**The Survivor**

by apolesen

**Summary**

1985. Four years after the death of his friends, Remus decides to break out of the pattern of his post-war life and try living among Muggles. In a sleepy town in southern England and the bustling city of London, he tries to build a new life for himself, piece by piece. The more he sees of the Muggle world, the more Remus wonders if that structure is as stable as he would like to think it is.

“The Survivor” is set in Thatcherite Britain, in the wake of the Falklands War and the onset of the British AIDS epidemic. It explores themes of disease, stigma, war trauma and grief, reflecting both on the historical context of the 1980s and Rowling’s characterisation of Remus Lupin.

**Notes**

Throughout this fic, I use the HIV/AIDS terminology used in 1985. Nowadays, HIV is the name of the virus, and AIDS is the syndrome it leads to. However, the acronym HIV was not coined until 1986. The virus had been discovered independently by two teams, one French and one American, who named it different things, LAV and HTLV-3. By 1985, it had been established that these were the same virus, and usually the American team’s name HTLV-3 was used, although often the term “the AIDS virus” (with AIDS sometimes spelt
Aids or A.I.D.S.) was used, despite not being technically correct.

Like with terminology, I have sought to give a historically accurate view of ideas of the nature of HIV/AIDS. Many things that were seen as factual in 1985 have now been discredited. This means that you shouldn’t take this as a source for medical facts. If you wonder about anything, I strongly recommend you check out for instance the Terrence Higgins Trust’s website (http://www.tht.org.uk/sexual-health/About-HIV).

This fic has been in the making for a long time, and I am indebted to a great number of people. Most importantly, Tumblr user tobreakandblossom has done a great job betaing, and Tumblr user runicmaquette has been a huge help and support.

Note about canon: As I started working on this fic long before Pottermore, I have ignored most Pottermore canon.

Complete trigger warning list: sexual situations, unsafe sex, mental illness (PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks), homophobia, serophobia, reference to suicide attempt, suicidal thoughts, reference to self-harm, body horror (werewolf transformations), violence, mourning, blood, meat, animal deaths, recreational drinking and smoking, some disordered eating, vomiting.
I wouldn’t wish the eighties on anyone, it was a time when all that was rotten bubbled to the surface.
- Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk*

Living with AIDS is like living through a war which is happening only for those people who happen to be in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes, you look around and you discover that you’ve lost more of your friends, but nobody else notices.
- Vito Russo, *Why We Fight*

‘Now it’s in the *Prophet* too.’

The impatient sound of a newspaper being shaken stiff made Remus pause on the stairs. His father’s voice had an uncharacteristic edge to it. Chair-legs scraped against the kitchen floor as his mother said:

‘Let me see.’

Footsteps rounded the table. Standing stock-still, like an eavesdropping child, Remus imagined her leaning in and reading the article that had startled him. The silence stretched on. Remus was just about to take another step when the sound of his mother’s voice stopped him.

‘We have to talk to him, John. I’ve been telling you, for months now - new articles almost every day...’

Remus stood frozen, one foot hovering over the next step. As quietly as he could, he put it back down again and listened. His father sighed.

‘I’m afraid you’re right.’

‘You don’t have to sound so reluctant.’

‘I know you’re right, but... I suppose I feel that it’s not really our business.’

‘How is this not our business?’

‘You have to admit it’s... awkward.’

‘Never mind that it’s awkward. It’s important,’ Mrs Lupin said. Her husband grumbled something. ‘Oh, tosh. This is just that you seem to think that a live and let live-attitude means pretending it doesn’t exist.’

‘Verity, it’s different among wizards,’ Mr Lupin said, sounding much less annoyed than his wife.

‘Obviously it isn’t anymore,’ Mrs Lupin answered, now almost tearful with strange, unexplained anger. ‘Do you think something like this won’t affect him, just because he’s a wizard? What do we know about that...?’

Not wanting to overhear a conversation so obviously about himself, Remus went down the stairs. The steps creaked in the places they always did, and by the time he entered the kitchen, his mother was in her seat again, her broadsheet spread over half the kitchen table.
‘Good morning,’ Mr Lupin said, looking up from the Prophet.

‘Morning,’ Remus said.

‘What’s all that, dear?’ Mrs Lupin asked, looking at the pile of clothes he was holding.

‘Just some laundry. I was looking through my wardrobe, and these smell of moth-balls.’

‘Well, if you’re planning to wear them...’ Mrs Lupin got to her feet and made to take the clothes from him.

‘It’s alright, mum, I can do it...’

‘Nonsense,’ she said and filled her arms with them. ‘Although you can take that jacket - it’ll need airing, not washing. The rest can go in the machine.’ She let Remus take the tweed jacket, which was precariously stacked in the middle, and then hurried into the laundry-room. The bang of preparing the machine, which still seemed half-mysterious to Remus even years after learning how to use it, followed.

He turned back to the breakfast table as his father poured him tea and went back to reading his paper.

‘Anything in the Prophet?’ Remus asked, trying to sound casual.

‘Not much,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘Quidditch on the front page.’

‘Ah. Slow news day, then.’ Remus carried his tea-cup over to the window, looking out into the small garden and the country lane beyond. The trees outside were shedding their leaves, which had turned shades of brown and yellow during the month he had stayed there.

‘Well, I’m going out for a smoke,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘The blackcurrant jam’s all finished, I’m afraid.’

‘That’s alright,’ Remus said.

‘I told him you’d want it,’ Mrs Lupin called.

‘It’s okay, mum,’ Remus called back. ‘I don’t mind.’ He started making toast, vaguely aware of his father shuffling around the house in search of his pipe, and his mother muttering to herself as she sorted the laundry. He spread raspberry jam on the toast, glad for the change. The blackcurrant jam was a childhood favourite, a touching attempt to spoil him which he now, at twenty-five, found jarring.

He ate his toast standing by the counter, too tense to sit down. Through the window, he saw his father come out of the front door. He lowered his hand, pipe clamped between his teeth. The flicker of fire shone through his fingers, then receded into a dull glow. Remus thought of going out to join him for a moment. However much his mother disapproved of it, the smell of pipe tobacco remained an early treasured memory. It was comforting, much like recalling being small enough to sit in his father’s lap.

Thinking about it closer, Remus realised he did not particularly want to step outside and talk to his father. Instead, he turned back to the kitchen table. He had been planning to read the Daily Prophet, but it was gone. Glancing back through the window, he realised that the newspaper was under his father’s arm. Remus frowned to himself, recalling the conversation he had overheard. Part of him felt it best to pretend he had not eavesdropped on his parents, but another part was curious enough that he thought of walking over to the laundry door and asking his mother. No,
His cautious side reeled him in. It would probably be better not to know.

He finished his toast, topped up his tea-cup and called:

‘Mum, I’m going upstairs.’

‘Of course, darling.’ Then the door opened and she peered out at him. ‘Have you eaten anything?’

‘I had toast.

‘You should have some porridge too.’

‘I’m happy with just toast, thanks.’ He smiled at her, and before she had time to react, he turned and left the kitchen. As he went upstairs, he wondered whether his mother had already guessed what was happening. After all, she was bound to notice that all the clothes he had brought down were Muggle ones. He closed the door behind him quickly, even if he knew no-one else was upstairs. He was not quite ready to show even the empty hallway what he was doing.

The room, which had been so tidy on his return a month ago, with the dusted shelves and the smoothed-out blankets, was now cluttered. The bed, the desk, even the floor were covered with piles of belongings. He had refolded the clothes on the bed before breakfast. Now, he put a few sets of robes into the trunk, which stood open by the window. He was not planning to wear them, but it felt odd not bringing any wizard’s clothes. He would wait with packing the Muggle clothes. Instead, he turned to a pile of books. The magic ones - an excellent book about magical creatures his parents had given him for his birthday, and a treatise on hauntings that he had been meaning to read - went in first, then Muggle novels and anthologies.

He paused in his packing and looked around. This room unsettled him. There was so much history here that he could not get away from. This was the window Fenrir Greyback had climbed in through, here he had Changed, and there, in that corner, Remus had been bitten. It was in this room where he had endured all his childhood illnesses, where he had lay awake during late summer nights, longing for the start of the school year, where he had dreamed, though awake, about being touched. And it was here that he had spent the year after the war, that year which seemed like a grey wall, separating him from his previous life. Getting out of it had been like relearning to walk. Through all those events, the room remained eerily the same.

It was no wonder he had to leave. There were ghosts in this house, none of them from people but all from memories. The past three years had been a constant cycle of going away and then returning to his parents too soon. A few times he had simply run out of money. Once he had fallen ill. Several times, he had not managed to find anywhere to transform during the full moon, so he had had to fall back on his parents’ cellar. More times than he cared to mention, however, it had been because he had lost his job. When he had arrived a month ago, after burning his hand on a silver knife at his previous job and being chased from the shop by his employer, his parents had greeted him with open arms. They always did.

Looking at the half-packed trunk, Remus felt guilty. Still, he knew that he could not idly stay here. Their love, so demonstrative and all-consuming, had become a prison.

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It was not until the late afternoon Remus picked up the courage to broach the subject. He had sat through lunch, waiting for a pause in the conversation, but whenever they all fell silent, he felt unable to speak. The words dried on his tongue and remained unsaid. A few times, he thought he caught his mother looking at him with concern in her eyes. Trying to find something similar in his
father’s behaviour, Remus thought there was something nervous about the way he spoke at length about the various alloys he was using for the model of Jupiter’s moons he was making.

After lunch, Remus had gone upstairs with the clothes, laundered and folded so lovingly. He had insisted on mending them himself, a task that kept him busy until the light in his room became too bad. He would have to finish the patch on his tweed jacket later. There was no reason to put this off any longer.

When he came downstairs, his mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

‘Hello, Remus dear. I was just about to make some tea.’

‘Sounds lovely,’ Remus said. ‘Can we have it together, all of us?’

‘Of course, of course. Go tell your father.’

Remus went through the living room to his father’s workshop. Inside, Mr Lupin was standing on a ladder at one of the shelves covering the walls. Remus rapped his knuckles against the open door.

‘Yes?’ Mr Lupin said, not looking at him.

‘Mum says there’ll be tea soon.’

‘Good, good,’ Mr Lupin murmured. ‘Now where is it...?’ He stood up on tip-toe and stretched dangerously after one of the models. ‘No, that’s not it...’ He returned it to its place and pulled himself back onto the ladder. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking of making a lunascope with ivory again,’ he said. ‘It’s been a few years. It’s a very interesting material to work with - if you can get enough to make a orb...’

‘Isn’t it expensive?’ Remus said, suppressing a sigh. Although his father strictly worked with making any kind of astronomical model, lunascopes had been his speciality and obsession ever since Remus had been little. When he had been younger, he had found it odd, even slightly offensive, that his father spent so much time making devices which displayed the moon phases. As he had grown up, he had realised that this was Mr Lupin’s way of coping. He sold many, often to shops in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, but there was still an entire wall full of them in the workshop. Domes of glass with an orb suspended under it, milky white stones shaped and set in a cage of metal, even ones shaped like complex Muggle barometers, stood along the shelves, all moving in unison. Now, they were all indicating only the thinnest waning sickle. The new moon was a day away.

‘Well, yes, but I got an order of lunascopes. Thought I might experiment a bit. I have some ideas. Oh, there we are.’ He picked another lunascope off the shelf and climbed down the ladder. ‘I used moonstone in this one,’ he explained, ‘and I wanted to see how I’d gone about it. Might be useful, for the Jupiter model...’ He carried the lunascope over to the workbench, took off his glasses and put on a pair of goggles. ‘Let’s see...’

Remus watched his father working for a while. The separate pieces of the Jupiter model had been laid out on the workbench. He stepped closer and picked up one of the four rounded pieces of semi-precious stone.

‘Ganymede?’

His father looked up briefly.

‘Yes, yes, that’s right.’
Remus put it down again.

‘What would happen if you put in the other moons?’

Now, Mr Lupin took the goggles off and put his glasses back on.

‘The other moons?’

‘Well, Jupiter has lots of satellites,’ Remus said. ‘It’s not just the four of them. I think there’s at least sixteen.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Mr Lupin said, as if this was ludicrous. ‘I certainly haven’t seen them.’

‘Well, they’re not visible through a telescope. Muggle astronomers have found them.’

Mr Lupin snorted.

‘Muggle astronomers? I can’t see that counting.’

‘I think it’d be interesting. From a magical point of view.’

‘I can’t start making models of Jupiter with sixteen moons,’ Mr Lupin said. He put his goggles in again and picked up the stone representing Io. ‘People would think I’d gone loopy.’

Remus shrugged.

‘At least Zeus got around enough to name another twelve moons,’ he said, not very loudly. ‘Come on, dad, there’s tea.’

‘Just a minute, just a minute...’

Remus went into the living-room on his own. His mother was just putting down the tea-tray on the table by the couch.

‘He’s just finishing up,’ he said by way of explanation.

‘So he’ll try to finish the entire model before tea,’ Mrs Lupin said, rolling her eyes, but not without a smile. ‘John!’ she called in the direction of the workshop. ‘Tea!’

‘Coming, dear!’

Remus and his mother looked at each other and smiled; Mr Lupin’s ability at being absorbed in his work had been a source of annoyance and affection for them both.

Within a few minutes, Mr Lupin emerged. Remus watched as he settled into his armchair and accepted a cup of tea and a biscuit. He wondered how long he should wait. He did not want to throw it at them, but if he waited too long, his father would start talking about astrological modelling or his mother might begin discussing the the garden or the church roof. He sipped his tea, eyes still on his father. Mr Lupin took a gulp of tea and sighed with pleasure. Remus put his cup down.

‘There was something I wanted to talk to you about,’ he said.

A change came over his parents. His mother’s back straightened, and she looked at him with real fear. His father looked up, his tea forgotten, spilling onto the saucer.
'It’s time for me to move.’

It was as if it took a few moments for them to understand what he had said. Mr Lupin was the first to move, but simply by exhaling. Mrs Lupin bit her lip; she looked close to tears.

‘I thought I might see what the Muggle world is like.’

His father put his teacup down, and picked his wife’s out of her hands.

‘Why?’ he said, sternly.

‘Well, I can’t stay here forever,’ Remus said with a laugh, but realised that it was a mistake. Mrs Lupin’s face had gone rigid. ‘I just think it’d be easier to find something. With the Ministry and everything...’

Mrs Lupin stood up suddenly.

‘I need to start dinner,’ she said, her voice as strict as her face. She put the cups on the tray and swept out into the kitchen with it. Mr Lupin stayed in his armchair for a moment, staring at his son. Then he stood up too.

‘I’d better get on with that Jupiter model...’

Remus was left alone in the living-room. Briefly, he thought of following either one to speak to them, but he decided against it. Instead, he went upstairs to his room.

The mess from that morning had receded, but there was still much to pack - what Muggle money he had (enough to keep him for a few days), a photograph from James and Lily’s wedding, his Muggle grandfather’s wrist-watch. His mother had given him that sometime in his teens - he could not remember quite when. It was not an expensive watch, and the leather-strap was very worn, but it still worked. Reminded by this, Remus went over to his bedside table and took out his pocket-watch. The inside of the gilded brass lid bore two inscriptions: “Julius 1907 Remus 1977”.

On the day he had been born, Remus’ father had put aside his own father’s watch to give his son. It had been a hefty, expensive silver watch with an ornate key and a diamond on each hand. By his sixth birthday, it had been obvious that Remus would never be able to carry it, much less hold it. As a substitute, he had been given his great-uncle Julius’ watch - certainly less valuable, but a nice piece of craftsmanship, with no silver in it. Remus had only seen his grandfather’s watch in photographs. What had happened to it he was not sure, but he suspected that his father had sold it to pay for Remus’ treatments. The thought of all the painful and ultimately futile attempts to treat his lycanthropy made Remus wish that his dad had cannibalised the watch to make lunascopes instead. There would have been some ironic humour to that, and would have done them more good in the long run. He weighed the brass watch in his hand, and then put it in the trunk too.

Perhaps he should go down and talk to them, after all. Pulling himself together, Remus left his room. Already on the landing, he could hear his parents’ voices from the kitchen. They must be talking about him again. He went back into his room.

Here there were memories of his childhood all around. Toys and school-books might have been moved to the peripheral shelves, but they were still there, dominating the room. He had done all his growing up away, at school and then among the Order. The end of the war had hit him so hard that he might as well have been a child again, at least in his parents’ eyes. The short years since then seemed not to count. Here, his achievements and his experiences melted away. His parents’ house was not so much a geographical place as a lost country of his childhood.
His father had made the desk himself for his eleventh birthday. It had seemed a splendid gift, and he had sat for hours on the spare kitchen chair they had let him have, rereading the Hogwarts letter at his new work-place. He had been excited about the idea of having homework, because that meant he was going to school. The year before his sixth year, he had grown tired of the pale blue walls and invited his friends to repaint it. They had spent three days on the project. They had all ended up half-covered in white paint, much to the chagrin of Mrs Lupin, who felt that she should have been able to stop at least her own son from fighting with the brushes. She had still brought them tea, squash and sandwiches at regular intervals, which they usually took down and had in the garden, lounging too long in the sun. Peter had still had white paint in one ear when he turned up at King’s Cross six weeks later. Remus recalled with a stab of regret how the white paint had looked when splattered over dark hair.

Idly, he looked through his bookshelves, wondering what else to bring. On the top shelf sat Mister Thomas, a cuddly rabbit which his father had dyed green to hide the bloodstains left on it after Greyback’s attack. (Being five years old, Remus had rejected it for several months because of this. A rabbit simply should not be green.) A few shelves down stood his first-year books. They had been old already when he got them, and he had cracked the spines on several of them, so there had been no reason to try to sell them on. Besides, he had loved them too much for his parents to dare to take them from him. At eye-level, above his school-books, were a variety of books on Dark creatures and defensive magic, even a few scholarly tomes on werewolves which his friends had bought him. He had only dared to have them on the shelf because there were other books which gave them camouflage.

Somehow his collection of Muggle fiction and poetry had not felt like enough of a disguise for the books he kept behind his larger school-books. Now, he heaved out his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi and pulled out a few books: a well-thumbed copy of Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man, which he had found in a charity shop at the age of fifteen and read several times, Maurice, of which he had a first edition, and a finely bound copy of Leaves of Grass. As he buried them under other Muggle books in his trunk, he was aware that he treated them as though they were pornographic. Not even in his own room did he dare to have them visible on the shelf, even if his parents would not learn anything about him that they did not already know from them.

Remus had just finished packing the books his mother called up the stairs:

‘Remus! Dinner! Wash your hands!’

‘Yes, mum!’

By the time he came downstairs, his parents were already at their places. His father was beating out a nervous tattoo against the table-edge, until his mother reached out and put her hand over his, to make him stop.

‘Hi,’ Remus said, his voice betraying his nerves. ‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Shepherd’s pie.’ Mrs Lupin stood up and reached out her hand. ‘Give me your plate, dear.’

She served the food with annoyed efficiency. There was implied disappointment in her movements, performing such a motherly task. Remus thanked her and smiled, but she avoided his eye. As they started eating, the silence seemed to hang between the three of them. He looked from mother to father, waiting for one of them to react. She was biting her lip hard while cutting her food, but still it trembled; he stared at his plate with a stony expression, lost in his own thoughts.

It was almost a relief when Mrs Lupin put her cutlery down and covered her face with hands.
‘Verity...’ Mr Lupin said and reached out to stroke her back. His wife seemed not to notice. Instead, she took her hands from her face and said:

‘Why, Remus? Why?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Remus asked.

‘You owe us an explanation,’ Mr Lupin said calmly. Remus sensed he was casting himself as the voice of reason in this argument. Despite his kind tone, there was that undercurrent of blame. There always was, with his parents.

Remus sighed and put down his fork and knife.

‘I’ve spent the past three years trying to find a job in the magical world. People are bound to start noticing. What if they start swapping notes? What if word gets out about what I am? So I thought I could lie low for a while. It’d give them some time to forget me.’

‘But why among Muggles?’ Mr Lupin said, frowning. ‘Surely there is no need...’

‘It’d be nice to work somewhere where I don’t have to be afraid of getting lynched,’ Remus said, unable to stop himself. His parents looked confused. ‘Mum, dad, the wizarding world isn’t safe for werewolves. You know that.’

‘What makes you think the Muggle world will be any better?’ Mrs Lupin asked sharply. ‘Just because they wouldn’t know what your condition is doesn’t change anything, you know. You’d still have to Change.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Remus said. His patience was wearing thin. ‘But do you have any idea of the strain it puts me under to worry that people might find out why I’m ill once a month? I want to be able not to worry about it.’

‘And how are you going to explain it to them?’ Mr Lupin said.

‘Dad, I haven’t figured everything out yet. But I will.’

‘It’s not right,’ he said firmly. ‘Remus, your place is in the wizarding world. You have earned it.’

_Just because you fought for me, and Dumbledore decided to give me a chance,_ Remus thought. The reminder of that debt to his father made him feel bitter.

‘Do you think people care? They don’t care that I’m a fully qualified wizard. They don’t give a damn that I have six NEWTs. All they see is a monster.’

‘You’re not a monster,’ his mother said firmly.

‘I know,’ he said dejectedly. ‘But tell that to the Ministry.’

‘You shouldn’t let them get to you...’

‘But they already have, dad. They _always_ have.’

His father sighed, but it was his mother who spoke.

‘You don’t know what the Muggle world is like right now,’ she said. ‘There are children only a mile away who have holes in their shoes. Mothers who can’t feed their families. Fathers who can’t get a job. Do you think I make those food parcels for fun?’
‘I know that, mum,’ Remus said, interrupting her. ‘But it’s a question of there being few jobs, as opposed to no jobs. I can’t get a wizarding job. It’s too difficult, and frankly, I don’t dare. Besides, I was thinking of going down south. London, perhaps.’

‘There were riots in London only a fortnight ago,’ Mrs Lupin said sharply.

‘Fine, I won’t go to London. I’ll go somewhere else. Perhaps to the countryside. I’ve never much liked cities anyway. But I am going.’

His parents stalled. Finally his mother took a deep breath and said slowly:

‘They might refuse you employment for... other reasons than the lycanthropy.’

Remus took up his cutlery again and started cutting a piece of shepherd’s pie.

‘I wouldn’t tell them that,’ he said, not looking at his mother. An old thought briefly returned - did it show? Was it possible to tell by the way he looked, walked, spoke? He thought it didn’t, but he did not know how others perceived him.

‘Look, Remus, it’s not right,’ his father said suddenly. ‘Wizards shouldn’t have Muggle jobs.’

‘Great-uncle Julius worked in the council archives,’ Remus reminded him. Mr Lupin sighed.

‘Well, uncle Julius stopped being able to do magic,’ he said. ‘All that mixing with Muggles...’

‘“Mixing with Muggles”?’ Remus repeated incredulously. ‘Dad, he volunteered for the Army...’

‘And it was a stupid thing to do,’ he said sharply. ‘It wasn’t his concern, was it? It was a Muggle war.’

Remus laughed, unable to believe what he was hearing.

‘It was almost fifteen years before you were born, dad...’

‘Well, look where it got him!’

‘Great-uncle Julius stopped being able to do magic because he was shell-shocked, not because he hung around Muggles,’ Remus said, getting to his feet. He carried his plate over to the sink - he had lost his appetite. ‘What a good thing that I’ve already got that over with, so you don’t have to worry about that happening to me!’

Both his parents looked up in shock.

‘Remus!’

‘How can you joke about such a thing?’ his father said sharply.

‘If anyone can joke about it, it’s me, isn’t it? It was me it happened to.’

‘You can’t count us out of this, young man,’ Mrs Lupin said, not tearful anymore but angry. ‘This is not just about you...’

‘Can’t you at least trust me enough to let me live my own life?’ Remus snapped. He took a deep breath and managed to compose himself somewhat. ‘I thought you’d understand, mum. I’ve always been curious what the Muggle world’s like.’
‘No, your father’s right,’ Mrs Lupin said, also getting to her feet and collecting the remaining plates. ‘It’s not right, crossing worlds like that.’

‘You crossed worlds.’

‘I married your father,’ she snapped. ‘That is something completely different.’

‘Fine,’ he said.

‘Just because your mother is a Muggle doesn’t make you one,’ Mr Lupin said, a little calmer now. ‘We don’t want you pretending to be something you’re not.’

It took a moment for him to find an answer.

‘When do I not pretend to be something I’m not?’ he asked, incredulously.

‘I wasn’t talking about that - I was talking about the magic...’

‘What - “it’s not the same”?’ he snapped. ‘Why can’t I decide what I hide? I’m used to keep secrets - what difference is one more going to make?’

They stared at him, mystified. It was as if they really did not understand.

‘Mum, dad, I’m of age,’ Remus said. ‘I’ve been of age for eight years. You can’t tell me what to do, or where to stay.’

Mrs Lupin sighed and hugged herself. The silence was only a truce, not a surrender. She went back to the table and sat down again. Mr Lupin took her hand. Remus caught them looking at each other, and sensed a quiet conversation going between them. He remembered their cryptic discussion at breakfast. He wondered again what it had been about.

Then his father shook himself, as if distancing himself from whatever they had spoken about.

‘Why?’ he asked. ‘Is it a question of money?’

‘Partly,’ Remus admitted. ‘You don’t tell me much of what is going on, but I know that money is tight...’

‘It isn’t,’ Mrs Lupin said quickly. ‘Don’t think for one moment that you’re a burden...’

‘I wouldn’t mind actually being told what’s going on,’ he said. ‘After all, I’m not a child.’

Mr Lupin ignored this.

‘What else?’

‘I need to do something with my life,’ he said. It was strange having to spell this out. ‘I’ve spent a month sitting around here doing nothing. It’s been like that for half the time the past three years. I can’t be idle.’

‘Then help me with the models,’ Mr Lupin said, his face brightening. ‘You could learn the trade. And you were always good at arithmancy and astronomy. And if there’s two of us, we would be more productive, so I’d be able to pay you...’

‘I can’t,’ Remus said. It made him feel weary that his father forgot this. ‘For one thing, I can’t handle silver. For another, my fingers aren’t in good enough shape.’ He wiggled them in
illustration. This close to the new-moon, they were fairly dextrous, but in only a week, the joints would start swelling painfully again. ‘To be honest, dad, even if I could I wouldn’t want to. It doesn’t appeal to me. It’s your job, not mine.’ Deciding it was better to the honest, he said: ‘I can’t stay here. I need to get away from it all.’

His parents looked crestfallen.

‘But... Remus...’ his mother said, her voice shaking.

‘It’s time to fly the nest.’ He shrugged, hoping would convey that this was somehow out of his hands.

Mrs Lupin pulled herself up, as if clinging to some small piece of dignity.

‘When were you thinking of leaving?’ she asked.

‘Tomorrow.’

She inhaled, almost like a hiss of grief, but hid it well.

‘I’m packing,’ Remus said. ‘Actually, I should probably get back to that.’

His parents looked at each other again. Remus thought there was something pleading in his mother’s eye, as if trying to prompt his father to do something, but if that was the case, he either did not notice or ignored it.

‘Very well,’ he said. His voice was hollow.

‘Alright,’ Remus said. ‘I’ll be upstairs.’

Before they answered, he turned and left the kitchen.

His bedroom seemed eerily empty after the tense feeling in the kitchen. He paused in the doorway, trying to get used to this new silence. His mother’s face seemed drawn in front of his eyes. Remus rubbed his eyes and sighed, torn between annoyance at their lack of understanding and self-reproach for some of the things he had said.

At once, he was grabbed by a sudden mad urge to make away with all farewells - finish packing and leave in the night. Now, when he was upset and - he realised - tired, it seemed both kinder and easier. He imagined being free from that nagging guilt of not taking up his father’s offer and not acknowledging his mother’s pleading gaze. It would be liberating to be able to make his own way, and not feel reminded that really he should stay at home under his parents’ watchful eye. Removed from their presence, it was easy to imagine a life without that, but also without the constant money-worries. He could build up a modest library on topics he enjoyed. On Sundays he could read his books at some local café. Perhaps he would glance up from the pages at someone, and receive a smile in return...

Remus shook himself. It would not be like that. He was choosing the less comfortable of two lives, but it was the only one he could choose. Looking back on his daydream, he realised that he had just wished that his parents did not exist. The thought ran through him like a physical sensation of cold and made him shiver. He shied away from it, scared by the knowledge that someday, his parents would die. He dared not think about it closely, as if it would bring it to pass. They were the only people he had left.

It was strange how easy it was, even now, when he was well, to think of his own death. For as long
as he could remember, it had always been a possibility. Although they had never spoken about it, his parents must have imagined burying him, even discussed and planned it. Their possessiveness was understandable, considering that they had spent years watching him suffer, and saved every knut and penny to pay for experimental potions and backstreet treatments, all the time knowing they might survive him. For a brief moment, he considered his decision again. He did not want to hurt them, after all they had done to him.

Then he remembered some of the things they had said, and he became angry again. It was an exhausting feeling. If he let himself slip into it, he would find so many things to feed it that he would never be able to stop. All the reasons he loved them would become reasons to hate them.

_I will not storm off in a rage_, he told himself. _I'm a rational adult. I will leave for the right reasons._ It took immense effort to pull himself away from the pit of anger. He wanted to indulge it, but knew that all it would do would be to prove them right. If he shouted and broke things, they would treat him like a child having a tantrum or (indistinguishably) an invalid coming apart at the seams. He was left with the uneasy feeling this house and this room gave him. His parents’ protection of him trapped him here with old fears.

_Just one more night_, he promised himself. _Then I’m leaving._

***

He dreamt of green light. The patterns the spells shaped as they were discharged burned into his retinas. He blinked, and still saw them. The hiss of curses being conjured and hurtling through the air filled his ears. Against them, within them, he saw swirling shapes, materialising and dematerialising. He himself was standing still. The curses were flying around him. He should do something - he should defend himself, or attack - but he could not lift his hand. Any second now, his luck would run out, and one of those curses would hit him. The world spun. There was no longer any solid ground under his feet. He scrabbled for something to hold onto, but instead his wand fell out of his hands. His vision was just light.

With a start, he woke. The darkness around him startled him. He blinked, expecting the imprint of light on his eyes, but there was nothing. He tried to calm his breathing. His deep breaths shook with the effort.

A creak from the shadows made him jump. Then a light appeared - his door had been opened.

‘Remus?’

The light from a lit wand fell on Mr Lupin’s face. Remus sighed in relief.

‘Sorry, you startled me.’ He found his own wand on the bedside table and lit it too. ‘What are you doing up, dad?’

‘You called out,’ he explained and stepped inside.

‘Sorry,’ Remus said and rubbed his eyes. ‘Did I wake mum as well?’

‘No,’ Mr Lupin said. He swished his wand, and the desk chair came trotting over to him. ‘I was already awake.’ He sat down and looked at him searchingly. ‘Nightmare?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’
Remus shrugged.

‘I can’t really remember any details. I... dropped my wand. There was fighting.’ The dream was slipping away. ‘I don’t know.’

His father made a sympathetic sound. When Remus looked over at him, he was struck by how old he looked. He was only two years away from turning sixty, but it was not just age. He looked worn out, not by violent bouts of illness, like Remus, but from the slow and relentless grind of an unforgiving reality. *He would have had an easy life, if it hadn’t been for me,* Remus thought. *He’d have kept his Ministry job, he could have afforded to have more children, he would be spared all that sorrow...*

And yet he smiled at him. It was a sad smile, but it was loving. Remus smiled back, cautiously. Having just woken up from a nightmare, he felt exposed. There was also the reminder of all the other times his father had sat where he sat now. When he had been little, and too scared of the moon waxing to sleep. When he had clawed himself bloody during the full-moon, and had not been certain whether he was about to faint or fall asleep. When he had kept himself awake for fear of dreaming about the war, yet desperate to escape the waking world of sudden noises and painful memories.

‘I’m okay,’ he said, half to his father, half to himself. ‘You don’t have to stay, dad.’ Mr Lupin rolled his wand between his fingers, watching how the light shifted over the room. Remus sensed him about to speak several times, then he clasped the wand again and took a deep breath.

‘We’re worried about you.’

Remus sighed.

‘Dad, I’m not changing my mind about this.’

‘Your mother says...’

‘Mum always worries,’ he said, interrupting him. ‘She frets for no good reason. You know that.’

Mr Lupin sighed.

‘She has good reason this time.’

‘Oh?’

Remus did not know what he meant. Surely this was not the rioting in London that she had mentioned? They must know what he could cope on his own - after all, he had fought a war. He might not have come out of it unscathed, but he had survived it.

‘I can take care of myself, dad.’

His father took a deep breath.

‘It’s not so much a matter of that,’ he said. ‘There’s been a lot in the Muggle newspapers recently... about a disease. It’s incurable and deadly.’ His words sounded stilted, as if he had rehearsed them many times in his head and now, when speaking them, found them inadequate. ‘Have you heard about this?’

‘No,’ Remus admitted, listening now. He wondered why he hadn’t. Surely something like that would be spoken about in wizarding circles too?
‘It’s... quite terrible, actually,’ his father said. He sounded almost embarrassed, but there was a slight quiver in his voice. Remus realised that he was genuinely upset. ‘It breaks down the body’s defences. People die within a few years. And there’s nothing they can do.’ He paused and swallowed. It shook Remus to realise that his father, who was by no means easily upset, was close to tears. ‘Remus... you’re...’ He paused and tried to compose himself. ‘You’re careful, aren’t you?’

‘Careful?’ Remus did not understand what he meant. It seemed like a complete non sequitur. ‘What do you mean, dad?’

Mr Lupin took a deep breath and, closing his eyes as if it would make it easier, said:

‘It’s spreading among homosexuals.’

Remus sat stock-still, not certain how to react.

‘Oh,’ he said. He shifted, clasped his hands, unclasped them again. His father had opened his eyes again, but was looking away. ‘You mean careful when it comes to sex.’

‘Yes.’ The word sounded hollow. They sat in silence, neither of them inclined to speak. Remus stared at his hands, not wanting to look at his father. After a long time, Mr Lupin spoke, with a new, almost authoritative tone. ‘Your mother and I feel we have reason to be concerned.’

Now Remus did look at him. With a sinking feeling, he realised what his parents were concerned about. In their mind’s eye, there must be a parade of nameless men, each a new corrupting influence on their son. His parents, who had always worked so hard to be understanding, and at times - happier times, before Sirius’ betrayal - had even seemed happy for him...

‘How long has it been going on - this disease?’ It all depended on that, of course. He felt himself tensing with worry.

‘Rather recent, in Britain, from what I’ve understood,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘It started in America four years ago or so, but there weren’t that many cases over here until last year.’

Remus relaxed.

‘Then you don’t have anything to worry about.’

‘Remus, you can’t just dismiss this...’

‘Dad, drop it,’ he said, louder. ‘It’s....’ He reached out and brought his alarm-clock into the light from the wand. ‘...three o’clock in the morning, and I need to sleep, because I’m going away tomorrow.’ His father still watched him, as though he was not about to let it go. With a feeling of trepidation, Remus realised that it would be better, and ultimately easier, to be frank. ‘Look, dad,’ he said. He tried to speak up, but it was hard. ‘I haven’t seen anyone for four years. Not since Sirius.’ He paused, as though he needed to rid his mouth of the bad taste of that name. ‘And I can’t see that changing, even if I do get a Muggle job.’ He half wanted to elaborate - about how minute the chance of meeting other gay men was in the first place, and how, even if he did, he was thin and pale and covered in twenty years’ worth of werewolf scratches, and other scars besides - but there was no way he could say those things.

Mr Lupin frowned, looking just as disconcerted at this confidence as at his own assumption of his son’s promiscuity.

‘Right. Well... well, that’s good to... good to know,’ he stammered. ‘But you should be... aware of it.’
Remus smiled - being this tired, he found his father’s awkwardness endearing.

‘I need to go back to sleep, dad.’

‘Of course.’ He got to his feet and cleared his throat. ‘Well, good night.’

‘Night.’

Mr Lupin left. The light under the door grew fainter as he crossed the landing. Remus put his hand on his own wand and said, ‘nox’. The light went out. He lay down again, first on his side, then on his back. The conversation had left him wide awake. He tried to clear his mind, but closing his eyes and trying to clear his mind did not work. Time and time again, he came back to the things his father had said. There was so much of it that he barely knew where to start. First of all, this illness, which his father had not given a name. And then his father’s sternness mixed with fear - ‘your mother and I feel we have reason to be concerned.’ The fact that they thought he was sleeping around! Anger, reminiscent of that he had felt last night, flared up inside him. Here was yet another sign that they did not trust him. Worse than that, they had let prejudice override common sense. Besides, they should have realised that after the events leading to Sirius’ imprisonment (how he hated even to think of him!), he was not likely to go off with some other bloke as if nothing had happened. Didn’t they know him well enough to see that? Had they not seen what that betrayal had done to him?

He sighed in frustration and turned onto his side again, punching his pillow into shape. It was a strange feeling, to be credited with more experience than one had. That it came from his parents made it particularly awkward. Now, he thought uneasily about the fact that he had told his father, however euphemistically, that he hadn’t slept with anyone since Sirius, even implying that he had been the only one he had ever slept with. He felt a strange guilt at even having said the word “sex” in his father’s presence. Then he remembered his father’s mortification at having to use the word “homosexual”. He must be just as embarrassed. Remus remembered his parents’ shocked faces when he had said he wanted to talk to them. They must have expected something completely different...

Remus sat up, remembering the conversation he had listened to that morning, and their speaking glances at dinner. They must have looked for the right time to speak to him all month, consciously keeping the knowledge away from him. In his mind’s eye, he could see the Daily Prophet clamped securely under his father’s arm as he smoked his morning pipe. It had been in the Muggle papers for over a year, but it had only just turned up in the Prophet.

Curiosity propelled Remus out of bed. He put on his dressing-gown, took his wand and lit it. Careful not to make a sound, he stepped out onto the landing. He paused. There was no light from under his parents’ door, and he could not hear anything. Perhaps his father was asleep again, or pretended to be. Remus went downstairs. The only thing to be heard was the sound of his bare feet against the steps. In his nightshirt and dressing-gown, walking barefoot, out of bed in the middle of the night, he somehow felt much younger. He was sneaking out of bed to rifle through his parents’ secrets, like a curious child would. The thought annoyed him.

The October chill had penetrated into the downstairs rooms. Remus crossed to the workshop, hesitating for a moment in the doorway. It felt like an imposition to enter, but then he reminded himself that his father entered his room without knocking.

While the living-room had been dark, the workshop was bathed in a faint light from the lunascopes. Remus swept the light of his wand over the surfaces. Soon, he spotted the newspaper, discarded on a chair. Unsettled by the artificial moonlight, Remus took it and hurried back into the living-room. There, sitting down in the sofa, he unfolded the paper. As it rustled, he glanced
towards the stairs, even if he had not heard anyone there. In the night, every noise seemed magnified. It felt as if even the sound of him rubbing his foot against the carpet might wake his parents.

It took him a while to find the article. It was short, taking up only a third of a page. The headline read: “St Mungo healers warn of Muggle disease” Remus traced the lines with his wand:

“Three healers at St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries have made a statement about a recently discovered illness, primarily found among Muggles engaging in a variety of unconventional practices. Muggle medical experts have named the disease Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, most often abbreviated AIDS. The disease was reportedly first observed in America in 1981, but soon crossed the Atlantic.

‘Muggle health authorities have stated that over a hundred cases occurred last year,’ says one healer. ‘Numbers are certainly on the rise. Over two hundred new cases has been reported since the beginning of 1985.’

AIDS is characterised by a breakdown of the body’s ability to fight off disease, which leads to several conditions which magical medicine is unable to treat. Life expectancy after the syndrome is diagnosed is seldom more than two years, and often less. Healer Sheridan Talbot warns that Muggle authorities is now expecting a dramatic rise in cases, as AIDS may spread beyond the confines of small groups. There is therefore a considerable risk that it will eventually affect the wizarding community.

‘We have as little chance to fight this thing as the Muggles’, Healer Talbot says.

When asked whether any patients with AIDS have been treated at St Mungo’s, the healers declined to answer, but emphasised that ‘there will inevitably be cases among wizards’.

AIDS is primarily spread through bodily fluids. The healers advice caution when dealing with Muggles.

‘The disease is mostly spread through intimate contacts’, says Healer Messaline Barrett. ‘There is no reason to be frightened of your Muggle neighbours. No one has caught AIDS through shaking someone’s hand.’

What then about those who do not stop at shaking hands? Fornication between wizards and Muggles, which only years ago could bring the wrath of the Death Eaters, followers of He Who Must Not Be Named, now carries with it a different threat.

‘When AIDS enters our community, it will be through wizards or witches who have engaged in venereal acts with Muggles’, Healer Talbot concludes.”

Remus put the newspaper down on his lap. The beast had a name, then. He reread the first paragraph. His lit wand-tip paused at the phrase “Muggles engaging in a variety of unconventional practices”. That was the closest the article had got to mentioning homosexuality. The Muggle press was likely to be less euphemistic. There had obviously not been any doubt in his parent’s minds that he was at risk of this thing, so there were bound to be more direct references.

Putting the Prophet aside, he crossed to the fireplace and took a bunch of discarded newspapers from the basket beside it. He sorted out the wizarding ones, and returned to the sofa with several copies of the Times. The paper rustled as he turned the pages, and several times he paused, afraid he would wake his parents. Quickly, he forgot that worry. Instead, he started searching the papers
with a new anxiousness. The light of his wand darted across headlines. Soon, he spotted the words he had been looking for. As soon as he started seeing them, there seemed no end to them. Wide-eyed, he read article upon article, leaning over the newspapers, shielding words he thought he would never see in print. He became inundated by facts, opinions, reported rumours.

“Rights before responsibility … a deadly disease that anyone could catch from intimate contact with an Aids sufferer … spreading at an alarming rate … Aids is rather like a black parody of Pascal’s wager. The risk of catching it may be slight, but the consequences of doings are horrendous. People therefore prefer to take no chances - and that means avoiding known sufferers and potential sufferers. … Aids is spread principally by the promiscuous homosexual activity … This is a reductio ad absurdum of civil rights - the right to sexual activity that risks both slow and horrible suicide and the spread of a fatal disease through society.”

“The cost of caring for a predicted total of 3,000 patients of Aids (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) by August 1987 will be £60 million … Hospital staff caring for Aids patients were already overburdened with the work involved and were struggling to cope. ‘There is a danger that other patients, with other diseases, will suffer from lack of care because of the commitment of staff needed to deal with Aids patients.’”

“…sexual contact, blood transfusion, syringe needles or other sharp instruments contaminated with infected blood … reduced energy, fever, swollen lymph glands, loss of resistance to infections, and some cancers …”

“‘Because of this unnatural act we have this disease of Aids spread throughout the world. We should be trying to get rid of the sickness in society, educating people to eliminate it.’”

“A judge in Manchester yesterday lifted a court order which prevented an Aids victim aged 29 from leaving hospital … the decision by magistrates to keep the man in hospital was a proper one, however, given the medical evidence … Health officials are concerned that many people who may be at risk from Aids will try to donate blood just to have it tested for traces of the infection …”

“Several thousand people in Britain will die of Aids within the next few years and nothing can be done to prevent it, according to the preliminary findings of a study into men’s homosexual behaviour … because of the incubation period of the disease is at least two years, the deaths will occur even if homosexuals become celibate immediately.”

“…the Gay Plague … the wise man or woman will modify his or her sex life. It would obviously as well to avoid intercourse with a bisexual or the very promiscuous … sexual drive being as strong as it is, discretion will often be rejected in favour of excitement … In view of the present situation it seems that the free and easy approach to sexual matters which started in the 1960s and 1970s, will now have to be abandoned until a vaccine can be produced.”

Remus rubbed his eyes. Reading in the poor light of his wand made them hurt, but he barely paid attention to it. While he had been reading, it was as if the world around him had grown. It was a towering, threatening presence, smothering and exposing him at the same time. The constant mentions of homosexuals startled him, but he had the sense that the journalists, and for that matter the readers, who the newspaper seemed to assume were all good and honest heterosexuals, were even more taken aback that such people even existed. There was a forced candidness in these
articles, quite unlike the euphemisms in the Prophet. There were mentions of things he had never seen written down, and only seldom heard discussed outside the dormitory or the bedroom. Some of the mentions were verging on the sympathetic, but many were critical or even hateful. Here was yet another reason for society to hate homosexuals. There were rational arguments against them now - even if they didn’t corrupt the youth, or were generally unsavoury, they were plague-carriers. With a sense of unease, Remus thought about this new possible position. His orientation may have had the potential of inspiring disgust, but it had been his condition - which had nothing to with his preferences - that inspired fear. Now that was not a certainty anymore. Underneath or beyond the reasoned language of the articles of the broadsheet, Remus sensed a state of panic.

At least he was in the clear. There had only been a handful of cases in Britain before last year. Although he could not be certain about his former lover’s faithfulness, he was at least certain that he had never been to America. That fact may be enough for him, even if was unlikely to convince the homophobes. Still, this must have a huge impact on people’s behaviour. Were people still even having sex? On the other hand - how had they put it in that last article? “Discretion will often be rejected in favour of excitement.”

Remus sighed and started to folding up the papers again. His feet felt raw with cold. Through the gloom, he could just about make out the hands of the grandfather clock in the corner. It was half past four - he had sat here well over an hour. Now he was aware of how exhausted he felt.

He stuffed the newspapers back into the basket, feeling it was not worth it to try to hide the fact that he had read them. He looked around the darkened living-room, eager to escape. Tomorrow, he had promised himself. Tomorrow morning. He needed to get some sleep before then, if he was to be in any state to travel. Careful not to make any noise, he went upstairs again. He lay awake for some time yet, still thinking through what he had read.
Remus’ first impression when he woke was of light, making the blood-vessels in his eyelids shine red. The second was the sound of footsteps.

‘Remus? Remus, dear, time to wake up.’

He muttered in protest to the waking world, then opened his eyes. His mother was standing at his bedside, bathed in the bright autumn sun.

‘I brought you a cup of tea,’ she said and put it down on his bedside table.

‘You shouldn’t have,’ Remus murmured, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

‘Well, I thought it was time for you to wake up.’ Her smile was kind, but unmistakably sad.

‘What’s the time?’ He turned to look at the alarm clock. It showed eight thirty - not as bad as it could have been, but later than he had wanted.

‘Drink your tea and get dressed,’ his mother said. ‘I’ll make you some breakfast.’ She kissed the crown of his head and left.

As he drank his tea, Remus thought of the conversation he had had with his father. Now, in the light of day, it felt almost unrealistic. He had to pause and recall what his father had said and what he had read to make sure that he had not dreamt it.

When he came downstairs ten minutes later, he had dressed in Muggle clothes. He had stood in front of the mirror for some time, wondering whether he looked convincing. The slipover and the collared shirt looked formal, almost stuffy, even with the top button undone. He would have to defer to his mother’s expertise. She was alone in the kitchen when he entered. Her face broke into a broad smile when she saw him.

‘Look at you,’ she said. ‘You’re quite the well-dressed gentleman.’

‘Is it too much?’ he asked uncertainly.

‘You look just right,’ Mrs Lupin said and tugged at his collar. ‘I would give you a job in an instant.’

Remus smiled gratefully. He could still sense her worry and her disappointment at the things he had said, and there was something self-effacing over her happiness for him, but she seemed to have accepted that he was going.

‘Where’s dad?’ he asked, pouring himself more tea.

‘He’s outside with his pipe,’ she said. ‘Just went out. He’ll be back in in a few minutes.’

Remus reached to help himself to breakfast, but she batted his hands away and served him. She frowned to herself and then, just as she turned away to put the frying-pan away, she said:

‘He said that you and he had a bit of a chat yesterday.’

‘Technically, it was today,’ Remus said. The sides of Mrs Lupin’s mouth twitched, but it was not really a smile. She did not seem in the mood for drollness. ‘So, did he give you a blow-by-blow
Mrs Lupin sat down beside him.

‘He told me what was said, yes.’

‘You should have just mentioned it, mum. There was no need to keep it from me and make a big deal out of it.’

‘This is a “big deal”, Remus…’

‘Well, if he told you what was said, you know what I told him,’ Remus said, unable not to sound annoyed. ‘You don’t have anything to worry about. I’m not dating anyone. I haven’t for years.’

Mrs Lupin clasped her hands together and looked up at her son again.

‘How come?’

‘What do you think?’ Remus said, but stopped himself - he would regret being rude later, after he had left. ‘I just can’t really face it.’

His mother put a hand on his arm.

‘We don’t want you to be lonely,’ she said softly.

‘Mum, you just told me…’

‘What I mean,’ Mrs Lupin said, interrupting him, ‘that we both hope you will find someone who cares about you. After all, it’s not the… physical side of it that’s important, is it?’

Remus forced himself not to get up and leave the kitchen. Her words - that implications that his feelings were understandable, but his desires were not - enraged him. Trying not to let his anger show, he shook off her hand.

‘Mum, please. Can we not talk about this?’

Mrs Lupin sighed.

‘I don’t think we really realised how much all this with Sirius Black affected you.’ That sounded ludicrous to him - how could they have missed that? Perhaps they had expected his sex-life to be unaffected, while the rest of him got close to breaking-point. For all he knew, his parents saw that part of him as separate from the rest of him. ‘Just because your judgement was off once…’

‘My judgement was off?’ Remus repeated. ‘Is that what you call it? Look, I really don’t want to talk about this.’

‘Very well,’ his mother said. ‘I’m sorry.’

With a deep sigh, she got up. Remus returned to his breakfast, annoyed at himself for losing his temper. Perhaps his mother was not only his poor judgement. If only they had not also been taken in by that charismatic, beautiful young man, they could have saved their son from all that heartache.

But there was no point to such thoughts. Remus must have thought every version of them so many times. It was exhausting and useless. He wished he could tell his mother that, but it was assuming too much.
The front-door opened, and Mr Lupin stepped into the kitchen.

‘Good morning, Remus.’

‘Good morning, dad.’ He watched as his father crossed to his mother and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Did you sleep alright?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘I woke him in the end,’ Mrs Lupin said. The gaze she cast on him was affectionate. Perhaps she had not taken offence after all.

‘Are you all packed?’ Mr Lupin asked.

‘Yes,’ Remus said. Not keen to discuss his departure, he turned to his father. ‘So what are you doing this week, dad?’

Mr Lupin smiled good-naturedly.

‘Oh, I should finish the model of Jupiter, and then I’ve got those lunascopes to get on with.’

‘Good luck with that.’

‘Thank you. I had a new idea, actually - although I think I’d like to try to do one with ivory as well. It would be nice to make a lunascope in the shape of a clock. I was thinking that you could have the hands showing when the moon rises and sets, and the clock-face to indicate the phases. It’s round already, so it could be like a waxing moon…’

Remus listened to his father’s musings on which mechanisms and charms would be best to achieve such an effect, and was struck by a sudden fondness for him. He had heard this kind of monologue countless times, but today it was comforting. It felt much easier to like his parents when he knew he was not going to live with them anymore.

When Mr Lupin’s oration on the usefulness of silver in lunascopes came to an end, he cleared his throat and asked:

‘So… Where are you going?’

‘Down south. Somewhere in the country, I was thinking.’

‘That’s a bit of a gamble,’ Mrs Lupin said. ‘It’ll be difficult to find somewhere there…’

‘But it’ll be safer,’ Mr Lupin said. His wife nodded in agreement. Remus wondered in what way he meant “safer”. He had a suspicion that it was not exposure as a werewolf his father was thinking about.

‘But finding both somewhere to stay and somewhere to work…’

‘I’ll start with somewhere to live,’ Remus said. ‘And then I’ll try to find something closeby. And there are buses, aren’t there? Or I could get a bike and learn how to cycle.’ His father tutted. The thought of something as Muggle as cycling seemed to outrage him. His mother did not look very happy about it either. ‘If worse comes to worse, I can always Apparate. Anyway.’ Remus stood up. ‘I need to get my things. Thank you for the breakfast, mum.’ He kissed her cheek and took the last piece of toast with him.
His room looked very neat now, and even if there were plenty of things left, there was a sense of emptiness in it. Maybe it was the closed trunk at the window that did it.

Drawing his wand, he gave it a tap. At once, the trunk shrunk to the size of a shoebox. He put it in his rucksack and heaved it onto his shoulders. Putting his tweed jacket over his arm, he went downstairs. There, Mr Lupin was still at the table, looking apprehensive, while Mrs Lupin was at the workbench, making sandwiches and looking positively frantic.

‘Mum, dad…’

Mr Lupin stood up.

‘Ready to go?’ He obviously tried to sound cheery, but his frown ruined the effect.

‘Yes.’

‘Just a moment, Remus…’ said his mother, added the final touches to the ham sandwiches and started wrapping them up. He accepted the paper bag and the thermos she thrust at him.

‘Thank you, mum.’

‘Oh, and…’ His mother groped in her pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. She took Remus’ hand, poured them onto it and closed his fingers around them. ‘For stamps and phone calls,’ she explained, looking him in the eye. ‘Please promise you’ll be in touch.’

‘Of course I will,’ Remus said and smiled at her.

‘Will you call tonight so we know where you are?’

He nodded.

‘And you must write,’ Mr Lupin said, getting to his feet. ‘I’ll send you a letter with Agrippina tomorrow.’

‘But dad… I’ll be living with Muggles. Don’t you think an owl delivering my mail might be a bit odd?’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ Mr Lupin said, looking a little lost.

‘I’ll send it for you, love,’ Mrs Lupin said and pressed his arm. ‘You know how stamps work, don’t you, Remus?’

‘Yes. I’ll be fine.’

In the hallway, Remus put away lunch and coins. His parents were both standing in the doorway to the kitchen, looking at him tearily. He put on his jacket and his shoes and turned back to them properly.

‘Right,’ he said, not certain what else to say. His mother stepped up close and took his face between her hands.

‘Take care of yourself, Remus,’ she whispered, her voice shaking with tears. ‘You must.’

‘I will,’ he assured her.

‘And no cycling,’ she said suddenly. ‘You don’t know a thing about Muggle traffic, and we don’t
She smiled, her eyes shimmering.

‘Oh, I do hope it goes well.’ Then she pulled him into an embrace. He hugged her back tightly. Then he embraced his father, who hugged back with equal tenderness. When they let go, Mr Lupin put his arm around his wife, who was trying to smile. Remus smiled back as he picked up his luggage, wishing that his mother’s smile had been genuine and not so tearful.

‘Right then,’ he said and opened the door. ‘I’ll be in touch.’ His parents nodded. ‘Bye.’

He walked down the garden path. At the gates, he turned and waved. His parents, standing on the threshold now, waved back. Remus opened the garden gate and stepped through. It was not until he was out of sight that he relaxed.

The world seemed to open up around him. His senses expanded, no longer tied to his weeping parents, but able to take in the beauty around him. The day was bright and warm. The blue sky was only disturbed by a few wisps of clouds, and the sun shone cheerfully down on the country-lane. Remus could have Apparated from the doorstep, but the weather was so wonderful that he would rather walk while deciding where to go. Until now, all he had decided was to go south. He knew his mother was right, that it would be easiest to find a job in a city, but he did not like it. Cities were noisy, impersonal places, so full of people that it was almost impossible to find somewhere to Change safely. No, he did not want that. Instead, he would indulge his wish - however irrational - of finding somewhere smaller.

What he needed now was a starting point, a place he knew about so he could Apparate to it. Thinking back, he remembered a place they had once gone for a picnic, only six or seven months before Lily and James died. All in all, it had been a dangerous thing to do, but Lily insisted that it was not good for a baby to be inside all the time, and they could defend themselves in case anything was to happen. The picnic itself had not been much of a success. Peter and Sirius had not even turned up. Peter had later admitted that he had forgotten about it, as he often did under the strain of the war. Sirius had offered no explanation, although in retrospect Remus thought he knew why he had not shown. Harry had cried for three hours straight, leaving Lily looking even more exhausted than usual. James had been the only one not annoyed at the baby’s constant screaming - he had been in a duel that had burst his eardrums, so he didn’t hear very well. Remus had ended up feeling rather lost, with James not really being able to keep up a conversation and Lily trying to stop baby Harry from crying. Looking back at it, however, it had been a happy day, a short respite from the fighting and the darkness.

He would go there. It had been in Suffolk, he recalled, although he would not be able to point it out on the map. He did remember seeing a town not far away. That would be his starting-point.

It was time to go. He focused, and turned.

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In between heartbeats, he was nowhere, travelling through the void that fills up the gaps of the world. As quickly as it had embraced him, the darkness spat him out. Remus reeled, unsteady on his feet, blinded by the sunshine. Slowly, he took in his surroundings. It was indeed the place his friends had picked for the picnic half a decade ago. In the distance, he saw houses, forming the outline of a town. A soft breeze ruffled his hair, bringing with it the reminder that soon it would get colder. For now, it only made him smile. Tightening the straps of his rucksack, he set off at a brisk
walk.

The town, he found when he reached it, was smaller than he had thought, barely more than a village. He looked from side to side, trying to see some sign in a window or a poster on a noticeboard. There were none. Despite being a bright Monday morning, he only saw a handful of people. It was not difficult to find a deserted spot away from prying Muggle eyes to Apparate a few miles south.

Remus had no idea how much ground he covered that morning. He would appear in the fringes of the towns and villages and walk through them. Usually he would be on the lookout for signs, or stop in pubs to look through the local papers when the landlord wasn’t looking. Sometimes, hoping against hope, he would enter shops and ask if they had any vacancies. He was always met with apologetic frowns and shaking heads. The fine weather made it easier not to lose sight of what he had come for.

Sometime after noon, he sat down on the bank of a small river to eat his sandwiches and drink his tea. When he sat still, he could feel the chill properly. Against his better judgement, he asked himself what would happen if this gamble didn’t pay off. If he did not find anything today, would he go back to his parents? Perhaps he could sleep under the stars. Sleeping outside sounded romantic, but he had done it enough times to know that even after a warm day in high summer, nights were cold, and using magic, however deserted the space seemed, was usually unwise.

As he continued into the afternoon, he was starting to doubt his plan altogether. He felt tired after all the Apparating. Could he make it to London today if he decided that this plan was a bad one? He reached out with his mind, magically visualising where he was now and how far away London was. He was not certain he would manage it in one jump, maybe not even in several.

As the day dragged on, Remus started growing dispirited. The clock in the parish church’s tower struck three when he wandered into yet another small town. A sign that badly needed a lick of paint announced that the town was called Lackham Parva. There were no signs about vacancies in the shop windows, so Remus went to the post-office in search for a notice-board. He found it just by the door. As he read through the announcements for dances, book-switching, lost cats, he felt his heart sink. It had all been a bad idea, after all. Perhaps he should just go to London.

His eyes fell on a handwritten notice. “Guest house - Bexwold.” He leaned close to read it. There were some basic details about the accommodation and a phone number. The notice looked old, but it seemed foolish to ignore it. Remus found a post office pen and wrote down the phone-number on his palm. Just then, he realised that someone was watching him. He looked up, and saw an old man surveying him curiously. Remus smiled, as some kind of peace-offering.

‘Planning to go to Bexwold, are you?’ the old man said.

‘I thought I might,’ Remus said. ‘Is it far from here?’

‘About three miles east. But I wouldn’t go there if I were you.’

‘Why not?’

The man said and shrugged, as if trying to put on the air that he really didn’t believe it, but was only passing on general opinion.

‘There’s something funny about it. People say there’s something in the woods.’

‘Thanks,’ Remus said, not knowing what else to say. He put his rucksack back on, left the pen on
the table and went outside. The old man’s warning had piqued his interest. What was more, what he had said had sounded like superstition. For a moment, he thought that he should be running away, not towards this, if there was something going on, but he doubted there was anything in it. Besides, Muggle superstitions had always fascinated him. He liked to see where they were right, and what they had filled the gaps with.

The telephone box down the road was covered in graffiti, but it still seemed in order. He extracted some of the change his mother had given him and, holding the receiver in place with his shoulder, dialled the number he had written on his hand. He licked his lips apprehensively and waited for someone to pick up.

There was a distant ‘click’ in the earpiece, and a deep alto voice:

‘Hello?’

‘Yes, hello,’ Remus said, caught almost off guard. ‘I saw your notice about the guest house in the post-office in Lackham Parva, and was calling to see if it was still… up to date.’

The person at the end of the line paused. Remus felt a brief flare of panic - the notice was old and forgotten, and he had just made a fool out of himself, and he had just spent some of the coins his mother had given him to phone her on it.

‘I had completely forgotten that notice, sorry,’ the woman on the phone said. ‘But yes, there are rooms available, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Oh, good.’ The panic melted away. ‘I would be interested to look at one of the rooms.’

‘Naturally. When do you think you would be here?’

‘Would in half an hour’s time be alright?’

‘You’d have trouble getting from Lackham Parva to Bexwold in half an hour,’ the woman said; Remus thought she was smiling on her side of the line. ‘There’s only one bus an hour, and it takes forty minutes.’

‘I’m not in Lackham Parva anymore,’ Remus said quickly.

‘Oh, in that case… Half an hour is fine. May I take your name?’

‘Lupin.’

‘Very well, Mr Lupin. I’ll expect you at half past three, then.’

‘Great. Goodbye.’

He hung up, and set off at a leisurely pace, taking in the countryside, until it was twenty past three and he decided to Apparate to the guest house. He put everything else out of his mind and concentrated on the name of the village. Bexwold - such a strange sound. He turned…

…and appeared. He was at the end of an avenue, lined with high oak trees. It was a big difference from the small town where he had just been. Although he could hear the distant sound of cars, this smelled like the countryside. There must be fields close by.

As he started walking straight ahead, away from the avenue, he caught the first glimpses of a house. It was an isolated Victorian brick house, with brick decorations under the roof-tiles.
Evergreen clung to the walls, and around the gate stood the stems of climbing roses, dead and shrivelled in the autumn cold.

He went through the gate and up to the garden path. He rang the doorbell and waited, resisting the urge to look through the lace curtains. After a while, he started wondering if the doorbell had worked probably. He was just about to ring it again when he heard the sound of someone hurrying down the stairs and through the hallway. The door opened.

‘Mr Lupin?’ The woman on the threshold was tall, even regal, despite her hair sweeping into her face after rushing to the door. Her deep voice was unmistakably the same as on the phone.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘I’m Mrs Mason.’ They shook hands. ‘Come in. The room is upstairs.’

Remus followed her, looking around apprehensively. The hallway had felt cheerful, but the upper floor felt cold and un-lived in.

‘How many guests do you have right now?’ he asked.

‘Oh, none, I’m afraid,’ Mrs Mason said, making her way to the end of the landing. ‘Business isn’t what it used to be. People tend to move away from the country instead of to it. Although it picks up in the summer.’ She opened the door. ‘I opened the window just after you called, just to let some fresh air in, but it’ll air out.’

Remus stepped in. It was not a large room. There was a bed in one corner, and a chest of drawers beside it. By the window stood a little table with a kettle on, and a chair. He imagined unpacking his belongings, putting his books on the chest, arranging his clothes. Through the window, he saw the lane running in front of the house, half-obscured by the tree growing outside.

‘Is there a bathroom?’

‘Yes, down the hall.’

‘And what about cooking?’

‘You’ll have access to the kitchen in the mornings, and in the evenings for tea. You do your own cooking and grocery-shopping, mind.’

‘Naturally. What’s the rent?’

Mrs Mason named her price. Remus had to recalculate it into galleons - he needed to get used to thinking in pounds.

‘Would cash be alright?’ he asked.

‘Well, I would prefer a cheque…’

‘I’m afraid I don’t have a cheque-book,’ Remus said. ‘But I would like the room.’

Mrs Mason smiled a little. It did not make a very big difference to her face, but it made it easier to smile back.

‘Cash will be fine. How long are you planning to stay?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ he admitted, ‘but could I pay for a month?’
‘Certainly. Would you come downstairs?’

They went back down, into the kitchen, where Remus took enough money in Muggle banknotes to cover the rent out of his rucksack and handed them over. Mrs Mason folded them horizontally to smooth them out, counted them and looked them over. Then she put them away, wrote him a receipt and then got out a book which seemed to be a book of her guests.

‘It was Lupin - L-U-P-I-N, like the flower?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘And your first name?’

‘Remus.’

‘Would you write your previous address and your signature, please?’

Remus took the pen and did so.

‘Did you have any more luggage, Mr Lupin?’

‘Yes. I left it outside. I’ll go fetch it.’

Before Mrs Mason had time to say anything, Remus had picked up his rucksack and gone outside again. Pushing the door closed so she would not see what he was doing, he took the miniaturised trunk and tapped it with his wand. It inflated to its normal size. He carried it into the hall, as Mrs Mason watched from the kitchen door, looking confusedly at the big trunk she had missed.

‘I forgot to ask,’ Mrs Mason said, once Remus put down the trunk. ‘What do you do for a living?’

‘I’m looking for a job, actually.’

‘I see,’ Mrs Mason said, raising her eyebrows skeptically. ‘I thought you might be a writer or something.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Well, I’ll let you get on.’

She went into the kitchen. Remus pulled his trunk up onto its side and started pulling it up the stairs.

‘Oh…’ Mrs Mason reappeared in the doorway. ‘I doubt it’s your kind of job, but the Carters are looking for a new lad.’

Remus turned to look at her mid-motion, the trunk balancing precariously on one step.

‘Who are the Carters?’

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Twenty minutes later, Remus had put his trunk in his rooms, received his keys and left the guest house to head into Bexwold. It was a small place - everything seemed to exist on this one street. Some houses were obviously people’s homes. There was also a pub, a tobacconist and, close to the church which headed the high street, a butcher’s shop. Pheasants and legs of mutton hung in the window. The sign above it announced the name of the owner - Carter. There was a hand-written
note in the window, stating what Mrs Mason had already told him, that they were looking for a
new assistant. The bell on the door rang when he pushed open the door.

The first thing that struck Remus was the strange but not unpleasant smell of both raw and prepared
meats. The counter was filled with homemade sausages, sliced, diced and prepared meats, loins,
feet, tails - even heads and offal. There were also eggs, and vegetables and fruits in abundance. The
autumn apples looked particularly fine.

The beaded curtain behind the till clinked as a hand swept it aside. The man who stepped through
it must have been fifty-five at least, but his eyes were keen.

‘What can I do for you, sir?’

‘Actually, I’m here about the job advertised in the window,’ Remus said. Mr Carter looked
surprised. Remus notice him taking in his tweed jacket and button-down shirt Then he covered up
his surprise and smiled.

‘Well, in that case...’ He rounded the counter, went past Remus and turned the sign on the door.
‘What’s your name?’

‘Remus Lupin.’ The butcher smiled and stretched out a large hand.

‘And I’m Arnold Carter - as the sign says.’ Remus shook his hand and smiled back, taking an
instant liking to him. ‘Do you have a CV with you?’ He nodded. ‘Come through, then.’

He followed the butcher through the bead curtain, into a back room.

‘If you just sit down, and I’ll get my wife...’ Carter gestured at the table in the middle of the room.
As Remus sat down, Carter disappeared through another door. Nervously, Remus picked up his
CV, which he had typed out on his mother’s typewriter when she was not watching. He looked
through the various mentions of jobs in antique shops, bookshops, apothecaries, pubs. He cast a
glance on the typed copy of Dumbledore’s letter of recommendation, full of vague mentions of
diligence and trustworthiness. A sudden wave of disillusionment broke over him. He had a list of
dozens of jobs which he had kept far too short a time, and a letter from a school-master whose
word had no weight in the Muggle world. He could see no reason for anyone to give him a job.
Even if they did, the full moon was in two weeks, on the night between a Monday and Tuesday.
Why would he keep this job any longer than any of the others?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Mr Carter returning. Now, he had a woman with
him. She had the look of being older than him, but Remus got the feeling that it was only an
impression. She looked diminished somehow, but she smiled at him, and he thought he saw
curiosity in her eyes.

‘This is my wife, Denise,’ Carter explained.

‘How do you do, Mrs Carter,’ said Remus and stood up. They shook hands.

‘How do you do, Mr...?’

‘Lupin,’ he said. ‘Remus Lupin.’ She frowned, despite still smiling.

‘What an odd name. Where is it from?’

‘Oh, it’s Latin,’ Remus said quickly and shrugged. ‘My mother’s always been very keen on
mythology.’
‘How nice,’ Mrs Carter said, still perplexed. Mr Carter pulled out a chair for her, which she went to slowly. Remus sat down again.

‘Have you ever worked in a butcher’s shop before?’ Carter asked, glancing at Remus’ CV.

‘No, to be honest.’ He watched him as reading through the paper. The silence was uncomfortable.

‘It doesn’t look quite like the kind of thing you’ve done before,’ Carter said at last and handled the CV to Mrs Carter.

‘I’m used to working in shops, though,’ Remus said quickly. ‘And I’m a fast learner.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ Mr Carter said, now reading through Dumbledore’s letter. ‘You don’t have any references from your previous jobs?’

‘None of the more recent ones.’ It was like watching the man’s hopes for him evaporating. As her husband read through the letter, Mrs Carter did not take her eyes off him. Despite her kindly gaze, he found it disconcerting. Then she took the letter of recommendation from her husband and read it too. For a while, there was complete silence. Only when she finished reading and put the letter down did Mr Carter speak.

‘See here, Mr Lupin, we need an assistant not just to mind the shop. It’s also preparing different kinds of meats, making deliveries, that sort of thing. And to be honest, it’s rather heavy work.’

‘I’m stronger than I look,’ said Remus, aware that it sounded like an excuse. Mr Carter looked about to say something, but Mrs Carter touched his arm. Evidently changing his mind, Carter said:

‘In that case, you wouldn’t mind a small test?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Carry that crate over here.’

Remus followed Carter’s pointing finger. There was a wooden crate full of vegetables standing on the floor. He crossed to it and leaned down to get a good grip. When he first lifted it, he realised that it was far heavier than he had anticipated. He bent his knees, got his fingers under the crate and lifted it up. Then, with relative ease, he carried it over to the table and placed it in front of the Carters. Mr Carter looked genuinely surprised, but Mrs Carter only smiled.

‘Well,’ Mr Carter said. ‘Well done.’ He looked at the crate rather helplessly. ‘Would you mind putting it back?’ Remus carried it back to where it had been before. At the table, Mrs Carter was speaking to her husband in such a soft voice that Remus could not hear. When he turned around, Mr Carter touched her arm and stood.

‘Would you mind giving us a few minutes, Mr Lupin?’

Remus shook his head, wondering whether this meant that they were changing their minds.

‘Go for a little walk,’ Mrs Carter said in her soft voice.

‘Give us ten minutes,’ Mr Carter added. ‘And if we can keep these until then...’ He gestured at the CV.

‘Of course.’ Before he could leave, Carter shook his hand. Mrs Carter’s smile looked suddenly secretive.
Remus let himself out by the still unlocked shop entrance. The chime from the church tower proclaimed the time to be half past four. He set off towards the church, as good a direction as any. With its flat-roofed, crenelated tower, it looked almost like a fortress. He let himself through the gate and walked around the church, between the graves. His eyes passed over the names and the dates, most of them far in the past. Some stones were half-covered in ivy, obscuring the inscriptions. In a corner of the cemetery was a war monument, the dates of both Muggle wars written under the title proclaiming the glory of the fallen. Remus looked down the high street. This cemetery probably held more dead bodies than the village had living people.

At once being the only breathing being within those walls frightened him. He was an intruder. He hurried towards the gates. When he closed them behind him, he looked up at the clock again, and saw that the long hand was approaching the eight. Turning away from the gate, he went back towards the butcher’s shop.

Well at the door, he hesitated, not knowing whether he was supposed to wait outside or go in. As he was trying to decide, he saw the beaded curtain inside separate and Mrs Carter appear. She waved at him, her smile just like it had been before. Remus stepped in. The bell on the door rang above him.

‘Come through,’ said Mrs Carter and went ahead. Remus followed her. In the back-room, Mr Carter was standing up, looking at the CV again. When he looked up, he folded the papers up and offered them to him. Remus reached out to take them, not surprised but feeling defeated at this rejection. But as his fingers closed on the papers, Mr Carter said:

‘I’m willing to take you on for a week to see if you’re up for it.’

Remus looked up at him. He was smiling, tightlipped but sincere.

‘If that’s something you’re interested in,’ he added.

‘Yes,’ Remus said. ‘Absolutely.’

Mr Carter pushed the papers into his hand.

‘Can you start tomorrow?’ He nodded. ‘Good. I want you here by 6.30. Clean clothes and short sleeves, please. Will cash in envelope be alright? Or would you prefer cheque?’

‘Cash in envelope sounds excellent,’ Remus said. He did not quite believe that he had actually been offered something, even if it was just a week. By the way Mr Carter was looking at him, his surprise and delight was visible on his face. ‘What would the salary be, if I may ask?’

Again, Remus had to convert it to galleons.

‘Does that sound alright to you?’

‘Yes, definitely. Thank you.’

Mr Carter nodded, with a sense of finality, and rubbed his hands together.

‘Well, in that case, I will see you tomorrow morning.’

Remus shook his hand. Then he went over to Mrs Carter, who was getting up from her seat by the table, and shook her hand too. With a final word of thanks and good-bye, he left the butcher’s shop, resolute to find a phone box and call his parents to tell them the good news.
Chapter 3

It was still dark outside when the alarm clock went off. Remus turned it off and got out of bed. Not yet sure about the layout of the room, he made his way to the door and flicked the light switch. The bright room felt like an isolated place in this sleeping world. Outside, he heard the wind whispering through the trees.

As the kettle boiled downstairs, he washed and dressed. The tea water was ready when he came down to get the bread he had bought from a rather sad-looking bakery the previous day. He made some sandwiches for lunch, and then turned to make breakfast. Remus was well aware that using magic in a Muggle house was strictly not a good idea, but this seemed like such a small thing it barely counted. With a tap of his wand he turned two slices of bread into toast. He brought his breakfast up to his room and ate it sitting by the window. From his perch, he could make out the dark shapes of the tree-tops against the sky. If he looked at an angle, he could just about make out the bright half-circle of the moon, about to set.

His thoughts wandered, then settled on the day ahead. Then he thought: perhaps this is the one I’ll be able to keep. Not that there was any guarantee it would be easy, but at least Mr and Mrs Carter didn’t know anything about werewolves. His inexperience was probably a bigger obstacle. But he had not lied when he had told them that he was a fast learner. As long as he caught on quickly enough, they might keep him on – that is, if nothing else came in the way. Could he really pass for a Muggle? There must be things he didn’t know - things he did not even know existed. At best that would be embarrassing, at worst disastrous.

There were other obstacles too, of course. Remus found himself looking at his arms, for once bare. He tried to look at the many scars on his skin with a stranger’s eyes. It did not matter if the Carters didn’t know about werewolves - they would notice those arms. There was nothing to be done about the scars on his face, as they had already seen them, but he could hide the rest. He traced an intricate shape over his left arm with his wand. The scars seemed to melt into the skin. When he drew his hand over it, he could feel the familiar ridges of scar-tissue, but they were not visible. He took his wand in his left hand and repeated the shape. Conjuring with his non-dominant hand was harder, and the glamour was not as strong, but it would do - his right arm was not quite as bad anyway.

The alarm clock’s hands had moved to form a vertical line, splitting the clock-face. He was supposed to be at the shop in half an hour. Remus put down his wand, but then picked it up again. Even if he was going to be among Muggles, he did not want to be without it. He stowed it in the inner pocket of his jacket before he left, moving quietly so as not to wake his landlady.

The route into the village looked different in the dark. A few times, Remus had to stop and make sure that he was walking in the right direction. More than once he wondered why he had not simply Apparated - that way he would not get lost. Unwilling to use magic in a Muggle areas, he continued walking. A faint strip of light was growing in the east, but it did not reach down onto the road where he walked.

At long last, Remus saw the street-lamps of the village ahead of him. As he hurried towards the shop, he took his wrist-watch out of his pocket and checked the time. He was a few minutes early.

He reached the door and knocked. Through the glass, he saw the distant light from the back room, and something move through the darkness of the shop. As the shape approached the door, it gained shape, and he recognised Mr Carter. He unlocked the door and pushed it open.
‘Good morning, Mr Carter.’

‘Early bird gets the worm, eh?’ Carter said and grinned. ‘Come in - you’re right on time.’

He followed him through the shop, dark except for the light coming in from the street-lamps outside. The electric lights in the back-room were so bright that he felt momentarily blinded. He had grown used to the murkiness of gas-lamps and open fires the past few years.

‘There’s a hook over there where you can leave your jacket,’ Carter said and gestured. Remus took off his jacket and hung it where he had shown him, feeling a momentary twinge at his wand leaving his person. ‘In the future, just come through the back door. You just go down the alleyway and turn left.’ The butcher took out an apron and handed it to him. As he tied it around his back, Remus asked:

‘Do you live above the shop?’

‘Yes - it’s the best way to do it,’ Carter said. ‘Close to work, and it means no-one dares to break in. I can’t remember - did you mention where you live?’

‘I’m renting a room with Mrs Mason,’ Remus said. ‘South of the village.’

‘At Mrs Mason’s, you say? Do you have a bike?’

‘No, I walked.’

‘That’s quite a trek, this early in the morning.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind, Mr Carter.’ He nodded, looking pleased.

‘Mrs Mason usually keeps herself to herself. Always felt she was a bit odd. Never been able to put my finger on why. She used to do booming business with that guest house, but not so much anymore. Anyway, I’m sure she’s a good landlady. Now, how’s your sense of the area?’

‘Not as good as it should be, sir. I haven’t been here long.’

‘Well, if you’re as fast a learner as you say you are, you should be alright. I’ll have Denise show you a map and explain the deliveries. They go out on Tuesdays. Now come on, wash your hands and I’ll show you what needs doing where.’

When Remus came back to his room that afternoon, his knees ached after hours of standing. He took off his shoes and collapsed on his bed with a sigh of relief. This was a pleasant tiredness, not brought on by illness but by action. It was a long time ago he did such a physical job, but he had enjoyed the day. It had been varied, starting with deliveries - from the abattoir, which delivered most of a cow, and from the farms, bringing eggs and vegetables. Carter had chatted with the man from the abattoir and introduced Remus, although he had forgotten the man’s name at once. The woman who delivered the eggs, all piled up in cartons in the basket of her bicycle, was called Miss Courage, and looked to be Remus’ junior by a few years. ‘I haven’t seen you before,’ was the first thing she said to him, brightly, before Mr Carter had come out to pay her for the eggs.

By the time they opened, Remus had already been so busy that he had not had time to worry about making mistakes. Together, he and his boss carried out the wares to put into the counters and arranged vegetables and eggs. The town was small enough that the butcher’s shop doubled as a greengrocer’s.
Steadily, as the shop opened and customers started turning up, Remus started realising how small the community he had ended up in really was. Every customer greeted the butcher by name, and Mr Carter would stage-whisper to Remus:

‘That’s Mrs McConnell... Here comes Mrs Stewart... That there was the Kitegates’ boy…’ The only ones whose names he did not know, he would instead place on the intricate map of connections. ‘That’s Mr Thomson’s sister-in-law, but damned if I can remember her name’, or: ‘that man’s bought Moore’s farm. Rebuilt it into some modern monstrosity. A real shame.’

That comment seemed to be the only thing that acknowledged the passing of time in this place. Remus reflected that this little village was not unlike the wizarding world in miniature, where you were bound to be neighbours or classmates or at least passing acquaintances. It was not like he had imagined the Muggle world would be. His image of that world was Charing Cross Road in London, busy and confusing. It was all buses and exhaust fumes and noisy music. He had never imagined it could also be a calm little village which maintained an uneasy truce with modernity.

Even the young seemed to be missing. By the end of the day, he had only seen few young adults, and he had only seen a handful of children, still in their school uniforms. Remus did not know where the closest school was, but he guessed you had to go by bus to get there. He recalled what Mrs Mason had said yesterday, that more people looked to leave Bexwold than move there.

A scream carried up from the ground floor. Remus was abruptly shaken from his musings. The sound of the scream flicked a switch in his head. All thoughts of the Statute of Secrecy forgotten, he grabbed his wand and sprinted downstairs. His mind was running through scenarios of attack and defence, taking in the floor-plan and marking out weak points in the structure.

He came to a halt in the kitchen door. Mrs Mason was standing at the window, mouth open and eyes wide, her hand clutched to her heart.

‘What’s happened, Mrs Mason?’ Remus asked, trying to catch his breath.

She looked up at him.

‘I thought I just saw an owl,’ she said, her voice odd. ‘I’ve never seen one in the daylight before… I think it crashed in the garden. I’ve never heard of such a thing…’ She looked quite shaken.

Remus exhaled, fighting the impulse to laugh.

‘Do you think it’s dead?’ Mrs Mason asked. ‘Perhaps that’s why it crashed.’

‘I’ll go and have a look,’ he said, hiding his wand up his sleeve. His voice shook a little - the adrenaline burst was wearing off. ‘Sit down and catch your breath, Mrs Mason.’

Reluctantly, she went to sit down. Remus stepped out of the back door. The garden beyond it had probably been beautiful only a few weeks ago, but now in the middle of October it looked brown and unappealing. He could hear squawking from behind some bare rose-bushes.

When he rounded them, he saw Agrippina, his father’s owl, struggling against the cord tied around her leg. The cord was attached to a note and, absurdly, a pair of wellington boots. Remus stifled a laugh and leaned down.

‘Calm down, Agrippina,’ he whispered and stroked the owl carefully. She tried to bite his finger and squawked furiously at him, so he decided to keep his distance and untie the cord instead. When he finally undid the knot, Agrippina hooted indignantly and shot off.
Crouching behind the rose bushes, Remus unfolded the note.

Dear Remus,
You forgot to pack your wellies. Seeing as you’re living in the countryside, they might come in handy.
With love,
Dad

Remus could not help but laugh. It was a wonder that poor Agrippina had made it all the way down to Suffolk with such a load. He would have to write to him and remind him that the owl attracted attention. On closer thought, perhaps he should tell his mother instead.

He put the note in his pocket and hid the wellies under the rosebush. He would retrieve them later in the evening. When he returned to the kitchen, Mrs Mason looked around anxiously.

‘Was it an owl?’

‘Yes, it was, actually,’ he said and crossed to the kettle. ‘It’s gone now. Where do you keep teabags?’

‘Oh, in the cupboard to the left.’

Remus made two cups of tea and brought them over to the table.

‘You’re too kind, Mr Lupin,’ Mrs Mason murmured as she took one of them. Remus sat down opposite her.

‘That’s alright.’

‘It just startled me, that’s all,’ Mrs Mason said, explanations quickly turning into excuses. Remus was not sure it was for his sake or hers.

‘You don’t often see owls in the daylight.’

‘No… no, you don’t,’ she agreed. ‘You get all sorts of animals around here, of course. There’s a huge flock of deer that will sometimes pass right by this house. I’ve had foxes in the garden for I don’t know how long. And you do see owls at night - lots of them.’

She drank her tea, her shock receding. After a while’s silence, she said:

‘You seem like a city-boy to me. How come you’ve moved here of all places?’

‘I’m not, actually,’ Remus said. ‘I’ve spent most of my life in the country. My parents live out in the middle of nowhere.’

Mrs Mason smiled.

‘I was wrong, then,’ she said. ‘But the question still stands. You don’t strike me as a butcher’s boy.’

Remus shrugged.

‘It’s nothing I’ve done before, but - why not?’

Mrs Mason looked a little wistful, and nodded.
‘Yes, indeed. Why not.’ She sipped her tea. ‘I hope you will like it here. It’s not a bad place. It’s small, of course - but it’s not quite in the middle of nowhere.’

‘I like what I’ve seen this far.’

‘Good.’

‘Are you local?’

‘Not originally,’ Mrs Mason said. ‘I started off in Plymouth. I’ve run this place for the past ten years, though, so I’ve acclimatised.’

Remus hesitated before asking the next question.

‘What about Mr Mason?’

Mrs Mason laughed.

‘Oh, I left him in Plymouth.’

They were silent for a while longer. Then Remus remembered something he had thought about.

‘Mrs Mason, if you’ve been here this long…’

She raised her eyebrows in question.

‘In Lackham Parva, in the post-office where I found your telephone number, there was an old man who told me that Bexwold was a funny place. He said there was something in the wood.’

Mrs Mason laughed, looking delighted.

‘Oh, that!’ she said. ‘It’s very silly. A while back, some of the farmers had some animals killed. I think the children in the other villages make up stories about it.’

‘But you don’t think there’s anything in it?’

‘It’s all rubbish,’ Mrs Mason said reasonably. ‘Something in the wood, indeed…’ She stood up and took their mugs.

‘What about the killed animals?’

‘Sheep, mostly,’ she said, starting to wash up. ‘I don’t know any real facts. When people say it’s been going on for years, they might just be making it up. But one of the farmers did have a sheep killed just a few months ago.’

‘What do you think happened to it?’

‘Well, nothing hiding in the woods, that’s for sure,’ she said. ‘Kids doing drugs, probably.’ She put the mugs to the side to dry. ‘I’m afraid there’s a lot of that around here.’ She turned to look him. ‘You seem very interested in this,’ she observed.

‘I’m very interested in urban myths,’ he said and rose. Mrs Mason looked at him in appreciation.

‘Well, I don’t know if you can call them urban.’

***
Remus’ second morning in the butcher’s shop was like a memory exercise. He remembered some names from Carter’s commentary yesterday, and did his best to learn the new ones whispered to him. Some of the customers, even ones he had not met yet, seemed to know his name. One old lady peered at him and greeted him with: ‘so you’re the new boy - I hadn’t expected someone so skinny.’

By ten o’clock, Carter sent him back into the back room.

‘Go put the kettle on, would you? Denise should be down soon.’

Remus was just filling the teacups when he heard Mrs Carter descend the stairs to the flat above. They were slow, as if she was afraid to fall. Mr Carter came into the back-room. Remus could make out the couple’s voices but not their words. It sounded tender, so he lingered over the tea-tray a little longer than necessary. When he came out of the kitchenette, Mrs Carter was just sitting down at the table.

‘I’ll take my tea out in the shop,’ Mr Carter said and took one of the mugs off the tray. ‘Ta. Denise will fill you in about the deliveries.’

Remus put the tray down and placed one of the cups in front of Mrs Carter. It took her a moment to notice; her eyes were fixed on something else. Then she snapped to attention.

‘Oh, thank you, dear.’ Remus took his own mug and looked to see what she had been so enrapt by. It was a framed photograph of a young man, dressed in a uniform Remus could not identify. He stood with his hands clasped in front of him, smiling confidently at the camera. The man’s eyes met nothing in the room, unaware of those watching him. The photograph bothered Remus. He knew full well that it would not move, but there was something static about it which had nothing to do with the way it had been developed.

Not wanting to be caught staring, he looked away and took a quick sip of his tea, scalding his tongue. He put down his cup, and then picked it up again as Mrs Carter spread the ordinance map she had just unfolded across the table.

‘So here we are,’ she said, pointing out a village on the map. ‘You’re staying at Mrs Mason’s guest house, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that’s there, so this must be the way you walk in the mornings. Now, there are three weekly deliveries. The Smith farm is past Mrs Mason’s - here.’ She pointed to it, and then traced a route with her finger. ‘So if you go down this street, and then turn onto this road here. You go left, and then...’ She tapped a cross drawn in biro. ‘There’s the farm. The second is the Chapmans. Lovely old couple. To get there, you go past the church, and down this way...’ Again, she showed him the route he was supposed to take. Remus’ eyes followed her finger, trying to memorise her advice. ‘And from their cottage, you can get to Mrs Leason easily. There’s a small lane here, which takes you to this road, and there it is - Rose Cottage.’

‘Right,’ Remus said. ‘I think I remember it.’

‘Take the map with you this time,’ Mrs Carter said and started folding it up. ‘The deliveries are supposed to be done by twelve - isn’t that right, Arnold?’

Mr Carter poked his head into the back room.

‘Yes, noon,’ he said. ‘So we want you back here at half past. Denise, will you give him the keys to
‘The bike?’ Remus repeated before he could stop himself.

‘We keep it in the shed on the yard,’ Mrs Carter said and got to her feet.

‘It’s got a box for the deliveries, to keep them cold,’ Mr Carter said. Neither of them seemed to have noticed his nervousness. ‘I’ll get the stuff for you.’

A few minutes later, Remus had been given the keys to the bike, the map, a list of the deliveries and several packages of meat.

‘Anything the matter?’ Mr Carter asked. ‘You look a little...’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Remus said quickly, took off his apron and grabbed his jacket. ‘I’ll go at once.’

The butcher nodded.

‘Good. Be back in time.’

Remus was out of the door before he had finished the sentence. The bicycle was in the shed in the back yard as he had been told. He put the packages in the box on the luggage carrier and stuffed the map and list in his pocket. The lock was stiff, but after a few attempts the key turned and the lock opened. As he wheeled it out, he listened to the clicking of the unfamiliar mechanism. He looked around and, seeing no one there, took a left instead of a right, avoiding the main street.

As he lead the bicycle down the small parallel street, his mother’s words came back to him. *No cycling - you don’t know a thing about Muggle traffic.* She was perfectly right, of course. He knew to stay on the left side of the road, but he didn’t understand any of the signs. Besides, he had not even sat on a bike. The closest he had got was riding on the back of the motorbike, but that had been in the air most of the time.

When he reached the avenue close to Mrs Mason’s house, he lead the bike behind a tree, locked it and undid the fastenings of the box. In his mind, he recited the list - the Smith farm, the Chapmans’ house, Rose Cottage. He envisaged the map, and the cross Mrs Carter had put on the farm. He turned on the spot...

...And was squeezed back into being just behind an outhouse. He left his hiding-place and approached the big house. Before he had reached it, a door opened and a woman stepped out.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘My name’s Lupin,’ said Remus. ‘I’ve got your delivery from Mr Carter.’

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Smith, her face softening. ‘You’re the new boy. You’re very early. Where’s your bike?’

‘It broke down farther down the road.’ He put down the box, took up the packages marked ‘Smith’ and handed it over.

‘Thank you. Do you need to borrow a repair kit?’

‘It’s not too bad, actually,’ he said quickly. ‘I’ll be able to get it back.’ He picked up the box again. ‘But thank you.’ Mrs Smith said good-bye and went back into the house. Remus did not return to his previous hiding-place to Disapparate, but walked down the path which must lead to the road, in
case she was watching him. When he was certain he was out of sight, he filled his mind with the thought of the Chapmans’ cottage.

A moment later, he was standing in front of it, precariously in plain sight. He turned around, afraid to see some startled Muggle there, but there was no-one. When he handed over the package, Mr Chapman tried to invite him in for a cup of tea as his wife shouted encouragements from the kitchen. Remus declined, blaming the other deliveries. He found a good spot behind an oak and concentrated on Rose Cottage.

With the next heartbeat, he appeared again. Deep, angered baying inundated his senses.

He stumbled backwards, almost dropping the box. Then his faculties caught up with him, and he saw the animal. It was a labrador, digging its front paws into the ground and showing its teeth between barks. It might be black, but it was well-groomed and (in comparison to what he had expected) rather small. Remus put his hand to his chest and tried to get his breathing under control. That was how Mrs Leason, a sprightly woman in her seventies, found him moments later.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘Did Nibs startle you?’ She bent down and took the dog by the collar. ‘Shush, you. Bad dog.’ She looked up at him again and smiled apologetically. ‘You must have given her a fright too.’

‘I suppose I might have,’ Remus said weakly. The dog must have seen him appear out of thin air, or perhaps it could smell the wolf on him. Trying to pull himself together, he said: ‘I’ve got your delivery from Mr Carter.’

‘Oh, I see,’ the old lady said. ‘How lovely.’ She let go of her dog to cross to him. As soon as her hand left the collar, the dog bounded forward and threw itself at the fence, baying. Remus jerked back, away from it. The animal’s rolling eyes and threateningly bared teeth brought something altogether worse to mind.

‘Nibs! Nibs! Stop that at once - bad dog!’ shouted Mrs Leason and grabbed hold of the dog again. With all her might, she steered the dog away from the fence and towards the house. She pushed the door open, shunted the dog inside and closed it before it had time to sneak out again. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she said as she turned back. ‘She’s usually so good with strangers...’ She looked at him and pressed her lips together in worry. ‘Oh dear, you look very pale.’

‘I’m alright,’ Remus said. He balanced the box on the fence and took out the final package. As he handed over it, he hoped Mrs Leason would not notice how his hand shook.

‘Thank you, my dear.’ She turned the package around in her hands and read the label of what was in it. ‘Yes, that’s right.’ Then she looked up at him again. ‘You haven’t been with the Carters long, have you? I haven’t seen you before.’

‘This is my first week.’

‘Oh, I see. That explains it. What’s your name?’

‘Lupin.’

‘Well, Mr Lupin, thank you. I’m sorry about silly old Nibs. I don’t know what got into her.’

‘No need to apologise,’ Remus said and stepped back, to show that he was on his way. Mrs Leason smiled.

‘Bye now.’ She turned and went back to her cottage, as Remus hurried down the lane. He could
hear the dog’s barks as Mrs Leason opened her door. He hurried his step and ducked in between
the trees. *The avenue - the bike*, he thought and turned on the spot.

Next moment, he was standing where he had set out from. He sank down, his back against the
trees. There he stayed, with his forehead against his knees, for a long time. In his mind he still
heard the barking of that dog. He reminded himself that it had been a normal labrador with a well-
groomed coat and a neat collar - it was called Nibs, of all silly names - but it did not make a
difference. He could not rid himself of the vision of that massive, shaggy black dog.

Little by little, the horror receded. Reason was catching up with him. He regained enough
composure to look at his watch. It was only eleven o’clock. He could not go back yet. The Carters
expected the rounds to take until half past twelve. He would not be able to explain why he was
back an hour and a half too early. It struck him now that Apparating had been risky. What if his
employers found out how quickly he had managed to do the deliveries? But no, he could not see
how that would pose a threat to the Statute of Secrecy. If the Carters heard that he had delivered
earlier than usual, they would just think he was efficient. If anyone told them the exact time he had
delivered, they would assume that they were mistaken, because no one could cycle that fast. They
would not assume that he could move by magic, because to them that would seem absurd.

But he should not make a habit of it. He would simply have to learn how to ride a bike. The avenue
would work well as a training-ground. The trees would shield him a little, and he would notice if
someone came along the road. If word reached the Carters that he did not actually know how to
ride a bike, they would undoubtedly become suspicious.

As he led the bike onto the road, he felt himself still shaking from his scare. He pushed it aside as
best he could, taking a few deep breaths and making himself concentrate on the here and now.
Staring at the bike, he realised that he did not actually know how to balance on it. He was aware of
the general theory: feet on pedals - pedals propelling the bike forward. It couldn’t be too difficult,
could it?

He swung one leg over the frame, put his right foot on the pedal, and froze. Getting his other foot
off the ground was a bigger problem than he had anticipated. Every time he tried to lift it, it only
turned into a small jump. Finally, he managed to lift it properly and put it on the pedal. At once, he
keeled over. He had no time to put his foot out to break the fall, and crashed to the ground, leg and
shoulder slamming into the road. He got up slowly, hissing with pain.

His next few attempts went much the same way. When he tried to keep one hand on a tree, he
managed to get both feet off the ground, but as soon as he let go he lost his balance. After an hour
of falling over, he gave up, cast a quick healing spell over his forming bruises, and lead the bike,
the cold-box strapped onto it again, back towards the butcher’s shop.

***

As the week progressed, Remus started finding a routine. His days started early, and were busy, but
varied. Often, he was in the shop, helping customers. It had the potential to be monotonous, with
the picking out of wares and the weighing, but the customers were nice enough to make it pleasant.

Although Mr Carter was a fixture in the shop and the back-room, Remus seldom saw Mrs Carter.
He was under the impression that she did not actually work in the shop, even if she was obviously
invested in it. When there were few customers, Carter would quiz Remus on different kinds of
meat (which he was particularly good at - the smells were distinct enough that he could always tell)
or show him forms of preparation.

The evenings were quite, and ended early. Mr Carter would give Remus something that would not
keep until next day, which he would have for supper. Mrs Mason left him to his own devices, except for once when she had looked into the kitchen and suggested that he took the pot off the stove earlier this time and open the window. However good he was becoming at identifying and preparing types of meats, his cooking still had a way to go.

On Thursday, Remus was allowing himself to start hoping he might get to keep the job. Mr Carter had not said anything, but he seemed to like him well enough. Even the slim possibility made him happy. However, there were practical problems that would have to be dealt with.

As soon as he came home that day, Remus changed into his wellington boots and set out, walking away from the village. The countryside opened up before him. It was so flat he thought he could see miles ahead, until sky and land met. As he walked, he turned his face up towards the sunshine. Autumn was still beautiful, with its vibrant colours and earthy tones, but there was a chill in the air, which would only get worse, but right now it was still bright, and the sunshine warmed him. For the first hour, all Remus could see was fields. There were a few farms, but all were inhabited. As he came southwards, he could smell salt. He had not realised how close to the sea he was. It was then that he spotted some buildings a little way ahead. He hastened his step.

A conglomerate of buildings loomed ahead of him. They could not be very old, but in their disrepair they looked like ancient monoliths left to rot. As he came closer, the impression changed. The low concrete were cracked and covered in graffiti. Most of the doors were gone, leaving only the hinges. This close to the sea, it must have been a military base. Now, it had been left to the elements. The only sign of life was some rubbish strewn on the ground. Remus remembered what Mrs Mason had said about “kids doing drugs”. He could not imagine the frustration of being a teenager in this place.

After some time, Remus hit upon a hut with an intact door. The interior, all one room, was empty of furniture. The only form of decoration was the graffiti. There were remnants of bottles and squashed cans on the floor, as well as newspapers and a discarded condom. Avoiding the glass shards, Remus stepped in and inspected the walls. The concrete must be a foot thick, and the door was sturdy metal, even if the hinges needed oiling. He could Vanish the rubbish and seal the door. The high-set window looked too small for the wolf to escape through. It was obvious that people came here sometimes, but all he needed to do was to cast a few simple spells. That would make any teenagers intent on coming to the old military base on the evening of the full moon remember that they had something else planned. This would work well as a place for the transformation. He did not feel anything yet, but the moon was already waxing. By next week, when it would be three-quarters full, it would start gnawing at his bones. He hoped that, if he still had a job by then, he would be well enough to do it.

***

On Friday, people preparing for the weekend kept the shop busy all day. This storm of customers meant that by the time Remus went to make the afternoon tea, he had still not had the opportunity to breach the question of employment with Mr Carter.

Just when he came into the shop with two mugs of tea, the door opened. A tall man with a tweed cap pulled down over his forehead entered.

‘Why, good afternoon, my good sir,’ Mr Carter said in a theatrically hearty voice.

‘Good afternoon, yourself,’ the man said and tapped a short, playful beat on the counter. Carter looked over at Remus and asked:

‘Enough water in the kettle for another mug, Lupin?’
‘Yes, sir. Have these.’ He put down the tray, went back into the kitchenette and put the kettle on again. Curious to hear who the visitor was, he went back into the shop.

‘How are the kids doing, then?’

‘They’re doing alright,’ the guest said. He was leaning against the opposite wall now, looking quite relaxed. ‘Cathy’s falling behind on maths, so we had to give her a bit of a talking to. Spends too much time on the piano.’

‘Plenty of worse things she could do, eh?’ Carter said. ‘And the missus?’

‘She’s doing splendidly. How’s Denise?’

‘Well enough. Anyhow. Did you come in here just to drink our tea and waste our time, Bill?’

‘I was after some sausages, actually,’ Bill said.

‘Enough for the four of you?’ Carter counted the sausages, cut them and rolled them up. ‘Weigh those, would you, Lupin?’

‘I’m paying for them?’ Bill said in mock-horror. ‘I bloody well raised that pig.’

‘And then you bloody well sold it to me,’ Carter said.

‘So now you’re selling it back to me.’

‘And at a profit. A lot of work went into those sausages.’

Remus felt that this was a bit of a ritual. As he weighed the sausages, he was aware of Bill watching him, as if trying to assess him.

‘Did Carter put you to work on those?’

‘A little,’ Remus said.

‘In that case, it might be a new experience.’ He got his wallet out and paid. ‘Arnold, you’re rude not introducing us. Getting confused in your old age.’

‘Difficult to get a word in when you start up,’ Carter said, obviously not serious. ‘This is Remus Lupin. Lupin, this is Bill Masters. He’s our provider of pork.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ Remus said. They shook hands.

‘I hope you last longer than the last one,’ Masters said. ‘Sometimes I think Arnold scares them off.’

‘Nonsense,’ Carter snorted. ‘The last one was weak as a kitten and crashed the bike at that.’

‘Crashed the bike yet, Mr Lupin?’ Masters asked.

‘No, sir,’ Remus said.

‘Don’t listen to him, Lupin,’ Carter said. ‘He’s just trying to throw you off balance.’

Remus felt he had to say something more.

‘I don’t scare easily,’ he said. ‘So unless Mr and Mrs Carter want to scare me off…’
Masters laughed, and Carter himself smiled.

‘I don’t see a reason to,’ Carter said. ‘What do you say, Lupin? Feel like staying on?’

Remus felt warmth blossoming in his chest.

‘Yes, sir. I would like that very much.’

Carter clapped his hands together.

‘In that case, I should get started with the contract,’ he said. ‘And I should make sure you’re paid for this week, too. Enjoy those sausages, Bill. Tell us what they’re like.’

‘Will do,’ Masters said and waved at him, heading for the door. ‘Give my love for Denise.’

‘Go make yourself that tea,’ Carter told Remus when Mr Masters had left. ‘I’ll close up the shop early, and sort out the contract.’

***

Remus left the shop with a spring in his step. As he left the village and turned onto the avenue leading towards the guest-house, he started whistling to himself. What did it matter that the full moon was only ten nights away? And why was it important if his parents worried? He had a job. Everything that stood between him and keeping it seemed trivial right now.

When he reached the guest house, he went upstairs and sat down to write a letter to his parents. In this good mood, he found more to say than usual. From an early age he had perfected the art of writing letters which looked substantial but actually said very little. It had been useful at school, when pranks and rule-breaking and one unconventional crush had taken up most of his time, and had been essential during the war, when owls were being intercepted. Even without those reasons, he disliked writing about his feelings, and he did not see much reason to give his parents details of his comings and goings. But today, when he was filled with this surprised happiness, he wrote them a proper letter. He described the people he had met during the week, told them about the shop and even related his search for somewhere to spend the full-moon.

It was getting dark when he finished the letter. He glanced at his watch. If he hurried, he would be able to post it before they emptied the post-boxes. It would reach them tomorrow, so his father could not even complain about Muggle post being slow.

The air was a little chilly now, but Remus walked fast to keep warm. He reached the pillar-box by five to six. The post office van was not in sight yet. He posted his letter and started walking back, but a few hundred yards, he paused. He did not want to go back. If he went back to the guest house, this happiness would eventually dwindle into melancholia. Now, he tried to put a name to this feeling. Perhaps what he was feeling was adventurousness.

With sudden determination, Remus he made a decision. He would go to the pub. There was one on the high street - he had gone past it every day since he came here. A pint of ale sounded like just the thing. As he steered his steps towards the high street, he realised too that he would not mind being around people tonight. He wanted to see this community, not from behind a counter but from among them. He imagined the comforting hum of friendly conversation. It was a soothing sound, not one which overpowered or challenged the listener, but instead invited comradeship. It felt like the right kind of thing to do. Besides, he had just been paid. Earlier in his room, he had put one crisp banknote in his trouser pocket. Now he felt the linen of the note and thought of what he might spend it on.
Halfway up the high-street, the pub-sign, bearing a painting of a medieval-looking image of a child in full armour, marked the entrance. The pub’s name, Babe in Arms, was painted under the picture. Remus smiled to himself at the pun and, hurrying the last few yards, stepped inside.

The heat of the fire and the drinkers’ bodies hit against him as he stepped through the door. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the half-light from the lamps, which were clouded with smoke. The fire in the fire-place cast an orange light, but it did not serve to illuminate anything more than the two elderly gentlemen sitting in front of it. They were deep in conversation, one with a sleeping sheepdog at his feet, the other emphasising his point by tapping his walking-stick against his armrest. It looked like an old ritual, enacted every Friday for many decades.

Most of the tables in the pub were occupied as well. Remus saw several people he recognised, but not many he could name. All but a few of the drinkers were men; he saw a few wives, with glasses of white wine beside their husbands’ pint glasses. In one corner he spotted Miss Courage, who had two half-pints in front of her. She saw him too and waved, smiling. He waved back, and was relieved to see her lean close to the man beside her and kiss him on the cheek. Remus did not want her to get the wrong idea.

He passed through the smoke, going from the lapsang-like aroma of the pipes to the tarry whiff of unfiltered cigarettes to the bar. There was a gap between a couple sitting on bar stools and a group of men who were swapping jokes and anecdotes. Remus put his elbows on the bar, enveloped by both groups, comfortably in the middle but not part of either.

‘What can I get you, love?’ asked the landlady.

‘Pint of bitter, please.’

She took out a glass and started pulling the pint.

‘You’re Carter’s new assistant, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said and watched the beer tumble into the glass.

‘You can’t have been here long,’ she said. ‘You’ve not been in here before.’

He smiled apologetically.

‘No, but I’ve only lived here a few days.’

The landlady smiled back and put the glass in front of him.

‘I think we can forgive you then, love. That’ll be seventy-two pence, please.’

Remus took the note out of his pocket.

‘I don’t have anything smaller, sorry.’

‘That’s alright. It’s you who’ll have to carry all the change home,’ she said. ‘Unless you spend it on beer. Good way of lightening your pockets. There you go.’

‘Thanks.’

Leaning against the counter, he sipped his beer. He felt himself sinking into the hum around him, settling into place. He listened to snatches of conversations, catching glimpses of lives. As he listened, he reflected that there was so much these people had which he did not. A man in the
corner threw his head back and laughed, as he beat his friend in the back in appreciation at what he had said. Miss Courage’s boyfriend was trying to steal kisses from her as she laughed and ducked away, only to kiss him herself just as he drew back. The two friends at the fireside had fallen silent, and sat, contented, watching the flames. At once Remus felt apart from them all. But I don’t have to, he told himself. Don’t keep to the sidelines. Get to know these people. He relaxed again, and drank some more beer. Even standing here, among them, was being part of it. Eavesdropping may set him apart only in his own mind - he was sure that everyone here did it.

‘But we could go in March…’

‘Won’t it be cold in March?’

‘It won’t be, Anne, it’s France.’

‘Well, I’d have to learn some French phrases. I haven’t done any since school, and that was just a year or two.’

‘…and I told him, not bloody likely. But he wouldn’t let it go…’

‘I can’t see why the government puts up with it, you know. Last year they tried to assassinate the PM! Shouldn’t we do something about it?’

‘Have you heard the one about the vicar and the judge who go golfing?’

‘Know that one already.’

‘I don’t - how does it go?’

Remus listened idly to the joke told by the group to his left.

‘So, the judge goes first, and he loses the ball. “Goddammit, I missed!” he shouts. So the vicar says, “you shouldn’t blaspheme like that.” Then it’s the vicar’s turn, and he does alright. The judge goes again, and the shot goes completely wrong…’

‘Do you know anything about golf, Stephen?’

‘No, I don’t, and neither do you - let me tell the joke.’

‘Alright. So what happens?’

‘Right. The judge says “goddammit, I missed again!” The vicar starts getting annoyed now, so he tells him, “look, you need to stop blaspheming. If you swear like that again, God will punish you.” The vicar has his go, and it doesn’t go badly. So then it’s the judge’s turn, and he doesn’t even hit the ball this time. “Goddammit, I missed!” he shouts, and suddenly, from heaven comes a bolt of lightning, and strikes down the vicar. And this deep, deep voice is heard, echoing over the land: “Goddammit, I missed!”’

The others laughed. Remus smiled at the joke.

‘How many mice does it take to screw in a light bulb?’

‘Only two!’ said one.

‘The hard part is getting ‘em into the light bulb,’ called another.

Now Remus laughed.
'Right, here’s another one,’ said one of the drinkers. ‘What makes fruits into vegetables?’

A murmur rose from the others, as they tried to figure out the punchline. Then there was a disjointed chorus of ‘don’t know’, spoken like a question in anticipation to the rest of the joke. The man looked triumphant and said:

‘AIDS.’

The group laughed. Fear lodged in Remus’ throat.

It was as if the pub had gone cold. The boisterous, chummy atmosphere, the sound of people lovingly planning their holidays or laughing together, receded. He had been shifted sideways, into a world where his role was different. It occurred to him that the fact that he was not laughing was betraying him. He tried to smile at least - maybe it would create a shield for him to hide behind - but the muscles in his face would not cooperate. He made a silent wish that they had not noticed him, or that they thought he was too polite to listen in on their jokes. But he had laughed at the other ones. He felt aware of everything about his appearance that may expose him - his tweed jacket among these sensible overcoats, his brogues (though scuffed, newly polished), instead of boots, little things about his appearance (his thin wrists, his clean-shaven face, anything that might look boyish or effete), but above and beyond all, his failure to laugh at the joke about dying gays.

For a second or two, he thought of saying something. Do you think it’s funny, people dying? How can you be so cold-hearted? Then he saw clearly what answer he would get. They brought it upon themselves - it’s no more than they deserve - why do you care about the queers anyway? He reflected briefly (blaming it on the beer) that Sirius would certainly had confronted them. He would have grabbed the man by the collar and shouted at him. Remus could almost see him now, in his close-fitting Muggle clothes, his beautiful face distorted with anger. Then he shied away from the thought, knowing where that anger had ultimately been directed. He also realised that he did not have Sirius’ brazenness. He would not dare, knowing the risks of speaking up far too well.

He finished the rest of his pint in one.

‘Another one?’ asked the landlady.

‘No, thanks,’ Remus said. He had seldom been so aware of his voice. He was announcing his departure, but perhaps it would betray something else about him - did his vocal range, his politeness, his pronunciation give him away?

He nodded goodbye, not daring to speak again. The walk to the door seemed long. He walked it with the purpose of someone who knew wands were pointing at their back. It felt like when you spotted the covert signal that meant “leave now, you’re in danger”.

Remus pushed the door open and stepped out. If the people who had been telling the jokes realised what had made him leave so quickly, what would they do? Would they be passionate enough to come after him? He looked over his shoulder at the door, still closed. Behind it, perhaps they were speaking about him. Even if they did not know who he was, the landlady did, and she might well tell them if they asked. Would there be rumours, that that Lupin boy who worked for the Carters might be a queer? What would happen if those rumours reached Mr Carter? He felt his heart racing now. As he looked at his hands, he saw his left trembling, like it had done during the war. Inside his head, he heard his own voice berating him. Did you think you would fit in? How could you be so stupid to think that you could be just like them? You’re not, and it doesn’t have anything to do with the magic or the wolf. You should have known when you walked into that pub - when you walked into this village - that this would happen.
He put his hands in his pockets. In his left, he clutched the coins, digging the sharp edges into his palm in the hope that that would make it stop shaking. For all he knew, nothing would happen. He tried to assure himself that they might not have noticed him after all, might not have jumped to those conclusions, might not even care.

Still, he had to fight the urge to look over his shoulder all the way home.
Chapter 4

‘Remus, come and have a look.’

Remus didn’t want to. He wrapped his arms around his knees defiantly In front of where he sat was a clock, its face opened and its innards exposed. His father was crouching inside it, readjusting the screws and testing the cogs.

‘It’s not dangerous,’ he coaxed. ‘It’ll be working again soon.’

Remus shook his head. There was something about the massive clock he didn’t like. It was large enough that he could have walked into it, but he could not bear the thought.

‘Suit yourself,’ said his father and tested a spring. ‘It’s mended now, anyway.’ He crawled out of the clock and closed it. Half of the silver clock-face was oxidised black. As his father twisted the key, Remus wished he could stop him. But there was nothing he could do. He was too small, too weak. The clock started ticking. Dad went over to him and put his arm around his shoulders. The arms of the clock moved in sync, and the clock-face brightened as the filth disappeared, little by little. The long hand approached the numeral twelve. Remus wanted to scream. The silver face turned perfectly round, and the clock started chiming. It sounded like howling.

Remus opened his eyes. The alarm clock had not yet rung. It was the ache in his bones which had woken him. Slowly he sat up and tried to stretch. His joints felt stiff and worn down. Only a week until full-moon. Judging by the way he felt now, it was going to be a bad one. When he got out of bed, his head started spinning, bad enough to make him sink back down. It took a minute or two before he felt steady enough to rise. He wondered whether he would actually make it to work, and if he didn’t, how he would be able to keep this job over the full moon if he was already feeling this bad. He forced himself to ignore the giddiness and got ready. He was not giving himself the option of not going.

When he came downstairs, Mrs Mason was in the hallway, arranging a bouquet of dried flowers.

‘Good morning, Mr Lupin,’ she said and looked up at him. ‘How are you? You look rather preoccupied.’

‘I’m fine,’ he said and mustered a smile.

‘You’ve been like this all weekend,’ she persisted.

‘Just some things on my mind. Sorry, Mrs Mason. I’m running a bit late today. Goodbye.’

Not waiting for her to answer, he left. He was annoyed that she had spotted it, but she was right. He had not been able to shake off what he had overheard in the pub. He kept going through it again and think that really, it had been such a small thing. Just a stupid joke. But it did not feel stupid. He had thought that the first day of a proper employment would be a happy day. Instead, he was afraid of what might happen.

The walk into the village seemed longer than it usually did. Time and again, the thought oh God I’m going to be late drowned out his other worries. He wished he could run, but he already had a pain in his knees. Even walking as fast as he did strained them.

He rushed through the backdoor of the butcher’s just as the church-bell rang.
‘Morning, Lupin!’ Carter called and came out of the kitchenette.

‘Good morning, Mr Carter.’ He took his jacket off, pulled the jumper over his head and put on his apron.

‘Good weekend?’ Carter asked.

‘Yes, sir. Thank you.’

‘Good. Jenkins should be here any moment now - it’s one of Bill’s today. We’re barely going to sell anything else than pork chops today, I’ll wager.’ He paused and listened. ‘Ah, yes. There’s the van. Go wash your hands, Lupin. Look lively.’

Remus obeyed. He had been lost in a momentary rush of relief. There had been no rumours after all. They didn’t know, at least not yet.

He continued thinking about this for much of the day. Even that made him cross. If it hadn’t been for that joke in the pub, he would never had thought of it. Then again, perhaps he would not have been on his guard then. The drinkers beside him had probably not noticed him and had not seen anything odd in his behaviour, but there might be other opportunities for it to spread.

What would he do if he was asked a direct question? Deny it? Spin some lie? Say ‘that’s not any of your business’? (But that in itself was an admission.) Or would he be honest? He didn’t know. He feared that he would freeze up, and his silence would speak for itself. Strangely, the prospect of lying about this didn’t appeal to him at all. Pretending not to be a werewolf was something he had done since he was a child, and something he was used to, but pretending - even claiming - that he was heterosexual felt strange. He had only done such a thing by omission before. But he would not dare to be honest either. He simply hoped that he was never put in that situation.

In the afternoon, Remus was left to mind the shop on his own. When Mrs Carter pushed through the beaded curtain, a mug in each hand, it was quiet for the first time since lunch.

‘All quiet?’ she asked.

‘It wasn’t, ten minutes ago.’ He accepted the mug from her. ‘Thank you.’

She smiled at him, appreciatively. There was often something almost transparent about her, but smiling made her look more solid.

‘I’m very glad you’re staying on,’ she said.

‘So I am,’ Remus said and sipped his tea.

‘How do you like it here? In Bexwold?’

‘I like it. It’s a very pretty place.’

‘Yes, isn’t it?’ Mrs Carter said, nodding. ‘I grew up here, you know. It was different back then, of course. Times have changed.’

Remus did not know what to say about that, so he smiled a little and drank his tea until she spoke again.

‘I always get so curious of the people we have working here.’

‘Well, I can understand that.’
‘Where did you grow up?’ she asked.

‘Yorkshire and Scotland,’ Remus said, truthfully. He decided to miss out the part about boarding-school - it meant something else to Muggles. ‘My parents live in Yorkshire.’

‘What do they do?’

‘Well, my mum used to work as a typist, before she married. My dad was a civil servant for a while, but now he works with, erm, mechanics.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Mrs Carter said, although he was uncertain if she did. ‘Do you have any brothers and sisters?’

‘No.’

She nodded and smiled. Remus thought of the photograph of the soldier in the back room. He wanted to ask about it, but he did not know how.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

The question, so innocently put, caught him off guard. He had not expected this so soon, and not from Mrs Carter.

‘No,’ said Remus. ‘I don’t.’

‘I suppose with you just having moved here…’ she said airily.

The sound of the bell on the door ringing interrupted her. Mrs Stewart stepped in, bringing a whiff of the cold air with her. She gave him a funny look - his relief at a customer must be visible on his face. Mrs Carter stood on the side and listened to him serving her, and by the time Mrs Stewart left, Mrs Carter had completely forgotten her questions about any potential girlfriends, and asked him about what growing up in Yorkshire had been like instead, until he had to excuse himself to close the shop.

***

Next day, Remus could feel the moon inside his bones. The face that stared back from the mirror as he shaved was greyish white. He had slept poorly and dreamed of the Change.

He was glad to be out of Mr Carter’s company doing deliveries. The fewer opportunities Carter got to notice now ill Remus looked, the better. He hoped that people’s tendency to see what they expected to see instead of what was there would protect him.

Once again, he Apparated between the houses which got deliveries. His attempts at cycling, after the round was done, were just as poor as they had been the week before. He only managed to keep it up for half an hour before the pain starting up in his muscles forced him to sit down and rest until it was time to turn back.

The symptoms of the coming Change were becoming more obvious even during that day. In the evening, he could barely eat dinner, and next morning, all he was able to stomach for breakfast was tea. At the same time, his sense of smell was growing keener. On his way to work, he could feel the smell of damp soil, moulding leaves and wandering animals all around him. However much as he tried, he could not stop the miserable thought: how will I get through this week?

bout an hour after Mr Carter and he had opened the shop, there was a loud knock on the back-door.
‘That’ll be Miss Courage,’ Mr Carter said as he wrapped some liver in paper for a customer. ‘Answer the door, would you?’

Remus put down the tray he had been cleaning and went to open the back-door. As Carter had said, there was Miss Courage, the girl who provided them with eggs. She greeted him with a smile.

‘Hello!’

‘Hi,’ Remus said.

‘I saw you at the pub last Friday, but you left before I had time to say hello,’ she said.

‘I was running late for something,’ he lied. He did not want to talk about that now. ‘So… eggs?’

‘Better than that, today,’ Miss Courage said. ‘Pumpkins. Come and have a look.’ She gestured follow her and hurried out of the alley. Remus followed. The old lady who had bought liver had just come out of the shop, and stopped to look as she peeled away the tarpaulin over the back of the small lorry.

‘They’re looking lovely this year, Hettie,’ the old lady said.

‘Thanks, Mrs Morrison,’ Miss Courage said and turned back to Remus. ‘What do you think? They’re really big, aren’t they?’

Remus nodded, barely aware of what he was answering. Miss Courage’s pumpkins were large enough that he would have to use two arms to carry them comfortably, although nothing compared to Hagrid’s of course, but it was not they that had made him freeze up.

‘Are you okay?’ Miss Courage asked.

‘What date is it?’ he asked.

‘The twenty-third, I think.’

The twenty-third of October. The last time he saw James had been on the nineteenth. When he last saw Lily, he could not remember. They had been killed on the thirty-first. It was little more than a week until Halloween, until the Potters had been dead for four years, and the day after that, four years since Peter died. He tried to remember what date he had last seen Peter. Sometime in the middle of the month, he thought, but he didn’t know for sure. Four years - how could it already have been four years?

‘Are you going to help me?’

The question broke his reverie. Miss Courage had picked up a pumpkin and was looking a little annoyed, so unlike her usual smile.

‘Yes, of course,’ Remus said. ‘Sorry.’ He took a pumpkin in his arms and followed her down the alley-way. They were still carrying pumpkins into the back room when Mr Carter came to look at their progress.

‘Wonderful,’ he said and looked closer at one of the pumpkins they had placed on the table. ‘You’ve outdone yourselves.’

‘Cheers,’ Miss Courage said. ‘Dad wanted me to talk to you about the pricing...’
Remus left them discussing the price of the harvest and went to fetch the last pumpkin. There was a chill in the breeze. As he hurried out to the van, he rubbed his exposed arms, trying to work some heat into the skin. He let go of himself and made to pick up a pumpkin, when something made him hesitate. There was a smell on the wind. It was at once nauseating and familiar. He sniffed, trying to place it. It put him in mind of dank and filth and... animals.

As soon as it had appeared, the smell was gone. The wind brought with it the smell of people and cattle, nature and exhaust-fumes, but nothing sinister. He must have been imagining it. He picked up the pumpkin and hurried indoors, knowing he would spend the day weighing and labelling them. At least it was distracting.

***

On Thursday morning, it rained. The smatter of it against the window woke him, and it continued as he drank his tea. He was terribly hungry, but he felt nauseous at the thought of eating. As he looked out of the window, all he could see was the monotone dark-grey of the sky. The room was cold. He wished he could have stayed in bed, where it was warmer, but he knew there was no way that could happen.

The weather had not changed when he left the house. He hunched his shoulders and bowed his head against the rain. Slowly, the damp worked its way into his tweed. The scarf stuck to his neck, the wool clammy with droplets of rain. At least the wellington boots kept his feet dry, but his toes were freezing. If only he could have cast an Impervius charm... But he knew that was not an option. He was supposed to be a Muggle - in the Carters’ eyes, normal and unremarkable. Turning up completely dry without an umbrella in weather like this would seem odd. So he trudged along in the mud and the rain, feeling particularly resentful about his circumstances.

When he finally arrived in the village, the chill had turned into an ache deep inside of him. His lungs felt shrunken in his chest with cold. He was busy pulling the hair plastered to his skin from his face when he stepped in to the back room of the shop.

‘Good morning,’ he called out. There were footsteps on the stairs, and Mr Carter appeared.

‘Look at the state of you!’ he exclaimed. ‘Did you swim here, Lupin?’

‘I don’t own an umbrella,’ Remus said, all too aware of how miserable he sounded.

‘Well then you should bloody well get yourself one!’ he boomed. ‘Take off that jacket. Are the rest of your clothes dry?’

Remus took off his jacket and scarf, and concluded that apart from the front of his legs, he was fairly dry.

‘Put your shoes on, while I get you a towel,’ Mr Carter said. He sounded gruff, but in a caring kind of way which Remus associated to other people’s fathers, who had no cause to constantly worry about their sons. Perhaps it was an old habit. Remus took off his wellies and put on his indoor shoes under the gaze of the unmoving soldier on the wall.

Mr Carter came downstairs with the towel, followed by Mrs Carter. When she caught sight of Remus, she said:

‘My goodness! Look at you, you poor thing.’

‘I’m alright, Mrs Carter,’ Remus said and accepted the towel.
‘You need a cup of tea.’ With a sudden air of busyness about her, she hurried upstairs again. By the time Mr Carter and Remus were moving things into the counters, she returned and, despite Mr Carter’s objections, made Remus stop for a few minutes to drink some of the tea. He put down the cup earlier than he had probably wanted and went back to work, but he took sips out of it now and then, grateful for the gesture.

There were few customers that morning, as the heavy rain continued. Mr Carter and Remus prepared a new batch of sausages, both waiting for the ring of the bell on the door which never came. Eventually they ended up both standing behind the counter with a cup of tea each. Mr Carter had switched on the radio, and seemed to listen to the rather uninspiring piano sonata. Remus stood in silence, watching the rain streaking the windows. The smells of all the various kinds of meat in the counter, which had simply been peculiar at the new moon, was now difficult to bear. He tried was doing his best to ignore it and smell his tea to prevent the other smells overpowering him. He was just getting it under control when Mr Carter spoke.

‘So... What happened to your face?’

Remus reached up and touched the scars left by the werewolf’s claws.

‘I was attacked by a dog. Years ago.’

‘Oh. Nasty. Did it bite you?’

‘Erm, yes, but it healed alright.’

‘Is that why you’re afraid of dogs?’

Remus looked up sharply.

‘What makes you say that, sir?’

Mr Carter shrugged.

‘Well, Mrs Leason told me that when you delivered to her, you jumped sky-high when her labrador barked at you.’

‘It just startled me,’ Remus muttered, ashamed. Mr Carter shifted, clearing his throat uncomfortably. He did not say anything else. Remus watched the water slip down the window, beyond the meats hanged up on display. The classical piece came to an end, and a officious-sounding voice repeated the composer’s name, the title and the opus number.

‘And now the news.’ A voice which sounded almost the same took up the prompt.

‘Discussions on how to combat AIDS continue.’

Remus looked straight ahead. Was it noticeable how intently he was listening? Had he straightened up? Was his face too forcibly relaxed?

‘Today, discussions which will hopefully lead to a national campaign of information commenced. Some groups have expressed concerns about that such a campaign might not have the desired effect, but instead encourage certain kinds of behaviour.’

Gay propaganda, Remus thought. That’s what they’re afraid of. The radio cut to an interview with a gruff, male voice - not a radio voice but a politician - outlining the risks of discussing homosexuality and drug abuse. Remus wanted to look at Carter, but he knew that glancing over at
him would be too obvious. What did his employer think of this? Did he agree with the man explaining why people like Remus were unfit to be discussed in public? He wished that there would be a distraction or an interruption of some kind. Couldn’t a customer turn up? Or perhaps Mrs Carter could come into the shop? Something must happen, so that Remus did not have to listen, and Carter did not have time to comment. Briefly, he thought he might be unfair assuming that Carter was a homophobe. He seemed like a kind man most of the time. But there was that masculine roughness about him, which made him think that Carter might think that anyone who lacked that quality was not a real man.

But nothing interrupted them. The report went on. It was no more than another minute, but to Remus it felt unbearably long. He was torn - he wanted to hear, because he wanted (needed) to know, but he did not want it discussed like this. What would Carter think if he turned off the radio, or changed the channel? Perhaps he would read it as general annoyance, or for that matter as disgust at the subject-matter. He did not want him to think that, whatever Carter’s views were. It would be as strange and false, just like if he had said yes when Mrs Carter had asked him whether he had a girlfriend. He did not want to be seen for what he was, but he refused to pretend to be something he was not.

The news report moved onto other subjects. Carter stood much like he had before. Remus stood where he had, still afraid that if he moved, it would unleash some comment from Carter.

The bell on the door rang, and Remus jerked awake from his thoughts. The first thing to appear was a dripping umbrella. Following it was, not a customer, but Mrs Carter.

‘Hello,’ she said. She looked happy to be out of the rain - despite the umbrella, her hair looked damp.

‘What were you doing out there, Denise?’ Mr Carter exclaimed. ‘In weather like this…’

Mrs Carter reached into her pocket and took something up, carefully. Remus moved forward to see what it was. In her hand lay a red paper flower, mounted on a plastic stalk.

‘Oh, I see,’ Mr Carter said. ‘Did you get one for me too?’

‘Yes. I’ll put it on your jacket.’

‘Thanks, darling.’

Mrs Carter had leaned her dripping umbrella against the counter and was securing the flower on her lapel. Seeing Remus watching, she looked up at him.

‘They’re selling them just by the church, dear.’

‘Oh. Thanks,’ Remus said, with no idea what he was answering. He was certain he had seen flowers like that before, but he did not know what they meant.

‘Are there any people around outdoors, Denise?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Well then.’ Mr Carter clapped his hands together. ‘I don’t think anyone can blame us if we close up an hour early. Doesn’t make any difference, being open. We’ve been standing here, listening to the bloody radio for ages. We might as well do something better with our time.’

‘Don’t be so dispirited, dear,’ Mrs Carter said, but she did not stop him when he told Remus to lock
the door and count the till. She was about to go through to the back room, but paused at the beaded curtain. ‘I'll leave the brolly by the door, Mr Lupin. You take it with you, so you don’t get soaked on your way home.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Carter.’

She smiled at him, warmly. As he went back to counting the till, Remus reflected on that maternal quality of Mrs Carter’s, at once familiar and disconcerting. Again, he thought of the soldier in the picture. When Mrs Carter was kind to him, was she seeing someone else? When Mr Carter barked at him for getting wet, was he remembering another young man? Remus rubbed his eyes. He was tired - far more tired than he should be. He wanted to say that was because of the waxing moon, but that would be an attempt at blaming it on something commonplace, like saying you had a headache because there was thunder on the way.

When Remus left the shop, the rain was falling with renewed enthusiasm. He hunched under the umbrella and walked fast. It occurred to him that maybe he could get an answer to one of his questions at least. It seemed better to learn about Muggle things he did not understand as soon as possible, instead of leaving them to become mysteries.

The red telephone-kiosk ahead of him seemed to shine through the gloom. Remus hurried to it, collapsing the umbrella and bringing it in with him. The phone-box smelled of damp, and the glass was steaming up. With hands shaking from the cold and the approach of the full moon, Remus dug for the right coins in his pockets. Finally he found them and dialled the number. The telephone crackled, as though the technology grew uncomfortable when so close to magic. Remus weighed from one foot to the other, waiting for his mother to pick up. The telephone was on the far wall of the laundry, as far away from Mr Lupin’s workshop as possible. Remus imagined the phone ringing, and wondered if his mother was not around to hear it. For all he knew, it had broken again, as it did regularly.

Just as he thought that there would be no reply, the ringing ended abruptly. Almost dropping his coins, he put them into the coin slot.

‘Hello?’ said Mrs Lupin’s voice from the other end.

‘Hello, mum!’

‘Oh, Remus, darling! What a surprise! How are you?’

‘Alright, thanks. It’s raining here.’

‘Here as well. It’s terrible. I think you can almost hear it.’

‘I can almost not hear you over the sound it’s making here,’ Remus said. The patter of the rain was louder in here than inside any house. ‘How are you? How’s dad?’

‘I’m fine. Very well. Your father is doing fine too. He’s working a lot. He misses you. I think he gets a bit frustrated, not having anyone to discuss his work with. I’m not much help, of course,’ Mrs Lupin said. Remus wondered whether that was actually true. His parents had been married for over thirty years, and the few times that he had heard his mother speak of his father’s models, he had had the impression that she understood them very well. It was rather his father who thought that it was not right to discuss that kind of thing with a Muggle.

‘But never mind about us,’ she said. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m alright. A bit acheey,’ Remus said, but she saw through it. She knew exactly what the full
moon did to him.

‘Have you asked for time off yet?’

Remus grounded himself.

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Well, you should...’

‘I can’t ask for time off. I’ve only had this job for a fortnight - not even that...’

‘But you can’t work around the full-moon!’ Mrs Lupin exclaimed. ‘How are you going to manage that? You need to rest!’

‘I can’t, mum,’ Remus said. ‘I need to keep this job. I can handle it.’

Mrs Lupin sighed deeply.

‘I don’t like it, Remus. You have to take care of yourself. You promised me that.’

‘Well, yes, I know, but in all honesty, mum, I need to feed myself too,’ he said, trying his best to hide his annoyance. ‘Anyway, I wanted to ask you something.’ He heard his mother sigh at how he changed the subject. ‘Mrs Carter had a paper flower on her lapel today. A red one. What does that mean?’

To Remus’ surprise, she laughed.

‘Remus, I’ve been wearing a poppy every autumn your entire life - haven’t you noticed?’

‘Well, I... no...’

‘What on earth do they teach you at that school? I must say, though, that she’s very early. Most people don’t bother with a poppy until November...’

‘But what does it mean?’ he asked, growing impatient.

“It’s a sign of remembrance. For war veterans. It’s a poppy because the only thing that would grow in the no-man’s-land during the First World War were poppies, or so they say. Didn’t they teach you about this in Muggle Studies?’

‘I can’t remember it,’ Remus admitted. ‘We did talk about the wars, but not the flowers...’

‘Well, the poppy is for remembering all wars now, not just the First World War. Almost everyone wears them. It’s mostly veterans who sell them.’

‘Alright. Thanks for the explanation, mum.’

‘Always happy to help. Now, how are you finding it - living as a Muggle? It is going well?’

‘I think it’s going pretty well. I don’t think they find me odd or anything. They’re nice people.’ He did not even consider telling her about the joke in the pub, and how it worried him. She would not understand the nigh primal fear it had awoken in him. It was just another thing to hide, of course - he was already keeping a variety of things for them in his letters, from his attempts at learning to ride a bike to his daily glamours to hide his scars. They all seemed small in isolation, but when he put them together, he realised that he was becoming quite proficient at lying to his parents, as he
had when he was a teenager at school. Being rid of the enforced honesty of his post-war convalescence was a relief.

‘Well, I’m glad to hear it. You should call more often, Remus. Letters just aren’t the same.’

‘Yes, I’ll try. I don’t suppose there’s any chance of getting dad to talk to me over the phone?’

‘Not very likely,’ Mrs Lupin said. ‘You know how he hates telephones. He’d end up breaking it, probably.’

‘You’re right.’

They fell silent; the phone-call was coming to an end.

‘Do take care of yourself, Remus,’ Mrs Lupin said, suddenly tearful. ‘And if you want me to come see you...’

‘I’ll be fine, mum.’

‘Will you get in touch after the full moon?’

‘Of course. Give my love to dad.’

‘Yes, I will. Write to him again, Remus. He’ll appreciate it.’

‘Of course.’

‘Well...’

‘Wait, mum,’ Remus said. ‘One more thing. Has Britain been in any wars recently - in the past few years?’

‘Well, there were British soldiers in Lebanon until last year, but I think that was just peace-keeping, whatever that means. It wasn’t strictly a war that Britain was in. So the most recent was the Falklands,’ Mrs Lupin said. ‘That was in 1982.’

‘Who was it fought against? What were they fighting about?’

‘Argentina,’ Mrs Lupin said patiently. ‘They were trying to claim the Falklands Islands, so we went to war.’

‘And who won?’

‘We did. The Falklands have stayed British.’

‘And this was in 1982?’

‘Yes. It broke out in, oh, April.’

‘Alright. Thank you, mum.’

‘Don’t mention it, darling. Take care of yourself - be in touch!’

‘Yes, I will - goodbye.’

‘Goodbye!’
Remus’ hand lingered on the receiver when he put it back. This explained it all. The photograph of the young man in the uniform, the premature poppy, that sense of loss he got from the Carters. That the young man was their son had not been difficult to guess, and that he was dead had seemed obvious. There was something in the way the photograph was positioned, and the way they both looked at it that had convinced Remus of that from the very start. He had not been sure, of course, but something - perhaps the decision to have a posed picture of him in uniform, rather than a childhood snapshot - made him think that he had not died from natural causes.

As he walked homewards, his fingers around the umbrella growing colder by the second, Remus wondered about how and when and where. He had seen pictures of military graveyards in Flanders. They resembled great mouths in the landscape, the white headstones gleaming like a perfectly regular set of teeth. On occasion, there would be one or a few turned the wrong way, a snaggletooth caused by a hasty retreat or the unexpected gain of a few feet. Was that how the Carters’ son rested, commemorated among hundreds of identical stones? During his own war, hundreds - wizards and Muggles - had died, but none had ever been buried together, unless they were family, and never under the same kind of stones. It had never been a war about land, and there had been no battlefields or fronts. Every corner of the British Isles had been their theatre of war. There had been no battle-lines or pushes - only raids, duels, skirmishes. No uniforms - only hoods and uncovered faces. And no monuments, except the one statue in Godric’s Hollow. They had never had the consolation of not knowing their enemy. They had not been fighting people they had never met, but their own classmates, friends, even brothers.

To Remus, the Muggle military memorials seemed impersonal and cold, but at least they existed. The wizarding world did not commemorate their battles or their dead. Instead, they wanted to forget - to forget the fallen, ignore the survivors and refuse the possibility that the war may not be over after all. For his dead friends, there was no remembrance. Those who outlived them had given them their individuality, but had refused them the company of their comrades in death.

The thought of war and the dead lingered with him all evening. His appetite was all but gone, and the stirring memories of the fighting made him even less inclined to eat. In the end he simply made some toast. He pulled the bread apart with his fingers until it had cooled almost completely, then folded the pieces to eat them. It was a way of keeping his hands busy more than anything else. He thought of James and Peter and Lily; Benjy and Dorcas and Marlene and all those others who had died, and those who had not. He thought of Peter’s mother, his own parents and Mrs Carter. His thoughts even strayed to Lily’s sister. She and Lily had not been close - quite the opposite - but surely she must have grieved too? What was to say that she had not grieved as much as he had? Perhaps he was wrong to doubt that.

He went to bed already at half past nine, in the full knowledge that he would not sleep for a long time yet, even though his body was crying out for rest. As he lay down, his joints creaked. A sudden dizziness came over him. Gratefully he put down his head onto the pillow. Little by little, he felt himself relax. He would cramp up during the night again, but for now, he felt a semblance of physical comfort. His mind, however, would not give him any peace. Four years. How was that possible? Somehow it felt both far too long and far too short. The war sometimes felt distant, and his friends, who had been his life for ten years, seemed little more than a dream. At other times, the distance shrank and he felt it all as keenly as when it was new. He hugged himself and buried his face in the pillow. Four years! In just one more, it would be half a decade. And the distance would only grow, and grow, and grow, until everyone forgot. The fallen would become truly dead, not even alive in memory.

Remus stirred. His panic receded a little. It felt as if he was watching his emotions through a lens, and someone had just rotated it to change the focus. Four years since the end of the war did not just mean four years since he last saw James and Peter. It also meant four years since he had last been
kissed - since he had last slept with someone. In this twilight state between waking and sleeping, he dared to remembered what sex with Sirius Black had been like. At school it had been blind fumbling in deserted class-rooms and stolen moments in the empty dormitory. Early on in their relationship, it had felt difficult not to touch, even if Remus never dared anything more affectionate than a brief hand on his arm in public. Sirius, on the other hand, had always been so loud and ostentatious. That had made his joy even more dizzying. He was the centre of attention of someone who usually flitted from distraction and distraction. Sirius saw him, in a way he never seemed bothered to see anyone else, not even James. Whenever they were on their own, they became lost in each other. He recalled the way his skin felt under his hands, his body against his. It had been intoxicating, but so tender. It had felt as natural as breathing. He had been so in love. And he had thought... he had thought...

But no. That mouth he had kissed had told lies. That man had sold his friends to the enemy, and wilfully - gleefully - killed innocent people. The momentary respite from reality, where that betrayal had not happened, was over. At once, those happy memories seemed like something infected. Remus felt ashamed at recalling them, coming close to cherishing them. It was an insult to his friends, who had suffered the same betrayal, but with consequences far worse.

Still, he could not help wonder. Had Sirius ever loved him? Had there been a time when it had been for real? That lead to the question that had plagued him ever since the illusion had been broken. Why had he not killed him? It seemed strange, even (to his grief-stricken mind) unfair, that James and Peter had been killed, but he had been spared. Maybe Sirius Black had not considered him important enough to bother with. James had been singled out as a target early on, and Peter had been brave enough to realise what was happening and go after him. But Remus... He had not taken action to protect his friends. He must not have posed enough of a threat to warrant such treatment. That was by far the preferable explanation. The other - that he had been spared because the traitor still had feelings for him - did not bear thinking about.

Stop it, Remus told himself, wiping away his tears. You’re ill and exhausted. You need to sleep. No good’s going to come of lingering on it. He curled up under the blankets, trying to make himself as small as possible, as if to hide from these thoughts. It would make no difference. Once it was unleashed, he could not stop this tide. He wept into his pillow, so tired all he wanted was to sleep but unable to stop crying, terrified that his landlady would hear him through the floor. When he finally fell asleep, it was with little hope of any real rest.
Chapter 5

Remus was not certain how he managed to get out of bed and go to work the next day. He wandered through Friday in a haze, going about his daily chores with no thought or considerations. Mr Carter eyed him, half worried and half suspicious, but it was only just when Remus was leaving for the day that he asked, ‘are you coming down with something? You look ill.’ Remus shook his head and said he was fine, hoping that he would not betray how unwell he actually felt.

It was a short-lived joy to wake up on Saturday and know that he did not have to go to work that day. He stayed in bed and drifted in and out of sleep for hours. Time and time again, he would open his eyes, still half asleep, and look at his room. Once or twice, a nightmare lingered a moment after he woke, and made him think that someone was there with him. Whenever he managed to shake himself awake, the fog lifted and he knew that he was on his own. Then he fell asleep again, and dreamt of looming shapes, waiting to attack.

It was well past noon when sleep fled completely. Remus was left wide awake, at the mercy of his aching body. He shifted, trying out his limbs, wearily registering the ways he felt worse. In a few days’ time, it would peak, and after that one night of terror out of twenty-eight, he would start getting better. His symptoms would wane with the moon. Of course that did not mean any respite from it. Two weeks after then, he would start deteriorating again. Then the full moon would come, the Change would happen, and the circle would start anew. The moon phases would eternally follow each other, and so Remus would always grow worse after he felt better, just like tide would always follow ebb.

Neither could he hope for the process to become any easier. He had always known, since he was five years old, that the transformations and the days leading up to them would get worse with age. Now, at twenty-five, he wondered how much worse it could get. Perhaps it would continue to get more painful and more crippling, until it either killed him or forced his body to always feel like it was always close to transforming, whatever the phase of the moon. The amount of time his body was human would not change, but the window in which he could be a person, a member of society, would get smaller and smaller. Would he end his days bedridden, unable to move, waiting for the moon to wax? Or would he die suddenly, in the grips of the pain or the transformation? The thought of dying as half-man, half-beast disgusted him. The prospect of his corpse being in wolf-form was bad enough, but being between the two shapes was far worse.

He tried to remind himself that that was not his life. The full moon may be two days away, but after that he would get better. What was more, he had someplace to live. He had a job. He knew these things, but now, lying cold and aching, weighed down by bleak visions of the future, it was difficult to believe it. His thoughts wandered back to the fragments of hatred he had started noticing, just under the surface in the village. It was like a monster which he had spotted and recognised for what it was, and his only hope now was that it would not recognise him in turn and attack. But if it - they - did? What would they do? In the past, he had always been so preoccupied by the threat of being exposed as a werewolf - that alone was enough to have him lynched. Even if he had been afraid of someone guessing he was a homosexual, it had seemed far-fetched that anyone in the wizarding world would. Here it was different. Might they sack him - throw him out of the guest house? Shun him in the streets? Avoid touching him? They might well. Surely any homosexual would be a pariah. There was death in each and every one of them. The AIDS virus had simply made it happen, and given society at large an opportunity to speak of it. The fact that he did not have it would be irrelevant to them.

There was rot, even in this room which was his own. He needed to get away from here, if only for
a few hours. It would make no difference to the facts, but it would calm him down. With some effort, he pushed himself off the bed, got dressed and went outside. He walked down the avenue, until he was out of sight.

He must be out of his mind. It was two days until the full moon, and he was planning to Apparate eighty or ninety miles. Goodness knew how that would go. But he had already made his mind up, regardless of how stupid it was.

It took him some time to pull himself together. Then he threw himself out into the void.

The busyness of London seemed to bloom around him as he appeared. It was such a difference from the quiet country lane, that Remus had to fight the impulse of clapping his hands over his ears. Traffic, people, music everywhere. The world was splashed in colour, made glossy and perfected on bill-boards and poster columns. There was a squeal of tyres as a bus, a splash of red against the backdrop of the grand houses, stopped at a crossing. As Remus started walking, he felt himself relax. London was so big and frightening that his fear of exposure lost its hold of him.

After a little while, Remus turned off the big, busy roads, and sought the calmer Regency streets. The air seemed clearer. Despite the exhaust fumes and the sickly smells pumped out of restaurants, it felt easier to breathe here.

He paused now, looking around. He recognised this street. It took him a moment to realise why. Had he not walked down this street with Sirius once? It had been the summer of 1979. The sweltering heat of the day had slowly died, and an early evening breeze had cooled them. They had walked along side each other all day without touching, but now, Sirius had slipped his fingers between Remus’. Shocked, he had tried to pull his hand back - his mind had been reeling with what would happen if they were seen - but Sirius had not let go. They had ended up precariously interlocked, Remus’ hand pulled up and Sirius' deftly following his. ‘Moony, relax,’ Sirius had said, pulled his hand down and changed his grip, palm to palm. ‘We’re not the only ones, you know.’

He had walked straight into Soho, into the gay quarters of London. Had it been an accident, or had he subconsciously steered himself here? After all, he had left Bexwold to get away from rural small-mindedness. This was the furthest away he could possibly get to it. Warily, he looked around. This was a different kind of exposure. Even being here revealed something about him. The only difference was that here, it would make him part of something, instead of excluding him. Nevertheless, it made him uneasy.

He thought of turning and walking away. The National Gallery was no more than a ten-minute walk away. Say fifteen minutes, considering how he was feeling. He could go there and lose himself in the crowds. There he would enjoy blessed anonymity.

He found the prospect of that comforting, but at the same time lacking. Did he not want that anonymity? Was he rejecting that protection? At once, he realised that that was just what he was doing. In the same way as he was tired of being a child under his parents’ wings, he was sick of this constant hiding. He felt unexpected anger flare up inside him. The way his father had choked on the word ‘homosexual’ - simply a descriptive term, and one that described his son. He had hesitated to say it as if it were some vile word. That implicit forbidding tone in his mother’s voice, telling him to find someone, but warning him off sex. The assumption that as soon as he were out of their sight, he searched out strangers for carnal acts. ‘Carnal’ implied such obscenity, no minds present, only sweating bodies, no more than conglomerations of meat. He saw it, in clearer view than he hoped his parents might ever imagine it, himself being fucked by some faceless man, not even in a bed but in a park or a public loo. He was startled rather than upset by the obscenity of the
vision.

He did not turn around, but walked further down the street. Even now, being this tired, he felt as if he had had some kind of revelation. He asked himself if he had just come to the conclusion to come out completely. Examining his motives, he decided that no, that was not the case. He did not dare, simply because he did not trust the world - anyone - enough. Had he had the choice now, he was not sure he would even have told his parents.

Still, he felt stronger and steadier in mind, if not in body, than he had done for days. He decided to get himself a cup of tea, having not eaten anything today. There was a café nearby, the name Out There stamped in garish pink letters over the door. When he stepped in, he was enveloped by the clinks of spoons and hum of conversation, creating a sound-curtain along with the music in the loudspeakers. The place looked inviting, but Remus still hesitated. Despite his sudden resolve, it felt strange to be in a place that was so obviously marked as gay. A rainbow flag had been stapled to the wall behind the counter. A Fauvistically coloured photograph of Oscar Wilde hung in a frame decorated with flowers, outshining the far plainer, unadorned portrait of Gertrude Stein on the opposite wall. On a table close to the counter, newspapers with names like Gay Times were laid out for customers. Remus considered picking one at random, even if he had brought a book, but in the end he didn’t dare. Instead, he bought his tea and carried it over to a free window seat.

A world that he had barely thought existed flowed past the window. He felt at once isolated from it, spotting men holding hands on the other side of the glass, and part of it, enveloped in the cosy confines of the camply decorated café. He was a novice, he supposed. It felt silly, not having been to a place like this before the age of twenty-five. But there had not been time in his past life, before it had shattered. If the war had never happened, things would have been different.

As he clutched his mug to warm his hands, he tried to unpick the strings of history and imagine a world where Voldemort had never made a bid for power. He soon gave up. He was approaching it as if it were an arithmancy problem, which could be worked out neatly on paper, when really it was so tangled that there was no way to tell which part of history was attached to which. It was so tempting to think that if Voldemort had never existed, and the Death Eaters had never rallied around him, he would be living a blessed life surrounded by his friends. But even barring accidents, there was no guarantee of that. Perhaps they would grow apart, or fall out. They might just not have time with each other anymore, with lives to live. They might grow out of pranks and camaraderie. And even if the war had never happened, Sirius Black would still be himself. There would still be some betrayal, but of another kind. At best, it would be an honest break with all of them, where they realised that he was not the friend they had thought, and collectively excluded him. At worst… well, it went like it had in reality.

Remus sighed to himself and sipped his tea. He wished to be rid of the thought of Sirius Black. He wanted himself, his identity and his sexuality to exist independently of that first, terrible romance. Forgetting about it would never happen, but he wanted it to let go of him. Was he ready for that? Did he want that? The alternative was to remain in Black’s clutches, the slave of an ill-conceived teenage crush that had swallowed years of his life and all but ruined him. When he had left his parents’ house a fortnight ago, it had been because he had decided to refuse to be a child. Just as he was no longer trapped by his parents’ advice and worry, he did not want to be trapped by Black. It was easier said than done, he knew, but sitting here, and realising that he shared something which he found difficult even to speak of with most if not all the clientele, made him want to break through the self-confining walls around him. One way or another, he wanted to commune with these people.

But that would have to be some other day. He remained in that window seat for what felt like hours, not reading his book but instead watching the people around him, trying to forget the
approach of the full moon.

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On Sunday, Remus slept until noon, and even after waking up, did not get out of bed for hours. It was not a case of indulgent laziness, but rather sheer lack of energy and will. He thought of the previous day with pleasure - it had been an uncommonly happy day, even if all he had really done was to go somewhere and have a cup of tea. Despite that, he felt unable to feel happy today, when he was so unwell.

After a long time, he pulled himself out of bed, and went over to his suitcase. The locks were stiff under his arthritic fingers. Finally they yielded. Tucked safely into his wizard’s robes was his medicine box, made from polished wood with several compartments of phials and bottles. He disregarded some of the strongest potions now - he would need those tomorrow - and instead went for the weaker alternative, a bitter concoction that he dripped in water. Having downed it, he lay back into bed and hovered between sleep and wakefulness for over an hour.

When he woke again in the afternoon, he felt well enough to get out of bed, even if he did not savour the idea. He had some tea and toast (although he could not bear the thought of butter or jam). The food did make him feel better, and he managed to keep it all down. Strengthened, he got dressed and set out towards the old military base. He did not Apparate for fear of splinching himself, but walked instead. Well there, he Vanished the rubbish in the room he had selected, made sure that he could lock the door and started casting wards around it. It would keep the noise from escaping through the high window, where the glass was long gone, and would change the mind of anyone who approached. When the spell-work was done, he had to sit down to rest. He did not get up until he realised how cold it was getting. He rose slowly, knowing that he should get back and try to eat something more. Then he should probably get to sleep again. He would not sleep at all the night after that.

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Next morning, Remus went from asleep to awake without noticing the transition. He lay still in bed as the alarm-clock blared at him. Twelve hours, now, until the full moon rose and grabbed him. His body seemed detached from his mind, as if it was already changing into someone else’s. It felt like the pain was almost gone. Remus knew that really, it was just so continuous that his mind had cancelled it out. As soon as he moved, it would come flooding back. His mother had been right. How would he manage this? How would he manage tomorrow? If this transformation would be as violent as it felt it would... It had not been this bad for over a year. It must be the stress of the new environment.

He wondered what would happen if he didn’t turn up today. Well, they would fire him, no doubt. And if he managed to call and tell him he felt too ill to come in? They were decent people. He could hope that they would not begrudge him that. Probably they would not want him there is he was ill, especially if they thought he was contagious. But if he did call in sick, he would not be paid for the days he missed, and Mr Carter would probably think less of him. He did not want that.

With immense effort, he managed to sit up and swing his legs over the edge of the bed. He could just about reach the medicine box. He struggled to open it, for how long he did not know. When it finally opened he was afraid that the jolt would upset the bottles inside and break them. If that happened, he would have no way of replacing them. Potion-making was difficult when you couldn’t use a silver knife. His father had brewed this batch of the strongest potion, but reluctantly - it was an unforgiving concoction. Even if it would keep him going for a few hours, when it stopped working he would crash quickly, and feel worse than before. It had been James who had
dug out the recipe first, and he and Sirius had brewed it for Remus during the war. It had served its purpose then, when Remus could not afford to let his guard down even around the full moon. This situation may be less dangerous, but he still needed to stay on his feet.

The bottles, he found, were all intact. He picked up the correct one and pulled out the cork with his teeth. He did not bother with a glass, but drank it out of the bottle. The contents were barely a mouthful. The clear liquid tasted tangy and sour, but at once he felt power return to him. His joints and muscles still ached, and when he held his hands up, he saw that they were shaking, but at least he felt in control.

Breakfast was out of question. He felt nauseated enough this close to the full moon, and the potion always upset his stomach. For a moment he wondered whether he was going to be sick, which would mean that he had wasted a dose of the potion, but the feeling passed. It was better to simply set out towards the village. Full of nervous energy, he dressed and left. Outside, it had only started to dawn. He glanced up at the paling orb in the sky and shivered. It was like a promise. *Not long now.*

When Remus stepped in through the back-door of the butcher’s shop, the overpowering smell of meat hit him. He knew that all the raw meat was still in the cold-room, but he could smell the juices which congealed in the trays, the tender muscle lovingly cut...

He shook himself. It felt like someone else was thinking with his mind. Now, he snapped back into himself, and the smell was no longer mouth-watering. It felt so strong that he felt sick again.

‘Lupin?’ Mr Carter called from upstairs.

‘Good morning, Mr Carter!’ he replied, took off his jacket and reached for his apron. The blackened scar on his forearm caught his eye. ‘Damn.’ He must have been so preoccupied by taking the potion that he had forgotten to cast the glamour over his scars. He paused and listened. Mr Carter was still shuffling around upstairs. He would hear when he started to descend. Remus drew his wand form the jacket’s inner-pocket and cast the spell over each arm. He stuffed it back into the pocket just as he heard footsteps. By the time Mr Carter came downstairs, Remus was just tying his apron. At least it gave him a pretext to hide his shaking hands behind his back.

‘Good morning, Lupin. Good weekend?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good, good.’ Mr Carter looked at him, his gaze almost suspicious. He must be pale, he reflected, and the potion might make his eyes look odd, but Mr Carter did not comment. ‘Come on then. Let’s get to work.’

As they got the shop ready and opened, Remus marvelled at how well everything went. He offered to mind the shop while Carter had his lunch. The thought of food did not appeal to him at all. The meat around him was somewhat disconcerting, but he repressed the thoughts of what it would be like to bury his teeth into the pheasant hung in the window or hunt down the cows whose flesh was laid out before him.

When Carter came back from his lunch, he looked over the counter.

‘Did we sell the diced beef?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Mrs Stewart was in.’

‘We should do some more, then. There’s a tray in the freezer - not particularly good on its own,
just the thing to dice. Get it and deal with it, would you?'

‘How large should I make them?’

‘Squares of about half an inch. Use the large knife, like I showed you.’

Remus fetched the tray from the large walk-in freezer and took it to the workbench, glad now to be away from the shop. It was easier to ignore one, albeit rather large, cut of beef, rather than the smells of all that meat from such a variety of animals. He picked up the cleaver. The reflection of the light in the metal was steady. He held out his left hand - it trembled. The worst he would do would be to shift the meat, then. He doubted Mr Carter would mind if the dices were not completely even, if they were selling it diced. At least he would not take off a finger.

The work was repetitive, but it required concentration. As he brought the cleaver down again and again, shifting his grip and moving the meat, he felt his mind loosen from himself. The work distracted him from the tension that beset him. He arranged the slices and started dicing them. Keeping his left hand steady was getting harder. Only a few left now... He made the last cut and put the cleaver down. Pushing the tray closer so he would not drop anything, he took a handful of the diced meat and let it fall into the tray. One cube stuck to his palm. He reached to brush it off. At once he was seized by an impulse to instead take it and put it into his mouth.

Remus waved his hand, as though something poisonous had locked its jaws around him. The piece of meat fell off, into the tray. He transferred the rest of the meat into it as quickly as he could. If he worked fast, the thoughts might not return. Putting the tray safely on the workbench, he rubbed cold sweat off his forehead with his arm. His hands were slippery with meat juice, so he turned the tap with his elbow. He lowered his hands to put them under the water, when the way the blood on them caught the light made him stop.

Who would it hurt…?

He glanced up, over at the door. Mr Carter was nowhere to be seen. He turned his left hand. The juices ran down his fingers. All he would have to do would be to lift his hand...

He gave in. In one swift motion, he ducked down and licked his fingers. The taste of the cold meat-juice made him gag. He pulled his fingers away and retched. Only the sound of the water-tap masked the sound. He took water into his mouth, spat it out, forced himself to drink. As he pushed his hands under the cold water and fumbled for the soap, he marvelled at his own idiocy. That he had given in to that thought! He had always hated the feeling that someone was thinking with his brain, but he had let it take control. He was human, and if he wanted to stay that way, he must keep the beast at bay.

‘Lupin!’

He looked up, drawn back into reality.

‘Coming!’ he called back. He washed and dried his hand with frantic speed. Then he took the tray and hurried into the shop.

‘Ah, good,’ Mr Carter said and took it from him. ‘Excellent.’ He placed it in the counter, then looked back at his assistant. ‘Are you alright?’

Remus stumbled. The corners of his vision darkened. He reached out, not certain what he was reaching for, scrabbling for support. His hands met a solid surface. It seemed like the only still thing in a spinning world. Then someone took him by the shoulders.

‘Come on, sit down.’ Roughly, Mr Carter made him walk a few steps, then manoeuvred him into a chair. Remus leaned down, trying to put his head between his knees. His back cracked as he
moved. The potion had worn off. It had never stopped working this suddenly before. Now, he was awash with everything it had suppressed. When the world had stopped spinning quite so much, he straightened up a little and wrapped his arms around himself. The cold he must have been exposed to all day hit him.

‘What the hell did you get up to at the weekend?’ Mr Carter asked. Remus shook his head, closing his eyes to keep the dizziness from coming back.

‘Nothing,’ he said, his voice thin. ‘I must be coming down with something. I’m sorry...’

Mr Carter sighed.

‘Well, you’re no good to me fainting in the shop,’ he said. ‘Go home. Get some rest. Don’t bother turning up tomorrow.’

Remus forced his eyes open. The dread he felt now outshone everything else.

‘Mr Carter, please, I...’

Mr Carter interrupted him.

‘I’ll see you on Wednesday again. So go rest up.’

Remus pulled himself to his feet.

‘Yes. Yes, I will... Thank you...’ His employer gave him a look.

‘Will you be alright getting home?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ Remus said, fumbling with the ribbon of his apron. ‘I’ll... be back Wednesday.’

‘Good. Now, off you go.’ Mr Carter turned and walked through the beaded curtain. Remus put his apron on the hanger, struggled into his jacket and set off, not towards the guesthouse, but towards the military base.

It felt as if his feet were weighed down with stones. His knees protested as he bent them. The road seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of him. Putting his arms around himself, Remus tried to rub away the pain in his muscles, but it made no difference. He glanced up at the sky to see where the sun was, but really he did not need to. Inside him he could feel every part of his body counting down. It was less than three hours until the full moon rose.

By the time he reached the concrete building he had prepared for himself, Remus felt he could barely stand. Two hours now. He pushed the heavy metal door shut behind him and sat down against it. Then he took off his scarf, bundled it up and lay down with it under his head. He closed his eyes and tried to think about something other than what was coming. It felt impossible. Little by little, he felt the approach of the rise of the moon. An hour and forty-five minutes. Hour and a half. Now just an hour. A nervous pain went through his chest. It would be bad this time. How bad? There was no way to tell. As so often before the full moon, his mind now reached out and begged: Please, let me survive the night. Let me get through it without any permanent damage. Let me live until the moon starts waning. Let it not be so painful. He did not know why he worded it almost like a prayer - religion had never played a part of his life. Perhaps this was simply him asking the Moon for mercy.

It was time to get ready. Getting to his feet was a slow process. He made sure the door was locked and then started pulling off his clothes. His wand was safely stowed into his jacket. He folded his
jumper and shirt and put them up in the high window, where the wolf would not be able to reach them. With difficulty, he untied his shoelaces, took off his socks and stuffed them into the shoes, and put them in the window too. Dusk was fast approaching. The concrete floor was cold, and stray grit pushed into the soles of his feet. He took off his trousers and pants and put them with the other clothes. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering in the cold. Not long now. Standing up was uncomfortable, but he did not want to sit down. He would rather suffer the pain of standing up rather than the discomfort of grit against his skin. Soon, soon...

The rising of the moon hit him like a blow. He screamed and fell to his knees. The pain that had been building inside him exploded. His heart beat impossibly fast as it twisted into a new shape. His bones were agony as they started stretching. His back arched. It felt like fire was rushing down his spine. His coccyx seemed to quiver, preparing to break into separate vertebrae and grow into a tail. Before his very eyes, his hands started changing shape. The fingers seemed to grow into his hands. With a snap, the bones leading to his thumbs broke and reformed, pulling the digit back. His skin throbbed as the follicles sprouted new hair. His eyesight shifted. Colour disappeared. Against his will, his knees straightened. He fell to his side, screaming. His knee-joints would break and heal, bent the other way. Then his collar bones would disappear and his shoulder bones would disconnect. He would lose consciousness soon. He must lose consciousness soon. As his hearing became more and more acute, he heard the crack of his joints breaking. His mind went.
Chapter 6

Remus could not tell if he woke from sleep or came out of a faint. The first thing he noticed was the cold. Then, the taste of blood.

Carefully, he moved his limbs. It hurt, but not as badly as it could have. He opened one eye, then another. The first rays of sunlight were pushing in through the high window, illuminating the graffiti on the walls. Remus could make out the angry red letters against the dull concrete, the same anti-Thatcherite message that someone had written on every wall around the base. DITCH THE BITCH. His colour-vision was still intact, then. Some part of his mind that was not occupied with the pain reflected that it seemed pointless to write something like that on an inside wall.

Slowly, Remus raised his head and pushed himself up. The thin layer of dried blood on his skin cracked as he moved. The bite-marks on his arms had not quite stopped bleeding. His face was throbbing; when he touched it he could feel the bruising. He must have thrown himself into a wall. He did feel nauseous, but no more than he usually did after the transformation, so he was probably not concussed. The werewolf had a thicker skull than its natural cousin.

It took a lot of effort to get to his feet and retrieve his clothes. Dressing was painful, but he was glad for the warmth. He decided to leave his shoe-laces untied, as his fingers were too stiff. The walk home was long, but there was no way he could Apparate in this state.

Simply getting the heavy door open made him so exhausted he had to sit down for a moment. Several times during the walk, he paused to catch his breath, and twice he stopped and retched, but to no effect.

Mrs Mason’s house looked deserted when he arrived. His landlady must still be asleep. Careful not to make any noise, Remus unlocked the front door, slipped in and locked it again. Finally in his room, he stepped out of his shoes with a sigh of relief, and took his jacket off. He wanted to collapse onto the bed at once, but he needed to do something about his face first.

His reflection in the bathroom mirror was enough to startle him. His hair was caked with dried blood from a cut in his forehead. The skin on the right side of his face was fast turning a shade of purple. There was nothing he could do about the cut, but he could heal the bruises. He went back to his room and to his relief found that he had left the medicine box open. He brought a jar of cream back with him. As soon as he applied it, the bruising seemed to grow paler, and his face stopped hurting.

He stripped off his clothes, bloody from the walk home, and washed the worst of the blood from his hair and arms. When he came back to his room, he threw his towel on the floor and crawled into bed. As soon as he lay down, he felt himself drifting off. Despite the pains and the nausea, lying down was blissful. The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was the hands of his alarm clock approaching five.

***

There was a shutter banging in the wind. Someone must have forgotten to fasten them properly, or the Scottish winds had pulled it lose, sending the lock falling to the grounds...

Remus opened his eyes. He was not at Hogwarts, or even in Scotland, and the sound was not a window shutter. There was someone knocking on the door. Confused and drunken on sleep, he stumbled out of bed. As he reached for his dressing-gown, he looked at the clock. It was not quite
seven o’clock. He had slept for two hours.

The knocking continued until he unlocked the door and opened it. Behind it stood Mrs Mason in her nightgown, her fist still raised. She looked a little surprised at seeing him. Her hand fell.

‘What can I do for you, Mrs Mason?’ His voice was hoarse after the night’s howling.

‘I’m sorry to wake you, Mr Lupin, but Mr Carter’s here to see you,’ Mrs Mason said. She frowned, serious despite her tiredness. ‘He’d like you to come downstairs - dressed.’

It took a few moments for her words to register.

‘Of course,’ he said finally. ‘Just a moment.’

As she turned away, Remus closed the door. How he found the energy to dress, he did not know. It was the kind of feverish speed with which he was used to act during the war, when things needed to be done even when he was too weak to do them. He wiped the last of the anti-bruising cream off his face with the discarded towel. Then he dressed, taking the first things he found in the drawers (pants, jeans, shirt, jumper), struggled socks onto his feet and stepped into his wellington boots as he put on his jacket. It was not until he was running down the stairs that he wondered why Mr Carter was there. Perhaps he had misunderstood what he had said, and he had expected him to turn up anyway...

Mrs Mason stood in the hallway, clutching the collar of her dressing-gown shut. Beside her stood Mr Carter, looking uneasy. There was something funereal about their silence.

‘Mr Carter?’

Carter looked up.

‘Ah, Lupin,’ he said.

Remus cleared his throat, trying to make his voice sound a little more normal.

‘Did I misinterpret what you said yesterday...?’

‘No,’ Carter said quickly. ‘I know, I’m sorry, but... I need someone to go with me. Can’t ask Denise. Come on, the car’s outside.’

He should say no. He should tell the truth, that he was feeling so ill that being out of bed made him feel like throwing up. But Mr Carter’s tone of voice stopped him. At once he knew that something terrible had happened.

‘Alright. Of course.’

Carter turned, said a word of thanks to Mrs Mason and went outside. When he passed her, Remus smiled at her apologetically. She attempted to smile back, but seemed unable to.

Carter climbed into the driver’s seat of the battered car parked outside, and Remus went around to get into the passenger seat. Carter fumbled with his keys, his hands uncharacteristically clumsy. Finally he turned the key and the engine started. He glanced over at his employee.

‘You look terrible,’ he said earnestly. ‘How did you get that?’ He indicated on his own forehead where Remus had a cut.

‘Oh, I fell,’ he lied. ‘Tripped on my way home. It’ll heal.’ He was silent as Carter turned the car
around. Finally he could not stop himself anymore. ‘What’s happened, Mr Carter?’

The butcher swallowed.

‘You met Bill Masters, didn’t you?’

‘The pig-farmer, sir?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Carter. ‘He called, about half an hour ago. I thought it best to have someone else with me to see it.’

He would say no more. Remus watched the cold dawn outside. Sitting inside the car, he felt disconnected from the rest of the world. It was as if he was still stuck inside a dream, turned strange and vivid through the closeness to the full moon. But he knew this was real. He was in too much pain and the situation was too unspecific for it to be a dream. If his subconscious was in charge, it would have fashioned a scenario revolving around something like an ambush by Death Eaters, not this.

The drive to Masters’ farm was not long. The farmer himself was waiting at the gate. Carter turned off the engine in front of the gate and got out, leaving Remus to struggle with his own door.

‘Who’s that?’ he heard Masters ask.

‘That’s Lupin. You’ve met. I thought it was best that someone else saw this too,’ Carter said. Remus stepped out of the car and approached them. Masters looked even more grim than Carter.

‘Oh, yes, so it is. You’re not doing him any favours, making him a witness to this,’ he said cryptically. Then, to Remus: ‘Come on. I hope you have a strong stomach.’

Carter fell into step with the farmer, while Remus followed a few steps after, listening to them speaking.

‘All of them...?’

‘Not quite. But it’s bad enough. I don’t know what use they’ll be...’

‘But the doors...’

‘Forced. I don’t see how...’

‘Have you called the police? The insurance company?’

‘Not yet. But I’ll have to.’

They approached a barn, its doors ajar. Even from here, Remus could smell something foul. A strange shrieking was coming from inside. Carter quickened his steps and pushed the door open. His hand went to his mouth.

‘No...’ He stepped in, eyes wide with terror.

Remus hurried after. As soon as he stepped in, he wished he had not.

The barn had been used for housing pigs, but it was unrecognisable as anything with an everyday use. The floor was slippery with blood and faeces. Everywhere, body-parts - legs, ears, skin - lay scattered. Half-eaten pig carcasses lay huddled together in the pens, as if they had sought protection together against their predator. In the corners, the survivors crowded, screaming in
‘How many?’ asked Carter. There was no emotion in his voice.

‘I don’t know,’ Masters admitted. ‘There were fifty pigs in here. I haven’t been able to get close enough to count the live ones. I think that’s easier than anything else. Or... we could count the... heads.’

‘What could have done this? What animal is big enough...?’

‘There’s nothing larger than foxes around,’ Masters said.

‘You remember Grahams’ sheep?’ Carter asked.

Masters snorted.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Arnold,’ he said. ‘This door was forced. By a human.’

‘But this can’t be a human being!’ Carter exclaimed. ‘Look!’ He pointed at the flank of a pig. Its belly was ripped open, but the indentations of the jaws where obvious. Remus stared at it, willing it to turn into something else. He must be imagining it. It couldn’t be...

But it was. The marks of a wolf’s teeth shone red against the pink hide.

Remus turned around and stumbled outside. His perception had shrunken to the sight of the bite-marks. He made it to the corner of the building before the nausea overwhelmed him. He was sick, leaning with his hands against the wall. His stomach worked convulsively, forcing up his own blood and gastric acid. Every time he thought it was over, he would retch again and bring up more. His eyes watered. His throat and his nose burned.

At last, it came to an end. He leaned his forehead against the wall, gasping for air, close to tears. The sound of footsteps was not enough to rouse him.

‘Don’t blame you.’ It was Masters’ voice. ‘That was my reaction too.’

Remus blinked a few times, trying to rid his eyes of tears, and straightened up.

‘We didn’t need a witness,’ Masters said, his voice dropping. ‘Arnold couldn’t face it alone. Unsurprisingly.’

‘Are you going to call the police?’ Remus asked.

‘Yes,’ Masters said. ‘I don’t know what else to do. I have no idea what’s happened. I mean, if it weren’t for the fact that there haven’t been any wolves in England since the eighteenth century...’ Remus’ stomach clenched again, but Masters only shrugged, as if this had only been musings. ‘I have no idea what - or who - did this.’

‘Could it be a dog...?’

‘No,’ Masters said, shaking his head. ‘Pigs are strong animals. They’d be able to defend themselves against a dog.’

‘What will happen?’ Remus asked.

‘Well, the insurance company should give me some compensation. But it’ll be slow to start up again. It’ll be impossible to start over this year. I’ll have to get new pigs in the spring. I doubt the
ones in there will live.’ He sighed. ‘Arnold will have to find someone else to buy pork from. I’ve sold meat to him for fifteen years, and now... there’s no meat left.’

He was about to turn, when Remus said:

‘Mr Masters?’

He turned around, eyebrows raised.

‘Was anyone else harmed?’ he asked. ‘Is everyone accounted for? Other animals… and the people.’

Masters’ face took on a closed expression.

‘My family’s fine. As for the animals, I haven’t found anything else disturbed.’

He turned and walked over to the entrance again. Remus thought of insisting, but didn’t. If anyone had been attacked by a werewolf last night, it would not go unnoticed. He followed Masters, and joined him in the entrance. Mr Carter had wandered further in. He looked around him, at the blood and the bodies. His eyes had taken on a strange glassiness.

‘It’s strange. I’ve spent my entire adult life in abattoirs and butcher shops, but this…’

They stood in silence, all wanting to look away but being unable. After a long time, Masters sighed again and turned away.

‘I’ll call the police,’ he said. Carters nodded and followed him.

‘We should be on our way.’

‘Cup of tea before you go?’

‘No thank you.’ Carter sounded rather choked. ‘We must be off.’

Masters walked them to the car. The two friends agreed to be in touch later. The farmer waved at Remus, who waved back as he got into the car. Carter started up the car, and they drove off in silence. There was nothing to say. They were halfway between the farm and Mrs Mason’s house when Carter spoke.

‘Thank you for coming.’ He said it grudgingly, as if he was embarrassed to admit it.

‘That’s alright,’ Remus replied, not knowing what else to say.

‘Bill told me what had happened over the phone,’ he explained. ‘I couldn’t take Denise with me. She wouldn’t be able to bear it.’ He swallowed, gazing out over the countryside. ‘Do you know about Paul, Lupin?’

Remus shifted in his seat.

‘Is Paul your son?’ he asked.

‘Yes. I know these things get talked about,’ Carter said. ‘I thought you might have heard. Paul was in the army. He was deployed to the Falklands in April 1982. He was killed in the Bluff Cove Air Attacks. Eighth of June, it was. We were going to ask for him to be repatriated, but we never did. He was killed in an explosion. We decided that it would be odd to know that there might be bits of some other poor lad in the same coffin.’
Remus thought of Peter. He swallowed, suppressing a wave of sickness.

‘I’m sorry.’

Carter shrugged, momentarily unable to speak. His face had gone stiff.

‘He used to work in the shop, before he joined the Army. We didn’t mind. We were proud.’

‘It must be very difficult,’ Remus said. It felt like an empty thing to say. It struck him now that he
was doing their son’s old job. A strange replacement, the war dead replaced by the veteran.

‘It hit Denise hard. She took over Paul’s job, after he left, but after he died… She hasn’t been able
to face it. She doesn’t do much these days. Can’t blame her.’ He shook his head. They were silent
for a few moments. When Carter spoke again, his voice was lighted. ‘At least there was a purpose
to it. There are so many terrible ways you can die, especially if you’re young. He gave his life for
something. I suppose that means it’s not a complete waste.’

_But it is a waste,_ Remus thought. _There is no such thing as a death that is not a waste._

Carter stopped the car outside the guest-house a few minutes later. Remus waved after him as he
drove away. When the car was out of sight, he let himself into the house. He heard Mrs Mason in
the kitchen, and hurried up the stairs. As he came upstairs, he was suddenly aware of the fact that
he was still covered in dried blood under his clothes. He badly needed a bath. But no, it would have
to wait. He needed sleep.

As he unlocked the door to his room, he heard tapping from inside. On the window-sill, framed by
the small window, sat Agrippina, the family owl. Remus did not even have the energy to sigh and
roll his eyes at his father’s forgetfulness. He opened the window. Agrippina cooed and stuck out
her leg.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I have nothing to give you, I’m afraid.’ He stroked her feathers. This little piece
of home was comforting. Then he took the letter from her and skimmed it. It was the promised
letter, written by his father, asking him how he was feeling. He scribbled an assurance that he was
alright on the back and tied it to her leg. ‘Off you go,’ he said. She ruffled her feathers, spread her
wings and took off. Remus lingered at the window, watching her fly away. He felt a surprising
pang of homesickness.

Wearily, he closed the window and pulled the curtains. He undressed, put on his pyjamas and went
to bed. A thin strip of light escaped from under the curtains. The room had the odd isolated feeling
of a dark room in the daytime. Remus wanted to close his eyes, roll over and fall asleep, but he
seemed unable to. He could not rid himself of the image of the pig carcasses torn apart by sharp
teeth. Dozens of animals cruelly killed - a man’s livelihood been destroyed - and in the great
scheme of things, he was the person most likely to have done it.

***

All of next day, a hush seemed to lie over the butcher’s shop. Mr Carter put Remus to work in the
shop, dealing with customers, while he himself stayed in the back-room, alternatively preparing
meat and speaking on the telephone. Around noon, Mr Masters came in. Through the beaded
curtain, Remus heard the murmur of their voices. He did not dare ask what was happening. Carter’s
frankness yesterday must have been some symptom of shock. Now, he was taciturn, even curt, with
Remus, who in turn was glad that he was not involved in decisions. Nevertheless, he knew every
time he sold a piece of pork, it was one of a small, dwindling supply, at least until Mr Carter found
a new supplier.
At the end of his work-day, Remus wanted little else than to go home and rest. He had been on his feet almost all day and his knees ached. However, another purpose drove him. As soon as he got out of sight from the high-street, he Disapparated. He materialised standing in front of the half-open door of the concrete building where he had transformed.

He needed to put his mind to rest. Carefully, he inspected the door and the hinges. They were as whole as they had been before the full-moon. The interior was marked, of course. There was blood smeared on the concrete where the wolf had thrown itself against the walls, and claw-marks where it had attacked them. Remus drew his fingers along the marks - they were the wrong size for his human hands, and yet he had made them. He pulled his hand away, rubbing his fingertips against his palms, trying to get rid of the memory of growing claws. None of the damage to the walls threatened the integrity of the structure, and the roof was intact too. That left the window. It was set high above the floor, high enough that he had to jump to look out of it. After a few tries, he managed to get a grip of the opening and, feet scrabbling against the wall, pulled himself up. His head fitted through, but not his shoulders. With a sigh of relief, he let go and jumped down. If he could not get out of the window in human form, he could not do it in wolf form. Even with disconnected shoulders, the wolf’s bulk was far larger than his.

He walked back, needing time to think. There was no way he could have killed those pigs. The wolf had not escaped. Besides, when he had been sick at the sight of the carnage, he had not thrown up anything solid. A wolf’s metabolism may be very fast, but not that fast.

But it still did not make sense. A werewolf running lose would head for the nearest human, not break into a locked barn. It would have been possible for a wolf to break down the doors, but Remus doubted it would bother. There was something strangely calculated about this. Now he remembered what Carter had mentioned - the doors had been forced by a human. The werewolf must have opened them before the transformation. He had changed inside. He must have spent all night in there, and escaped only after the moon set.

It was positioned - planned. Werewolf attacks were usually fuelled by hunger and violence, but none of that warranted this kind of organising. He wished he could see the bite-marks again. Perhaps they would tell him something - but it would be impossible. The dead pigs must have been dealt with by now. He tried his best to push it out of his mind, but to no avail.

***

Remus woke next morning from the grips of a nightmare. He had been in the entrance hall of Hogwarts, and thought he had heard something from the Great Hall. Slowly, in the way that one only moves in dreams, he had approached the doors and pushed them open. The smell of blood assaulted him. The floor was covered in bodies, ripped and bloody. Some were simply limbs, hands, guts. Others stared at him in death, accusing him. James, Peter, Dumbledore, Lily, Frank, Alice, McGonagall... He had cried and shouted, asking it not to have happened, but the mark of his teeth were on them all. When he jerked awake, he half expected them to be there, lying around him.

But he was alone. He sunk back onto his pillow, unable to feel relieved. It was the thirty-first of October, James’ death-day. He felt that it should be a day that was marked somehow. Silence should be observed, windows should be draped in black, no-one should laugh. Instead, it was a day like any other. He would have to get out of bed soon, have breakfast, go to work. Around him, people would talk and laugh and smile. No-one would show the respect that should be shown, because they did not know.

On days like this, not even the waning of the moon mattered. He was starting to feel stronger again,
and he realised as he got out of bed that he was feeling quite hungry. Even that felt like an imposition.

Like the previous day, the shop was quiet. Today, Remus was grateful rather than relieved. He did not want to talk to anyone. Mrs Carter came into the shop once, bringing a cup of tea with her. She asked him how he was, and he murmured something indistinct in reply. As she left, quicker than she would have otherwise, he felt guilty, wishing he had said something to her. He just did not know what. What he wanted to ask her about was her son, but that would be too upsetting. Besides, he could not tell her that he knew what it was like, because he could not explain about the war. It was strange that these people, who had lived in what he had seen as a war-zone, thought that the only wars during the past few years had been fought far overseas. Even if they had known a Muggle who had been killed by Death Eaters, they would never know. At most, they would think of them as the victim of an unsolved murder, not as the casualty of a war.

The day passed slowly. The overcast sky outside made it look like it was already darkening. Few customers came in, perhaps fearing rain. Some came to ask if they had any pumpkins left, but Remus had to turn them away. He had sold the last of Miss Courage’s harvest yesterday. Closing-time came as a relief. As he said goodbye, Mr Carter barely answered, as if he had half forgotten he was there. Remus hurried out of the shop, hands in his pockets and head bowed. He went onto the high street and was about to turn to go home, when something caught his eye. By the church sat an old man, a little camping-table put up in front of him. Even if Remus could not see it, he knew what must be on it. As he approached, the piece of stiff red paper on plastic stalks became clearer. The old man had been watching him as he drew near, his step so purposeful that there was no way of mistaking where he was going.

‘Good afternoon,’ he called when Remus was close enough to hear him. Now when he saw his face, he realised he was one of the men at the fireplace in the pub. No doubt he was a local character.

‘Would you like to buy a poppy? ’

‘Yes, please,’ Remus said, surprised at the clearness of his own voice. Sedately, the man picked up a paper flower. Remus dug in his pockets and found some coins. The items changed hands. The younger veteran took the flower from the older, reverent towards this object he had barely known about until a few days ago. ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, sir,’ said the old man. Remus studied him for a moment.

‘Did you fight in the Second World War?’

‘Yes, I did.’ The man brightened a little, happy at the attention. ‘I volunteered in January 1940. I’d been up at university for a term, but it didn’t seem so important then. I was sent to France. Dreadfully dull it was at first. And then came the German invasion. Well, you know what happened, of course. I was taken back to England from Dunkirk in a fishing-boat. I still exchange Christmas cards with the fisherman who took us over. Young chap - still alive, you see. Anyway, eventually I was sent to North Africa, and then ended up in Italy, where I was stationed until the end of the war.’ He smiled broadly, as though anticipating questions. Remus turned the poppy between his fingers.

‘It must have been dreadful,’ he said, for want of anything else. The old man’s face fell.

‘It was war,’ he said, almost harshly. Evidently this was not what he had expected. ‘It was our duty. There was no quibbling about it.’

‘No, of course not.’ Remus thought of a hundred questions, every one as inappropriate as the next. He wanted to hear about the death this man had seen, the friends he had lost, the ideals he had
shed. He wanted to know that he was not alone. But he would not answer any of those things. Remus knew that without even asking.

‘Did you go back to university after the war?’

The old man shook his head.

‘By then I felt too old. I knew some chaps who did, but no. I didn’t. Sometimes wish I had, but there you go.’ Then, smiling, he patted the money-box. ‘Thank you for the donation. It’s for a good cause.’

‘Thank you,’ Remus said and turned away. As he walked down the street, he felt the eyes of the veteran in his back. He almost wished he had stayed and coaxed him into talking more. He was the first person in the Muggle world he had met who might be able to understand what he had been through. Like Remus, his life had been changed immutably by war. At the same time, he knew that the man would not wish to give him the confidences he wanted. To him, who had time and state ideology on his side, the horrors and the losses would seem far away. Indeed, they might seem worth it. Retrospectively, the Second World War had become everything Remus’ war would never be to him.

Remus went home, his heart doubly heavy. The poppy lay on the table beside him as he had dinner. It prompted a vortex of thoughts, from the old man he had brought it from to the friends he had lost. Again and again, the image of the Potters’ grave appeared in his mind. He did not know whether he really wanted to go, or if he could bear it if he did not. Finally, he decided that the discomfort it might cause him to go was far less than the betrayal of not going. He fetched his tweed jacket from upstairs and put the poppy through the buttonhole. He walked until he could no longer see the house, then stopped and closed his eyes. He concentrated on the church and the village and turned on the spot.

Blackness swallowed him momentarily. The next thing he knew, he was standing outside the gates of the churchyard in Godric’s Hollow. It was twilight, just as it had been in Suffolk, but Remus thought the sky seemed a darker shade of blue here. In the west, the last few streaks of purple and pink were fading.

He paused with his hand on the cold metal of the gate. Could he bear this? For a moment, it seemed like an option to let go of the gate and Disapparate again. But no, he had come this far. He drew his wand before stepping inside. The dark of the graveyard unsettled him.

The gate gave the faintest of creaks as he pushed it open and entered. It made the hairs on his neck stand on end. He had never been here during the war, but this place brought back that tense feeling he had grown used to then. Telling himself he had nothing to worry about, he set off.

Remus’ feet found the way down the paths and between the stones on their own accord. The white marble of the gravestone stood out in the dark. A few yards away from it, he stopped, afraid to see the names carved into the stone.

He was not the only one who had come here today. Several wreaths had been placed on the gravel in front of it. He wondered who else had been there. Other Order members? People from Hogwarts? Lily’s family? Or just admirers from the wizarding world? One of the wreaths bore a card with the letters M.O.M. emblazoned on it. The sight of it awakened an odd kind of resentment in the pit of his stomach. It was a possessive anger against the people who had barely known Lily and James when they were alive but went out of their way to show how they cared now. But even the people who had known them and been their friends could not have felt their loss as keenly as he did. There had been no one closer to them than him left, except for Harry, who was just a child, and
perhaps Dumbledore, who seemed above grief. The only one closer had turned out not to care at all.

His anger changed, and instead it turned towards the friend who had betrayed them, the man who had killed them, the very fact of their death. He remembered both Lily and James with a fondness which made his heart ache. How unfair it was that they had died! They had been so young, so loved. The grief their death had caused to all of them seemed in itself cruel. Again, Remus thought of Harry. Had his aunt and uncle taken him to visit this spot, perhaps even given him a flower to put on the grave? From what he remembered of Petunia, he doubted it.

He walked closer and stopped in front of the headstone. The grave needed no more flowers, so he put his wand away, cupped his hands and murmured an incantation. The blue flame grew quickly in his cupped palms, tickling his skin. Another few Latin words sealed the fire. Remus crouched and dropped it, like one would let go of water one had scooped up to drink. It hovered an inch from the ground. The marble sparkled in the light.

‘Hello, Prongs. Hello, Lily.’ He reached out and drew a finger over their first names. His eyes travelled to their death dates, the same one repeated twice. How could it have been four years? Forty-eight months had passed since Lily had last drawn breath. Fifty-one full moons had come and gone since James saw the orb growing round - many more since he had transformed and run with his friends. The fact he knew so well cut into him - that they were dead, and there was no way to revoke it. After all this time, it still made the world grow a little paler. It was as though some part of him had imagined that a colour which did not exist could be seen after all, and now he had blinked and realised that all he was looking at was void.

Four years, and it still did not feel real. He would notice things he thought he must tell Prongs. He sometimes thought of questions to ask Lily. He realised things he wondered about Harry. During the year after their deaths, he had sometimes, during what he had considered his good moments, been half-sure that it had been a bad dream and they were not dead, but were living an ordinary life - going for walks, preparing lunch, reading to their son. Now he had no delusions of the reality of their deaths, but he kept having those thoughts. Some part of him had still not let go of it. He did not think he ever would. Prongs’ death was yet another scar he bore, and it would not fade. James and Peter had been cut out of him, and the act had left an invisible ridge on his soul which would occasionally cause him pain, even bleed. To him, it was as disfiguring as the mark of Fenrir Greyback’s jaws on his thigh, the lines left by claws on his face or the silver-stained scar on his arm.

His legs had started hurting, so he stood up again. The fire crackled, casting new shadows onto the gravel. It would last through the night, probably until dawn. He wondered whether it would draw more witches and wizards to the grave to pay their respects. The Confunded Muggles were unlikely to pay any attention to it - they would probably take it for a reflection of a streetlamp or simply something they had imagined...

Remus’ body reacted before his mind did. He felt himself tensing, his back straightening, his hand reaching for his wand. There was someone behind him. It was nothing but instinct, but he was certain of it. Slowly, he wrapped his fingers around his wand.

In one sweeping motion, he swirled around into a duelling pose, raising his wand. He was halfway through casting a nonverbal spell when he realised his mistake. Two rows behind him stood Albus Dumbledore, his hands nonchalantly raised. In one he held his lit wand. With the other, he gave a little wave. Remus’ wand-arm fell to his side. Blood was roaring in his ears.

‘Professor Dumbledore.’
‘Good evening, Remus,’ said the newcomer. Then he gathered up his robes and stepped neatly over the graves to join him. When he stopped beside him, the side of his smiling mouth twitched a little. Despite the smile, Remus thought that the look he gave him was sad, as though his reaction had brought him pain. ‘At ease,’ he said finally.

‘I’m sorry, sir.’ Remus put his wand back into his pocket.

‘No matter. Paying your respects?’ He nodded. ‘I expect that fire’s yours.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a nice piece of magic, if I might say so,’ Dumbledore said, watching the fire with interest.

‘Thank you, sir.’ From him, that meant something. ‘Are you, sir?’

‘Hm?’ Dumbledore looked at him, his smile kind but a little distracted.

‘Paying your respects.’

The old man’s face fell.

‘Ah, yes. Yes indeed.’ Remus thought that Dumbledore glanced over his shoulder before looking at the grave in front of them. ‘I see that we are not the only ones.’ He waved his wand, and a small sculpture of a phoenix appeared, spinning in thin air. Dumbledore took it and placed it close to the stone. In the light from Remus’ fire, the bird looked like it would take flight. ‘It will last longer than the flowers.’

Remus nodded, wishing that he had been able to conjure a fire that would be more resilient.

They stood in silence for a minute or so, watching the grave. Remus felt the adrenaline which had overwhelmed him during the brief moment he had thought he was about to be attacked wearing off. He tried not to shiver. If Dumbledore noticed, he did not say. Instead, he turned to him and said:

‘Would you care to join me for a drink, Remus?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he answered, glad for the reason to leave the grave.

Dumbledore took the lead, and Remus followed him towards the gate. Once they were outside the graveyard, Remus fell in step with him. He felt odd in his jeans and tweed jacket beside Dumbledore, dressed in what looked like a dozen yards of purple silk under his travelling cloak.

‘I must admit I thought I might meet you here,’ Dumbledore said conversationally. ‘I am glad that I was right. It was a long time since I saw you.’

‘Eighteen months, I think.’

‘Yes, that sounds about right. You sold me some excellent new scales. But we did not have much time to chat, in that commercial setting...’

Dumbledore fell silent and came to a halt. Remus stopped to. They had been approaching the war memorial, transforming now. On top of the plinth stood a statue of a man, a woman and a little baby. The headmaster gazed up at it with a sad smile. After a little while, Remus admitted:

‘I don’t like it. They got Lily’s face all wrong.’

Dumbledore nodded slowly.
‘Hm, yes. The sculptor hasn’t quite captured her spunk, has he?’

Remus looked up at it, but then averted his eyes. To him it was obvious that the sculptor had never
seen these two people in the flesh, but had worked from photographs. He could spot it not only
from Lily’s overly kind, almost passive face, but from their postures and the height difference, all
of which was wrong. He did not want to look at it, afraid that his memories of her actual face and
the real set of James’ shoulders would disappear and be replaced by this poor copy.

They continued in silence towards the pub. It was almost empty, apart from two Muggles at the bar
and a witch smoking a clay-pipe in a corner. This mixing seemed strange to Remus. These past few
weeks had made him used to compartmentalise magic and the Muggle world, on top of everything
else.

Dumbledore bought two glasses of whiskey from the landlord, who seemed to notice nothing
wrong that a man in floor-length robes in bright purple had just walked into his pub.

‘Well,’ Dumbledore said once they had settled down. He raised his glass. ‘Chin-chin.’ Remus took
his glass and, feeling rather foolish, clinked it against his old headmaster’s. With the first sip, he
felt the tenseness give way.

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, dear boy.’ Dumbledore put down his glass and looked at him. ‘What are you doing
nowadays? Are your clothes an indication, or did you decide to travel incognito?’

Remus laughed.

‘I’ve got a Muggle job.’

‘Ah, splendid. What it is?’ Now, he could not help feeling a little embarrassed.

‘I work in a butcher’s shop, down in Suffolk.’

Dumbledore nodded approvingly.

‘There is no shame in being at the source of a community’s steaks and sausages.’

‘And pigs’ feet and pheasant and offal,’ Remus added.

‘Ah, I must have a word with the house-elves about getting some pheasant,’ Dumbledore mused.
‘It’s so difficult to get hold of in Scotland.’

They lapsed into silence, sipping their drinks. Remus’ mind was no longer on the culinary woes of
the north. After a long time, Dumbledore said:

‘It is fulfilling?’

Remus hesitated, thinking it over. He was not certain how he was finding it anymore.

‘It’s not a bad job,’ he said finally. ‘I like the owners.’

‘How are you finding living among Muggles?’

He thought of the way he kept narrowly avoiding making obvious mistakes, then of the ways in
which he did not quite feel safe. He did not dare to tell Dumbledore about them. Although he was
fairly certain about his headmaster’s inclinations (‘oh, he’s family alright’, as Sirius had put it), he
did not know whether he would understand this.

‘It’s gone fairly well, this far,’ he said. ‘But it’s… not like this.’ He looked around the pub. The witch had moved over to the bar and seemed to be talking to the men about football. ‘There are things I don’t understand. And things they don’t understand.’

‘Your mother is a Muggle,’ Dumbledore observed.

‘Yes - she’s helped me out a lot. But I’ve never really paid attention to it before - some just small, everyday things, others.’ He remembered the framed portrait in the shop’s back room. ‘I didn’t know about the Falklands War.’ He glanced over at Dumbledore to see if he looked perplexed. His face still bore its calm, schooled impression.

‘It was the spring of 1982,’ Dumbledore said kindly. ‘You were in no state to keep up with the news.’

Remus sighed, feeling uncomfortable.

‘Well, yes.’ He turned his glass between his palms. ‘The people I work for had a son who was in the Army. Their only child. He died.’ Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment; it made him look very old. ‘Mrs Carter used to work in the shop before that, but now she doesn’t. She’s still around, but from what I’ve heard - from what I’ve guessed - she wasn’t like she is now. Sometimes it’s like she’s gone transparent with grief.’

‘Small wonder,’ Dumbledore said, his voice still soft. ‘To lose a child must be the worst thing that can happen to a parent.’

Remus thought of Peter’s mother, and how she had shown him the Order of Merlin her son had been given posthumously. Her hands had shaken so much that the medal had jangled. Then he thought of his own mother. There had been no reproach in Dumbledore’s voice, but he still felt it.

‘Mr Carter seems to think that it was worth it.’ He hesitated, trying to put his thoughts into words. ‘Their son was killed in such a terrible way, but his father still seems to think that it is something to be proud about. As if of all the ways you could lose a child, that would be the best way.’ Remus tried to imagine dying far from home, or knowing that you would probably never see your child’s grave.

‘And you cannot understand that,’ Dumbledore concluded.

‘No,’ Remus said. ‘The people I work for don’t know it, and can’t know it, but I fought a war. My friends were killed. Some of them I even watched die. I can’t see a reason for that.’

‘For dying for a cause?’

Remus could not tell if Dumbledore was sympathetic with his argument anymore. At the same time, he realised that there was bias in his thinking. He had been ready to die in order to stop Voldemort’s rise to power and to protect those he loved. He was just not ready to accept people he knew making the same sacrifice. That was the survivor’s selfishness, he knew, but he could not rid himself of that perspective.

‘Do you think that Lily and James died for no reason?’ Dumbledore asked. Remus tried to find an answer.

‘If there was a point to their deaths, doesn’t that mean that their deaths were right?’ he said finally. ‘I can’t accept that they were.’
‘Their deaths ended the war,’ his mentor reminded him.

‘But not the killing,’ he said, a little too quick to be fully polite. ‘Peter died a full day after them. There’s not even a grave I can go to tomorrow. Alice and Frank were tortured out of their minds months later. And there were others - many of them.’

Dumbledore sighed.

‘What else can we expect of war?’ he said. ‘And is it not better to resist and die, rather than to let evil prevail? It would be better if we did not have to fight at all, but that is not the world we live in.’

‘No,’ Remus said. ‘It wouldn’t. But it’s also… that was a war for a piece of land. Why would people ever fight over such a thing?’

‘The Muggle government - and your employers, by the sound of it - thought it was important.’

‘I just can’t understand it.’

Dumbledore turned his tumbler between his hands.

‘What we are willing to die for is not dictated by logic,’ he observed. ‘More often than not, it is inspired by sentiment. I have lived through many wars. I remember the young men rushing to join up in 1914. So young… some of them barely of age.’

_I was seventeen when I joined the Order_, Remus thought, surprised at his resentfulness. _Fifteen when they first asked me to consider it._

‘They were all so eager. I also remember them coming back. Those lines of lorries to the hospitals... I remember hearing that they would plead to be sent back, even if they were injured.’

He glanced over his glasses. ‘Do you think them foolish, Remus?’

‘You said it yourself,’ Remus said. ‘Sentiment.’

‘But to them it was real,’ Dumbledore said. ‘They were ready to sacrifice their lives for their country.’

‘Were they all?’ Remus asked. ‘Or did they just say they were?’ Dumbledore shrugged, as if he did not know and did not much care. ‘What if it was all just a massive lie? A state of mass-psychosis?’

‘It doesn’t make it irrelevant.’

‘It’s not just a question of sacrifice,’ Remus said, fighting now to actually sound angry. ‘Soldiers do not just give their lives for something. They gamble their lives, yes, but they take others’.

‘And perhaps that is sometimes necessary,’ Dumbledore said calmly. Briefly, Remus glimpsed another side of him - the strategist hidden under the avuncular façade. ‘Do you regret the things you did, Remus?’

Remus emptied his glass. Putting his thoughts into words was difficult.

‘I would rather not have had to do them,’ he said finally. ‘But I did do them, and I have learned to live with that.’ He wondered what feeling worse about the things he had failed to do than about the things he had done made him.

‘Probably wise,’ Dumbledore said. He finished his drink and gave Remus a companionable pat on
the knee. ‘And now, my boy, I must be off.’

Remus got to his feet.

‘Thank you for the drink, sir.’

‘My pleasure, Remus. Always my pleasure.’ They shook hands and with a serene smile, Dumbledore turned and left the pub. Remus sunk back into his chair, unwilling to follow too closely. He felt oddly frustrated. He always expected conversations with Dumbledore to be very fulfilling, but they seldom gave any kind of answers. There was something annoyingly Socratic about his style of conversation. He realised now that maybe he should have told him about the werewolf attack in Bexwold.

As he turned it around in his head, he remembered the old man telling him not to go to Bexwold. *There’s something in the woods.* Mrs Mason had laughed, and said it was all made up. The sheep that had been killed over the summer she had attributed to “kids doing drugs”. Now he wondered why he had not realised at once what was going on. There really was something in the woods. He recalled that smell he had felt almost two weeks ago, the day the pumpkins had been delivered to the shop. He had not realised what it had been, but now, he realised what that animal smell had been.

Perhaps he should search the forest. Then he shook himself. What was he imagining? The woods seemed vast. He could not search them himself. Even if he did, what would he do if he found the perpetrator? He must keep away from the temptation of looking for thrills like that. Better to keep his head down, and not draw attention to himself.

Certain that Dumbledore had left by now, he left the pub and found a secluded place to Disapparate from.
Chapter 7

Remus’ first thought upon waking next morning was of the approach of winter. The second was of Peter. That thought lingered with him as he got ready and left for work.

He remembered both James and Peter with affection, but his memories of Peter were always tinged with regret. He felt that he had never paid him as much attention as he should have. In their own ways, they had been so bedazzled by their two friends that they had seldom been very aware of one another. At least that was how it seemed now - perhaps Peter’s death had diminished Remus’ memories of their friendship, replacing it with guilt. Some of it was not a projection back in time. His friends’ romantic entanglement had spooked Peter, something that had occasionally been translated into petty, passive cruelty, much more hurtful than James’ jokes. Remus wished he could have made it better somehow - by explaining it to him, or perhaps just not having told him in the first place. He had not been convinced it was a good idea, anyway. He knew that silence and secrecy had its uses. There was freedom in being out, but there were also perils. Yet he knew that there was no way Sirius would accept that - conceited, vainglorious Sirius, who had been raised to be proud and certain of himself. When he had abandoned his family’s values (or so they had all thought), he had moved that entitlement onto other things. More than once he had flown into a rage against Peter, sometimes even when he had only shifted uncomfortably at his friends’ knees bumping together or Sirius’ hand lingering on Remus’. Remus remembered those rages with horror because he knew how it had ended. ‘James and Lily, Sirius! How could you!’

As a gentle rain started falling and Remus put up his collar and tightened his scarf, he wondered if Peter had blamed him. Of course he should have - Remus had been closest to him, after all. He should have been the one who had realised what was happening (the signs were all there, after all). At the same time, he was afraid that Peter might have seen their relationship as a corrupting influence - that, by encouraging that twisted part in Sirius, Remus had sown the seeds of the betrayal. He would never know.

With some mental effort, Remus pushed these memories aside, and instead tried to concentrate on the happy memories of Peter instead. He thought of excursions and escapades they had planned and made. It made him smile even as his throat tightened.

When Remus let himself through the back door, the shop was quiet.

‘Hello?’ he called as he unbuttoned his jacket.

‘Morning!’ Mr Carter called back from upstairs. He came down just as Remus was putting on his apron. He looked dejected, a look that somehow did not fit on his face. ‘Raining outside?’

‘It’s more like a drizzle,’ Remus said. Carter sighed.

‘I hate November.’

Remus hummed his agreement and, united in their dislike of British autumn, they set about opening up the shop.

When they had put everything in order, Carter sent Remus to put the kettle on while he opened up the shop. When Remus entered with a mug of tea in each hand, Carter was standing idly behind the counter.

‘Ta,’ Carter said and accepted the tea. He sipped it and sighed with pleasure. Then, more
apprehensively, he looked out of the window, past the pheasants and pigs’ heads and out at the grey sky. ‘This fucking weather...’

Remus smiled. There was something oddly gratifying about hearing older people swear. But the mirth disappeared quickly. They stood in silence, sipping their tea and looking out at the window. No one was in sight. It looked like it would be a slow morning.

Deciding to break the silence, Remus asked:

‘How is Mr Masters doing?‘

Carter exhaled through relaxed lips and shook his head.

‘It’s a mess. The police are being unhelpful. As puzzled as everyone else, I suppose. And the insurance company are being difficult. They have to gives him something, but it’ll take time.’

‘What about the shop?‘

‘I’ve found another chap who’s willing to sell us pork. He’s a little further away than I’d’ve liked, and the prices are extortionate, but what can I do?‘

‘I assume this isn’t general knowledge...’

Carter shrugged.

‘Oh, it’s bound to be all over the place soon. I’d be surprised if it’s not already. News travels fast. Or rather, the countryside is filled with damned gossips.’ He put down his mug. ‘Anyhow. Not much we can do. Clean these up, would you, and then get onto dicing some more stew meat? There’s some beef in the cold room which will do nicely.’

Remus retreated to the back room and set about his tasks. He felt some anticipation against dicing meat, but it was nothing like last time. He watched himself, afraid of what he might feel, but the wolf had retreated for now, and raw meat once again held no interest to him.

He was just cutting the last of the meat when Carter called from the shop:

‘Hurry up, Lupin!‘

‘Almost done, Mr Carter!’ Remus called back. He finished the task and moved the diced meat into the tray. As he dried his hands, he heard first the bell on the door, and then Mr Carter’s voice.

‘What can I do for you, erm, sir?‘

Remus picked up the tray and carried it out. He pushed through the beaded curtain, and caught sight of the customer. The tray slipped out of his fingers.

The metal rang as it hit the floor. The diced meat scattered. Mr Carter exclaimed:

‘Dammit, Lupin, what do you think you’re doing?‘

But Remus did not pay attention to it. The newcomer stunk of dirt and pigs’ blood. Remus thought he saw dried blood in his grizzled sideburns. His clothes were filthy and stained, half Muggle, half wizard. From behind the long, dirty hair, eyes shone a lupine yellow. His discoloured teeth were bared in a cruel grin.

‘Lupin,’ Carter snapped. ‘Deal with that!’
Regaining the use of his body, Remus crouched and started picking up the meat back into the tray. He heard shuffling from the other side, and the shadow of the customer fell over him.

‘I’ll have that,’ Fenrir Greyback said and pointed a gnarled finger at the meat on the floor. His voice was a constant growl which made a cold thrill go down Remus’ spine.

‘But it’s not fit to eat,’ Carter objected. ‘It’s been on the floor...’

‘Would be sad to let it go to waste.’

Carter shrugged.

‘Very well. Lupin, will you deal with it?’

Remus stood up, avoiding the gaze of the werewolf. He was momentarily glad that Carter was staying, but when he looked up at him, he saw how angry he seemed, and looked away. Keeping his head bowed, he wrapped the meat and weighed them. When he turned and said the price, he could not keep the tremble out of his voice. Greyback muttered to himself. Even if Remus was pointedly not looking at him, he saw how his hands were patting his clothes, looking for money. Finally he pulled a banknote out of an inner pocket. It had a splash of blood on it. For the first time since his appearance, Remus looked at him. Greyback grinned his animal grin. Without a word, he took the banknote, put it in the till and pushed the change across the counter. Greyback scooped up the coins, dropped them into a pocket and picked up the parcel. With a last grin, he left.

Remus held his breath until the bell on the door had stopped tingling and Greyback was no longer visible through the window. He exhaled and rubbed his forehead, feeling not relief so much as an easing of dread. His hands were shaking.

Carter pushed past him, bringing him back to reality. He went around the counter and up to the door. With a swift motion, he flipped the ‘open’ sign turned the lock.

‘What the hell was that about?’ he asked, fixing Remus with a stare. Remus swallowed, not quite certain his voice would carry. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself.’

‘You don’t understand, sir...’

‘Oh, I don’t understand, do I?’ Carter growled. ‘And what do I not understand?’

At once, Remus felt his hands steady, anger letting him take control.

‘That man is dangerous,’ he said.

‘You know him?’ Carter asked, angry and surprised.

‘Yes, I do, unfortunately,’ Remus said. ‘He’s a criminal. If he ever comes here again...’ He trailed off. What was he going to tell Carter to do? Call the police? Goodness knew what Greyback would do then. ‘Please, you need to keep away from him. It’s important.’

‘You make it sound like a threat,’ Carter said, his voice hard.

‘It is a threat, Mr Carter. Not from me, but from him,’ he said, pointing at the door. ‘He’s dangerous, I tell you.’

‘And how do you know him?’ Carter asked, his voice hard. ‘How come you know someone like that?’
'I...’ His voice failed him. ‘We had a run-in, a few years ago.’

‘A “run-in”? Was this a blast from the past? A dirty secret come back?’

‘I don’t have any secrets,’ Remus lied. ‘Please, sir, it’s important that you understand...’

Carter snorted.

‘Get back to work,’ he said, unlocked the door again and stalked into the back room.

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The day passed slowly, cold and monotone. Carter barely said a dozen words to him during the rest of the day, and only grunted goodbye. Remus left the shop feeling dejected. This new antagonism with his employer lay heavy on his shoulders.

The cloud-cover above was a uniform grey and raindrops still clung to the leaves in the trees. He pushed his cold hands into his trouser pockets, trying to warm them between the fabric and his legs. His joints, which had been easing up since the full moon, were aching again. Still, he paid it little attention. All his concentration was on his hearing. He knew what was to come, but it was not until he reached the avenue that he stopped short. The cloying smell of old blood pricked his nose. With slow movements, Remus took his hands out of his pockets and drew his wand.

‘I know you’re there.’

A skulking shape not immediately recognisable as human broke free from the semidarkness of the trees. The first thing Remus could make out were the yellow eyes, then the bared teeth. The werewolf stepped into the road, shadow made flesh. As he approached him, Remus could smell the predatory stink. His lips were perpetually pulled back, equal halves animal snarl and rictus grin. Only when he spoke did his lips close.

‘Well hello, Lupin.’

Remus raised his chin and squared his shoulders. In his own mind, he was grounding himself, but he realised that he looked like he was trying not to seem scared. He tightened his grip on his wand.

‘Cat got your tongue?’

‘What are you doing here?’

Greyback laughed, wheezing.

‘It’s a free country, isn’t it? I’m allowed to go wherever I want.’

‘You shouldn’t be.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

Greyback lunged. Remus raised his wand. His attacker stopped himself in the middle of the movement, the wand digging into his chest. Remus stared at him, all too aware of his own rapid breathing and thundering heartbeat. He had only been baiting him - he had not meant to attack him. Remus had reacted instinctively, falling short only of casting a spell.

‘I’m a bit disappointed, actually.’ Greyback puffed out his chest, pushing against the wand-tip. ‘I had expected you to actually do something.’
‘You’re lucky I didn’t kill you,’ Remus said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. Greyback opened his eyes wide in mock-horror.

‘Oh, am I?’ he said. ‘Or are you just a coward?’

Remus did not answer. He wanted to look away from that face. It was a reminder of how easily it would be to let humanity slip away.

‘Go on, then,’ Greyback growled. ‘Kill me. Then they’ll throw you in Azkaban and you’ll be dead before the next full-moon.’

‘There are other spells that can kill someone,’ Remus said, angling his wand better. It would be so easy. He could slit his throat, or shoot a curse at his heart, and it would be done.

‘You shouldn’t need a spell,’ Greyback hissed. ‘Do it with your teeth and your hands. Indulge yourself.’

Remus stepped back. Reason repossessed him. He kept his wand raised, but he no longer aimed it.

‘You disgust me.’

‘Oh, is that it?’ Greyback said, growing more eager. ‘Not even worth killing, am I? It’s worse to be alive? Have you ever even killed?’

‘Yes.’ That little word covered such a big truth.

‘I mean for real - with your teeth, when you’re yourself. Not with magic, walking on two legs, and wearing a human skin.’

‘Shut up,’ Remus snapped. ‘I don’t want to hear any of your metaphysics. You know nothing about me.’

‘Yes, I do!’ Greyback snapped back. ‘I transformed you. I elevated you.’

‘You bit me! You infected me - it is not a gift, it’s a curse! It gives you no power over me. It doesn’t make you my sire or my father or anything like that. The only influence you’ve had on my life is how much you’ve ruined it.’

Remus drew a shaking breath, startled by his own outburst. Greyback had gone very still, but his grin was unchanged.

‘You’re not ruined,’ he almost whispered. ‘The thing that is ruining you is you fooling yourself that you’re human. If you could let go of that stupid notion, you would know infinite peace.’

‘No. Mindlessness,’ Remus spat. ‘That’s all it is - just stupid, animal hunger.’

‘You think that’s bad?’ Greyback asked. His eyes shone of something close to religious mania. ‘Would you not rather be free than a prisoner?’

‘I am not a prisoner. I am a human being. I am rational - I am moral…’

‘You’re a wolf!’ Greyback shouted. ‘If I peeled away your skin, Lupin, there would be fur there. When the full moon rises, don’t you feel relieved at becoming what you really are? Don’t you resent walking on two legs like this?’

Remus stood, lost for words.
‘You’re insane,’ he said finally.

‘You’re brainwashed,’ Greyback retorted. ‘It’s a shame. You could have been spectacular, but your parents kept you, and here you are. Believing their lies, convinced that you should live among them - convinced that you’re human!’ He spat on the ground. ‘You’re wasting away. Another ten years and you’ll be dead. If you don’t feed the wolf, it feeds on you.’

‘Fine,’ Remus said. ‘I don’t mind, if being like you is the alternative.’ He raised his wand again. ‘Now, tell me. What are you doing here?’

For a moment, Greyback’s grimace looked strangely like a child making a face at a grown-up.

‘I live here sometimes. There’s no law against it.’

‘You killed those sheep last summer.’

‘So what?’

‘And the pigs. You ruined a man’s livelihood…’

‘Do you think I care?’

‘Well, I’m not letting you get away with it!’

‘Oh, are you going to tell?’ he snarled. ‘Going to run to the Ministry and tell them all about the big bad wolf?’

‘Maybe I will,’ Remus said.

‘No, you won’t,’ Greyback said, smiling again. ‘What do you think happens if you go to the humans and tell them that a wolf killed some Muggle’s livestock?’ Remus did not answer. He knew where that was going. ‘Do you know who they’re going to arrest? You. Because you were here, and they’re not going to believe a word you say.’

Remus did not know what to say to this. He hated it, but he knew that Greyback was right.

‘You disgust me.’

Greyback sneered.

‘Feeling’s mutual. You want to play make-believe, pretend you’re a wizard. You won’t even stop at spying on your own kind.’

‘You wanted me to serve Voldemort?’

‘The Dark Lord promised us prey,’ Greyback said. ‘Places to roam. No other wizard has ever offered us that before.’

‘Voldemort only cared about werewolves to the extent that they were weapons,’ Remus said.

‘“They”? We. And even if you’re right - so what? I like hunting, killing. I’m good at it. Wizards have always seen us as monsters because of that, but the Dark Lord valued it.’

‘I would never have served him, whatever he promised.’

‘Then you should have stayed out of it.’
‘But I didn’t,’ Remus said. ‘So where does that leave me?’

‘It makes you a traitor. You sold out your own pack.’

The words shook him. He had always been the one who was the faithful one - the betrayed party - so being called a “traitor” was strange. Then again, the only pack he had ever had was dispersed, killed by its own kind.

His hands suddenly steady, he raised his wand.

‘Go.’

Greyback hissed.

‘Make me.’

Yet he turned, and walked off. Remus did not turn away his gaze, or lower his wand. He could deal with him now, when his back was turned. No one would miss him. No one would know. It would serve him right, after all the things he had done…

Remus lowered his wand. He had killed people in battle, when his life had been at stake. He could not kill an unarmed man with his back to him - not even if it was Greyback.

He waited until he no longer heard the steps in the undergrowth. As he walked home, he kept his hand around his wand, and did not relax until he had locked the front-door behind him.

***

The next day, Saturday, Remus was only working until just after lunch, much to his relief. Mr Carter’s sudden distrust was obvious. Several times, Remus noticed him watching him with suspicion. It worried him, but not as much as the possibility that Greyback might return did. On his way to work that morning, he had looked over his shoulder, and in the shop, he would constantly watching the street outside. Every time the bell rang and the door opened, his stomach twisted with anxiety.

He badly needed some distraction. Knowing that he would probably not have any success with Mr Carter, he asked Mrs Carter, who came downstairs around noon, whether he could borrow the bicycle over the weekend.

‘Well, of course. No one ever uses it,’ she said and dug out the keys. ‘Are you planning an outing?’

‘Something like that,’ he said. ‘Thank you very much.’

When he left the shop, he took the bicycle from the shed and led it out of the village. As soon as he was out of sight, he mounted it and put one of his feet onto the pedal. With some effort, he got his other foot off the ground and, scrabbling to get it on the pedal, he started moving. This time, he went a good few metres before tipping over. The impact hurt his hip and shoulder, but the pain was distracting. He got up and checked that the bike was not broken. Using pain like this was a bad idea, he knew. It might lure him into old habits. Nevertheless, the compulsion of this combination of rebellion and mild harm was too strong. He tried again, and fell over just as before.

One positive side of this indirectly harmful preoccupation was that the more he did it, the less painful it became. After a few hours, he could keep his balance well enough to actually cycle. He was still unsteady, and a few times he almost lost his balance, but more often than not, he could stop and put a foot down to stop himself falling over.
The bicycle bore him further and further away from the village and the danger therein. He left the thoughts of the threat and what it might do in his absence behind. The cold wind whipped his face and made him screw up his eyes. As during his walks, he could taste salt, even if he knew the sea was still far away. He marvelled at the ease with which he moved - far quicker than walking and much quieter than on a motorbike. In a way, it felt most reminiscent of a broom, with the wind on his face and the smooth movement forward. There was also a similarly surreal feeling of freedom. Broomsticks got it from taking its usually earthbound rider into the air. There was another kind of liberation at work here too. During these short hours, cycling had cut Remus lose from the anxiety that had plagued him all day. On the bike, he could outrun it.

As soon as Remus got off the bicycle, the worry returned. He returned to the house at twilight, locking the bike against the garden-wall. On the doorstep, he stopped, listened and, to his own disgust, sniffed. There was nothing that indicated that Greyback had been there, but he still lingered, watching for movement in the gathering darkness.

When he came into his room, he made for his desk at once. He needed to tell his father. He had already dipped his pen in ink and was about to put it to the parchment when he hesitated. What good would it do? It would bring such pain to him. The guilt of provoking Greyback had redefined Mr Lupin’s life. Remus sometimes thought that in every interaction between his father and him, Mr Lupin was driven as much by guilt as by love. Why did he want to remind him of that? It would not serve as any consolation that Greyback had said that the revenge against Mr Lupin no longer held any interest.

Remus remembered his father’s reaction to when he had told him at seventeen that he was joining the Order. ‘Why would you want to fight? It’s so dangerous. You could get hurt. You could be killed. Leave it to others, Remus. You have your entire life ahead of you.’ It had made Remus angry at the time. His father knew that he did not have a life ahead of him, at least not a long life. He was unlikely to grow old. And what kind of life would it be, living under Voldemort’s reign? After the war, the father had not blamed him directly for deciding to fight, but he had not been able to hide his anger that his son had been damaged by the conflict that he could have stayed out of. It had taken his friends away from him, and it had taken his peace of mind. If Mr Lupin found out that it had renewed old enmities as well, it would break his heart.

And what would happen if Remus did write to him and he came to help? What if Greyback attacked him? Killed him? When he had taken his revenge on him, murder had not been interesting - it was too easy and too short-lived a punishment. But now he sought to harm Remus, and Mr Lupin no longer had the protection of being the victim. He would be as exposed to danger as anyone else.

Remus replaced the lid of his ink-well. He left the desk and the parchment, blank but for a single blot where the ink had fallen from his arrested quill.

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That Sunday, Remus rose at first light, having slept poorly. When he left the house, he had expected to see downtrodden grass and footprints in the flower-beds, but there was nothing that proved that Greyback had been there. For a moment, he entertained the idea that perhaps the werewolf did not know where he lived. Then he realised that this was just wishful thinking. If he knew which farmer provided his employer with pork, he surely knew where he lodged. Besides, he had been following him on Friday.

If Greyback knew where he was, he would have to learn where Greyback was. His years as Dumbledore’s spy had taught him Greyback’s habits. He would be sleeping rough, more likely
than not in nature. Those ominous words spoken by the man in the post-office kept echoing in his mind: *there's something in the forest.* That was where he would search.

As he walked slowly through the forest, inspecting recesses in trees and dips in the ground, his thoughts went back to the letter he had not written yesterday. He still felt that he should probably tell someone what had happened. Perhaps he could write to Dumbledore. He had always been kind to him, after all, and he was generous with his help. But what would he be able to do? Dumbledore was no longer his commander. He had a school to run. This business was dangerous and gritty, and somehow also embarrassing. Remus’ condition had caused enough problems for Dumbledore throughout the years. As it turned out, even the advantages it brought were now coming back to haunt him. It seemed better to keep that threat away from him.

He continued between the gnarled tree-trunks. The branches were all but bare now, forming a dark web against the grey sky. This place would be beautiful in the snow, Remus thought. Like this, it felt oppressive. The fallen leaves were damp underfoot, forming a treacherous carpet which might make him slip at any time. He blasted away some piles of leaves, to make sure that they were not hiding anything. The spell sent the leaves flying into the air, the noise disturbing the calm. Then, in sudden silence, they fell again, as if from the trees. None of the piles of leaves hid anything, except for one very startled hedgehog, waking from hibernation. Remus guiltily covered it with some leaves and hurried off.

He knew that really, he should go to the Ministry. Greyback had committed a crime even by not being confined during the full moon. The fact that he had killed livestock only made matters worse. Nevertheless, he knew that Greyback had been right. At best, they would not take him seriously. The far worse alternative, which was the more likely, was that they would assume that he was trying to deflect the blame from himself.

A sudden thought made Remus stop in his tracks. What if the Ministry already knew about it? From what he had learned from Aurors he had known in the Order, there were wizarding liaisons with the Muggle police, who would report anything which seemed magical. The police and the farmers might be puzzled about what animal would be large enough to kill those pigs, but for the Magical Law Enforcement, it would be an open-and-shut case. If they learned that Remus worked nearby, they were bound to assume that he had done it. After all, there was no evidence, apart from his word, that Greyback was there, and even if he were to convince them, he had not seen him until after the full moon. There was no guarantee that he had been there a few days previously.

All he could hope for was that the Ministry did not know what had happened. In the meantime, he would have to take things into his own hands. He continued his walk through the woods, looking for anywhere someone might hide during the nights.

By the time he emerged from the woods, it was well past midday. There was an abstract itch in his skin. He felt a sudden longing to go back to that café he had found last week. What would happen if he left Bexwold? Perhaps Greyback would know, and it would give him the opportunity to cause trouble… Remus shook himself. He could not expect himself to stand guard. Besides, Greyback could only do so much damage in human shape.

Instead of Apparating directly to the café, he appeared a few streets away. It felt right to approach it by foot. Around him, Soho felt comfortably run down, much in the way that an untidy flat felt more like a home because it was lived in. Remus ambled through the streets, towards the café. Sometimes he perceived boundaries within the area. On one side of Shaftesbury Avenue, many of the shops - groceries, shops, dry-cleaners, jewellers, travel-agents - had signs in Chinese. On the other side, English dominated. He had only to take a left, and he would have found himself surrounded by shops selling leather clothing and unspeakable objects. Throughout Soho, he saw
subtle signs of criminality. Money exchanging hands while the transactors hunched their shoulders - a man and a woman, who had just spoken, walking off, becoming to the world a couple - well-dressed characters with such flair their surroundings must assume they were crooks. Chinatown - the gay village - the underworld. It was strange, the way minorities huddled together, whatever the reason. Soho was in the middle of London, but here were its margins.

From the street, the café he had been to last week looked crowded. For a moment, Remus was afraid that there would not be any free tables. When he stepped in he saw how the two women who had been sitting at the window table where he had sat last time he was here were leaving. Smiling apologetically, he went towards the table from the door while they went the other way. He left his jacket over the chair and his book on the table, and went to buy a cup of tea.

When he came back, he sat down and opened the worn paperback. He had taken it from his mother’s bookshelf a week or so before leaving his parents’ house, with the intention of becoming better acquainted with Muggle literature. Most of what he had read was modern, but the nineteenth century was more or less a blank for him. All he knew was the few things he had picked up from his mother, who sometimes seemed to know all of Dickens off by heart.

The heavy Victorian prose felt difficult to wade through, especially with the chatter of the café around him. He found that he did not particularly mind. Every few pages, he would glance around the café. He felt like he was looking for something, but had no idea what it might be. Perhaps simply reassurance. In Dickensian London, a character like Greyback would not be out of place, but in a gay coffee shop in Soho, he felt like a bad dream. (Remus sincerely hoped that Greyback would never figure out that fact about him - he had enough cannon-fodder to harm him with as it was.)

He looked down at his book again, and found his place. Some two lines into the description of a particularly dingy back street, the world around him demanded his attention again.

‘Excuse me?’

Remus looked up, and saw a man standing at the other side of the table, his hand resting on the back of the other chair. He was tall and auburn-haired, with a blue stud in one ear.

‘Is this chair free?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Remus said and waved his hand. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Cheers.’ The man picked up the chair and turned away. Then, just as Remus was about to go back to his book, he turned again and looked at him. ‘You were here last Sunday too,’ he said.

‘Erm, yes,’ Remus said.

‘He was here last week,’ the first man said, as if this was his area of expertise. ‘At the same table.
With a book.’ He turned to Remus and looked at the paperback. ‘The same book?’

‘No,’ Remus said. ‘I finished that one.’

The newcomer sighed, entertained.

‘Let the poor man be, George,’ he said. ‘Can’t you just ask for a chair without bothering people, for once?’

‘Aren’t you curious about people?’ George asked. ‘What’s the point with this place if I can’t chat to people?’

‘I don’t mind,’ Remus said quickly. ‘It’s fine.’

The two men looked at him as if they had both momentarily forgotten he was there.

‘See?’ George said defensively to his friend (Remus was not sure whether they were a couple or not). ‘He doesn’t mind.’

Before the other man had time to answer, the blue-haired waitress who had given Remus his tea appeared, closing the quarter-circle around Remus’ table.

‘What the hell is going on?’ she asked. He wondered whether the strange discussion was disturbing other customers, until the man whose name he still did not know said:

‘George is being his usual self.’

‘Well, Simon’s sitting around with three mugs of coffee over there, and I expect he’ll drink them all if you don’t come and protect yours,’ she said.

‘Fair enough,’ the second man said, then turned back to Remus. ‘Look, we’ll leave you to it. Cheers.’

The man with the earring picked up the chair and, with a smile, they both left. Remus looked after them as they made their way to a table where a blonde man, resting his chin in his hand, was seated. They sat down, the waitress taking the chair from Remus’ table. He could not hear what they said, but he noticed the one called George gesturing in his general direction, and the blonde man glanced over. Remus looked down into his book. He found he had lost his place completely.

Instead, he put it aside and looked out of the window. Rain hung in the air, making the people walking by cast suspicious looks at the sky. Remus finished his tea and walked over to the till with the mug. The blue-haired waitress got up from the table and rounded the counter.

‘Could I have some more tea, please?’ Remus said.

‘Sure,’ she said and took the mug, turning her back to him.

‘Hey.’ It came from behind him. Remus looked around and saw the man with the dark eyes leaning back in his chair to look at him better. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Remus.’

The man smiled and stretched out his hand.

‘I’m Ryan.’

‘Ryan,’ Remus repeated. ‘Your friend was George, right?’
‘That’s right,’ George said and waved at him. ‘And this character is Simon.’

‘Hello,’ said the blond man, casting a glance at him with hooded eyes. He did not smile.

‘Look, if you don’t mind getting the third degree from George, you’re welcome to join us,’ Ryan said.

‘I wouldn’t want to intrude…’

‘You wouldn’t be,’ George said.

‘Alright then,’ Remus said, disregarding the flare of panic at the prospect of talking to people. ‘I’ll just get a chair…’

‘Take mine,’ said the waitress, handing him his tea. ‘I’ll hover here. I should be working anyway.’

‘Oh, alright. Thanks.’

Remus sat down and looked at the three men who were watching him intently.

‘So, you’re named after the founder of Rome?’ Simon asked.

‘His brother,’ Remus said.

‘Why?’ George asked.

‘My mum really likes myths. She read every single anthology she could get her hands on while she was expecting me, so I suppose it was inevitable.’

‘That’s a much better reason for being named anything than most people’s,’ Ryan said. ‘I was just named after my granddad.’

‘And you can’t have been at school with anyone with the same name as you,’ Simon added.

‘There were three Georges in my secondary school,’ George said.

‘I was lucky,’ the waitress said. ‘I never had that problem.’

‘Well good for you, Si-yo-ban,’ George said jokingly. She took a step around the counter and playfully smacked him on the back of the head. ‘Fine, fine, I’m sorry!’ he shrieked. Remus covered his hand to his mouth, feeling bad for laughing, but he saw that Ryan was laughing too, and George was giggling. Simon only rolled his eyes.

‘Your name’s Siobhan, then?’ Remus asked, pronouncing the name properly.

‘Yep, that’s right,’ Siobhan said. ‘I grew up over here and I never knew anyone else called that. And no one could spell it.’

‘Siobhan and I are united in having weirdly spelled names,’ Ryan said.

‘How can you spell Ryan strangely?’ Remus asked.

‘It’s not Ryan as in the English name, actually,’ he said. ‘It’s Rayan - R-A-Y-A-N. It’s pronounced basically the same way.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Remus said. ‘Sorry…’
'Don’t worry about it,’ Rayan said with a smile. ‘It’s not that common.’

‘So, what’s your book?’ George asked.

‘Bleak House,’ Remus said and put the book on the table. ‘I’m not very far in yet.’

‘God, that’s a brick,’ Siobhan said and picked it up to feel the weight. ‘You could bludgeon someone with this.’

‘Built-in self-defence weapon,’ Rayan said.

‘How are you liking it?’ Simon asked.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ Remus admitted. ‘It’s a bit… fusty.’

‘I’ve always thought Dickens’s a bore,’ Rayan said. ‘But I haven’t read anything of him since school.’

‘You need to spend time on it,’ Simon said. ‘You can’t read a page or two at a time. You need to sit down and read fifty or a hundred pages at a time.’

‘Wasn’t it first published as a serial, though?’ Remus said. ‘That would be shorter.’

‘I once read that he was paid per word,’ George said. ‘That’s why he just goes on and on and on.’

‘The instalments were several chapters, so you’d get three or four chapters a month, and then read them at once,’ Simon explained.

‘And then you’d go around and wait for the next one, I suppose,’ Rayan said.

‘It’s a bit like telly,’ George said. Rayan laughed.

‘Oh, god, yes! It would be like when you were a kid and would go around dying to find out whether Doctor Who would get out of trouble this time. I swear, that month when they showed the yetis on the tube one, I couldn’t think of anything else. And we went up to London for a day-trip, and I refused to take the tube because I was terrified.’

‘How old were you, Rayan?’ George asked.

‘I must have been eight or nine.’

‘Idiot,’ George said, laughing.

‘It was really scary! I had a vivid imagination!’ Rayan objected, laughing too. Remus joined in half-heartedely, not really understanding. Simon, who had not said much, looked exasperated.

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘Doctor Who. Yetis,’ Rayan said. George threw his arms wide and rocked slowly from side to side in illustration. ‘Did you watch it, Remus?’

Remus shook his head.

‘No, sorry. My parents don’t have a television.’

‘Oh,’ George said, stopping his yeti imitation.
‘Well, at least you have an excuse,’ Rayan said. Their attention was on him now.

‘So…’ George said. ‘I can’t remember seeing you here before last week.’

Remus looked away, aware suddenly of the scars on his face. George looked curious, and Rayan looked kind, as if he was assuming that this was a step towards coming out. Even Simon was looking at him now, and Siobhan was listening from the other side of the counter.

‘I only discovered this place last weekend. It’s not really in my local area.’

‘Where do you live, then?’ Simon asked.

‘Suffolk - Bexwold, to be precise. It’s in the middle of nowhere.’

‘And you’re just here over the day?’ Rayan surmised. Remus nodded.

‘It’s nice to get away for a bit. The village is very small.’

George made a sympathetic grimace.

‘So, how do you get here?’ Rayan asked. ‘Do you take the train?’

‘There’s a bus and then a train,’ Remus said, remembering what he had picked up about Muggle travel routes around Bexwold. ‘It’s about two hours.’

‘Gosh, that shows dedication,’ Rayan said and smiled. This unabashed curiosity made Remus feel both flattered and embarrassed. He smiled back.

‘So, what do you do?’ he asked, keen to talk about something other than himself.

‘I’m a photographer.’

‘That sounds exciting.’

‘I’m not a fancy one, unfortunately,’ he said. ‘Mostly do fat babies and weddings, really.’

‘Still,’ Remus said, shrugging.

‘When I got into it I wanted to do black-and-white photos of artfully lit male bodies or fancy nature shots. But that kind of thing just isn’t possible. So I’m a lackey of the bourgeois.’

‘Don’t you ever do it?’ Remus asked.

‘Artsy photos? It happens, when I have some spare time.’

There was a pause, which George used to launch in and say:

‘Bridges.’

Remus looked at him, perplexed.

‘You build bridges?’

‘Not personally. I plan the maintenance, mostly. I’m an engineer.’

‘Oh. That sounds interesting.’
'It is,' George said and grinned. 'Has anyone ever explained to you how a suspension bridge works?'

'Please, George, spare us,' Simon said, smiling slightly.

'Fine, some other time.'

'What do you work with, Simon?'

'I’m an accountant,' he said, making it sound like a confession. 'It’s not as boring as it sounds.'

'I doubt it is,' Remus said.

'It is,' George added.

'So, what about you?' Rayan asked. 'What do you do in the middle of nowhere?'

'I work in a butcher’s.'

'What, like a slaughterhouse?' Simon asked, wide-eyed.

'No, no, a shop. I’m “the boy”,' Remus said, making air quotes with his fingers.

'I’ve always wondered - how do you make sausages?' George said. 'I know it’s intestines and meat, but do you use the gut of the same animal?'

'I’m not really sure,' Remus said. 'I’ve only done it a few times.'

'What’s it like?'

'It’s not too bad. I mostly cut the fat or man the mincer.'

'Can we stop talking about meat, please?' Simon said. He was looking a bit sick.

'Of course,' Remus said. 'It’s not very interesting anyway.'

'Nah, it’s interesting,' Rayan said. 'I have no idea how it works.'

'Neither do I, half of the time,' Remus said. George laughed.

'You don’t look like a shop assistant,' he observed.

'What do I look like, then?' he said, surprised at his own forwardness. George looked him in the face, biting his lip.

'I don’t know. Teacher? Librarian?'

'You’re just saying that because of the tweed jacket,' Simon said.

'I guess you’d look the role more if you had an apron on,' Rayan said.

'I tend to take it off when I leave the shop.'

Rayan grinned. Remus looked away.

'I should go,' he said. 'I’ve intruded enough.'
‘You’re not intruding,’ George said.

‘I need to catch my train, sorry.’ Remus stood up. ‘It was nice to meet you all.’

‘You too,’ Rayan said.

‘Might see you again?’ George said.

‘I expect I’ll be around next weekend,’ Remus said and picked up his book.

‘Great.’

‘Bye, then.’

He smiled and turned.

‘Bye, Remus!’ Siobhan called from behind the counter.

‘Bye!’

He looked over his shoulder as he opened the door. The three men were looking after him; Rayan was smiling and George was waving. Simon watched after him with a frown. Remus waved back and smiled. His stomach gave a jolt. He turned around again, let the door close behind him and left in search for somewhere to Disapparate.
Monday morning was so cold that Remus was surprised not to see frost on his way to work. He hurried towards the shop, rubbing his hands together for warmth. As soon as he stepped in, he heard the sound of Mr Carter thundering down the stairs. He came into view, close-mouthed and frowning. Without as much as a ‘good morning’, he said:

‘Right. I want a word with you.’

Remus stood frozen in surprise.

‘Yes. Of course, Mr Carter.’

Carter had crossed his arms and pulled himself up to his full height. Remus felt a knot of worry settle in his chest. He had not realised before how large Carter was.

‘About this man… Greyback. I’ve been doing some thinking, and I want to know everything. You were pretty unforthcoming last week, and I don’t like that.’

Remus exhaled. The breath gave him some time to think. His secrets really were catching up with him.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ he said. ‘But I told you everything.’

‘Poppycock!’ Carter spat. ‘You told me nothing. All you deigned to tell me was that this man was dangerous, but how and why, you kept all to yourself. So, you’d better tell me what’s going on. I want to know how you fell in with such an unsavoury character.’

Remus swallowed. What could he say?

Impatient at his silence, Carter pressed on.

‘Is it drugs?’

‘No!’ Remus said indignantly. ‘No, absolutely not.’

Carter glared at him, looking suspicious. This must have been his pet theory over the weekend. Remus expected that the fact that he was thin and ill-looking made it an attractive explanation.

‘Then what is it?’ Carter asked. ‘I’m warning you, I will not have dishonesty from my employee.’

Remus felt his resistance break.

‘He’s a sadist,’ he said, caught somewhere between euphemism and improvisation. ‘He likes violence - he thinks it’s fun. I never sought him out. He’s not my mate. He’s a vicious monster. I’ve seen him do terrible things to people because he “felt like it”.’ He reached up and touched the scars on his face. ‘He’s the one responsible for these.’

‘You said you were attacked by a dog,’ Carter said. He sounded like he was trying to keep his suspicions alive, but they were giving way to outrage. When Remus did not answer, he asked: ‘Did he set a dog on you?’

Remus nodded. It was true in a way.
'My God…' Carter murmured. ‘I thought you were on his side. I assumed you’d ratted him out. But you’re the victim.’

‘Not the only one,’ Remus said. How many of the werewolves in Britain had been turned by Greyback? Perhaps there was data on it, somewhere at the Ministry. Carter was still looking at Remus when he glanced back at him. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was assuming an altogether different kind of violation.

‘If he comes here again, don’t call the police,’ Remus said, eager to make him think of other things. ‘He’ll kill you - and them.’

‘But we can’t let someone like that walk around free,’ Carter objected. ‘He should be in jail!’

‘Well, he’s not,’ Remus said. ‘This far he’s had a knack of slipping through the net. Mr Carter, there’s no reason to put yourself in danger because of this.’

Carter had started pacing the shop.

‘But he’s still around, isn’t he?’ he asked.

‘He’ll get bored,’ Remus said, with a conviction he did not feel. ‘He’ll move on.’

‘But this man - he’s a criminal,’ Carter said. ‘You said he’d hurt people. Has he murdered people?’

‘I think so,’ Remus said. He did not dare to say that he knew it for sure. ‘But there’s no evidence. Just… have a care, sir.’

‘So all we can do is pray he doesn’t show his face again.’

‘Essentially, yes.’

Carter sighed deeply.

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Neither do I,’ Remus said, ‘but trust me. Eventually he’ll move on. For all we know, he’s already gone.’

Carter let the subject drop. All day, Remus thought he treated him rather more kindly than he had done before. He did not know if he was trying to make up for his earlier harshness, or if he felt sorry for him. However uncomfortable it made him, it made the day considerably nicer than before. It did not stop Remus from looking up nervously every time the bell rang, half expecting Greyback to step through the door. He never showed, but on his way home, Remus thought he saw something moving between the trees. He drew his wand, but saw nothing more. He kept his wand in his hand the rest of the way home.

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The week passed slowly in a rainy gloom. With the clocks having changed, it was light in the mornings again, but by five o’clock in the afternoon, the pitch-black night of the countryside enveloped the village.

Tuesday was Bonfire Night. He had heard from the Carters that one of the farmers invested in a large number of fireworks every year and set them off on a field just outside the village. Hoping to escape the crowds which would come to watch the display, Remus went home. The booms
reverberated off trees and buildings, and when he went to the window, he could clearly see the
devices. He watched for several minutes, hugging himself. The red devices put him in mind of
wand-sparks, sent up to signal peril. He dug his fingers into his arms, fighting the
impulse to grab his wand and run out to help. Then a green flash filled the sky, quickly
reducing to a rain of coloured stars. Remus felt suddenly unable to breathe. He drew the curtains
and sat on the floor, waiting for the sounds of the fireworks to stop. It was not until after midnight
that he had calmed down enough to manage to fall asleep.

During the coming nights, Remus was kept awake by the rain. When he slept, the incessant tapping
against the window bore itself into his dreams. Several mornings in the row, the newspaper on the
kitchen table bore hysterical headlines. Wearily he read the news items, and wondered when there
would be an end to it. Surely the horrific news about AIDS must run out soon? How could it
possibly get any worse? He knew, of course, that it could, and it would. With every new headline
and item on the radio, and with every time a customer tutted or ranted about it, the unease grew
inside him. Was this the new identity he had sensed himself taking on in London before the full
moon - the masked victim? Every time the epidemic was mentioned, in whatever context, he felt
himself recoil and then hope that no one’s eyes would turn onto him. There were times when it
seemed inevitable that someone would look at him and just know that he was gay. What then? It
did not bear thinking about.

But then there was the other side of him, the side that wanted to rebel against it all. That version of
Remus despised the way he seized up every time the news came on. That Remus was rash and
angry in a way the other one would never dare to be. It asked, why am I ashamed? I do not deserve to be afraid. No one has the right to make me scared. He wished he dared to be that person all the time, but at the same time, he was grateful that he was not. It was
easier to stay quiet and keep his head down.

Nevertheless, this constant talk of AIDS had brought companionship as much as sex to the
forefront of his mind. Part of it was the same feeling he had had the first time in London - a wish
simply to meet people with whom he had something in common. He thought of the group he had
met last weekend, and wondered whether he might make friends with them. They had seemed nice.
On the other hand, he had no idea whether they had liked him. He thought Rayan and George, as
well as Siobhan, had, but was not sure about Simon, who had not spoken much. Over and over
again, he promised himself that he would go to London again in the weekend, and hopefully meet
them again. It would be a wonderful thing, making friends.

But another part of it was far more base than that. Lying alone, listening to the rain against the
window, he longed to be embraced. He wanted to be wanted. It would be a proof of his worth that
he had not had for too long - in retrospect, had never had, as for all he knew he had only been part
of an elaborate disguise. He imagined someone lying beside him and holding him, so vividly that
he found himself edging towards one side of the bed to make room for this imaginary man. All he
knew was that he wanted there to be someone who wasn’t Sirius Black. It didn’t even have to mean
anything. Just as new friends might ease him back into society, sex with someone new might ease
him back into himself. Not that he knew how or who. He had no idea how he would find someone
who would willingly sleep with him. It was not just a question of meeting someone. How could
anyone fail to be repulsed by his scars? There was no way for him to hide them. Even glamour
would not solve it.

Then his thoughts would stray to Fenrir Greyback, lurking somewhere in the woods around
Bexwold. For a brief moment, he felt something like pity when imagining him sleeping on the
rotting leaves of the forest floor, under the trees which would start dripping as soon as the rain
stopped. He imagined the smell of damp wool and putrid decay. Then he pushed the thought away,
disgusted by the knowledge that that man was probably still close. He had no proof, but floating
between waking and sleeping, he thought he could sense his presence somewhere close.

All through the week, Remus tried to shake off his conviction that Greyback was still in the village. By Sunday noon, he had almost convinced himself that he was gone. The thing that made him more certain now was not a push, but a pull. London beckoned, and after wondering whether he should really leave Bexwold, the promise of company - of friendship - had made him shove aside all the reasonable worry he had felt, and decided to leave.

He had locked his room, gone down the stairs and was halfway down the hall when Mrs Mason’s voice stopped him.

‘Mr Lupin?’

He stopped and turned. The landlady had appeared in the door to the kitchen, still clutching a tea-towel in her hand.

‘Are you going out?’ Her tone was friendly, but Remus thought there was something strange with the way she did not smile.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Thought I might make the most of my day off.’

She nodded, to show she understood, and came a little closer.

‘I just thought I’d tell you, if you didn’t know, or had forgotten,’ she said hesitantly. ‘Today is Remembrance Sunday.’

Remus had to think for a moment to understand what she was saying.

‘Oh. Yes.’

‘Well, there’s a service,’ Mrs Mason explained. ‘In the village church, at six. I happen to know that the Carters always go, and I was thinking… I think they’d appreciate if you went too.’

Remus stood, torn between options. There was a whole afternoon until then, and he was not restricted by train times, but he had been hoping to have the whole day to himself. He wanted to sit at the café for as long as he liked, to read and to talk to people. He had thought he might go to the pub after that, but if he was supposed to be back in Bexwold at six… On top of that, he barely knew how to behave in church, when to stand up and when to kneel, or what words to say. And had he not spent enough time thinking about the war dead?

But at the same time, Mrs Mason’s face was almost pleading. He thought about kind Mrs Carter, and her lingering gaze at the portrait of her son. Perhaps he owed it to her - and to Mr Carter, who claimed being blown up and having one’s dead body mingled with others’ was a good way to die, as long as it was for a good purpose.

‘Thank you for reminding me,’ Remus said. ‘I’ll be there.’

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The café was crowded when Remus finally arrived. He felt a stab of annoyance when he saw that his usual window seat was taken, but found another table. As he waited for his sandwich, he wondered whether sitting in a different place would mean that the people he had spoken to last week would not notice him. He told himself that it was a silly thing to think. Was he really that worried about not being recognised? He had scanned the faces of the customers, but the three men he had chatted to were not among them, and Siobhan with the blue teased hair was not at the till.
What would happen if they did turn up, and they did not acknowledge him? He would doubtlessly feel hurt. Then again, it should not surprise him if that happened. He might have hitched his hopes on making friends here, but it was likely that he was just some bloke to them. There was no real reason for them to remember him.

Remus took out his book and started eating his sandwich. Despite a feeling that he should persevere with it, he had given up on *Bleak House*, at least for the moment, and instead started rereading *A Single Man*. He had only read it once since the end of the war. It had taken on a new meaning then. Unlike before, he now understood the bottomless grief it described. But the other parts of it - the unexpected joy of life, the long internal monologues and the strange fantasies - were comforting. It had been the first book with a gay character he had ever read. He had picked it up, thinking that it would only be implied. When it was first made absolutely clear - explicit, even - twenty pages in, the sixteen-year old Remus had felt a jolt in his stomach so violent that felt like it should have been seen from the outside. There were bits he did not understand - he knew nothing of cars or freeways or campuses - but he had pieced together a picture of how Muggle Los Angeles would work, built on that introverted novel. Perhaps one day he would go there and find out.

He read while he ate, but looked up every few pages. He wished that someone would catch his eye, or fleetingly smile at him, or just acknowledge him somehow, but the clientele was absorbed in their own conversations. The feeling of being alone in a crowded room was sneaking up on him. Did he look out of place? He wondered whether his clothes were right here. Did he look at all appealing? Self-consciously, he pulled at his tweed-jacket and noticed the poppy on his lapel. The paper had torn and gone uneven with damp. He looked around, spotting a number of others wearing poppies. At least carrying that symbol was not setting him apart. Now that he thought about it, he thought that everyone else’s poppies looked in much better shape than his. Did people get a new one on Remembrance Sunday? He should have asked his mother.

He shook himself. There was no way he could blend in both in a London gay café and in a small village church wearing in the same outfit. Exclusion from either, however unofficial, would be of very different kinds. If the community in Bexwold took a dislike to him, there might be repercussions for his livelihood, and if they simply thought he was eccentric it would probably only change how they treated him. If the gay community, which in Remus’ mind was represented by this café, decided (as though it was a hive mind or a silent democracy which made unified decisions) that he was not *really* one of them, the exclusion would hurt much more. But why, he asked himself, would people here not accept him? *Because I don’t know the rules or the codes or the secret language*, he answered. *Because I’m self-conscious and underweight and nowhere near as good-looking as most people here.*

He put down his book and rubbed his face. He had not taken in anything of the past ten pages. Even if he had read the book many times before, he had to read it all again. He reminded himself that this was his day off, and he was supposed to relax, not wind himself up. *Easier said than done,* he thought. Spare time gave thoughts the opportunity to spin out of control. Resolutely, he picked up his book again and started from the last paragraph he remembered reading. Nevertheless, he could not stop himself from looking up every time the door opened.

It was not until just before four o’clock that Remus looked up and saw the group he had spoken to the week before come in. His stomach made a surprised somersault - he had not realised just how much he had hoped to see them. Embarrassed, he looked back down in his book, as if to pretend he had not noticed them, but only a moment later, someone said:

‘Hello, Remus!’

He looked up towards the door. Rayan and Simon were standing there.
‘Hi,’ Remus said and smiled at them.

‘Not on Dickens anymore?’ Rayan asked.

‘No, I gave up. I’ll try again in the summer. It was just really long.’

‘Reasonable. How was your week?’

‘It was alright, thanks,’ Remus said. ‘Erm, do you want to sit down…?’

‘Sorry, we’re just here to find Siobhan. George was supposed to meet us here,’ he said and shrugged in apology. ‘We’re off to the cinema. Thought we could huddle inside just as well as freezing our bollocks off outdoors.’

‘Wise,’ Remus said. ‘How was your week?’

‘Bloody dull, to be honest,’ Rayan said. ‘The weekend’s been better, though. And Bonfire Night was pretty good.’

‘Oh? What did you do?’ Somewhere in the back of his mind, Remus cheered at himself - he was having an actual conversation, like an ordinary person.

‘We went to see the Lord Mayor’s fireworks,’ Rayan said. ‘It was amazing - it was just above the Thames, and they all reflected in the water.’ He elbowed Simon in the side. ‘Simon, the fireworks - weren’t they cool?’

Simon, pulling himself out of his thoughts, nodded in agreement.

‘Yeah, they were good.’

Just then, the door opened behind them and George came in.

‘Hello, all!’ In quick succession, he kissed both Simon and Rayan on the mouth. Then he turned around and spotted Remus, who had been watching. ‘Hi, Remus.’

‘We were telling him about the Lord Mayor’s fireworks,’ Rayan said.

‘Oh, they were brilliant! They had the kind which is one colour in the middle and another colour in the edges,’ George said.

‘Were there any big firework displays down in Sussex?’ Simon asked.

‘Suffolk,’ George said.

‘It was Suffolk, right?’ Rayan said. Remus nodded.

‘Yes, it is. I did see a bit of fireworks, yes. But I doubt they were as good as the Lord Mayor’s.’

Rayan grinned and said:

‘Would be strange if they were.’

Remus laughed.

‘Well, you’re right about that.’

Siobhan appeared from the door behind the counter, pulling on a coat. She turned and waved at the
woman behind the counter.

‘See you tomorrow, Trisha.’ Then she turned to her friends. ‘Okay, I’m ready. Hi, Remus.’

‘What are you going to see?’ Remus asked.

‘Back to the Future,’ Siobhan said.

‘Rayan chose it,’ Simon said.

‘I’m making him come along,’ Rayan said and grinned. ‘I like time-travel.’

‘Oh, we’d completely missed that,’ Simon muttered.

George nudged Rayan and said something Remus did not catch. Rayan nodded and turned to him.

‘Look, we’re going to the pub after the film, so if you’d like to tag along…’

‘It’d be half past six, sevenish,’ George supplied.

Remus made an apologetic grimace.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I promised my landlady to go to this Remembrance Sunday service…’

Rayan’s face fell.

‘Oh. That’s a shame.’

‘I’d love to,’ Remus said quickly. ‘But I really should…’

‘It’s okay,’ Rayan said and smiled. George looked almost like he was going to argue, but he didn’t.

‘Perhaps next week.’

‘I expect you’ll be around then too,’ George said.

‘I suppose so,’ Remus said.

‘Come on,’ Simon said. ‘We’ll be late.’

‘Enjoy your film.’

There was a chorus of ‘thank you’s and ‘see you’s. Then the group shuffled out of the café. Remus watched them walking down the street, absorbed in each other again. He wondered whether he hoped to be part of that group of friends. He had been very glad when they had turned up, and they had seemed happy to see him. And they had asked him to the pub. Perhaps he really was about to get some friends.

He glanced at his watch again. Five past four. There was not really any reason to stay here. He might as well go home and read in his room - and perhaps change into something a little more sombre for the service.

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The church clock was approaching six when Remus hurried through the darkened churchyard. The street-lamps of the High Street seemed to do nothing to light up the evening. Even the soft light emanating from the church only accentuated the darkness round it. All the way from Mrs Mason’s
house, he had been fighting the urge to look over his shoulder. Perhaps it was simply the knowledge that Greyback was possibly still here. Perhaps it was the memory of the war.

The church was not as full as he had expected it. Some pews held only one or two worshippers. Hurriedly he slipped into the pew closest to the doors. Several people looked over their shoulders, among them Mrs Mason, who smiled encouragingly. He smiled back at her and then bowed his head, embarrassed at the pretence but glad of the excuse not to look at anyone.

When had he last been inside a church? Thinking back, he concluded that it must have been James’ funeral. Since then, his mother had suggested he come with her to church a few times - no doubt she thought it would be comforting - but he had declined. Religion was his mother’s domain, and he had never really been part of. This was not wholly down to her being a Muggle. Some wizards, especially of the old pureblood families, were practicing Christians, but as his father had not been one of them, religion had often seemed like a far-away concept to Remus. Looking around the church, all he could reflect on was its architecture. It was a medieval building, but he spotted the hand of Victorian restorers in many details. He could not see the stained-glass windows against the darkness outside, but when he looked over his shoulder, he saw a photograph of one window on the paper screen, bearing a few typed pages on the church’s history. A group of apostles, bearded but for the youthful John, crowded around Christ, their features too fine and their bodies too well-proportioned to be medieval. Remus turned to face the altar again and surveyed the scattered worshippers. The mix of candles and sloping electric lights left the centre of the church dark. He spotted the Carters sitting close to the front, heads together in quiet conversation. Remus wondered what they were talking about.

The vestry door opened, and the glint of a processional cross caught Remus’ eye. The congregants got to their feet. The procession went down the aisle in silence, their footsteps echoing eerily through the church. Remus clasped his hands, feeling silly to have nothing to do with them. He kept his eyes on the procession, only glancing at the other congregants for a cue to sit down.

Now, the choir had taken their stalls, and sang. Remus’ thoughts wandered. It struck him that wizards would never have a service of any kind for this reason. Did they seek to forget, or was it the Muggles clinging to the past? He thought of the war memorial outside the church and the wreath of poppies placed there. All those young men who had met their death in the mud and the rain a lifetime ago. His great-uncle had fought at their side, Remus reminded himself.

His memories of great-uncle Julius were vague, all from before he had been bitten. He recalled sitting in his mother’s lap in a cramped living-room, while his father spoke to a sinewy old man in a winged armchair. Remus had been scared of him, with his bulging eyes and his uneven teeth. He had leaned close once, grinning at the little boy, and Remus had recoiled at his foul breath.

After he had been bitten, his parents had cut almost all bonds to their relatives. There was no way of explaining why their sunny five year-old was suddenly pale and ill-looking. They were vague about their son’s condition, and explained that they could not travel. It was better, they decided, that they be withdrawn than that their families decided to stop speaking to them. Julius had died before Remus’ seventh birthday.

In more than one way, Remus realised, he and Julius were rather alike. Julius was half cut-off from the family. Many relatives felt uncomfortable or even disgusted at his loss of magic, or simply did not know what to say to him. The family-members who still saw him regularly, Remus’ father among them, did so with the knowledge that he was unpredictable and sometimes even rude. But he had his reasons, as Remus knew all too well. What he knew of Julius’ wartime experience was only what his father had told him. In a fit of fascination with the Muggle world, he had been caught up in the patriotism of 1914, and at twenty-four had quit his job at the Ministry and volunteered for
the Army. He had been dispatched to somewhere in France, and had stayed there until early 1916. Quite what had happened or what Julius had done there, Remus’ father had not been able to tell him. Perhaps Julius had never spoken about it. Whatever had transpired, it had been enough to invalid him out. He had been left without any magic abilities and with a number of strange habits.

As Julius had been twenty-four when he had volunteered, he would have been roughly the age Remus was now when he had been sent home. Remus had been far younger during his own war - younger than almost all the men in the trenches, except the boy soldiers who had lied about their age to get away from their dreary lives. Suddenly it seemed ludicrous to recruit seventeen year-olds into a secret order fighting a civil war. The others had pledged their allegiance only after school, but in Remus’ case, the first he had heard of it had been at the careers advice in his fifth year. ‘There will be few employers, if any, that will have you, Lupin,’ Professor McGonagoll had said. ‘But there are other vocations. You cannot be unaware of the fact that Lord Voldemort is gathering followers.’ No, he had answered. He was aware of it. ‘If it comes down to it, Lupin, would you be willing to resist?’

His answer had been clear, of course. He had not even thought about it. Later, during the nights when he lay awake, waiting for the silence to be broken by the shouts of an attack, he had wondered what would happen if he had said no that day in Professor McGonagoll’s office.

‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,’ intoned the priest. ‘There is none other commandment greater than these.’

What an absurd thing to say, when they were congregated to remember the war dead. What love was there in war? None. The only thing that existed was necessity.

Or was he thinking that to alleviate his own bad conscience? He recalled the times he had killed. During the war, he had often dreamt about them, but his own losses had obscured much of the shock now. The first time had been completely intentional. In the middle of the fray, Remus had seen a Death Eater heading towards Lily, and the anger that sparked in him had been so strong that the Killing Curse had come easily to him. He knew he was not the only one of the Order who had cast it - far from it - but it had been a shock. His left hand had shaken for the rest of the evening, and although he had sat surrounded by his friends, he had felt isolated from them.

The other time was not as calculated. He sometimes wished he could call it an accident, but that did not feel right. He had duelled a Death Eater for what felt like hours, although it must have been a matter of minutes. They had stood close, so close that getting an aim had been difficult. He had hit his opponent over the arm, so that he dropped his wand, but the Death Eater had hooked his foot behind Remus’ knee and felled him. His hand had closed around his throat as he scrambled for his wand. In that moment, Remus had managed to wedged the tip of his wand between their chests. It had just been a stunning spell, but there was something about the finality with which his enemy’s body collapsed on top of his that made him know that he was dead. It was Sirius who had pushed the body off him and pulled off the hood, revealing an unfamiliar face. Crouching by the body, watching it impassively, he had said: ‘He must have had a dicky heart. Only explanation…’ After Sirius’ arrest, Remus had dreamt that event anew, where the face underneath the hood had not been an unknown Death Eater’s, but Regulus Black’s. Sometimes, it was simply the feeling of the bottom falling out of his stomach, knowing that he had killed someone so young. At other times, he dreamt about Sirius towering above him, the hood still in his hand, raising his wand to avenge his brother.

The words of the reader at the pulpit penetrated his thoughts.

‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?’
He remembered the words on James and Lily's grave-stone. “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” Every time he had visited their grave, he had wondered who had chosen those words. He had never heard either of them mention them. To him the phrase seemed obscure and menacing. There was something uncomfortably proud about it. For some reason, he suspected Dumbledore’s involvement. Perhaps it referred to the same idea that he had sometimes touched upon in his speeches and monologues - that those who die live on inside the heart of their loved ones. When Remus had been younger, he had liked that idea. It had felt comforting then, before his friends had died. Now, it felt like a lie. Peter and James were not alive anymore - Lily and Edgar and Benjy and Marlene and Caradoc and Gideon and Fabian did not reside inside his heart. No platitudes could change what had happened. Death was a cold, terrible fact, one he had become well-acquainted with. It had taken his friends, one by one, and when he had presented himself to Death, it had rejected him. He had been cast back into this life, this pain and confusion, where even his parents’ constant assurances that they loved him were painful. Life had hurt him, but he had become afraid of Death, like he had never been during the war.

‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.’ Another reader now; another Bible passage. ‘This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.’

The thought of Peter came so suddenly to him that it felt like a punch. He bit his lip, but there was no stopping the tears. He clasped his hands harder in his lap and swallowed the sobs so that the other congregants would not notice. He realised now that he was not the only one. Through the semidarkness, he saw Mrs Carter drying her eyes on her handkerchief. However ashamed he felt to cry in public, it felt right to weep for his friends. This was a service to remember those fallen in war, and that was what had happened to them.

His thoughts turned from his dead friends to the people he had met in London. Was he trying to replace his old friends somehow? If he became one in that group, would that be a betrayal? He was not certain membership in a group was what he wanted, but without doubt he wanted friends. That was not disloyalty. However unhappy that fact had made him in the past, he was alive, and his friends were dead. Surely he owed it to them, through the very unfairness of the situation, to live.

The priest, standing behind the altar, now announced communion, asking the congregation to draw near. Remus stayed in his pew and watched as the other people filed forward. When they were on their feet, they seemed far fewer than when seated. Mr and Mrs Carter went up to the altar-ring together, and returned to their pew holding hands. Mrs Carter’s free hand was clamped around her handkerchief.

When the last worshipper had returned to their seat, the priest turned to face them again and spoke.

‘Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of thy glory and dominion, world without end.’

‘Amen,’ Remus said with the congregation. How he wished he could believe that. His friends should be in paradise, wandering through eternal meadows. They should not lie cold in their graves, only to rot and become food for worms.

‘May the souls of the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.’

Again, he joined in:
‘Amen.’

The priest, the choir and the other people, the words for whose roles Remus did not know, left in procession. When they had passed into the vestry again, the congregation shuffled to their feet. Remus stood up, but lingered, not wanting to be the first to go outside.

‘Mr Lupin!’ said a hushed voice behind him. He turned and saw Mrs Carter. She reached out her hands towards him. ‘I’m so pleased to see you here, Mr Lupin.’ She said and took his hand between hers.

‘Of course,’ he said and smiled, not knowing quite what to say. ‘It was a very beautiful service.’ She nodded and smiled, tears still in her eyes. Mr Carter put a hand on her shoulder.

‘We mustn’t keep you,’ she said and let go of him.

‘Good to see you, Lupin,’ Carter said and nodded at him.

‘And you, sir.’

‘See you tomorrow, then.’

‘Good night,’ Mrs Carter said, and went out of the church.

Remus followed slowly. In the doorway, Mrs Mason appeared at his side.

‘So you made it,’ she said and smiled approvingly.

‘Yes, I did,’ he said. ‘Are you going home, Mrs Mason…?’

‘I’m going to the pub, I think,’ she said. ‘Care to join me?’

‘Erm, no. Thank you. Not tonight.’

‘Then I might see you back at the house. Good night, Mr Lupin.’

‘Good night.’

She stepped outside and walked down the gravelled path. Remus was about to follow her, but paused on the porch. The congregants were moving in the darkness to his left. To his right was the memorial of the fallen from the parish, and behind it, something moved. He blinked a few times, and his eyes adjusted. Through the dark, he felt himself locking eyes with the werewolf in the church-yard. They both remained stock-still, like predators fixating on its prey. Then Remus blinked and, keeping his head high, he followed the congregation towards the cemetery gates.
Chapter 9

Remus woke, knowing he had dreamt of Sirius Black. There might have been a course of events when he had been asleep, but now he could remember only a series of images.

They were at the sea, where they had never been together in reality. The beach was empty, and there was an odd quality to the light, as so often in dreams. Perhaps it was supposed to resemble dawn. Together they walked along the beach. Sirius stopped and picked up a flat stone and made it bounce over the water’s surface. The wind caught his hair and sent it whirling about his head like a dark halo. He squinted against the wind so that crows’ feet formed by his eyes. Those small wrinkles, imperfections in his perfect face, had seemed so vivid. Sirius laughed into the breeze and pushed his fingers into his hair to sweep it back. The laughter got lost in the wind.

In another sequence, separated from the first by something like a cut in a film, they were away from the wind. Remus was watching the sea, which threw itself against the beach and nearby pier as though trying to break it. Beside him, he felt Sirius’ body-heat, and heard him move. After a while, he felt his eyes on him. He looked away from the sea, at Sirius. His gaze was calm and unwavering. Remus could feel his heart pounding inside his chest, just as he heard the sea beat its waves against land. It seemed absurd that anyone thought it worth looking at him like that. But Sirius barely blinked. Not once did his eyes wander. It was as if he was drinking in his face, fixing it in his memory. Their fingers touched and interlinked. Slowly, they moved closer. Neither of them spoke. In this world, speech did not seem possible. Sirius’ face came closer and closer, until it blurred. Remus surrendered and closed his eyes. Sirius’ mouth was soft against his chapped lips. The touch was so light he could scarcely feel it. Sirius wrapped an arm around Remus’ waist and pulled him closer. He felt him now, just like it had been...

He could not remember more. There might have been something about them walking down the pier, and he had a vague memory of pointing out cloud-shapes, but it was slipping away from him. He could not remember whether there had been anything other than kissing in the dream. It was possible, but he felt himself close to fabricating the rest.

Remus got out of bed, angry at himself for dreaming such things. After all these years, he should be able to let it go. When he was awake, he could keep in mind what Sirius Black had done and felt the hatred that he deserved. Often it carried over in dreams, but sometimes, his sleeping self seemed to forget about it, and retreated to a time before the betrayal. Every time it happened, he woke berating himself. How could he dream of him like that? Why did his subconscious still linger on his beauty and his tenderness - things that had turned out to mean nothing? Remus was afraid of what such dreams meant. He abhorred the thought that somewhere inside him, his love for that man still existed. At times it felt like he had worked his fingers bloody to dig it out. He had picked every shred of tender feeling for him out of himself, leaving his body feeling flayed, and yet he had failed. The feeling of being infected with lingering love for someone he now hated had been just as bad as the pain brought on by the loss of his friends.

Now, four years later, he felt just as foolish as he had then. He had trusted him completely, in a way he had never thought he would be able to trust anyone. He had unreservedly given everything to someone who had not been who he claimed. Sometimes Remus wondered whether it had been easier if the ultimate betrayal had been against him instead of against his friends. As things were, he seemed not to have been worth that attention. So why did he still think of him? Why did Sirius Black still hold such sway over him?

He did not know. Tonight had been the new moon, but that was when his affliction was at its
furthest away, and his health was best. He should be left alone then, he felt. Already tired of himself, he started getting ready for the day.

When he stepped outside, the air bit at his skin. The ground glittered with frost. Remus paused on the front step, watching the crystals clinging to every individual blade of grass in the garden. The silent beauty of it calmed him a little. His eyes travelled over the ground, where every plant seemed frozen in time.

He was jolted out of his reverie. There was something in the grass just under one of the windows that broke the calm. Remus crossed to it, feeling the fragile blades of grass break under his soles. After a few steps he stopped and crouched down.

Outlined in the frost-covered grass was a foot-print. Remus did not even have to consider where that large boot came from. He knew at once to whom it belonged. When he stood up, he saw more of them, running from the stone wall, to the window, and around the corner of the house. They must have been done recently, after the frost fell. Even with his senses dulled by the distance of the full moon, Remus could smell the damp of moulding leaves clinging to filthy clothes.

He stepped back, as if afraid to disturb some important evidence. Had he thought that Greyback did not know where he lived? Of course he must - he knew he had followed him. He had been here in the night, moving around, looking through windows. Fear was closing around Remus’ body like iron bands. Breathing felt difficult. A lump had settled in his throat, and made him feel like he was choking.

And all at once, it got worse. *Mrs Mason!* he thought. What if Greyback had gotten in? What if he had done something to her… With a massive effort, Remus made himself move. Pulling his heavy feet off the ground, he ran back to the front door. As he reached into his pocket for his keys, his hands were shaking so badly he almost dropped them. It felt like an age before he managed to get the key in the lock, and turn the key. He sprinted inside.

‘Mrs Mason!’ he called.

For a heart-wrenching second, there was nothing. Then there was the sound of slippers against linoleum, and next moment, Mrs Mason appeared in the kitchen doorway, still in her dressing-gown and with a mug of tea in her hand. Remus exhaled in relief. He felt ready to weep.

‘Whatever’s the matter, Mr Lupin?’ Mrs Mason said and stepped closer, eyes furrowed. He swallowed and shook his head.

‘Nothing,’ he managed. Still looking at him, Mrs Mason put a hand on his arm.

‘But you’re shaking,’ she said. ‘Come in and sit down…’ Her hand tightened around his elbow, but he did not let himself be led. Instead, he looked her in the face and said:

‘Are all the windows locked?’

Mrs Mason let go of him.

‘Why, I think so,’ she said. ‘I haven’t really checked…’

‘You should. And if there’s any sign that someone has got in…’

‘Why would there be?’ Mrs Mason demanded. ‘Mr Lupin, you’re really not making any sense.’

Remus rubbed his eyes.
‘I know it sounds insane, but I think someone was planning to break into the house last night.’

The landlady pressed her lips together.

‘Whatever makes you think that?’ she asked in a reasonable tone.

‘There are foot-prints…’

‘Why, that doesn’t prove a thing. You seem a little overworked to me, Mr Lupin. Come into the kitchen and sit down for a moment.’

‘No, I can’t,’ he said. How he would love to sit down and wait until he stopped shaking and the feeling of being choked stopped. The smell of the tea in Mrs Mason’s cup was wafting over him, and all he wanted right now was a strong, sweet cup of tea to calm him down. But he did not have time. ‘I need to go to work.’

Mrs Mason sighed.

‘Very well.’

He opened the door again, then turned to look at Mrs Mason.

‘Please be careful,’ he said. She snorted, but smiled.

‘You too, Mr Lupin,’ she said. ‘Be kind to yourself.’

She went back into kitchen, sipping her tea unconcernedly. Remus stepped outside again and started making his way towards the village, still trembling from the shock.

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The rest of the week, the memory of that footprint in the frost haunted him. On his way to and from the shop, he would look over his shoulder. Often he found himself staring out of the shop-window, dreading what he might see. As it got darker, the hiding-places multiplied. As he made his way home in the dark, he wondered which shadow should turn out to be his tormentor, which would be the night when he struck. That lurking beast made its way even into his dreams. Sometimes it was just a wary feeling. At other times, he would be staring into Greyback’s eyes as they lost what humanity they had left, and the animal became ready to strike.

After his lapse with Mrs Mason the morning he had found the footprints, Remus felt that he could not allow himself to show his worry. He did not want anyone to question him about what was on his mind. The worst would be if Mr Carter surmised what it was about, and started asking him about it. Remus did not know what to say to his employer. He had brought this danger to him, and he could not do anything to get rid of him.

Perhaps he should leave Bexwold - up sticks and move to London. After all, he left Bexwold whenever he had time on his hands. He might like Mrs Mason and the Carters, and some of the town-folk, but they were not his friends. It was in London he was tying new ties of friendship, not here, and he doubted that Greyback would like the city. Surely he would not follow him there.

But what would he do? He had a stable job here. It was not the best, but it was something. Sacrificing it would be foolish. Besides, his absence would not necessarily mean that Greyback would leave. If Remus was right and he would not like to follow him to the city, he might stay here. What if leaving made it worse? He must not run away from his problems. At the very least, his presence would keep Greyback entertained. He would have to grit his teeth and bear the
loneliness and the constant low-level sense of threat.

But surely he had to do something! Maybe he should go to the Ministry and report what had happened. He could tell them about the pigs and the intimidation. But Greyback’s own words came back to him. The Ministry would not care. Now, over two weeks after the event, Remus had no evidence that the pigs had been killed by a lycanthrope, even if it had been obvious to him. Even if he could get hold of evidence, and they decided to take action, there was nothing to say that they would not arrest him. Greyback was not best loved, but if another werewolf reported him, they would happily assume that he was trying to shift the blame away from himself.

He tried to think of who to tell. There seemed to be no reason to tell his father. He would not be able to do anything, except worry or demand that he come home. Neither would Dumbledore be able to do anything. Alastor Moody might consider to help. Remus felt a deep respect for the man, and even if he was difficult to read, Remus thought Moody liked him. As an Auror, Moody would be able to pull the right strings. Kingsley Shacklebolt, whom he had been on good terms with during the war, was another possibility. But Remus hesitated. It was a big favour to ask someone he had not spoken to in four years.

The weekend approached. Remus longed to get away from Bexwold, where the walls seemed to be closing in on him. He found himself weighing the dangers of leaving, and admonished himself. He was lapsing back into wartime thinking. He had to stop himself from doing that, and keep acting as normal at any cost.

Therefore, on Saturday afternoon he left the house by the front door and walked down the lane to Disapparate. As London materialised around him, the first drops of rain fell against his face. Remus turned up his collar and readjusted his scarf as he started walking. Despite the exhaust fumes and the cold rain, it felt easier to breathe here.

By the time he reached the café, water was trickling from his hair down his neck, and his jacket was giving off the unpleasant smell of wet wool. As soon as he stepped inside, he was aware of three pairs of eyes staring at him.

‘Look what the cat dragged in,’ George said with a grin.

‘No offence, mate, but you look pretty bad,’ Simon said.

‘I didn’t anticipate the rain,’ Remus said and took off his jacket. He pulled a hand through his hair, trying to get rid of the worst of the water. ‘Should’ve known better.’

‘Take a pew,’ Rayan said and pulled out a chair.

‘Cheers.’

As Remus blew at his hands to warm them up, the three friends continued their previous discussion. Having come in towards the end of the story George was telling, Remus was not entirely certain what was going on, so he listened quietly. When they fell silent, Rayan asked:

‘How was that service you were going to?’

‘Interesting, and depressing,’ Remus answered. ‘It was all about the war dead, so…’

George leaned his chin in his hand.

‘So, do you go in for that kind of thing?’
'The war dead?'

'I meant church. Religion.'

'No. No, not really. This was my first time inside a church for years. But I thought it would be nice to go. Show some solidarity.'

'Yes, I saw your poppy,' Simon said. 'I favour the white one, myself.'

'What does that mean?'

Simon raised his eyebrows.

'You’ve never heard about the white poppy?'

'Let’s say for the sake of argument that I’ve spent most of my life living under a rock,' Remus said. Rayan laughed, but Simon did not seem amused.

'Remembrance Sunday should be about remembrance, not militarism,' he explained. 'The red poppy has become a symbol of continuous war. It’s about soldiers marching up and down, showing off their medals. It’s not about the horror of war, and the fact that we should do something about it. The white poppy means “no more war”.' He tapped the table with his finger to punctuate every word. 'We will remember those who have died in war, but we should actively strive for peace.'

Remus met his eyes. His first reaction had been to tell him that he did not know what he was talking about, and he had no right to lecture him about the horrors of war, because he had seen them first-hand. Had Simon seen his friends die? Had he hidden in the undergrowth for hours, wishing for those who sought to kill him to move on? Had he sat in vigil at his wounded lover’s bedside, waiting for him to wake up? Had he ever come back to base and not been able to stop crying, without knowing why he was weeping in the first place?

But he knew he would not tell him those things. Instead, he swallowed and said:

'I don’t think that people who have not been to war can quite understand what it is like.'

'Alright, I can get behind that statement,' Simon said, but did not look convinced.

'War is a terrible thing,' Remus said.

'Are you a pacifist?'

He considered it.

'No,' he said. 'Sometimes, there is no other option.'

'Really?' Simon said. 'Do you think the Falklands War was righteous?'

'No, I don’t. But wouldn’t you say that, say, the Second World War was inevitable, and at that point necessary?'

'He’s got a point,' Rayan said. 'There’s a difference between Alfonsín and Hitler.'

'You’re just saying that because in the Second World War, the other side was the aggressor,' Simon said. 'In the Falklands War, it was Britain who wanted the Lebensraum. The comparison should be between Thatcher and Hitler, not Alfonsín and Hitler.'
‘But Argentina invaded the Falklands first,’ George pointed out.

‘Only after the British had seized it in the first place, way back,’ Simon said. ‘And let’s get back on topic. Remus, do you honestly think that the murder of millions is defensible, because Hitler was a maniac?’

‘Hitler murdered millions too,’ Rayan said.

‘Shut up, Rayan,’ Simon retorted and continued looking at Remus. When he spoke, he found his own voice strange, more quiet than he had expected it to be.

‘It’s not defensible. It’s never defensible. But I can’t come up with another solution. And probably neither could most of the soldiers. They rarely have a say in what happens in wars.’

Only when he had finished speaking, he realised that he felt close to tears. Before Simon had time to answer, Rayan leaned over the table, made a sweeping motion with both arms and said:

‘Alright, end of discussion.’

Simon opened his mouth, but Rayan pointed at him and said:

‘No. Shut up, Simon.’

‘Yeah, what the hell?’ George said. ‘You can’t just jump at someone’s throat like that! You don’t know what Remus’ story is.’

Simon looked grumpy, but muttered:

‘Sorry,’ he muttered.

Remus wondered what to say. A minute ago, he had felt like getting up and walking off, but now he felt himself calming down - a victory against himself.

‘Apology accepted,’ he said, and mustered a smile.

‘Cool,’ Simon answered, not looking at him.

Rayan clapped his hands together.

‘I think we all need a drink,’ he said. ‘Come on - let’s transfer to the pub.’

The rain had abated to a drizzle, but Rayan offered Remus half of his umbrella. They walked shoulder to shoulder as George, wearing a garish raincoat, walked between them and Simon.

‘She hasn’t done any cooking for a fortnight,’ he said. ‘It’s driving me round the bend!’

‘She works with preparing food all day,’ Rayan said. ‘She must get bored with it.’

‘Wouldn’t kill her to take in the milk, though, would it?’ George said.

‘Have you talked to her about this?’ Simon asked.

‘I’ve dropped hints.’

‘Tell her,’ Rayan said.

‘Sorry, who are you talking about?’ Remus asked, feeling confused. By the sound of it, George
was living with a woman, which was not what he had expected.

‘Siobhan,’ Rayan explained. ‘She and George share a flat.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘They’re both very good at complaining about each other,’ Simon added.

‘Still wish you’d tell me what she says about me.’

‘We only hear bits of it, darling,’ Rayan said. ‘If you want the juicy stuff, you’ll need to ask Trisha.’

‘Or the civil servant dyke,’ George said, ‘who is in our flat even as we speak. It’s still okay that I crash on your floor, right, Rayan?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Who’s the civil servant dyke?’ Remus asked, feeling this was rather a cruel nickname.

‘She’s Siobhan’s girlfriend,’ George explained. ‘She’s some kind of high-flyer in government - although apparently she’s a civil servant, not a politician. I’m just waiting for the scandal to break.’

‘Don’t joke about it, George,’ Rayan said. ‘It’d be horrible.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ he said. ‘It wouldn’t be too bad, though, having some out gay civil servants. It might make things easier.’

They arrived at the pub. Simon, obviously still feeling bad about the earlier confrontation, insisted on buying Remus a drink. They found a corner table, large enough for the four of them, and settled down.

‘Have you seen Ellis recently?’ Simon asked Rayan.

‘I went to see him last week. He’s doing okay.’ Rayan hesitated and added: ‘Ish.’ Simon sighed.

‘Okayish is better than before, though, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah. I think he’s mostly really frustrated, being cooped up in his flat.’

‘That must be pretty frustrating.’

They continued to discuss their mutual friend, as Remus half-listened and sipped his beer. After a while, George poked him in the arm and asked:

‘Can I explain the suspension bridge?’

Remus, slightly taken aback, but intrigued, said:

‘Alright.’

‘Right.’ George grabbed a few napkins and took out a biro. ‘The physics of a suspension bridge is absolutely fascinating…’

He talked and sketched various parts of the bridge. Remus listened bemusedly. George’s enthusiasm over something as commonplace as a bridge was endearing, even if Remus only
understood half of what he said. He barely stopped for breath, and gave his listener no time to ask about words and concepts he was not familiar with. Simon and Rayan had stopped their own conversation, and listened to George instead. Remus watched them, feeling at once part of the group and excluded from it. George, incessantly talking, hazel-eyed and with a blue stone stud in his ear. Rayan, smiling in recognition of his friend’s obsession, big-handed, dark-eyed, his hair recently cut. Simon, folding a swan out of a discarded napkin with a suspension bridge drawn on it, still boyishly blond, but with a pronounced crease between his eyebrows. Remus wondered what they made of him, with his grey hairs, his scars and his clothes a size too big. Was that how they saw him, or had they found something else to see in him - his eye-colour, or his hands, or the line of his jaw? Those were all things Remus liked about himself, although he found the features put together unimpressive. He tried to recall flattering things people had said about his appearance - surely Sirius, for all his self-preoccupation, must have complimented him at some point? Probably, but Remus could not remember it. But that wasn’t important. It was the present that mattered. He briefly wondered (a thought that startled him) whether one of them might consider sleeping with him. He shook himself, leaving the thought behind.

When George’s explanation of the suspension bridge had ended, Remus asked, remembering:

‘So, how was that film you went to see?’

At the same time, Rayan and Simon answered:

‘Amazing.’

‘Dire.’

Remus laughed.

‘Opinion is divided, then.’

‘I really enjoyed it,’ Rayan said. ‘It was funny, imaginative…’

‘Ridiculous,’ Simon added.

‘That’s just because you don’t like science fiction,’ Rayan said. ‘You have to go with it - even suspend your disbelief…’

‘You know I can’t do that.’

It seemed like while bridges was what made George glow, science fiction was what incensed Rayan. He started mentioning books and authors and films, most of which Remus had never heard about before. Simon would reject them, or just shake his head. As this argument went on, George went to buy another round, and Remus helped him carry the glasses over. As Remus put down a pint in front of Rayan, he looked up at him and asked:

‘So what do you think of science fiction, Remus?’

‘I don’t know if I really have an informed opinion,’ he admitted.

‘Really?’ Rayan said. ‘What have you seen?’

‘I saw Star Wars,’ Remus said. He had gone to see it with his friends during the Christmas break in his seventh year.

‘Alright, good,’ Rayan said, grinning. ‘How did you like them?’
'I only saw the first one,’ he admitted. ‘I got overtaken by events, so I missed the others.’

‘At least he knows it’s three films,’ George said helpfully.

‘What about books?’ Rayan asked.

‘Erm…’

‘Le Guin?’

‘No.’

‘Bradbury? Philip K. Dick?’

‘No, sorry.’

He gave a long list of names, and to each and every one Remus had to shake his head and apologise. Finally Rayan sighed and asked:

‘Remus, have you read anything?’

‘I have read *Lord of the Rings*,’ he said.

‘Oh, thank goodness,’ Rayan said. ‘You’re not a lost case after all. Did you like it?’

‘Yes, I did.’

This seemed to make Rayan even more relieved. They started discussing the trilogy, Rayan concentrating on the finer points, and Remus, who had read it as a teenager, adding what he could remember. He enjoyed the discussion, but at the same time it struck him that there was a serious problem present here. His frame of reference was all wrong. He barely knew anything about Muggle politics, or Muggle history, or Muggle literature. He had never watched television, and even if he had been to the cinema occasionally, it was many years ago now. There was very little he had to say to these people, and as so often, he ended up face to face with his own ignorance when they asked him questions. Venturing into the Muggle world - not for a job or a place to stay, but for human interaction - was like coming to a foreign country where he could speak the language but did not know the culture. He felt like he was in a constant state of mild culture shock. Worst of all was that he had no way of explaining his own ignorance. Did they think he was uncultured and stupid? Did they see him as he saw himself, sitting quietly while the others talked about their likes and dislikes? In their company, his life must seem empty. The number of things he could not tell them were so many that he became an un-person.

The conversation meandered from fantasy books to other topics. Remus listened, and spoke when he had something to say. He was tempted to pretend to know more than he did but he knew that it was far too easy to make a fool out of himself. Perhaps they saw him as someone who was not very talkative. He was certainly not a big talker, so perhaps that was a role he could play well.

Time was passing fast. The landlord announced last orders, and Remus glanced at his watch in surprise.

‘God, is it that late?’ he said.

‘Do you need to catch your train?’ Rayan asked.

‘Yes,’ Remus said. ‘But it’s no great rush.’
‘Good.’

‘Alright, planning time,’ George said and fixed them all with a glance. He tried to seem businesslike, but only looked more intense. ‘We said we’d go out next Friday, and you, Rayan, are not allowed to pull out, like you did last time.’

‘I won’t,’ Rayan promised.

‘Good! Because it’s my turn with the flat, and I’m not just going with Simon, again. No offence, Simon, but you’re a rotten wingman.’

Rayan looked over at Remus.

‘You should come with us.’

‘Good idea,’ said George. Remus bit his lip.

‘Erm…’

‘Come on! You never know who you might meet,’ George said. ‘I hope I’ll meet that guy I talked to last Saturday - what was his name? Callahan.’

‘Can’t remember him,’ Rayan admitted.

‘Tall, gorgeous eyes, and rather a lovely West Coast accent.’

Simon put his glass down heavily.

‘No, George. Don’t even think about it.’

‘What!?’

‘You know what they say,’ Simon said, his eyes boring into George. ‘“Thou shalt not fuck an American.”’

George threw his hands up in exasperation.

‘That’s not going to make a difference, Simon! It’s not just the Americans now, is it?’ He sighed and crossed his arms. ‘If I see that guy again, and he’s game, I’m not going to let anything stop me.’

‘So dying is fine by you?’ Simon said.

‘Look,’ George said, genuinely angry now. ‘If I catch it, I catch it. If I die, I die. But I’m not bloody well going to stop living because of it. Besides, ever heard of a rubber, Simon?’

‘Stop it, you two,’ Rayan said. ‘Please.’ He cast a glance at Remus and smiled, as if apologising. Remus smiled back and raised his eyebrows in sympathy. ‘It’d be fun if you came along, Remus.’

‘Alright,’ Remus said. It made him happy that someone wanted his company. ‘I will, then.’

‘Great,’ George said.

‘When and where shall we meet?’

‘Nine alright?’ George asked. Everyone nodded. ‘Outside the café?’
'Alright,' Remus said and took his jacket off the back of his chair. ‘Nine o’clock on Friday, then.’ He stood up and put his jacket on. ‘Sorry, I need to go. Need to catch my train.’

‘This has been nice,’ Rayan said.

‘Yes, it has,’ Remus agreed. ‘I’ll see you all next week.’

Everyone smiled and said goodbye. Remus turned and left the pub. He slipped into a deserted side-alley and Disapparated, bringing a few stray raindrops with him.
As the work-week started, Remus felt like he was living in several worlds. Before he had only thought of two different worlds - the wizard and the Muggle, cohabiting without knowing it. Now, his reality felt splintered in the extreme. There was the world of Bexwold - the daytime, workday world, where basic needs were met. Then there was the world of Soho, which existed in the weekends. In neither was he quite himself - just like he was not himself in the wizarding world. When slogging away in the butcher’s shop, everything in London - the café, the pub, the people - felt distant. In a place like this, homosexuality did not exist. These people probably thought they had never met anyone like that. Then again, his gay friends in London had been surprised to meet someone working in a village miles away, and none of the people he had met the past five weeks knew wizards or werewolves existed.

The Monday passed quietly in the shop. Remus divided his time between standing at the counter and working in the back-room with Mrs Carter. On Tuesday morning, Mr Carter packed the usual deliveries.

‘You’d better be careful today,’ he told Remus, who was putting on his extra jumper and jacket. ‘It’s very windy. You might lose your balance in this weather.’

‘I’ll keep it in mind, Mr Carter,’ he said and picked up the cold-box and the keys.

‘Good lad.’

Remus went out of the back-door, and put down the cold-box to unlock the shed. It was not until he grabbed the padlock that he realised that it was hanging open. Frowning, he opened the shed. At first, he thought nothing was wrong - there was nothing missing. Then his eyes grew more used to the gloom, and he saw the bicycle. Spokes had been torn from the rim. The chain had been grabbed and yanked out of place. The cables to the breaks had been severed. Remus stood frozen, not knowing what to do. He could get his wand out and try to undo the damage, but he knew little about how it was supposed to look. Instead, he turned back to the door.

‘Mr Carter!’ he called in.

‘What?’ Carter called back. He came through the beaded curtain, looking annoyed. ‘What are you still doing here?’

‘I think you should come have a look at this,’ Remus said. Carter sighed with displeasure.

‘Let me just lock the door.’

Remus stepped back to the shed and looked at the damaged bike again. Soon, the door opened, and Carter approached.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s the bike, sir.’ Remus moved aside to let Carter look. He stepped up and looked in.

‘Jesus Christ,’ he murmured. ‘How did that happen?’

‘The padlock wasn’t locked.’

‘Didn’t you lock it last time?’
‘I haven’t been in here since last Tuesday,’ Remus said. ‘And to be honest…’ He took it out of the
door and tried to close it. It would not lock. ‘I think this was broken by force.’ Carter looked from
the lock to the bike.

‘Is this that madman again?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Remus said. ‘I think so.’

‘Well, that’s a bloody nuisance,’ Carter sighed. Remus almost said, at least it’s only a bike - it’s not
animals, like what he did to Mr Masters, but he stopped himself, remembering that Carter did not
know that that had been Greyback. ‘There’s not much to do about it,’ Carter said. ‘I’ll take the
deliveries back inside, and you go borrow a bike off Mr Ingram next door.’ He fell silent and
leaned down to look at the bicycle’s wheels. ‘It looks like it’s all done by hand, doesn’t it?’ he
murmured. ‘It’s like he’s grabbed a handful of these…’ He closed his fingers around some of the
spokes which had been torn away. ‘He must be damned strong.’

‘He is.’

‘I’ll call and tell them that the deliveries will be late,’ Carter said and turned back to the door. Then
he turned around and asked: ‘Why would he break the bike of all things?’

‘I couldn’t say,’ Remus said. ‘Let’s just hope it’s salvageable.’

‘Yes, let’s,’ Carter said. ‘Money is tight as it is.’

Despite what he had said, Remus thought the knew why Greyback had done what he had. He must
have seen him making deliveries or practicing riding the contraption. This, he imagined, had little
to do with Mr Carter. It was Remus who used that bicycle. What Remus could not tell was whether
this was just another petty angry gesture, or a threat: I will do the same to you.

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Remus wished he could blame the fatigue which was creeping up on him simply on the sense of
paranoia which was taking up so much of his waking time, but the moon was waxing. He observed
the symptoms wearily. His joints ached, his head felt light, his dreams became frightening. The full
moon was next Wednesday, only a week away now. He hated to think what might happen that
night, while he was incapacitated and locked in the military base. He wondered whether he could
warn Mrs Mason and the Carters and tell them to be careful, but every time he formulated that
thought into words, it sounded deranged. When rejecting that idea, he considered writing to the
Auror Office, and telling them that there might be a werewolf attack somewhere in Bexwold. But
no, if they received an anonymous letter to that effect, they would probably ignore it. He saw no
way out of it.

Knowing he would not be able to work the day of the full moon, Remus approached Mr Carter and
managed to receive his permission to have next Wednesday and Thursday off, on the condition that
he worked all of Saturday. Realising that he might use the fact that the shop’s bicycle came back
from being mended on Tuesday, he asked Mrs Carter if he could borrow it next Wednesday. That
way, he would not have to walk all the way to the military base, and he could get there much
quicker. As he had expected, she said yes.

Perhaps it was this kindly act that suddenly reminded him that he had not called home for over a
week. His mother’s voice in the receiver sounded flustered, asking why he had not called, if not
during the week then in the weekend.
‘I went to London to see some friends,’ he said.

‘Friends?’ Mrs Lupin repeated.

‘You don’t have to sound so surprised, mum. I do have friends.’

She had said ‘of course, of course’, and they moved onto other topics.

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On Friday, Remus woke feeling more nervous than he had for a long time. He went to work, oblivious of the feelings of the waxing moon in his bones or the worry of what might happen in Bexwold during his absence, but instead anticipating the evening. As he sold steaks and sausages, eggs and potatoes, even one of the pheasants hanging in the window, he wondered what the club they were going to would be like. He had never been to anything like that before. Sirius may have been enamoured with the Muggle world, but he had never brought him to a gay club (which, he reflected bitterly, did not mean that he might not have gone himself).

But he pushed away the thought of Sirius. He had no place in his mind today, of all days. He was going to go there with his friends, and he would enjoy himself. He might even (a thrill of excitement went through him) meet someone. Even to dance with someone, perhaps kiss - it seemed unattainable, but oh how he wanted it.

By the time he came home, it was still several hours until it was time to leave. Remus opened the wardrobe and the drawers, trying to find something appropriate to wear. He lost count of how many times he held a shirt up in front of himself to check how it would look, or tried something on and decided that it was wrong. He had no idea what people usually wore at clubs. His hunch was that a t-shirt would be the most common choice, but there was no way he would wear anything short-sleeved. Besides, he did not have the chest to pull off something very tight. Finally he settled for a green button-down shirt and left the collar open, enough to leave his jugular notch visible. When he looked at his watch, it was still not even seven o’clock.

Dinner was an uninspired affair. When he came back to his room, he could not settle down to read, as he had planned. After some time he put down his book and simply sat staring into thin air, acutely aware of the butterflies in his stomach. Finally, his watch showed twenty to nine. He got up with such ease that he was surprised he had ever sat and waited.

He made his way out of the house, quietly so Mrs Mason would not notice. Vaguely he wondered what she thought he did when he left the house. He walked to the place he always Disapparated from. This time, the short walk felt different. He was taking a new step - he did not know whether it had a goal, or the road itself was the point. Remus felt bold and nervous all at once. He realised that he was smiling, and that, blissfully, he had not looked over his shoulder. *I hope it’s not raining in London*, he thought, unusually vain about his hair. He Disapparated.

The London sky above him was cloudy, but the pavements were dry. Remus looked around, taking in his surroundings, then set off. His shoulder joint had started aching, and while he walked, he rolled it, hoping to ease it away. *I will take all the antelunar pain some other day, but let me enjoy tonight*, he thought and looked up at the sky. He could not see the moon, but he could feel it, turning the tops of the clouds silver.

At the café, he could make out a lone figure. He saw it waving, and he waved back, although he could not tell who it was. As he came closer, he saw the distinguished facial features which could only be Rayan’s.
‘Hello!’

‘Hi,’ Remus said, hurrying towards him. ‘Where are the others?’

‘Simon’s not coming,’ Rayan said. ‘He felt like a quiet night in, apparently. Dull bastard.’

‘And George?’

‘Oh, he’s running late as usual.’

‘I know the type,’ Remus said. ‘How are you?’

‘Good, thanks,’ Rayan said. ‘Can’t complain. How are things in the world of meat?’

‘They’re alright. The highlight of my week was that I got to sell an entire pheasant.’

‘Did it still have feathers?’ Rayan asked.

‘Of course it still had feathers. That’s half the fun.’

‘If that was the highlight, what on earth was the low point?’

‘Someone broke my bike. Or, well, it’s my employer’s bike, but I’m the one who rides it.’

Rayan made a grimace.

‘I suppose there are vandals everywhere.’

Remus smiled.

‘Poor Vandal - getting blamed for all this public destruction.’

Rayan laughed. Just then, there was the sound of quick footsteps, and George appeared.

‘Sorry - hi,’ he said. ‘Simon’s not here?’

‘No, he bailed,’ Rayan said.

‘Idiot,’ George said. ‘Come here, you.’ He kissed Rayan on the mouth, before catching sight of Remus. ‘Hallo, Remus. Would you like a kiss too?’

Remus looked at him, taken aback.

‘Alright,’ he then said. George smiled and pecked him on the lips. The contact was only momentary - after all, it was only a friendly kiss - but it moved something in Remus nevertheless. The knowledge that this was the first pair of lips to touch his for over four years resonated within him.

George himself seemed not to notice, but had instead turned to Rayan, who was still giggling.

‘What have I missed?’

‘Remus said something funny - late antiquity joke,’ Rayan said.

‘Well, then it was probably nowhere near as funny as you thought it was,’ George said and smiled at Remus. ‘Come on, girls.’
Rayan and George walked side by side, followed by Remus, half a step behind. Some ten minutes later, George said:

‘Oh, great. There’s a queue.’

Remus looked ahead as they stopped. They had joined a slow-moving queue, which led to the open doors head. Music was pouring out. It must be deafening inside, considering how well he could hear it here.

‘Remus, keep up!’ George called. Remus hurried to join them. As he moved forward, the rest of the queue came into view. The sight of all these clubbers, most in casual attire, some in drag, all chatting, laughing, calling out to each other, felt as profound as George’s kiss. The atmosphere, even in the queue, was unlike anything he had experienced. It was not simply that there was (as far as he could see) only men there. He had been at plenty of gatherings without women - he had lived in a boy’s dormitory for seven years, and there had been training-sessions and meetings with the Order with no witches present - but that was not like this. The feeling of that kind of homosocial group, as far as he had reflected on it, was either businesslike, as though real decisions and actions might happen here but not elsewhere, or masculinely raucous, the importance of physical power and heterosexual dominance hanging in the air. This was altogether different. This group was full of zest, reveling in uncommon freedom. The men here were intent on enjoyment, even indulgence, brought together for the specific purpose of pleasure in many guises.

The queue was moving, and step by step they drew closer to the door. Remus put his hands in his pockets and took a deep breath to ground himself. Beside him, Rayan was talking to a man who was standing just in front of them - by the sound of it an old acquaintance. Just behind him, George was chatting to a drag queen in foot-high heels.

Rayan’s conversation was cut short when his friend disappeared in through the doors. The bouncer, a man more corpulent than muscly, greeted Rayan.

‘Hiya, mate.’ Then he looked over at Remus and asked: ‘You been here before?’

Remus shook his head.

‘You know what kind of place this is?’

‘Phil, he’s with us,’ Rayan said. ‘He’s family.’

‘Oh. Sorry, Rayan. Just doing my job. In you go, then, mate.’

With the queue pushing at their backs, they stepped in.

The impressions hit him all at once. Music was streaming out of the speakers, loud enough to drown out anything but the suggestion of voices. The crowd was pressing around him, trapping him. Lights in colours upon colours shone and blinked from along the walls. To the left a blue - in the corner of his eye a red - facing him, blinking twice a second, a green. The light coloured his vision and threw the dancing crowd into jagged silhouettes. Their bodies twitched in the constant movement from darkness to light.

The green light blinked. Remus stopped in his tracks. His lashes seemed to collect the light. It imprinted itself on his retina. Even when it went out, twice a second, he saw the green flashes.

His heart’s pace was outstripping the flashing of the light. The crowd pushed harder against him, even without moving. His lungs had been stolen - his throat closed up - the roar in his ears and the green light of the killing curse in front of his eyes…
How did he pull himself from its glare? Even moments later, he could not remember. The next thing he knew, he was running against the flow of the queue - head bowed, arms flailing in front of him, as if swimming against the current. His flight was sightless and confused. He ran, heedless of shouts and complaints as he pushed his way through. All he knew was that he had to get away.

He burst into freedom. He was outside again, several metres from the entrance. His legs shaking - his entire body shaking - he stumbled to a nearby wall and first leaned, then crouched against it. He still heard the din from the club, drowned out only by the roar of his heart. Somewhere through the noise of his mind, he registered voices, almost lost in the babble of the crowd.

‘Are you okay? Hey, are you okay? Remus?’

‘Hey, come back!’

‘Fuck off! I just want to make sure he’s alright!’ Then in a whisper: ‘Remus?’

A hand was placed on his shoulder. It felt distant. His body was in revolt - lungs gasping, heart racing, stomach twisting - but at the same time, he was no longer part of it. Right now, the cheeks which were getting cold from the night air, but hot from the tears, were not his. He was simply a passenger, huddling deep inside, unable to manipulate the vessel he inhabited.

He did not know how long it lasted. The return journey back into his body, into reality where mind and flesh were one, or at least connected, was neither gradual nor sudden. Like with his flight, one moment Remus realised that he had already begun to see through his own eyes and feel with his own hands again. A little longer, and he felt the presence of another person, not touching him anymore, but simply crouching beside him, breathing, being.

‘Hey.’

Remus wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand, then his sleeve, and looked over at Rayan.

‘Hey,’ he answered, his throat raw. Rayan bit his lip, torn between pity and compassion, momentarily lost for words.

‘How are you feeling?’

Remus tried to think.

‘Cold,’ he answered finally.

‘Yeah,’ Rayan said, and sat down beside him. For a moment he sat still, copying Remus’ pose, then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of tissues. In a gesture which carried much sentiment he could not put into words, he handed them to Remus.

‘Thank you.’

When he had dried his eyes and blown his nose, and bit his lip to stop himself from crying again, Remus took a deep breath.

‘Alright,’ he said, mostly to himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of Rayan watching him.

‘Do you want to go somewhere?’ he asked after a while. ‘Do you want some tea? Or beer?’

Remus weighed between the two options, fully aware that tea was the more reasonable.
‘I’d love a beer.’

‘Okay, then.’ Rayan got to his feet. ‘Do you need a hand?’

‘No, I’m fine.’ Remus pushed himself up against the wall. Suddenly aware of how cold it was, he put his hands in his pockets. Slowly, the two of them started walking. They were quiet for some time. When they turned the corner into a new street, Rayan cleared his throat.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

‘Yeah,’ Remus murmured. It was better to agree, and let him think whatever he wanted to think. He neither could nor wanted to explain what had set him off.

‘The first time I went in there, I almost did the same thing,’ Rayan said, with forced lightness. Remus did not know how to answer, certain from his tone that he had not done the same thing at all. After a while, he said:

‘Crowds make me nervous. That’s all.’ Then, realising what had happened, he stopped and turned to face Rayan. ‘I’m sorry I ruined your night out.’

‘Nah, you didn’t.’ He waved his hand dismissively.

‘George was so keen on having you there…’

‘George’ll be fine,’ Rayan said. ‘He doesn’t need looking after.’ He shrugged. ‘Besides, I quite like a quiet pub outing.’ Then he grinned and said: ‘Although not like that.’

Remus laughed, surprised that something so silly could be funny. The laughter made him feel like he was about to start crying again, so he stopped and swallowed hard.

‘Let’s go,’ he said. ‘It’s bloody cold.’

‘Amen to that.’

They walked a short way, then Rayan stopped and turned into a pub. The place was crowded, but after the club, it felt positively calm.

‘You grab a table, I’ll get the drinks,’ Rayan said. Remus found a small table against a wall, filled with pint glasses but unoccupied. He sat down, glad to be off his feet. Some sensible part of his head pointed out that he should go home and sleep. The previous panic had been replaced by a feeling of shakiness, but one he was in control of. Sleep would do him good, he knew, but he did not savour the idea of being on his own. Right now he wanted company and conversation, not a turned-off bedside lamp and the noises of a half-empty house.

Rayan came bustling through the crowd, drops of beer spilling down his hands for all his attempts to keep the glasses steady.

‘Here we go.’ He put down the glasses and sat down. ‘Cheers.’

‘Cheers.’ They clinked their glasses together and drank. Remus felt a calm fall over him. He watched as Rayan put his pint down and reached into his pocket.

‘Do you smoke?’

‘No,’ Remus said. ‘I used to, but I stopped.’
Rayan pulled out a cigarette packet and opened it.

‘Sometimes I think of giving it up, but I don’t smoke that much, so… no reason to deprive myself of some pleasure, right?’

‘I didn’t realise you were a smoker.’

‘I tend not to smoke at the café,’ he explained, and paused to light his cigarette. ‘Siobhan hates it, and I don’t see any reason to antagonise her.’ He looked at him and asked: ‘So, how come you gave it up?’

Remus sipped his beer.

‘It wasn’t really planned,’ he admitted. He wavered, wondering how much to say. ‘I was in hospital for a bit, and my parents weren’t likely to buy me cigarettes, so I just fell out of the habit.’

Rayan made a ‘hm’ sound and nodded.

‘Not a bad way to stop, I suppose. It’s effective, at least.’ He hesitated, then asked: ‘How come you were in hospital?’

‘Oh, I had an accident,’ Remus said, trying to sound casual. He glanced down at Rayan’s cigarette packet. ‘Actually, can I have one?’

Rayan raised his eyebrows and offered him the packet.

‘Sure you want to ruin all that good work?’

‘Oh come on,’ Remus said and took a cigarette. ‘It’s just one cigarette.’ He accepted Rayan’s lighter and lit it. The thought that it would be much better to deal with his frazzled nerves some other way disappeared. The nicotine was working on him already. They smoked and drank in silence.

‘How are you finding your first sinful cigarette?’ Rayan asked.

‘It’s rather wonderful, actually.’

‘I often get accused of smoking poncey cigarettes,’ he said. ‘Not enough tar for some people.’

Remus nodded in understanding.

‘I used to date someone who smoked Players. They were disgusting.’

Rayan made a face.

‘Ugh, I hate those.’ He stubbed out his cigarette. ‘What did you smoke?’

‘Sterling. Admittedly, I bummed rather a lot of my cigarettes from my boyfriend.’

Rayan shrugged theatrically.

‘That’s what they’re for.’

Remus smiled at his charade, and stubbed out his own cigarette. Rayan continued:

‘Smoking is not something that usually makes me envious, but my friend Ellis - well, ex-turned-
friend - somehow manages to make it look so decadent, it’s almost pornographic, but in a sort of Art Deco way. He’s got a cigarette holder and everything.’

‘That does add a bit of glamour.’

They lapsed into silence. Remus declined the offer of another cigarette, and drank his beer instead. When the level of their beer glasses had sunk enough to warrant it, he braved the crowd around the bar and bought the next round - a pint for Rayan and a half for himself. He felt he should keep his head, to make sure he did not uncharacteristically start recounting embarrassing dormitory stories. When he came back, they still did not speak. Their silence was of a companionable kind, something he could not remember last time he experienced. With his parents, silences were always tense things, riddled with meaning and messages. In the butcher’s shop, it happened often, but it often wavered between heavy and uncertain. He realised how much he had missed, sitting in silence with a friend.

Nevertheless, it was he who was the first to speak.

‘Rayan, do you think I come across as naive?’

‘I suppose you don’t mean in general,’ Rayan said. Remus nodded. ‘You mean when it comes to gay stuff?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

Rayan gave a snort, that sounded like half a laugh.

‘No, I wouldn’t say so. I mean, it’s obvious that you’re…’ He trailed off. Remus prompted him with a hand gesture. ‘Sorry, I’m trying to avoid saying “inexperienced”, because that sounds like it’s about sex.’

‘Do I seem inexperienced about sex?’ Remus asked, a little alarmed now. Rayan watched him with narrow eyes, as if trying to measure him up.

‘My impression - which I guess could be wrong, I haven’t known you for that long - is: you’re not a virgin. But you haven’t lived as much as some. Perhaps not as much as you’d like either.’ He took a gulp of beer. ‘Am I close?’

‘It’s pretty spot on, actually,’ Remus said. Rayan smiled.

‘Good to know I’m keeping up my eye for detail.’ Then: ‘What’s your impression of me?’

Remus laughed, feeling a little embarrassed.

‘I don’t know…’

‘Go on. Guess. Promise I won’t get offended.’

Remus looked at him, trying to make any of his vague perceptions or hunches into actual observations.

‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘You’re confident. I like that. I’m a little jealous, actually.’

Rayan smiled sympathetically.

‘Look, I know we can come over a little strong,’ he said. ‘George in a crowd is like a bloody doodlebug, and Simon’s got his head up his own arse. And I’ve been told I’m a terrible flirt. Also,
I talk too much, apparently. Anyway, my point is… God, what was my point?” He frowned, cartoon-confused. Remus laughed. ‘Oh, yes. People like Simon are going to make you feel bloody unwelcome. But you’re not. It’s not like I was born knowing all the gay hang-outs of London. You’ve never been to a gay club before - so what? You found the café a month ago - but you live two hours away and you’ve come up every weekend since, for goodness’ sake. It’s not like you’re not dedicated. All these things take time to learn, and not everyone can start learning at the same time, for various reasons - their own, their family’s. It’s no one’s business.’

‘Thank you,’ Remus said. ‘That is actually really nice to hear.’

Rayan smiled.

‘Good.’ Then he pointed at Remus’ empty glass and asked: ‘Do you want another one?’

‘No, thanks. I’m alright.’

‘Okay.’ Rayan raised his pint glass and toasted him casually. When he had drunk and put it down, he put his elbows on the table and shifted in his seat. ‘So, how long have you lived in Suffolk?’

‘Not long. Just over a month,’ Remus said. ‘I’ve been living all over the country the past few years. Some of it with my parents.’ This was in the tone of an admission. He shrugged, aware it sounded a little pathetic. ‘It’s a long story.’

Rayan spread his hands, as if to say ‘there are always reasons’.

‘Do your parents know you’re gay?’ he asked.

‘Yes. They’ve known for years.’

‘Did they find out, or…?’

‘No, I told them. I’d left school. I had a boyfriend. I didn’t want them to figure it out on their own. It felt better to be preemptive.’

‘How did they take it?’

‘Remarkably well,’ Remus said. ‘They’re really nice about it, most of the time.’ He paused, unsure whether to talk about this. ‘Recently, I think they’ve been less fine with it than before.’

‘Because of the scaremongering, you mean?’

Remus nodded.

‘They’re good at getting worked up, my parents.’

‘Only child?’

‘Yes. Is it that obvious?’

Rayan grinned.

‘I know the type. Not one myself, though. I’ve got a sister.’

‘Are you close?’

‘We were, back when we were kids. Now… I’m doing my thing, she’s doing hers, you know?’
‘I can guess,’ Remus said. ‘So, what about you? Have you come out to your family?’

‘Not to my parents, no,’ Rayan said. ‘I know they’d take it badly. It’s just easier to let them think whatever they’re thinking, and keep some kind of truce.’

‘Are they religious?’ Remus asked, simultaneously wondering whether that was a presumptuous thing to think.

‘Nah, completely secularised. Just prejudiced. They’re both red-hot socialists, my parents. Or were, at least. I think my mum’s getting a bit soft in her old age. Still, I don’t think that they’re going to give up on it and start being all pious. I suppose that if you’ve skipped the country because of your beliefs, you want to keep them.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They were very keen on Mosaddegh. They happened to be at a conference here in Britain in ’53, so when the coup happened… well. They managed to get jobs and stayed here. I don’t know that much about it, really. They don’t talk about it much. Can’t have been easy. They’re pretty much completely naturalised now.’

He sounded rather casual about it, as if all this was his parents’ pain, not his.

‘What do they do?’

‘My dad’s a lecturer in political thought, and my mum writes for the New Statesman. Gives you a sense of what kind of people they are,’ Rayan said.

‘But despite all the socialism, they wouldn’t be okay with you being gay?’

‘God, no. Better keep them in the dark. My sister knows, though. She overheard me on the phone once, talking to Ellis, and made me tell her what was going on. She’s not thrilled about it, but it could be worse. She still talks to me, you know. She still likes me.’

‘Always something,’ Remus said, for want of anything else.

‘I mean, I don’t outright lie to my parents,’ Rayan continued. ‘I’m just vague. From what I’ve gathered, George’s parents think that Siobhan’s his girlfriend, and he lets them think that. I guess they’ve never met Siobhan, or they’re bound to realise she’s not. Actually, it makes me wonder whether they’ve ever met George. I can’t see him ever passing for straight.’

Remus laughed.

‘No, I see what you mean.’

Rayan smiled back. Just then, the bell behind the bar was rung.

‘Gosh, is it last orders already?’

Remus looked at his watch.

‘Quarter to eleven.’

‘So, what do you think?’ Rayan asked. ‘Another?’

‘I think we should call it a night,’ Remus said. ‘Sorry.’
‘Don’t apologise,’ Rayan said, emptied his glass and stood up. Remus followed suit.

Outdoors, it felt even colder than it had before. Remus rubbed his arms, trying to work some blood into them.

‘You alright?’ Rayan asked.

‘Yeah. Just cold,’ he answered. ‘I’m dreading getting back.’ However quick Apparition was, it was unpleasant, and he would have to find somewhere safe to do it.

‘Which station is your train from?’

‘Liverpool Street.’

‘That’s miles away,’ Rayan said.

‘I suppose there’s a bus.’

‘You walked to meet us?’

‘Yes.’

Rayan blew on his hands to warm them.

‘Do you think it’s going to snow?’

They both looked up at the night sky. It was almost clear now.

‘No, don’t think so,’ said Remus, down, looking down. ‘But there’ll be frost.’

Rayan still had his head thrown back.

‘Look at the moon,’ he said. ‘It’s full.’

‘Waxing gibbous,’ Remus said, his eyes on the paving stones. Rayan looked at him now.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that it’s three-quarters full. It’s not full for another few days.’

Rayan looked at him in a new way.

‘That’s a strange thing to know,’ he said, smiling. Despite what he said, it was obvious that he was impressed.

‘I’m pretty good at crosswords,’ Remus said. He was rubbing his hands together now.

‘There must be a bus stop here somewhere…’ Rayan said, returning half-heartedly to the question of transport.

‘There probably is, but I can never get my head around the London bus system.’

‘And night buses…’ Rayan said and shook his head. He seemed to think something over, and then said: ‘I live pretty close. About twenty minutes. Want to crash on my couch?’

‘That’d be nice, actually,’ Remus said, surprising himself. ‘If it’s not an inconvenience…’
'Of course it isn’t,’ he said and smiled. ‘Besides, you look like you need to thaw before doing anything else.’

‘Some tea wouldn’t go amiss now.’

‘Well then.’

They started walking. Rayan was looking up at the sky again.

‘Isn’t it mind-boggling, that people have walked on it?’

‘Sorry, on what?’ Remus said.

‘The moon.’

‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

In reality, it terrified him. He had been nine years old, and had been bitten almost four years earlier. His mother had gone over to the neighbours to watch the moon landing, while his father had stayed home with him. They did not tell him, but he knew from overhearing them that his parents wondered how it would affect him. Would the magical quality of the moon change if humans had set foot on it? As it turned out, it did not - the transformation a week later had been no worse or better than the previous one.

‘How old were you at the moon landing?’ Rayan asked.

‘Nine. What about you?’

‘I’d just had my tenth birthday. Eighteenth of July - three days before. Did you watch it?’

Remus shook his head.

‘Wasn’t it in the middle of the night?’

‘Yeah, it was at three a.m. or something. My parents let me stay up. The waiting was the best bit. The actual thing was a bit grainy and boring, really, but… pictures from the surface of the moon. That’s pretty amazing.’ He looked over at Remus, searchingly. ‘You don’t seem very excited about it.’

‘I just don’t like thinking about it,’ he said. ‘It makes my skin crawl.’

‘Space-travel and stuff, you mean?’

‘Yeah.’ It felt better to agree. Explaining his particular aversion was not possible, and it was true that the idea of people in space unsettled him. It was simply a case of perspective, he knew. He had been trained to see the night-sky as a two-dimensional map over which bodies moved. There was a natural order to things - humans walked the earth, and the stars and planets wandered the sky. The heavens should not be violated by being pushed through by mortals. Not once in seven years of astronomy lessons had the question of manmade satellites or astronauts come up. If there were scholars considering the magical applications of these things, they were certainly not published in the Transactions of the Astronomical Society. Even Remus’ father, an openminded man most of the time, had been perplexed, almost a little offended, when Remus had asked whether he should not add the non-Galilean moons to his model of Jupiter.

‘I can’t help it,’ Rayan said. ‘I’m a bit of a space nut. Too much Star Trek as a kid.’
‘I haven’t seen it.’

Rayan stared at him for a moment, then laughed.

‘Remus, you really did live under a rock!’

‘I told you.’

‘Well, you’re missing out. There should be another film out at some point. I loved the last one, even if no one else did. It’s all spaceships and explosions, but when it comes down to it, it’s just incredibly gay.’

‘Really?’ Remus said, laughing now. ‘I assumed it would be very macho.’

‘Not really. There’s not a single love-interest in the films, and in the TV series they never stick around. It’s all about making supreme sacrifices for the man you love. Lots of male bonding.’

‘It sounds pretty good.’

‘The spaceships and explosions aren’t bad either,’ Rayan said.

They had come to a halt as he dug for his keys. He unlocked the door and led the way up the stairwell. Finally they reached the door to his apartment.

‘Here we are,’ he said and unlocked it. ‘Come in.’

Remus stepped in and took his jacket and scarf off.

‘Tea, right?’

‘That’d be great, thanks,’ Remus said. ‘Can I use your loo?’

‘Sure. Just through there.’

When Remus stepped out into the hallway again, he could hear the sound of the kettle boiling. He moved towards the sound slowly, looking around. The flat was small and admittedly a little messy, but it felt welcoming. Paperback novels lay in piles on the tables. The walls were decorated with movie-posters and photographs, which he assumed were Rayan’s own.

When he came into the kitchen, Rayan was just pouring the water into the mugs.

‘It’s a nice place, this,’ Remus said.

‘Thanks. Milk?’

‘Yes, please.’

Rayan took the milk out of the fridge and sniffed it.

‘Should still be alright.’ He added the milk and handed over the mug. Remus poked the teabag with the spoon and sipped the tea.

‘This is lovely. Thanks.’

They stood opposite each other in the kitchen, clasping their mugs in cold hands. Some photographs on the kitchen table caught Remus’ eye.
‘Are those yours?’

‘Yeah. They’re a year or two old, but…’

‘May I…?’

‘Sure.’

Putting his tea down, Remus picked up the photos. The first was of a middle-aged woman, with dark brows and a stern mouth. Behind her back was a gilded mirror. In the glass, the back of her coiffured hair and the out-of-focus reflection of the camera could be seen. The second featured the same woman at a desk. Then, a man in his fifties, with a Roman nose and salt-and-pepper hair. Finally, a young woman, black hair cascading over her shoulders, gaze fixed on the lens.

‘Is this your family?’

‘Yes.’ Rayan moved over. ‘That’s my mum. Dad… and that’s my sister, Zahra.’

Remus looked back at the photo of the young woman. The resemblance with Rayan was striking.

‘Are you twins?’

He shook his head.

‘No, she’s three years older than me. We get asked that a lot, though.’

Remus looked at them again.

‘They’re wonderful.’

‘Thanks. Wait a minute…’

Rayan left the kitchen, and came back a few moments later, a big camera in his hands. He was already turning the tiny wheels on it. Remus put down the photographs, feeling apprehensive.

‘Stand over here.’ Rayan put his hand on Remus’ arm and moved him.

‘I don’t think…’

‘Look at me.’ He raised the camera. There were three rapid clicks. Remus both wanted to protest and smile. He was not sure when he had last had his photo taken. It was over as quickly as it had begun. Rayan put the camera down on the kitchen table and picked up his tea again. Remus did the same and sipped it. He was warming up already.

After a few minutes’ silence, Rayan said:

‘Shall we go sit down properly?’

‘Alright.’

They took their mugs and went the short way to the living-room. The sofa was not very wide, but, when they sat down on it, Remus reflected that it was fairly soft, and would be comfortable to sleep on.

‘This looks good,’ he said.
‘Cool,’ Rayan said as he undid his shoelaces. He took his socks off with his toes and pushed them aside. Remus had a hunch that there was probably several orphaned socks under the sofa. ‘I’ve got a spare duvet somewhere, and you can have a pillow. I’ve got loads.’

‘That would be nice,’ Remus said and sipped his tea. Rayan put his cup on the table. Remus moved a stack of playing cards a little to the side to make space for his own mug. Just as he leaned back again, Rayan put his hand on his shoulder. Remus turned to face him. *How did he end up so close?* he thought.

A moment later, Rayan kissed him.

They lips slipped against each other. Remus kissed back, caught up in the feeling. He had forgotten what this was like - not a peck, but a kiss…

He pushed him away gently.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked. Rayan opened his mouth, looked like he was about to give a stupid answer and changed his mind. Instead he said:

‘I’m sorry, I… just really felt like kissing you.’

Remus took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. It had been a good kiss - very good indeed - but he dreaded the implications.

‘Rayan, I… What was that about?’

‘What do you mean, “about”?’ Rayan asked, looking honestly perplexed. ‘You’re cute, and I felt like kissing you. You were looking so pensive and I couldn’t resist - I should have asked you first, sorry…’

Remus almost missed half of what he said.

‘You think I’m cute?’ The word sounded ludicrous. Rayan smiled.

‘Sure. In a sort of thin, bookish way. Oh, that sounded mean, but I meant it in a nice way. It’s a good thing.’

Remus pulled himself up and took a deep breath.

‘Alright. The thing is - I don’t want a relationship right now. I’m… getting over a bad breakup.’

‘Okay.’ Rayan shrugged, fairly unconcerned. ‘I mean, we don’t have to date or anything. That wasn’t necessarily what I meant. We’re friends, and I’m into you, and if you’re into me… What I mean is, we could still fuck.’

Remus was silenced for a moment, mildly shocked both by the casual use of that word and the sentiment. But if friends could kiss each other on the mouth as a greeting, why could they not have sex?

‘I suppose that’s true,’ he said finally.

‘So… what do you think?’

Remus hesitated. What if it ruined it? Friendship was such a fragile thing. Maybe sex, even with the full understanding that this was something they did as friends, not lovers, would morph their relationship. These assurances that were given in order to stop things from becoming awkward
might instead trap them in limbo.

But right now, disregarding those fears of the future, he liked the idea. He had reflected before that Rayan was quite good-looking. Now, his casual reflection on his looks turned into undeniable physical attraction. The kiss still burned on his lips. The tender skin yearned. With a sudden sense of liberation, Remus gave into it. His hand planted itself on Rayan’s knee. He leaned in. Rayan’s mouth met his half-way.

They kissed with ease. Remus had somehow thought he would have forgotten how it was done, and that he would be like an un kissed teenager who banged teeth together and did not know what to do with his tongue. He was glad he was wrong. The kisses were gentle at first as their mouths grew steadily used to each other. Excitement started taking hold. Remus put his hand behind Rayan’s head, holding him closer. Rayan put his arms around him. They lost their balance and, for a moment, they were a tangle of limbs. Then they settled, Remus on his back and Rayan on top of him. Their kisses grew hurried and sloppy. Remus’ hands ran down Rayan’s back, resting there for a moment, then moved to his arse. Rayan arched into his hands and kissed his neck. Remus caught his mouth again, before Rayan ducked down and kissed his chest through his shirt. He started untucking it - Remus put a hand on his.

‘Rayan…’

‘Do you want to move to an actual bed?’ he asked breathlessly. Remus nodded. He took the hand Rayan offered him and was pulled from the couch. Once in the bedroom, Rayan put his arms around Remus’ waist.

‘What were you about to say?’

Remus swallowed.

‘Could we turn the lights off?’

Rayan’s hands snaked under Remus’ shirt as he leaned in and kissed his neck.

‘Why?’ he whispered. Remus swallowed again, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, aware that any moment now, Rayan would come upon the ridge of an old scratch. He did not know how he would react. Better to prepare him somehow.

‘I… have some scars. I don’t really like showing them.’

Rayan let go of him, looked at him for a moment and then nodded.

‘Okay.’ He moved around the room, adjusting the lighting. Remus stayed where he was. He felt cold, as if he was already naked, so he wrapped his arms around himself. Rayan turned the ceiling-light off and lit a lamp on one of the shelves, so that the room was bathed in half-light.

‘Is this alright?’ he asked. ‘I thought… so we see what we’re doing.’

Remus nodded. The cold, which may have been real or simply nerves, made him shiver.

‘Hey, are you alright?’ Rayan asked.

‘Yeah. Just… it’s nothing. It’s alright.’

Rayan put his hands on his shoulders and rubbed them. He must have sensed his discomfort, and to Remus’ relief, he seemed to understand it.
‘Let’s… get back into the mood.’ He kissed him lightly, just lips against lips. Remus kissed him back, easing into the situation again. Soon Rayan’s hands wandered, becoming more daring. Remus’ hands moved too, mirroring and diverging from Rayan’s. The touches were second only to the marvel he felt. He was touching another human being - another human was touching him. Hands, lips, teeth - the soaring feeling that this was something he thought he would never experience again, and he had been wrong. Here he was, in someone’s embrace. Here was a new body to learn. That realisation was more arousing than any touch.

They broke apart for a moment, so that Rayan could pull his shirt over his head. Remus gasped audibly at the sight of his bare chest. He could not stop himself from reaching out and touching it. Rayan started playing with the buttons on Remus’ shirt, his free hand snaking around his waist and cupping his arse.

‘What are you into?’ he said softly. Remus opened his mouth and closed it a few times, feeling embarrassed. Rayan laughed. ‘You’re blushing,’ he said and touched his face. ‘Come on, don’t be shy.’

‘Sorry, I’m not used to…’

‘Saying what you want?’ Rayan supplied.

‘Well, yes. Talking about sex.’

‘No time like the present to learn.’

Remus grounded himself, summoning words far more obscene than he usually used.

‘I like being fucked.’

Rayan grinned.

‘We can arrange that.’

Without breaking eye-contact, he unbuttoned Remus’ shirt, from the top down. Remus swallowed - his self-control was stretched to its limits. Rayan undid the last button and pushed the shirt off his shoulders. He had his tongue between his teeth, as if concentrating. They stood frozen, until Remus thought that if he was not touched now, he was going to burst. Incensed, he grabbed Rayan’s arms and kissed him hard. Rayan, taken by surprise, gasped against his mouth. Remus pushed him towards the bed. He let himself fall back onto it, grinning at this sudden excitement. Remus kicked off his shoes, climbed onto the bed and straddled him. They kissed, their bodies rubbing against each other through their clothes. With fumbling hands, Rayan undid Remus’ fly and touched him. He closed his eyes, the sensation caught between pleasure and tension. He could not bear more - or, no, he could not bear not to have more. He rolled off Rayan and started taking off his trousers. Rayan undid his own trousers, and pulled off Remus’ before discarding his own. Their underwear followed.

They kissed briefly. Rayan leaned over Remus to the bedside table and opened a drawer. He rummaged through it, precariously balanced on one arm, before he found a condom and a tube of cream. He sat back on his heels and looked at Remus, half-lying by the head of the bed, propped up on his elbows.

‘Okay?’

Remus nodded, not trusting himself to speak.
The preparations were excruciating in their slowness. Rayan’s fingers made him gasp. At first, he simply touched and stroked, almost leisurely. Then he pushed against the muscle. The breath caught in Remus’ throat. Rayan paused, catching his eye.

‘Go on,’ Remus whispered, wishing he could rush him, but it had been a long time since last with someone else’s fingers. He forced himself not to bite his lip, and instead tried to relax. Slowly, pleasure overtook discomfort.

‘You ready?’ Rayan asked.

‘Yes,’ Remus said. Rayan pulled out his fingers. ‘Give me that pillow…’

He placed it under his hips as Rayan put the condom on. They looked at each other, preliminaries over. Remus reached out his foot and stroked Rayan’s shoulder with it.

‘Come on,’ he breathed. Rayan took hold of his legs and moved forward. He pushed in. They gasped at the contact. Remus had to remind himself - *it is happening. It’s real.* Then he stopped thinking altogether, but simply pushed against Rayan in a frantic rhythm.

It did not last long. Their movements grew ever more desperate, until there were no pauses. The strokes became disjointed and uncontrolled. The climax slammed into Remus, making him call out. Then Rayan gasped and went stock-still, head hanging and shoulders shaking. Slowly, he started moving again, looking rather like he had been stunned. He pulled out and got off the bed. Remus stretched his legs and tried to catch his breath.

‘There are tissues on the bedside table,’ Rayan said and threw the condom in the bin.

‘Cheers.’ Remus pushed himself up, grabbed a few and cleaned himself up. Then he fell back again, exhausted. He heard Rayan walk around the bed, and felt him pull the covers from under him. When he opened his eyes and rolled over onto his side, Rayan was getting into bed, settling the covers over them both.

‘Needless to say, I’m not expecting you to sleep on the couch,’ he said.

‘Good.’

Rayan looked at him intently for a moment, considering something.

‘Want to cuddle?’

Remus grinned at him.

‘Yes.’

Rayan reached out an arm towards him, and Remus shifted closer, putting his head on his shoulder.

‘Rayan?’ he murmured, his eyes closing now.

‘Mm?’

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure. Literally.’

Remus smiled at the poor joke and shifted closer. He was sinking into the tiredness which always came with the aftermath of sex. He did not fight it, but let it claim him. His last sensation before
falling asleep was Rayan running his hand over the ridges on his arm.
Remus dreamt he was howling, clawing at the walls. They were pushing against him, enclosing him like a cocoon. Little by little, he came to realise that they were not walls. It was skin. He was the wolf, and the rest was just a shell.

He woke, pulled back into his own body, his skin turned the right way again. In the first few moments of waking, he did not know where he was. The light and the smells were wrong for his room, and this was not his bed… Then he remembered. He opened his eyes and saw Rayan lying beside him, still fast asleep. Remus smiled to himself, still mildly surprised that it had really happened. Then he got out of bed, intent on finding the bathroom.

When he came back, still stark naked, Rayan was stirring. As Remus got back into bed, he opened his eyes and peered at him through his eyelashes.

‘Hi,’ he murmured.

‘Good morning,’ Remus said and lay down, facing him.

‘Fancy seeing you here,’ Rayan murmured.

‘Are you about to ask me if I come here often?’ Remus grinned.

‘Mm, only if you want me to.’

They lay for a while, face to face and eye to eye. Then Rayan put his hand on Remus’ arm and said:

‘Breakfast?’

‘Oh, yes please.’

Rayan grunted and got out of bed, finding a dressing-gown.

‘Wait a tic, I’ll get you a towel. Then you can shower and I can make breakfast.’

‘Wonderful.’

‘Is toast alright?’

‘Yes, fine.’

A quarter of an hour later, they were sitting in the small kitchen, having tea and eating toast. Remus was slightly uncomfortable in yesterday’s clothes, but he was glad to be dressed again.

‘So, what are your plans for the rest of the weekend?’ Rayan asked.

‘I have no idea,’ Remus admitted. ‘It’s nice not to have plans. What about you?’

‘Not sure yet. I’m going to go visit Ellis tomorrow. But today? I’ll take it as it comes.’

‘That sounds nice.’

They became quiet. First it was of a friendly kind, but then Rayan’s silence seemed to change.
Even the way he chewed his toast and stared into the table spoke of unease.

After some time, he swallowed and, still staring down into the table, said:

‘My sister used to cut herself.’

Remus put his mug down.

‘She got better,’ Rayan continued. ‘You know, she saw a therapist and things. Sorted out her issues. She’s fine now.’ Only after a second or two of silence did he look up at Remus.

‘I was attacked by a dog,’ Remus said, aware how terse and controlled his voice sounded.

Rayan pointed to the well-aligned scars on his lower arm, separate from the scratches and bites.

‘Those aren’t made by a dog.’

Remus pulled down his sleeve.

‘Look, I don’t know what you’re imagining…’ He faltered. ‘This is none of your business.’

Rayan sighed.

‘Okay, you’re right,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

They were quiet for a moment. Then Rayan said:

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ Remus said and forced a smile. ‘But I really don’t want to talk about this.’

‘Right. Fine. That’s okay.’

They fell silent again. Remus did not want to rush out and give the impression that he was offended, but he wanted to be gone. Rayan had not said those things to be rude, but because he cared. He wished he could feel grateful, but instead he only felt scared and exposed. He hated his scars, and he hated how much he had hated himself. Now he half-regretted yesterday. How could he have been so stupid to take his clothes off and let someone see those marks?

He shook himself. There was no reason to be so drastic. Nevertheless, he disliked the thought of him seeing his scars, studying each one, identifying their various origins.

When he felt it was acceptable to do so, he looked at his watch.

‘I should go,’ he said and made an apologetic grimace.

‘Oh. Of course,’ Rayan said. ‘There’s a bus stop about fifty yards to the right. One of the buses goes to Holborn, and you should be able to get to Liverpool Street from there pretty easily.’

‘Thank you.’

Rayan followed Remus into the hall, and watched how he put on his jacket.

‘This has been fun,’ Remus said, facing him. Rayan smiled.

‘It has. I’ll see you… next weekend?’
Remus nodded and smiled.

‘Yes.’ They hesitated for a moment, then kissed - less than the kiss of lovers, but more than a friendly peck.

‘See you later,’ Remus said. They still looked at each other as he opened the door. Once he had stepped over the threshold, he turned away and let the door close after him without looking. He walked a few blocks, knowing that there was a possibility that Rayan was looking for him in a window. After a few minutes, he ducked into a porch and Disapparated.

When he was thrown back out of the void, he was in the country-lane running from the bus-stop to Mrs Mason’s house. The sun peeked between clouds, as if it had grown shy during its absence. Remus stood for a moment, enjoying the light. Now, with some distance between him and that awkward conversation, he felt happy. He was not the person he had been yesterday. He had been renewed. The world around him had been remade, to be exactly the same except for that one encounter, which changed so much. It was not simply about sexual satisfaction, and the sated need for human contact. He had proved to himself that he was no longer fixated on Sirius Black. He had finally cut himself loose.

Remus walked homewards, humming to himself. Yesterday could have gone so badly, but in the end it hadn’t. As for Rayan’s comments, it didn’t (or shouldn’t) matter if he made guesses about Remus’ scars. Surely it would be strange if he did not reflect on them. What mattered was that he seemed to genuinely like him, and that they had enjoyed each other’s company.

He was in view of the house now. Mrs Mason was standing in the garden, her tall figure hunched at the shoulders, one hand worrying her lip.

‘Mrs Mason!’ he called. His landlady jumped, her hand going to her heart. Then, spotting him, she sighed with relief.

‘Oh, Mr Lupin,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry.’ She took a deep breath and said. ‘I was wondering where you’d got to…’

‘I’ve been in London,’ he explained and let himself in through the gate. As he approached Mrs Mason, he saw how serious she looked. He had never seen her face this pained before. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘I’m just a little startled,’ she said. ‘That was on the front-step.’ She pointed at something on the side of steps. ‘It must have been - it got pushed off when I opened the door. I was just trying to figure out what to do with it…’

Remus stepped closer. The smell of blood wafted towards him.

The thing in the empty flower-bed looked first like a pile of red-spattered feathers. Then he started picking out details - a wing, a leg, the curve of a stomach. He crouched at it and reached for it.

‘Don’t touch it - it might carry diseases,’ Mrs Mason said anxiously. Remus did not heed her, but grabbed the wing and pulled it away. The front of the tawny owl was covered in blood. Her throat gaped. Mixed in with the smell of blood was the stink of saliva. When he leaned in, he could see teeth-marks in the exposed flesh.

A lump lodged in Remus’ throat. He remembered his father bringing home his new owl during the summer before Remus’ first year; how she would appear twice a week in the flock of birds erupting into the Great Hall during breakfast; how he had sent letters to his friends over the
holidays with her.

He let go of her wing and turned her around a little. The leg which had been lodged under her body came into view. Still tied to it was a letter, stained with her blood.

Remus turned to Mrs Mason.

‘Do you have a shovel?’

She nodded.

‘Fetch it, and I’ll bury it in the woods,’ he said, hating calling Agrippina ‘it’.

‘Yes. That’s a good idea,’ she said. ‘It didn’t feel right to put it in with the rubbish…’ Mrs Mason left, sighing to herself. When she had turned the corner, Remus untied the letter from the owl’s leg. The name on the envelope was smudged by blood, but his father’s handwriting was still recognisable. Hearing Mrs Mason coming back, he slipped the letter in his pocket.

‘Here you go,’ she said miserably and handed over the shovel. Then she looked down at Agrippina and asked: ‘What do you think killed it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Whatever it was must have done it right here,’ she said, ‘or else carried it here. There’s blood on the door…’

Remus looked at where she pointed. There was a dark stain there, as if the bleeding creature had been pushed against the paintwork. He felt sick. Promptly, he looked away and set about pushing the dead owl onto the blade.

With the bird precariously balanced on the shovel, he walked down the lane and in among the trees. He stopped after a few minutes. He tipped Agrippina off the head, selected a spot under a tree and started digging. After only a few cuts with the spade, his shoulders ached.

‘What the hell am I doing?’ he said to himself, put aside the spade and took out his wand. He blasted a hole in the ground, deep enough to deter scavengers. Carefully, he picked up Agrippina and placed her in the hole. He wondered whether he should say something. ‘I’m sorry.’ It was all he could think to say.

He drew his wand again and waved it. The loose soil moved and filled in the hole. Remus sat down beside it. At first he simply watched the small mound that had formed. After a while, he pulled out the letter Agrippina had died delivering. He took his time reading it. On occasion he had to pause to interpret the writing where the blood had seeped through the envelope. It was not a remarkable letter, simply an update on the things that his father had been doing and thinking and reading. He sounded happy enough, if still a little uncertain about Remus living among Muggles. Remus smiled sadly at the thought of what he might say if he knew what his son had gotten up to last night.

He got to his feet again, put the letter in his pocket and picked up the shovel. As briskly as he could, he made his way towards the village. It felt like his wish yesterday had come true - the full moon had started to remind him of its approach. He wished he could go home and change his clothes, perhaps even have a bath, but first there was one thing he had to do.

Remus hurried to the telephone box, leaving the shovel outside. Finding the right coins, he dialled the number and waited. The signals passed one by one.
‘Come on,’ he muttered. Just then, there came a click.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi, mum,’ Remus said. ‘It’s me.’

‘Remus!’ Mrs Lupin exclaimed, sounding as relieved as happy. ‘Oh, how lovely to hear from you! How are you?’

‘I’m alright, mum. Look, I’ve got some news. I need to talk to dad.’

Mrs Lupin laughed.

‘The very best of luck to you.’

‘Mum, I mean it,’ Remus said, not trying to hide his annoyance. ‘Please. Go fetch him. It’s important.’

‘Alright. But be patient with me.’

He heard her putting the receiver down, and the sound of her shoes against the floor. He leaned against the glass of the telephone box. The familiar pain was settling in his knees. He wanted to sleep, or at the very least lie down.

After several minutes, there was the sound of someone picking up the receiver.

‘Remus,’ his mother said, ‘Your father’s here. I’m handing over the phone.’

A moment of silence, then the sound of a person putting the receiver to their ear.

‘Hello?’ Mr Lupin’s voice sounded hesitant, like he did not trust that he would be heard.

‘Hello, dad. It’s Remus.’

‘Hello, Remus. Did you get my letter?’

‘Dad, I’ve got some bad news.’ He thought he could hear him stiffen. ‘Agrippina’s been killed.’

No answer came for so long that he wondered whether Mr Lupin had dropped the receiver.

‘Killed?’ he repeated.

‘Yes.’

‘How?’ Mr Lupin said hoarsely.

Remus stood silently for a moment, deliberating. This was his possibility to tell the truth, and get this terrible secret out in the open…

‘I think it was a fox,’ he said instead. He heard a controlled sniff on the other side of the line.

‘Thank you for telling me,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘Where is she now?’

‘I buried her in the woods.’

‘Good. Good.’ A pause again. ‘I will hand, erm, you back to your mother now. Good-bye.’
The receiver changed hands.

‘What’s happened?’ Mrs Lupin asked.

‘Agrippina’s been killed by a fox,’ Remus explained.

‘Oh, dear. That’s terrible. Remus, love, I’d better make John some strong sweet tea. But let’s talk soon.’

‘Of course. Take care of each other.’

‘And take care of yourself!’

‘I will. Good-bye.’

Remus hung up. For a moment he lingered, staring at the telephone receiver. It had been so easy to lie. I should have told them, he thought. But he was not sure he could. Sighing, he got out of the phone-box, picked up the shovel and walked homewards.

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During the days before the full moon, Remus had a sense that there were two of him, and he was constantly switching between them.

The days after he came back from London, he marvelled at what had happened there. He wondered whether it was possible to notice a change in him. Did he look more content, like he felt? Was it possible to see signs of sexual satisfaction in him? It almost made him feel like a different person.

While he went about his daily chores in the shop, he found himself thinking about the sex they had had that weekend. He watched the people pass through the shop, and felt that he was harbouring a precious secret. Most of them would surely be disgusted and horrified if they knew what he had done. A few weeks ago, that had scared him, but now he rather felt some kind of rebellious glee.

He delighted in his wicked deeds. How are you, Mrs Stevens? Good to hear you’re keeping well. My weekend? It was very nice, thank you. I was buggered silly by a very handsome Londoner. How was your weekend?

He noticed that as he lingered on these things, he thought about sex with Rayan more than he thought about Rayan himself. It did not really surprise him, but it was nevertheless a kind of assurance. He liked Rayan, but he was not in love with him. Neither did he want to be. Even if he was glad to be moving on, he was not quite ready to expose himself in such a way.

But then there was the other Remus, who would take the place of this calm, pleased version. Every time he blinked, he saw the family owl butchered and left on his doorstep. However much he tried to stop himself, he imagined what must have happened, over and over again. He pictured Greyback pouncing from the ground, capturing Agrippina in mid-flight. She would squawk, her wings flap. Perhaps her talons would scratch his face. But her struggle would be in vain. It is no good being a predator when there are larger ones, ready to feed on you. Remembering the blood on the door, Remus imagined how Greyback must have taken the dead bird and pushed her against the door before laying it out on the doorstep.

The pain of the waxing moon felt like a countdown. On Sunday - three nights, on Monday - two, until Greyback was allowed the freedom of the wolf, and Remus would be unable to stop him. As he would lock himself in the deserted military base miles from the village, Greyback may choose his victim carefully and attack. As he served the customers, Remus wondered, will it be this person? or the next to walk through that door? Or Mr or Mrs Carter? Mrs Mason? Or Miss
Sometimes, he stopped himself in the middle of these meandering thoughts and told himself that there was nothing to say that Greyback was planning to kill. Perhaps he had simply gotten it into his head, and there was not really a threat. But then he remembered the footprints around the house, the broken bike and the murdered owl. The pattern was clear. Whether for the purpose of revenge or boredom, he had decided to punish Remus. He had already done it indirectly by killing Mr Master’s pigs last full moon. It was just a question what his target was. Remus wished there was something he could do - some way to prevent him from harming anyone…

The solution hit him on Tuesday afternoon, as he sat down on the stool behind the counter, exhausted from standing up the past hour. It was twenty-six hours until the transformation, and his muscles were aching and his bones felt fragile. The smell of raw meat tickled his nostrils, making his stomach turn. His thoughts wandered from the fact that four days ago, he had lain in the arms of another man, to the threat from Fenrir Greyback. If only he would leave, he thought. If he wasn’t here anymore…

There! There was a way out. He could not stop Greyback during the full moon. Neither could he persuade him to leave. The only way to make sure that no one came to harm at his hands was if Greyback was dead.

Sitting on that stool in a village butcher’s shop, ostensibly waiting for a new costumer, Remus considered the issue. If he killed Greyback, he would never hurt anyone again. The world would be released from his terror. No more children bitten, no more innocents killed. No one would mourn - or if there were those who felt grief, then they were misled. Remus thought of their last encounter, how he had talked about killing him but not really meant it. It had all been an empty threat then, but now… He had killed before, but could he do it again, in peacetime and unprovoked? But this was not unprovoked. Look at him, covered in scars and scratches, the full moon pulling at his bones. And he was not the only one… No, don’t think about it as revenge. If he were to do it, he would do it to protect others, those he knew and those he did not.

He imagined how he would go about it. It would have to be today. Tomorrow Greyback would be weaker, but so would he. On his way home, he could turn into the woods and try to pick up his scent. He would have to do it with magic. He would be a poor fighter this close to the full moon, and even if it was influencing Greyback too, he was stronger. If worse come to worse, he could restrain or stun him first…

As he remembered the last time he had seen Greyback, he thought about what he had said to his threats. They’ll throw you in Azkaban and you’ll be dead before the next full-moon. Would they send him to Azkaban? Would the Ministry care about a murdered werewolf? He was certain that they would not give a damn. They would think good riddance. But what if they realised that the perpetrator was another werewolf? The Ministry may not care if they were the victim, but they cared all the more when they were the perpetrator. They would know that Greyback had been killed with magic, and it would not take them long to find the nearest wizard, and once they realised that he was a lycanthrope… He could imagine how the law would see the case. Here was a werewolf who despite the curse had received a magical education, not privately but at Hogwarts, along with normal children, and then he uses that privilege of magic to kill.

The repercussions would be huge. Hogwarts would never again accept a werewolf as a student. They might even make laws preventing it. They might take wands away from adult wizards who were bitten. Dumbledore’s position as headmaster would be threatened. More likely than not, he would be forced to resign. And his poor parents… Remus himself would be sent to Azkaban, where he would not survive long. He would probably die during the next full moon, or bleed to
death after it. If not, his bad nerves guaranteed that he would be driven mad soon enough.

The little time he would have there would be spent together with Death Eaters and criminals, and, worst of all, Sirius. He imagined how he would grin and say, 'nice of you to drop by, Moony.' Of course he would not look like he had when he had known him. He supposed he would be emaciated and unkempt. In fact, he would probably be unable to make quips now. People lost their minds in there, after all, and he had been there four years. He may not even be able to speak anymore. Maybe he would simply stare at him, without recognising him. Remus hated what a painful thought that was. Would all that be worth ridding the world of Greyback? he wondered. Or was he selfish to think that?

Then he shook himself, startled at his own thoughts. This was murder he was contemplating! It did not matter how much he weighed the suffering of one person against another’s, or considered whether Greyback’s death would serve the greater good. These things should not be calculated by logic. Remus may have killed in the past, but only in the heat of battle, to save his own life or the life of someone he loved. It was completely different to sneaking through the forest and killing an unarmed man, however dangerous he was. If peace was to mean anything, that kind of thing should not be considered, much less done. It frightened him how easily he had considered the question of murder. It must be the wolf speaking - or at least Remus hoped it was. He did not want to be capable of murder. He did not want to become like Sirius. No, he had to resist the urge, and accept that in this, he was powerless. All he could do was to hope against hope that nothing would happen, and no one would be harmed.

On his way home, he walked past the edge of the forest, not even looking between the trees.

***

The following day, Remus barely got out of bed. Having taken time off had been a good idea - he did not want to collapse like he had last month, and now he felt like he might if he tried to stand up too long. His bones felt as if they would shatter. They would, given time. Whenever Remus looked at the alarm clock, he would calculate how long it was until the full moon. Ten hours. Eight hours. Seven and a half. Five. Three and three-quarters.

He slipped in and out of sleep, dreaming restlessly. Sometimes he would wake and the dreams would still be there. Once he opened his eyes and thought he saw Peter sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, writing an essay. Then he blinked and he was gone, simply a ghost of sleep. In his dreams he ran four-legged, chasing prey he could not see. He was alone, with no pack to run with, but he would hunt nevertheless. Now he saw the movement being the trees, then the rear end of his prey, as it zigzagged through the forest. He was gaining on it, even without brothers to drive it on. Now he saw the stag, and leapt. It threw back its crown and lowed in horror. The wolf’s teeth sunk into its flank, and they fell down together.

Remus opened his eyes, suddenly wide awake. He looked at the alarm clock. It was half past two. Only an hour and a half until the full moon. It was high time to get out of bed. It took some time to get dressed, and he knew that the walk to the shop would take longer than usual. From there sit should go fairly quickly with the bike. By the time he left his room, the keys to the shed in his pocket, the time was three o’clock. When he came down the stairs, he saw Mrs Mason in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil.

‘Mrs Mason?’

She looked over at him.

‘Hello, Mr Lupin,’ she said. ‘You don’t look well at all.’
'I’m a bit under the weather,’ he said. ‘But don’t worry about me. I just wanted to say, make sure that the doors and windows are locked tonight. In fact, you should close the hatches on the ground floor.’

Mrs Mason frowned.

‘What is it you’re so afraid of…?’

‘Please, Mrs Mason,’ Remus said. ‘Please make sure you’re properly locked in.’

She sighed and nodded.

‘Alright,’ she said. ‘I assume you’re not going to tell me why?’

‘It’s just for security,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘But…’

He waved and walked to the front door, leaving her in stunned silence.

The walk to the village felt longer than usual. The trees threw their threatening shadows over the path, leaving him almost in darkness. He felt vulnerable, but knew that in less than an hour, he would be the dangerous one. The street-lights on the high street was a relief. He hurried towards the butcher’s shop. The shop was in darkness, and no lights shone from the top floor. Perhaps the Carters were out somewhere, Remus mused. He turned into the side-alley, towards the shed where the bike was kept. He fished out his key and grabbed the padlock to unlock it.

The keys jumped out of his hand as something slammed against his back. It carried him forwards, pushing him against the door. The shed shook. The air was forced out of his lungs by the blow. He felt unable to move, too confused by the suddenness of the attack.

The weight withdrew, someone grabbed his hair and pulled him round. Another hand closed around his windpipe. Now he saw the face of his attacker, grinning maliciously. Remus felt a sinking feeling as he stared back at the werewolf’s shining eyes. I should have known. He’s coming for me.

‘Hello, runt,’ Greyback growled.

Remus wheezed, grabbing at his wrist. He sunk his fingernails into his skin, but it seemed to make no difference. Instead, he took it between both hands and gave him a Chinese burn. Greyback hissed and let go in surprise. Remus made to rush towards the street, but slipped on the irregular cobblestones. He fell hard.

‘That’s not very polite,’ Greyback said. Grabbing him by the hair, he forced him up onto his knees. Remus could not see, eyes tearing up from the pain, but he heard the sound of glass shattering. ‘Come along.’ He grabbed him by the shoulder, got him to his feet and pushed him through the back door of the shop.

Remus stumbled and was about to fall, but regained his balance. He turned to stare at Greyback, who pushed the door closed with frightening finality.

‘What are you doing?’ Remus asked. The werewolf grinned.

‘Having a bit of fun. And teaching you a lesson at the same time.’
Tearing his eyes off Greyback, Remus scrambled towards the shop front. Despite the moon working on him as well, Greyback was faster, and caught him by the arm.

‘Please,’ Remus said. ‘We’re going to kill each other.’

‘Perhaps,’ Greyback growled. ‘Perhaps not. May the best wolf win, eh?’

‘There are people living here! You’re putting them in danger…’

‘People you picked,’ Greyback pointed out. ‘Won’t it be great when they find this place wrecked, and you in the middle of it?’

‘Please,’ Remus begged. ‘Please, let me go…’

‘Where are you going to run? Look at the clock.’ He twisted Remus’ arm onto his back, and pushed him around. The clock on the wall was half past three. ‘You’ve got thirty minutes. Just enough time to find some juicy-looking human to pin your sight on. Seen anyone you think looks tasty around here?’

As he talked, Remus moved his left arm as slowly as possible, trying to hide the movement under heavy breathing. His fingers closed on his wand. Then, in one motion, he drew it, aimed and cast a stinging hex over his shoulder. Greyback howled and let go of him. Remus spun around to face him, taking the wand in his right hand. His opponent was doubled over, his hand over his eye, but before he could cast another spell, Greyback had regained his equilibrium. His eye had swollen up, and tears streamed through the puckered skin. It only made him look more frightening. His lips were pulled back, and he growled, gnashing rotten teeth. The sight transfixed Remus. It made the animal in him recoil. The wolf knew that it stood no chance. Greyback charged.

What the wolf that Remus was about to turn into had no knowledge of, of course, was magic. Nevertheless, it made him hesitate a fraction too long. The Stunning spell that he cast missed Greyback, and hit the ceiling instead. Plaster snowed down over them. Greyback grabbed him. They went down together.

Their combined weight hit the table, which splintered. Another spell missed Greyback by an inch, hitting the portrait of the Carters’ son instead. It fell straight off the wall, and the glass shattered. Greyback was on top of him now, grabbing at his throat. His hands seemed larger than they were before, like they could break his neck simply by squeezing. Remus brought his knee up, but only caught his thigh. With an effort, he pushed his wand into Greyback’s ribs. The werewolf froze.

‘Let me go,’ Remus said. ‘I don’t want you to kill you.’

Greyback sneered.

‘Coward.’ He pulled himself off Remus and grabbed his wand-arm with both his hands. Remus struggled, thinking (absurdly) that Greyback was about to give him a Chinese burn back. Instead, he grabbed his fist with one hand and his lower arm with the other, and twisted.

Freezing pain shot through his arm. Screaming, Remus dropped his wand. Through the tears, he saw it skidding away over the floor. As soon as Greyback let go of him, he drew his injured wrist towards his chest and cradled it. Greyback got to his feet beside him. Through the pain, Remus knew he had lost. He wondered what Greyback was waiting for - there was no way that Remus could do anything more to him now. Even as a wolf he would pose no threat. He might as well get it over with now…

He heard him circling him, slowly. Remus was certain he was going to pounce, but instead
Greyback took hold of his feet and dragged him across the floor. He did not resist - he did not have the strength anymore. The pain was sapping him of any will to fight back.

Greyback let go of his legs. Remus could hear him working with something, swearing under his breath. Then there was a wave of cold, and Greyback pulled him up by the arm.

‘In you go, boy,’ Greyback said and pushed him. Remus toppled and held out his hands to break his fall. The impact jarred his injured wrist, making him cry out. There was the sound of a door closing.

Shivering, Remus pushed himself up with his good hand, looking around. It was dark, but he knew he was alone. He pulled the collar of his jacket up to ward off the cold, which was quickly penetrating his clothes. The chill dulled the smell of meat, but his sensitive nose still picked it up. With his left hand held up, he walked forward carefully. After only three steps, it met the metal of the door. He moved his hand to the door-frame, fumbling for the light-switch.

The freezer lit up. The walls were covered in shelves and trollies filled up with meat. In the middle of the room a pig carcass hung from the ceiling. So much for a wolf to feast on and smash. His breath misted in front of him, and his fingers were so cold he could not move them properly. He tried to push the door open, but it was locked from the outside. Instead, he banged his hand against the door.

‘Let me out!’ he called. ‘Let me out! Greyback!’

The metal sung under the blows, but his voice did not penetrate the walls. He looked around, his desperation growing. With the destruction in the back-room that they had already caused, and now this, all the meats in the freezer destroyed or spoiled - what would happen to the Carters? What would happen to him? If they opened the freezer and found him, naked and covered in blood, what kind of conclusion would they draw? He wanted nothing more than to get out of here, but it was too close to the transformation to trust himself to Apparate accurately. Unless he was able to materialise inside the abandoned army base, he would end up transforming in the open, where he would be free to hunt. At least here he could not hurt anyone.

That was, unless anyone opened it. The Carters seemed not to be at home now, but when they returned, what would they do when they found parts of the shop smashed up? If they heard the sounds from the freezer, and opened it… He would kill them. For all he knew, Greyback had gone up to transform in their flat, or was waiting in the back-room. They might be sentenced to death anyway. But he had to do his best to stop anyone from coming into the freezer during the night. Without a wand, it would be more difficult, but he should be able to do something.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it go, trying to forget the pain in his wrist and the cold stinging his skin. Putting his good hand on the door, he spoke the words.

‘Protego totalum. Repello muggletum. Date silentium. Supprimo strepitum.’ Again, he drew a deep breath, grounding himself. ‘Protego totalum. Repello muggletum. Date silentium. Supprimo…’

He doubled up, screaming with pain. The forces that would twist him out of shape were taking hold of him. He pushed himself up against the door, feeling tears on his cheeks, already going cold. Ice-crystals were forming on his eye-lashes. He wiped them off his face and returned to his chanting. But it was becoming more difficult to concentrate. Soon, soon… The cold was unbearable, but if he did not undress soon he would tear through the clothes when he transformed. For the first time he could remember, he wanted the transformation to happen. The wolf would cope with this cold much better than he could.
A second shiver of the transformation went through him, and reluctantly he started taking his
clothes off. He put them on a shelf, as far up as he could reach, to keep them out of the way.
Finally he stood shivering, his injured wrist cradled in his other arm. There were no windows, but
he did not need to see the moon to feel it. Was this the night when the wolf would finally claim
him, confined in a small space with metal hooks and midwinter cold? He closed his eyes and
turned his face up.

The moon grabbed him. It pulled at the wolf hidden inside him, tide-like. Remus fell to his side,
convulsing, his injured arm trapped beneath his body. His bones broke and reassembled, and his
reason was replaced with blood-lust.
Chapter 12

Consciousness returned. Nestling somewhere in his head, it pushed at him. Move, it said.

Remus didn’t - couldn’t. He was too cold.

*Move, or you’ll die. You’ll freeze to death.*

He opened his eyes. The floor was coated with a thin layer of frozen blood. The trollies which had lined the wall had been knocked over, and the containers of meat had been pulled down. The smell of the meat mingled with the stink of scat. A few feet from him lay the half-eaten pig carcass, savagely pulled from its hook.

He put his hand to the floor to put himself up, but fell back with a scream. He had forgotten about his wrist. It looked worse now, all swollen and discoloured, throbbing with pain. The wolf must have walked on it - it must have been angry at the pain…

*Move!*

He pushed himself up by his other arm and got to his feet. He had never been so cold in his life. As he took down his clothes and pulled on his shirt, struggling with his injured arm, he looked over the devastation. His stomach turned. He doubled over and vomited. Bone fragments pricked his throat.

When it was finally over, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Clumsily, he pulled on his trousers and stepped into his shoes. Of everything, his toes were the most cold. How bad was it? He looked at his fingers. Though they were pale, they did not look frostbitten. Wrapping himself up in his tweed jacket, which now seemed pitifully thin, he stumbled to the door. He would not be able to Apparate without his wand, so his only option was to attempt to open the door.

He cleared his mind, letting go of the wolf and the pain and the horror of what lay ahead. He allowed himself only to think of the lock mechanism. He stared at the door until he could feel the components of the lock. Then he flung all the mental energy he had against it, thinking, *Alohomora.*

A moment of silence. Then came the smallest click from inside the door. Gasping with relief, Remus pushed at the door with his shoulder. It opened into the back room, which seemed blessedly warm. He took a few steps, then dropped low. There was someone on the other side of the beaded curtain.

‘And all the doors were locked, you say?’

‘Yes, I’m certain,’ said Mrs Carter, sounding weaker and more shaky than Remus had ever heard her. ‘I checked myself, before we went…’

‘When did you leave?’

‘Twenty past three, just after we closed the stop. We stayed the night at my sister’s.’

‘And you came back… this morning?’

‘About an hour ago, yes,’ she said.
'I called right away,' came Mr Carter’s voice. Remus covered his mouth with his good hand, quenching a sigh of relief. They were alive, and unhurt. By the sound of it, they were talking to a policeman. Moving as quietly as he could, Remus scanned the floor. There! His wand was lying just by the smashed photograph of the Carters’ son. He hurried over and picked it up.

‘Arnold, I think I heard something…’

Not waiting to collect himself, Remus turned on the spot and Disapparated.

He reappeared in the middle of his room, winded but, to his surprise, intact. He barely had time to ground himself before the thought hit him: he could not stay here, and he must not let anyone see him.

With his injured hand still pressed against his chest, he pulled out his trunk from under the bed. He opened it with a tap of his wand and pulled out his cloak, which he wrapped himself in for warmth. Then he made a big arc with his wand, marking the entire room. The books flew from their shelf. The medicine box became a projectile on its way into the trunk. All the drawers opened like big mouths, and the clothes flung themselves into the air. While they settled into the trunk, Remus emptied the desk. Most things he pushed them into the trunk pell-mell. All he left was some money to cover the rent. What had he been thinking? he asked himself, cursing. Live among Muggles, as if Muggles and wizards lived in different realities, and his problems would not cross over with him!

He tapped the trunk, which closed and righted itself. He put away his wand, pulled the cloak tighter around him and grabbed the trunk. Then, with little more warning than before, he Disapparated.

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He seemed to slam into reality. The noise of London engulfed him, so different from the silence of his empty room. When he opened his eyes, Charing Cross Road was all around him. Even this early in the morning, the road were already busy. Despite that, no one even glanced at him. The city rendered him invisible, even in a cloak. Hunching his shoulders, he hurried towards the shabby small pub a few yards away.

The Leaky Cauldron was as busy as the Muggle street outside. Remus kept his face turned away, hoping his hair would hide the worst of the blood. He hurried through the pub and into the lavatory before anyone could stop him.

His reflection in the mirror was a startling sight. His hair was tangled and bloody. He had cut his lower lip on something, and a fresh claw-mark ran down his jaw. Slowly, he started stripping off. His torso was just as bruised and cut as his face. With his good hand, he turned on the taps and bent low. As best he could, he scooped up water onto his hair. It did not do much good, but the water pouring down his shoulders, though cold, felt warm.

Opening his trunk, he stuffed his Muggle clothes into it and pulled out a set of robes. He pulled it over his head one-handed and, taking a deep breath, made himself push his right arm into the sleeve. he bit his lip against the pain, hard enough that it started bleeding again. Disgusted at the taste, he spat into the sink. He clasped his wrist to his chest, as if keeping it close to his body would make it heal. Though afraid of what he might find, he inspected it closer. It was bruised and swollen, but the angle looked normal at least. Carefully he let go of it and took out his wand. It felt odd in his left hand. If he made a mistake, as he risked doing casting a spell with his non-dominant hand when this shaken, he might impair himself for life. He put the wand back in his belt. Far slower than he would otherwise move, he pulled on his cloak again, pausing only to put his address
book in his pocket.

When he reentered the pub, he noticed that he had become visible again. Now, the people stared at him, fascinated and horrified.

‘Merlin’s beard, what’s happened to you, lad?’ Tom the innkeeper exclaimed.

‘I had an accident,’ Remus rasped. These was the first words he had uttered since the transformation. ‘Could I use your fireplace? I need to get to St Mungo’s.’

‘Of course - go ahead,’ Tom said and gestured at the lit fire. ‘You want to leave your trunk here? I’ll look after it for you.’

Remus nodded, grateful at this kindness.

‘There’s Floo powder in the jar shaped like a toad.’

‘Thank you.’ This scarcely felt enough, but it was all he could think of saying. Remus went over to the fireplace and reached for the jar. With his clumsy left hand, he almost knocked it over. Tom rushed forward, obviously anxious not to have anything broken, and opened it for him. Remus murmured a thank you again, took a pinch of the glittering powder and threw it into the flames. As they turned emerald, he clutched his hurt hand to his chest. Making his voice as steady as it could be, he called out his destination and stepped in.

Spinning between fireplaces was worse than Apparating. He closed his eyes and swallowed, willing himself not to be sick. At least the travel did not last long. The spinning stopped abruptly, and the emerald flames spat him out. He stumbled, his knees weak. When he opened his eyes, the waiting room around him was spinning.

Someone took him by the elbow.

‘Come along, come have a sit-down…’ The mediwitch steered him to a chair. ‘Oh dear, you’re all cold. I’ll get you a blanket.’ She hurried away, and returned with a blanket for him. Then she took the clipboard she had under her arm and picked a self-inking quill out of her apron. ‘Now, what’s your name?’

‘Remus Lupin,’ he said, voice shaking once again. ‘I think I’ve broken my wrist, and I… may have hypothermia.’ The mediwitch looked up from her clipboard at his hand, which lay crumbled against his chest. He swallowed, bracing himself, and said as quietly as he could: ‘And I’m supposed to tell you that I’m a werewolf.’

Her flinch was almost imperceptible. She scribbled on her clipboard and gave him a brief but strained smile.

‘Just wait here, and someone will see you soon.’

She left a little too quickly. Remus was about to drop his gaze again and retreat into himself, when he realised that the witch sitting opposite was staring at him. The people in the Leaky Cauldron had looked at him with compassion, seeing only a young man who had had an accident, but this witch’s gaze made it clear that she had heard him speak. She saw the scratch on his jaw and the scars on his face and the raw patches on his fingertips for just what they were. He looked back. He wanted to somehow convey the truth: ‘I am a person - I was just unfortunate. I am not a monster.’ But he knew it would do no good. He could see only hate and disgust in her eyes. Hurt, he looked away.
As soon as he broke eye-contact, the witch got up and went over to the welcome desk. Her words were hurried and hushed, and Remus only caught parts, but he heard enough.

‘I will *not* sit in the same waiting room as that... *creature!* Someone like that has no right to be here, among decent, normal human beings...’

‘Madam Trilly, that man is a patient...’

‘Resources shouldn’t be wasted on people like that! You could help people who deserve it...’

‘Mr Lupin?’

The mediwitch who had taken his details was back, wearing a tight smile which might have been either apologetic or disapproving.

‘Come with me, please.’

He followed her. As he passed the witch standing at the welcome desk, she hissed ‘filth!’ He kept his face turned away, hoping she had not heard his name.

The mediwitch lead him through the narrow corridors, to a half-open door. The room inside was tiny. The tall man at the desk looked like he had folded himself up to fit behind the desk. When the mediwitch ushered him in and closed the door, the healer looked up and stood.

‘Good morning, Mr... Lupin, wasn’t it? I’m Healer Malvern.’

As the healer moved around the desk, Remus spotted a thick file with his own name was on it.

‘Mr Lupin?’

Remus shook himself and turned to the healer. He was a grim-looking man, but there was a sympathetic glint in his eye.

‘Sorry.’ He reached out his right hand, still clutched in his left. ‘I’ve hurt my wrist.’

‘Sit, would you?’ Malvern said. Precariously, Remus managed to sit on the table. ‘You mentioned hypothermia to the nurse?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he admitted as the healer put a hand against his forehead. ‘But I’ve spent all night in a walk-in freezer.’

‘What’s a walk-in freezer?’ asked the healer and handed him a goblet. ‘Drink that.’ Remus obeyed, and instantly felt himself start to warm up.

‘It’s a cold room that Muggles use for storing meat,’ he explained.

‘How cold was it?’

‘Somewhere around twenty below zero.’

‘You’re lucky you had pelt,’ Malvern said. ‘Anyone else would be dead.’ He took hold of Remus’ left hand and looked at his fingers. ‘They look fine.’ Effectively, he pushed the hair away from his patient’s ears and then, once Remus had one-handedly taken his shoes off, inspected his toes.

‘You’re fine. Nothing that a hot bath won’t cure. Now, this wrist.’ The healer took his injured arm between his hands. ‘Did this happen when you transformed?’ he asked, turning it so that it was palm-up.
‘No, it was before. I was in a fight.’ The last word came out strangled. Malvern had just touched his wrist, sending a jolt of pain up his arm.

‘A fight?’ Malvern said and made him bend his wrist. Remus bit the inside of his cheek as tears blurred his vision. This pain made him feel reduced to a child. ‘Was there someone in there with you?’

He shook his head emphatically.

‘No. It was before. I didn’t hurt anyone.’ Then he closed his mouth again, feeling suddenly sick with pain. Malvern let go of his wrist for a moment, and returned with a brass loupe with symbols carved around the sides. He clamped it to his eye and, picking up Remus’ injured hand again, adjusted the lens.

‘Yes, it’s broken alright,’ he said, inspecting the bone through the loupe. ‘You probably made it worse when you were in wolf-form. But it’s easily fixed.’ He put away the instrument and drew his wand. Remus took a deep breath. The healer tapped his wrist and in an instant, the pain disappeared. He exhaled in relief. ‘Move your fingers?’ Remus wriggled his fingers experimentally. It felt weak, but it no longer hurt. Malvern took it again and bent it. ‘As good as new,’ he said. ‘Be a bit careful with it the next few days.’

Remus nodded.

‘I… I mean, the wolf… it chewed up some bones, I think.’

‘Hm, I see.’ The healer seemed to calculate something in his head. ‘You’ve been back in human form long enough that if it hasn’t caused you problems yet, it probably won’t. It’ll just pass through you. It won’t be pleasant, but you should be fine. If you start feeling very sick, or you notice any bleeding, come back in. Now, let’s take a look at that scratch…’ He made him turn his head to inspect the wound on his jaw. ‘It doesn’t look too bad. It’s not deep. Put some dittany on it, morning and evening for a week. It’s inevitable that it’ll scar, but dittany will make it paler. And that wound on your lip… That’s not cursed - just looks burst. And your fingertips will heal by magic as well.’

With a succession of wand-swishes, Malvern healed his lip and the scratches on his fingers. When that was done, he returned to his desk and opened the file. Remus edged off the table and picked up his cloak.

‘Do you have a job?’ Malvern asked.

‘No,’ Remus said, the realisation catching up with him.

‘Somewhere to stay?’

He swallowed.

‘No, not right now.’

Malvern sighed, looking at the file in front of him.

‘Are your parents alive?’

‘Yes.’

‘And are you... on speaking terms?’
‘Yes.’

Healer Malvern closed the file and looked up at him.

‘Go to them. You need to rest.’

Remus busied himself with putting on his cloak, not returning his gaze.

‘Alright.’

‘Good.’ Malvern half stood and extended his hand. Remus shook it.

‘Thanks,’ he said and, not waiting for a reply, left. He half-ran to the exit, not wanting to give anyone the opportunity to speak to him.

The street outside looked empty. Looking around to make sure he was not seen, Remus crossed the road and ducked into a nearby phone booth. Still looking around, afraid both of wizards and Muggles seeing him, he picked out his address book. Holding the receiver between his shoulder and his ear, he dialled the number and waited. With every signal, he lost some hope. Then the line opened and he heard a familiar contralto:

‘Hello?’ He breathed out in relief. ‘Hello?’ Mrs Mason said again.

Remus hung up. He stood for a moment, savouring the assurance that Greyback had not gone after Mrs Mason, just like he had not stayed in the shop and attacked the Carters. That did not mean that nothing had happened, of course, but it was the best he could do, short of trying to call the local constabulary and wheedling out details from them. With a final glance up and down the street, he stepped out of the phone box and Apparated back to the Leaky Cauldron.

At the pub, he collected his trunk and went into the backyard. As he tapped the bricks of the wall with his wand, he replayed the conversation with the healer in his head. Malvern was right - he should go back to his parents. He felt exhausted - his body ached and his nerves were shot. But it did not matter that he could see the logic in it. His parents had said that living among Muggles was a bad idea. He could not bear turning up and give them right. Much less did he want to turn up at their doorstep bruised and bloody after the full moon. Just the thought of his mother’s fretting and his father’s concern felt too much. No, Remus refused to be at his parents’ mercy. He was an adult - he could look after himself. For a moment, he considered going to Rayan. He would probably put him up for a few nights. Remus rejected the idea - they had known each other for a matter of weeks, and he did not want to impose on him. Besides, his fretting might be as bad as his parents’. Explaining his injuries would be difficult.

Half determined, half resigned, Remus stepped into wizarding London. In the cold autumn morning, Diagon Alley seemed to sparkle. The mass of colours hurt his eyes, which a few hours ago had been colour-blind. The air was thick with the happy chatter of shoppers and the bright greetings among friends. Remus walked straight through it. He felt detached from this world, all too aware of his patched robes and the lycanthropic scars on his face.

He walked further, turning off into side-streets. The thrum of the main street grew more and more distant. The brightly painted shutters and the colourful shop-signs seemed a world apart now. Instead of toffee-apple and dried herbs and roasted chestnuts, but of urine and rotting rubbish. Soil was visible between the badly maintained cobblestones. It was difficult to believe that he was still in the middle of London. From some back alley, he heard angry shouts. He half wanted to run towards them and intervene, but he knew better. Instead, he pressed on until he came to a street almost as crowded as Diagon Alley.
In the past, only Order business had taken Remus to Knockturn Alley. Then he had walked through it with blinkers, intent only on whatever meeting he was there to infiltrate. Now, he looked at it properly for the first time. He saw the remnants of sleeping-places in doorways and against walls. Only the occasional sleeper was still curled up under cloaks and blankets; here it was dangerous not to be on your guard. Remus pulled at his scarf until it covered the claw-mark on his jaw. It was too obvious a sign here. Around him moved hobbled beggars, skulking figures and shrouded visitors. Some came here because they had no choice, others because their taste in magic was not acceptable in normal wizarding society. At least some were able to leave, Remus reflected, looking over his shoulder and seeing a finely robed wizard turning down the alleyway he had just come.

‘Hey! Hey, you there!’

Remus looked around.

‘Yes, you, in the brown cloak!’

Now he saw who was shouting at him - a witch sitting against he wall in a nest of blankets. Her wand hung from a string around her neck. Both her hands were missing. Between her stumps, she was holding a clay pipe.

‘You got fire?’ she asked.

He was going to conjure fire from his hand, as he liked to do, but, conscious of what he had but she was missing, he pulled out his wand instead and lit her pipe.

‘Ta,’ she said and sucked at the pipe with a satisfied smile. Remus did not move, but watched as she pushed the pipe deeper into her mouth with her stump. The woman opened her eyes and glared.

‘What? You never seen anyone smoke a pipe before?’

‘Sorry,’ Remus said quickly. ‘I’m sorry…’

Not knowing what to say or do, he hurried on his way. He continued deeper into the wizarding city, a weight settling in his chest. He could imagine his parents’ horror if they knew even that he had set foot in a place like this. Nevertheless, he felt the hateful realisation that he belonged here. This was the only place wizarding society would allow him to have.

Remus walked until he could see the end of the alley. It was only a few blocks away from it that he caught sight of a sign beside a door, bearing the words “Lodging House”. He looked up at the high, tottering building, and, with no real thought in his head, rapped the boar-shaped door knocker. He had expected to have to wait, or even knock again, but the door opened almost at once. A face poked out and stared at him.

‘What do you want?’

‘I wondered if you had any rooms free,’ he asked, taken aback.

‘Can’t you read?’ asked the witch and pointed at the ground-floor window. A sign saying “rooms available” hung there. Someone had added the note “strictly no goblins” in red ink. Remus felt his stomach turn. He should leave, but at the same time he knew that there would be nowhere else. He swallowed, as though trying to get rid of the bad taste in his mouth, and asked:

‘What’s the rent?’

‘One galleon, seven sickles a week, to be paid in advance,’ the witch said. ‘We’ve only the attic room free, but the price is the same.’
'May I see it?'

She grumbled something under her breath and waved him in. He hurried in as quickly as he could. When she turned to look at him through her thick spectacles, he tugged at his scarf, intent on hiding the cut.

'I’m Madam Wilkes. I’m the owner. I expect to be treated with respect, if you’re to stay here.’

‘Of course, Madam Wilkes.’

‘Come along then.’ He enchanted the trunk to float after him, and followed her up the stairs. His knees ached and his thigh-muscles protested as they ascended. ‘We have rules, of course. You break those and I’ll throw you out. No visitors after seven o’clock in the evening. No eating in the rooms. No potions-brewing. No loud spellwork. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Madam Wilkes. Naturally,’ he answered, the stairs making him pant. Wilkes threw a glance at him.

‘Infirm, are you?’

'It’s just quite a lot of stairs,’ he said, trying to smile, but receiving nothing in reply.

‘Well, it’s all we’ve got. Here we are.’ They had reached the top of the stairs. Wilkes got a large set of keys out and unlocked the only door on the landing. Remus looked in. The room was indeed pitiable, with only a small skylight letting in the light. On one side of the room was a bed and a bedside table. By the opposite wall stood a rickety chair and a small heating stove. Remus crossed to it. It was only three steps between it and the door. He reached out towards it - it was completely cold.

‘You’ll have to pay for coal,’ Madam Wilkes said. ‘Ten knuts a shovel.’

‘What about facilities?’ Remus said, looking around.

‘There’s a chamber-pot under the bed, and you can rent a bath for a sickle. There’s a water-tap and buckets on the ground floor if you need that for filling it.’

Remus hid a sigh.

‘Very well. I’ll take it. And I’d like to rent the bath at once, please, and buy a shovel of coal.’

‘That’ll be a galleon, eight sickles and ten knuts, then.’

Remus went into the room and upended his purse on the bedside table. With his gloved hand, he pushed the coins he needed back into the purse, then poured it into his new landlady’s hand, hoping she would not recognise how he avoided touching the silver. She did not seem to, but simply counted the coins herself and muttered thank you. He reflected how much more he had liked Mrs Mason (blessedly safe from him now).

‘Come along then, if you want that bath.’

Walking down the stairs was not as taxing as up them, and Remus tried not to think about that he had to ascend them again soon. They stopped on the first floor, where Madam Wilkes started unlocking a door he assumed led to her own rooms. While they stood there, the front door slammed and the sound of someone skipping up the stairs was heard. Remus turned to look at the newcomer, a short woman with several lace-hemmed skirts and a dainty witch’s hat pinned on her
‘Hello, Madam Wilkes. Could I have the bath, please?’ she said; she had a sickle in her hand.

‘This... gentleman-’ the landlady pronounced the word with impressive sarcasm ‘-has already asked for it.’

‘Oh,’ she said cheerfully. ‘Hello. I’m Celeste. I’m on the fourth floor.’

‘Remus Lupin. Up under the rafters.’

‘So you’re just above me, then.’

‘You’re behind on your rent, Miss Periwinkle,’ Madam Wilkes growled, interrupting them. ‘I gave you more time, as I was feeling generous, but mark my words...’

The woman rolled her eyes.

‘I have your money,’ she said and pulled out her purse. She took sickles and knuts out of it until her hand was full and she had the right amount. She poured the coins into Madam Wilkes’ and, not waiting for her to count it, started climbing the stairs. ‘I’ll see you around, Mr Lupin,’ she said before disappearing out of sight. Madam Wilkes snorted and went to dispose of the money. Remus lingered on the landing. He tried pacing to make the wait easier, but walking hurt his knees more than standing. At long last, Madam Wilkes returned, carrying a tin bath.

‘You can fetch the coal when you bring back the bath,’ she said.

‘Thanks.’ Remus pulled out his wand and levitated the bath in front of him up the stairs.

It was such a relief to sit down when he reached his room that the bath remained floating a few inches from the ground for over a minute before he realised he had stopped it levitating. Even if the bed was lumpy and the blankets felt damp, it was difficult to resist lying down. The promise of a bath was the only thing that made him get up. With a flick of his wand, the bath filled with water. A jab, and steam rose from it. He priced his shoes off, discarded cloak and scarf and, with some difficulty due to his sore muscles, pulled his robe over his head. Sitting down in the hot water was welcome. He sank down into the small bath-tub as much as it allowed. His shoulders remained over the water level and his knees jutted out comically, but he could lean his head back against the edge. He closed his eyes, telling himself that he must not fall asleep in the bath. After this, he would have to return it to Madam Wilkes, and only after that would he be allowed to sleep. Even the prospect of a lumpy bed felt welcome.

His mind turned from the chance of rest to what his life had descended into. Yesterday, he had been renting a room in a good enough house, and he had had employment. He had liked his landlady, and had got on with his employers. Today, he had almost no money, a small room in a dank house guaranteed for only a week, and no job whatsoever. He had fled his previous life without a word after leading a vicious monster to the village. Would the Carters be able to rebuild their shop? How would Mrs Mason interpret his disappearance? And what of Greyback? Would he stay, or would he try to find him again? Remus told himself that Greyback had found him only by chance, and he had no way of tracking him. Then again, perhaps he had acted just like he had expected him to, and tried to lose him in the crowd.

The healer had been right. He needed to rest. He should go home. There was nothing stopping him.

Except shame. That was enough.
Chapter 13

His first morning as Madam Wilkes’ lodger, Remus woke feeling stiff and tired. Knowing there was no way to avoid it, he got out of bed and collected his Muggle wallet and his wizard purse. He emptied them both onto the bed and counted the money. The jumble of Muggle banknotes and wizard coins was a depressing sight. They did not add up to enough to live on in the long run. The Muggle money was not even enough to make it worth to exchange it. He would have to spend it on food, he guessed. The wizarding money would last him for more than a week, and there was not going to be enough to pay the rent. He needed to find a job, but first he needed food. He had not eaten anything since before the full moon.

He dressed and went a few streets away from the lodging house before finding a café which he felt he could both trust and afford. He had a rather poorly cooked breakfast and a mug of tea while reading a copy of the Prophet that someone had left behind. The notices in the back particularly caught his attention. Several were about jobs - a witch in Dublin was looking for a secretary, a shop in Machynlleth was in need of a clerk, someone in Anglesey wanted to employ a private tutor. No one objected when Remus rolled up the newspaper and took it away with him.

Back in his room, he found that the bedside table was too small even for a piece of parchment. Instead, he put his trunk on the bed and leaned a book against it to fashion a desk. Writing the first few letters took the entire morning. Despite his hopes, he did not feel particularly optimistic. His handwriting looked shaky and untidy, betraying his recently injured wrist and his stiff fingers. That alone was enough to disqualify him from the secretary job, and might well make the others think twice about even seeing him.

There were still several notices he might write to, but he would leave them until the afternoon. It seemed better to send off the ones he had already finished with. He sealed them, put his purse in his pocket and left for the post-office.

Knockturn Alley was silent around him, but he still did not realise that the sound of running feet against the cobblestones was coming towards him until he noticed someone stopping just behind him. He looked around, on his guard. By his shoulder stood the woman he had met at the lodging house.

‘Hello,’ she said and smiled up at him. She had an open, oddly innocent grin. ‘Remember me?’

‘Yes, I do,’ Remus said, relaxing a little. ‘Miss Periwinkle, wasn’t it?’

She waved her hand at him.

‘Call me Celeste. I can’t remember your name, I’m afraid.’

‘Remus.’

‘Oh, I knew it was something Roman. Hello, Remus. What are you up to?’

‘I’m going to the post-office,’ he said, holding up the letters. ‘I need to send these off as soon as possible...’

‘Mind if I walk with you?’

Not knowing what to say, Remus shrugged and started walking. Celeste fell into step. As they walked in silence, Remus felt himself tensing up again. After some time, Celeste spoke.
’I’m not trying to pick you up, you know. I’m just trying to be friendly.’

Remus froze.

’Of course you are,’ he said, feeling foolish. ’I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind.’

’That’s alright,’ Celeste said. ’If you don’t mind me saying so, you looked like you were a bit of a mess yesterday morning.’

He chuckled.

’Yes, you could say that.’

They continued, more comfortable in the silence now, until Remus asked:

’How long have you lived at Madam Wilkes?’

’Oh, more than two years now. It’s not much, but it’s alright. I mean, Wilkes is a dragon - no, that’s an insult to dragons, but you see what I mean. She’s terrible. But she does cut me a little more slack. After the first year, she stopped lecturing me about politeness.’

’Have most lodgers lived there so long?’

’Oh, no, not at all. Most people don’t stay very long at all. A few months, usually.’

’Who else is there?’

Celeste considered it.

’There’s Chidi, who lives on my floor. She’s a darling girl, but her English isn’t very good. Do you know French?’

’Reasonably well,’ Remus said.

’Well, then you’re better off than me. She’s teaching me, though. She teaches me French, and I teach her English.’

’That’s a good arrangement. What other lodgers are there?’

’I don’t know who all of them are, to be honest. Some of them barely show, or they just come home to sleep. On the second floor there’s a man I think is called Messenger. He seems like rather a sad fellow - he always keeps his curtains drawn - which is odd, because he looks like he’s fallen out of a gothic novel - like he should be strutting around and sucking swooning witches dry. Then there’s Mrs Dove... no, she left last week. That was a pity. She was nice. There’s someone else in her room now, but I can’t remember who it is.’ She shrugged. ’That’s the best I can do.’

’I know more than I did,’ Remus said.

’What about you?’ Celeste asked.

’What do you mean?’

’Who are you, I suppose I’m asking.’

’Not anyone, really,’ Remus said.
'What do you do for a living?'

'Right now nothing,' he admitted. 'I’m looking for a job. Hence the letters.'

'Best of luck with that.'

'Thanks.'

'Have you applied for something in particular?'

Remus sighed and fingered the letters.

'Anything being advertised, really.'

'What do you do?'

He looked at her, feeling that surely, this was a repetition.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you have a specialty? Or something you do particularly well, I mean?'

The thought made Remus’ steps slow. What did he do? He had six NEWTs, but they had never made any difference. None of the jobs he had had had required qualifications, and there had been little uniformity between them. There were things he liked better than others, of course, but he had never been able to afford being picky. Was there nothing he was good at?

The only thing that he could think of was defensive magic. He had always been good at Defence against the Dark Arts, and he had been well trained in the Order. He had never been quite as good as James and Sirius, of course, but James was always better than anyone (although his wand-work sometimes tended towards the sloppy), and Sirius’ excellence had probably stemmed from expertise of a completely different kind. In the Order, Remus had excelled. He had thrived. But now, in peacetime, he went from unskilled job to unskilled job, with no hope to find anything fulfilling or interesting. With sudden clarity, he saw that the War had not just changed his life as he had known it. It had moulded him into someone who was useless in peace.

'I don’t know,' he answered, not daring to answer otherwise.

Celeste did not seem to know what to say about this, but shrugged and smiled, looking a little helpless.

'Where were you going again?'

'The post-office.'

'I’m going to Finnemore’s, which is just opposite,' she said.

They did not speak for the rest of the walk. As they drew closer to the post-office and the pub opposite it, Celeste said:

'There’s Chidi!' She called: ‘Chidi! Ici! Chidi!’

A black woman, her hair in twists and tied back with a purple scarf, turned around. Catching sight of Celeste, she smiled widely and waved. Celeste ran up to her and they kissed each other on the cheek.
‘Come meet our new neighbour,’ Celeste said and look her friend’s hand, pulling her over to Remus. ‘Chidi, this is Remus. Remus, this is Chidi.’

‘Bonjour,’ Remus said and shook her hand. ‘Enchanté.’

‘Enchantée,’ Chidi replied, looking him up and down searchingly. ‘Vous êtes notre nouveau voisin de dessus?’

‘Oui.’

‘Magnifique.’

‘Chidi, we should go,’ Celeste said softly, almost playfully, and pulled at Chidi’s cloak. Chidi looked at a watch hanging from her belt, in front of her scabbard-like wand sheath.

‘Yes, of course,’ she said in accented English. Then, turning to Remus: ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘See you around,’ Celeste said and linked arms with Chidi. Remus turned and watched them head towards the pub. Although they did not share a whole language, they were speaking at break-neck speed, sometimes at the same time, going from French to English and from English to French, even miming and signing for clarity, without letting go of each other. The Babel-walls between them was not enough to inhibit their natural rapport. Remus watched them with consternation and something approaching envy. He wondered when he had last had a conversation like that, where it seemed not to be mouths but minds that spoke. (He knew the answer, but would not give it, for he wished it was different.)

Inside the post-office, the chatter of post-owls engulfed him. The noise pressed against his brain with such insistence that he had the impulse to cower. Grounding himself, he paid to send off his applications, picking slower owls than he had planned. It was a relief to escape into the open air again. Standing in the busy street, he asked himself what he wanted. He should get something to eat, but what he needed was company, or at least a familiar place. He walked back to the lodging-house, and emerged soon afterwards, dressed in Muggles clothes. He Disapparated in the middle of the street, unconcerned who saw him leave, and materialised in a slithering eighteenth century alley of Soho. Soon, he stepped into the café that had become his usual haunt.

Having only been here on weekends, Remus had never seen the place so empty. There were a few costumers, but most tables were unoccupied, and behind the counter, Siobhan and the petite Trisha were chatting. When Remus entered, they both looked up, and Siobhan’s eyebrows shot up.

‘Hello,’ Remus said.

‘Hello there,’ Siobhan replied, looking surprised. ‘What are you doing here? It’s a Friday!’

‘Well…’ He shrugged and then came to the conclusion to be upfront about it. ‘I lost my job.’

Siobhan deflated with a sympathetic sigh.

‘Oh, God, I’m so sorry. That’s terrible.’

‘Yes,’ Remus agreed, not knowing what else to say.

‘Are you still living down south?’

‘No. I’ve moved to London for now. Better chances of finding something.’
Siobhan looked uncertain.

‘Hopefully,’ she said. ‘Good luck. And at least you’ll be around people.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And I’m sure Rayan will be happy.’

Remus laughed nervously, caught off guard.

‘What’s he been saying?’

‘I just think he’s taken a shine to you - and a little birdie might have mentioned you spending the evening together last week. So, what’ll you have?’

‘A ham sandwich and a cup of tea, please.’

Siobhan produced both with impressive speed. As he handed over the money, she looked at him searchingly.

‘You’re look sort of peaky,’ she said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ Remus said. ‘Just getting over a cold.’

‘Better than coming down with one, I suppose. Enjoy your lunch.’

‘Thanks.’ Remus picked up the plate and the mug and went to sit down. Just as he had pulled out the chair and taken his book out of his pocket, Siobhan turned around and said:

‘Oh, Remus?’

He looked over at her.

‘It’s not a secret or anything, this, is it?’ she asked. ‘I mean, can I tell George you’re around London now?’

‘Of course you can,’ he said. ‘I don’t care who knows.’

‘Good,’ Siobhan said and nodded. ‘I’ll let you get back to your book.’

Remus sat down to his lunch and his book, but found concentrating hard. His thoughts kept straying to applications he should write that afternoon. Then, they started going back to memories of the last few days. Yet again the enormity of what he had done struck him. Mrs Mason would start wondering where he was, until she went to investigate and find his room completely empty, her only lodger gone in the night with no explanation or even a farewell. He remembered now that he had left his wellington boots by the door. Only they and the money he had left on the desk would show that he had ever been there. Mr and Mrs Carter may be so absorbed with the vandalism of their shop and the destruction of their stock that they at first did not realise that their shop assistant did not turn up after his time off. Then they would ask Mrs Mason, who would be none the wiser. What would they conclude? His room had been emptied, so they would gather that he had left of his own free will. Maybe the police would find it relevant that the shop assistant’s disappearance coincided with the vandalism - even if the police did not find it suspect, the village hive-mind would. Would Remus become one of those things discussed in the pub? Do you remember that boy who worked for the Carters, the one who disappeared overnight? They say he was involved with some funny-business. Odd sort - perfectly polite, mind, and nice to talk to, but
he just wasn't quite normal, if you get my drift. Quite-like. They say he had a partner-in-crime -
this big, threatening bloke who turned up at the Carters’ once...

Remus interrupted the narrative, too disturbed by what his mind was producing. There was no
reason to linger such things. Concentrate on the present, he told himself. Think of the things that
need to be done. He took his unused napkin and dug out a pencil from his pocket. He tried to break
down the task at hand, which felt so huge, into steps. He wrote “Write applications” at the top of
the list, then “ask in shops”. He stared at the list, realising it was useless. He might as well write
“sort out your life”. Despite what he had told himself, he sunk back into thoughts of what he had
done, and what on earth he would do.

***

The following morning, Remus woke early. He had grown used to it during the past two months,
and despite his best efforts, he could not go back to sleep. Finally he rose, got dressed and went
out.

It was completely light when he returned an hour later with a scavenged newspaper in hand. The
day was cloudy but dry, yet the stairs were wet when he ascended. It was slow going. He was not
healing as fast as last month, and climbing stairs made his knees hurt. Halfway up, the ache was
bad enough that he sat down to rest for a moment. He unrolled the Prophet and started looking
through the notices. Just as he turned the newspaper around to read the headlines, he heard noises
from downstairs - heavy footsteps and grunts. Occasionally, there was a metal clang and a muttered
‘oh, shit.’ Soon Celeste came into view, heaving a bucket full with water. Being quite short, she
had to hoist up the bucket to stop it from hitting the step in front of her, which made water slop
onto the stairs and down her front. That only made her swear more.

Remus got to his feet, put the newspaper in his belt and hurried down to her.

‘Here, let me...’

Celeste shook back the hair that was falling into her face with an annoyed look.

‘What?’ she asked. She luged the bucket up another step. ‘Give me a hand? Have you seen how
thin your wrists are? Your arms would snap right off.’ With a burst of energy, she climbed the rest
of the stair in one go. Remus pressed himself against the railing to let her pass, and then went up
to the landing, where Celeste was beating the water from her skirt. ‘You don’t have to hover around. I
can deal with it,’ she said, with a flicker of her previous pluck. ‘I’m used to it.’ She dried her hands
on her sleeves and picked up the bucket again.

‘Why don’t you use Aguamenti?’

Celeste’s gaze pierced him. When she spoke, her voice had gained edge, brought on by too many
people making the same mistake.

‘Well, I’m a squib, aren’t I?’

Remus gaped, then closed his mouth, feeling the embarrassment press down on him.

‘I didn’t realise,’ he said. ‘Sorry, I didn’t think…’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Celeste said abruptly. ‘No-one ever does.’

‘I could heat that water for you...’
‘No, I’ve got the kettle boiling downstairs. I can manage on my own. I always have done.’ She stopped at the next landing, looking impatient. ‘Do you want to pass? Not that you walk very fast, but I’m not particularly fast myself with this bucket.’ He went around her, as fast as he could. Then he stopped and turned around again.

‘Do you want...?’

‘No and no thank you, I do not want any help. I’m fine on my own. Now, move along. You’re blocking the stairs.’

Remus hurried upstairs to continue his applications, feeling foolish.

***

By the evening, Remus was tired of writing applications. His wrist, though whole again, felt sore from all the writing, and his back ached after his constant hunching over his make-shift desk. He looked at his pocket-watch, and thought that there was a chance that Rayan and the others were in the pub where they had gone a few weeks ago. He wished he had some telephone numbers, so he could call them and arrange to meet, but with no number to give them, it would be an unequal exchange. He decided to rely on chance for now. Changing into Muggle clothes, he left the lodging house.

It was the first time since he was a child that he walked through wizarding London in Muggle clothes. He had not expected to feel so singled out. His new-found invisibility in the crowd was reversed. Now he was the only one in jacket and trousers among cloaks and robes. As he walked down Knockturn Alley, and then Diagon Alley, he felt eyes on him. There was a random call of ‘Muggle!’ from an open window. Later on, someone in the street shouted: ‘put on some proper clothes!’

For a brief moment, Remus felt an exhaustion so complete that he knew that if he let it get hold of him, it would never let go. Whatever he did, and however he dressed, he did not blend in. Here, his clothes were wrong - but out in Muggle London, his manners and his scars marked him as odd. In wizarding robes he’d look like a freak to the Muggles, but among his magical peers he would look thread-bare and suspicious.

He shook it off, and rose above it. Single-mindedly, he headed towards the Leaky Cauldron.

Stepping from Diagon Alley to Charing Cross Road was truly entering a different city. From wizarding London, Remus had been able to see the constellations of the night-sky. The gibbous moon, waning now, was just visible behind a wisp of cloud. The streets had been lit only by lamps and braziers.

Above Muggle London, Remus could make out no stars, and barely any moon. The city was bright around him. Shop windows lit the pavements, and the puddles of light from the street lamps flowed together to form an orange glare. He wandered through it, glad that the night was warmer than previous ones. After a little time, he turned off the large street. Here the street lamps were fewer and the light from the houses did not escape outside. This part of town was far more alive than the sterile shopping street. The shifting colours of neon signs looked half magic, even though they were simply ingeniously harnessed noble gas. Here there were not cars, but people, milling rather than walking. The air, heavy with music, carried with it the promise of chased dreams and pursued pleasures.

Remus walked slowly, letting himself enjoy the sight of these modern-day revellers. When he finally reached the pub he had been heading for, he wavered for a moment, then shook off the
indecision and stepped in.

The heat of the interior enveloped him. The windows were all steamed up, creating an impenetrable film between inside and outside. The pub buzzed with voices, weaving together into a wordless din. Remus looked around, scanning the faces of the drinkers. First he thought there was no one there he knew, but then he caught sight of Simon’s blond head. As he made his way in that direction, he spotted Rayan and George as well. Rayan caught sight of him.

‘Remus!’ he called and waved at him. Remus hurried over to them. ‘What are you doing here?’ He got up and gave him a hug. As he drew back, he stopped mid-motion for a moment, as if considering to kiss him. Then he stepped back and smiled. ‘George said…’

‘Siobhan told me you’d lost your job,’ George said. ‘Is it true?’

‘Yes,’ Remus said and shrugged. George made a sympathetic sound.

‘Poor you! Come here.’

As soon as Remus was within reach, George stood up, took his face between his hands and kissed him. When Remus sat down, he felt Rayan looking at him, perhaps regretting his own indecision.

‘So, what happened?’ Simon asked.

Remus shrugged.

‘I don’t really feel like talking about it.’

‘Fair enough,’ Rayan said. ‘Losing a job is terrible.’

‘I can’t see anyone firing you,’ Remus said.

‘Oh, it’s happened, I can tell you,’ Rayan said.

‘So where are you now?’ George asked. ‘In London?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s brilliant!’ Rayan exclaimed. ‘I mean, obviously not brilliant that you lost your job, but….’ He trailed off, smiling in an embarrassed way. Then he said, with renewed courage: ‘Anyway, can I get you a drink?’

‘That’d be great,’ Remus said. ‘Thank you.’

Rayan got to his feet.

‘Pint?’

‘Yes, please.’

He pushed past Remus’ chair, leaving the other three in silence. After a moment, George said: ‘So why London? Is it just to honour us with your presence?’

‘Well, it seemed like the obvious thing to do,’ he said. ‘It’s nice to be around people I know, and there should be jobs here.’
Simon shifted in his seat, and looked directly at Remus for the first time.

‘You do realise that that’s the worst thing you could’ve done?’ he said.

It took a moment for Remus to figure out how to answer him, startled as he was by this claim.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Lots of people come to London for jobs,’ Simon said. ‘And more often than not they don’t find anything.’

‘Well, I couldn’t stay in Suffolk,’ Remus said, surprised at the coldness in his own voice. ‘Where was I supposed to go?’

‘Simon, shut up,’ George said abruptly. At that moment, Rayan came back, a pint of beer in his hand.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

‘Take a guess,’ George muttered.

‘It’s alright,’ Remus said quickly. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘I’m just making an observation,’ Simon said sharply. ‘The country’s gone to shit, so people are coming to London, because they think it’s a big city - there must be opportunities, but there aren’t.’

‘So your solution is to tell Remus to fuck off back to that hellhole he lived in before?’ Rayan asked.

‘I said no such thing,’ Simon snapped. ‘I just said that it was not the smartest thing he could’ve done.’

Rayan sighed and sat down beside Remus again.

‘Stop being such a bloody pessimist,’ he said. ‘And there’s no reason for you to take everything out on other people.’

Simon sighed deeply and got up.

‘Excuse me,’ he said and headed towards the loos. George rolled his eyes. Rayan smiled apologetically at Remus, and then said:

‘It’s nice to see you.’

‘It’s nice to see you too,’ Remus said and raised his glass. ‘Thanks for the drink.’ They clinked their glasses and drank. Then he put down his pint and turned to George. ‘Did you have a nice night out last week?’

‘Yes, really good,’ George said. ‘Thanks.’

‘Did you meet your American friend?’

He grinned broadly.

‘Yes, sir. He was just as gorgeous as I remember him being.’

‘Good for you,’ Remus said.
‘I heard you had a nice pub trip with Rayan,’ George said.

‘Yes, we did have a really nice time,’ he said and cast a glance at Rayan, who smiled at him. Under the table, his hand brushed against Remus’ knee.

‘Where are you staying?’ Rayan asked.

‘Nowhere particularly nice,’ Remus said cryptically. ‘It’s fairly central, but the place is practically falling apart.’

‘There are so many places like that in London,’ George said. ‘Extortionate prices, too.’

The door to the loos opened, and Simon stepped out. He crossed to their table, his step as decisive as on his way from it, and sat down again. Without looking at Remus, he turned to George.

‘Have you had time to have a look at that book I lent you?’

‘Yeah, a little bit,’ George said. ‘I can’t say I get the point yet.’

‘Where are you up to?’

Rayan turned to Remus, catching his eye. Remus smiled at him, feeling slightly embarrassed. He had the fleeting sense that Rayan was far fonder of him than he was of Rayan, which he did not know how to respond to. But perhaps that was not the case - maybe he just had too many other things to distract him. It struck him that living in wizarding London but socialising among Muggles added yet another thing he could not answer properly. Was it even possible to live in both worlds at once? If he had to choose, he wondered, which would he leave? Rayan’s hand came to rest on his arm. Remus covered his hand for a moment. The Muggle world terrified him. Its newspapers shouted hateful messages against him. But at least he was not alone against them. What did he have in the wizarding world?

But leaving that - giving up magic - seemed nigh impossible, and the inability to speak of such large parts of his life meant that the role of Muggle felt ill-fitting. He knew that despite what he might tell himself, he was not going to live completely in one world. He could not choose.

‘Remus, I just remembered,’ Rayan said and took his bag out from under the table. ‘I developed that film…’

‘Oh?’

Rayan dug through the bag until he found an envelope. From it he produced some photographs. Deftly, he flicked through them, until he stopped and handed the lower pile to Remus. It was the photograph of him in Rayan’s kitchen.

‘There are two more,’ Rayan said.

Remus placed all three on the table, looking at them together. Going from one to the other, Remus studied his own face in the photos. In the first, he looked serious and caught off guard. In the last, he smiled. He knew full well that it was him, but somehow he also did not recognise himself. This was not the face he saw in the mirror. Through Rayan’s lens, he had become, perhaps not handsome, but striking. In the greyscale, his eyes looked darker. The shadows in his face did not look like signs of illness, but were instead distinguished. There was a wariness in his gaze - no doubt the surprise, and the remnants of the panic attack - but he did not look like he had cried, as he had.
'What do you think?' Rayan asked. Remus realised suddenly that he had not spoken.

'They’re great,’ he said. ‘Just… a little surprised.’

'How come?’

'It doesn’t really look like me.’

'I think it does,’ Rayan said, picking up one of the photos and holding it up beside Remus’ face. ‘Yep, it’s definitely you.’

Remus laughed. Rayan smiled at him and collected the photographs.

'You can have them if you want.’

'But you took them, they’re yours…’

'I’ll just develop another set,’ Rayan said. ‘I’ve still got the negatives.’

'Alright then.’

'Wait a tic…’ He looked through his bag and found a piece of paper, which he folded the photographs into. ‘There. That’ll keep them safe.’

'Thank you.’ Remus took them from his hand, feeling a sudden tenderness towards him. Rayan’s smile changed a little.

'My pleasure.’

Remus looked away and drank some beer. He realised now how tired he was. Making a decision, he drained his glass.

'I’m sorry, I’m really tired,’ he said. ‘I think I’ll be off.’

'Really?’ Rayan said.

'Yeah, sorry.’

'It was nice of you to drop by,’ George said. Simon watched him, but said nothing. Remus put the photographs in his jacket pocket and stood.

'See you later.’

'Bye!’ they said.

He turned and walked out of the pub. When he stepped outside, the cold tickled his exposed neck. His scarf must still be on the back of his chair. He turned around to go back, but the door had already opened. Rayan stepped out, holding up his scarf.

‘You forgot this,’ he said and handed it over.

‘Thank you.’ Remus slung it around his neck. Rayan made no sign of going back inside.

‘You don’t have to leave, you know,’ he said.

‘I am feeling pretty tired,’ Remus said. ‘It wasn’t an excuse. I should go home and get a good night’s sleep.’
Rayan shifted uncomfortably.

‘I’m sorry Simon’s such an arsehole.’

Remus considered what to say.

‘He really doesn’t like me, does he?’

‘No,’ Rayan admitted.

‘Why?’

‘He can be real prick sometimes. Although he’s usually not this bad. I have no idea why he’s got it in for you, to be honest.’

Remus considered how to put his suspicion into words.

‘Is he jealous?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Rayan said. ‘I mean, we did have a fling about two years ago, but we’re just friends, you know?’

‘So are we.’

‘Well, I don’t sleep with him,’ Rayan said. ‘Not for quite a while.’ He smiled. ‘Just ignore him. He’s being an idiot.’

‘Alright,’ Remus said.

Rayan cleared his throat.

‘Look, I don’t mean to be pushy…’ His fingers pushed gently against Remus’, and intertwined with them. ‘But perhaps you could show me that terrible place you live now…’

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said. ‘If my landlady figures out I’m gay, she’ll evict me.’

Rayan sighed.

‘That’s no fun,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

Remus had not noticed him moving, but he seemed closer.

‘What about my place?’

‘I’d love to, but I did mean it,’ he said. ‘I’m really tired. But sometime soon.’

They looked at each other. Rayan’s eyes seemed to glow. Remus half wanted to pull away. Affection scared him. Was his fear of not being able or not daring to requite it, or of the possibility that it was again not true? He made himself keep looking, and felt his apprehensiveness lessen. Rayan leaned down and kissed him.

They kissed slowly. Their lips slipped against each other. The tips of their tongues touched once, a tantalising promise for another time.

Then Remus drew back. Rayan smiled at him again.

‘Look, I’ll see you soon, yeah?’
Remus smiled back.

‘Yes. I’ll be around the café.’

‘You know what?’ Rayan dug in his pockets. He found a pen but no paper. ‘Do you have anything to write on?’

Remus took the photographs, wrapped in a sheet of paper, of out his pocket. Rayan took them.

‘Cheers.’ Careful not to damage the photos, he wrote something down. When he handed back the parcel, Remus saw that it was a phone number. ‘Give me a call, okay?’

Remus smiled.

‘I will.’

They hugged. Rayan planted a kiss on his cheek, and Remus kissed him back. They drew apart, smiled again and parted.

Remus started walking, hearing the door to the pub close. From down the street, he heard a shout.

‘Bloody queer!’

He forced himself not to look over his shoulder, not speculate whether the man who had shouted was the kind of person who only called out slurs, or who would chase after him. He listened for more, but the next thing seemed to be addressed to one of his companions.

‘It’s fucking disgusting, doing that in the street.’

He continued walking, paying attention to the sounds around him. No one followed him. It was not until he turned onto Charing Cross Road that he relaxed. Angry shouts about his Muggle clothes seemed very tame in comparison to this.

Briefly, despite his fatigue, he regretted declining Rayan’s advances. *I will see him again soon*, he told himself. He found himself longing for that. The events of the full-moon had left him feeling tainted. He wanted to reestablish contact with another human being, to tell himself that Greyback was not right. The wolf was not him. He had a mind, and a body, and both were his own. There was no fur under his skin. He was, he told himself, shouting over the doubt, loveable.
Chapter 14

The Sunday was the first day of December. Every night, Remus would rise several times to feed the fire in the small stove. It made little difference, and he took to sleeping wrapped in his cloak. The days were not as bad, and being out and about helped. Remus made frequent trips to the post-office, often enough that the office workers soon started recognising him and addressing him by name, having handled his mail. On Monday, replies to his first applications started arriving. He had expected it, but when he read the letters of rejection, he still got an unpleasant sinking feeling.

He wrote more letters of applications to new adverts in the paper, and started asking in shops all around wizarding London. He did everything he could think of to look as respectable and proper as possible. He spent the evenings mending his clothes. In the mornings, he shaved despite the half-light in his room. He had put dittany on the scratch on his jaw, which was fading into a scar. One day, he cut his hair, having enchanted his shaving mirror to hover in mid-air. Despite all these efforts, whenever he caught sight of his reflection in the street, he looked careworn and threadbare.

Knockturn Alley was an ever-changing place. People moved through it, here one day and gone the next, whether to another place, or to another plane. The only constant was the danger. Remus had always been warned off going there as a child, and during his time in the Order he had felt wary of it, but he had never realised the extent of it. Perhaps the cowed body-language he had noticed in himself was simply a natural defence. There was something in this place, he thought, that might break your will if you stayed too long. Resignation and despair hung in the air.

The threat was not only to morale and self. It was without doubt an unhealthy place. The stink of sewage and refuse was everywhere, and blisters, boils and wax-white complexions were common sights. A few days into his stay, Remus saw a coffin being carried out of one of buildings flanking the lodging house. When he saw the young man who alone followed the pall-bearers, he reflected how ill he looked. Unwillingly, he had wondered whether this man soon would follow whoever was in the coffin. He had stopped and bowed his head, not having a hat to take off.

In the daytime, Knockturn Alley was filled with shoppers, beggars, vendors. Quacks selling amulets walked the streets, displaying their wares on trays hanging from their necks. Paupers stopped anyone with clothes less threadbare than their own, pleading for help. Children ran errands, dodging between the legs of the adults. Now and then, a well-dressed witch or wizard would enter the alley, often pulling their cloak over their head, or simply holding a handkerchief to their nose and mouth, in order to ward off the smell and hide their face. Often, such a presence made people fall silent. Only the most desperate would come forward and beg from them. Not once had Remus seen them give a beggar anything. Instead, they would push them away, not minding if they fell to the ground. Fear and awe mixed among the crowd. Without anyone voicing it, everyone knew what kind of people they were. Remus had only witnessed one attempt at resistance. The witch with no hands, who Remus had learned was called Sarah, had once caught sight of one such wizard, and screamed:

‘Death Eater! Go rot in Azkaban, you scum!’

Someone had rushed forward and put their hand over her mouth, and her curses, both profane and magical, were muffled. Remus turned away, hoping that the wizard would not confront her. He remembered that during the war, he had heard rumours of Death Eaters cutting the hands off Muggle-borns to prevent them from using their wands. He had thought it sounded too gruesome to be true at the time, but now he realised that perhaps it was not so after all.

As soon as the sun set over London, Knockturn Alley seemed to change. At night it was another
world. The shoppers disappeared and the crowds dispersed, but the alley did not empty. Everyone kept close against the walls. The amulet-sellers were replaced with pedlars of other wares. Women without cloaks in the cold weather, walked up and down the alley, scanning the faces of those who passed. A boy (for he could be no more than seventeen) would stand a block or so from the lodging house, and follow Remus with his eyes when he passed. Remus in turn would look away, embarrassed and afraid.

Even when he sought refuge in his room, the harsh reality outside would make itself known. One night he was woken by screams of ‘murder!’ He did not know what to do, and fell asleep again before deciding to get out of bed. The following morning, he asked Madam Wilkes about it.

‘It happens,’ she said and shrugged. ‘You’ll just have to get used to it.’

‘But if someone’s being attacked…’

‘Stay out of people’s business,’ she snorted and went back into her rooms.

Celeste had been right that the other lodgers at Madam Wilkes’ kept to themselves. Remus ran into Mr Messenger one evening, just after sundown. He looked much like Celeste had described him, dark-haired, broad, handsome man, but his cheeks were sunken and his eyes held a look of tortured humanity. Remus had said hello to him and introduced himself, but he had only murmured a reply before wrapping his long black coat around himself and hurrying off out. Some of his other neighbours would at least give him their name - like the weedy Miss Crop, who took in armfuls of mending for a living, on the second floor, or Mister Warren on the third floor. When Remus had met him in the stairs, he had grinned, revealing wooden dentures.

‘You’re a wizard. I can tell. You’ve got good teeth,’ he had said. ‘Teeth are my business. I would pay well for one or two of those. Demand is high, see. Some use goblin teeth, but they’re ugly things - never look natural. And far too sharp - people end up biting themselves badly. So nice wizards’ teeth - well-looked after, from a young mouth…’

‘I’m not interested,’ Remus had said, wondering why he had not interrupted the man earlier. His leer reminded him slightly of Greyback.

‘I’d pay a galleon for a canine,’ the man had said.

‘No, thank you.’ With those words, he had turned and fled.

No one else stopped to talk. In his own way, Remus was happy about that. He had very little to say. Wizarding London felt like an exposed place. There had been things he had worried would come out when he lived among Muggles, but here he felt that all it would take was someone to see his scars and draw the obvious conclusion. In the Muggle capital he disappeared in the crowd in a way he had not done in the small rural community of Bexwold. He looked for signs in the shop-windows there as well, but he knew that without an address which he could give, he was unemployable. As a resident of wizarding London, he did not exist in the Muggle city. The only place he visited properly was the café in Soho, using the ever-shrinking amount of Muggle money he had left on lunch. He did not run into Rayan or George during the next few days, and neither (to his relief) Simon, although Siobhan worked most days. One day he even asked her if there was anything - anything at all - he could do. She smiled sadly.

‘Sorry, Remus. We’ve got all the help we need,’ she said. ‘We get a lot of people asking.’

‘Of course,’ he said, trying to hide his disappointment. He saw why people would want to work in
such a place, surrounded by people who would not judge them.

‘I’ll let you know if I hear about anything,’ Siobhan said. ‘What kind of thing are you looking for?’

‘Anything.’

‘Full-time? Part-time?’

‘Either.’

He thought her gaze changed at that - maybe she had glimpsed his desperation.

‘Alright. I’ll let you know. But don’t get your hopes up.’

In many ways, the café became a refuge. By Wednesday, Remus had still not found a job, and, feeling the need to recharge himself, he put on Muggle clothes and set out. He was so lost in thoughts of lunch under the colourful portrait of Oscar Wilde that it took him a while to realise who the two women walking in front of him were. Then suddenly he recognised the dainty witch’s hat, and the purple hair-scarf.

‘Celeste!’

Celeste turned around, and Chidi looked over her shoulder. He rushed up to them and caught his breath.

‘Gosh, you look like an actual Muggle,’ Celeste said.

Ignoring the comment, he took a deep breath and said:

‘I wanted to apologise. For… making assumptions.’

Celeste sighed.

‘Thanks. Apology accepted.’

‘I really shouldn’t have…’

‘It’s fine,’ she said with a shrug. ‘It happens all the time. I’m just fed up with it, you know?’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I understand the feeling. Not about that, but…’

She looked uncertain at that, but let it pass. Chidi smiled at Remus and said:

‘I am afraid we are in a hurry.’

‘Yes,’ Celeste said, shook herself and smiled at Remus, evidently pushing her annoyance aside. ‘We’re on business.’

‘I won’t keep you,’ he said. ‘Good luck.’

‘Cheers.’

They said goodbye, and Remus hurried on. He turned into Diagon Alley, and went through the Leaky Cauldron. He continued down the large shopping street, and turned off into Soho. The sky was cloudy, bathing the city in a greyish light. As he turned into the right street, he felt the first rain drops fall. He was glad to enter the café.
The café was empty but for one table, where Siobhan was seated together with a woman with short, greying hair. She looked up when the door opened.

‘Hello, Remus,’ she said and stood up. ‘How are you doing?’

‘Alright, thanks,’ he said, coming up to the counter.

‘Any luck on the job front?’

‘No, not yet,’ he said.

‘What can I get you?’

‘A toasted ham sandwich, please. And a cup of tea.’

‘Sure.’

As Remus counted out the money, Siobhan’s friend caught his eye. He looked over at her, certain he had been wrong. When he looked more closely, he realised that he had seen correctly. The woman was wearing a set of witches’ robes. Over the back of her chair, a crimson cloak hung. She was watching him with sharp eyes. Siobhan, who had realised that they were looking at each other, said:

‘I should have introduced you. Amelia, this is Remus. Remus, this is my girlfriend, Amelia.’

The witch stood up. Her cloak shifted, and he caught sight of the emblem of the Wizengamot. Warily, Remus shook her hand.

‘We’ve met, actually,’ Remus said, realising who she was.

‘Oh, okay,’ Siobhan said, pleasantly surprised. ‘Small world, eh? Well, you catch up, and I’ll get your lunch, Remus.’

She went into the kitchen, leaving them alone. The witch sat down again, still watching him.

‘Remind me,’ she said. She had a deep, commanding voice. ‘When did we meet?’

‘It’s been briefly, a few times,’ he said. ‘I knew Edgar.’

Amelia Bones’ face softened a little.

‘Did you?’ she said. ‘Oh, poor Edgar. And his little children…’ For a moment she was lost in sorrowful reminiscence, then she pulled herself together and looked at him. ‘Do sit down. I suppose you were at the funeral?’

Remus took Siobhan’s chair.

‘Yes.’

‘So you’re one of Dumbledore’s lot?’

‘Yes, I suppose you could call it that.’

Her gaze was making him nervous. Perhaps it was just that she was another magical person in a Muggle setting. Perhaps her involvement in Magical Law was what worried him. When she spoke again, her voice was much more pleasant than before:
‘Now I remember you. You were friends with James Potter.’

The mention of his dead friend’s name had an odd effect on him. It simultaneously shocked and comforted him.

‘I was.’ They were silent again - all their mutual acquaintances were dead.

‘Yes, I remember you at the funeral. I’m very sorry.’

Remus tried to smile, but it only turned into a grimace.

‘So am I.’

‘I don’t think you gave any evidence, in the trials afterwards,’ Bones observed. ‘Dumbledore was very keen on bringing in people who had seen things…’

‘Well…’ He would not have made a good witness. The court would not have accepted the statements of a werewolf as reliable. There were other reasons too, of course, and for once they seemed easier to mention. ‘I had a bad war.’

‘There is no other kind,’ Bones said.

Remus cast a glance towards the kitchen, to make sure that Siobhan was not within earshot, and said:

‘I don’t mean to be rude, but… what are you doing here?’

‘I’m having lunch,’ Bones said levelly and picked up her half-eaten sandwich.

‘Yes, but…’ He trailed off. ‘Far be it from me to criticise a member of the Wizengamot, but… in robes? In a Muggle café? Isn’t that… breaking the International Statute of Secrecy?’

Bones snorted.

‘Oh, we’re not very worried about things like that here,’ she said. ‘Everyone’s used to people dressing oddly in Soho.’

‘Not in full-length robes, Madam Bones.’

‘Call me Amelia,’ she said, her mouth full of sandwich. ‘Meeting me here, you have that right.’ She finished her sandwich and then put the monocle hanging from her neck into her eye-socket to look at him. ‘Do you know how common ritual magic is in the gay community?’

‘No,’ Remus said, confused.

‘Surprisingly common. The Ministry never gets involved, of course. We (or, rather, they) aren’t very interested in magic which isn’t wand-based. I would say it’s more common among the women, so you might not have noticed it…’

Remus shifted, uncomfortable at someone telling with so little effort.

‘My point is that witches and wizards blend in well here. The Muggles might find us a bit odd - but they find each other a bit odd too. Here, we are free to be ourselves, and simply a little eccentric.’ She gazed at him for a moment. ‘You had no idea, did you?’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘I didn’t.’
‘When people disapprove, one finds somewhere to hide,’ Amelia said matter-of-factly. ‘Places like this are a sanctuary both for magic folk and Muggles. We’re both outcasts, of sorts. So we band together. We simply make sure that some questions aren’t asked. I wouldn’t recommend dropping magic into the conversation, but people here are much more likely not to be confused if you do than elsewhere. You’d find it hard to find a more candid place where wizards and Muggles mix.’ She sighed. ‘Something that makes the rest of the wizarding world even less happy with us, of course. Not only do most of us not have children, and fail to pass on our magic. We also let Muggles get close to us. It’s no wonder that there were several attacks around here during the war.’

‘I never heard about that,’ Remus said, shocked.

‘You wouldn’t have,’ Amelia said drily.

‘No, I expect I wouldn’t.’ He felt a stab of anger towards Dumbledore, Moody, and all the people who conveyed intelligence to them. Had that not been seen as relevant? Had they not heard about it? Or did they not care?

‘Was anyone killed?’ he asked.

‘I know about one girl - a Muggle, not a witch - who died, but there might have been others.’

‘What was her name?’ It seemed important to know.

Amelia’s face fell. She picked the monocle from her eye. Just then, Siobhan came out from the kitchen.

‘Here you go,’ she said and placed a mug and a plate in front of Remus.

‘Thank you,’ Remus said, his enthusiasm for food gone now.

‘Siobhan, do you remember the gas-leak up towards Wardour Street?’ Amelia asked. ‘It was in 1980.’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ she said, remembering. ‘I was still a student then, but I remember it.’

‘Do you recall the name of the girl who died?’

‘Her name was Lucine,’ Siobhan said with certainty. ‘She was the friend of a friend of mine. I never met her, but… It was really sad.’

‘Yes - terrible,’ Amelia said with a sigh. Remus nodded, not knowing what to say.

‘A gas-leak,’ he said finally.

‘Yes,’ Amelia said with a meaningful gaze. In that gaze there was some kind of reprimand, telling him that despite everything she had said, there was some things that needed to be hidden. Remus could not respond to that without giving too much away. He found himself thinking that there should be some memorial. Surely Amelia Bones would agree? It seemed strange if she, whose lover was a Muggle woman, would not feel perturbed by the fact that none of the Muggles who died as the wizards clashed together were remembered. Even if he did not know who she was, Remus told himself that he would try to remember the dead woman’s name. The fact that Siobhan knew it had been some comfort at least.

‘I need to get back to work, I’m afraid,’ Amelia said and got to her feet. ‘Thank you for an interesting conversation.’ She nodded at Remus.
‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘Good bye, darling,’ Amelia said and turned to Siobhan. They kissed.

‘We’re still on for tomorrow night, right?’

‘Yes. I’ll see you at six.’ Amelia pressed her hand, then let go of it, put her monocle back in and left. Siobhan watched her go, and sighed happily when the door closed. With an embarrassed smile, she looked at Remus.

‘I’m still not over the butterflies stage,’ she explained. She collected the plate from the table and went into the kitchen. Remus took his copy of *A Single Man* out of his pocket. He placed it on the table, but was not certain whether he wanted to read it. The lonesome atmosphere and the pain of the dead lover it was about felt too close to home. Instead, he moved to a table by the window, and, holding his tea-cup between his hands, watched the rain pour down outside.

***

That night, Remus lay awake late enough to hear a nearby church-tower strike two. When he woke, it was the quality of the light that told him that it was approaching midday. His pocket-watch, which lay on the bedside table, showed the time as half past eleven.

He was halfway through shaving when there came a heavy knock on the door. He looked over at the door, all too aware that he was half-dressed and had a face full of soap. There was another knock.

‘Mr Lupin!’ It was Madam Wilkes’ voice. ‘Mr Lupin, are you there?’

He put down his razor and went over to the door.

‘Would you give me a few minutes, Madam Wilkes?’

‘It’s about the rent, Mr Lupin,’ she answered, her voice penetrating the door well. ‘You paid last Thursday, and today is Thursday, so if you are not intending to leave, you have to pay today.’

Remus closed his eyes for a moment. He had known that this would happen, and he knew that he did not have enough money.

‘I haven’t forgotten, Madam Wilkes,’ he called to her. ‘I will pay you in the afternoon.’

‘Make sure you do!’

He heard how she descended the stairs with heavy steps. Hearing her leave, he turned back to his shaving, his spirits considerably lower.

As he finished dressing, Remus considered what to do. Leaving was out of the question, but there was no way he would earn that kind of money today. With a heavy heart, he picked up his pocket watch. He looked at it for a moment longer, then put it in his pocket.

He left hurriedly, glad not to meet anyone in the stairs. He walked fast with his head bowed, not wanting anyone to see where he was going. It should not be shameful, but as soon as he told himself that, his father’s features appeared in front of him. His imagination suggested vividly how pale Mr Lupin would become, and how the look of indignation would spread over his face. *You can’t be serious, Remus. You pawned your pocket watch?*
What else am I going to do? he answered defiantly.

Come home, of course, his father would say.

No, he couldn’t do that. He walked quicker the last few yards.

Inside the pawnshop, all manner of things - stuffed owls, marble busts, necklaces, books, cauldrons, magical instruments, belts, hats, decorated inkhorns, Greek vases, antique clocks, things valuable and commonplace - lined the walls. The little man behind the counter was in the middle of inspecting a pair of earrings through a magnifying glass. For a few moments, Remus stood there, wondering whether the proprietor had not heard him. Then, in his own time, the man put down the earrings and the magnifying glass, and turned to him.

‘Good afternoon, sir. How might I help you?’

‘Good afternoon.’ He did not know what to say, so he simply took the watch out of his pocket and put it on the counter. The pawnbroker raised his eyebrows, looking intrigued, and reached for his magnifying glass again.

‘Ah. May I...?’

‘Go ahead.’

He picked up the timepiece and turned it in his hands. First he looked at it simply through his spectacles, then through the magnifying glass. With accustomed fingers, he lifted first the glass and then the back of the watch.

‘Early twentieth century,’ he said, still peering at the watch. ‘It’s possible to tell from the model. This type with the interchanging moon and sun went out of fashion in the 1920s, and you see very few watches made after that decade with them. And there is a natural *terminus ante quem*, of course, because of the first engraving - “Julius 1907”. And I expect that the second pertains to you, sir?’

‘Yes,’ Remus said.

‘An heirloom, then. It’s been well-looked after. A few scratches... the second hand’s been mended, but well. The gilding has survived nicely. The chain is not in as good nick, but still, passable. The key is new.’ He put down the magnifying glass. ‘It’s quite a nice watch.’

Remus took a deep breath and asked:

‘What would you give me for it?’

The pawnbroker turned the watch in his hand.

‘Five galleons and six sickles. Had the chain been in better condition...’

‘Fine - that’s fine.’ He was not interested in the merits of the watch - he would lose it anyway.

‘Very well, sir.’ The pawnbroker filled in the pawn ticket with slow care. The delay unsettled Remus. Even though he was in no hurry, he was eager to leave. After some time, he was presented with the pawn ticket and the money.

‘The loan is for a fortnight, terminating on the nineteenth of December.’

Remus put the galleons into his purse first and then swept the sickles in with the gloved side of his
hand. He put the ticket in the purse as well, for safe-keeping.

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, sir,’ the pawnbroker said and bowed, genuinely politely. Remus left, reflecting that perhaps seeing people let go of their valued possessions made you kind.

Entering the pawnshop had felt awkward, but leaving it was far worse. He pulled his cloak around himself and clutched his purse with his free hand. For once there was something in it to steal. He would go back to the lodging house at once, pay the rent and find a good hiding-place for the rest of the money. Then he would have to continue looking for work. If he could find the money, he should redeem the watch.

He turned right to go back into Knockturn Alley, but a familiar face made him stop in his tracks. Weaving in and out of the crowd, black robes billowing around him, was Severus Snape. He no longer had the appearance of a scrawny seventeen year-old. At twenty-five he was tall and forbidding. Maturity had made his feature less gawky, but his cheeks looked more sunken and his skin more sallow. There was something aged about him.

Snape disappeared for a moment behind a stand, and then reappeared, far closer. Remus did not want to be seen, particularly not by someone like Snape. Not wasting any time to find a better hiding-place, he ducked into a cramped back-alley, running down the side of the pawnshop. The alley smelled of garbage and cat piss, and was just wide enough for one person to walk down it. Remus pressed himself against the wall facing away from Snape, and tried to shrink into the shadows.

A knot of conflicting feelings was tightening in his stomach. Throughout his school-years, he had felt guilty about his friends’ taunting of their fellow-pupil, but he had not once been given a reason to like Snape. Even when he had hung around Lily, he had never said two civil words to Remus. Later on, the words he had said had been all but polite. Remus’ friendship with James and Sirius had been enough to make him persona non grata for Snape and the realisation that he was a werewolf had pushed him into hatred.

Just as that familiar figure passed the mouth of the alley, a new thought presented itself. At school, Snape had always seemed drawn to the Dark Arts, and he had mixed with people like Avery and Mulciber, who had joined Voldemort as soon as they had left school. In the years of fighting, Remus had sometimes wondered whether one of the hoods his enemies wore hid Snape’s face.

That lead to another thought. If he had been a Death Eater, had he known that there was a traitor in the Order? Had he and Sirius Black, sworn enemies at school, sat beside each other at the Dark Lord’s table? Had they put aside old grudges when Sirius turned his playful malice from Snape and towards his best friend? Had Voldemort made Black and Snape shake hands and become comrades? The thought that they would be allied, that they both knew what fate would befall James before it did, was horrifying, but the more thought of it, the more he believed it. He wanted to rush out of the alley and catch him up, grab the front of his robes and shout, ‘did you know? did you let it happen?’ If he did, how would Snape react? Perhaps there would be fists or drawn wands. He savoured the thought of violence. He edged closer into the alley to stop himself form doing anything rash.

The sun from the main street was obscured, as though by a large cloud. The voice which came from the mouth of the alley made him jump.

‘What are you doing hiding down there, lad?’
For a moment, Remus was only aware of the huge, blue eye rolling back and forth. Then he saw
the face around it, and realised who was looking at him so sternly.

‘Auror Moody?’

‘Stop clutching your chest like you’re about to faint and come out of there,’ Moody growled,
stepping aside. Remus hurried out of the alley and into the sunlight, blinking a little at the
brightness. Despite being dazzled, he could still make out the auror’s changed face.

‘Why were you down there, Lupin?’ Moody demanded. Remus turned his attention to the crowd,
but could not see Snape anywhere.

‘Old school acquaintance. Not one I wanted to renew.’ Moody growled in understanding. The large
blue eye had swivelled around, so that the iris disappeared into his head. ‘Erm, Auror Moody...
What’s happened to you?’

‘What? You mean this?’ He raised his hand to his face and, to Remus’ disgust, tapped his blue eye
with a fingernail. It made a noise like porcelain. ‘Got hit with a curse - the healers had to take my
eye out. Not too bad, actually. This new one is useful.’ The eye swung back to survey Remus like
its dark twin was doing. ‘I don’t think I need to ask what’s happened to you,’ he said
authoritatively. ‘Out of a job, are you?’ Remus nodded. ‘For how long?’

‘Just since the full moon.’

Moody raised a mangled eyebrow - evidently he found that hard to believe.

‘Long enough, I should think,’ he said at last. ‘You look starved, boy. Come along. Let’s get you
some grub.’

‘No, there’s no need...’ Remus said. ‘You don’t have to - I’m fine...’

‘“Fine!”’ repeated Moody. ‘Fine!? I’ve seen your lot look better the day after the full moon. Come
with me, lad. If you collapse in the street, you’ll be my department’s problem before you’re the
Being division’s, anyway.’

Moody had a voice which was difficult to disobey. When he turned, Remus followed him. The
crowd divided for them in reverence for the Auror uniform. When they passed a shop-window, he
cought sight of their reflection. Moody’s scars may make Remus’ look like slight irregularities, but
beside that resplendent scarlet coat, Remus’ robes looked even more shabby than they had done
before. He realised too that he was pulling up his shoulders again, as if trying to hide himself. He
straightened up as best he could.

When Moody spoke, it was so sudden that Remus almost not registered it.

‘What did you pawn?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You were in the pawnshop, weren’t you? What did you pawn?’ Moody asked again.

‘Oh.’ Remus looked at his feet. ‘My pocket-watch.’

‘And the loan’s for - what? Three weeks?’

‘A fortnight.’
Moody grunted a little. Remus had expected to be scolded, like he had imagined his father doing, but the auror said no more on the matter. Instead, he ushered him into a nearby pub. A boy, looking rather frightened at Moody’s imposing figure, led them to a table.

‘A plate of bread, cheese, cold cut meat, that kind of thing, and a tankard of ale. That’s all.’ Then, Moody turning to Remus. ‘So, who was your school chum?’

Here was an opportunity to get some answers.

‘Severus Snape.’

Moody’s lip curled.

‘I know the name.’

Remus took a deep breath to gather his nerve.

‘Auror Moody, was Snape ever accused of being a Death Eater?’

Moody made a grimace and leaned in a little.

‘He was never taken to trial, if that’s what you mean,’ he said. ‘But yes, there were certainly accusations thrown about. None of them came to anything, though.’

‘Why not?’

Moody was about to answer, but the serving-boy appeared at that moment. He put the plate and tankard down in front of Moody, who pushed it over the table to Remus.

‘Eat,’ he told him. Remus realised that he would not give him any answers until he had done so, so he started eating. It tasted better than anything he had eaten all week. In the meantime, Moody took out a hip flask, raised it in a lazy toast and drank from it. Remus took a gulp of the ale. Once he had swallowed, he asked:

‘Why wasn’t Snape put on trial?’

‘Dumbledore vouched for him.’

‘Dumbledore? Why?’

Both of Moody’s eyes, which had been pointing in different directions all the time they had been sitting down, now looked the same way.

‘Because apparently Snape turned spy for us.’

Remus put his cutlery down in shock.

‘Did he give evidence?’

‘Separately, yes. He gave names. But he never witnessed at anyone else’s trial. Dumbledore’s word was good enough for the court.’

Remus could not contain his anger.

‘He should have been tried anyway. They all should have been. Separately and properly. The way it was done was a disgrace.’
Moody sighed.

‘I know what this is about, and it’s most definitely not Snape.’

Remus met his gaze.

‘If Crouch hadn’t been so eager to make a point, we would have had answers. You must have wanted them too.’

‘But Crouch did what he did, and none of your youthful anger can change that, Lupin,’ Moody replied grimly. ‘Besides, the outcome would have been the same.’

‘Still,’ Remus said, Snape forgotten. ‘He should have had a trial. If it was anything like fair, he would have been sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban, like he was, but at least it would have been done properly.’ He sat back, deflated after his outburst. He drank some ale and ate some cheese, no longer very interested in the taste of either. Moody was watching him closely.

‘Of course we wanted answers,’ he said. ‘Everyone in the Order did. Dumbledore was furious at Crouch for just throwing Black to the Dementors, but it’s too late to change that. The trial should have happened four years ago. It can’t be held now. After that much time in Azkaban, he’s unlikely to be in any shape to stand trial. He’ll have lost his mind long ago.’

‘But there’s so much we don’t know,’ Remus said. To his horror, he heard that his voice had gone strained. There was a lump in his throat. ‘Sometimes I think it through, and it doesn’t make sense.’

‘You can’t be saying that you think that Black didn’t betray the Potters.’

‘No, no, that’s not what I’m saying. He did - of course he did. But sometimes, there are things that don’t seem to add up. Not important things, but nevertheless…’

‘Don’t underestimate small things,’ Moody said.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Remus said and shrugged. ‘Mostly it’s just a feeling. I keep thinking that I should have realised what was happening. Sometimes I think “it can’t be right - I would have known”, but I did know. I just thought it was... something else.’ He did not dare say that he had assumed (foolishly and selfishly) that Sirius had fallen out of love with him, and that was why he was suddenly so disagreeable. ‘If I hadn’t been so self-absorbed…’

‘You can’t blame yourself for this.’

Remus laughed, surprising himself. His eyes stung.

‘I do blame myself,’ he said. ‘If someone should have known, it should have been me.’

‘No. It should have been Dumbledore,’ Moody said firmly. ‘He’s a superior Legilimens to anyone, and even he didn’t realise that Black had gone bad.’

Remus barely listened, even if he knew Moody had a point. He was still lost in his memories.

‘It must all have been true once. He couldn’t have lied since he was eleven. He couldn’t have fooled the Sorting Hat. It’s just a question of when the deception began...’

But Moody shook his head.

‘His heart was rotten,’ he said. ‘Mark my words, there was nothing that any of us could have done for that one. Azkaban is where he belongs.’
Remus folded his hands on the table and looked down on them. As so many times before, he wondered what had made Sirius, who had hated his family’s pureblood vanity, turn his back on the convictions he had made his own, in order to become the kind of person people had expected him to be when he was a child. Was it as Moody implied, that Sirius had simply had bad blood - that dark magic and bigotry had incubated inside him until it saw its chance? Or had his need for rebellion somehow become so great that he decide to revolt against the Order as well? He found it impossible to think about it. Any reasoned argument was drowned by the feeling of surrealism. Sirius had demonstrated his aptitude for cruelty already at school when he had tricked Snape into the Shrieking Shack, but he had never seemed fickle. Obviously Remus was wrong about that, but it still confused him.

‘How much I hate him, I keep feeling that I’m being too soft on him,’ he admitted. Moody’s mouth spasmed in a way which might have been a compassionate smile.

‘The two of you were close, I know that. And you took it hard - must have, to drive you to that.’ He made a vague gesture towards him.

Remus froze, startled.

‘How do you know about that?’

Moody rubbed his chin awkwardly, aware that he had overstepped some social boundary.

‘This new eye sees through solid objects - it sort of slipped through your sleeve. I saw that scar on your wrist. I’m still getting used to what’s actually visible to other people.’ Remus put his hand on his forearm, as if to guard it. ‘That’s how you got it, though, isn’t it?’

Moody’s tone was uncharacteristically soft. Remus looked away.

‘Yes.’

‘It must have been a silver blade, to have stained your skin like that.’

‘It was my father’s potions knife. It look weeks to heal. They had to stitch it up to keep it closed.’

‘When was this?’

‘The twelfth of January 1982.’ Remus leaned back in his chair, watching his hands again. The lump in his throat was back. He wanted so badly not to think about this, much less talk about it. He wished he could flee from the whole situation. Still, he realised that he could not leave it like this. ‘I just couldn’t bear it.’ He shifted, leaning his elbows on the table and putting his chin in his hands. There was a sob filling up his mouth, and he did not want to let it out. ‘I was such a fool.’

He heard Moody sigh and lean forward.

‘Are you expecting a dressing-down, Lupin? Think I’m going to tell you what a coward you are?’

‘Isn’t that what I am?’

‘I can’t pretend I’m not damned glad you failed, and I’m certainly not the only one. But you are not a coward, or a fool. I doubt you did it because you made a mistake in your logical thinking.’

A tear fell down Remus’ cheek. He wiped it away and swallowed, but his voice still shook when he spoke.
'It terrifies me, to think about it. Remembering it is... like watching someone else, someone who isn’t quite a whole person. It was like I couldn’t function, because they were dead. There wasn’t enough left of me without them.’ He wiped his face on his sleeve.

‘But you got through it,’ Moody said, as if making an observation.

‘Doesn’t make it go away, though, does it?’ Remus said. ‘Besides, it’s not just about me. I’ve learned to live with it. But my parents haven’t. They’re never going to let it go. They spent almost a year watching over me after it happened - I wasn’t left on my own for as much as a minute. And when I eventually got better, moved out, went to find a job... they hated it. They were afraid I’d try again as soon as I was out of their sight. It’s still like that. They’re never going to trust me ever again.’ He took a deep breath before continuing. ‘I betrayed them. So many people died in the war. I survived it, and then I tried to go the same way. Isn’t that ungrateful?’

For the first time since they breached this subject, Remus looked at Moody. He did not think he had ever seen him look so sad.

‘You were a casualty,’ he said, speaking slowly and clearly, as if it was crucial that he understood. ‘There’s no way around that.’

‘I know,’ Remus said quietly. ‘Or I do when I think about it. Mum and dad never wanted me to fight. They were always so worried. But I don’t think they ever counted that I would come back... like that. In a way, I think it would have been easier for them if I’d lost a limb or something. They would have known how to handle that. But this... it terrified them. They were actually afraid of me. Not for their sake, of course, but for mine.’ He sighed. ‘I don’t know if this makes any sense.’

‘It does,’ Moody said. ‘It’s not really uncommon, I’m sorry to say. You see it all the time in my line of work, even if no one talks about it. To be honest, I’m not surprised. Dumbledore has my upmost respect in many ways, but he pushed you too hard. All of you. He didn’t see when you started cracking. Or if he did see it, he didn’t do anything about it.’ Remus opened his mouth to speak, but Moody held up a scarred hand and continued: ‘And the fact that you cracked says nothing about your value as a fighter. You made a considerable difference. But the fact remains that you were young, inexperienced and only trained in the field. Even with you lot, the odds were beyond bad. Too much rested on you.’

Briefly, Remus considered whether that was another reason for what Sirius had done. Perhaps the fighting had put such a strain on him that he had just wanted to end the war. They said that he had been unhinged. He had not even resisted when the Aurors came to arrest him - all he had done was laugh. Perhaps he had not been triumphant, but simply relieved that it was finally over... No. Remus was not ready to give him a reason. Besides, no one could have anticipated the end of the war that night. When Black had handed the secret of the Potters’ hiding-place to Voldemort, it had been to achieve victory, not a ceasefire.

‘I think about the war a lot,’ Remus admitted. ‘Even when I don’t want to. It’s like it sticks to the inside of my skull. I can’t stop thinking about it. I am better - much better, but sometimes…’

‘Sometimes…?’ Moody repeated.

Remus hesitated, afraid at the way this would sound.

‘At Halloween I went to Godric’s Hollow, to James and Lily’s grave, and Dumbledore startled me in the graveyard. I drew my wand at him. I didn’t cast a spell, but it was a close thing.’

‘Well, when something does happen, you’ll be ready,’ Moody said.
‘But right now, nothing looks likely to happen,’ Remus said. ‘This isn’t about being vigilant. This is about that some part of me can’t tell a sudden sound from a threat, and that’s the part that controls my wand-arm.’ He decided to say what he had been thinking for so long out loud. ‘I think the war damaged me, in more ways than one. I don’t think I can function in normal society.’

Moody sighed.

‘I’m the wrong person to ask about that.’ He took a swig out of his hip-flask. ‘I know it’s difficult. But two things. The first is that barring other incidents, it’s going to get easier to deal with, as long as you’re aware that you might lash out. The second is that when this war continues, you’ll be ready. Because it’s not over. Voldemort will come back. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Remus said, bitterly. ‘He can’t be gone. But I don’t want to go around waiting for that. I want to be able to have a life.’

Now, Moody most definitely smiled at him.

‘Don’t we all?’ Then he waved a hand at his plate. ‘Come on, eat. You need it.’

Remus obeyed. The beer made him relax a little, and the food did good.

‘I’ve never talked about this before,’ he said after a while.

‘Who knows?’

‘My parents. Dumbledore. They wrote to him when it happened. I don’t know if it was because they wanted his support, or because they thought it was his fault. Not that my parents would ever speak ill of Dumbledore, but they’re very good at insinuating blame like that. And he must have told professor McGonagoll. She wrote me a letter - a very considerate one. I suppose she felt responsible too, as she was my old Head of House. But that’s it.’ He shrugged. ‘I barely know anyone my own age anymore. Of the other Gryffindors in my year, five are dead and one is in Azkaban. There’s only me left. There are the people from the Order, but… I fell out of touch with them. So I don’t really have any friends to confide in.’ He ate another bite of ham, and then said: ‘I don’t think people who didn’t fight notice that - how many people died.’

He thought of the girl who had died in Soho. He had told himself to remember her name, but now it was gone from his mind.

‘They just see the gain,’ Moody said grimly. ‘These are the people who threw parties the day after Voldemort disappeared, and won’t hear of the possibility of him coming back. It’s easier for them not to dwell on the price that was paid, because they refused to pay it.’

They sat in silence while Remus finished his food. Moody’s insistence on that the war was not over unsettled him, even if he knew he was probably right. Still, talking about some of the things on his mind made him feel a little better. He had never thought he would give those confidences to anyone, certain that no one would be sympathetic, but Moody had been surprisingly encouraging.

‘Thank you for the food,’ he said. Moody waved away his thanks and said:

‘Tosh. Glad to get the opportunity to see how you’re keeping.’ Then he surveyed him. ‘You have somewhere to live?’

‘I’m in a lodging house.’

‘Where?’
Reluctantly, Remus answered:

‘Knockturn Alley. It’s not the nicest, but... it’s what I can afford.’

‘Just stay away from the warlocks,’ Moody advised. ‘Most people there aren’t bad, really. What about work?’

‘I’m looking. No luck yet.’

‘Do you need money?’

Remus shook his head.

‘No, I’ve got some now. Actually, I need to get back. I have to pay my rent.’

They said goodbye in the street outside the pub. Remus watched the auror limping away, grateful for this unexpected ally. Then he turned back towards Knockturn Alley, and went to face his landlady.
Chapter 15

Remus was starting to find the routine of applications and rejections tedious. On Friday morning, he surveyed the list of applications he had sent. Counting them, he realised he had sent fifteen letters in nine days. Half of them he had already struck off the list, having been rejected. He pushed the question of how soon he would be rejected from the others away. Instead, he got ready for the day. As always, he went out and got breakfast. On his way back, he found a copy of the Prophet and read through the advertisements for jobs. He had grown familiar with the ones that repeated several days, but some were new. Halfway up the stairs, Remus turned back to the front page and looked at the headlines. He stopped in his stride, wondering how it had not caught his eye at once. “FIRST CASE OF MUGGLE PLAGUE AT ST MUNGO’S”.

Remus stared at the headline, unable for a long time to look away. Finally he tore his gaze from it and hurried up to his room. He closed the door securely and went to sit on the bed, the paper in his hands.

“St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries has announced that the disease AIDS, which has infected over 20 000 Muggles world-wide in five years, has reached Britain’s wizarding population. St Mungo’s admitted its first patient with the lethal illness last week. Although St Mungo’s officials have reported the admittance, they have given no details about the patient’s identity. However, they have disclosed that the patient is critically ill.

The first manifestation of AIDS is often flulike symptoms a few weeks after infection, but can equally be symptomless until breaking out completely. Most of those infected will eventually fall prey to a variety of infections and forms of cancer, and die within three years of diagnosis.

‘It was just a matter of time before we started seeing patients with the disease. AIDS cases have risen sharply in Britain during the past year, so we have known to expect it for a long time,’ says Healer Messaline Barrett.

When asked what preparations and precautions St Mungo’s have put in place, Healer Barrett has no answer.

‘It’s early days yet. We don’t understand AIDS very well at all. We have discrete contact with Muggle experts, but even they don’t have many answers.’

What, then, can witches and wizards do to protect themselves? Healer Barrett insists that it will still be safe to visit St Mungo’s while the patient, who is being kept isolated, is being treated. According to her, it is not dangerous to move among or even interact with Muggles. This far AIDS has been isolated not only to the Muggle world, but certain fringe populations, such as drug addicts and homosexual men (i.e. inverts).”

Remus stared at the sentence he had just read. There it was - the first reference to gay people he had ever seen in wizarding print. He felt like laughing at it. It looked so absurd, glossed with another word which to him sounded woefully archaic. The fact that the Prophet didn’t trust their readers to know what a homosexual was! He put his hand to his mouth, the urge to laugh turned into a feeling like he was about to cry. He looked back over the article. They said that the patient was being isolated. What were they doing to that poor soul? Remus thought of the terror he was used to feeling every full moon, of being trapped and alone, of dying confined in a locked room. Perhaps that was similar to what that person felt. He was glad that the healers had not given
anything away about their patient, but as he continued reading, he felt the gratitude for that disappearing.

“St Mungo’s officials refuse to specify which of these groups the first patient is part of.

In October, Healer Barrett told the Daily Prophet that when AIDS enters the wizarding population, it would be through sexual contacts with Muggles. It seems wise, then, to refrain from intimate contacts with Muggles. In particular, witches should avoid relations with Muggle men who have been known to engage in homosexual practices. Healers say that this disease spreads only through blood and other bodily fluids, not skin contact, but many are taking no risks, and are steering clear of anyone thought to be infected.”

Remus pressed his hand harder against his mouth. He imagined the horror-stricken faces around hundreds of breakfast tables, reading these words. Wizards would stop speaking to their Muggle neighbours. Flirtations would be broken off. Parents would agonise at the thought of taking their children through the Muggle part of King’s Cross to the Hogwarts Express. Many might mutter that they had been right all along - wizards and Muggles shouldn’t mix. Muggle blood was impure in more ways than one.

Remus read through the article again, wondering whether he had missed it. But no, he hadn’t. There was no mention of gay wizards. The only homosexuals were Muggles, who maliciously infected innocents through seduction, or simply by their presence.

His horror turning into anger, Remus crumbled the newspaper into a ball. In two strides he crossed to the stove and shoved the paper into it. It was only then that he remembered the classifieds. Fumbling, he got hold of a poker and tried to pull out the paper. It fell onto the floor, charred lines glowing. Remus dropped the poker and tried to stamp out the fire. His hem swung close to the paper, and missed it narrowly. He hiked up his robes and looked at the remains. They were a pitiful sight, but after raking it with the poker again, he found the page he wanted. He mended it as best he could with magic, and Vanished the rest of the newspaper. He did not want to give Mrs Wilkes a reason to accuse him of trying to burn the house down.

The day dragged on in a succession of drafted application letters. By the afternoon, Remus’ head felt numb and his wrist ached. The dull work had laid itself over the morning’s agitation, leaving him feeling uncomfortably isolated. Bored of his cramped room, he decided to head over to the café. He would get some air, and he could ask Siobhan if she had heard anything about jobs.

When Remus came into the café, Siobhan was nowhere to be seen. Only Trisha was at the counter, reading a magazine and twisting a curl around her finger. When he came up to the counter, she looked up and put away the magazine, looking embarrassed.

‘Hello. What can I get you?’

‘Is Siobhan in?’

Trisha shook her head.

‘Afraid not - it’s her day off.’

Remus shrugged.

‘Just a cup of tea, then, please.’
Trisha turned away to get the tea, and Remus fished up some money out of his pockets. He inspected the coins in his palm - all the Muggle money he had left. It would only buy him another two or three meals. For a moment he regretted ordering the tea. Then he told himself that he needed it. He paid and went over to his usual table, bringing one of the magazines on the side-table with him. For a long time he sat and flicked through it, reading snatches of texts here and there, letting the sound of others’ conversation envelope him. He felt the Prophet article hovering at the corner of his mind. He did not want to think about it, but his idle thoughts kept nearing it, so he had to yank them back.

The door opened. Remus looked up. To his surprise, he saw that it was Rayan who had entered. He was dressed like he had never seen him, in a suit and tie. Standing by the door and looking around, he looked lost, so unlike his usual self. Remus rose and called:

‘Rayan?’

He turned around to look at him. Only then did Remus see how distraught his face was.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked and walked up to him.

Rayan swallowed noisily. Then he met his gaze.

‘Ellis is dead.’

Remus opened his mouth, meaning to say something, but then exhaled.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said, for want of anything else.

Rayan nodded and tried to smile, but it turned into a grimace. His face scrunched up with a sob. Remus made a compassionate sound and hugged him. He felt him shaking in his arms. At first he simply stood there, sunken against Remus, unable even to put his arms around him. It took him several seconds to return the embrace. Remus did not know how long they stood there, holding each other for all to see, as Rayan wept against his shoulder. How, he wondered idly, could someone else’s grief feel cathartic? As he held his weeping friend, he felt his own preoccupations disappear. The immediate need to comfort Rayan seemed the most important thing in the world. There was an efficiency in his caring, and a gratitude at the distraction, but it was nevertheless sincere.

At long last, Rayan let go of him and withdrew.

‘Come on,’ Remus said and took his hand. ‘Come sit down.’ As they walked over to his table, he saw Trisha watching them helplessly. She caught Remus’ eye and held up a teacup, biting her lip, as if to apologise for the insufficiency of the gesture. Remus nodded to her, and sat down. Rayan was busy wiping his eyes, and did not look up for a long time. Trisha came over with a cup of tea, waving away Remus’ attempt to give her money. She mouthed ‘take care of him’, and cast a pitying look at Rayan.

When Rayan finally looked up at Remus, his gaze dropped almost at once again. Instead, he sighed deeply.

‘What happened?’ Remus asked.

Rayan shrugged.

‘He’s been ill for ages,’ he said. He caught sight of his tea and started stirring it idly. ‘But I thought he was getting better. He’d been out of hospital for six weeks…’ He bit his lip hard, to stop himself
from crying. Remus put his hand on his.

‘When did he die?’

‘Yesterday,’ he said. ‘In the evening, apparently. I tried to call him this morning, and there was no answer… At first I thought he was just taking a nap, but then I tried again, and he still wasn’t picking up. So finally I called his neighbour, who knew him a bit, and she told me that…’ His voice broke, and he swallowed a sob. Remus pressed his hand. ‘They’d told her,’ he said angrily. ‘She saw the ambulance and went out to ask what had happened, and the nurse who had come to check on him told her. But Ellis had left my phone number, and the nurse bloody well didn’t call me.’

He pulled away his hand, and covered his face. Remus tried not to look at him, unwilling to intrude into his grief. It took longer for him to stop crying this time, but when he lowered his hands, his anger was gone.

‘I can’t believe he didn’t tell me this was about to happen.’

Remus paused, not sure what to answer.

‘Perhaps he wanted you to spare you. Or perhaps he didn’t know.’

Rayan played with the spoon in his tea, watching the liquid pour off it as he tipped it.

‘I think he must have,’ he said. ‘I suppose I should have realised… But he’d been so happy recently. I thought it was perhaps it wasn’t so bad after all…’ He broke off. ‘But obviously I was wrong.’

Remus reached out and rubbed his arm. Rayan met his eyes, and mustered a smile. Remus smiled back, holding his gaze.

‘Drink your tea,’ he said softly. Rayan gave a half-laugh, which threatened to turn into a sob.

‘Alright, mum.’

He picked up his mug, and reached out his other hand to Remus, who took it. He held Rayan’s hand between his own, watching him drink his tea, now and then looking out of the window.

‘I’ve never seen you in a tie before,’ Remus said after a while.

Rayan shrugged.

‘I’ve been photographing at a wedding reception. I made the call on the way back - stopped at a phone box… God, what a stupid place to find something like that out…’

Remus nodded compassionately. Then, carefully, he let go of his hand.

‘If you want me to leave you alone…’

‘No, no,’ Rayan said and took his hand again. ‘Stay.’ He smiled. ‘I want you here.’

Remus smiled back.

‘Okay.’

They sat in silence, holding hands. Remus watched Rayan’s face, and recalled the first confused
assault of grief. He wondered whether Rayan felt like getting up and going to his friend’s house, hoping to find him there after all, thinking that it had all been a mistake. For Remus, it had been different (as it always was). He had never lost a friend to illness, only to violence. But the preparations may be similar. Just like those fighting a war, someone ill had to face up to the possibility that they might die, and equally that they might survive. Remus wondered who of his friends had died first. He tried to remember who had been at what meetings, and at what funerals. The first casualty must have been Marlene McKinnon. He remembered that vividly.

James and Marlene had been late, and Lily, Sirius and Remus had been waiting in the kitchen for them to come back. None of them had dared speak, afraid that the thought they were all thinking would slip out. Suddenly, a whirl of shapes had materialised a little above the ground. Remus had seen them tumble out of the air. Then he had heard James screaming.

Lily had been the first one out of the door, but Sirius had pushed past her. Marlene was prone on the ground, while James was kneeling at her side, shaking her. Savagely, Sirius had pulled his hands off and tried to find her pulse. ‘She can’t be… she can’t be dead…’ James had babbled as Lily embraced him. Sirius’ face had been so rapt with attention that he must be able to feel a pulse and feel her breathe. Then his expression changed. ‘No,’ he hissed. With wide-eyed efficiency, he had tipped Marlene’s head back, blew air into her lungs, pushed down on her chest with such force that her ribs protested. Little by little, his eyes grew more panicked, and the calm was stripped from him. His movements became unmeasured and violent. His wand lay forgotten. He did not compress but pound her chest, all while he screamed, at first exhortations and curse-words, then just animal noise. From either side of the prone body, James and Remus had looked at each other. Remus knew that he was thinking the same thing, that in this moment it was clear that they were not fighters or soldiers or anything else. They were a group of frightened teenagers, trying to revive their friend. Then, without words, they came to a decision. They had stepped forward, taken Sirius by the shoulders and pulled him off. By then he was crying. Clumsily, Remus had tried to hug him. Sirius had buried his head against his chest and screamed. It had been Lily, who had known her best, who had closed Marlene’s eyes.

Rayan’s voice brought him back from the memories.

‘Oh, god,’ he said in realisation, looking up.

‘What?’ Remus asked.

‘Who’s going to fix the funeral?’ He looked close to tears.

‘Did he have any family?’ Remus said. Rayan shook his head.

‘No. At least none who’d speak to him. I know he wrote a will years ago, and there might be stuff in there…’ He rubbed his face. ‘Oh, I don’t know where it’d be…’

‘Don’t think about it now,’ Remus said. ‘Even if you knew where he kept his papers, and how he’d want it, you can’t do anything about it right now.’

Rayan sighed.

‘No, you’re right.’

‘Perhaps he’s told someone else where he kept those things?’

‘Yeah. I’ll have to call his friends. Oh god, they might not know…’

Remus rubbed his arm compassionately.
‘Would you like to go for a walk?’ he asked. Outside, the sun was setting, but the sky was clear.

‘Yeah. That’s a good idea.’

They got up, waved good-bye to Trisha and left. They walked slowly, shoulder to shoulder, hands in their pockets. It was some five minutes until Rayan broke the silence.

‘I’ve never been to a funeral. No old relatives close by or anything. I barely know what it’s like.’

Remus thought about all the funerals he had been to. Almost all of them had been for people his own age. He tried to count them, but gave up. There were too many.

‘I could go with you, if you want support.’ He had not expected himself to say that, but realised as the words left his mouth that it was the right thing to say. Rayan smiled sadly.

‘Thanks.’ He thought about it and said: ‘I think that Ellis would have liked me to bring a date to his funeral.’

They both laughed. Then Rayan’s laughter turned into tears. They stopped as he tried to pull himself together. When they continued walking, Remus put his arm through Rayan’s and asked:

‘What was he like?’

Remus smiled.

‘Ellis is the funniest person I know. He can make anything funny. You should have heard him when he was diagnosed - we were all so worried for him, and he kept making these awful puns…’

He smiled, again fighting tears. ‘He was the funniest person I knew.’

Remus pressed his arm.

‘How did you meet?’

‘At the Feather - the place we went to, you know,’ Rayan said. ‘I was dancing. He was hanging around the bar. I knew he was watching me, and I was waiting for him to come and dance with me, and he was waiting for me to come over so he could buy me a drink…’ He smiled at the memory. ‘I thought that he can’t have been looking at me after all, so I left, and he came chasing after me… He tended not to dance. He had a bad knee - he always said he’d torn the ligaments doing panto. I don’t know if that’s true, but he was a pretty amazing dame. As I said, he was funny. And so incredibly camp. He had this stupid thing he’d do, where if anyone came into his shop - he had an antique shop, bits and bobs rather than posh stuff. Anyway, if he thought a customer was a homophobe, he’d turn up his campness and keep calling them “daaarling” and “duddy”, and then when they looked like they were about to say something, he’d go for this completely stony-faced butler act. And then back again to camp queen. He used to say that it was a great way of embarrassing people into buying something, just to have a reason to leave.’

‘He sounds wonderful.’

‘Yeah.’

The sky over London darkened over them, the polluted colours of the sunset giving way to a murky black. They were on the Strand now, the Thames reflecting the lights of the streets and the bridges. As they walked down the riverside, Rayan dropped Remus’ arm, and took his hand instead. Remus’ heart stuttered with fear, but also with excitement. Instead of pulling away, he pressed Rayan’s hand in his. They floated between silence and reminiscence. Rayan spoke about his friend,
what their relationship had been like, how it had ended and turned instead into a friendship, about
the ways they had been there for each other. He mentioned his illness only occasionally, never
saying what it was. Remus thought he knew.

Eventually, they sat down on a bench overlooking the river. They let go of each other and, silently
and individually, watched the movement of the black water.

‘I shouldn’t have fooled myself,’ Rayan said eventually. ‘I should have realised he was dying. It’s
just… not the kind of thing that you just accept, you know?’

‘Of course not.’

Rayan sighed.

‘Sometimes I think… who’s going to be next? It’s like it’s inevitable, isn’t it? It’s just a question of
who and when.’

Remus did not know what to say, so he stayed silent. He heard laughter and voices nearby - a group
of young men on the lash. He wanted to turn around and shout at them to shut up. Their joy
seemed like an affront, not just to Rayan’s grief, but to all of it.

‘Remus?’

He looked over, and saw that Rayan was looking directly at him.

‘Yeah?’

‘Kiss me.’

The jeering laughter of the drunk men rang in his ears.

‘Is that safe - in public…?’

Rayan shrugged.

‘Nothing’s safe these days,’ he said. ‘Who cares?’

So he leaned in and kissed him. It was slow and deliberate, not just a kiss because he had been
asked and because he wanted to kiss him, but also because of the loud men passing. He thought of
Ellis, the camp shop-keeper provoking prejudiced customers. Remus admired his courage. He
barely dared holding hands in the street. Kissing in public, especially outside Soho, terrified him.
He fully expected to hear the group of men making their way towards them, their laughter turned
into insults. Instead, their calls faded as they moved on, out of ear-shot. Remus, his lips still locked
with Rayan’s, felt some small triumph.

They kissed for a long time. When they finally pulled apart, Rayan put his head against Remus’
shoulder. Their hands intertwined again. Vaguely, Remus thought about suggesting they go for
dinner. Before he had put that thoughts into words, Rayan looked up at him and said:

‘Can we go back to my place?’

Remus’ stomach made a somersault. His mouth had gone dry.

‘Alright.’

They walked towards Rayan’s flat, shoulders brushing together. Remus’ heart was already beating
faster. He wondered when they would first kiss - in the staircase, or in the hall? He recalled what Rayan's hands on his body had felt like, and found himself wanting to feel them again. He even wished that they had done this again sooner. There was inevitably an ulterior motive here - this was a distraction. Remus did not mind, knowing the need for distractions himself. He was happy to provide it.

As they stepped inside the house and Rayan unlocked the door to his flat, Remus started watching him closely - his fingers gripping the keys, his white cuffs sticking out from under his sleeve, the wave of his hair over the nape of his neck. Remus took in every detail, fascinated.

Rayan must have felt him watching, because he looked over his shoulder and smiled, albeit sadly. The key turned in the lock, and the door opened. As soon as they had stepped inside, Remus put his hand on Rayan’s hip and kissed him. The door closed slowly behind them, neither of them thinking to pull it closed.

It was different from the first time. Then, it had all felt rushed and new. There were so many sensations that he had not felt for so long, that he had not known where to start. Now, he took time to enjoy every part of it. They kissed, going deeper, and then retreating to pecks, before growing more passionate again. Their hands started to move other the other’s body. After a long time, Rayan took him by the hand and pulled him into the bedroom. Still in the dark, they fell onto the bed, kissing again. Slowly, they started shedding clothes. Mouths moved over skin. Remus felt his neck bruising under Rayan’s lips and teeth, and gasped with pleasure. He pushed him onto the mattress and moved down his body, undoing his shirt. Rayan’s chest heaved with his breath, pushing against his lips. Remus dipped his tongue into his navel, making him groan.

‘Oh god…’

He set to work on his fly, and pulled down his trousers and underwear. His mouth felt empty, like it had been made to be filled. He pushed his lips against Rayan’s erection, taking the head into his mouth. Rayan’s breathing hitched, and he groaned loudly. He moved against his mouth, but then reigned himself in and said:

‘Remus… come up here.’

Remus withdrew and went on his hands and knees back to the head of the bed. In the darkness, Rayan was simply a shadow taken corporeal form, which now grabbed him and kissed him savagely, taking pleasure in knowing that that mouth had been on his cock. He entangled one of his hands in Remus’ hair, pushing their lips together, and cupped his genitals with the other. Remus moved against his hand, and gave an undignified moan into Rayan’s mouth.

‘Please…’ he whispered, pulling back an inch.

‘Please what?’ Rayan whispered back, halting. ‘Please more or please don’t?’

‘More,’ Remus gasped. ‘Fuck me.’

Rayan’s hands went to Remus’ trousers. He pushed trousers and pants down to his knees. Remus shifted to get them off completely, aware of Rayan doing the same beside him. They found each other again. Rayan’s white shirt shone in the light of the street-lamp. Remus pushed his hands under the cotton and traced his chest and stomach, his hips and arse. Rayan grabbed his buttocks - suddenly there was no time for careful touching - and leaned in, licking his ear. The effect it had on Remus was so strong that he almost missed Rayan’s question.

‘How do you want to do it?’
Remus’ breath trembled, and he wondered whether he would be able to answer.

‘Hands and knees,’ he managed to articulate.

Rayan licked his neck, touching the tip of his tongue against the love-bite he had left before.

‘Now?’

Remus nodded.

‘Yes.’

He let go of him. Trembling, Remus kneeled on the bed and leaned down on his elbows. He thought of taking off his jumper, but there was something delectably obscene about wearing a thick jumper but being bare-arsed. He watched his hands against the sheets as he heard Rayan opening a bedside drawer. He rummaged around in it, muttered ‘bingo’ and then swore when he dropped the lube on the floor.

‘Okay,’ he said and climbed onto the bed. ‘You ready?’

‘Yeah.’

The lube was cold, but Rayan’s skin was warm when it pressed against him. Remus’ hands closed on the sheet as Rayan pushed in slowly, finding the right angle.

‘This okay?’ he whispered. Remus nodded and groaned, lost in the intensity of the sensation. He pushed back against him, his head hanging and his knees slipping on the sheets. His arms ached and his legs shook, but he kept himself upright, answering every shove. Rayan covered his body with his own, rubbing against his bare skin, and then against his jumper. The sound of his breathing filled his ears. ‘There…’ Remus panted. ‘Yes - my god - oh…’

He came with a wordless cry. His elbow slipped, and he fell onto the mattress. Gasping with the aftermath of it, he pushed against as best he could as Rayan’s strokes became more and more arrhythmic. For a moment he stopped, petrified, before exhaling and catching himself with his hands on either side of Remus’ head. He stayed there for a moment, panting, then he pulled out and rolled over onto his back.

‘Galloping gargoyles,’ Remus murmured, catching his breath and laying his his head on Rayan’s shoulder.

Rayan turned his head a little.

‘Did you just say “galloping gargoyles”?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Must have imagined it…’ Rayan murmured, already falling asleep. Remus’ eyes fluttered closed. There was no way to fight this. Smiling, he allowed himself to slip off.

***

He woke abruptly. One moment, he was fast asleep - the next, he was lying with his eyes wide open. Beside him, Rayan’s slow breathing continued undisturbed. He smiled at the memory of what had happened between them.

Then, as soon as that thought had crossed his mind, a feeling that something was wrong beset him.
It took him a while to realise what it was. He recalled how they had come, a few seconds apart, and how Rayan had rolled off him and, soon afterwards, gone to sleep. He hadn’t gotten out of bed in between. Perhaps I’m mistaken? he thought. I wasn’t really paying attention… But no, the memory of him pulling out and rolling over was vivid.

Remus sat up slowly, not wanting to wake his bedmate. Perhaps he had forgotten to take off the condom - that must be uncomfortable… He reached out towards the bedside table and turned the bedside lamp on. Rayan was lying spread-eagled on the bed, his undone shirt still on, his genitals in full view. No condom.

Surely it hadn’t slipped off when he had pulled out? he thought. It was a quick enough job to check. No, that had not happened. But in that case… I must be wrong, he thought. He must have gotten out of bed to throw it away after I fell asleep.

Moving quietly, he got out of bed and went over to the bin. He tilted it so that he might see the inside of it. It was completely empty. No condom - no wrapper. Remus looked back towards the bed in confusion and caught sight of something on the floor. He picked it up. It was a condom, unopened. He recalled how Rayan had dropped the lube and sworn, and picked it up again. Standing exposed in the half-light, a wrapped condom in his hand, Remus realised what they had just done - what he had just done.

The condom fell out of his hand, back onto the floor. Every part of him screamed run! flee! get out of here! Remus grabbed his pants and trousers, and struggled into them. He put his socks in his pocket, and stepped into his shoes, not bothering to tie them. He took his jacket from the hallway hanger and pulled it on.

He threw himself out of the door and rushed down the stairs, out onto the street, away from the bedroom and risk they had taken.
It felt like being submerged in cold water. Constantly he hoped that soon, now, any moment, he would wake from this nightmare. But the air in his lungs was always on the point of running out. He was suspended, not sinking or floating upwards. He neither drowned nor surfaced.

Saturday passed in a blur. He had returned home and must have slept, because he found himself in bed, woken by the dawn, sidling in through the skylight. He was still in his Muggle clothes, even in his jacket, his shoes discarded by the bedside. The only thing that made him move was the overwhelming feeling of uncleanliness. In a haze, he went down to Madam Wilkes’ rooms to collect the bath. As he handed over the sickle, she pulled a face. He wondered whether she could smell the sex and exhaustion on him. He did not meet her eye when he took the bath and brought it up to his room.

Remus stripped, throwing his clothes on the floor in disgust. The water was so hot is almost scalded him, but he relished the feeling. He wanted it to burn away the dirt and the touches from his hands under the water’s surface. How could he have been so stupid? he wondered. What on earth had possessed him…?

He recapitulated, trying to reason with himself. So, he and Rayan had had unprotected sex. That did not automatically mean that he would get AIDS, did it?

It took him a moment before he answered himself.

But remember Ellis.

Ellis, Rayan’s ex-boyfriend who had been ill for ages, and had died the day before yesterday. Rayan had never said what he had died of - perhaps Remus was making assumptions. But as he thought through the things Rayan had said, he felt that there could be no doubt. Who’s going to be next? he had asked. It’s like it’s inevitable, isn’t it? It’s just a question of who and when. If Ellis had had AIDS, then what were the chances of Rayan not having it? And if he did… Remus tried to concentrate on his hands, the scalding water, anything but the way his throat was closing up with anxiety.

You can’t know, he told himself. They might have broken up before Ellis caught it.

But you know Rayan sleeps with his friends - he slept with you. How do you know he doesn’t sleep with his exes as well?

Remus had no answer to that. He wondered why these thoughts had not occurred to him yesterday. He had read so much about AIDS and worried about it, even earlier that day, so why had he not thought about it yesterday evening? He had been so focused to comfort Rayan that the risks of sex had completely escaped him. He thought about what they had done - how he had had his cock in his mouth, and how he had been fucked - still staring hard at his hands, taking in every crease, every scar, every bone, just to keep those thoughts from touching him. He resisted them, but not for long. His concentration broke, and the thoughts flooded him. He closed his eyes as they filled with tears, leaned his forehead against his knees. He wept, the only sound the irregular drip-drip as the tears ran down his face and fell into the water.

What was I thinking?
And now it was too late - nothing to do about it now. However much he washed himself, he could not wash it away. He sat in the bath until the water started cooling, and Madam Wilkes came knocking on his door, shouting at him to hurry up.

***

Day after day, his thoughts went in circles. He kept up internal conversations for hours at a time, presenting arguments and counterarguments about the likelihood of being infected. It was the difference between fighting against the water, trying to move somewhere, not even necessarily to the surface, and staying still and swallow the water to speed it along. As his rational side despairingly argued, his irrational side watched the possibility grow to a nigh-certainty.

He knew what would be the reasonable thing to do - go over to Rayan’s flat, ring the doorbell, and talk to him. It must have confused him to find Remus gone when he woke up, with nothing as much as a note to explain. If he went to see him, he could ask him outright whether he had anything to worry about, and for that matter why…

At that point he always interrupted himself. The question why came to him often. He thought of the condom he had found on the floor, and thought out every possible scenario. Rayan might have dropped it and forgotten about it when he picked up the cream. It might have fallen out without him noticing, and that he had forgotten about it altogether. He had been upset - it would have been easy for something like that to slip his mind.

Or he might have taken it out, and not bothered to pick it up, thinking it wasn’t important. That opened another, terrifying possibility. Could he have consciously decided not to use it? However Remus thought of it, used to the thought of betrayal as he was, he could not think that Rayan would do something like that maliciously. But that did not mean that he could not have done it. *It’s like it’s inevitable, isn’t it?* he had said. Perhaps he had been inflicting his grief on him, wishing either to follow his friend or not to be alone in his own suffering.

He wished he could put the blame on Rayan, but now, after just weeks of acquaintance and this sudden break, he seemed little more than a shadow. Sometimes he found himself wondering whether it had all happened - getting to know him and George and Simon and Siobhan, spending weekends in the café, sleeping with Rayan not once but twice… He felt no joy at it now, however much he wanted to. It seemed like something closed to him now - an unrealistic dream. All he had now were the consequences of it.

Instead of trying to blame Rayan, he considered others who had influenced his life recently, and may have driven him into that situation: the people at the pub, Greyback, even his parents. More than anything, he wanted to blame Sirius. But none of it rang true. They had nothing to do with this. It was his fault and his alone - for agreeing to sleep with him, and for not insisting on using a condom. He wished there was some extenuating factor - that he had been drunk, or anxious, or tired - but he hadn’t been. He had been in control. The only thing clouding his judgement had been horniness and concern for his friend.

The panicked childish chatter inside his head, which only paused for those grey swathes of conviction, exhausted him. His cramped room was hateful to him, but he found it difficult to summon the power to leave it. Many times, he found himself lying on his bed, too fraught with worry to get up. The great weight in his chest seemed to anchor him there. The room, the bed, even his own skin imprisoned him. Often, the effort of getting up was so great it was seldom worth it. He would stay, staring at the damp spots on the ceiling, ignoring how he steadily grew hungrier. Either he would finally force himself to get up and find some food, or he would fall asleep, and
wake feeling less hungry.

At other times, he wished for that apathy. Then he would pace up and down his room. He would see himself from the outside, an animal pacing its cage, and try to sit still, but to no avail. When that happened, he would go out, hoping to walk off his anxiety. He took his cloak and walked around wizarding London, but the crowded streets made him feel worse. Instead of losing himself in them, he was trapped. Here there was nowhere to escape his thoughts. People’s eyes seemed to follow him, curiously eyeing his scars and his patched clothes. He wondered whether they knew what was on his mind - whether some Legilimens had pushed into his mind and plucked out the secrets for all to see.

At times he spotted people he knew - he saw Emmeline Vance outside the apothecary, and to his horror caught a glance of Madame Bones close to the Leaky Cauldron. Both times, he ducked out of sight. He did not want to answer any of Madame Bones’ probing questions, and he had no desire to catch up with Emmeline. He had always liked her, but he did not know what he could say. Other Order members lived their own lives, full of small and big things that one would chitchat about. What could Remus say about the four years since they had last met? He had lost a year to shell-shock. He had almost died by his own hand. And now he was probably going to die within a couple of years, just because he had slept with the wrong person.

During those first days, that was a thought he kept repeating to himself. *I am going to die.* The fear it instilled in him was strange. He was used to the thought of his own death, but this was different. This was not a looming possibility, which might strike one full moon, or in ten years’ time, when the lunar cycles had ground him down too much. He thought he could feel the virus move through his blood-stream, clinging to his insides. Two years, they had said in the papers. But who knew what it would be like, as the moon pulled and the AIDS pushed at him? They might change one another, and he could not tell how. Indeed, he doubted anyone would be able to tell him. From what he had gathered, the healers at St Mungo’s, just like the Muggle doctors, had only a sketchy understanding of AIDS, and lycanthropy was uncommon enough that he could not imagine that they had any answers. What would they do if he came to them and told them what he was so certain of (for this was more than a suspicion now)? The question of how the two conditions would affect one another would not frighten them, as it did him, but fascinate them. They might see in him a possibility for a medical breakthrough, or simply an interesting study. He did not want to become a specimen, stared at and examined, reduced even by those who should help him into an object.

The streets of wizarding London were narrow and winding, and its community was tightly knit together, unabashedly inquisitive about others’ business. Remus donned Muggle clothes and set out into Muggle London. Among its millions, he became invisible. Here, he could wander for hours with no goal. Surely if he walked far enough or for long enough, he would outrun his thoughts. He walked along the Thames, past the bend in the river to Blackfriars. He crossed through Green Park and Hyde Park, circling the Serpentine and walking into Kensington Gardens. He sat for an hour on a park bench by the garish Albert Monument, the only thing with real colour in the park full of dead grass and bare trees. Pigeons, who had trained for generations to recognise loneliness, landed at his feet, certain they would be fed. Remus thought of kicking at them, wondering whether he would feel some triumph at the flutter of wings as they fled. Instead, he sat stock-still, watching them coo and pick at the ground, confused at his behaviour.

Did he not have an early memory of feeding the pigeons? He could recall the seeds in his hand, and his mother holding him by the shoulder, so he would not scare the birds by rushing forward.

It must be one of the few things he remembered from before he was bitten. That boy, who would have grown up to be strong and normal, was a different person. The only memories he had were like salvaged snatches of film, documenting someone else’s life. For as long as he could remember
- properly and in sequence - he had been a werewolf. He could only vaguely recall the time just after the bite, stranded in a white hospital bed, his parents stroking his hair and telling him to be brave.

All his life, he had been ill. However much he longed for it, he could not imagine what it was like to be healthy, and not have the moon constantly pulling at him. What frightened him now was not being ill, but falling ill. He used to be clock-work, weakness and ill-health as sure as the tide. Now he was suddenly a time-bomb. He did not know when to expect it.

Besides, he did not know what to expect. Pacing around his small room late that night, he tried to remember what kind of things AIDS led to. There had been mentions in the paper of vicious pneumonia and rare cancers. He imagined finding dark spots on his scarred skin - yet another type of mark. Bitterly he thought that at least he knew what being ill was like. It would be worse for someone like Rayan, with his impeccable physique and good looks. (Briefly, guiltily, he thought of Sirius, wasting away in a prison cell, his beautiful face ravished by starvation and loss of happiness. Unlike with Rayan, that was a punishment he deserved.) Maybe being suddenly beset by diseases for which there was no help or cure was worse if you had something to lose. But Remus doubted it. The horror this might lead to for others did not diminish his own.

His father had warned him. With horror, he recalled that night-time discussion. It had seemed embarrassing and inconvenient more than frightening at the time. Naturally, he had been concerned, but he had also been annoyed at his father's assumptions. Nevertheless, he had taken his worries to heart - and yet done just what he had told him not to. Did it not follow that he would get infected? Was he not bound to be punished? In unguarded moments, he found himself thinking that he had lived up to the stereotype his parents, despite all their attempts at being understanding and kind, had believed in him. Well out of their sphere of influence, he had acted just like they had expected him to.

Then he reminded himself that it was not like that. He was not in love with Rayan, and he was not his boyfriend, but he had genuinely liked him. Does that matter now? his inner voice asked. Do you think your parents would think that liking the man was enough? It's still sleeping around.

With one person! he argued back, as he paced up and down his room. Twice!

And? he answered himself. Once would have been enough.

He would have to tell them, he realised. For a moment, he stopped in the middle of his room and let the darkness embrace him. Eventually - when and if he knew for sure - he owed it to them. He shrank away at the thought of facing their disappointment and sorrow. Would his mother cover her mouth and cry? Would his father's face go stiff with conflicting emotions? Remus could not make up his mind which parent he wanted to keep it from more. His mother's distress would be vocal and obvious. His father would probably not say anything at all, but sit silently. Eventually he might shut himself into his workshop and leave it unsaid whether he was angry or grieving.

Would they not have the right to be angry? They would think - rightly - that his love life was killing him. It had seemed to him as the big escape from the worry and restrictions of his childhood. Now here was the testament that it only brought ruin upon him. First Sirius, who killed his friends and had brought Remus to the brink of insanity - and now this.

He started pacing again. Perhaps it had only been a destructive impulse that he had foolishly acted upon, thinking that it would bring them both comfort. Would his parents feel betrayed? This was not like the lycanthropy, where he was not at fault. He had been warned, and he had put himself in danger nevertheless. His parents loved him - he knew that beyond any doubt - despite that he was a werewolf, and despite that he was gay. But would they love him despite that he had AIDS? Would
that be a stigma too much? It did not matter that it was Rayan who had dropped or forgotten the condom. He should not have been there in the first place, and if he was, he should have reminded him - insisted. Remus could not plead ignorance or drunkenness. For once he had let go of all those churning thoughts and done something he would not otherwise have done.

What if his parents gave up on him? What if they refused to let him into their house? What if Remus would die on his own, without his parents there to watch over him? That thought made him go cold. But equally, he feared the blame in their eyes as they sat with him. He imagined his mother holding his hand, but secretly thinking that he was self-absorbed and impulsive - a disobedient child, for he was always a child in their eyes. If he told them, he would be laid bare for them. He knew that they must have discussed his sex-life behind his back, but now it would not be an imposition for them to pry and ask, but a necessity. They would evaluate his choices and decisions and find them wanting.

A knock on the door made him stop in his steps. Lighting his wand and opening the door, he found Celeste standing there, tightly wrapped in a dressing-gown.

‘Hello.’

‘Hi,’ she said, blinking a little at the light from his wand-tip. ‘I’m sorry, but it’s one o’clock in the morning and I haven’t had a full night’s sleep for a fortnight, and I really need it...’

Remus reached for his pocket-watch, before remembering that he had pawned it. Instead he shook back his sleeve and locked at his wrist-watch. It was ten past one.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise it was so late...’

‘No, no, I understand,’ Celeste said. ‘Sometimes you need to pace - I do it too - but... I need to sleep, and it’s keeping me awake.’

‘I’m really sorry,’ Remus said again. ‘I’ll stop.’

She smiled, rather sleepily.

‘Thanks.’ Then she squinted through the darkness. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes.’

Celeste watched him for another few moments, looking as though she might press him, but the need for sleep seemed to win out.

‘Well, I’ll see you later.’

‘Good night.’

‘Night.’

Remus closed his door and locked it. Resisting the urge to continue pacing, he sat down on the bed. From here, he could see the stars out of the skylight. The moon was not in sight, but he could feel her thin crescent above. Only days until the new moon, and then only another two weeks...

He remembered an early memory of his mother tending him after a transformation, her sleeves soaked in his blood. That awoke a new fear in him. His blood was infected, and each month he scratched and bit himself until he bled. If he was at home, he would smear that blood all over the cellar walls as the wolf threw itself against them. Once the moon had set, his parents would help
him up to his bed and tend his injuries. His blood would get on their hands and work itself into small cracks in the skin… He thought of his mother pricking her finger when tending the roses, or cutting herself on the shears by accident - of his father in his workshop, missing his invention with the tool and finding his hand instead. Those small injuries would be enough. He would put them in danger. Even if he kept away and transformed somewhere else, he would still leave the blood there, for some unwitting person to touch. The Prophet had called AIDS a plague, which made him a plague-carrier. So they're right, he thought, hating himself for the thought but finding no fault in it.

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Floating between waking and sleeping, Remus thought he heard Wormtail approaching. He knew that sound of small paws and claws tapping against the floor. The others couldn’t be far behind - he must have gone ahead to find a way in, as he often did, being the smallest…

Remus opened his eyes and thought, he’s alive after all. He rolled over to his side as he heard the small footsteps again. It came from under the bed, but was moving out…

A rat padded out into the square of light from the skylight, and set to wash itself. Remus’ half-awake excitement plunged. It was just a rat - not his dead friend. Of course there were rats in this house. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and the rat scrambled across the room to the far wall, where it disappeared. For a long time, Remus stared at the crack it had pushed through, thinking of the claustrophobic tunnels in the walls and the dark spaces under the floor-boards.

Eventually, Remus fought down the thoughts. Instead he got out his coin pouch and upended it on the mattress. Pulling the blanket over his shoulders to ward off the cold, he started counting the money. It had become a ritual of his, but it never served to lift his spirits. The money he had gotten from the pawnbroker was disappearing quickly. He could pay another week’s rent, and as long as he was careful, he had enough for baths and food for another seven days too. If he skipped breakfast or didn’t have a bath at some point, he could make it last a little longer. He was not certain whether he would be able to pay for the coal.

And after that? He needed money - he needed a job. He thought of the café, and Siobhan’s promise of keeping an eye out for something for him. For all he knew, she might have found something. Going to ask would make sense, but at the thought of it, his stomach tied itself in knots. It was a Wednesday, so Rayan should be at work, but what if he wasn’t? He did not want to see him, or his friends, or anyone. Even if he caught Siobhan on her own, she would tell George she had seen him and he would tell Rayan, and if Siobhan had found him a job, they would know where to find him…

Remus realised that he had pulled his knees up to his chest and was hugging himself, terrified. Relax, he thought, but his muscles would not respond. Get a grip! he shouted at himself. So slowly he thought at times he was not moving, Remus put the money away. He lay down under the covers again. The cold snuck under the blankets, biting his skin. He curled up, pressed his eyes shut and pulled the covers over his head.

He hoped that if he lay here, like this, he might be able to quench the feelings welling up inside him. Reality was scratching against his skin. He wanted to shrink and hide, away from the world outside…

But he could not hide from this, for it was not the outside world that he feared. He was scared of himself, and what he carried. Lying under his covers, wishing he could become invisible, he stared into the eyes of death.
His limbs finally loosened and the panic subsided. As he got up and dressed, they were still watching one another. Remus pulled on his tweed jacket and buttoned it up against the cold. There would not be a moment when they did not gaze at each other. Everywhere, there would be that grinning skull: *hodie mihi, cras tibi*. His day would come. He knew that.

Some part of him spoke, kindly: *Then why be afraid?*

_Because I do not know how to be anything else._

Not bothering to shave, unwilling to look himself in the mirror, he left the lodging house. Avoiding to even look towards Soho, he instead headed in the direction of Bloomsbury. He needed distractions - things to fill his mind - crowds to lose himself in. Ten minutes later, he was mounting the stone steps of the British Museum.

The foyer was thick with tourists, all hoping to have the place to themselves as it was out of season, and school-groups, out on an end-of-term trip. He did not so much push as slide between them. A few people stepped away from him, eyeing him suspiciously.

Soon, he found himself in the Assyrian gallery, staring up at the five-legged Mesopotamian bulls. Their eyes did not meet his. Instead they stared unseeingly on their new home, far away from the place of their birth. On a screen, there was a reproduction of an etching of the excavations. One of the bulls stuck out of the ground, its bearded human head and winged back exposed, its taurine body still buried. The archaeologists and workers stood around, stiff and formal. When Remus looked back to the two bulls flanking the Balawat Gates, he felt some kind of remorse for these creatures. They may be made of stone, but they had been uprooted. As he walked up to the remains of the gates - only decorated bronze bands, but so old, over 2700 years, according to the sign - he felt dwarfed by history. In the presence of these monumental remains, he was insignificant - and how insignificant the people who toiled to make them were. There was a comfort in that. The feeling remained as he walked past the reliefs from Nineveh, of sieges, hostages and fearsome demons. So many people had lived and died, peacefully in bed surrounded by their children and grandchildren or staring into an enemy’s eyes in horror. Did his existence, his life, his dying, matter in the grand scheme of things?

He turned into the Egyptian galleries, and watched school-children running between the sculptures. They pointed, posed and laughed. To them, a colossal severed arm seemed incredible. They stared at wonder on the nose-less pharaoh heads, and the lion goddess Sekhmet. Some things they passed by without a glance, like the ritual book inscribed in a stone which had later been used as a millstone. Remus, remembering the text from History of Magic, went up to it and tried to recall that lesson. He had always liked the History of Magic as a subject, and the reading was fascinating, but the lessons were dreary. It might have been one of the times that James was trying to throw chalk through Professor Binns’ head (he had not noticed). Amused for a moment, he imagined his entire Hogwarts year flooding this gallery like the Muggle children did now. Spontaneously, he laughed.

Then, abruptly, he stopped, his amusement dried up. So many of them were dead. Of the Gryffindors he was the only one to truly survive. For a moment, he felt that grief was about to overcome him. He needed to sit down. The children’s calls seemed to cut into his ears now. He wanted to shout _shut up! you don’t know what is waiting for you! Do you honestly think this will last!?_

Of course they did - they were children. He should be happy that they could believe in laughter and carefreeness. There was no need to tell them the truth. He looked out over the gallery, and wondered, morbidly, how many of them would die before the age of thirty, in accidents and wars and disease. Right now, they were all so full of life. In his first year of Hogwarts, he did not know
that so many of his friends and classmates would be gone only ten years later. Watching the children, he thought of the world they would grow up in, where the rich became richer, and everyone else became steadily poorer. Where love could mean death. Would they hit puberty and be scared to touch each other? Or would they make his mistake, let down their guard for a moment, and die?

He needed to talk to someone. This was eating him from the inside. But who? There was no one he could speak to about such things. His parents were out of the question. Even if Dumbledore and Moody were both kind to him, this was too personal. There was no one in the Order he knew well enough. That left no one - no one alive, at least.

Would he have been able to have that conversation with James? When it came to confiding in any of his friends, James was (had been, he corrected himself) probably the nicest. Peter had not always understood when things were important, and Sirius had a tendency towards cruelty.

Sitting down on one of the museum benches, he imagined what it would be like.

James, I’ve done something incredibly stupid.

He tried to think how James would answer. He knew just the way he would jerk out of his thoughts and put his elbows on his knees. He would raise his eyebrows.

What have you done, then? No. Rather: How stupid?

Very.

Ah. He would lean back again. It was easier to recall his body-language than his choice of words. All right, Moony, tell me the worst.

I slept with someone I probably shouldn’t have slept with.

And...?

I think I might have caught something. Something bad.

Okay. How bad?

Fatal, in the long run.

James would shift and lean forward.

Right. What would he say? First, don’t panic. Then he would put his hand out palm-down in that emphatic way he did, as if he was trying to push someone’s spirit down. Seriously, Moony, calm down.

I’m calm, Remus told him. In his imagination, his voice still shook.

Okay. Good. One step at a time. Are you sure?

I think so.

That’s not very sure.

I don’t know for sure, but I think… Yes, I’m sure.

What are you options?
Remus thought about it.

_St Mungo’s, asking my parents for help, walking into a Muggle clinic…_ Those were the only ones he wanted to voice, even in his head. _I don’t like any of them, really._

_Pro and cons?_ Was that what he would say? Or would he ask which one he liked best? Perhaps. _Which one seems least bad?_

Remus tried to think about it, but his mind didn’t let him reason properly. His chest felt tight again.

_Oh God, Prongs, I don’t know. I can’t think. What am I supposed to do?_

...

Nothing. However much he searched his memories, he could not get an answer. As he fumbled to find the words, the image of James - his posture, his gestures, his facial-expressions, all the things that made him truly human and alive - froze to a still and faded. This was not James speaking to him - it was just Remus himself making up lines for him. It was less than a ghost.

Remus hid his face in his hands, oblivious of the people around him. Despair was pounding inside him. He had to get out of here. He could not stay put, or he would be engulfed.

He got to his feet. Fleetingly, he wondered what the people around him thought of him. He must look like a madman. He reached the glass doors out of the gallery. As he leaned against one of them to push it open, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass. It was the first time today he saw his own face, and it startled him. As though seeing himself with someone else’s gaze, he realised how worn he looked. It was a long time since he had been this thin so close to the new moon. His eyes were what scared him most. They were bright and feverish, staring out of a pale face.

He could not stand that sight. He pushed through the doors and hurried through the museum. Without apologising or slowing down, he pushed through the crowds. All he could think about was getting out. Finally he erupted onto the stairs, but did not stop. He half-ran down the steps, and continued down the streets. The traffic on the streets he walked shrieked and bellowed. He walked south until he reached the river, which he followed until he was so weak with hunger he had to turn back to Knockturn Alley.
Chapter 17

The Thursday was the new moon. Remus should be feeling better, but he felt just as bad as he had a week after the full moon. The cut on his jaw had healed, leaving a dark line in its place, but his joints were still stiff and his muscles ached. Often, he had to pause half-way up the stairs to his room to catch his breath. His fingers were stiff enough that it hurt to hold his wand properly. It worried him, and his own self-admonishments made little difference.

*What do you expect, stuck in a place like this for two weeks? It’s winter, and the room’s damp and mouldy. Besides, you’re working yourself up. You barely sleep. You’re not eating properly. It’s no surprise you feel faint and unable to breathe. It’s just nerves. You’ve felt this before - it’s nothing but nerves.*

But what if it wasn’t? That was what he always came back to. He knew that this was just the kind of thing that made him feel ill - going over the same thing over and over again - but he could not stop himself. The worries propelled themselves forward, not heeding his attempts to stop them. It was almost like when the wolf’s impulses started turning up in his mind close to the full moon. The anxiety was like someone, whose voice was almost but not quite his, whispering incessantly in his ear.

He stayed in his room in the morning, but, knowing that Madam Wilkes would come and knock on his door about the rent, he went downstairs and gave her the money. She counted the coins gingerly.

‘Fine,’ she muttered. ‘Mind you don’t fall behind, Mr Lupin. I don’t hold with tardiness.’

‘Of course not,’ he said.

‘I expect the next payment first thing next Thursday morning,’ Madam Wilkes said. ‘Is that understood?’

‘I’ll do my best, Madam Wilkes.’

She turned and went into her rooms again, without a word of goodbye. Remus pulled his cloak around him tighter and descended the rest of the stairs. When he was halfway down, the front door opened and Mr Warren came in. As they passed each other on the lowest steps, he grinned at Remus.

‘Haven’t changed your mind about my offer, lad?’ he asked.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Remus said without looking at him and hurried out of the front door. He stalked down the alley, feeling angry. He would rather starve with his teeth still in his mouth than live on the breadline without them. Dignity had become something precious that might slip away from him at any time.

As he started walking, he could not help imagine what pulling a tooth would be like. It would no doubt hurt... and it would bleed. If there had been any possibility of him giving in, he would have given up those thoughts then. He thought that perhaps at some point in the future, he would grow used to being afraid of his own blood. It was not only full-moons, but paper-cuts, grazed knees, cracks from the cold. He had never thought of how many opportunities there was to pass the virus on to someone else, whether they were close to him or not.

*If I am infected, I should kill myself, Remus thought. It would be kinder to everyone. But not like*
He halted, startled. He had to force himself to start moving again. Had he really deteriorated so much, to start thinking of suicide? As he walked, he tried to pick apart his feelings. This, he realised, was not the same as before. This was not that animal wish for oblivion. Last time, it had been like a raging storm inside his head, the emptiness howling. Then he had longed for the full-moons, because there was a chance, however small, that he would not wake up again. He always hoped that the Change would bring some catharsis, like hurting himself in human-form did, but it never did. Being kept away from sharp objects, he would draw blood in other ways, picking at fresh claw-marks and bites until they bled again. His mother would take his hands - not hold them but grab them, hard and decisively - and, weeping, plead with him not to. Her begging made him feel ashamed, and yet he did not stop. Those wounds would not heal during one moon-cycle, but he would still have them when he Changed again. They had scarred particularly badly, healing into ugly welts. Other marks were far finer, but more easily identifiable.

This felt altogether different. He did not want to feel pain, and the notion of self-harm, which would shed blood, felt repulsive now. In the past, the murkiness of his mind had given way to a sharp clarity, and a decisiveness to do something. Now, he realised that he had even stopped walking. His mind was thrashing against the metaphorical waters, but there was no sharpness, no will to act. More than anything, he didn’t want to die. He was terrified of it. He wanted to live. But if things were to be like this… If his continued existence would harm those he loved, then what was the point? It felt not like a thought of suicide so much as a logical suggestion.

At the same time, he asked himself, could suicide ever be logical? No, said one part of him. Yes, said another. He pushed the thoughts aside, telling himself there was time - it was two weeks until the full-moon.

Still, during the following days, he was aware of these thoughts lingering in the back of his mind. The next day, a Friday, was the thirteenth of December. On the wizarding streets, many wore amulets to ward off the bad luck of the day. Remus, feeling that bad luck was all he had, once again escaped into the Muggle city. It was getting too cold just to wear his tweed jacket and a scarf. Wizarding clothes might leave his legs more exposed, but at least his cloak was warm.

Seeking to escape the cold, and not feeling like walking due to the ache in his knees, he decided instead to go on the tube. He had no money to pay for a ticket, but it was easy enough to get through the barriers without one, with only minimal use of magic.

He descended. Briefly he thought of the caverns under Gringotts, but these tunnels were nothing like them. The white tiles and the stark lights made the place feel soulless, but the mass of people who moved around him reminded him that this was part of the real world. To him this was strange, but to the Muggles hurrying to and from their trains, this was part of everyday life. He stopped at a map of the tube system and studied it, but he had no destination. In the end, he chose a train at random - the Circle line going westwards. When the train pulled into the platform, he closed his eyes, but still could not stop thinking the thought, this could be a way. It would be quick, at least. But it would be gory, with blood splattering on others… The train ground to a halt, and Remus opened his eyes again, the impulse receding. He stepped onboard and found a seat.

The carriage filled up quickly. With every stop, passengers left and passengers got onboard. Here was a London in miniature. Old women with string-bags filled with groceries, a mother trying to keep their children in check, businessmen reading papers in files, a young woman with a novel, a man with headphones, nodding with his music, his cassette-player clamped in his hands, tourists with maps and cameras. Dozens of languages could be heard - English, Spanish, Bengali,
The air was hot and stuffy. A man beside him was smoking a pipe, someone else further ahead puffed on a cigarette with cheap, strong tobacco. The woman with the children, casting an annoyed glance at the smokers but having no right to tell them off, opened the vent. Cold, humid air seeped through it, but more than anything it let in the noise. The sound of the train hurtling down the tunnel was almost deafening. Remus reflected that probably, it was not actually that fast - no one else seemed to react badly to the speed or the noise - but to him it was nigh unbearable. He thought of getting up and shutting the vent, but he could not make himself stand up. The woman who had opened it seemed to realise that it did little to disperse the smoke, and closed it instead. Seeing him watching, she shrugged, as one does when sharing a hopeless moment with a stranger. Then she turned back to her children, who were begging for attention in what he thought was Hindi.

Passengers got off and stepped on. After some time, he seemed to be the only person who had got on at Embankment left. Some of the station names meant nothing to him. The calls for every station - ‘Please mind the gap. Change here for the Piccadilly and District line. Stand clear of the closing doors’ - became a mantra with no meaning. Through the doors and windows, he would glimpse the platforms. Some were dull and grey, with only colourful posters advertising musicals and films to brighten them. Others were tiled with finely decorated tiles, and had art nouveau decorations surrounding the words WAY OUT with an arrow towards the exit. A few times, Remus thought of getting off and walking instead. It would preoccupy him. Still he stayed in his seat. He did not have to energy to walk.

‘This is Monument for Bank. Please mind the gap,’ called the voice. The train had slowed and stopped, the doors had opened and the now-familiar exchange of passengers happened. As the train started moving again, Remus looked around without much interest. Unexpectedly, one face caught his attention. It was a young man, standing only a few feet away from him, dressed in a leather jacket and jeans. His hair fell down over one eye. Every few seconds, he would shake it back, closing his eyes in the process. Remus found himself taking in every feature of his face - his eyelids, his lips, his cheeks, his eyebrows. His hand around the pole, his legs expertly moving with the train’s movements. Then he realised that the man was not alone. A young woman, holding the same pole, reached out and tucked the offending fringe behind the man’s ear. He grinned and leaned down to kiss her. They laughed as they kissed. When they drew back, he kissed her nose, making her giggle and catch his lips again. Remus stared at them. There was an ever-sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

*I will never be able to have something like that again,* he thought. *Never mind that I would never be able to kiss someone I loved on the tube, or even hold hands here. I will never kiss anyone ever again. I will never sleep with anyone again in my life.*

He knew he could not. The risk - even taking precautions - was too grave. But it would not only be that. Would not anyone in their right mind reject him? First the lycanthropy, with the scars it left him with. And now this virus. For now, it was invisible. Here, in this tube carriage, he was passing for a normal human being, if one with strange marks on his skin. How long would that last? From what he had read, it could take time - perhaps years - but it also might start soon. When he thought of how his life would become, he could not see any love. He had tried to reenter that world, and expose his heart. Now it would waste away, both literally and metaphorically. He would die in the most horrible manner possible - unloved.

‘This is Embankment.’

Abruptly, power returned to his legs. He pushed past the couple, still absorbed in each other, and left the train. On his way through the entrance hall he saw what he had not noticed before. A man
was sleeping under the map of the underground system, with only some old newspapers between him and the stone floor. The underground was indeed a representation of all of London.

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The next day, Remus could not face leaving his room until late in the evening. He bought an eel-pie from a vendor half-way down the street. He had always hated eel, but it only cost him ten knuts. He could not spend much more on food if he wanted his money to last. He ate without appetite, forcing himself to finish the greasy pie.

By the time he had finished eating, the long spate of paralysing anxiety that had kept him in his room was replaced by restlessness. He started walking. He left Knockturn Alley behind, but did not head towards Diagon Alley. Instead, he turned the other way and followed the cramped passages which were part of wizarding London. Most of the magical parts of the city had barely changed since being rebuilt after the Great City Fire of 1666, only decades before the Statue of Secrecy was imposed, but these alleys looked far older. The passages’ cobbles were sometimes interrupted by steps, worn down by centuries of feet. The buildings were jagged, angling in ways which the houses in Diagon Alley never did. Still, these parts were undoubtedly lived in. Window-boxes and lace curtains made the houses seem far more welcoming than any part of Knockturn Alley. A cat hurried down the passage, its tail skirting Remus’ cloak. He turned around to look after it. Through the darkness he caught a sight of a collar. He had not seen a cat with a collar during these weeks in Knockturn Alley.

As he walked, he found himself wondering what time it was. He had left his wrist-watch at home, and for a moment he remembered his pocket-watch, which he would lose in less than a week. He saw no way of finding almost six galleons in that time. Looking up at the sky, he could not see many stars, but the moon was out. From the tips of the crescent moon, the outline of the disc ran like a shining thread, forming a perfect circle. Remus had a memory (could it possibly be from before he had been bitten?) of his mother calling that “old moon in new moon’s arms”. It was such a tender image, the crescent holding the dying moon close, rocking it while it shrank. To Remus, it seemed ironic that anything about the moon could be tender or kind. He looked away and continued on his way. All the time he was aware of it - a nail-clipping, a beast’s slit pupil staring down at him.

He turned back and turned into Diagon Alley. The shops were closed, but dim lights illuminated the shop-windows. A shop-sign creaked in a gust of wind. The alley, often bustling with people, felt eerie and deserted now. It was a cold night. Perhaps people had stayed in. As Remus reached the end of the alley, he made a sudden decision. He took out his wand and tapped the brick-wall. A hole opened, and he stepped through.

The heat and the voices hit against him when he stepped into the Leaky Cauldron. The pub was full of people, drinking and talking and laughing. Remus went straight through the pub and emerged on the street outside.

Keeping to the shadows to hide his strange attire, he walked down the street. He headed northwards, abandoning Tottenham Court Road for the quiet Victorian streets of Bloomsbury. He glimpsed the British Museum, and the tower of the Senate House, before hurrying on. He walked with head bowed, no longer looking, but going only where his feet led him. He would turn corners or go straight ahead based only on chance. He wanted to get lost. As long as he was walking, he was safe.

The blaring of a car-horn jerked him out of his thoughts. He had been about to step into the way of a car, driving down Euston Road. The driver turned down the window and shouted ‘Weirdo!’,
giving him the finger. Remus shrank back into the shadows. The broad street was so bright, with
street-lamps and cars illuminating it. Opposite him rose the half-derelict St Pancras station. In this
light, it looked abandoned. Its Victorian decorated bricks and neo-Gothic towers spoke of former
glory, but it had fallen into disrepair.

He crossed the road and walked along the vast station’s outer wall. When he reached the corner, he
could see King’s Cross, only a stone’s throw away. The station awoke too many memories - he did
not want to see it. Instead he turned into the street running between the two stations. Nearby he
could hear the sounds of a late-night train leaving King’s Cross. It made him turn his head, waiting
until he could not hear it anymore. He turned back to the street he was at, and stopped dead.

He had not seen them when he had turned the corner. Like he, hugging the wall, they had melted
into the shadows. On either side of the street, sleeping figures sat or lay. Some were wrapped in
blankets, others only in coats. A few had old sleeping bags. Here were the dead and wounded of
London, lined up like casualties after a battle. In the darkness, one could have mistaken some of
them for piles of rubbish or discarded blankets. How many such people had he passed this evening
without noticing or acknowledging them? Here, squeezed in between two monuments of the
greatness of the capital, were the rejects of London.

With sudden clarity, Remus saw his own future. This was where he would end up - one of
London’s countless homeless, left to pave the streets with his freezing body. The people who
helped him would disappear, or die, or lose patience with him. Or perhaps he would simply not ask
for help. Then the cold and the isolation would set to work on him. He would float between the
worlds, like a wraith caught between realities. Eventually, it would come for him. He did not know
what ‘it’ was, but it did not really matter. If it wasn’t AIDS, the lycanthropy would kill him just as
well. But for all he knew, it might be something less dramatic - an infected scratch or some gang
taking out their aggressions on him, or simply the cold.

He had expected to feel panic, but now he found himself calm. It was like gazing down from a cliff
and realising that you didn’t get vertigo anymore. It felt so inevitable that being afraid was not
worth it anymore.

At the same time, he thought that he might not live to see such a future. It might only happen if he
did not go through with it. What would be worse, dying from cold or from, say, drowning? What
could be more painful for his parents? Knowing he died by his own hand, or not knowing where he
was at all? He hated the risk of being a danger to others, but even staring on what might (would) be
his future, he realised he was still undecided. Despite his fears, he was not certain he would dare to
act.

Remus turned on his heel and quickly made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron. When he stepped
in, many of the patrons were on their feet, putting on cloaks and hats. Remus went straight up to
the bar, and asked the publican:

‘Have you called time?’

‘You’ve got another five minutes,’ Tom the innkeeper said. ‘What can I get you?’

Remus took up his purse and looked into it.

‘How much for a large whiskey?’

‘Any particular kind?’

‘No,’ Remus said. ‘Frankly I’m not after taste.’
'Two sickles, then, please.'

'Alright,' he said and shook out the coins. He did not even care about the cost. All he wanted to do right now was to get drunk. If he had had enough money, he would have bought a bottle. As soon as Tom put the glass in front of him, he picked it up. He drank it down in two gulps. The bad whiskey burned his throat, but the pang of the alcohol was welcome. He handed back the glass to the innkeeper, who cast him a hopeless look. Anaesthetised, Remus made his way back towards Knockturn Alley.

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Days passed. In his memory, they merged together. Every one seemed the same. All he did was to lie on his bed and think, pace his room, and count his money. Through the weekend he admonished himself for drinking that whiskey. Still, he would not have been able to pay next week’s rent even if he had not bought it.

He barely left his room during those days. The crowds outside pushed at him, smothering him. During the nights, he heard the rats running under the floor-boards. Once a dog howled out in the alley. When Remus fell asleep, he dreamt of a dog whining and scratching at the door, wanting to be let in. He woke in a cold sweat, and went to make sure the door was locked.

Another night, he took out the photographs, still wrapped in the paper with Rayan’s phone number. He studied his own face at the light of his wand, and felt as if he was looking through time. When those photos were taken, he had no idea what was going to happen. He did not realise the risks he was about to take. Remus wrapped them up again, but lingered at the phone number. He deliberated, and decided, no. Instead he pushed the package deep into the trunk, behind a piece of the cloth that clad it that had come loose many years ago.

It was not until Tuesday that he felt able to go out for a walk. He kept to wizarding streets this time, but rubbish bags still made him look twice, to be sure that they were not in fact people. After some time, he had to turn back. One of his knees had started hurting, making him limp. Laboriously, he made his way back to the lodging house. On the first flight, he had to pause to rest. Something on the landing caught his eye - a rolled-up newspaper. He picked it up and looked at the date. It was the Sunday issue, two days old. He wavered for a moment, knowing that Madam Wilkes may see it as stealing. Then he decided that she would have no use for a two day old newspaper. Sticking the paper in his belt, he continued the climb up to his room.

Well there, he sat down on the bed, his back against the wall, legs stretched out in front of him. He spread the paper out in his lap, and looked at it. He had not read the paper in ten days. He had not been able to face trawling through job adverts. Still he knew he needed money. He would ease himself into it, and look at the headlines first.

Remus opened the paper. On one side, there was a story about relations between the British Ministry and the Ministry in Greece. On the other side were letters to the editor.

Sir,

I am appalled at the Ministry of Magic’s lack of response towards the current A.I.D.S. crisis. A small number of deviants, whose right to using magic is at best questionable, are putting the wizarding community in peril. Should not these depraved persons be refused entry into wizarding institutions? They should keep their predilections among Muggles, and not besiege wizarding families with the threat of their disease.

Remus did not know if he was holding his breath, or was forgetting to breathe. He felt sick. He
wished he could be angry at this bigotry, but instead he just felt horrified. Not knowing what else to do, he threw the paper onto the floor. He tried to pull his knees against his chest, but it hurt too much. Instead he lay down and buried his face in the pillow. It should have been cathartic, letting out his fear and pain, but he felt no such thing. Crying was only an outward manifestation of it.

More than anything, he felt hopeless. By picking up that newspaper and deciding, even for a moment, to look for a job, he had been about to reconquer a part of normal life. Instead, he had been told that he was not a human being, with feelings and wishes and fears, but simply a malicious threat.

He lay like that for a long time. All he was aware of was his body - the ache in his left knee, the feeling of a healed welt against his fingers through his sleeve, his eyes hurting from the crying. Idly, he ran his fingers over the scar. What it represented scared him. He felt a bout of nausea again. Was this just mental, or was it physical? Was he falling ill? Carefully, he sat up, trying to ascertain whether he had a fever. He did feel faint and shivery, but the room was cold… or at least he thought it was. He could not quite tell. As he sat up again, he caught sight of the newspaper where he had thrown it. It had fallen open on a new place, and a familiar face was staring at him from the page.

His heart beating fast, he got off the bed and picked up the paper again. Sinking back, he stared at the old woman boring her eyes into him. He had not seen her many times, mostly at King’s Cross, during the first years of Hogwarts. They had all kept their distance. Her face was unappealing and shrivelled, but he still saw the family resemblance. The nose and the chin, and the way the upper lip was shaped were hauntingly familiar. Remus had been cold before, but now he was shaking.

Obituary - Walburga Black (1925-1985)

Walburga Black, née Black, died on Friday 13 December, at age 59. Mrs Black was born on the 7th of December 1925 to Pollux Black and Irma Crabbe. She attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, being sorted into Slytherin House on her arrival in 1936. She became engaged to her second cousin, Orion Black, in 1945. The couple took up residence in the the Black family’s Grimmauld Place mansion in London after marrying in 1947, and had two sons, born 1959 and 1961. In 1979, Mrs Black was both widowed and lost her youngest son, Regulus. Nevertheless she remained a fixture in wizarding high society. Mrs Black is survived only by her eldest son Sirius, a follower of He Who Must Not Be Named incarcerated in Azkaban since 1981 for thirteen counts of murder. With the passing of Walburga Black, one of the wizarding families of old moves one step closer to extinction.

The newspaper slipped out of Remus’ hands. It fell, landing with Walburga Black’s face still visible. He closed his eyes hard, wishing for it to go away, but instead he saw Sirius. He saw him as he had been at school, and with the Order. Staring into thin air, a look of epiphany on his face the first time he heard the crescendo in “The Bewlay Brothers”. Pouting with concentration as he bent over his anatomy text-book, tracing the bones in his own beautiful hands. Admiring himself in the mirror, fishing for compliments, knowing he would get them. Straddling Remus’ lap and kissing him, until he wondered how anyone could ever kiss him like that.

And Sirius laughing. They said he had laughed. He imagined his silver-bell laughter, always so beautiful, turned hysterical as he was led away. Remus wanted to clamp his hands over his ears and shut it out, but it was inside of him. Again he lay back onto the bed, keeping his eyes closed until the image of Sirius had faded.

It had all been a lie, and one that had almost killed him. When he had been recovering, he had
thought that he would not give Sirius the satisfaction of killing him as well as the other two. Still it had always felt like that was what would come for him eventually. To his horror, he laughed himself. *Someone got there before you did,* he thought. *I don’t even need you to kill me with love. I do that fine on my own.*
Remus woke with the knowledge that something had changed. The atmosphere of the cramped little room was not the same. The light coming from the skylight blinked into shadow for a moment. The planks groaned under a sudden weight. Then, the mattress shifted as someone sat down on it.

Startled, he pushed himself up, away from the intruder. Then he saw who it was, and relaxed.  
‘Christ, you scared me.’

His guest grinned. The beginnings of crows’ feet appeared at the edge of those made-up eyes.  
‘Hi, Moony.’

‘What are you doing here, Sirius?’

‘Wanted to see you, of course,’ Sirius said casually, leaning back on one hand. His hair fell elegantly over one eye. He threw his head back and shook it away. Seeing him watching, he smiled. Remus wondered why he was not smiling back. He had not seen him for some time, but now he could not remember why.

‘Your mother’s dead,’ he said, remembering the newspaper.

Sirius shrugged and grinned.  
‘Good riddance.’

‘You’re really not sorry?’

‘You know I’m not,’ Sirius said. ‘She was a cruel, heartless bigot. I’m not going to mourn her.’

The light fell on his face. Remus saw a black smudge running from his eye.

‘Your eyeliner’s a mess, Padfoot.’ He reached out and put his hand against his face. Sirius winced and pulled back. ‘Oh - sorry... What’s happened?’

‘One of the Aurors struck me,’ he said, putting his hand over his cheek to shield it. His nail-varnish was cracked and peeling. ‘I’m going to bruise.’

Remus froze.

‘But that was four years ago.’

‘Really?’ Sirius said absently. ‘It feels like a hundred to me.’

This was wrong. Sirius was in Azkaban. Why was he here - why did he look like he had when he was twenty-two, with his elegant hair and his perfect skin and his make-up? He had killed all those people...

Remus pulled away.

‘What’s the matter?’ Sirius asked.
‘You killed them,’ Remus said. ‘You killed Peter and James...’

Sirius looked at him as if he did not understand. Then his face changed, as if he had spotted something.

‘Moony...’ He reached out and took hold of his shoulder. Remus threw his arms over his head, whimpering. ‘Moony, stop it, this is important.’ Sirius grabbed his arm and pulled it down. Trembling, Remus looked up at him. The look in Sirius’ eyes was scared. ‘Remus, there’s something in your blood.’

‘What?’ Remus said. Sirius traced his fingers from his shoulder to the vein in his throat.

‘Your blood is poisoned,’ he said. ‘You reek of it. It’s going to kill you.’

Remus’ throat had gone dry.

‘What is it?’ he asked. Padfoot looked him in the eye and spoke.

‘It’s love.’

Remus woke with such force that he half sat up. For a moment he sat frozen, wondering where Sirius had gone. Then he realised. With a groan, he sank back, burying his face in his pillow. It didn’t mean anything, he told himself. It was just his brain trying to make sense of things that worried him, and weaving it together to a narrative to make it easier to process. He still felt angry. James would not come to him, and neither would Peter, but Sirius, who was not even dead, haunted him.

Sounds from the stairwell shook him out of his thoughts. There were people running up the stairs. He sat up and then held very still to hear them through the walls.

‘But what is this about?’

‘That is none of your business, Madam Wilkes.’

‘This is my lodging house - he is my lodger! If he’s done something...’

‘I’m here on Ministry business, Madam, I am under no obligation to tell you anything. Now leave me alone.’

The footsteps, heavy and uneven, came closer. Remus fumbled for his dressing-gown and planted his bare feet on the floor, as if to brace himself. Someone knocked at the door. He walked over, hesitating with his hand on the handle. Another impatient knock shook the door. Remus unlocked it and opened it a little. A hand shot out and pushed the door open. Alastor Moody stepped in and slammed the door shut - Remus only just caught sight of Madam Wilkes, hungry for information. He looked from the closed door to his uninvited guest. The Auror folded his arms and glared down at him.

‘What’s happened?’ Remus asked.

‘You,’ Moody said. ‘You’re in trouble.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t you “what” me, boy!’ Moody growled. ‘Do you know what this is?’ He pulled a scroll out of his pocket. Remus shook his head. Having just woken up from a bad dream, he was not
following. ‘It’s a report about a missing person. You.’ He jabbed him in the chest.

‘What - me? I mean...’ Remus took a moment to try to pull himself together. ‘Who reported me missing?’

‘Your father.’ Moody undid the ribbon around the scroll. ‘Apparently the last letter you sent them arrived on the twenty-sixth. That’s over three weeks ago.’

‘Did you tell him I’m here?’ Remus asked.

‘No. I didn’t see him. This isn’t my area. I only just found out about it.’ Moody threw the scroll at Remus. He fumbled, and it fell to the floor. Quickly he picked it up and looked at it. The handwriting was even and bureaucratic - not his father’s, but a Ministry clerk. The statement was so formal and dispassionate that it did not sound like his father, but it was written in the first person.

Our son Remus left our home in Yorkshire on the 14 October, to work in a Muggle shop in Bexwold, Suffolk. The last letter (sent by Muggle post) arrived on Tuesday 26 November, and was dated the day before (Monday). Since then we have had no contact. When Remus failed to be in contact after the full-moon of Wednesday 27 November, I went to find him. His landlord (Mrs Mason) and his employers (Mr and Mrs Carter) said they had not seen him since 26 November. He had not handed in his resignation. Mrs Mason claims he left overnight, and had left no message. All his possessions had been removed from his room. I also went to the place he had told us he would be isolating himself at during the full-moon (a Muggle military base within walking-distance of the village), but there was no sign of him there.

My wife and I are worried for our son’s safety. In the past he has been mentally unstable. He may be a danger to himself. He would only be a danger to others in wolf-form.

At the top of the scroll, the word ‘WEREWOLF’ was written in red capitals.

‘Well?’ Moody said. Remus did not look up, his eyes still on the statement. The guilt made him feel sick. He imagined his father in his ill-fitting Muggle suit go around to the Carters and to Mrs Mason. He must have been beside himself with worry, and to have to speak to all those strangers... And he had gone to the military base. Vividly, Remus saw in his mind’s eye how he had walked from building to building, hesitating at the entrances, expecting and dreading and almost hoping to find something...

His legs wouldn’t support him for much longer. He went over to the bed and sat down, a hand over his mouth, fighting tears. He had expected Moody to press him, but he stood patiently, letting him try to compose himself. Finally, Remus drew a shaking breath.

‘sorry I can’t offer you a seat.’

‘Not a problem,’ Moody grunted, shifting his weight onto his other leg. ‘Now. Why the hell haven’t you got in touch with your parents?’

‘I... couldn’t. I didn’t dare to.’

‘Why?’

Remus hesitated.
'It’s rather complicated.'

‘Then start with this. Where did you transform last full-moon?’ Remus hung his head. When he spoke again, Moody’s voice was sharper. ‘Did you transform in the open?’

‘No,’ Remus said, suddenly angry. ‘Why do everyone assume I’m breaking the law? No, I didn’t!’

‘Then where were you?’ Moody asked. Remus felt himself deflate. He did not have the strength to resist.

‘In the walk-in freezer at the butcher’s shop where I worked.’

‘What?’ Moody growled. ‘Why?’

‘Fenrir Greyback.’

Moody’s dark eye narrowed. His blue eye was staring straight at him.

‘He turned up around last full-moon. Someone killed almost all the pigs owned by Mr Carter’s supplier. And then two days later Greyback showed up at the shop...’

‘And you didn’t tell anyone,’ Moody finished.

Remus shrugged.

‘No one would have believed me,’ he said. ‘If I’d gone to the Ministry and said that there was a werewolf killing farm animals, they would have assumed it was me.’

Moody looked at him for some time.

‘You’re probably right, unfortunately,’ he conceded. ‘Come on, get dressed. I’m taking you to the Ministry to have them get rid of this report.’ Moody stomped over to the door, but paused. ‘And don’t think I’m done with you after that.’

Then he stepped out and closed the door behind him. Remus remained sitting on the bed, staring at his bare feet for a moment. He knew Moody should not be kept waiting, so with an effort he stood up, pulled off his dressing-gown and nightshirt and put on his robes. With his wand in his belt and his cloak wrapped tightly around him, he came out of the room. Moody did not look at him, at least not with his dark eye. When they stepped out onto the street, he said:

‘We’ll Apparate straight there. If you hold onto me, you’ll get through as well.’ He stuck out his elbow. A little uncertainly, Remus took it. ‘Alright?’ Not waiting for an answer, Moody turned on the spot. Remus was only a fraction late. He was jerked from the ground, pulled out of reality. The next thing he knew, his feet hit the marble floor. The shock-wave carried through his legs, making his knee-caps rattle and his shins hurt. Moody had pulled his elbow out of his grip, and was already walking through the halls with desks on either side. Trying to steady himself with a few deep breaths, Remus followed.

He had almost caught up when Moody stopped at the desk of a bored-looking wizard.

‘Sherrington.’

The wizard looked up.

‘Yes, Auror Moody?’ he said with little enthusiasm.
'It’s about your missing werewolf,’ Moody said and handed over the scroll. Sherrington took it from him and unrolled it.

‘What’s this got to do with Auror-business?’ he asked, not looking up from the scroll. ‘Is he a Dark wizard? To be perfectly honest, I think he’s topped himself. That’s what his old dad seemed to think. Good riddance, if you ask me.’

For a moment, Remus remembered his dream. With an effort, he pushed it aside.

‘No, I mean I’ve found him for you,’ Moody growled. Sherrington looked at Moody, then noticed Remus. He looked him up and down, reread the physical description on the form and then looked back at him.

‘Average height, slight build, light-brown hair, scars,’ he muttered. ‘That looks about right.’ Moody nudged Remus, who stepped closer. Sherrington took out a quill and dipped it in ink.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Remus John Lupin.’

‘Current address?’

‘124 Knockturn Alley.’

The wizard scowled.

‘Big bloody surprise. Current employer?’

‘None.’

‘And are you capable of saying more than three words at a time?’ Sherrington asked.

‘Yes, actually I am,’ Remus answered tartly.

‘I’ll deal with him, Sherrington.’ Moody said, grabbing Remus by the shoulder. ‘Get on with whatever it is you call work.’ He steered him aside, into a section which was mostly empty.

‘Is that man going to write to my parents?’ Remus asked. His anger at the Ministry wizard was gone now. He felt himself shaking again.

‘Yes, he’ll tell them that the matter has been resolved,’ Moody said. ‘Now, before anything else, you need to tell me about Greyback.’

Remus nodded - there was no way out of it.

‘Is there any chance I could sit down?’ he asked. Moody drew his wand and waved it. A simple chair clattered to the ground. Remus sat down, grateful. Moody drew up a stool for himself and sat down, stretching his wooden leg out in front of him.

‘So Greyback turns up,’ Moody said. ‘Before the full moon?’

‘He must have,’ Remus said. ‘Those pigs were killed by a werewolf. I saw them myself. Mr Carter - the butcher - brought me to see them. Greyback must have broken in before transforming and let the Change happen there.’

‘Sounds like Greyback,’ Moody muttered. ‘But you didn’t see him until after?’
'That’s right. It was the first of November.’ Moody looked sceptical about the specific date. ‘It’s Peter’s death-day. I remember.’ He prompted him to continue. ‘He came into the shop, and then he followed me on my way home. I confronted him. He must have followed me later too - probably before as well - but whenever I stopped or called out, he left.’

‘That’s all he did? Follow you?’

Remus shook his head.

‘There were acts of intimidation. Footprints outside my landlady’s window. My employer’s bicycle was wrecked. My parents’ owl was killed and left on my doorstep.’

‘Do you know why?’ Moody asked.

‘Because I spied on the werewolves during the war, he said,’ Remus said. ‘He also mentioned that it’s disgusting that I “pretend to be human”. He’s got this strange idea that werewolves’ real forms are the wolf. But I don’t know if that’s the entire reason.’

‘What is your instinct telling you?’

Remus thought about it. The fact that Moody cared about his opinion made him feel a little stronger.

‘In a way I think he was after revenge,’ he said, ‘but... I think he’s bored. Perhaps he’s restless too, with the war over.’

‘Possible,’ Moody grunted. ‘Anyway, you said you transformed in that walk-in freezer because of him. Why?’

Remus paused, trying to compose himself.

‘I was on my way to the military base, where I was going to transform,’ he said. ‘Mrs Carter had promised I could use the bike, so I hadn’t left as much time as I would have if I was going to walk there. Then when I got to the shop to pick it up... he attacked me.’ Both of Moody’s eyes were looking at him now. ‘There was a fight. Greyback disarmed me. And then he locked me in the freezer. I couldn’t get out - I didn’t have my wand, and there was no lock on the inside, and I was running out of time anyway...’ Remus looked down at his hands. It felt terrible to think of it. ‘It was so very cold in there. Lots of shelves and trollies - all metal. And meat. A carcass hanging from the ceiling. I tore the place apart. I have no idea what the Carters are going to do about it. I must have ruined their business completely.’

‘What happened next?’

‘I woke up. I managed to unlock the door. Took my wand, Apparated to my room, emptied it. Then I left.’ He looked up at Moody. ‘If you don’t believe me, you can talk to St Mungo’s. I went there first thing when I got to London. Greyback broke my wrist when he disarmed me, and the cold was getting to me. The healer I saw was called Malvern. It’ll be in my file.’

‘There’s nothing here I have difficulty believing, Lupin,’ Moody said. ‘Except this. Why didn’t you tell me any of this when I saw you last?’

Remus shook his head.

‘I didn’t want to think about it. It was too much. I’ve been so worried that he’ll follow me here...’
‘And what? You thought that saying his name would summon him? Don’t be stupid, boy.’

‘I didn’t feel like talking about it.’

‘Is that why you haven’t been in touch with your parents?’ Moody asked. ‘You could have done with their help.’

Remus did not know where to start.

‘Do you think I wanted my mum and dad to know that I was living in a slum?’ he asked. ‘As soon as they knew, they’d turn up and drag me home.’

‘You want to stay there?’ Moody asked.

‘No. But I don’t want to go home to my parents. I’m sick of being a child. I just want to be independent for once.’

They lapsed into silence. Remus watched his hands again, not wanting to meet Moody’s eye.

‘You’ll have to write to them,’ Moody said eventually. Remus shook his head.

‘No. I can’t. I don’t want to.’

The legs of Moody’s chair scraped against the stone floor.

‘Now you look at me,’ he growled and grabbed Remus’ shoulder. He flinched - Moody’s grip was strong enough to hurt. Reluctantly, he looked him in the eye. ‘Your father thought you were dead. Don’t you realise that? They must have thought that you’d died during the full-moon. He went looking for your body. And then when he came here, it was probably because he thought you were cold on a slab somewhere, or planning to be. However little you like them, you can’t let your parents think that when it’s not true.’

Moody let go of him. Remus looked away. Unbidden, his eyes filled with tears. Moody was right. His parents were just trying to protect him. He had given them reasons to be worried in the past, and all things considered, they were almost right. As he turned away his face and reached up to wipe the tears away, feeling childish, he realised that his hands were shaking again.

‘What’s happened to you, Lupin?’

He looked over at Moody again. His mismatched gaze looked almost concerned.

‘A fortnight ago, you were worried about things, but now! You look like you’re on the verge of a breakdown.’

Remus swallowed, trying to steady himself.

‘I think I might be,’ he admitted.

‘Is this about Greyback?’ Moody pressed. Remus shook his head. ‘Then what the hell’s happened?’

‘I don’t really want to talk about it.’ His voice sounded weak. Moody snorted.

‘Well, you should. Don’t go bottling things up. Anyway.’ He stood up. ‘Get yourself home. Write to your parents. Promise me that.’
Remus rose shakily.

‘I promise.’

‘Good. And stay out of trouble.’ Moody turned and started walking away, back to his desk.

‘Auror Moody?’ He turned, and Remus hurried over to him. ‘I hate to ask, but... I don’t have any money. And my rent is due tomorrow.’

‘That money you got from your pocket-watch’s run out, then?’

He nodded.

‘Almost.’ Then he admitted: ‘I’d like to redeem it. But there’s no way I can...’

‘And I’d be a kinder creditor than pawning something else,’ Moody concluded.

‘I don’t really have anything else,’ Remus said. ‘Some books, clothes, a Muggle wrist-watch - nothing of any real value. My wand, but... I can’t do without that.’

Moody’s coarse face softened.

‘Come along, lad.’ They walked over to Moody’s desk, where he dug out a coin purse. ‘Fifteen galleons enough?’

‘It’s plenty,’ Remus said. Fifteen galleons seemed like a staggering amount of money.

‘Pay me back within the next few months - whenever you can,’ Moody said and handed over the purse. ‘In instalments, if that’s easier for you. If you forget I’ll dog you about it.’

‘Thank you. Thank you very much.’

‘Now go write that letter.’

Moody sat down and started reading some parchments on his desk. Remus left, still shaking.

***

The next day, Remus paid his rent as soon as he had woken up. This time, Madam Wilkes even said ‘thank you’, if rather discourteously. Then he set off to the pawnshop, pawn-ticket and money in his pocket. He left the shop with the familiar weight of his watch there instead. He had tucked the chain into the pocket as well, not wanting to show that he was carrying anything of value. The rhythmic thud of the watch against his thigh was comforting.

Back in his room, he took it out and wound it. He held it between his hands as the cogs inside started turning. He felt as if he had reclaimed some part of himself by getting back this heirloom. He traced the engraved names with his finger, thinking of his father who had mended it for him, and his great-uncle who had first been given it. Watching the hands go round the clock face, Remus wondered whether great-uncle Julius had had the watch with him when he had gone to war. Had he kept it in an inner pocket through that hell? Remus had usually left it at home in a drawer during missions, afraid it might get dented or lost. Still, holding something that might have been someone’s link to the peaceful world...

Abruptly he wondered what Julius Lupin would have made of him - twenty-five years old, a werewolf, living in a slum, unemployed, gay, and possibly - probably - almost certainly slowly dying of AIDS. Remus wished that he could tell himself that his great-uncle would have liked him
nevertheless, but he found it difficult to imagine that a wizard, in particular one born in the 1890s, would tolerate a great-nephew who was a werewolf, let alone one who was homosexual. Briefly, he reminded himself that Julius had never married. Naturally, he might never have met the right girl, or might have made himself impossible through his temper and his awkward position between the wizarding and Muggle worlds, but… He guessed he would never know.

Putting the watch aside, Remus got his trunk up onto the bed to serve as a desk. His shoulder-joints and arm-muscles hurt - eight days until the full moon now. He rolled his shoulders to ease them. Then he took out parchment, ink and quill, and turned his mind to writing to his parents. After all, he had promised Moody.

Dear mum and dad, he wrote, then paused. Where should he begin? What did you say to your parents when they had thought you were dead? “I’m sorry I made you worry”? “I know you’ve been worried for me but I’m alright”?

But he wasn’t alright - anything but. He thought of Greyback, and the Carters’ ruined shop, and Rayan, and his suspicion that he had contracted the AIDS virus. There was not one thing there he wanted to tell his parents. He could lie, of course, and pretend that everything was fine. He tried to compose that letter in his head, but got nowhere. Finally, he pushed the trunk onto the floor and lay down on the bed, staring into the ceiling, waiting for time to pass.

***

Remus woke before dawn. He stayed in bed, waiting for the sun to rise. There was no reason to get up before then - his room would be in darkness until the sky grew lighter. He lay and watched the night pale into early morning. He felt strangely empty, as if all the parts of him that meant anything had been picked out of him.

When the light penetrated the skylight, Remus rose. He dressed without giving it any thought. His face itched - it was four or five days since he had last shaved. He had not seen the point of it, but now he felt that it had gone too long. He took his shaving-kit out and suspended the shaving mirror in mid-air with a wave of his wand. The long stubble made him look older, which was only accentuated by the dark bags under his eyes. He wondered, picking at his fringe, whether he had more grey hairs than a month ago. Perhaps it was just his imagination.

He filled the wash-basin with water and set to lathering his face. When he picked up the razor, he noticed a slight tremble in his hand. He waited, staring at it. After a while, it stopped, and the light reflected in the blade did not move anymore. The fact that his right hand shook was a sure sign that there was something wrong with him. Usually, it was only his left that trembled.

Certain that his hand was steady now, he started shaving. Little by little, he saw himself emerge from under the beard. He grew younger, but also more lost. Sometimes, Remus thought he looked both older and younger than twenty-five.

The uncovering was a slow process. The sharpness of the razor required him to take his time. Every so often, he paused, wondering whether his hand was about to start shaking. It did not. Instead, it was the razor itself that betrayed him. He was standing with his head tipped back and the skin of his throat pulled taut. He followed the skin with the blade downwards. The slowness of his movements had calmed him, shaking off the emptiness he had woken with.

The skin under the razor stung. He lowered it and looked himself in the mirror. At first, he saw no mark on his skin. Then, slowly, a red line appeared, where the badly honed razor had cut him. At first, it was only a dash, less than half an inch wide and only a fraction thick. As he watched, it grew thicker. A drop of blood bulged out of the cut and trailed down his throat.
Remus watched with morbid fascination. So this had been what he had been so afraid of all these weeks. The bright red drop shimmered in the early morning light.

Abruptly, he realised he was hyperventilating. He did not know when he had started, and whether it was that or the agitation which was making him feel light-headed. The razor fell out of his hand and clattered into the basin. He grabbed for his towel and pushed it against the wound. He closed his eyes, and tried to talk himself down. It’s just a nick. It’s not much blood. Just a few drops. You’re on your own in here - it’s not going to hurt anyone.

Nevertheless, he felt shock coursing through him. His throat was tight, and his knees were shaking now. He felt cold and drained, as if he was bleeding out. His eyes still closed, he walked over to the bed and sat down.

When he trusted his legs again, he got up and washed off the lather. He cleaned the razor and put it away. This would have to do. Still shaking, he returned to the bed. How long he lay there, he did not know. When his breathing calmed again, he felt so weak that he stayed on the bed for some time. It was the sight of blood on the sleeve of his robe that made him sit up. It must have gotten there when he was stemming the blood-flow. After deliberating, he took off the robe and fetched his Muggle clothes.

Leaving the wizarding streets, he walked southwards, shivering in his tweed jacket. Others were wearing coats and hats. Not even his knitted scarf was enough to keep out the chilling wind. At least the trousers were warmer than robes. He passed Trafalgar Square, pushing through the throng of tourists. Choosing not to go through the admiralty Arch, he instead turned into the next street, into Whitehall. Around him now were the corridors of power. Monumental buildings flanked the wide street. From their pedestals, heroes of old stared out into thin air, dreaming of the glorious past. Some, Remus saw when he passed the Ministry of Defence, were more recent than other. Their clothes were twentieth century, and the style was less classically stiff, but the bronze made it the same. He stopped at the corner of the Ministry and looked over the street, at the gates dividing Downing Street from the rest of London. Tourists were flocked in front of them, craning their necks and pointing, trying in vain to catch sight of the black door of Number Ten.

Surprising himself, Remus felt a sudden wave of cold hate against the woman behind that door. He thought of the homeless he had seen at King’s Cross, left to drift through the cold - the devastation in the Muggle communities only miles from his parents’ house - the people whom others would not touch as they thought a handshake may give them AIDS - the soldiers who died for a group of islands far away.

As though answering that last thought, the white shape of the Cenotaph ahead drew his attention. Turning away from Downing Street, Remus walked towards it. It stood stranded in the middle of the street, like the prow of some ship. Flags, waving in the breeze, were fastened to two sides. They were not much more than decorations to him. Wizards tended not to use flags and such-like very often, even if Remus knew them better than some. The first time Sirius had seen a British bank-note, he had asked who the woman on it was. ‘It’s the Queen,’ Remus had said and laughed. ‘How can’t you know the Queen?’ Sirius had shrugged and said, ‘well, she’s not on our money.’ Naturally she wasn’t - wizarding money was minted by goblins, who did not hold human authority, whether Muggle or magic, in high regard.

At the Cenotaph’s base lay wreaths of paper poppies, left there on Remembrance Sunday. On the stone itself stood the words “The Glorious Dead”. As he watched this stark, silent memorial, he wondered how someone dead could be glorious. His mind associated freely - glorious, glamorous, fabulous. He thought of Rayan’s friend Ellis, who camped up to annoy bigots and acted in pantos until he ruined his knee. No one would give him a monument. No one would raise a memorial over
Remus when he died.

It struck him, standing there, how few of the victims of war the Cenotaph commemorated. The only way it would have commemorated his great-uncle was if he had died. But he had not. Instead he had lived on, with a part of himself missing, lost in the trenches. There was no reminder of the survivors. The maimed veterans, or those returning home with shell-shock, or those who came back to find that they had no life to return to, were not worth remembering in society’s eyes. The dead were as silent as the stone, with no needs or complaints. For the victors, suffering survivors were inconvenient.

The Cenotaph was depressing him too much. He pressed on, past the Houses of Parliament and along Westminster Abbey. The monumental architecture started giving way to more humble buildings. He turned into a street of mock-Regency brick houses. A little ahead of him was a woman with a pram. An old lady was letting herself into one of the houses. Otherwise the street was empty. Remus wondered whether he should turn back to Knockturn Alley to get some food. He wished he had some Muggle money, but exchanging only a few galleons would not be worth it. He knew he should try to get a job, but even if he managed to apply to something, he had no Muggle address to give an employer. But I need to make money somehow, he thought. If not I’ll starve…

‘Remus!’

Surprised at the sound of his name, he looked over his shoulder. A man, a few blocks away, was hurrying towards him. Remus’ stomach somersaulted when he recognised him. He turned and started walking again.

‘Remus!’ Rayan called again. Remus kept his eyes fixed on a point in front of him and quickened his step. ‘Remus, wait up!’

The footsteps were closer now. A pair of shoes clattered against the paving-stones just behind him, and he heard Rayan exhale heavily as he slowed to a quick walk.

‘I’ve been looking all over for you,’ he said.

Without looking over his shoulder, Remus said:

‘I don’t want to talk to you.’

‘What’s happened?’ Rayan asked, his voice becoming sharper. ‘You just disappeared…’

‘Leave me alone,’ Remus said, turning his head fractionally, enough to catch sight of Rayan’s handsome face.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ Rayan said.

‘Just leave me alone, I said!’

‘Remus, please…’ Rayan grabbed his arm and spun him around.

Something shifted inside Remus. Detached from himself, he felt it like a breath being held. Then at once it erupted. The magic forced its way out of him and slammed into Rayan. The red light blinded him. When the world around him reformed, he saw Rayan lying stretched out on the ground.

‘Rayan?’
He did not stir. Remus crouched down and fumbled for his pulse. For a terrible moment, he thought he was dead, but then he found it. It had only been a stunning spell, and all it had done was stun him.

Then the realisation of what he had done hit him. He looked around. Had there been witnesses? Had someone gone to fetch the police? Were Magical Law Enforcement officers Apparating to take him into custody? The street was empty and quiet. Remus could only hear his own pulse raging in his ears. He had to get away. Forgetting all about magic and Apparition, he ran. He ran until his legs would not carry him any further, and his lungs could no longer take the strain. He sunk down against the wall in an alley, clutching a stitch in his side and tasting bile. The adrenaline rushing through him was making him shake on its own, but the horror of what he had done was worse. Struggling to breathe, he started crying.
Remus woke feeling confused. The past few days had not stayed in his memory. Reality had been fragmented, a flurry of thoughts and small events. He had been trapped in his room by his own fears, certain that soon, the Magical Law Enforcement would catch up with him.

The fact that he had lost control kept coming back to him, like a mantra. It was humiliating - that only happened to small children, before they had been trained to harness their magic and channel it through a wand. But in that moment, his wish to get out of there had been so strong that the magic had taken control of him instead of the other way round. In hindsight, he could not see why. He should have stopped and talked to Rayan - confronted him, if that was how he wanted to think of it. At the very least, he should have stayed until he woke up, to make sure that he was unhurt. But he had not, and he did not know how to accept that.

His breath caught, as if on a protruding hook in his chest, and came out as a hacking cough instead. He pushed himself up, trying to make it easier to breathe. When it subsided, a realisation struck him. Today was Christmas Eve.

His little room was just like it always was - bare roof beams, peeling wallpaper, irregular floorboards. He thought of his parents’ house, with the Yule log and the holly around the windows. Before Hogwarts, he and his mother would spend days before Christmas making paper-chains from coloured paper. His father would enchant a set of decorative angels to flutter around the kitchen. Mrs Lupin would laugh with delight at them every year. Then he remembered Hogwarts - the massive Christmas trees, the enchanted fairies, the singing suits of armour… It all seemed like another world.

Seeking to find some way of penetrating into that world, Remus got dressed and wandered towards Diagon Alley. The street seemed to sparkle. He had barely noticed before now that every shop-window was decorated with lights and garlands. Through the window of a tea-house, he saw a couple kissing under the mistletoe. (He wondered whether there was a branch of mistletoe at the café, to catch people unawares.) As he walked through the crowds, he saw plenty of stressed faces, but he could not find it in himself to feel sorry for them. This affluence seemed more than anything joyful. These people had so much - not just money, but opportunity and will to spend it on things they wanted, or were told they did. They had families to stress about finding gifts for. They had annoying relatives, whose boring conversation they dreaded. Even these uncomfortable things seemed so luxurious.

But Remus had a family - he had his parents. Why did he not go to them? He did not have an answer. All he knew was that he simply did not dare.

As a couple with several excited children walked past, Remus wondered what Harry’s Christmas Eve was like. In his mind, he sent a quiet wish - almost a prayer - that all was well with him.

He had had enough of a life he could not have. He was coughing again. He paused until the fit passed. Pulling up his hood against the cold, he turned back and walked towards the poorer streets. This time, he took another route than before. After walking only a few blocks, he spotted Celeste ahead, leaning against a wall and picking at her fingernails. She had a look of utter boredom on her face.

‘Hello, Celeste.’

She looked up and broke into a smile at the sight of him.
‘Hello, Remus. Merry Christmas.’

‘Merry Christmas,’ he said. ‘Where’s Chidi?’

Celeste sighed.

‘Working.’ She scratched her cheek and winced. ‘She’ll be another hour. And here I am.’ she tried to scratch her cheek again, but hissed, as if in pain. ‘Today is supposed to be a good day for business,’ she complained. ‘Lots of stressed family-men and lonely losers who need a bit of fun. But I haven’t had any luck today. And Annabelle keeps smirking at me…’ She looked past Remus and stuck her tongue out. Remus followed her vision, and spotted a red-haired woman a little way way, returning the grimace.

‘What’s happened to your cheek?’ Remus asked, recognising the shimmer of a glamour on it.

‘I had a rough customer yesterday,’ she said. ‘I was blue from here down to here.’ She indicated her eye and pulled her finger down to the level of her nose.

‘Oh, god, I’m sorry,’ Remus said, startled. ‘What happened?’

‘Well, some men think that the thing to do after a bit of how’s-your-father is to punch a girl in the face.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I kicked him in the balls and ran. Nothing else to do. I wish I’d taken his purse, though.’

Remus didn’t know what to say to that, so instead he said:

‘Did Chidi cast the glamour for you?’

Celeste nodded.

‘Yes. It itches like hell. But I can’t scratch it because my face is a huge bloody bruise.’ Her hand fell in frustration. ‘I think that’s why I haven’t had any offers today. It’s making my face look odd.’

‘Why didn’t you ask her to heal the bruise for you?’

‘It’s going to heal on its own,’ Celeste said, sounding annoyed. ‘It’s not going to kill me. I don’t see any reason to have more magic in me than necessary.’

‘Glamours are tricky,’ Remus said, deciding to change the subject. He was not sure how to respond to Celeste’s dislike of magic, although he could understand where it came from. ‘I think yours is about to stop working. When they start shimmering like that…’

‘Shit,’ Celeste muttered. ‘Is it supposed to make my skin feel like putty?’

‘They do that,’ Remus said. ‘There must be some drawback, I suppose.’

Celeste’ attention wandered suddenly.

‘Step back, you look like you’re haggling,’ she whispered and stepped past him. ‘Hello, sweetheart.’

There was no answer, and Celeste swore under the breath.
‘I don’t believe it!’

Remus turned to look the way she was glaring. Celeste’s rival was walking away, arm in arm with the very man Celeste had addressed. She looked over her shoulder at Celeste and shot her a triumphant look. Remus almost missed how familiar the back of that unwashed head of hair was.

‘Bloody hell,’ Celeste sighed. ‘No luck…’

‘I went to school with him,’ Remus told her. He was glad he had had the sense to put his hood up.

‘Friend of yours?’

‘No.’

‘Fine, you can hate him and I’ll hate her,’ Celeste said. ‘Look, I’m bored of this.’ She slipped her arm through his. ‘Buy me a drink.’

The way she looked up at him made him hesitate, not certain what to say. Seeing the confusion on his face, she pushed him playfully with her shoulder.

‘Not like that, silly,’ she said. ‘Just buy me a drink. And let’s go there like this, so the others can tell Annabelle I went off with a chap.’

Remus laughed.

‘Fine,’ he said and bent his arm, making hers fit better around his.

They went to a pub a few blocks away. The interior was smoky and made Remus cough again, but at least it was warm. Celeste ordered two large glasses of gin and picked a table. When she sat down, she sighed with relief. By the way she moved, Remus could tell she was toeing her boots off. Remus understood the sentiment, but his knees hurt too much to do such a thing. He straightened his legs and felt slightly more comfortable. Celeste raised her glass to him. He clinked it with his own.

‘Cheers,’ she said.

‘Cheers.’

They sipped the gin. It made Remus choke, but he forced it down. It tasted little better than moonshine.

‘So,’ Celeste said. ‘How did you end up here?’

Remus shrugged.

‘I lost my job,’ he said. ‘I had to disappear for a while.’

Celeste smiled.

‘Are you always this forthcoming?’

‘Well, there’s not much to say,’ Remus said. ‘What about you?’

‘Do you want my life story?’ Celeste asked, leaning her chin on her hands.

‘If you want to tell it,’ Remus said. He was glad to let her talk, knowing it meant fewer questions to
himself.

‘It’s not anything special, really,’ Celeste admitted. ‘It’s a lot like many others.’

‘I don’t know others’ stories very well.’

‘Alright.’ She took a sip of gin and started speaking. ‘Both my parents were pure-bloods. They
were from minor families, but all the same. Very proud. Perhaps that was how they figured out
pretty soon that I didn’t have any magic in me. I really tried, but I couldn’t as much as float a leaf.
My parents...’ For a moment, her voice had faltered. Then she picked up her story again. ‘They
weren’t best pleased. But it was alright. I had my sister. She was a year younger than me, but I was
the one who ended up hiding behind her.’ She paused and drank some more gin. ‘Then my sister
turned eleven, and she got her letter. I’d always known she would, of course. Claudia could make a
teapot tap-dance when she was eight. But I’d hoped that she wouldn’t. So, she left for school in
September. And suddenly I had no-one to hide behind. By November, I’d had enough. So I ran
away from home.’

Remus listened, somewhere between disbelief and horror.

‘You were twelve?’

Celeste nodded.

‘By then, I didn’t feel I had a choice,’ she said.

‘Did your parents not look for you?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘As far as I know, they didn’t even report it. But what do I know? They never found
me, at least.’

‘What about your sister?’ Remus asked.

Her face spasmed.

‘I wrote to her whenever I got hold of an owl, or could afford to rent one from the post office. But it
was difficult. We could only write to each other when she was at Hogwarts, and I felt terrible
leaving her on her own over the holidays. So eventually we stopped writing.’ She looked down at
her glass. ‘I regret that now. Just after she finished school, she vanished. It was in the papers -
“Hogwarts leaver disappears - no leads”. It was in the summer of 1981.’ Remus shuddered. He
remembered that summer, and knew what disappearing then meant.

‘Did they find her?’ he asked quietly.

‘Her body.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Remus said, meaning it.

‘I just wish I knew who’d done it,’ Celeste said. ‘Not who as in which person, but... which side. If
she was killed by You-Know-Who’s followers, that’d be terrible. But she was a pureblood witch.
What if she joined him? What if it was the other side that killed her? But perhaps she just got in the
way. That’s what I like to tell myself. Then again, I didn’t know her anymore. I hadn’t talked to her
for years.’

‘It must be terrible, not knowing.’ At least he knew on which side his friends had been, ultimately.
'I went to her funeral,' Celeste said, not seeming to have heard, or not knowing what to answer. 'My parents didn’t recognise me. I was glad, really.'

They sat in silence, until Celeste drained her glass and put it down heavily.

‘Anyway. That’s me,’ she said, her words more casual than her voice. ‘Now you owe me.’

‘Alright,’ Remus said. It only seemed fair. ‘My dad’s a wizard. My mum’s a Muggle. It leads to some interesting culture shocks at home, but it’s alright. They just... don’t really get it.’

‘So you think that this is a nice place to be instead?’ Celeste said, spreading her hands.

‘It’s not really that simple.’

‘Did they throw you out?’ Celeste asked bluntly.

‘What makes you say that?’

“You’re a keeper of the other goal posts, aren’t you?’ she said and gave him a meaningful look. Remus laughed.

‘I haven’t heard it called that for a long time. But to answer your question, no, they didn’t. I didn’t leave because of them. Not really. I... hadn’t meant to end up here.’

‘Who does?’ Celeste said.

‘I had a job, but… as I said, something happened.’

‘Care to tell me what?’

Remus shook his head.

‘No, but suffice to say that it was bad.’

‘I’m so glad you trust me enough to tell me all these things.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said. ‘I don’t want you to get into trouble.’

‘That’s sweet of you,’ Celeste said. ‘But I can look after myself.’

‘I’m still not telling you.’

‘Fine.’ She smiled. ‘It’s alright, you know. I know that it can feel important to keep something of yourself under lock and key here. I do it as well - if slightly less.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, not knowing what else to say.

‘Think nothing of it.’

They sat quietly for a while, taking minute sips of their gin, as that was all that was possible.

‘So, how did you meet Chidi?’

‘In the Leaky Cauldron,’ Celeste said. ‘About - what? - six months ago.’ She smiled, thinking of her friend. ‘She’d just come to London, barely knew any English, and didn’t know how to get into Diagon Alley. No one would tell her, even if she had a wand, and apparently she turned a stool into a piglet to prove that she was a witch. I’m not sure that’s actually true, but Tom said she did, and I
can believe it. I’ve never had a wand, of course, but I’ve seen enough people open the brick wall to know how it’s done. I tend to hang around until someone goes through, see. So I told her. And, well, that was it, I suppose.’

Her smile grew wider, but she did not articulate any of the feelings Remus could see on her face. He wondered whether it was patronising of him to think of Celeste and Chidi as “friends”. He wished he had the courage to ask how they would refer to each other. At the same time he knew that they might not even have had an opportunity to figure it out. He felt an acute sense of sympathy towards them, but also guilt for downplaying of their relationship, if only in his mind.

To stop himself thinking, he got his purse out.

‘How much were these?’ he asked.

‘Four sickles and six knuts, I think.’

Remus stuck his hand into his purse. Fumbling for the coins, he grabbed one. It was like picking up a glowing ember. With a shout of pain, he dropped the sickle. There was a circular burn-mark over two of his fingers, which stung and smarted. He closed his hand and swore.

Then it struck him that Celeste was very silent. Should she not ask him what had happened, or what she could do? He looked at her. She was staring at him, wide-eyed. Her eyes went from the silver sickle on the table to Remus’ burned hand to his pained face, and back again. Where there had been friendliness and even affection before, there was now bone-chilling fear. He met her eyes, and saw in them how he was changing in front of her.

Faster than he had anticipated, she stepped into her boots and flung herself from the bench, bolting for the door.

‘Celeste!’ he called, grabbed his purse and ran after her. When he got out onto the street, she saw him disappearing round a corner. ‘Celeste, please!’ he shouted. He could not run - his knees hurt too much. All he could hope for was that she stopped, came back and listened, but he knew it would not happen. She had realised what he was, and where he had got his scars from, and now she could not think of him as a friend, or even a person. To her he was a monster.

He stood gazing after her, wondering what this would lead to. She would tell Chidi, he was certain. Would she tell Madam Wilkes? If she did, the landlady was bound to throw him out. No one would want a werewolf in their house. If the other tenants found out, they might take matters into their own hands. He wouldn’t stand a chance - it was three days until the full moon. Even with a wand, he was not certain he could defend himself against a mob. He closed his eyes shut, trying to control the panic rising inside him. Perhaps he should run. He could go somewhere else - Glasgow, Manchester, Dublin, Belfast, Aberystwyth…

A scent woke him from his thoughts. As soon as he smelt it, he knew, as surely as if he’d seen them, that there was another werewolf nearby. He opened his eyes and inhaled. The smells and what they implied made him feel sick. He looked around, expecting to find Greyback close-by. Then he thought with horror that he might have followed Celeste. He dreaded to think what he might do to her. But when he turned around and smelled the air, he felt that his scent was coming from the other direction. He must have passed this way several minutes ago.

Had he come to find him, or was this just down to chance? Remus drew his wand. A kind of determination he thought he had lost filled him. If he had come here for him, Remus would find him first. He was sick of being tyrannised by this man. He did not know where this decisiveness had come from. Perhaps it was recklessness, even self-destructiveness, or an externalisation of all
the worry and anger he had felt the past three weeks. His hand tightened around his wand as he followed the scent.

Usually, he hated using his sense of smell, sniffing the air like an animal. Now, it seemed natural. He was allowing the predator inside him full reign of his body. He picked out the way, the scent as obvious to him as a red string unwound in this labyrinth of alleys and passages.

The scent became stronger. At last Remus paused at a corner and peered around it. In the cul-de-sac ahead, Greyback stood with his back turned to the alley, relieving himself against the wall as he hummed wheezily under his breath. There was something startlingly ordinary about this scene, which made it only more disturbing. This would be the ideal moment, Remus thought, now when he was occupied. Still he waited, the disgust getting the better of him. Instead he stood stock-still, getting a better grip of the wand. The sound of urine against the wall stopped. Still humming, Greyback shook himself and started doing up his trousers. Remus moved forward, executing such control over his body that he would not make a sound. One step, then another, then a third. Another and he’d be in reach.

Greyback’s head jerked upwards, the scent of a werewolf no longer masked by the smell of piss. Remus lunged forward.

He smashed into Greyback’s back and clung to his neck. Before he had time to angle his wand at his assailant’s throat, Greyback wheeled around with a roar, pulling Remus’ feet off the ground. He slammed him against the wall.

The impact winded him. He let go of Greyback and put his hands against the wall to steady himself. Just as he drew breath, Greyback’s fist connected with his stomach, pushing the air out of him again. He stumbled, his vision blackening for a moment. Still unsteady, he shot a spell towards Greyback. It hit him in the knee, and he fell.

‘Fucking hell!’ he shouted and pushed himself up. Limping, he approached. Remus shot another spell, but the wand jumped in his stiff fingers and the shot went wide. Greyback laughed. ‘Alright, you little shit,’ he growled. ‘Let’s have it.’

Remus cast a third spell. It only hit Greyback’s cloak, leaving a charred hole there. Greyback moved towards him, quicker than Remus could ever move three days before the full moon. Remus thought he would punch him, but instead he head-butted him. He felt blood gushing from his nose. He tried to aim a kick at Greyback’s injured knee, but got entangled in his own robes. The werewolf grabbed him by the throat and pushed him against the wall. The grip was just hard enough to constrict his breathing, but he was not quite choking him yet.

Greyback punched him. Remus’ lip broke. One more punch. His teeth rattled in his jaw, and his mouth filled with blood. At first he was about to choke on it, cough it out of his throat. Then he opened his eyes and saw Greyback, not grinning but gaping like an animal. The blood, less than he had thought at first, was collecting under his tongue. It pooled behind his teeth - this cursed, infected blood.

Remus gathered it on his tongue and spat. The gob hit Greyback on the mouth. His eyes widened for a moment in surprise. Then he grinned and licked his lips. The blood on his teeth was not his own, but Remus’. Greyback was laughing, thinking that this was a gesture of impotent defiance, when in fact, Remus had killed him. Absurdly, Remus laughed as well. For a moment, they grinned, not united in any way, but sharing something. Greyback tutted and shook his head, thinking he had won. To him, spitting someone in the face was nothing you would do unless there was nothing else to be done.
It was distraction enough. Remus grabbed Greyback’s arm for leverage and kneed him in the groin. He doubled up, swearing, and Remus twisted loose, moving his knee so it connected with Greyback’s nose. He felt it breaking. Greyback’s blood soaking into his robes. As one werewolf fell, clutching face and testicles, another dived for his wand. Not waiting for Greyback to make another move, Remus fired a stunning spell.

Greyback went still. Training his wand on him, Remus stepped forward and turned him around with his foot. He was breathing, but he was most certainly unconscious, his face pulled into an almost comic grimace. Quickly, Remus straightened out his limbs and cast tight bonds around his wrists and ankles. He pushed him further into the alley so any passers-by would not see him. When he had done that, he had to take a moment to breathe. His head hurt badly after the head-butt, and only now did he realise that he had blood down the lower half of his face. He coughed. Specks of blood flew from his lips. He wiped the blood from his face with his handkerchief and pushed it against his nose. But there was no time - he had to get help. He Disapparated.

The next moment, he appeared on an abandoned street beside an old red telephone-kiosk. He went inside on shaking legs. Having dried the blood off his right hand on his robes, he lifted the receiver and let it fall. He pushed the buttons. A pleasant, calm woman’s voice was heard:

‘Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state…’

‘Remus Lupin. I’m here to see the Aurors,’ he said, interrupting the voice. He could feel at least one of his front-teeth move as he spoke.

A name-badge clattered into the change-compartment.

‘Please pin the name-badge onto the front of your robes, and present your wand to the security wizard.’ Then, snidely, the voice added: ‘And you needn’t be in such a hurry, young man.’

The lift moved. Clutching the name-badge in the hand not holding the handkerchief, Remus jumped from one foot to the other impatiently. When the elevator phone-box came to a stand-still, he burst out of it. Not bothering to stop at the security-wizard, he ran across the Atrium. No one paid him any attention. Remus ran faster than he had at this time of the moon-cycle for many years. He did not heed his legs protesting, or his head throbbing, not even the wave of nausea hitting him. There was a lift open ahead of him. He ran into it and slammed the grill shut. The lift started its slow descent. Remus leaned against the lift wall, trying to get his breath back. His head pounded - perhaps he was concussed. His chest made a worrying wheezing noise. But there was no time to think of that. He needed to find Moody.

When the lift stopped on level two, he stepped out and again set off at a run. When he reached the Auror office, it looked deserted. He thought of a terrible moment that they had all gone home, but then he heard voices further down the room. He hurried towards them, and ran straight into someone in an Auror uniform.

‘Remus?’ the Auror said, surprised.

‘Kingsley!’ he exclaimed. ‘I need help…’

Kingsley Shacklebolt was watching him with concern in his eyes.

‘You’re covered in blood…’ he said and reached out. Remus drew back sharply, out of his reach.

‘Don’t touch me!’

Kingsley put up his palms placatingly, but his concern seemed intensified. Remus swallowed,
tasting blood. He tried to collect himself.

‘I need to see Moody,’ he said. ‘It’s about Fenrir Greyback.’

Kingsley’s concern gave way to professional efficiency.

‘Come along, then.’ He turned and walked towards the voices. Remus, ashamed at his outburst, followed.

Now the other Aurors came into view. A dozen of them were standing around a table filled with mince pies and gingerbread men. A large punch-bowl stood in the middle. Remus realised that the Aurors were having a Christmas party, something that struck him as strangely funny. Alastor Moody was standing among his colleagues, holding his hip-flask where the other held punch glasses.

‘Alastor!’ Kingsley called.

Moody looked up and spotted Remus. His face, which had been almost relaxed, sharpened.

‘What’s happened?’ he said, both eyes on Remus.

‘Greyback,’ Remus said. He heard now that his voice was shaking. He felt like crying - the adrenaline wearing off, no doubt. ‘He’s stunned and tied up in a passage off Knockturn Alley.’

‘He attacked you?’

‘We fought, yes.’ That was close enough.

‘Right,’ Moody said and turned to the Aurors. ‘Who hasn’t had punch?’

Kingsley raised his hand.

‘I’ve just had Butterbeer. I’m taking the broomstick home.’

‘This is my first glass,’ said a female Auror at the end of the table.

‘Good. Shacklebolt, Thorpe, come along. Lupin, where was this?’

‘Piper’s Passage.’

‘Right. We’re Apparating. Lupin, take hold of Shacklebolt, so you get out of the offices.’

‘Mad-Eye, I don’t think he should go anywhere,’ Kingsley said, but Moody shook his head.

‘I want him with us. Come on!’

Remus wiped his hand on his robes and took hold of Kingsley’s elbow. He felt himself trembling now.

‘Alright?’ Kingsley said. Remus nodded. They Disapparated as one.

The departure was not very bad, but the arrival was jarring. When they appeared in the passage, Remus almost lost his balance, and thought he might be sick.

‘But where…?’ said Thorpe.

Remus looked around. They were alone in the alley. He saw the marks of the fight in the blood on
the cobbles, but Greyback was nowhere to be seen. Moody went to the furthest wall and poked at
something on the ground with his wooden leg. It was the bonds Remus had conjured.

When Moody looked up at him, he saw anger in his eyes.

‘You tied him up, you said?’

‘Yes.’

‘Properly?’

‘Yes,’ Remus said. ‘I checked the knots.’

‘And he was definitely stunned?’

‘Yes, when I left…’

‘Alastor, he’s in shock,’ Kingsley said, interrupting them. ‘It’s not good form to interrogate him.’

Moody snorted and scratched his chin. Thorpe crouched to inspect the bonds.

‘These look like they’ve been chewed through, sir.’

‘Figures,’ Moody grumbled. Then he sighed and said: ‘You’re not at fault, Lupin, you just got my
hopes up that I might get the bastard for once.’

‘The Ministry won’t care about him beating me up,’ Remus said, hugging himself now.

‘Oh, we’ve got plenty of other things we can dig out. I wouldn’t know what to charge him with
first. Anyway, there’s nothing more we can do here. We’ll keep an eye out, but he’s likely to be
difficult to find. Tends not to hang around London much. Thorpe, we’re going back. Shacklebolt
get Lupin home.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Merry Christmas to you, Lupin,’ Moody said.

‘Merry Christmas, sir.’

Thorpe and Moody disappeared with a faint ‘plop’. Kingsley sighed and turned to Remus.

‘I’m taking you to St Mungo’s.’

Kingsley had a persuasive voice, and for a moment Remus was ready to go along with him. In fact,
he felt like breaking down and telling him everything. Then the fear came back to him. If Kingsley
took him to the hospital when he was covered in blood, and he told the healers about his
suspicions, they would undoubtedly tell Kingsley. Even if he was the one to tell him, he dreaded
his reaction. He had already lost one friend today because of his secrets. Even if Kingsley did not
draw back in disgust and leave, it was bound to disturb him. Perhaps not at once. He may not mind
listening to his worries and be sympathetic, but what about when he went home and sat with his
arm around his wife? That might put things in a different perspective.

‘Remus?’

Remus shook his head.
‘I don’t need to go to hospital.’

‘You do,’ Kingsley said. ‘You’re in shock. I think you’re concussed.’

‘I’m fine, honestly, I am,’ he babbled. Kingsley looked unconvinced. Remus deflated. ‘Please,’ he said quietly. ‘I just want to go home.’

Kingsley sighed.

‘Where do you live?’

‘124 Knockturn Alley.’

‘Is there anyone who can check on you?’

‘Yes,’ he lied. For all he knew, Madam Wilkes had already made a bonfire of his possessions.

They set off, walking slowly, not speaking. Twice, Remus changed his mind and was about to say ‘no, you’re right, I need to go to St Mungo’s’, but then he fell back into his previous conviction and did not say anything. It was strange, walking in the company of a friend he had not seen for four years and being silent. He wanted to hear what Kingsley had been up to, whether he had been promoted, if he had gone anywhere interesting, if he still did gardening and kite-building. He wanted a glimpse into a normal life. What was more, he sensed that Kingsley wanted to ask him the same things, but knew it would not be appropriate. Even if Kingsley did not know what had happened to him after Peter and James’ deaths, it was obvious just by looking at Remus that he had fallen on hard times.

They did not speak until they came to the lodging house. There they turned to one another, slightly awkwardly.

‘It was nice to see you again,’ Kingsley said. It was heartfelt, but it avoided mention of what had just happened a little too well.

‘And you.’ Remus said. He had a sudden impulse to hug him. Kingsley was not the hugging type - Remus didn’t know if he had ever seen him hug anyone at all - but he thought that he would be a good, strong hugger. ‘Give my love to Zadie,’ he said instead.

‘I will. If there’s anything I can do, get in touch,’ Kingsley said and held out his hand. Remus took a step back and held up his own. They were covered with dried blood.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered.

Kingsley looked sadly at him. Then he patted him on the shoulder and said: ‘Happy Christmas.’ With that, he walked off, leaving Remus not knowing quite what had happened.

He went upstairs, meeting no one on the way. In his room, still undisturbed, he washed the blood off his hands and face, and took off his bloodied robes. He lay down on the bed, drained of energy. His head still hurt, and when he put his tongue against one of his front teeth, he felt it moving ever so slightly.

He lay there for a long time, going through what had happened today in his mind. Would Greyback find him? No, he would run. Being stunned and tied up was too humiliating for him. Then he wondered when Madam Wilkes would come to throw him out. He lay awaiting the knock on his door. For hours, he stared into the ceiling, waiting for it to happen.
He drifted. Impressions muddled together, floating between dreams and memories. He shared a drink with Kingsley and Moody. Lily took her best friend’s arm and went over the school courtyard. James embraced him. Greyback’s grip around his throat tightened until he choked.

He woke up gasping, panic constricting his throat. When it let go and he felt he could breathe, he curled up and wept. He felt weak - he had not eaten all day, only had an ill-advised glass of gin. He should get up and find some food, but he could not. He did not have the strength. It was dark now, although he did not know the time. He fell asleep again, and moved from dream to dream. Rayan and his friends were there. An older man he knew to be Ellis sat with them, and toasted Remus. He ran through the Forbidden Forest, stalking something. He dreamed about the fight with Greyback, but this time he did not stop to stun his opponent. Instead, he kicked and kicked until his knees gave way.

He came to, coughing. He half expected to find Madam Wilkes standing over him, ready to hurl him out of bed and down the stairs, but he was alone. Outside, the sky was growing lighter. Carefully, he sat up. His head felt a little better, but he still trembled. He sat on the bedside for some time, waiting for the landlady to knock.

Finally, he could not take it anymore. He stood up and pulled a set of clean robes out of the trunk. He dressed and put his wand, purse and pocket-watch, as well as the photograph from James’ wedding, into his pockets. The bloody robes he stuffed into the trunk, which he sealed and placed by the bed. If Madam Wilkes threw it out, he might be able to find it again. If she searched it for valuables, she would find nothing.

Remus tiptoed down the stairs, an absurd version of the curious child going downstairs to look at his gifts. The street outside was nearly empty, stuck between the two worlds of night and day. Sarah the handless witch was half-asleep, humming a carol under her breath.

In the cold dawn of Christmas Day, Remus Disapparated. When he appeared again, it was colder but brighter, with no high buildings trapping the light. He stood in the country lane for a moment, his hand on the garden gate. The garden beyond was bare and grey. Where roses grew in the spring, there was only blackened thorns. In the spot for daffodils, there was only empty earth. His hand on the garden gate felt like bridging two worlds. He pushed it open, closing it behind him. He followed the path up to the front door, so familiar with its blue paint and the knocker shaped like a lion. Remus stood on the doorstep, not hesitating as much as waiting for the right moment. Knowing it would never come, he brought the knocker down hard.

After the loud sound, the silence was eerie. Remus stepped back. His stomach tightened with anticipation. From inside, he heard soft steps, feet muffled by slippers. His heart started beating faster.

The door opened. For a moment, the woman on the threshold simply stared at him. It was like someone lost at sea had come back to land. He stared back, just as incapable to move.

Then she screamed, suddenly, and flung her arms around him. She clutched him to her breast and let out a low wail. He clung to her, crying.

‘John! John!’ she called towards the open door. ‘He’s back - he’s here! Our little boy!’

There were more footsteps, these fast and heavy, and then a broken-voiced cry:

‘Oh thank God!’

Remus’ father flung his arms around both son and wife. Remus could hear him weeping too. They
stood like that, huddling in each other’s embrace, two of them in dressing-gowns and one in threadbare robes. He thought they might never let go of him. Right now, in this moment, he did not want them to. For all his hatred of being treated like a child, now he wanted to be small again, tiny enough to sit in their laps or fit between them in the sofa. He hugged them harder.
Chapter 20

After a long time - Remus didn’t know how long - his father let go and tugged at Mrs Lupin.

‘Come on, Verity, let go. Let’s get him inside. Come along, Remus. In you go.’

Remus let him take his arm and lead him in. As soon as the door closed, Mrs Lupin took his face in her hands.

‘Oh, what’s happened to you, my darling? What has happened to your face? My, you’re shaking…’ She took his hands. ‘Oh dear…’

‘Come here,’ Mr Lupin said and put his hand against his son’s forehead. Remus closed his eyes, not knowing what the verdict would be. He knew what a fever might mean.

His father took away his hand.

‘No, you don’t have a temperature. But you look ill. What’s happened?’ He took him by the hand, as if he were a small child, and lead him to the sofa. ‘I’ll make a fire…’

As her husband started building a fire, Mrs Lupin put her hand to her mouth, fighting tears.

‘You’re so thin,’ she whispered. ‘And those bruises… Oh, Remus…’ Remus looked down at his own hands, unable to look at his parents. Mrs Lupin turned away.

‘I’ll get you some tea.’

She hurried off. Remus watched his father kindle the fire. He knew from the posture of his shoulders that he wanted to say something, but could not quite bring himself to.

‘Dad…’ he said. The effort made him cough. His voice was cracked and unused. When did he last speak?

‘We had a letter,’ Mister Lupin said abruptly. ‘From a man at the Ministry. Mr Sherrington. We… reported you missing, see.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Remus said. ‘I’m…’ His apology was cut off.

‘We didn’t expect you to turn up like this, of course,’ said Mr Lupin. Mrs Lupin came into the living room and set a cup of tea down before Remus. Her eyes were red with crying, but now her mouth was pursed in an expression difficult to read. Remus picked up the tea and sipped it. The taste was so familiar.

Without warning, Mrs Lupin’s calm broke.

‘Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been?’ she exclaimed. ‘No letter, no phone-call - for a month! We thought… we thought…’ Her voice broke, and she bit her lip, letting the urge to cry pass. ‘We looked all over for you. John went to Suffolk, he went to London, he went to Hogsmeade. He showed people your picture and asked if they’d seen you! Why didn’t you let us know where you were!? ’

She sat down in the sofa opposite him, covered her face and cried. Mr Lupin sat down and put a light arm around her.
‘Don’t we matter to you?’ Mrs Lupin wailed. ‘Didn’t you realise how we’d feel?’ Remus started weeping as well.

‘Verity…’ Mr Lupin said, and stroked her back. ‘He’s here now.’

Mrs Lupin, still crying, launched herself out of the sofa and threw her arms around her son. He could not make out what she murmured as she hugged him, but he though it might have been ‘you’re alive’. Finally, when Remus started to think he might suffocate in her embrace, she let go. Instead, she grabbed his shoulders.

‘Where have you been?’

‘London.’

‘London,’ his mother repeated, as if she didn’t know what else to say. Her anger had boiled over and calmed, leaving only hurt. She shook off the slight. ‘Drink your tea, darling.’

Remus picked up the tea cup. The heat from the china seemed to radiate through his hands. His eyes stung again. He was aware of his mother struggling not to cry. The blame felt too much to bear. He put down the cup again.

‘I’ll go, if you want me to.’

His parents stared at him in surprise. Then his mother laughed, while tears burst from her eyes again.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ she said. ‘Stay right there, for goodness’ sake, you silly boy. Oh, you must be hungry - I’ll get you some porridge.’

She hurried away into the kitchen again, leaving him alone with his father. Mr Lupin shifted, leaning his arms against his knees and folding his hands.

‘What happened?’ he asked. Remus sat silently, unable to answer. ‘Why did you just leave your job like that?’ Still no answer. Mr Lupin sighed and leaned back in the sofa. ‘What happened to your face?’

‘I was in a fight.’

‘Oh, Remus.’

‘I didn’t start it. Someone tried to steal my purse, alright?’

‘Did they manage?’

‘No.’

He drank his tea in silence, pondering. He wondered whether he had made a mistake coming here with so many problems and no answers. At the same time, it was such a relief to sit in a comfortable sofa and drink tea so obviously brewed by his mother. He was too tired even to stand up at this point.

Mrs Lupin came back and, sitting down beside him, handed him a bowl of porridge. She had already put cinnamon in it, the way he liked it. He ate. He did not know when he had last had something to eat, and he could see that very question in his parents’ eyes. When he finished his porridge, he tasted the iron of blood. His front tooth was bleeding. He swallowed it and fought
down his panic.

‘Now,’ Mrs Lupin said and took his hand. ‘I’m going to tap up a nice hot bath for you. Where’s your trunk?’ When Remus did not answer, she said: ‘No matter, I’ll pick out something for you to wear. Alright?’ He nodded. She pressed his hand and left, again leaving father and son on their own.

After some time, Remus swallowed and said:

‘Dad, one of my front teeth has come loose.’

‘In the fight?’

‘Yes.’

Mr Lupin crossed and sat beside him.

‘Let me see.’

Remus opened his mouth and, putting his finger on the tooth, showed how it moved. He feared it might start bleeding again, but it did not.

‘Well, that’s the work of a moment.’ Mr Lupin took out his wand. ‘Hold still…’ He swished the wand and the tooth became well-sealed by the gums again. Remus murmured a thanks.

‘Let me fix your lip too,’ he said. ‘And that black eye…’

‘Alright.’

He did not have the energy to object, or even answer, just let him heal his injuries. He felt like crying again.

Mrs Lupin soon came back and, handing him a towel, sent him up to the bathroom. Remus, who had grown used to shivering as soon as he took off his cloak, undressed in the steamy warmth. He stepped into the tub while the tap was still running. The bubbles shifted colours, so that the surface of the bath glistened. His mother had bought this bubble bath in Diagon Alley last year as a treat, he recalled. Letting him use it was an act of kindness. Also, he was glad that they hid his body from his own eyes. More than ever, he hated the sight of his scars.

He sunk down until he was submerged to the neck. The hot water eased the pain in his bruised back and his swollen joints, and seemed to dispel his cough. What a luxury this was - running water! A real bath-tub! Bubble-bath and shampoo. Tiles on the floor. Fluffy towels. It barely seemed real. He did not even manage to feel happy about it. He was too tired for that. Instead, he felt relief.

He stayed in the bath until it started going cold. He got out, dried off and brushed his teeth. Taking care for once with his appearance, he dressed in the robes his mother had brought him - a semi-formal set which he seldom wore, finding them too fancy to be useful. For Christmas they were right, though, and it felt wonderful to put on something well-laundered. Before leaving, Remus tried to get his hair in order. In the mirror he looked shrunken and pale. The past month really had taken its toll on him. He turned away quickly, unwilling to see his own reflection.

He left the bathroom, still dragging his fingers through his hair. In the middle of the motion, he paused. The door to his room was ajar - his mother must have not bothered to close it when she fetched his clothes. Remus stepped closer, confused at his own reluctance. Somehow his room felt
like a threat. He reached out and pushed the door open.

Everything was as he had left it, down to the copy of *Transfiguration Today* he had borrowed from his father. The only difference was that the sheets had been taken off the bed. The blanket was neatly folded, leaving the mattress exposed. Remus’ world seemed to shrink so that it only included a point towards the side of the mattress, and the large, rust-coloured stain on it.

Remus was holding his breath. He knew - felt with every fibre of his being - what would happen when he started to breathe. He opened his mouth and drew air into his lungs. It came only in a small, interrupted sip, then another, and another. He could not make himself exhale. The blood-stain seemed to rear up over him, threatening him. He backed out onto the landing and put his hands to his face. Without reason or deliberation, he hunched against the wall. He was crying now, the hyperventilating mixing with the sobs.

‘Remus!’ There was movement in his peripheral vision. Mrs Lupin was on her knees beside him now, her arm around his shoulders. ‘Remus, it’s alright, you’re safe.’ He wheezed for breath, his throat raw with sobbing. ‘There, there, calm down, hold your breath. Remus, hold your breath - like this.’ She sucked in her breath and held it. He imitated her, as she counted, stroking his back. ‘One, two, three…’ He let it out, and sucked in another breath violently. ‘Not so fast - again. Hold your breath - and let it out - one two three. And in… out…’

He thought he had broken out of it when it came back. He fought with himself, physically and mentally. He regained movement only when he threw himself forward and was sick on the floor. Mrs Lupin tutted and stroked his back.

‘It’s alright, it’s alright. No matter.’

Despite the taste of gastric acid in his mouth, he could breathe again. It still took him several minutes before he stopped weeping enough that Mrs Lupin could help him to his feet. She lead him to the bathroom, where she gave him water and made him brush his teeth again. Then she crouched in front of him where he sat on the toilet lid, took hold of his arms and asked:

‘What set this off?’

Remus shook his head. The reason was too complex. He wondered silently, as his mother begged him to tell her, whether he had become afraid of all kinds of blood. After all, it was years old. But it was not just that it was blood, of course. That stain was a physical reminder of his attempt to take his own life. It had awoken a deep-seated fear in him because he had considered it again. His mother asked him again and again, but he sat silently, still crying.

After a long time, Mrs Lupin sighed deeply and stood up, recognising defeat.

‘Now, I’m going to take you downstairs to your father, and then I’ll clean up here. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ Remus said. Mrs Lupin smiled a strained smile.

‘Good. Come along.’

They walked downstairs, her with her hand on his elbow. Downstairs, Mr Lupin was busy bringing a Christmas tree into the living-room. He turned to smile at them when he heard them descend, but his face fall when he saw the state of his son. Mrs Lupin made Remus sit down, and waved to her husband.

‘John…’
They left, Mr Lupin casting a worried glance at Remus over his shoulder. The living-room went silent as they went into the kitchen. Only the crackling of the fire could be heard. Remus shifted in the sofa. His chest still hurt, and unbidden, his mind started presenting all the things that may be wrong with him to course such a symptom. He shook himself and took a deep breath. It’s only nerves. I had a panic attack - that’s all. It has nothing to do with the cough. He went very still now, realising that if he strained his ears, he could hear snatches of his parents’ conversation.

‘What has happened, to make him like this? Why won’t he tell us?’

‘We can’t make him talk…’

‘What can be so bad, John?’

‘He’ll talk when he’s ready. If we rush him, he won’t confide in us.’

Soon, Mrs Lupin came back, all smiles and comforting words, bringing him tea and toast. She went upstairs again, leaving him with his father.

‘Would you like to help me decorate the tree?’ he asked.

Remus shook his head - he was feeling too shaky.

‘No, thanks. I’ll watch. I just want to rest.’

Mr Lupin smiled.

‘Of course.’

He started putting up the decorations. The house had been left unadorned in tacit mourning, but now he conjured glittering ice roses and bobbing flames, glitter and baubles, holly and mistletoe. They whirled around the room, dancing with each other until they settled in their places. Remus watched as he ate. He knew his father was putting on a show for him. Some small part of him felt annoyed, but, born out of relief at feeling warm and safe, Remus felt a childlike excitement at his magic. Mrs Lupin came downstairs, and watched for a moment before going into the kitchen to start work on the turkey. Mr Lupin turned the radio on, filling the house with carols.

Remus stayed in the sofa, watching his parents’ bustling. They did not ask him to help, but let him sit. The carols finished, and changed to classical music - Remus thought he recognised it as Benjamin Britten. He let himself doze, only vaguely aware of the clattering from the kitchen.

When he fell asleep, he did not dream, or could not remember it. The sofa, even when sitting up, was far more comfortable than the bed he had slept in the past month.

He woke when his father shook him gently by the shoulder.

‘Remus, it’s time to eat.’

Remus rubbed his eyes and followed him into the kitchen. The table was set for Christmas dinner, the turkey taking the place of centre-piece. His mother, standing by her place, had changed into the red dress she often wore at Christmas.

‘Happy Christmas, Remus,’ she said and kissed his cheek. ‘Come, now, sit down. I’m afraid we’re a little unprepared, but it’ll have to do. We do have a turkey and we have crackers - only Muggle ones, but it’ll do, I hope.’
‘This looks wonderful,’ Remus said, meaning it.

Mr Lupin carved the turkey while Mrs Lupin doled out potatoes and greens. Wine and water was poured. Then, when they had sat down, Mrs Lupin picked up the cracker by her place.

‘Alright, get ready.’

They were joined in a circle of crossed arms and Christmas crackers.

‘On three,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘One, two, three!’

Remus pulled at the crackers, but his mother’s escaped from his stiff fingers, and the bang of his father’s made him jump, so his own cracker slipped out of his hand.

‘Whoops,’ Mrs Lupin said.

‘No matter. Here you go,’ Mr Lupin said and handed the paper crown out of the cracker to Remus. He put it on and took the joke his dad was handing him.

‘Go on,’ Mrs Lupin said. ‘Read it for us.’

‘“What happened to the wooden car?”’ Remus read.

‘I don’t know, what happened?’

‘“It wouldn’ go.”’

His parents laughed and snorted. Remus found that he was laughing himself.

‘They’re always best when they’re bad,’ he said. Mrs Lupin smiled at him broadly, as if glad he had said something. It made him wonder how many times since he got here he had spoken unbidden.

His mother looked away from him and turned to his father instead.

‘Come on, John.’ She held out her cracker, and he took his appropriated one. They grabbed the end of the other’s and, on three, pulled. There were two small bangs as the ends of the crackers came off. They laughed, put on their crowns and, standing up, kissed over the table. Remus looked down at his hands and smiled, glad that his parents were still so fond of each other.

‘Now, eat! Before it gets cold!’ Mrs Lupin urged them.

They ate, his parents read their cracker jokes - neither of which were any better than Remus’ - and talked. His father talked about different kinds of lunascopes he’d made in the past months, a book he’d read, his hope to sell some more astronomical models to Dervish & Bangs. His mother told him about the garden, where she wanted to plant a new rosebush, the fund-raising for supporting the local community, what her choir had sung recently. Remus was mostly silent, asking questions occasionally. His answers to their questions were mostly evasive. Realising that they would not get anything out of him about the past month, they started asking him about Bexwold. Mr Lupin shared his opinions about Mrs Mason (‘funny-looking woman, isn’t she? But nice enough’) and the Carters (‘seemed like they were alright for Muggles - sorry, dear’).

When they had eaten, Mrs Lupin shooed both husband and son into the living room, as she always did at Christmas. She tended to get flustered when people tried to help her clearing away, so they knew that leaving her to it was nicer for everyone.
Remus sat down in one of the sofas, while Mr Lupin got out a bottle of scotch.

‘Scotch?’

‘A small one, please.’

He poured the drinks, handed one to his son and sat down opposite him. They sat in silence, Mr Lupin watching the fire, Remus watching the drink in his hands. After saying so little, and being so reluctant to speak, he felt he wanted to share something, however small. How he had lost the only friends he had made at the lodging-house because one of them found out he was a werewolf. That one of his neighbours had offered to buy the teeth out of his mouth. Or something about Rayan - not that he had slept with him, but that he had met someone, and it had been nice…

‘Dad?’

‘Yes?’ Mr Lupin turned away from the fire and faced him. Remus took a mouthful of scotch to stall. He swallowed it, tried to look Mr Lupin in the face, but failed.

‘I attacked someone.’

His father froze.

‘No,’ he whispered. His voice trembled. ‘Please, Remus, tell me you didn’t. You said you locked yourself up…’

‘Not like that,’ Remus said. He felt an absurd kind of relief that he had imagined something worse. ‘I didn’t bite anyone. It wasn’t the wolf.’

Mr Lupin gave a great sigh of relief and took off his glasses to rub his eyes. In a way, Remus reflected, what had happened was worse. He had not been a mindless monster at the time. He had had his faculties of reason intact. He had been control - or at least he should have been.

‘I’m to blame,’ he said.

‘What did you do?’ Mr Lupin asked.

‘I stunned someone.’ Seeing him about to ask, Remus continued. ‘I don’t know why. I felt trapped, and I lost control. The spell just burst out of me…’

Mr Lupin sighed, but there was compassion in his eyes. Looking at his glasses, swinging softly by the arm, he said:

‘Something similar used to happen to Uncle Julius.’

Remus looked at him in surprise.

‘I thought Julius couldn’t do magic.’

‘Not with a wand,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘He had no control over it. But if he was upset for example…’ He threw his hands apart, imitating an explosion.

‘You never told me that.’

‘Well, I thought it was too upsetting,’ he admitted. ‘I didn’t realise it might be… well, useful.’

‘Did he ever hurt anyone?’
'He once almost set the archive on fire,' Mr Lupin said and put his glasses back on. 'He told his colleagues that he'd been lighting his pipe. They weren't happy with him, but no one was hurt. As for during the war… I don’t know. He never told me if anything happened there.’

'What do I do if the Ministry finds out? If they take me to trial?’

'Were there any witnesses?’

'Not as far as I know,’ Remus said. He had thought the street was empty, but someone could always have been watching from a window.

'Well, you don’t have the Trace on you anymore,’ Mr Lupin pointed out. ‘So they’d have to be told it had happened. Was this recently?’

Remus racked his brains. His sense of time was not the best.

'Five days ago.’

'Usually they’re very quick, you know,’ Mr Lupin said. ‘I don’t think you have to worry.’

'But if they do find out…’

'Then I’ll come testify,’ he said quickly, leaning forward. ‘I’ll tell them you’re not well. We’ll get a healer to back up that you can’t be held liable. But I don’t think you have to worry about that.’

Remus was so tired of weeping, so sick of himself and these constant displays of emotions, but now he started to cry again. He tried to make himself stop, and only cried more with anger.

'Remus…’ His father edged closer and took his hands. Fleetingly, Remus had an impression of Mr Lupin’s hands, strong and calloused from tools and figure-work. His own were thin and scarred. In his father’s grip, they felt like nothing. ‘Let us help.’

Remus sobbed and shook his head. Feeling childish, he pulled away one of his hands and wiped his face on his sleeve.

'I’m scared.’

'Of what?’

He shrugged. He barely knew the answer to that anymore. The moment gone, Mr Lupin let go of his hands and leaned back in the sofa. A pair of heels clicked against the floor. Mrs Lupin came to sit beside him, pleading with her eyes. Remus shook his head. Mr Lupin sighed.

'I wish you would trust us.’

But you haven’t made yourself worthy of my trust. All you do is judge and poke your noses in my business…

No, that was unfair. They had done plenty to earn his trust. But not now, not for this. He was too frightened and too proud to tell them. He wanted to claim that he was trying to protect them, but he knew that in reality, he just could not bear their reaction. He did not have the strength for that right now.

'Can we lay a jigsaw puzzle?’ he said instead. Mrs Lupin smiled.

'As long as it's not one with a moving picture.’
They spent the afternoon laying a jigsaw puzzle of the Palace of Westminster. As always, Mrs Lupin complained about how it was impossible to tell pieces with water and the ones with sky apart, and specialised instead in boats, bits of the bridge and the flower-bed in the foreground. Remus sorted pieces of neo-Gothic architecture, while Mr Lupin worked with the edges. When they got bored, they had most of the bridge and parts of the Houses of Parliament. They decided to give up and moved onto playing board games instead. They had tea and mulled wine and mince-pies as they played Cluedo (Miss Scarlet, candlestick, study), and Whizzing Wizard (Mr Lupin suffered a gruelling defeat). They exchanged presents - or rather, Mr and Mrs Lupin did, and jointly gave Remus a warm Muggle coat, wrapped in silk paper. He apologised that he had nothing to give them and hugged them both. After the gifts, Mrs Lupin turned on the radio and listened to a panto which was being broadcast, while Remus and Mr Lupin played a game of wizarding chess.

Finally, Mr Lupin yawned widely.

‘Hm, I think it’s almost time for bed.’

Mrs Lupin, who was slumped in the sofa beside him, looked at her watch.

‘It’s just nine thirty.’

‘Well, it’s been a long day.’

They smiled at each other. Then Mrs Lupin took a deep breath and heaved herself up.

‘I’ll go make your bed, then, Remus.’

‘No!’

The objection came out louder and more horrified than he had meant it to. His parents stared at him, startled.

‘I don’t want to sleep in there.’

‘But why?’ Mrs Lupin said. ‘It’s your room.’

Remus swallowed, and gathered strength he did not think he had.

‘My blood is still on the mattress. I almost died in that room. I never want to set foot in it again.’

For a moment, his parents stared at him, dumb-struck. Then his mother said:

‘If I get you some sheets and a blanket, you could sleep down here…?’

‘He can’t sleep on the sofa - not two days before the full moon,’ Mr Lupin objected.

‘No, here’s fine,’ Remus said. ‘I don’t mind.’

Mr Lupin shrugged helplessly.

‘Fine.’ He stood up. ‘Goodnight, Remus.’

‘Goodnight, dad.’

With a rather tired smile, he went upstairs.

‘I’ll get you a nightshirt as well,’ Mrs Lupin said and went to dig through the linen-cupboards. She
made a bed in the sofa as Remus changed into his nightshirt and brushed his teeth. Once she was done, she fussed for a few extra minutes - ‘will you be warm enough? shall I fetch you another blanket? would you like another pillow?’ When she finally believed that he actually was fine, she kissed him on the cheek, wished him good night and left.

Remus crept in between the sheets in the sofa, and, with a wave of his wand, extinguished the lamps. The curtains were already drawn, but a white light shone through the crack from his father’s workshop. Inside, he knew that all the lunascopes which covered one wall were gibbous, only two nights away from term. He fell asleep, and dreamt of the wolf.
Remus woke up, feeling clear of mind for the first time in many days. It must still be early. Although it was growing lighter out, the curtains had not been opened, and there were no sounds from the kitchen. Slowly, as if afraid that making a sound down here might wake his parents upstairs, he got out of bed and padded to the workshop. The lunascopes were still shining. Remus lit his wand and found what he was looking for - quill, ink and parchment. By the artificial moonlight and the light from his wand, he wrote his letter.

26 December 1985

To whomever it may concern,

Request for appointment

I would like to make an appointment with a healer as soon as is possible. I cannot outline the reasons for this in writing, but I can assure you that it is important.

Yours faithfully,

Remus Lupin

He signed and sealed it and wrote “St Mungo’s” on the front. Back in the living room, he put it in the inner pocket of his new coat, certain that his parents would not find it there. He went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

His mother came downstairs just as he finished making the tea. Soon, Mr Lupin followed, and they had a quiet breakfast together. Remus felt calmer than he had last night, and his parents dodged any questions about his absence. The only pitfall, however unintentional, was when his father asked:

‘Shouldn’t you shave? You’re free to use my razor, you know.’

Remus almost spilled his tea.

‘No. No thank you,’ he said, grabbing the cup harder to hide his surprise.

‘Thinking of growing a beard?’ Mr Lupin said, sounding unconcerned. He seemed not to have noticed his son’s reaction. Remus murmured something assenting. In reality, the stumble was both itchy and unflattering, but the thought of cutting himself on his father’s razor made him feel nauseous.

When Mr Lupin went for his morning smoke, Mrs Lupin turned to Remus.
‘I thought of going for a walk. Would you like to come with me?’

‘That sounds nice.’

When they left the house, Remus was wearing his new coat, which was far warmer than his tweed. He put his hands into its pockets and walked beside his mother in silence. The only interruption was his occasional coughing. As they drew closer to the village church, Mrs Lupin glanced at him.

‘I don’t much like the sound of that cough.’

‘It’s probably nothing,’ Remus said.

She sighed and changed the subject.

‘I’ve been thinking about your room.’

‘What about it?’

‘Do you feel the same as you did yesterday?’

Remus nodded.

‘Then the question is what we could do about it,’ she said. ‘I was thinking we could get you a new mattress. Perhaps even a new bed. You’ve had that one for ages - the mattress is very threadbare, and we’ve turned it I don’t know how many times, so it’d only be fair…’

‘I don’t think that would do it,’ Remus said, shaking his head. ‘I’m sorry, I just…’ He stopped for a moment, trying to phrase his feelings. ‘I don’t know if a new bed would improve it at all. It’s not just the mattress, it’s the entire room.’ They continued walking. Mrs Lupin bit her lip, trying to think of another solution. Remus coughed again, a few sharp bursts which made his chest hurt. When it subsided, he said: ‘Mum, you could do something else with the room.’

She looked up at him, confused.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, dad has his workshop. Can’t you make my room into - I don’t know, a sitting room?’ He narrowly avoided saying boudoir. The idea of his sensible, busy mother having a boudoir was alarming.

‘What on earth would I use that for?’

‘Reading. Embroidering. Just… having your own space. You could even get a television.’

‘Oh, it’d never work. Too much magic about. The phone is bad enough as it is.’

They walked on in silence for a new minutes. Then she picked up the conversation again.

‘Besides, where would you live? Where would you keep your things?’

‘The sofa’s comfy,’ Remus said. ‘As for my stuff, I wouldn’t mind if you boxed it all up and stored it somewhere. As long as I can get to it if I really need it.’

Mrs Lupin stopped. She was looking down into the ground, as if studying the patterns in the tarmac. When she spoke, her voice had gone hoarse.
'I couldn’t do that.'

‘What?’ Remus asked, watching her. She glanced at him, ever so briefly. There were tears in her eyes.

‘Put away your things. Put it all in…’ she swallowed. ‘…cardboard boxes. I’d think…’ She shook herself. ‘I’d think that you wouldn’t be coming back.’

‘Mum…’

She shook her head and held up her hand, stopping him. She spoke rapidly, her voice trembling, but there was an edge to it.

‘When you didn’t get in touch last month, I kept walking into your room and sitting on the bed and thinking, “any day now, we’ll know, and eventually, I’ll have to put away all these things because we won’t be able to stand the sight of it, and he’ll really be gone.” I had nightmares where I was packing your books and your toys and your clothes, and I knew you were dead…’

He wrapped his arms around her, hard. She wept into his chest, but not for long. Soon, she swallowed her tears and took a step back, holding him at arm’s length.

‘Tell me what happened,’ she demanded.

Remus opened his mouth and closed it again.

‘Whatever it is, I’ll understand.’ Her voice was so tender that it hurt him.

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said.

Her hands fell.

‘Alright,’ she said, failing to hide her disappointment.

‘I didn’t mean to hurt you,’ he said, but she shrugged.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Let’s get back.’

They walked back in silence. When they walked down the lane leading to the house, Remus could hear the sounds of something grinding against stone. They turned into the garden, and the source of the noise became apparent. The doors to the cellar, situated on the side of the house, were open, and Mr Lupin was just pushing a crate up the steps. He got it over the last step and onto the ground as they approached.

‘Hello,’ he said, stopping to catch his breath and wipe his forehead. Around him stood a few boxes, numerous jam-jars and a seldom-used trunk. ‘I’ve just been clearing out the cellar. I think it needs a bit of a sweep, but otherwise, it’s looking decent.’

Remus’ mouth had gone dry. Mrs Lupin turned to look at him, frowning.

‘Remus?’

‘I’m not staying,’ he said.

The colour went from his father’s face. His mother’s eyes narrowed again.

‘What do you mean you’re not staying?’
Remus looked down at his feet.

‘I’m leaving tomorrow.’

‘Why?’ Mr Lupin said. ‘You should stay here, it’s safer…’

‘No, I can’t,’ Remus said. ‘I’m going back to London.’

Mrs Lupin balled up her fists. There were tears in her eyes.

‘I’ve had enough of this.’

She turned away and made for the front-door.

‘Mum!’ he cried.

He almost said it - *I think I have AIDS*. He imagined himself saying it, his mother freezing, his father’s stunned expression. For a moment the fantasy was so vivid that he thought he had said it. Instead, he said:

‘I’m really sorry. I can’t explain. But trust me that it’s important…’

Mrs Lupin bored her eyes into him. Remus pressed on:

‘I *will* explain. Later. But not now.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ Mrs Lupin said and slammed the front door shut behind her.

Remus stood staring after her. It was his father’s voice that brought him back to reality.

‘Go and apologise.’

He turned to face him. The look of disappointment on his father’s face was painful.

‘What?’ It came out bluntly, even rudely.

‘Go and apologise,’ Mr Lupin repeated. ‘Since you got here, you’ve given us no explanation - noting at all. She’s been beside herself, Remus! You need to *talk* to us…’

‘Please, dad, trust me…’

‘How can we, when you don’t trust us?’

Remus stared at him. His father, who was always so circumspect… His voice speaking those words made him go cold inside. He was right - he did not trust his parents, but it had not crossed his mind that he was wrong to expect their trust. It was not surprising, if you thought about it, but as children so often do, Remus had forgotten that his parents were people. Mistrust was repaid by mistrust. He broke away from his father’s gaze and made for the garden gate.

‘Remus!’ his father called. ‘Remus, come back! Now at once!’

He did not heed him. Pushing his hands into his pockets, he started walking. He had no destination and no plan. All he wanted was to get away from his parents.

He did not know how long he walked. Around him, the landscape was shifting. The village fell away. In the distance, he saw the moors opening up. The air felt colder now. His cough seemed to
sit inside his chest, nipping at his lungs. He felt his perspective shifting. His surroundings seemed to be slipping away from him. His very body was becoming detached.

*I'm actually ill,* Remus thought. He no longer had the strength to stand up. Knowing it was a bad idea, knowing he should just turn back, he sat down at the side of the road. He rested his head on his arms. When he coughed now - deeper than before, no longer the shallow rasping he had experienced during the past few days - he did not bother to cover his mouth. The wind was picking up, blowing through his coat. He thought he heard someone in the distance, calling his name, but it must have been the wind.

He remained awake, but not quite present. It felt like his consciousness was slipping out of his body. More than once, he thought of getting up and Apparating back to the house, but he could not make himself move. Exhaustion and anxiety anchored him to the roadside.

‘Remus!’

That was not his imagination or the wind. It was a long way away, but he had heard the call clearly. Still he did not get up. He saw no point. The last thing he wanted was to go back…

‘Remus!’

Closer now. At once he wanted to raise his head and call *I'm here!* He wanted them to find him. He longed for the warmth of the fire and the comfort of his parents’ embrace. Never mind about mistrust - he did not care a jot. If he could just find the strength…

‘Remus…’

He heard the sound of shoes on the gravel, and sensed movement nearby. A protective arm closed around his shoulders. He rested his head against his chest, almost oblivious of his father’s attempts to pull him to his feet.

***

At first, Remus did not know where he was. He did not recognise that ceiling and that wallpaper. Then he blinked again and looked around. He was in his parents’ bedroom, lying in the middle of the double bed. Mrs Lupin put away her embroidery and moved from her chair to the bedside.

‘Hello,’ she said, smiling down at him.

‘How did I get here?’ Remus asked.

‘You don’t remember?’

He shook his head and coughed.

‘Here, sit up,’ his mother said. He let her guide him until he leaned against the bed-board. ‘There we are.’ She sat back down on the bed. ‘Your father brought you back, and we made you go to bed.’

‘I fainted?’

‘No, dear, you walked back on your own.’ She reached out and stroked his cheek. ‘You have a fever. You’ve been asleep. You’re just a bit addled, that’s all.’

Remus sank back, realising how exhausted he felt. He felt too tired even to worry.
‘How much?’ It came out almost like a murmur.

‘What was that?’

‘You said I had a fever,’ he said, making himself speak up. ‘What’s my temperature?’

‘Thirty-eight point one,’ his mother said. ‘That’s not very much, you know.’ She smiled at him again. Remus wondered whether she had simply buried her anger, or if she had forgotten about it. ‘I suspect you haven’t been taking very good care of yourself.’

‘I suppose not,’ he said. His head still felt fuzzy. When he thought about the lodging-house in London, it seemed strange that he had not caught cold before now.

‘Dad’s brewing up something for you,’ Mrs Lupin said and picked up her embroidery. ‘He should be up any minute now.’

Remus’ thoughts had gone back to the argument.

‘Mum… I’m sorry.’

‘Whatever for, dear?’ she said lightly, looking at the stitch she had just made.

‘For not talking to you, or to dad.’

She looked up from her work, at him. The play-acting was gone now. As she dropped her pretence, the lines seemed to deepen in her face. She was quite for a long time.

‘I’m not really sure what to say, Remus,’ she said finally. ‘I just wish…’ She sighed, interrupting herself. She had said it all before.

‘I’m leaving tomorrow morning,’ Remus said. ‘Whatever you say.’

She shook her head in protest.

‘Really, Remus, when you’re like this…’

‘Mum, you can’t keep me here,’ Remus said, hoping he sounded reasonable. ‘What would you do - lock me in the cellar now?’

Mrs Lupin sighed again and rubbed her eyes.

‘I was afraid you’d say that. But you do realise…’

‘Mum.’ He reached out to take her hand. She let him, watching him with sad eyes. ‘You can’t protect me from the world.’

She swallowed and straightened up, regaining some of her composure.

‘Alright,’ she said and pressed his hand. ‘But I want you to rest today, so you’ll be in good shape tomorrow. Then on Saturday morning, I want you to write to us, so we know you’re alright. And then write to us several times a week. And come visit - within the month.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘That’s fine.’

‘No, promise me, Remus.’
He pressed her hand.

‘I promise.’

She smiled and kissed him on the forehead.

‘Good. Now, get some rest until your father gets here.’

She settled back into the chair with her embroidery. Remus leaned against the pillows and watched her work at his bedside. He wondered how much of her life had been spent in such vigil over him.

***

That night, Remus insisted on sleeping in the sofa, and made his parents take their bed back. In the morning, his fever was gone, and he collected his few belongings. Mrs Lupin made turkey sandwiches for him to bring along. Mr Lupin asked where they should send letters, as they were planning on getting a new owl. Remus only answered that the post-office in London would do. His parents looked disappointed, hoping they would learn where he had live. In reality, he was not certain himself. For all he knew, he had nowhere to return to in London.

After many hugs and promises of writing soon, Remus stepped out of the door and walked down the garden path. He Disapparated from just outside the gate.

When he reappeared in a bustling street of wizarding London, he thought for a moment that he was about to fall over. The Apparition had jarred him - it was never easy going this close to the full moon. He glanced at his watch - it was just past noon. The sun would set just before four. He spared a few minutes to send off his letter to St Mungo’s from the post office, then started the long walk to the place he was going to transform. He stayed within the confines of wizarding London for as long as he could, but finally he had to slip out into the larger capital.

He kept to small alleyways and the shadows of large buildings. By the time he reached the derelict house he had chosen for the full moon, his knees hurt so much he could barely mount the stairs. Nevertheless, he pulled himself up to the first floor. He could smell something, or rather someone. Pushing open the door, he caught sight of a man, sitting in both jacket and hat with a blanket around his legs, opening a beer bottle with a makeshift bottle-opener.

‘Fuck off, this is my spot,’ the man said, glancing up before going back to the bottle cap. Remus did not move. The man looked up again. ‘Are you still here, weirdo? Fuck. Off.’

‘You have to leave,’ Remus said.

‘No, I don’t,’ the man retorted.

‘I mean it. You do.’

‘What are you going to do - call the pigs on me?’

‘GET OUT!’

It was not an human scream, but an animal roar. An hour before its time, the wolf was speaking through him. The man screamed and dropped the beer bottle. Scrabbling, he got hold of his rucksack and ran for the door. Remus heard him swearing with fear as he ran down the stairs. When the front door banged shut, he sighed. He felt bad about scaring him away - he was unlikely to find another roof to sleep under. But he had no choice. He moved the blanket, the beer-bottle and the opener out onto the landing and sealed the door. Laboriously, he got undressed and found a
safe place for his clothes.

In the empty room, he sat down on the floor and waited for the moon to rise.

***

The first thing Remus became aware of as he woke was the sight of blood. Slowly, he sat up. It was rubbed into his skin and was clotting in his hair, smeared on the walls and drying on the floorboards. He hated the sight of it. Perhaps the fear made it look worse, but he thought there was far more of it than usual. He wondered how much he had lost. Although he felt nauseous and sore as always after the full moon, he did not feel light-headed, so perhaps it was just his imagination.

He got to his feet, charmed the worst away from himself and got dressed. Then he started cleaning up the blood that covered the room. Where it had got into cracks or holes in the wood, he could do little about it, and eventually he gave up. He would just have to trust that no-one with bleeding gums would lick the floor-boards.

He Apparated back to Diagon Alley, almost to the same spot he had appeared yesterday. As then, he went into the post office. He was greeted by a smiling witch.

‘Good morning. What can I do for you?’

‘I’d like to write a letter, to be sent immediately,’ said Remus.

‘Do you have your own quill?’

‘No, I’d like to borrow one, please.’

‘And where is the letter going?’

‘Yorkshire.’

‘Wonderful.’

Remus paid, and was provided with parchment, quill and ink. He scrawled a quick letter to his parents, telling them he was alright and that he loved them. He sealed it and handed over it to the witch, who looked at it.

‘You wouldn’t happen to be Mr R. Lupin, would you?’ she said, looking at the recipient written on his letter.

‘Yes, I am.’

‘There’s a letter for you, then.’

She put the letter to his parents in the ‘outgoing’ box, and went to go through the alphabetised box marked ‘for collection’.

‘Here we are, sir.’ She fished up a letter, written on light green parchment. ‘Would you sign here, please?’ She offered him a ledger for collected post. He signed and took the letter, almost ripping it from her hand.

‘Have a nice day, sir,’ she called after him. He was half-way out of the post-office, already breaking the seal of the letter. With his heart pounding in his throat, he read the letter:  

Friday 27 December 1985
Dear Mr Lupin,

Re: Request for appointment

Having received your letter dated 26 December, we have allocated you an appointment at 10 a.m. on Monday 30 December with Healer Jeremiah Malvern.

Yours sincerely,

Embla Dwerryhouse
Senior mediwitch

Remus sighed in relief. At the same time he was scared. He only had to wait two days before getting help - only two days before he would have to talk about it. Putting, the letter in his pocket, he turned his steps towards Knockturn Alley.

What he felt, stepping into that neighbourhood, was not a sense of homecoming, but resigned familiarity. As he approached the lodging house, he looked around for his trunk, but could not see it thrown out. He mounted the steps and let himself in through the front door.

Half-way up the stairs to the first landing, he heard Madam Wilkes’ door slammed open. The voice of the fearsome landlady boomed through the stairwell.

‘Mr Lupin!’

Remus hurried up to the landing, where Madam Wilkes stood with her arms crossed.

‘Good morning, Madam Wilkes.’

‘You’re behind on your rent,’ she hissed. ‘As it’s been Christmas, I will overlook that, but mark my words, I do not make exceptions. You’re on your last shot.’

She gave him a harsh look. Remus stood, momentarily shocked into silence. Celeste had not told her after all.

‘What are you gaping at?’ she snapped. He shook himself.

‘Nothing. Thank you, Madam Wilkes. I’ll pay. A galleon and seven sickles, right?’

‘Well remembered.’

‘And could I please have the bath?’

‘One of the girls on the third floor has it. You can come back for it later.’

‘Fine. I’ll do that.’

He handed over the money for the rent and, not bothering to say goodbye, started climbing the stairs. He could not name the feelings coursing through him. Relief at not having been exposed - discomfort at being back in this filthy house - anticipation for whatever he would find when unlocking the door to the attic room. When he turned the key and pushed the door open, the room it revealed was just as he had left it. His trunk stood locked by the bed. The stove stood cold in its corner. Without removing his gloves, he started making a fire. Once it had caught hold of the coal, Remus sat down on the bed and took off his gloves. Flecks of dry blood fell from under his finger-
nails. He took a few deep breaths. With every one, it felt like his expanding lungs pushed the anxiety into a tighter ball in his stomach. Rubbing the worst off onto his trouser-leg, he reached into his pocket and drew out the letter. He turned it in his hands, considering whether to read it again. He did not need to - the words were etched into his memory. But it was not the words themselves that echoed in his head as he thought of them. Instead it was the realisation they had brought on.

Two days. Just two days.
The following two days felt like the longest in Remus’ life. His introspection, though intact, had changed character. He was no longer stalling, but waiting. He was about to take the plunge he had feared for so long. Soon, he would know.

When the thirtieth of December finally came, he woke at dawn. Through the skylight, he saw a section of pale sky. Perhaps it would clear and become sunny - perhaps it would rain. It had not yet decided. The hours until ten o’clock stretched out in front of him. He made himself stay in bed for some time, as he outlined the day to himself. He would dress, have breakfast, then go to St Mungo’s, and then… He did not know. It felt like he could not see further than that ten o’clock appointment. As he got out of bed and dressed, he went through every step in his mind – leaving the room, going down the stairs, walking through the streets. It all felt insurmountably difficult. He wanted to do none of it, but he did not want to stay in his room either. His stomach was in knots; the thought of having breakfast sickened him. *Just get through the day,* he told himself. *Make it until ten o’clock and get to St Mungo’s. Nothing else matters today.* He forced himself through the door and locked it behind him. The stairs going up to the attic room were steep and uneven, the kind you had to watch every step to not trip. He counted the steps, prompting himself like a parent might a child who would not eat. *Just ten more. Five. Two – almost there.* Instead of catching his breath on the landing, he hurried around the bannister and down the first few steps of the next stair. He almost ran straight into Chidi.

Remus backed up one step, startled. A look of surprise flitted across Chidi’s face, giving way almost instantly to a steely resolve. She swept onto the same step as him. Instinctively, he pushed himself against the bannister, trying to preserve his personal space, but the stairs were too narrow. For a long moment, they simply stared at each other.

‘What did you do to her?’ Chidi asked. Her voice was very steady, but so cold.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ Remus lied. Even though he was armed - his wand was in his belt - he felt vulnerable. His entire body felt weak, as though the full-moon was more recent than it actually was, and he was suddenly aware that Chidi was two inches taller than he was.

‘Celeste told me not to approach you,’ she said. ‘She is terrified of you. What did you do?’

Remus swallowed, startled.

‘She didn’t tell you?’

‘No,’ Chidi said. ‘She tried one time, but I did not comprehend her.’

In the middle of his agitation, Remus wondered why Celeste had not explained. It would have been easy, after all, even if Chidi did not know the word ‘werewolf’. Did she not dare, or was it some form of kindness? He could not hope for the latter. There was anger in Chidi’s eyes, but he thought he could see fear for herself in them too.

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing,’ Remus said. ‘I promise you, I didn’t hurt her.’

She seemed about to speak and press him.

‘I’m not lying, I swear,’ he said. His voice sounded pleading.
‘Did you threaten her?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I didn’t. I promise.’ He edged towards the banister. ‘I’m sorry – I have to go.’

He pushed past her, hurrying down the stairs as quickly as his legs could carry him.

Despite feeling weak and shaky, he had no appetite. Instead, he started walking through the wizarding streets, willing the time to go faster. Once he reached the brick wall at the far end of Diagon Alley, it was quarter to ten. He Disapparated from the alley. Moments later, he appeared in front of the old shop-windows which masked the entrance of the wizarding hospital. He watched the badly dressed shop-dummies and their blank stares. This is my last chance to turn and run from it all, he thought. Then he took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The waiting-room was fairly empty, and to his relief, he saw no one he recognised. Still, he shivered when he walked over to the reception and gave his name to the welcome witch.

As he went to take a seat, he felt like he had the fearful name of the disease branded on him. All he had said to the mediwitch was that he was seeing Healer Malvern at ten. He had not even mentioned it in the letter he had sent. Despite that, he felt certain it showed. The sequences HTLV-3 and AIDS might as well be written on his skin, among the scars and scratches, as yet another mark. He realised now that they had not even given the virus or the disease a name, just assignations. A jumble of letters and a number stuck on the end - an acronym turned into a word. He would die from something that was nigh unnamed.

‘Mr Lupin?’

He looked up, startled. Healer Malvern was there, his file under his arms. The clock hanging over the reception desk showed five past ten. The minutes had rushed past.

‘Would you come through?’ the healer said pleasantly, almost as if Remus was there to have his robes fitted or his hair cut.

He followed him to the same cramped office as he had been in last month. Once the door was securely closed, and Malvern had sat down behind his desk, he folded his hands and looked Remus in the eye.

‘Now, what can I do for you?’

Remus returned his gaze for only a moment. Then he looked down at his shoes. He clasped his hands and bit his lip. They sat in awkward silence.

‘Take your time,’ Malvern said after a minute or so.

Remus swallowed, licked his lips and tried to speak. Why did the words which had been on the tip of his tongue with his parents now escape him? He sighed, frustrated with himself and this situation. Tears stung in his eyes. He rubbed his face, swallowed and, with his eyes closed, spoke.

‘I think I’ve got AIDS.’

No answer. When he opened his eyes, he found Malvern smiling at him.

‘I know there’s been a lot in the papers about this,’ he said, ‘but they’ve given a very inaccurate picture of it. You can’t catch this by simply being around Muggles…’

‘I know that,’ Remus said, interrupting him. ‘I know how it’s spread. I’m gay. I had unprotected
sex with a man.’

Malvern’s smile faltered. His relaxed expression was replaced by one of alarm. He leaned forwards, interlacing his fingers on the desk, as though buying time.

‘Alright.’ He took a deep breath and looked his patient in the eye. Behind the schooled, serious facial expression, Remus could see the unease.

‘I’ll be frank with you. We’re very unprepared. We haven’t even got our own way of testing for this thing yet. Half the healers know nothing about it, and most - and I’m afraid I’m in this category - know far too little. So if you’d let me, I’m going to get hold of one of our… well, the closest we’ve got to an expect. Then we’ll probably have to refer you to the Muggle Health Service.’

It took a moment before Remus found his voice.

‘So will you give me another appointment with this other healer?’

Malvern sighed and stood up.

‘I think it’s best if I just go find her right away.’

He left. Remus could not tell whether his hurry was to get the other healer, or to get away from him. He felt drained, as if his outburst, explaining just what he was, had taken all his energy. The urge to cry came over him again. He bit his lip, hard, not wanting anyone to come in and see him weep.

He did not know how long he waited - it could not have been more than a few minutes, but the silence stretched on, and made it feel like hours. Then the door opened.

‘They’re coming out of the bloody woodwork all of a sudden,’ a woman’s voice outside in the corridor said. Then, Remus heard Malvern’s voice:

‘Alright, Mr Lupin.’

Remus rose to greet the other healer, a witch with a white-blonde perm.

‘Mr Lupin,’ she said and offered him her hand. ‘I’m Healer Barrett.’

They shook hands and sat down, Malvern taking his usual chair and Barrett conjuring up a chair wedged against the short side of the desk. She looked at him appraisingly and got out a clipboard to make notes on.

‘Healer Malvern has given me a basic outline, but I’d like to ask my own questions, if you wouldn’t mind.’

‘I suppose I wouldn’t,’ Remus said.

‘You’re a homosexual?’ She said it almost like a statement.

‘Yes.’

‘How many sexual partners have you had in the past six months?’

‘One,’ Remus said. Healer Barrett’s eyebrows rose. ‘Does that surprise you?’ he asked, surprised but gratified that he could still feel such annoyance. Barrett did not answer.
‘You’ll have to forgive the nature of some of these questions,’ she said, noting something down. ‘But it’s necessary, I’m afraid. What types of sexual activity have you engaged in?’

It took Remus a moment to collect himself to answer.

‘Anal sex. Some fellatio.’

‘And what role did you take?’

Now, Remus felt himself blushing.

‘Passive,’ he murmured.

‘This partner – was he a Muggle?’

Remus nodded.

‘Did you take any… precautions?’

‘We used a condom the first time.’ Speaking about it brought the whole experience back in vivid detail – his meltdown at the club, Rayan’s kindness, the heartfelt conversation, that first kiss on the sofa. Now it was all reduced to that one, clinical question. ‘But then the other time, he… we didn’t.’

Healer Barrett made another note on her clipboard.

‘When was this?’

Remus tried to remember precisely, but could not.

‘About a month ago. Beginning of December.’

‘Hm.’ She made another note. ‘What about drugs?’

‘No,’ Remus said. He thought she looked unconvinced, but she did not press him. Instead she asked:

‘Have you had any flulike symptoms? Fever, sore throat, rash? Aching muscles? Headaches? Nausea, diarrhoea?’

‘I’ve been feeling nauseous, but I’ve been worried, and I often feel sick around the full-moon. And I did have a fever on Boxing Day…’

The healer cut him off.

‘For how long? Was it high?’

‘No, just over thirty-eight, and it was gone the next morning. I’ve had a cough, but it’s been getting better, I think.’ Remus did not know whether he was answering these questions correctly, with the back and forth, for and against. It was like he was trying to convince himself of that either side – which was unimportant – was wrong.

Healer Barrett scribbled on her clipboard again.

‘I’m not familiar with your case – when were you bitten?’
The change of direction surprised him. Then he realised that he had mentioned the full-moon, and Malvern may have told her that he was a werewolf. She might even have been able to tell just by looking at him.

‘I was five.’

She glanced at the file open on the desk.

‘Twenty years ago, then.’

‘Yes.’

‘Hm. Where do you usually transform?’

‘I usually try to find a cellar or a warehouse somewhere secluded,’ he said. ‘Last full-moon – that is, three nights ago – I transformed in a house that was about to be demolished.’

‘You realise that this would become a concern, if you are infected?’ Healer Barrett said. ‘HTLV-3 – that’s the virus – is transmitted by blood, so…’

‘I’d have to be isolated. More than usual. Yes, I know.’

‘Good.’

Remus decided to pick up his courage and ask what he wondered.

‘If I do have AIDS, how is it going to interact with the lycanthropy?’

Healer Barrett looked surprised, as if that thought had not crossed her mind. Then she said:

‘I have no idea. It’s a very interesting question, though.’ The look in her eye was closest to possessive fascination, as if she would love the opportunity of being the one to write that paper. Then she said: ‘That is something we can worry about later.’ She put her clipboard away. ‘I’d like to have a quick look at you. If you’d take off your robes…’

Remus obeyed, submitting to the healer’s cold gloved hands. She felt his glands with careful efficiency. When she instructed him to lift his left arm, he saw how she registered his scars. He was wondering whether she would ask him about them, but she moved on. She declared his cough ‘nothing but a chest-cold - it’ll go away on its own’. Soon, she let him dress again. Once he had sat down, Barrett spoke.

‘All things considered, you seem fairly healthy. But that’s by no means an indication. It can take months or years before people get symptoms. We’ll set you up with a time for the test.’

Malvern cleared his throat.

‘Is that wise?’ he asked.

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’ Remus asked. Malvern looked at him carefully.

‘Would you want to know?’

The question startled him. He expected Barrett to intervene, perhaps even to say that this was not really up to him, but instead she stood silently, listening.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Remus said finally.
Malvern frowned, looking a little uncomfortable.

‘It might be easier, not knowing for sure.’

‘To have some plausibly deniability, you mean?’ Remus said, the same anger as before besetting him. ‘So you think I’ve got it?’

Malvern shrugged.

‘I can’t say. But, as you’re well aware, you’re a high-risk patient, and you’ve put yourself at risk of it.’

There was blame in that reflexive pronoun - he had not been put at risk, but had put himself at risk. He had had a choice, and he had made the wrong one.

‘Seeing as there’s nothing we can do anyway, and it may take time before you develop symptoms…’ He seemed to backtrack in his mind, and started again. ‘I’m simply expressing my concerns. This kind of news can be very difficult to get. I’ve read your file. Considering some of the… ordeals you’ve been through, the test might upset you.’

He knows, Remus realised. Something in his speech or his demeanour had betrayed his vague thoughts of suicide. He felt caught out, but more than that, the suggestion that he might be too fragile to have that knowledge angered him.

‘No, I’d like to know.’ His earlier abstract plans seemed irrelevant now. He needed that information, not to guide him to what to do next, but simply to stop the incessant questions inside his own head. Even without that, it seemed a selfish argument, considering it might put others at risk. He did not want to live his life assuming but not knowing. ‘I want to know.’

Healer Barrett nodded with an air of finality.

‘Very well. I’ll get in touch with the Muggles.’

With a nod to Malvern, she left the room. When the door closed behind her, Remus turned to Malvern and asked:

‘How do you get in touch with the Muggles?’

‘We have a telephone in the basement,’ Malvern said. ‘I hate the thing, myself. Never learned how to use it. But Healer Barrett is very good at it. It’s one of the reasons why she liaises with them.’ He leaned back in his chair and studied Remus. ‘Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?’

Remus sat in silence for a moment. He thought he knew exactly what Malvern was getting at, and it made him feel like his lungs were shrinking. Where would he begin? Instead of speaking, he presented his hand, palm-down. Malvern shifted forwards and, putting a light hand on his arm, studied the tremble in it.

‘There was a mention in your file of psychogenic tremors,’ he said.

‘It started four, four and a half years ago,’ Remus said. ‘It got better, but now it’s back.’

Malvern let go of his arm. Remus leaned back in his chair, feeling like he might cry or faint.

‘I understand this is difficult,’ Malvern said, speaking slowly, as if afraid to spook him. ‘But I can’t speak for you. You have to tell me yourself.’
Remus swallowed, taking control of himself.

‘One moment I can barely leave my room,’ he said. ‘And then the next I can’t sit still. My thoughts just go around and around my head, and I can’t let go of them. I can’t distract myself. I feel like I’m going mad. Every night I have nightmares. Sometimes I find that I can’t control my magic. I have panic attacks because of the smallest things – if I cut myself shaving or see a flashing light…’

He hung his head, feeling Malvern’s eyes on him.

‘Have you been harming yourself?’

‘No.’ It was no more than a murmur; being asked that, even if it was not the case, felt shameful.

‘Have you been eating properly? Just by looking at you, I can tell you’ve lost weight since I saw you, and that was just after the full-moon.’

Remus wrapped his arms around himself and leaned back again, though still not looking at Malvern.

‘Not really. I don’t have much money, and sometimes when I can’t leave my room… And sometimes I just don’t have any appetite.’

‘I don’t think I need to tell you that that’s self-destructive.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Remus sighed.

‘Especially considering the strain your metabolism is under through the transformations anyway.’

‘I know.’

‘This anxiety – did it start after your… encounter?’

‘Before that,’ he said. ‘But it got worse afterwards. Much worse.’

Now he dared to glance up at Malvern. He was watching him, kindly but dispassionately. It dawned on Remus that he was actually going to get help.

‘To some extent this kind of thing is often circumstantial,’ Malvern said. ‘I understand that you are in a difficult situation, what with the concerns about your health. I don’t suppose you took my advice about going to your parents’, last time I saw you?’

‘I went over Christmas,’ Remus said. ‘But I couldn’t stay.’

Malvern sighed softly, as if realising that there was nothing he could do about this. Instead, he stood up and got out a set of keys.

‘I’m going to give you something.’ He unlocked a cabinet in the corner. From the way he reached his entire arm into it, it was clear it was far deeper than it seemed on the outside. After some rummaging, he extracted a bottle, small enough for the base to rest comfortably in his palm. He brought it over to the desk and put it in front of Remus. ‘This is a calming draught. It’s supposed to be mixed with water – two drops in a glass of water every morning. It will ease the anxiety.’

‘Thank you,’ Remus said, not quiet trusting his voice. He took the bottle between his hands. It was cold to the touch, and the sapphire blue liquid shone in the light of the gas lamps.

‘I’d like you to come and see me again in a month, at the latest. Of course it depends on the test
‘Yes, of course.’ Remus closed his hands around the bottle. Even holding it felt comforting.

There was a brief knock on the door, and Healer Barrett stepped in. She crossed to the desk and handed Remus a piece of parchment.

‘It’s all set up. Your appointment is at two o’clock on the sixth of January. That’s in a week. I was surprised I could get you in so early - usually they’re swamped.’

‘Where is it?’ Remus asked.

‘It’s all on there. They won’t ask any awkward questions about who referred you, so you won’t have to worry about the Statute of Secrecy. You’re going to Middlesex Hospital. How well do you know Muggle London?’

‘Reasonably well,’ he said. ‘Middlesex Hospital is in Fitzrovia, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right. Mortimer Street. If you’d like, we can send someone with you.’

Remus shook his head.

‘No, thank you,’ he said. He would rather do something like this on his own.

‘Very well, then,’ Malvern said and got to his feet. Remus rose, putting away the parchment and the bottle safely, and shook hands with both healers. He left the office and the hospital with a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. It took him the entire journey back to Knockturn Alley to name it. He felt relief at finally having spoken. That, he decided, was something to cherish in the week of waiting ahead of him.
Chapter 23

The last day of the year was the first day that Remus took the potion he had been given. It left a bitter taste on his tongue, which served as a reminder of it all day. He knew better than to expect any immediate improvement, but things felt easier, just with the knowledge that he had done something about it. Even when ruled by one of his apathetic moods, Remus felt a kind of contentment. It felt almost like being awake early in the morning, knowing one should sleep but being unable and, ultimately, unwilling to.

The respectable streets were teeming with excitement for the new year preparations. Knockturn Alley was swarming rather than teeming. It was filled with rowdy drinking and raucous laughter. Remus wondered whether the difference was not actually in the quality of the celebrations, but simply in the context. When set in a derelict street with all the scars of poverty, the scene changed character. Many of the inhabitants of this part of wizarding London did not care about which year it was, or even which date. The time of year was only important insomuch as it made the nights colder. But those who found the strength to care grasped that reason to celebrate with such frenzy that their merrymaking stood in stark contrast to the rest of their reality. For a moment, Remus wondered what the Muggle world would be like this evening. He pushed aside the thought. Before going to bed, he charmed a blanket over the skylight, so that he would not see the flash of the fireworks. He fell asleep one year, and awoke another.

When waking, his first thought was of the cold. The fire in the grate had burned down sometime during the night. Remus thought of that old joke of referring to things that happened yesterday as last year. I made that fire last year. I haven’t eaten at all this year. He smiled and rolled onto his side, pulling the covers tighter around himself. He had slept deeper than he had expected. The fireworks and the noise in the streets had not woken him up. Looking up at the covered skylight, Remus thought that one reason why he was so cold was because he had one blanket less than usual. He thought of getting his wand out and summoning the one that had served as a blind, but instead he stayed as he had lain, thinking.

As with every new year, he thought this one - 1986 - sounded strange. In three months, he would be twenty-six, which sounded far older than twenty-five. In the coming autumn, James and Peter would have been dead for half a decade. For every passing year, Remus would grow older, while they stayed the same age. The only change would be that the memories steadily faded.

Instead of lingering on that fact, he turned his thoughts to Harry. That summer, he would be six years old. Remus wondered what he looked like, and how big he was. How grown-up was a six-year-old? He only had himself as a reference, and his experiences were not those of most six-year-olds. He tried to remember how the Muggle school system worked, and came to the conclusion that he must be starting year two in September. Harry would be able to read, then. Remus wondered whether he enjoyed reading, which subjects he liked best, who his friends were.

Finally, he shook off his daydreaming and got up, pulling the blankets around him. With every step, the chill penetrated deeper into his feet until it felt like icy thorns working their way through them. He opened the grate and looked down into the coal bucket. Barely enough to make a fire. He picked up the bucket and turned towards the door when it struck him. He could simply multiply the little coal he had. Why had he not thought of that? Looking down at the pitiful pieces of coal, he laughed. How stupid he had been! A few murmured words and a swish of the wand, and the coal bucket was suddenly full. He made the fire, marvelling at his own slowness. It was so obvious - how come it hadn’t crossed his mind?
Perhaps my mind is clearing, Remus thought. He did not really feel better, but neither did he feel worse. It was too much to assume that the potion would have such an immediate effect, but he took the appearance of this obvious idea, which had not struck him before, as a good omen.

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On Friday, Remus woke up with an appetite and a desire to read. He brought his copy of Maurice with him to read over breakfast, rejecting A Single Man. At least Maurice had a happy ending. As he ate his breakfast - scrambled eggs on toast - he could not help wonder if there was such a thing, and if he would get one.

In the afternoon, he went for a walk around Diagon Alley. His steps were cautious, as though he feared he might jinx this progress if he enjoyed it too much. He did not feel happy, but that did not feel very important. All he knew was that his chest did not feel like it was enclosed in iron bands, and he had not thought about his health for several hours. He knew that he would not improve all at once. That evening when he found himself trapped inside his own body, unable to get off the bed, that was what he told himself, louder than the voice shouting, the medicine isn't working - you did something wrong and it stopped working!

He slept, and woke next morning to find that, although he was not as keen to get up as he had been the day before, he was not covered in cold sweat and haunted by bad dreams either. He stayed in bed and read before going to get breakfast. When he left the café, he took the copy of the Prophet on his table with him. Carefully, as if his anxiety were a monster which might be awoken by the rustling sound of the pages, he opened the paper at the notices. He took his time, reading each in turn. One or two looked like jobs he could do, neither particularly interesting but at least something. As he started planning his applications, he thought that he was being more systematic than he had been before. Perhaps something really had changed.

In the evening, a feeling of loneliness came over him. After longing for solitude for so long, now he wanted noise and company. He swapped out his robes for Muggle clothes. His new coat felt heavy around his shoulders, but it shielded him from the cold far better than his cloak did. Hands in pockets and gaze turned down, he walked through wizarding London and down the broad shopping streets of the Muggle capital. He made his way into Soho, to Old Compton Street, and the pub where he had gone with the people from the café.

The air inside was warm and hazy with cigarette smoke. The smell cloyed at his throat, but also woke an unusual longing for a smoke. He looked around, scanning for familiar faces, but he saw none. For a moment, he thought of going back home, but he did not want to. Instead, he went up to the bar and, ignoring the voice that told him not to waste his money, ordered a pint. He stayed there, standing at the bar, drinking his beer and watching the people around him. Once, a man who had come up to the bar to order a drink turned to Remus and asked:

‘You okay there?’

Remus looked up, surprised to have been spoken to. The man’s easy-going smile and handsome features both attracted and repelled him. He wanted to answer him, strike up a conversation, be listened to. But if he did that, all his secrets might come spilling out. He might think ‘to hell with it all’ and go home with this stranger, just to be distracted.

For a moment, he hesitated.

‘I’m fine,’ he said and turned away. Although he did not leave the pub until it closed, he did not speak to anyone else, afraid to lose his resolve.
Sunday dawned, but heavy clouds made the darkness linger. Remus worked on his applications by the light of his wand. He wished he had a candle, so he did not have to balance his wand so precariously, but he was not sure Madam Wilkes would allow it, and there was nowhere he could put it anyway. Besides, candles were expensive, and he felt guilty about the money he had spent last night.

It was not only the gloom and the onsetting ache in his eyes that distracted him. The last few days, he had had a feeling that he was rediscovering emotions he had lost the names of. It took him a while to identify the one he felt now. For want of a better word, he labelled it remorse. He wanted to make amends, but he barely knew where to start. It was not until the late afternoon, when the sky had started to darken, that he had gathered courage enough to leave his letters and set out. He put his cloak on and Disapparated from the landing.

When he appeared, his first sensation was of something cold and wet around his feet. He was standing ankle-deep in snow which hid the country-lane where he had appeared. There were no trace of humans, but the long leaps of a hare disturbed the snow a little while away. On his left was a small gate, leading to what in summers was a garden. Now, it was a still expanse of snow, which glittered in the moonlight. He could see a light from a window further away. From somewhere around the house, he heard the sound of someone moving.

Remus pushed open the garden gate. It ploughed the top layer of the snow off. His cloak brushed the snow and his feet left imprints in it. As he drew nearer to the house, he saw a cloaked figure waving a wand. A log jumped into the air, divided down the middle and was cut in three. The kindling settled itself into a basket by the figure’s feet.

‘Zadie?’

The witch turned around and pushed her hood back. Remus had not seen her since before the war ended, but she was unchanged. She even still had her hair in the same braids as then. When she raised her lit wand and saw him, her face split into a wide smile, revealing that familiar gap between her front teeth.

‘Remus?’

‘Yes,’ he said and smiled back. ‘It’s been a while.’

‘It has,’ she agreed. She made her way over to him and they kissed each other on the cheek. When she stepped back, Remus asked:

‘Is Kingsley in?’

Zadie waved her wand to enchant the basket of kindling.

‘Yes, come on in. It’s his day off.’

The two of them, followed by the floating basket, made their way through the snow towards the porch.

‘How have you been?’ Remus asked.

‘Oh, same old,’ Zadie said. ‘I’m supposed to be off to Peru in a week, but there have been weather problems, so I might not make it to the sites. If that happens, I’m not going.’ They stamped the snow off their shoes. ‘I keep busy, though. Always new theory to catch up on.’ She raised her
voice and called into the house: ‘Kingsley, we’ve got a visitor!’

The house was warm and smelled of spices. Remus toed off his boots, leaving them to dry. Zadie had just taken his cloak to hang it up when Kingsley appeared. He looked different dressed in a belted tunic instead of the formal Auror uniform. His eyes widened just enough to betray his surprise when he caught sight of the guest.

‘I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.’

Remus shrugged.

‘I wanted to drop by.’

Zadie picked up the basket of kindling and drew a deep breath.

‘I smell mulled wine.’

‘Thought you’d be cold,’ Kingsley said. She kissed him.

‘You’re a sweetheart,’ she said. ‘I’ll help myself and do some reading.’

She went into the kitchen. Kingsley turned to Remus.

‘Mulled wine?’

‘I’d love some,’ he said. The thought of something warm and alcoholic was wonderful. They went to the kitchen and filled two goblets. Zadie had put the basket with the kindling at the table and left with a recent issue of *International Journal of Curse-Breaking* under her arm. Kingsley handed the goblets to Remus and picked up the basket.

‘Let’s go into the living room. Zadie’ll be in her study.’

Remus followed his host into the living room, where a large fire was already burning. He sank into the sofa with a sigh.

‘I’m surprised you have snow,’ he said as Kingsley sat down beside him.

‘This fell yesterday,’ he said and took his goblet. ‘Hadin’t expected it to stay this long, actually.’

‘There wasn’t any snow in Yorkshire - I was there over Christmas,’ Remus said. ‘And there’s not anything in London, of course.’ He raised his goblet. ‘Cheers.’

‘Cheers,’ Kingsley said and mirrored him. Remus felt himself warm up with the first mouth-full. It gave him enough courage to speak.

‘I wanted to apologise for last time I saw you.’

Kingsley watched the flames.

‘You don’t need to apologise.’

‘Still. I felt I wanted to… explain, to some extent.’

Kingsley bowed his head a little, a gesture meaning ‘go ahead’ or ‘by all means’. Remus looked down at the goblet in his hands.
'Things have been difficult recently,' he said finally. ‘I haven’t been well.’ He paused, thinking about the events on Christmas Eve. ‘And all this with Greyback…’ He swallowed. ‘I must have seemed completely deranged.’

Kingsley leaned back, his face unreadable. Remus wondered if he had said too much, and would be forced to explain more than he had anticipated. But Kingsley did not press him. Instead, he said:

‘You seem better.’

‘Yes. I feel better.’ He sipped his wine. ‘You look well, though.’

‘I am.’

‘I don’t think we’ve talked in four years.’

‘It must be that.’

‘What have you been up to?’ Remus asked. Now, Kingsley smiled.

‘During the past four years?’

‘It’s a long time, yes.’

‘So much and nothing at all, if you get my meaning,’ he said. ‘I work a lot. So does Zadie. Last year we talked about moving house, but we decided against it. We like it here. She’s doing a lot of work in South America now. Gringotts have too many people working in Egypt, so they’ve been reshuffling. She’s trying to make them send her to Great Zimbabwe - she thinks that there would be a lot of interesting finds there, but the bank’s not very interested. Not enough gold to warrant it.’

‘What about you?’ Remus asked.

‘I’m working on old Death Eater cases. There are still many we haven’t tracked down yet.’

Remus thought for a moment.

‘Does the name Claudia Periwinkle mean anything to you?’

Kingsley thought for a moment.

‘Yes,’ he said finally, his eyes distant, as if recalling the image of a page. ‘August 1981. Found close to the Devil’s Elbow in the Grampians.’

‘She was murdered,’ Remus added.

‘Yes. The killing curse.’

‘Do you know who killed her?’

Kingsley shook his head.

‘No. She’s on one of the lists of unsolved murders.’

‘Do you know anything about if she had allegiances or sympathies - either way?’

‘No,’ Kingsley said. ‘But just because we don’t know about it does not mean she didn’t have any. How come you’re interested?’
‘I met her sister,’ Remus said. ‘I was just thinking in case there’s been any recent developments…’

Kingsley shook his head.

‘It’s unlikely we’ll ever find anything. There are just too many unsolved murders from that time. I doubt we will solve many of them.’

Remus nodded. He drank some more wine.

‘Is anyone investigating Greyback?’ he asked after a while.

‘Thorpe’s in charge of it. But it’s not considered a priority,’ Kingsley said, adding, ‘I’m sorry to say. She’s got other cases.’

‘Have there been any sightings…?’

Kingsley put his goblet aside and left the room. He came back bringing with him a folder. He seemed to weigh it in his hand, hesitating.

‘This is not pretty,’ he finally said. Remus put down his goblet.

‘I have a strong stomach.’

Kingsley handed it to him and sat down. As Remus fumbled to open the folder, he noticed how stiff Kingsley’s face looked.

Secured with a paperclip to the papers in the folder were a number of photographs. Remus swallowed noisily. They showed a body, sprawled in interrupted flight. As he looked through them, he lingered on one photograph of the man’s unshaven, terrified face. It looked absurd set over his gaping neck.

Remus closed the folder.

‘Where did this happen?’

‘Northumberland,’ Kingsley said. ‘He was homeless. A miner, originally.’

‘And there’s no doubt?’

‘The teeth-marks are Greyback’s.’

Remus put the folder on the table, feeling sick. He was aware of Kingsley watching him.

‘I shouldn’t have tied him up,’ Remus murmured. ‘I antagonised him…’

‘You didn’t do this, Remus,’ Kingsley said. The fact that he used his name was comforting. ‘It doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with that.’

Remus shrugged. He knew that Kingsley had a point, but that did not change it. An innocent man had died. His death would be put down in a file among other murders and attacks, and however much Greyback was hated, nothing would happen.

Kingsley stood up.

‘I think we need more wine.’
When he came back with the goblets filled up, Remus’ thoughts were still on Greyback. Kingsley must have sensed it, because his first words were:

‘This means he’s far away, at least.’

‘For all the good it’ll do,’ Remus said. He accepted the goblet he was offered and drank from it. Then he put it down. ‘I thought of killing him.’

Kingsley looked at him.

‘Greyback?’

Remus nodded.

Kingsley sighed and leaned back. He ran his finger around the rim of his goblet, then said:

‘A lot of people feel that way.’

‘I was confused,’ he said. ‘It was just before the full moon - I wasn’t in my right mind. But I did consider it.’

He did not answer, but Remus thought he could sense some kind of sympathy. At the very least, he was not being condemned. His thoughts wandered, but not far.

‘Can I ask something?’

‘Of course,’ Kingsley said. Remus turned to look at him.

‘Did you see Sirius after he was arrested?’

Kingsley shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m glad I didn’t. For much the same reason, I suppose.’

They fell silent again. It was Remus who broke it, when he caught sight of a framed photograph on the mantelpiece. He got up and went over to it.

‘This…I’d forgotten this.’

Reverently, he picked it up and took it over. Kingsley leaned forward, elbows on his knees, alert again. Remus sat down beside him and held the photograph of the Order so they could both see them.

‘Do you remember that day?’ Kingsley asked. Remus thought about it.

‘Was that when Benjy and Marlene made that Eton mess for pudding…?’

‘Yes,’ Kingsley said and grinned. ‘It was awful.’

Remus laughed.

‘It really was!’

They looked at the people lined up for the photograph.

‘Fabian must be behind the camera,’ Remus said, pausing when he only saw one Prewett brother.
‘Yes, I think he took the photo,’ Kingsley said. Remus looked at himself. He looked very young, barely more than a child.

‘This was before I started going grey.’

‘You must have been eighteen here.’

‘I found my first grey hair before I turned nineteen,’ he explained. ‘Or, rather, Sirius found it. He teased me terribly.’ He decided to change the subject. ‘You look just the same.’

‘More or less,’ Kingsley agreed. ‘But not as much as Dumbledore.’

‘And he’s turned a hundred since then.’ Remus pointed at the photo. ‘Look at Daedalus Diggle’s hat!’

Kingsley grinned. They spent some time pointing out details. Remus wanted to say something about James, Lily and Peter, standing together, as if gathered in their victimhood, but he could not face it. The pain would be too acute.

Kingsley put the photograph back and poured them the last of the mulled wine. They sat in silence. Remus wondered how much wine he had had - he was starting to feel light-headed. The discussion of the war and the Order had made him feel melancholic and a little lonely. He wanted to continue talking and chase away those feelings of isolation.

But would he not still be isolated, hiding behind shields and masks? The vague sensation of intoxication was pushing at him.

He turned towards Kingsley, who looked at him, expecting him to speak. Remus sat silent for a moment, perhaps longer, wondering whether to stop himself. He didn’t.

‘I’m gay.’

The sound of his voice saying those words surprised him. Though he had spoken them only a week ago, this was different. This was not a necessity, but a confidence.

Kingsley’s eyes had widened. It was strange to see someone who so often controlled his face display such obvious emotion. He seemed to try to figure out what to answer.

‘Alright,’ he said, more to ground himself than anything else.

‘Are you surprised?’ Remus felt his stomach twist with fear. Kingsley hesitated before answering.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘I wondered a little, during the war, when you and Sirius shared that cottage. But I knew that he’d dated Tiffany Keating at Hogwarts…’

‘Sirius was bisexual,’ Remus said, before realising the tense he was using. ‘Or “is”, I suppose.’

Kingsley seemed to take a moment to process this.

‘So you two…?’

‘Yes.’

Kingsley made a face which a more loquacious man might have followed up with ‘blimey’. There was a moment of awkward silence.
‘So… when did you know?’ Kingsley asked. Remus thought back, uncertain. In a way there had always been an awareness of it, but as no one had expected him to ever marry, due to his lycanthropy, he had not given it much thought until he suddenly did.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said finally. ‘I think I started figuring it out properly in my third year.’

He did not want to go into details, but it had all been because of Sirius, of course. At some point that year, he had realised that the way he felt when Sirius touched him or looked at him was not innocent. It was not what the others felt.

‘It’s not like I woke up one day and thought “oh dash it, I’m gay”,’ he said, almost startled at hearing himself say the word again. He thought Kingsley smiled.

Perhaps the reason why it had taken as long as it had was because he had not known what to call it. He had been reading a Muggle novel, and a word he did not know had appeared. He had gone to his mother’s concise English dictionary, and while scanning the columns for it (he still recalled it: “honky-tonk n. (colloq.) tawdry drinking-saloon, dance-hall etc.; ragtime music as played in these”), his eyes were drawn by another entry: “homosexual a. & n. (Person) being sexually attracted to person of one’s own sex”. He had slammed the book shut and completely forgotten to look up what ragtime was. He was not sure whether he even finished the novel he had been reading.

‘I knew before I realised - if that makes sense.’

Kingsley thought about it.

‘I think it does.’

Remus bit his lip.

‘You don’t mind?’

Kingsley shook his head.

‘No. It doesn’t bother me. I don’t mind.’

Remus smiled. This time the tears he was fighting was from gratitude rather than grief.

‘Thank you.’

‘Not much to say thank you about,’ Kingsley said. Remus sighed.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I was half expecting…’ He cut himself off. He had not thought Kingsley would throw him out, but somehow he had not expected it to go this well. ‘Wizards never talk about it,’ he said. ‘I’ve never met anyone who was open about it…’

He trailed off. He was getting too close to the topic of AIDS. He had been about to mention that article in the Prophet which had included the word “homosexual”, complete with glossing. He did not want to bring it up, because it was bound to lead to questions. If someone came out, amid all this hysteria in the papers, one was bound to wonder. For all he knew, Kingsley was already asking that question in his head. Perhaps this new piece of information was making him reassess Remus’ sickly complexion and thin frame. Remus reminded himself that it was Sunday, and that tomorrow he was going to be tested. That thought made him shudder.

He did not realise for how long they had been silent until Kingsley spoke.
'Are you seeing anyone?'

'No,' Remus said. 'I met someone recently, but… it didn’t work out.' He shifted. 'Once bitten, you know.'

'I’m sorry.' Kingsley, paused, looking for words. 'It must have been terrible,' he said finally. 'With Sirius, I mean.'

Remus let out the breath he had been holding. There were tears in his eyes.

'It was.' He blinked the tears away. 'I had no idea until…'

'Of course you didn’t,' Kingsley said with conviction.

Remus had anticipated the natural question “but didn’t you notice anything?”, but he should have known better than to expect that. Despite his surprise, Kingsley’s trust in him seemed unshaken.

'I haven’t asked you what you’ve been doing the past four years,' Kingsley said. Remus felt surprised that their previous topic was something he felt he could change from so easily, but it was also rather comforting. Still, this new subject was not much better.

'Not much,' he said. 'I’ve stayed with my parents mostly. I think the longest I’ve managed to keep a job was nine weeks. I kept the last one six.’ He could not express that sense of being forfeited that he had been able to convey to Moody. He felt exhausted after all these confidences.

'It’s a disgrace, the way the Ministry treats werewolves,’ Kingsley sighed.

'Most of them haven’t met one,’ Remus said. ‘And if they have, they assume we’re all like Greyback.’

Kingsley was about to answer when the sound of footsteps were heard, and he closed his mouth again. Moments later, Zadie appeared in the stairs.

'Are you still at it?’ she asked, smiling at them.

'If you want more wine, we’ve had it all,’ Kingsley said.

'Only the mulled stuff, I hope,’ Zadie said, crossing to them. ‘Remus, won’t you stay for dinner?’

'I don’t want to impose on you…’

'You’re not. We’re having… Kingsley, what are we having today?’

'The stew,’ Kingsley reminded her.

'Oh, yes. We’re having lamb stew. There’s plenty.’

'Alright,’ Remus said gratefully.

'Actually, why don’t you just stay in the spare room tonight?’ Zadie said. ‘Then you don’t have to worry about getting home.’

'I should probably get home after dinner…’ Remus said. He did not want to overstay his welcome.

'Your room can’t have much insulation,’ Kingsley observed. Remus shrugged.
‘I think the rats provide most of the insulation, to be honest,’ he said before he could stop himself.

‘Rats?’ Zadie repeated and laughed incredulously. ‘Then you’re definitely staying for tonight, if not longer.’

‘I have to be back in London tomorrow,’ Remus said.

‘Then you can leave in the morning,’ Zadie said, already moving towards the kitchen. Remus turned to Kingsley.

‘Kingsley?’ He did not want to say the words “would you mind?”, but he thought he managed to communicate them nevertheless.

‘Stay,’ he said and got to his feet to help in the kitchen. ‘The rats can do without you for a night.’ Remus laughed.

‘Thanks,’ he said and pushed himself out of the sofa to help as well.

***

Remus slept better than he had for a long time, between clean sheets in a soft bed. The only sound that could be heard was the whisper of the wind through the nearby trees. He felt none of the tenseness that had plagued him at his parents’ house, knowing they were upstairs probably talking about him. For all he knew, Kingsley and Zadie were discussing him two doors town. Remus could imagine them lying on their sides, facing one another, speaking in hushed voices. The thought did not bother him, although he did not know whether that was down to his relationship to them or his clearing mind. Whatever may have been said, and whichever of his admissions Kingsley had shared with his wife, breakfast was a friendly affair, just like the dinner the night before. Remus left in the early morning, shortly after Kingsley had Apparated to the Ministry for work. Zadie waved him off, having already brought down a pile of books she needed to read in preparation for her next trip.

As soon as he reappeared in London, the worry started gnawing at him again. He stopped off at the lodging-house only to change into Muggle clothes and drink his potion. He whiled away the hours until his appointment on shops and window-displays. With no money to spend, he was content simply to look. Sometimes he would touch a jumper or a jacket or read a paragraph in a book. These touches and glimpses of things he could not afford to have only made the time pass slower.

When the shorter hand of his wrist-watch came to rest on the numeral one, announcing that his appointment was only an hour away, the distractions had lost their appeal. Remus started walking to the hospital, trying to walk as slowly as he could. By the time he got there, it was still half an hour until two o’clock. He could not stand the idea of sitting still. Instead, he started walking around the block. When he came back to the place where he had started, he kept walking, as though stepping up a path on the pavement. His hand was trembling in his pocket, and he was starting to feel sick. Only now did he realise that he had completely forgotten to eat lunch. Perhaps that fact was making him nauseous too, but he wondered whether, if he had eaten, he would not have actually been sick. He told himself that after they were done with him, he would go have something proper to eat.

Now it suddenly struck him that he had no idea how they tested for HTLV-3. His worked-up mind presented a number of suggestions, each more humiliating and painful than the last. When he stopped outside the doors of the VD clinic, his watch a quarter to two, he realised that he had never been inside a Muggle hospital. He did know things about Muggle medicine - stitches and blood-
letting, and those dry tablets his mum took when she had a headache - but most of what he knew was taken from films and books, and he was not completely sure what was made up or out of date. Bracing himself, Remus stepped inside.

The reception and the waiting room looked much like those at St Mungo’s. The nurse in the reception took his name, gave him a wooden token with a number on it and asked him to sit down. He thought of reading - he had his copy of Forster in his pocket - but he was far too nervous. First, he turned the token around in his hands. Then he put it down on the seat beside him and tried to roll his thumbs. He stole a glance at the others waiting - all of them avoiding his eye, jitting, staring at articles in magazines they could not bring themselves to read. Remus looked back at his hands, and did not look up, embarrassed to acknowledge any of the other patients. He wondered whether they were here for the same reason as him, and whether they wondered the same about him.

Twice, a nurse came into the waiting room and called out a number. No names were mentioned. Remus picked up the token again and turned it around and around. The number 48 was painted on it. Did that mean that they had gotten through almost fifty patients from when the day started to an hour after lunch? It seemed unlikely. Perhaps they were only two-digit numbers, which cut out one to nine, or they were handed out at random. Maybe they had lost some, or they continued handing them out until they got to the highest number…

‘Number forty-eight?’

Remus jerked out of his thoughts.

‘Yes.’

The nurse who had called his number, a tiny middle-aged woman, was smiling at him.

‘Come with me.’ She jerked her head down the corridor and set off. He followed her. She seemed to exude good cheer. He was not sure yet whether it was unsettling or calming.

‘Come on in,’ she said and opened a door for him. He stepped in, and she closed it firmly behind them. ‘Have a seat, have a seat,’ she said and bustled around to the far side of a narrow table. ‘I’m Doris. Let’s see…’ She opened her file. ‘Mr Lupin, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. That’s right.’ She smiled at him and shook his hand.

‘Pleased to meet you, Mr Lupin. Now, let’s see. What are we going? HTLV-3. Yes. Please, sit down. Make yourself at home.’

Remus sat down and folded his hands. They were shaking.

‘So how does this work?’ he asked. Doris was busy pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

‘Take your coat off, roll up your sleeve, and I’ll steal some blood from you,’ she said.

‘Oh, alright.’ He stood to take his coat off, and sat down. With trembling fingers, he undid the cuff button on his right sleeve. Doris, who was laying out her supplies, all packed up in plastic, looked over at him.

‘Most people like to have it taken in the arm they don’t write with,’ she said. ‘Or are you a lefty?’

‘Yes, I am,’ he lied and pulled up his sleeve. He would much rather have a pain in his wand arm than show yet another medical professional his scars. ‘Does it hurt?’
‘Oh, no, not much,’ she said. ‘I’ve been doing this for twenty years. I’m good. Now, put your arm on here.’ She patted the cushion between them. He did as he was told, and watched, in fascination and trepidation, how she put a strap around his upper arm and pulled it tight. ‘Have you never had a blood-sample taken before, love?’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘That’s a bit silly, I suppose.’

‘There’s a first time for everything,’ she said and nudged the lamp a little to get the light in the right place. ‘Oh, this’ll go brilliantly. You’ve got a beautiful artery there.’ She put her gloved finger on the bulging blood-vessel in the bend of his arm. ‘This won’t hurt a bit. It’ll be over in no time.’

Remus watched her unpacking her tools - phial, tube and needle - and putting them together. All the while, she chatted to him.

‘Did you have a good Christmas, then?’

‘It was alright.’

‘Were you with family or friends?’

‘I went to my parents’ house.’

‘Oh, that sounds lovely. I had a big family Christmas. My daughter and my sister and her husband, and my niece and her husband with my little baby grand-niece.’ Doris cleaned the skin over the artery, while still talking. ‘She’s only eleven months, bless her. She’s adorable, and she kept waddling about the place. Almost made the Christmas tree fall over the telly.’

Remus laughed dutifully. Doris looked up at him.

‘Are you nervous?’ she asked.

‘A bit.’

‘Do you want me to talk, or shall I be quiet?’

‘You can talk,’ he said. She smiled and picked up the needle.

‘Alright then. I’ll tell you about Emma, then. She’s my grand-niece. Her grandparents - on the other side, I should say - gave her a pair of maracas for Christmas. Can you imagine? She loved them, of course, but Boxing Day was pretty noisy, I can tell you.’

The needle was lying against his skin now. He bit his lip as it slipped in. It stung, but no more than that. A moment later, the plastic tube went dark-red as blood gushed into it. Remus felt suddenly dizzy, and closed his eyes hard.

‘You don’t have to watch,’ Doris said soothingly. ‘You’re doing great. It’ll be over in a minute.’

In fact, it was less than a minute. Soon, he felt her put pressure on his arm as she pulled the needle out. She undid the strap.

‘There we are. You can look again. Now, hold that for me…’ She put his other hand on the piece of cotton pressed against the needle mark. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m alright,’ Remus said, taking a deep breath. He avoided looking at the phial of blood Doris was holding.
'Now, let’s see. Name - Remus Lupin. Date of birth - 10 March 1960. Right?'

‘Yes, that’s right.’

She made a note on a label on the phial and went to put it away. Then she came back and put a plaster on the small wound.

‘This’ll heal in no time, as long as you don’t scratch it,’ she said. ‘I used to work in paediatrics, and I’d get to hand out stickers after blood-tests, but I don’t have any stickers here. But take a condom.’

She held out what looked like an old sweets jar, filled full of condoms. Not knowing what else to do, Remus took one and put it in his pocket.

‘Good. Now. Paperwork.’ Doris sat down again. ‘Your doctor didn’t give us an address, but she seemed to want you to get the results by mail. Or would you like to come here?’

‘By letter’s fine,’ Remus said, redoing his cuff.

‘You sure?’ she said, scrutinising him. ‘It might be nice, you know, having someone around…’

‘I think I’d like it by mail,’ Remus said.

‘Alright then. What’s your address?’

He gave her the postal address to the Leaky Cauldron and asked:

‘I suppose it’s… discrete?’

‘Oh, we won’t stamp the results on the envelope or anything,’ Doris said and smiled. ‘Don’t you worry. Now, did your doctor explain about the window period?’

‘No.’

Doris put down her pen.

‘The test doesn’t look for the HTLV-3 virus,’ she explained, ‘but the antibodies that your immune system produces to combat it. The thing is, it can take anywhere between two and eight weeks before your immune system kicks in. That means that, if you test negative, you should have another test done, as there’s a chance you just haven’t developed antibodies.’

‘So I won’t actually know?’ Remus asked, a cold weight settling in his stomach.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ she said. ‘It’s just a precaution.’ She looked at him closely. ‘Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You’re looking a bit pale. Do you want to have a lie-down for a bit?’

‘No, thanks,’ he said. He stood up and pulled on his coat. ‘I’m fine. Thanks.’

She smiled and waved at him as he left. As he walked towards the exit, he realised that he did in fact feel light-headed. Still he made it outside to a park-bench before he gave in to the delayed panic that had threatened him in there. He wept and gasped, covering his face with his hands. No one stopped to ask him whether he was alright. He was grateful now for the urban solitude.

When he calmed down and leaned back, feeling exhausted, it dawned on him that now it was done. In a matter of weeks, he would know. This long uncertainty would be over. And then? He was not sure. It all depends. He was staring down a cross-roads, without knowing which road was barred to him. He stayed on that park-bench, simply sitting and breathing, for a long time.
The days passed slowly. In his many idle moments, Remus found himself thinking of that phial of blood which had been taken from him. He wondered what procedures it was being subjected to. It must be one of hundreds of such phials, all marked with names and dates of births of people who did not know for sure yet. The person or the people who studied those samples must have a strange job. Remus had no idea how they went about it, but it was bound to be a repetitive process. To them, did the worry and fear of those whose blood they handled exist? Did they give any thought to the fact that whenever they wrote down a positive result, they had changed a life? Maybe it was easier to not look at the names, and not consider the people.

The plaster in the bend of his arm itched as a constant reminder. The day after the test, he took it off and found an inflamed square where the adhesive had been. The wound itself was barely more than a prick. He tried not to scratch it, but it proved difficult. More than once, his finger-nails came away bloody. He should go to the apothecary and ask for something against the itching, but he doubted they knew much about Muggle adhesive and what to do about it. Besides, he did not want to explain why he had been to a Muggle hospital. Instead he worked some dittany into the skin, which soothed it enough that he did not draw blood again. Within a few days, the prick from the needle was too small to be seen.

The new moon was approaching, and the grazes and aches from his last transformation disappeared. As he healed, he found himself walking the same routes as he had during the past month. Before, he had moved through the world as if incorporeal, but now, Remus found he came closer to reality, as if the membrane dividing him from it was thinning. He would pass bakeries and notice the smell of bread, or walk by a curry house and turn his head at the whiff of spices. In the sunlight, tired old buildings suddenly gained new life. Their caryatids straightened their backs, the atlantes bore their burden with renewed vigour and the stone faces set above the windows smiled. The flowers in the florists’ windows had brighter colours and fuller petals. Remus knew that the change was in himself, but this renewal had not yet reached him. He was still thinner than usual, and the anxiety seemed etched into his face. The transformation that happened around him was in itself a good sign, and it made his burdens lighter, but they were still there.

In his wanderings, Remus returned to the British Museum. There were no school children there now – term could not have started yet. The Hogwarts Express would leave in a day or two, if he remembered the dates correctly. As he climbed the monumental stairs to the museum’s upper floors, he recalled what that excitement had felt like. He had only been away from his friends for a few weeks, but they would talk all through the train journey, as if they had been apart for months. As so often, he missed his friends, just as he missed his youth.

Alone but for the guards and the occasional other visitor, Remus walked through this giant reliquary of everyday items. Sometimes he spotted things of magical significance. Muggle archaeologists seemed to label any long, thin item as a wand, but sometimes, they got it right. Remus felt a noticeable jolt of magic from an Egyptian wand made from hippopotamus ivory. He spotted other items as well, unwittingly displayed as evidence of superstitions. There were Greek curse-tablets from Cumae, a medieval Arabic amulet, a seventeenth-century plate with the zodiac. Remus lingered at each of these items, smiling to himself, simply because he knew something about them that others did not.

Still, the Muggle items seemed even more interesting. He stopped to admire the workmanship of a finely carved violin, with scenes running around the edge. He carefully read an explanation of the construction of Roman mosaics. He spent more time by an exhibit of clocks and watches than
anywhere else. The minutiae of the time-pieces interested him so much that he ironically lost track of time. Some were toys more than anything else, like the one of a girl milking a cow, which could be loaded with liquid to make the milk flow, or the Spanish warship with exquisite rigging, complete with little mechanical figures and functioning canons. Others were more honest with their nature, and looked simply like carefully crafted clocks. Remus wished his father were here to see all these things. He would love them. He was bound to find many of the devices inspiring. It would also be wonderful to go here with his mother. She would know stories he did not, both about the museum and about the exhibits. He thought about her collection of books on history which she read in the evenings. Perhaps she went around longing to go to a place like this.

That evening, Remus sat down and wrote to them both. He told his father about the contraptions he had seen, and asked whether wizard craftsmen might not have things to learn from Muggles (a point he did not know how his father would take). To his mother, he wrote about the museum itself, and about the things he knew about and the things he did not. “Perhaps in the spring, we can go to the museum together”, he wrote, then hesitated, wondering whether that line would make them come rushing down to London. Was it safe to make such a promise? It was difficult to tell what things would be like in the spring. Remus noticed, however, that he had just assumed that he would still be alive then. He wondered what it would be like, knowing for certain, one way or the other. If he tested positive, he could not tell his parents in a letter. Perhaps this would be the way to do it. They could go to the museum, all three of them, and then afterwards, they could go have tea, and Remus could broach the subject.

He shook himself. He could not imagine that conversation go any way than his father clamming up and his mother becoming nigh-hysterical. How could he think that it could be something you just dropped into conversation? What was he imagining – by the way, I’ve got AIDS, but don’t worry. I’ve probably got all of two years left to live.

He pushed the thought aside, and let the invitation for a spring visit stand. It would not do any damage - after all they did not know where he lived. To him, spring was not real yet. He could not imagine clearly any time after the test results. The arrival of that letter was like a wall between him and the rest of his life.

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The letter to his parents had been an attempt to make amends after the arguments over Christmas. The reply, which arrived already next day, was long and loving, and there was none of the passive-aggressive undertones that sometimes made their way into their letters. He seemed to have been forgiven. It was the arrival of that letter which made Remus decide to brave the Muggle world again and do what he had known he should have done a long time ago.

He walked slowly, but he felt no urge to turn and run. When he was only a few feet from the café, he stopped and took a deep breath. Then he took the last few steps in quick succession and went inside.

The bell over the door tinkled. Siobhan looked up from the till. At the sight of him, her face fell and her eyes grew. The voices and laughters from the customers seemed to disappear, and there was utter silence between them as Remus crossed to the counter.

‘Hi, Siobhan,’ he said, for want of anything else. She stared at him, lost for words.

‘Where have you been?’ she asked finally. Remus shrugged.

‘Just keeping low.’
She slammed the till shut.

‘You’re a bastard.’

Angrily, she turned and started stacking tea-mugs.

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said to her back.

‘You hurt my friend,’ she said without looking at him. ‘You’re not supposed to say sorry to me.’

‘I didn’t mean to hurt Rayan,’ Remus said. ‘It’s been a strange month.’

‘I’m not interested,’ she said curtly, but cast a glance at him over her shoulder. ‘You just disappeared off the face of the earth.’

‘Yes, I know. I am sorry. And I’m sorry to put you to the trouble to keep an eye out for jobs…’

‘Trisha told me you came around about it,’ she said, turning back to the mugs. ‘As a matter of fact, Trevor down the street was looking for someone to work the bar, and I mentioned you. He found someone else, though.’

‘Thank you nevertheless. I didn’t expect you to keep anything for me.’

The bell on the door sounded again, and a familiar voice called:

‘I come bearing milk!’ Then, stunned: ‘Bloody hell.’

Remus turned around. George stared at him, still holding a four-pint bottle of milk in each raised hand.

‘Hello, George.’

‘Fuck me, you’ve resurfaced,’ he said and gave Siobhan the milk. He seemed to struggle with what to say next. Remus buried his hands in his pockets. ‘Erm, right,’ George sat finally. ‘We should talk.’

They sat down at a table opposite one another. George rubbed his face and then looked him in the eye.

‘What the hell happened? You just disappeared.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said, meaning it.

‘You should have seen Rayan. He was in a state.’

‘I didn’t mean for that to happen.’

George sighed.

‘You’re not doing a great job explaining yourself.’

‘Sorry,’ Remus said, collecting his thoughts. ‘I haven’t… been well.’

‘You left in the middle of the night,’ George reminded him. ‘No note, no phone-call, no nothing.’

‘It was wrong, I know. I panicked.’
‘And then when he saw you in the street?’ he asked. ‘What happened then?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Did he faint? Because that’s what he thinks, and he’s terrified, Remus…’

‘No, no, he didn’t,’ Remus said quickly. ‘It was my fault, I…’

‘You what?’ George said. ‘Punched his lights out?’

‘I pushed him,’ he said. ‘I didn’t stop to look. He must have bumped his head. It was an accident.’

George sighed and shook his head.

‘A fine mess, this,’ he muttered. ‘Just what we need.’

‘How is he?’ Remus asked urgently.

‘Not great,’ George said.

‘Was he hurt?’

‘No, he wasn’t,’ he said. ‘It’s just… he’s got enough to deal with.’

‘With Ellis dying?’

George sighed again. He no longer looked angry, only sad.

‘Simon’s in hospital.’

‘Oh, God, I’m sorry. What happened?’

‘He collapsed at work. He’s got pneumocystis pneumonia.’

They sat in silence for a while. George nervously pushed down his cuticles, while Remus stared down at the table.

‘That’s really terrible,’ he said finally.

‘He didn’t even seem surprised,’ George said. ‘Just resigned. Said he’d been suspecting it for months. Just didn’t do anything about it.’ He swallowed. ‘Apparently they’re talking about sacking him. Of course they’re not calling it that, but his firm don’t want him around anymore. He told Rayan that not one of his mates from work has come to see him. Not one.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s sad, I suppose, that you didn’t meet Simon before he started acting like such a prick. For good reasons, as it turns out, but still…’

Remus tried to find something to say.

‘I hope he gets better soon.’

George stared at him with an anger Remus had not seen in him before.

‘He’s got AIDS!’ he almost shouted. ‘He’s not going to get better!’
He covered his face with his hands.

‘I’m sorry,’ Remus said, his voice shaking. ‘It was a stupid thing to say…’

‘Yeah.’

They looked at each other. Remus felt tears pricking his eyes. He blinked and swallowed. Realisation dawned on George’s face.

‘Oh shit,’ he whispered. ‘That’s what’s up with you.’

Remus shrugged, wiping his eyes hastily.

‘I went and got tested.’

‘Have you heard back?’

‘No, not yet.’

George reached over the table and took his hand. Remus pressed his briefly, and slipped his hand out of his grip.

‘I should go.’

George nodded.

‘Alright. Just wait a tic.’ He got a pen out and scribbled something on a napkin. ‘Give us a call if there’s anything, okay?’

‘If you’re sure…’

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘But you have to do me a favour.’

‘What?’ Remus asked.

‘Call Rayan. I think you owe it to him.’

Remus nodded.

‘You’re right. I will.’

‘You’ve got his number?’

‘Yes, yes I do.’

They got to his feet. George spread his arms.

‘Come here.’

Remus stepped closer, and they hugged. He had not been embraced for over a fortnight. He hugged him harder for a moment, gratefully. When they pulled apart, George kissed him on the cheek.

‘Take care of yourself, you daft bastard.’

‘Same to you,’ Remus said.

‘I like the coat, by the way.’
‘Thanks.’

Remus left, folding the napkin carefully and putting it in his pocket. He made his way back as slowly as he had gone there. When he reached the Leaky Cauldron, he lingered as Tom the innkeeper served the company at the bar. As they moved away, he stepped up.

‘I was wondering whether there was any mail.’

‘What’s your name, lad?’

‘Lupin.’

Tom picked up a bunch of Muggle envelopes and looked through them.

‘No, sorry. Nothing.’

‘Thanks.’ He was about to leave, when he turned back. ‘Do you have any vacancies?’

Tom eyed him, going back to wiping glasses.

‘You looking for a job?’

‘Yes. I’ve worked in a pub before.’

‘Hm, don’t know,’ Tom said. ‘Things are pretty quiet this side of new year. Sorry.’

Remus thanked him and continued on his way towards the lodging house.

***

There was no mail for him on Saturday, and when Remus came to ask about it on Sunday, Tom laughed at him.

‘The Muggles don’t do post on Sundays,’ he said. ‘They take a day off.’

‘I forgot,’ Remus said apologetically. Tom grinned at him toothlessly.

‘Waiting for something, are you? Got a Muggle sweetheart?’

‘No, not really,’ he said and returned to the wizarding streets, feeling foolish. The innkeeper had noticed his urgency. He wondered briefly if Tom ever opened people’s letters, and what he might do if he read the message Remus was waiting for, but he shook off the thought. Tom was known for his reliability, and he doubted he would do that. Still, he wanted to make sure he got hold of it as soon as it arrived. Short of camping out in the Leaky Cauldron, there was not much more he could do.

Remus turned off Diagon Alley and made his way towards Knockturn Alley. The street was a little more lively than it usually was in daylight. A few of the children who would run messages were playing hopscotch, to keep warm as much as for the enjoyment. Sarah was smoking her clay pipe as usual and talking to a woman whose discoloured skin made it clear she worked with raw magical herbs. Against one building stood several men - Remus doubted they were wizards - idly watching people come and go. From an alley ahead, a couple emerged. It took Remus a moment to realise that the woman, who waved goodbye to the man and tucked something into her pocket, was Celeste. She turned and walked in the opposite direction to the man, towards Remus. He made himself continue walking, but he still watched her. The only time he took his eyes off her was to glance around, certain the Chidi must be nearby, but he could not see her. They were drawing close
now. Now Remus looked the other way, knowing that she would ignore him.

As she passed, the injustice of it struck him. He turned and hurried after her.

‘Celeste!’

Looking over her shoulder, she gathered up her skirts and started running.

‘Please, wait!’

He ran after her. She was faster than him, but soon she came to a halt, clutching a stitch in her side. She watching him terror as he stopped beside her.

‘Celeste…’

‘Get away from me,’ she said and took a step back.

‘I’m not dangerous,’ he said, stepping forward. ‘I’m not going to hurt you - I can’t. Right now you’re faster and, frankly, probably stronger than me…’

She shook her head vigorously.

‘You’d say that,’ she said. Remus sighed with annoyance.

‘You were kind to me,’ he said. ‘You seemed to care. This shouldn’t change anything…’ He stepped towards her again. She flinched.

‘I’ll scream,’ she warned. ‘I’ll tell them all.’

Remus looked around. No one was paying them any attention now, but if Celeste screamed, they would not be so indifferent. What would happen to a werewolf they thought was threatening a woman?

‘They’ll kill me,’ he said, surprised to find his voice so matter-of-fact. ‘Why would you do that? They’re wrong about you, Celeste - they’re wrong about me too…’

‘Stop saying my name,’ she breathed. ‘Leave me alone.’

She was about to walk off.

‘Listen to me,’ Remus said urgently. ‘I am not my illness.’

And when he spoke those words, he found he believed them doubly. Whatever happened, whichever way he tested, and whatever people said about him, he was still *him*. He had been slave to his anxieties and fears for so long that he had forgotten that the prejudices were not right.

‘Please,’ he said and looked Celeste in the eye. The terror was still there, but she did not scream. Instead, she shook her head wordlessly and walked off. Remus watched her go. He had tried to explain, and that had to be enough.

***

The moon was waxing. Slowly, she was growing rounder. Within a week, Remus would be able to feel that cursed promise of the transformation in his bones. He slept restlessly, haunted by strange dreams, which only just stopped short of being nightmares. When he woke up, he only remembered snatches. Clutching the infant Harry to his chest and running. Green light. Sirius sitting shackled in
a corner of the Shrieking Shack, laughing. His mother’s hands with his blood on them. George sketching a suspension bridge on an official-looking letter.

The confused kaleidoscope of dreams was replaced by the whirl of waking thoughts. Celeste, who had run away from him, but who had not screamed as she had threatened. Rayan, whom he had betrayed, not through malice but by panic. Simon, who had spent the past few months knowing he was ill but not telling anyone until he collapsed completely.

He lingered there, recalling their first argument about the poppy. There was no doubt that Simon had been hasty and tactless, but Remus wished he could agree with him wholeheartedly. He wished he was an idealist, and could believe that acts of defiance would change things. Perhaps he would be happier if he believed that protesting or wearing a pin would make a difference, but he did not. He did not begrudge those people their commitment, or think that they were wasting their time on small symbolic acts, as he was sure some did. He just did not believed that anyone ever listened. If he were to chain himself to the gates of Downing Street and demand that the mines not be closed down, the poor not evicted and homosexuals not turned into scapegoats, would it change anything? Probably he would just get arrested. But, he thought, what if ten people chained themselves to the gates, or twenty, or a hundred? Never mind the chains - if a thousand or ten thousand people came there, would they not have to listen? No, of course they would not have to, and most often, they would not listen.

But perhaps, he thought, that was not the point. Maybe Thatcher would not listen even if the street outside her residence was thick with protesters, but someone might. Someone close to her might start losing faith in the ideas, or someone in the opposition might gain the strength to argue down a minister. During the war, the Order had all known that they were outnumbered, but none of them decided not to fight. Most of them were likely to die, but still they decided to join the Order. Naturally some of it was youthful loyalty, but if Voldemort rose again tomorrow, Remus would fight him. He did not want to fight or kill anyone ever again, but when the war continued, he would not have a choice. Not resisting would be impossible. How he wished that that resistance did not have to be violent, but that decision had never been his. He may not be a conscript or part of a system of ranks and orders, but in choosing to resist, he had bound himself to a conflict he had no control over. Withdrawing from it, before it started or when it begun, would not do any good. He alone would not stop Voldemort, and his acts of violence would not end the war, but perhaps it might make some kind of difference. It was necessary to show that there were still people who refused to accept his dominance.

He rose and got dressed, unable to let go of these thoughts. While he had pondered this, he had made a decision which was nigh subconscious. He was already out of the Leaky Cauldron and walking through the Muggle streets. Now he made his way towards Fitzrovia. Although he had only walked this way once, he found Mortimer Street even without thinking of it. Soon, Middlesex Hospital loomed over him.

He did not know Simon’s last name, so he could not ask for him at the reception. Instead, Remus stepped inside and smelled the air. It was heavy with human sweat, antiseptic, detergent. He chose a direction at random and started walking. As he walked down the corridor, he wondered, although he knew, what he was doing here. Why this need to see someone who was not close to him, and who obviously disliked him? He felt a need to explain things he should have explained months ago, even if they were not important anymore. Some part of it may not even be about Simon at all. It might be some morbid need to know what might happen to him.

He stopped. Mixed with all the other smells was a trace he recognised - not Simon but Rayan. Remus followed it up a staircase. At times he could not feel it, but then it returned. It led him into a landing, where it disappeared altogether. Picking a direction at random, he took the corridor to his
left. Here, the air was heavy with the smell of human bodies. All the antiseptic in the hospital could not erase that. Remus paused at the door. He had no reason to pick this one in particular, but he had fixed on it nevertheless. Looking around to make sure he was on his own, he opened the door.

The ward behind it held ten beds, all of them occupied. He walked down the middle, aware how those awake looked at him. At the second-to-last bed on the left, he came to a halt.

Simon’s head was turned to one side, eyes closed in sleep. It should have been a beautiful sight, but there was nothing romantic about this. Disease was not beautiful. His skin was a waxy white, his lips were chapped and, even in the few weeks since Remus last saw him, he had become far thinner. Remus sat down at the bedside, unwilling to take his eyes of that suddenly slight figure. Around him were contraptions Remus could not name. On the back of Simon’s hand - still wide, but already withering - was a plaster covering a needle, which was connected to a tube. One finger twitched in sleep. On impulse, Remus reached out and covered his hand. He had expected it to be cold, but instead it was warm. Now, when he was closer, he heard the wheezing of his lungs.

Remus sat without moving, watching him for a long time. This was not him yet. The sight awoke a strange mix of fear and acceptance in him. He could try to fight it, of course. He could resist. But at some point, there was nothing he could do, however much he wished there was. Perhaps his own demise was as certain as the waxing of the moon.

The silence was broken by the decisive clicking of a pair of shoes.

‘Excuse me.’

A nurse was making her way over to him with such disapproval in her eyes that he got to his feet.

‘I…’ he started, but she cut him off.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.’

‘I just wanted to see my friend,’ he said.

‘Then you can come back during visiting hours,’ the nurse answered. ‘But you can’t be here now.’

‘Of course,’ Remus said. ‘Sorry.’

He left the ward, not looking back. He wished he had woken Simon to tell him he was there, but he doubted he would actually be pleased to see him. Instead, his mind wandered. He recalled his meeting with George, and realised suddenly that he had forgotten his promise to him. As he made his way out of the hospital, he dug through his pockets until he found his address book and some Muggle coins. Once outside, he headed for a telephone kiosk.

Holding the receiver in place with his shoulder, he dialled the number and put in the coins. The signals went through. He waited, hoping he would pick up, hoping he would not.

There was a click.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi. It’s Remus.’

Silence. For a moment, he thought he was about to hang up.
‘Hi,’ Rayan said finally. His voice sounded gravelly, as if he had not slept properly or had been crying.

‘I... wanted to call and see how you were.’

‘Erm. Alright, I suppose.’

‘I heard about Simon. I’m really sorry.’

‘Yeah,’ Rayan said. ‘It’s pretty awful.’

‘Are they taking good care of him?’

‘They’re alright. You know, some people are bigots, and some people are alright... It all depends, really. He complains about the porters. Some of them won’t go into the ward, for flower deliveries and stuff. Idiots.’

Remus murmured something in assent. They were silent for a moment. Then he gathered his courage and spoke.

‘Look, Rayan, I’m so sorry.’

Rayan sighed.

‘Yeah. Sorry, I don’t know really what to say.’

‘You don’t have to say anything, really,’ Remus said. ‘I panicked. You were right, that I have problems. Mental problems, I mean. I wasn’t thinking straight.’

There was no answer.

‘Rayan?’

‘Sorry,’ Rayan said. ‘I was trying not to make some stupid joke about that I don’t think you’re ever able to think straight.’

Remus laughed. On the other side of the line, he could hear Rayan laugh as well.

‘Seriously, though,’ Rayan said, his tone earnest again. ‘I’m really sorry you’ve got problems. That stinks. I just wish you’d talked to me.’

‘I’m not very good at that.’ They were silent for a moment.

‘Look, George told me he’d seen you…’

‘What did he say?’ Remus said quickly, his heart tightening.

‘He said that you said that you pushed me, and I bumped my head. Is that true?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen...’

‘So I didn’t faint?’

‘No.’

Rayan gave a great sigh of relief.
'Oh, thank God, I’ve been so scared.’

‘Sorry.’

‘You’re forgiven.’ Something about the tone of his voice made Remus think he was smiling. Another awkward silence.

‘Was the funeral alright?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It was good. Nice. Lots of white flowers. George went with me.’

‘I’m glad you didn’t go on your own.’

‘Yeah, so am I.’

‘And I’m sorry I broke my promise.’

‘It’s okay. Not much fun to go to the funeral of someone you’ve never met.’

‘Still…’ Remus trailed off. They were silent for a moment. ‘So… what now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rayan said. Then, in a rush of words: 'Look, Remus, I’m really sorry. I like you. I do. But I have so much drama going on in my life… I don’t think I can deal with this right now.’

Remus swallowed, feeling tears in his eyes.

‘Me neither.’

‘Okay.’ Rayan sniffed. ‘Perhaps I’ll see you sometime, though?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Okay. Erm, look, I need to go.’ Rayan took a deep breath. ‘Take care, okay?’

‘You too.’

The line went dead. Remus replaced the receiver and wrapped his arms around himself. It had effectively been over for a month, but now he felt tears in his eyes. He blinked them away, took a few deep breaths and stepped out of the telephone kiosk. The air outside was cold, and it made his eyes sting. He paused, composing himself. He needed to get some breakfast, and he did not have enough Muggle money even for a cup of tea. He would go back to the lodging-house and change into his robes, then go find some food.

Charing Cross Road was crowded now. Remus dodged between gangs of teenagers, noisy families and groups of friends. He watched them all, beautiful in their liveliness. No one spared him a glance, and no gaze followed him when he ducked into the dingy pub between two flashy shops.

Still hunched with his hands in his pockets, he walked through the pub. It was as crowded as the Muggle street outside. Three elderly wizards were discussing something written in an arcane script on a piece of parchment laid out in front of them. In a corner, a few goblins were playing checkers. At the table beside them, Chidi was seated together with a man she was conversing. Remus turned away, narrowly avoiding running into a witch carrying several tankards of ale. He was just about to go through the door into the yard with the brick wall, when he heard his name being called.

‘Hey, Mr Lupin!’
He turned around. Tom waving at him.

‘There’s a letter for you!’

Remus turned around and rushed over to the bar. Tom handed him a white, nondescript envelope. Remus took it in his hands and felt his stomach somersault.

‘Thank you,’ he said, already turning away.

Instead of continuing into the wizarding quarters, he went out onto Charing Cross Road again. Life was screaming past all around. He looked at the envelope in his hands - it was thin enough to hold a single sheet of paper. As he started walking, picking a direction at random, he turned it in his hands. It only had his name and address on it. Nothing betrayed its contents. He ran his fingers over the flap of the envelope. Then he pulled back his hand, not daring yet.

He walked aimlessly, and little by little, the crowds thinned, until there was only the occasional stroller in sight. The sun peeked out from behind the milky clouds, and was then obscured, like someone blinking awake.

Would he open it? Until this moment, it had not occurred to him that he might not. In theory, he could throw it away, or destroy it by magic. Then it would be like it had never happened. Perhaps he could get used to not knowing. But as soon as the thought occurred to him, he pushed it aside. He had had enough of waiting. Destroying the letter would not change the contents of it, or undo the events which had necessitated it.

He stopped there on the pavement, and again turned the envelope in his hands. His heart was beating so fast it was like he had run all the way from the Leaky Cauldron and had just come to a stand-still. He slipped his pinky under the flap of the envelope and opened it, little by little. His fingers lingered on the jagged edges of the paper. Between them was a sheet folded in three. All he had to do was to reach in and pull it out. It seemed like the most difficult thing in the world.

He turned the envelope again, so that the upper third of the letter faced him, and pulled it out. The letters NHS and the hospital’s address were written in the one corner. Under it was a date from a few days ago, and his name and address.

Dear Mr Lupin,

He looked up. His stomach was in knots. His heart had started beating its anxious tattoo again. He looked back at the letter.

Dear Mr Lupin, On 6 January, you left blood for a HTLV-3 test. This sample has been analysed and has been found…

Remus shifted, closed his eyes, bit his lip. Made himself continue reading.

…has been found to be non-reactive, meaning that there were no antibodies for the HTLV-3 virus present in your body at the time the sample was taken.

He stared. Had he understood what he had read? Had it really said…? He looked through the sentence again. Non-reactive. He read it carefully, pausing at every word. His heart was beating harder than ever as he read the next sentence.

This means that the test was negative.

For some time – Remus did not know how long – he seemed to forget to breathe. His legs felt
Then the tightness was gone. He was crying, but at the same time he was laughing. He wiped his tears away and reread the letter. There were a cautionary few sentences below, informing him that the test was not to be fully trusted and that he should have another test done in a few months, but it did not bring his fear back. He would go, of course. He knew that unless he gave up sex entirely, these tests would have to become a fixture in his life. He had been spared this time, but there was no guarantee that that would last. Still, right now he could not imagine that the result of that next test would be anything else than this.

He gazed at the letter in delight. He had been so convinced. Now the morbid certainty had dissolved. The tumescent fear inside him was gone, and its absence made him feel light. He laughed again and spun around on the spot, unable to contain himself. With new purpose, he started walking again. The letter was still clutched in his hands, unfolded on top of the envelope. He didn’t want to put it away yet - he needed to check that he was really right. The words did not change between the readings.

He tried to dry his eyes with his fingers. The tears simply smeared over his cheeks, but he did not mind. He laughed without inhibition, looking down at the letters as though it had spoken to him and told him to live. He was so absorbed in it that he did not noticed that he was not alone on the pavement. He walked straight into a large man walking in the opposite direction.

‘Watch where you’re going!’ the man bellowed and pushed him. Remus stumbled and tripped off the pavement edge, almost falling over.

‘Sorry!’ he called after the family of four that passed. He knew better than to expect his apology to be accepted, and he had no wish to tarnish his good mood, so he started turning away. Half way, he paused. It took him a few seconds to realise what had made him stop. For a moment, he had thought he had seen Lily.

He turned around again, suddenly afraid that they might be gone. But they were still there, waiting by a crossing. Now he saw that the woman, who was blond and thin-faced, looked very little like Lily. He was about to put the similarities in the gait and the posture down to his imagination. The woman, noticing him watching, threw him a disapproving look, and pulled the larger of the children closer to her. The other boy turned to see what she had been looking at.

He was tiny, barely school-age – five years old, Remus reminded himself. Five and a half next month, six in July. Bright green eyes stared through thick lenses. On his forehead, cleaving one of his eyebrows, was a mark Remus had never seen, but had heard described many times. For a heartbeat, the boy looked at him with childish curiosity. Then his concentration was broken as the bony woman shunted him in front of her and they crossed the road.

Remus stood frozen, staring after the boy, still clutching the test results in his hands. An odd, overwhelming feeling was filling him to the brim. It was more than hope, more than a permission or a request to live. It was the realisation that there was a future. It was stretching out before him, dazzling him. There were tears in his eyes again. He had not felt this grateful to be alive for over four years. He put the letter safely in his inner pocket and set off.

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