

Into the Fray

OoOoOoOoOoO

*Once more into the fray
Into the last good fight I'll ever know
Live and die on this day
Live and die on this day
-Ottway, The Grey*

OoOoOoOoOoO

There were few things Lupin felt regret about when it came to her tactical decisions in life. This one, by far however, had to take the cake. And then some. That was the first coherent thought that didn't pertain to her immediate injuries that flitted across her mind. It was brief, it was fleeting, and it was gone quicker than the blink of an eye.

It was getting hard to think now. The rain was monotonous, lulling her to the dangerous territory of relaxation. Her call had been made, her homing beacon activated earlier. She needed to stay awake, but it was getting harder, her eyelids getting heavier. And the smell of blood was so thick; it was clogging the air, so cloying and sickly...

She coughed, heard her breath rattle, felt her lungs constrict painfully at the simple action that should have been effortless, knew that one of them was *probably* a step away from collapsing. She closed her eyes, forced them back open, felt them sliding closed again. Fought to keep them open.

Stay awake...

They drooped closed.

Awake...

OoOoOoOoOoO

Two Weeks Ago...

"Are you sure you'll be fine? I mean, I know you'll be fine, but without Quorra, I mean—,"

"Muum. I'll be fine."

"London, if I've told you a thousand times, I'll tell you a thousand times again, don't *call* me that!"

Lupin loved her mother dearly. She wouldn't let anyone ever think otherwise. But there were times when the woman made her want to bash her skull against a wall sometimes, she drove her

so crazy with her nitpicky attitude. She kept herself faced away from her mother for a few extra seconds to regain her composure and get her bearing before turning back around with a slight smile on her face.

“I’ll be fine, *Mom*. It’s just a hunting trip.”

Her mother made a face, but let it slide. This time.

“Bit of a long hunting trip. And you’re buying a cabin up there, too?” Her mother frowned, and already, Lupin could see the advice lining itself up in her mother’s mind, on her face, at that prospect, which would turn into an hour-long lecture about the responsibility of purchasing a new place. Especially with her paycheck, however plush it was compared to her time in the Corps.

“Well...sort of. I’m...*investing* in possibly buying one. For...future...hunting trips.” She felt a slight tremor in her hand at that, a slight twitch at the word ‘*future*’. She tried not to think about it, forced it back down.

Lupin eyed Quorra in her mother’s arms and smiled warmly at her pup. Felt her throat tighten painfully, felt her face and eyes go hot, but she blinked back the tears, forced herself to breathe again. Then she brought her gaze back to her mother and hugged them both tightly, gave them both kisses on the cheeks. Quorra laughed, smiling at her. Lupin could see that one tooth and again, her throat tried clenching shut. She had to clear it before speaking, tried to keep her voice from breaking. “I’ll be in touch. Okay? I’ll give you a call when I get there. Send me pictures of Quorra. I’ll miss her.”

“It’s too bad you aren’t going with someone. Maybe you could take her with.”

“I can’t take care of her and go on...on my hunts too. You know that. And I wouldn’t want to impose on anyone who did come with me.” A stab of guilt tore into her, finer than any knife and sharper than one too. White-hot and burning, right in the pit of her stomach. *Don’t think about it. Stop it.*

She tried to smile, but it felt forced, fractured. Her mother pursed her lips before hugging Lupin.

“Call me.”

“I will.”

“Drive safe.”

“I will.”

“And...don’t get caught.”

Lupin swallowed as she turned away, worry eating away at her and it only added onto the guilt, but she kept her voice cheerful as she waved over her shoulder and called, “I won’t!”

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The hours stretched on, like the long shadows as the day passed by while she drove. The I-5 highway that ran the length of California—or The Grapevine as it was unofficially called—rolled on like a straight shot to her destination. It was late at night by the time she pulled up onto the property she would be staying in for the next week or so. She wasn’t tired, though. She felt wide awake. She set to work, tossed her first duffel bag into the bedroom, hauled her second into the den, began setting everything up. Computer, tracking devices, motion sensors, wireless cameras. The works. She had to hand it to her buddy Ricky. He knew how to get his grubby little paws on these kinds of things. She set everything up, performed several troubleshoots on them all, and then did an inventory of her available weapons.

She worked through the night, morning came, but she still worked on. She stopped mid-morning for a break, went into town about forty minutes away, stock piled on food and supplies, called her mother. She drove back to the cabin, set to work again, took another break to put on a pot of coffee, and saw that she had a missed call from Lorcan. Another stab of guilt. She hated lying to him. Her mother. Her friends. Her co-workers. Different stories for all of them, and it all had come so easily, without hesitation, without an ounce of doubt in her voice when she whispered them away. It was harder with him, on so many levels, she couldn’t even *begin* to dissect one strand without pulling up several others. It felt easier—probably *should* have been—to do it on the phone, not face-to-face, but it didn’t. She hated lying when she didn’t have to. She had to do it all her life and she hated hiding, but it was ingrained in her now, hard to shake the habit even when she wanted to. She was always surprised when she got away with it, too, like it was nothing but a snap.

She hated that it was *that* ingrained, *that* easy for her to do. Made her feel sick as she finished with the call, hung up and stared at the phone, almost tempted to call back. Tell him the truth. But she kept to her resolve. Steeled herself and put her phone away where she couldn’t see it, couldn’t get tempted. It didn’t make her feel any less sick, though. This job, it was...

She shook the thought from her head. She finished with her equipment, packed it all up in a duffel bag, grabbed her emergency bug-out bag, and left, locking up behind her.

The forest surrounding her was immense, a sea of green rising up like mountain peaks to pierce the clear blue skies. There was a slight chill in the air, but the sun was warm. Lupin started heading east, toward the mountains that the cabin was so close to. The trek was long, but she picked out enough trails to get through, her eyes catching the subtle pathways marked by animals. She could smell all kinds: deer, birds, reptiles, coyotes, mountain lions. So much life was teeming in this place, in such a small section of land. Scent marks crossed over one another repeatedly. Some were strong and musky, others heady and fresh, and even more were faded and old.

The paths began to trek upward, and she continued to hike through the underbrush. Occasionally, she'd stop to study the layout of the land, set up a camera or a motion sensor. Then she'd hit the trails again, until she came to the face of a ridge. The rock face was cool to the touch and the shadows long. She found another trail, this one thin and harrowing in some places, but not impossible to traverse. It took time, and she was actually sweating by the time she made it up to the top. The forest below the ridge's cliff side was nearly a quarter of a mile below. The mountains continued to climb. A small alcove was hidden away in the side of the mountain. Lupin tossed her bug out bag and then the duffel bag into it, slid inside after it. It was a tight squeeze through the entrance, but inside, it was almost like a small den. She had enough room to move about freely, but not enough to stand up straight.

She left her bug out bag there, and hefted her duffel bag back onto her shoulder, began making her progress back down the ridge. She broadened her hike, heading back toward the cabin, using a different route this time. More equipment was spread out through the forest. She didn't have enough to cover much ground, but she had enough to cover some places. It didn't satisfy her paranoia, but it was the best she could do.

She made it back to the cabin well after dark. She felt fear of the shadows of the night, not for the first time. She hated feeling like that. The night should have been *her* realm to wander unafraid in and instead it was *his*. His world, his rules, and she was tired of playing by them. She wanted to rattle things up for once. She didn't want to be afraid, but she knew that it still ruled her. Still held her tightly.

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She stayed up all night again. Texts were easier to respond to. Less voice, less face, less chance of getting caught. Thera sent her a few. She had several from Lorcan as well. Her family and friends in LA did the same. Still no sign of Donny. Worry ate at her for him. His parents had a cabin barely sixty miles from here. A part of her wanted to drop what she was doing, go check on his cabin, find some clues. She'd already made calls, but they were always the same: he was no longer in the area, his car was gone. A missing persons report had been filed, but people in town claimed up and down that he'd left town. Drove right through.

The worry continued to fester and rot, but she had to push the thoughts aside. She'd have time in the next day or so. She knew that red-furred bastard was in the area. Somewhere. The patterns were the same. Just like the last two times. She felt a twist and a tear in her gut, thinking again on Donny. Then it turned to her family, her friends.

The bastard was in the same *state* as them. Who knew how many times he's been this close. Who knew if he caught her scent clinging to Donny's cabin. Years old, and worn out, but still there. She felt sick. *My fault. It's my fault if he's dead or missing or eaten, his blood's on my hands—*

She had to physically stop, blink the tears away, to still her shaking hands. She felt *sick*.

You'll find him. And you'll keep the others safe.

OoOoOoOoOoO

She wished she'd come to his cabin earlier.

Silas's scent was all over the place. Thick, musky, and just *there*. Like he was taunting her, knew she'd eventually come. The cabin was spotless inside, except for that damned bastard's scent mark. It clung to every furniture, to the rooms, to the very air. And Donny's was there too. And the smell of blood...

She wanted to cry. Every fiber of her being ached and hurt. Her friend was dead. There wasn't any room for doubt with that. Her worry increased. Everything felt hypersensitive. She drove with her eyes stinging and foot pressed down on the gas pedal back to her rented cabin. She had to finish getting everything set up. She knew Silas was in the area still. No doubt about it. But where was he? That was the question. She needed her systems set up. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Lupin set up the rest of her cameras and sensors around the property of the cabin. She didn't want to be caught unawares. Not this time.

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Two days passed without incident. Lupin slept very little, and when she did, it was fitful. Filled with anger, pain, and above all, fear. So much fear. The last time she slept, everything was filled with blood and so many faces...

Needless to say, coffee had renewed its special spot as 'best friend' with Lupin for the time being. She choked back two pots and was in the process of putting on another when her ears flicked towards her computer, which had begun beeping. She hurried to the console, hand on her pistol at her side, her heart pounding before she felt her shoulders sag in disappointment and annoyance. Another coyote had set off the sensors. Goddamned coyotes. They were everywhere. Rabid little hyperactive wanna-be dogs.

She sighed, ready to turn back to the kitchen. Her nerves were frayed. Jittery. It was day five and still no signs of him. Time was wasting away. But the fear held her back, kept her from going out and hunting more actively. It always came back to that. *Fear*.

The coffee pot finished up when the sensors went off again. She left her mug on the counter. A hand flew to the pistol strapped to her side again, heart hammering in her chest. She had a few seconds worth of time to feel shock charge through her like an electric jolt before she took her weapon from her holster, and dove for the front door.

The silence was deafening. She moved from window to window, room to room, checked her monitors again, then holstered her weapon. She let out a shuddering breath, feeling foolish. Of course she was jumping at shadows. She felt embarrassment well up in her, and decided to distract herself with finishing her cup of coffee.

She headed for the kitchen, rounded the corner before registering a familiar decaying scent, the flash of red, a yellow hateful eye glowering down at her while a dead one stared emptily into space before a fist slammed into her face.

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She woke with the taste of blood in her mouth, but couldn't get rid of it. Her mouth was gagged by duct tape, her hands bound behind her back and she was tied up to a chair. Her wrists burned and that familiar scent of burning ozone filled her lungs, mingling with the scent of scorched skin and she felt the pain finally register now that she was awake. Silver. *Silver handcuffs*. She fought back a whimper, realizing she wasn't alone and she was being watched. It was daytime and it took her eyes a moment to focus in the new light.

Silas was sitting in a chair in front of her, watching with an amused, almost playful grin on his scarred face. That dead eye stared blankly while his yellow eye was solely focused on her. He scratched at the stubble on his face, thick claws pulling at skin. He bared fangs at her when his grin broadened as she came back into consciousness.

"Well, well, the little curtail awakens." He spread his arms out, motioning towards her equipment. "And quite the setup you've got here. All for little ole me."

There was hate in his eyes, even the dead, blind one. His face pulled grotesquely on the scarred, burnt tissue on the left side, while the split left side of lip almost made him look like the Joker. She felt a shiver race down her back.

Almost as though he were reading her mind, he leaned back into the chair, the wood creaking in protest at his weight. "Oh, I know. Not very pretty, am I?" He motioned to the burn scar. "You must be quite proud of this, aren't you? Don't worry. I'll even us out. I'll be sure to make you as ugly as me before I kill you."

He laughed, as though he'd just told the funniest joke in the world. She glared at him, and risked trying to break free of her bonds. She was met with pain, disappointment...and weakness. Alarm welled in her chest, but she kept it from showing on her face. Silas twisted in his seat, reaching for something he had placed on the desk beside her computer. It was a vial with some sort liquid in it. He waggled it a few times.

"Wolfsbane. Quite deadly to us in large doses. It stunts our healing quite a bit. So, if I were to break every bone in your body," his face darkened as his smile grew wide again and he chuckled. "You wouldn't be able to feel the bliss of your healing take the pain away. And the more you ingest, the longer the effects."

She huffed a breath through flared nostrils. Everything seemed dull...and *wrong*. She couldn't smell him as clearly as she could before. And everything sounded muted, like she had cotton in her ears. And then there was that cold pit in her stomach, weighted down and heavy, and so hollow at the same time. It took her a few frantic moments to realize that she couldn't summon fire, either. Everything felt colder suddenly. She glared at the vial, glared at Silas, felt hate rising

up. The wolfsbane must have something to do it. Silas plinked the vial back on the table, and she noticed something that looked like a hypodermic needle next to it. Indignation welled in her. He must have dosed her when she was out.

“Did I mention it also dulls the senses? A bit scary feeling so...*human*, isn't it?” He laughed quietly. “And I'm sure you're figuring out that you can't spit your little flames out, either. Quite useful, this stuff. I probably should have used it before.”

She clenched her fists and immediately regretted it. The silver scorched her already raw and bloodied wrists and a small whimper escaped this time. Silas stood to his full height and her ears flared against her skull as he drew closer, the hardwood floors giving an occasional creak as his heavy frame advanced.

“Don't worry, though. I won't kill you. Not yet. I'm going to enjoy taking my time with you.”

He grabbed the back of her chair and effortlessly hauled it up. She snarled behind the duct tape as the handcuffs rose higher up on her wrists, felt the metal burn into her flesh while her head had to press up against Silas's chest. Up close, she could smell him more clearly than from across the room. He smelled like blood. Human, animal, it didn't matter. It all mingled into one metallic, rotting scent. And she could pick out Donny's scent among the most recent of his kills. She forced back a sob.

Her throat clenched tightly, making it hard to breathe while he hauled her toward the trapdoor that led to the basement. He kicked the door open, descended the stairs and clicked on a single light bulb that hung from the ceiling. He had to stoop as he placed the chair down, as gently as though he were carrying precious cargo. Lupin glowered at him as he stared down at her. He brought a clawed hand up, gripped her face tight enough to make her jaw ache.

“Don't go anywhere, now. I'll be back soon enough.”

He released his hold on her and patted her cheek twice before ripping the tape off. She snarled, spitting out obscenities as he turned to lumber back up the stairs. The door slammed shut behind his thick, barrel-shaped frame. She was left alone in the silence, with barely a passable light to illuminate the darkness.

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An icy wave washed over her, jolting her awake. It took her a few shocked moments to realize she'd been doused in cold water. She didn't remember falling asleep or even dozing off in the very least. It took her eyes a few moments to focus against the harsh yellow glare of the single bulb. She spotted Silas at last, lurking in the shadows, just beyond the light's rays. He stepped forward after a few moments, dressed in jeans, boots, a plain shirt and a leather jacket that looked worn and old by several decades. He had a dripping bucket in his hands and he tossed it to the side.

“Wakey-wakey, curltail.”

She growled. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, exactly, but it felt like about...two days. Give or take. It was difficult to tell without the sun. She was extremely thirsty and felt hunger gnaw at her gut. She hadn't eaten very much since she'd arrived at the cabin and she regretted that decision. And now she was cold, thanks to the water seeping into her clothes, her hair.

Silas had a smirk plastered on his lips, and she glowered at him silently. She tested her bonds, feeling more drained than the last time. She couldn't reach for that fire in her still. It felt like it was all but out and it terrified her. It was worse than when she couldn't reach it as the beast. It was almost as though it was...gone. Completely.

"You keep to odd company now, don't you, curltail," Silas started casually. She hadn't seen him since he'd locked her down here. He looked well rested and strong, while she felt drained, tired, pitiful. "I smell magic on you. Someone powerful, yes? And old. Perhaps about as old as I am. It's been a while since I've seen someone my age. Then again, I may be the only werewolf out there that's my age. I haven't seen another in...oh, two hundred years or so."

She tried tuning him out. Maybe doze off, gather her strength and wait for the wolfsbane to leave her system. Or plan something for an escape. So far, though, there was nothing to take advantage of. The cabin was furnished in a rather Spartan manner and the basement had nothing but dust and that old work bench Silas was hovering over. He had something spread out across it and her ears pressed against her head. He reached into his pocket and pulled something out, but she couldn't see what it was.

"How *adorable*." He turned, that shark-like grin spread across his face again as he stared at the object in his hand before wagging it in front of her. It was her phone. On the screen, she could see missed calls and texts and felt a stab of ice take root in her chest at the latest one from her mother, with a picture message attached. It was of her pup, smiling and happy. Dread filled her.

Oh, god, please don't let him get into my phone. Please.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. She had done *everything* but get a disposable phone for emergencies. She should have hidden her regularly used one. Or not bring it. *Something!* She hoped he couldn't get into it. Hoped any calls that came in, he'd missed.

"So adorable," Silas repeated, tucking the phone away again and turning back to the table. Lupin snarled, muscles protesting as she jerked around against the ropes that bound her to the chair. The silver handcuffs shifted and a fresh burning wave of pain raced up and down her forearms and she reined in the squeal that built up in her chest, trying to ride past.

Silas laughed. "Bit of a waste, if you ask me. Using up your only chance to have one," he paused and glanced at her, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "And having one with a *human*. Tainted bitch, that's what you are."

Lupin faltered and stared at him, a bold look of curiosity on her face. He stared, studying her, and then broke into a cruel smile. "Oh, you mean you didn't *know*? How rich!" His laughter

echoed in the cold, lonely room and it sounded harsh to her ears. “Werewolves only have one shot at having pups naturally in their lifetime. Males shoot blanks afterwards and females...” The smile seemed to twist even more, making his features that much crueler. “Females miscarriage at a certain point in the pregnancy. Bit harsher than just being barren. All that false hope and what not. Any other werewolves you want, you’d have to create through the bite.”

She felt as though she’d just been sucker punched in the gut, knocking the air from her lungs. It physically hurt to try and draw a breath. It felt like there was a hollowness forming in the pit of her chest as she dropped her gaze to the floor. Only...one pup...in *alifetime*? That hollow pit in her stomach, in her chest, it just seemed to grow wider, like a yawning chasm, and it *hurt*.

Silas stepped closer and sniffed the air around her, dragging her out of her thoughts. “And I smell that you *did* create a werewolf. My, my. I might have to track down the bastard and skin his hide too. Can’t have your *disease* spreading,” he looked disgusted again. She simply glared at him, feeling that anger build and flare up.

“But maybe...maybe I’ll take out that human you’re fucking first. Break his bones, peel his flesh, I’ll make him *beg* for the end. I’ll bring them all here, one by one, and make you watch. Everyone you care for, I’ll make them suffer, and you won’t be able to do a damned thing to save them.” He drew closer, and up close now, she could smell the blood, that stench that clung to him, a disgusting odor of decay and death. It was on his skin, his clothes, his breath. She nearly gagged. The yellow light didn’t help much, either, it made him look sallow and created more shadows, more crevices, in his pock-marked, scarred face as he came closer.

He glanced her up and down, before reaching for her neck. She tried to rear back, but he didn’t grab for her. He grabbed for the chain around her neck and yanked it free, breaking the chain. Her pentagram dangled on the end of it, held there on the clasp, twinkling dimly in the light. He chuckled, and tossed it over his shoulder without a thought. She watched it go, dismayed and angry.

“Disgusting little bitch, aren’t you? Consorting with them like that, fucking them, living with them. What kind of lycan are you? You’re supposed to hunt your food, not breed and play with them.” He snorted derisively like a recalcitrant horse before that grin spread across his face and he leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I’ll leave your pup for last, though. I’ll peel your pup’s skin and make her *squeal* before killing her. Oh, I can hear it now, like honey to the ears.”

She gave no warning when she lashed out. She dug her fangs into his thick neck, digging deep, tasting blood as it gushed in her mouth. It tasted disgusting and she wanted to release, but that fury that burned in her almost as bright as her fire refused to let her. She bit harder, her frame shaking, feeling a burst of strength in her.

Something hard and fast swung against her skull, and she saw stars, loosened her grip. A second blow crashed into her again and this time she did release. The stars continued to dance as something else struck her for a third time. Blearily, she realized she’d hit the ground. She tasted more blood, her own this time, realized she must’ve bitten her tongue. She spat it out, all of it.

“You sonuvabitch. You touch her and I’ll rip your head off!” The words, while they sounded brave, they were empty. She could barely lift her head up. She tried to blink it all away, tried to bring back a sense of bearing back, but it evaded her. A shadow fell over her and something heavy was on top of her, pressing harder into her chest, making it hard to breathe and she felt a gush of air rush from her lungs. Silas’s face hovered over hers and that reeking scent of blood was washing over her now and she turned her face away, only to have it forced back as a large hand gripped her face tightly. The handcuffs dug into her wrists painfully, the silver burning into her flesh.

Lupin felt the strength drain from her again, felt the panic claw and rise up in her as she was forced to stare into his eyes—one dead, one yellow and both full of hate and rage. He had something in his other hand and he pressed it against the bridge of her nose. So close, she couldn’t mistake that burnt ozone scent if she tried and that design on the blade—her silver knife. She tried to wriggle her face from his grip, but he held strong like an iron vice, letting the blade burn her.

“When I’m finished with you, I’ll have you begging like the rest of them, *pleading* for the end. No one shames me and gets away with it. *No one*. Especially a curltailed bitch who refuses to act even remotely like she’s supposed to. You’re at the bottom of the food chain, girl, and you’re there because *I* say you belong there. And no one in our world defies what I say. My word is law in their eyes.”

He growled deep in his chest, his throat, baring his fangs at her. He drew the blade down to her cheek. He barely put pressure down, but he didn’t need to. The silver did all the work, making it burn, making it feel like her flesh was liquefying at its touch. She smelled blood, panicked, tried to wrench her face away, and finally, he let her go, lifted himself up and she could breathe again.

Those eyes continued to glare down at her, still full of that anger and hatred and disgust. He peeled his lips back, bared his fangs again.

“Make peace with whatever demons you got left in your life, girl. Because in the end, I’ll be the devil that says when you leave this world. And I won’t let it end as quickly as they would.”

He struck fast, kicking at her exposed gut. It was sharp and a painful stab jerked through her body and she felt the air gush out of her again. She couldn’t catch her breath, even as he lifted the chair she was tied to back up right and left the basement. She coughed, drawing in breath through ragged gasps, her body shaking, shoulders sagging. It hurt to draw breath, but she refused to cry out, refused to give him the satisfaction.

A sob caught in her throat when she heard the cabin’s front door open and slam shut.

Alone again.

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She felt weaker the next time she woke. Hungrier. Thirstier. Exhausted. Her head throbbed. The cut on her face still burned, as though the silver blade was still pressed there. Her arms felt numb, except for the vague burning in her wrists, but that was a given. She felt hot and cold at the same time. It felt like a fever. Her mind jumped to infection immediately. Her wrists weren't healing, inviting who-knows-what to settle in the open, angry and raw wounds the silver was creating. It hurt to breath, the ropes felt too tight, her body too tired.

She was alone when she woke, that yellow bulb so dull and dim but so harsh and bright at the same time. The paradox didn't help her sluggish mind. She sagged forward, trying to ease her aching body. It did little to alleviate her. She spat at the ground, still tasting that vague metallic flavor of Silas's blood in her mouth.

She didn't know how much time had passed since she'd passed out. Her hunger was there again, though, clawing at her insides like a wild animal and it hurt. She felt weak. Tired. Useless.

The last burned in her mind, feeling as though it was being branded into her very thoughts.

Useless.

She could handle a heavily laden combat zone. She could handle having rounds fire over her head and mortar rounds going off in the air, the confusion and fog of war clouding everything over. She could handle looking down through the scope of a rifle and taking out an enemy. She was never useless then. But here, now, in this place, she could barely muster the strength, poisoned or not, to face the real monster that lurked in her life—in her mind and physically before her.

Fear.

It was ingrained in her, ever since that night he'd bitten her, changed her. It gripped her tight and refused to let go, digging its claws, its teeth, right into her and it dug deeper the more she tried to struggle free. She was tired of being afraid, of jumping at shadows and thinking it was him, of fearing for her life and the lives of everyone she was close to. She'd already lost a friend to that bastard. And she knew she wasn't the only one who'd lost someone to him. The course of centuries he's been alive, all those years were stained red with the carnage he'd left in his wake, leaving behind devastated families and friends. He'd hurt too many, long before he'd ever reached her, and she was just a blip on the radar.

She felt a slight renewal of vigor and energy coursing through her. She refused to go out with a whimper. She was going to go out with a bang, fire or no fire burning inside of her, and she was going to take that bastard out with her. That was the least she could do, if not for herself, then for everyone else.

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The stinging burn in her neck woke her up. A hand was gripping her face, keeping her in place. Fire coursed through her veins. Someone clucked at her.

“Hold still or it’ll hurt worse. Needles in the neck are tricky things.”

She blinked, her vision bleary before coming into focus, just in time for him to release his hold on her, withdraw the syringe from her neck. The fire continued to course through her, and she felt a headache coming almost immediately, starting at the base of her neck. It rose to the back of her skull, and she groaned.

“Can’t take any risks now, you might get your old strength back while I’m gone.”

“Gone...?” She croaked, not quite comprehending everything. She didn’t realize she’d said it aloud. She felt like shit. Her voice broke in the middle of the word. Silas moved away, and that dingy yellow light was in her face again. She ducked her gaze and hissed, her stomach giving a dull throb where he’d kicked her.

“Had to wait for a bit, let you heal some. Couldn’t risk you dying on me, not before I started to fetch everyone.”

That sunk in a bit more and she growled softly. “Bastard...you fucking bastard! Stay away from them!”

The second the words flew and she drew in a deeper breath, her body ached and screamed with pain. She choked back a whimper, shoulders trembling with stiffness. She had to take shallower breaths. She felt sweat on her brow.

“Scream all you like, but I wouldn’t suggest it. Broken ribs hurt, you know.” He chuckled. He was at the work table again, back turned to her, wrapping something up and tucked it under his arm. He glanced at her with his good eye and smirked. “It might take me a while to comb that godforsaken city, but I’ll find them. Every last one of them.”

“Don’t you fucking *dare*.”

“Or what? You’ll stop me? Rip my head off, tear my guts out? Please. Look at yourself. I’ve got you tied with *rope* and cuffed with silver and doped up on wolfsbane. You’ve got at least three broken ribs and you couldn’t pick up a gun to save your life. Dehydrated, starving, unable to conjure your pretty little fire...unable to shift. Even under a full moon. Like I said...useful stuff, wolfsbane.” He mocked her, lips curling into a sneer before they perked into a slight grin. “Oh, I can’t wait for the full moon. It’ll be so excruciating for you. To see you want to shift and not be able to, why the pain will be just...*unbearable*. My personal entertainment. I can just hear your screams now.”

The smile he sported was as savage as ever and his eyes flashed dangerous as he leaned closer, but well out of range of her teeth. He darted a large hand out, yanking her hair and pulled hard, exposing her neck.

“You’re going to be helpless to save them. You’re going to watch them all die. And then you’re going to die. *End of story*.”

She clenched her jaw, her body trembling all over, feeling that rage fill her up again. She felt something stir in her, but it was buried too deep for her to reach for. Just below the surface.

“Why waste your time on me? What the hell do you even do? Travel around, kill people, eat them? Is that it? Seems kind of like a pointless existence. Silas the Pointless. Kind of has a nice ring to it.”

He released his hold on her hair, his eyes flashing dangerously as he glowered down at her, hand clenching as though ready to strike her, opening his mouth to answer her, but he stopped suddenly, snapped his mouth shut. He cocked his head to the side, good eye to the ceiling. He waited. Lupin strained to listen as well, but whatever he heard, she couldn't. He straightened and turned back to the table and nabbed something up. It was a roll of duct tape. He peeled a piece off and pressed it against her mouth, tossed the roll back on the table.

Silas brought a finger to his lips and said with a mocking flourish, “Be a good girl and stay quiet for a while. Daddy dearest has to go take care of grown-up business.”

She snarled behind the tape, trying to peel it back with her shoulder, but she froze at the familiar sound of car doors slamming. Silas was already at the top of the stairs and quietly closing the door behind him when she did.

No.

She heard the creak of wood above her, watched the dust filter down at each step he took, until it stopped where she guessed the front door was at. Sure enough, she heard it creak open, and heard Silas rumble a pleasant welcome to whoever it was at the door.

Please. Please, don't let it be them. Please.

Anyone but them.

She couldn't hear the others' voices, except that one was male, his voice quieter than Silas's. The other, she could barely make out, but it sounded female. Her heart pounded away, it was so loud in her ears, she was sure that everyone up there would hear.

The different staccatos of voices continued: a rumble here, a lower pitch there, a quiet whisper every once in a while. The longer this continued, the less likely Lupin believed it to be the others. Alastor would have smelled her. Thera could have sensed her, or at least gotten impressions from the animals, however she was able to do that. She concluded it must have been local law enforcement. Someone must have called her in, maybe, reported her missing when she didn't call or text back. She tried rubbing her shoulder against the edge of the duct tape again, try to peel it off. It didn't work.

She sat there huffing through flared nostrils, waiting, straining her ears to try and hear what they were saying. She could just make out Silas's answers, barely.

“—no, no, I haven’t seen her, my poor niece. Called and said she’d be back a few days ago when I was on my way up, visiting a friend—who called it in—ah, right, right, her work buddies—,”

She wished she could scream. *Liar, murderer, bastard!*

But a reasonable part of her knew that if she did, they’d die at his hands. She couldn’t risk anyone else’s lives, not if she could help it. Not if she could prevent it.

She waited, the silence so loud and oppressive, she’d give just about anything to hear well again.

There was a period of quieter answers, Silas’s rumble having ceased. It was like the quiet before the storm. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, anxiety rushing over her. The seconds ticked by, feeling more like an eternity.

The weight on the floorboards above her shifted. Dust and dirt fell down. She heard Silas’s low rumble again, what sounded like a good-bye and good luck. She snarled behind the tape, ears pressing tight against her head, tail standing on end. There was a pause, however. The door didn’t close. She heard the male officer call back, but she couldn’t make out the words. There was a five-second period of silence.

A roar shattered it instantly. She heard screams, shouts, bellows; two gunshots; then nothing. She let out a shuddering breath, feeling cold and drenched in sweat. The cut on her face stung when a bead of it slid down into the open wound. The heavy footsteps marched across the floorboards above her again, shortly followed by the slam of the cabin door. The trap door was kicked open moments later.

Silas came down, hefting two bodies with him. Lupin’s throat went dry when she saw the khaki uniforms, the utility belts. She had been right; local law enforcement. The male was in worse shape, she could see the blood staining him. The woman, she couldn’t see very well. Silas tossed them onto the basement floor, giving her a resentful glare as he turned to leave.

“You cover your tracks well, girl. But now I have to cover mine. Dammit.”

He muttered to himself, and she caught the barest snippet of, “hide the damned squad car” and “delays”. She didn’t breathe a sigh of relief, she couldn’t. He was delayed. He had to hide their car, yes, but she knew it was at the cost of two more lives, and it was because of her. She felt tense, guilt, shame, anger all rolling around inside her. She couldn’t relax. She darted her eyes over the two, trying to see if there was anything she could use from them to get free. He couldn’t even activate her eye, it felt like it was locked up, just like everything else.

Her eyes darted everywhere, but she couldn’t see anything, but then something shiny caught her eye, from the work bench. She craned her neck, wincing at the spot where Silas had plunged the syringe into it. Her eyes widened. Her knife. He’d left her knife. How long had it been there? She didn’t care. It was there now.

She tilted her head back, listened carefully. The floorboards creaked, the cabin door opened and closed, the rumble of a car started up and then the sound faded as it pulled away. She started scooting the chair closer to the work bench. The knife was on the edge of the table. If she could knock it into her hands...

It took effort to scuttle across the floor while tied to a chair. She was covered in a thin sheen of sweat by the time she bumped the back of it against the table. Her wrists, strangely, didn't burn. It took her a moment of figuring out that there was something around them, keeping the silver from touching her bare skin. *How thoughtful*, she thought dryly. *Keeping me just comfy enough to keep me alive. Bastard.*

She lifted herself and the chair up, feeling a bit like a turtle, her hands reaching up, bumping into the bottom of the table. The minutes ticked by, and finally—*finally!*—she felt the familiar leather handle fall into her hands. She huffed a sigh of relief through her nose, her stomach and legs burning from exertion as she finally settled the legs of the chair back down. She set to work immediately, satisfied at the slicing noise her blade made against the ropes.

It was awkward, difficult. Most of the feeling in her arms had all gone. She could barely feel her hands. She was afraid of losing the knife, dropping it. *Just one strand*, she told herself. *I just need to cut through one strand. The rest will fall out.*

It felt like hours, but the coils loosened around her wrists. A little bit of feeling came back. It tingled and prickled like fire and needles. She wanted to stop, wait for the uncomfortable feeling to pass, but she kept going, biting the inside of her cheek. Finally the ropes fell away. She wriggled her wrists around, whining in relief. She rolled her shoulders, and the ones around her chest felt looser too, but they were still tight. She cut at them too. The sound was music, pure and simple, to her ears.

Those fell away too and she felt like she could have cried. No time, no time. She stumbled forward, her legs feeling weak and tired. She guessed she'd been down here for almost a whole week. Anyone would feel the same as her, if not worse if they weren't in the good shape she was in. She was surprised she could stand. She slid to the floor and carefully pulled her arms underneath her legs, trying not to jostle her cuffs. She saw the blood seeping through on the bandages underneath and whimpered. The sores and scabs beneath were breaking from all the movement, reopening the wounds.

She ripped the tape from her mouth, drawing in a full breath, trying to compose herself again before turning, if hesitantly, toward the two bodies. They weren't moving. They weren't breathing. She crawled on her knees to them, checked their pulses. Nothing.

Lupin swallowed, trying to force her way past the lump forming in her throat. She glanced at the woman, saw her hair was pulled into a neat bun. Buns meant bobby pins. She sprawled over to her, checking clumsily around the woman's hair, turning her head over. There was still color in the woman's face. Rigor mortis wouldn't set in for a while. What blood that was left in her body would pool on the bottom most part of the body...

More facts raced through her head, facts about the dead and their bodies and decomposition, and she tried to force it out, but then she started seeing the other's faces instead of the cops' and terror seized her. No. She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't let the others...

She pushed past the lump in her throat again, found a bobby pin, yanked it free, set to work on her cuffs. She was impatient, nearly dropped it three times, her hands were shaking so badly. It finally clicked and the first cuff swung open. She hurried with the second. It dropped away too.

She breathed a sigh of relief, wiped at her eyes, forcing the tears back. She didn't have time to cry, to break down. *Suck it up*, she told herself, *you have a job to do*. She glared at the wounds Silas had inflicted on the two officers. Two more dead. First Donny. Now them. Anger was slowly starting to replace the fear, rising up and blooming like a fire. It was small, but it was growing.

She'd get the bastard before he killed anyone else.

OoOoOoOoOoO

She didn't know how long it would take Silas to hide the squad car. Less than a few hours, most likely. She couldn't find her own car, but it was fine. It was a rental. No way she'd bring one of her babies up here and risk losing one of them, or the hidden weapons' stash they both sported. Too much ammo to lose, too.

She had snagged a duffel bag, threw what she could in it and buggered out of there, straight to the ridge. The sun was setting. It would get dark and cold soon. She could handle the dark. It was the cold she worried about. She could always heat herself up, never really be bothered by the cold unless she wanted to. But now, she couldn't summon a spark to save her life, not without the right tools now.

She chugged at the water bottle she'd found in the fridge, shoved a piece of bread into her mouth. It was stale, but better than nothing. It did little satiate her hunger, but she had to take what she could get. The sun dipped lower on the horizon. Long shadows engulfed her, made her shiver. She could see the mountains, the ridge, but knew she wouldn't reach them any time soon. Not in her condition. She felt weak, her legs tiring before she was even halfway there, but she kept going. Her ribs made it harder as well. Every breath burned and ached and she wondered how badly broken those ribs of hers were.

Again, the irony of her being fireproof, and yet everything felt like it was burning, was not lost on her.

Night fell completely, and it was almost an hour afterwards that she reached the ridge and its little trail upwards. It seemed more treacherous now, on her tired and clumsy legs. She took to it at a slower pace than she did...a week ago? Two weeks? Jesus, she didn't know. Her digital watch was gone, taken most likely. And she hadn't wasted time trying to find her phone.

She collapsed at the summit, where she knew she'd left her bug-out bag, gasping like a fish, every inch of her throbbing, aching, burning all over. She didn't want to move, didn't want to get up, but after a minute or two, forced herself up and headed for the little alcove and dragged herself inside. The pack was right where she'd left it. Everything was still inside, nothing had been touched. She dumped the contents of it and the bag she'd brought with her, out on the floor, surveying the materials.

She lingered the longest on her homing beacon. The temptation to activate it was strong. But she held off on it. Knew that if she flipped it on now, there would be a chance someone would come before she could finish off Silas. Or he finished off her, whichever would come first. She put it to the side, along with her emergency radio. She didn't know how long she'd be waiting here.

She added the two pistols she'd taken from the officers to the pile. Regular bullets would barely slow him down, but she didn't have the right rounds for their guns. They'd have to do in a pinch. If anything, a head shot might do the trick. For a few seconds.

This thought, and several more, ran through her mind. She tore at the nonperishable foods she'd stored away inside her first bug out bag. She felt a little invigorated at the energy it provided. She guzzled the water too. She checked her artillery again, and jumped at a deep, rolling rumble. She aimed a pistol at the entrance of the alcove, and found nothing there. No Silas, no lurking beast.

The rumble came again.

It took just a second's worth of time to realize it was thunder and not Silas growling. She clipped everything into place, finished off her rations, checked her ammo again.

And she waited.

She didn't have long to wait.

He came slamming into the alcove's entrance with a roar. He couldn't get his shoulders through the tiny opening, even by wriggling alternately between the two. He barely got one arm and part of his head through, but not the other. He took long swipes at her, but she was well out of reach. All she had to do was take aim and fire. The flash of the muzzle lit up the place. She could see the hate burning in his yellow eye, bright as any fire in the brief flash of light. He snarled obscenities at her, promising to make her eat the flesh of her loved ones as they died, to break all her bones and suck out the marrow, and peel every inch of her skin off when her time came, but to leave her face untouched until the very end. Probably some last hurrah and all that for him, if he ever got his paws on her.

The acrid smell of gunfire and the sharp metallic scent of blood quickly filled the small alcove. It was a heady scent mark, but when the last bullet was fire, she tossed the pistols into the awaiting maw of her pack. Silas had finally backed off. He wasn't getting in, but she could hear him snarling outside. He'd taken to the form of the beast to attack, but he hadn't gotten a hit in so far.

She had to laugh, even if it hurt to. She held her side, trying to will the pain away as her laugh grew louder. Silas roared outside and slammed into the entrance again, unheeded by the fact that he couldn't get to her. The ground and walls shook with his furious assault, but the mountain certainly wasn't budging.

"What's the matter, big boy? Can't reach me?" She paused mid-laugh with a soft 'ow', before she grinned again, starting to feel exhaustion trying to creep up on her. She grabbed one her knives, felt reassured now that the worn leather handle was in her hand. Silas grew silent, his muzzle pulled into an ugly, grotesque snarl as he regarded her. She stared back at him, smirking a bit in defiance.

"Only one way out, little curtail. And unlike you, I can afford to wait. I can go longer without food or water than you."

That struck a chord in her and the smile wiped itself from her face. That was true. He could wait her out. She was weaker than usual and exhausted, pumped full of wolfsbane. He wasn't. He's had food, water, rest. The cons outweighed the pros of staying in this little cave that had no escape route, no tunnel to crawl through. Not that she was in any condition to be delving deep into a mountain's belly so blindly.

His claws made deep gouges into the stone as he pulled away from the entrance. The thunder rumbled again. The wind screeched. She could practically taste the moisture in the air. She waited. He didn't come barreling into the alcove's entrance again. He was waiting her out, just like he'd said. She didn't feel so giddy anymore. She groped for her homing beacon, activated it. A soft red light glowed for a second, then went out. Came back on, went out.

She glanced down at her knives, one still sitting beside her and the other in her hand. She eyed the duct tape sitting beside her pack. She looked back up to regard the entrance. Still no Silas. She picked up the duct tape in the other hand. She began unraveling the latter, tying the knife into the palm of her hand, gripping it tight.

"Into the fray..." She murmured quietly to herself. She started tying the second knife to the palm of her hand, just like the first. She set her jaw in determination, dropped the tape into her pack. She glanced at the homing beacon. It wouldn't take them long to get here. A few hours, maybe even sooner than that. She didn't have long.

She crawled out of the alcove, saw the skies were dark. No stars, no moon, just darkness. A jagged fork of lightning pierced the skies, splintering and breaking apart at its ends. Silas stood nearly fifteen feet away from the entrance, his hulking form almost topping ten feet. His eyes seemed to glow in the second flash of lightning. His scar was uglier in the light, if that were possible, pulled up into that nasty snarl. His teeth glinted and he cracked his thick knuckles, each tip armed with a hooked claw. His red fur was standing on end.

She was shaking, she realized. Fear was telling her to run, telling to get out of there. To hide. She couldn't shift, she'd tried earlier and over the last few days. She was going to get killed in this state—

But you planned for that, didn't you? In case you didn't make it back...if you made it back?

Faces ran through her mind again, all lined with disappointment. Anger. Sorrow. But it was better than dead to her. Better alive and angry than dead in the ground because of her.

Lupin tightened her grip on both knives. She stood her ground. She didn't want to run anymore, didn't want to be afraid. She was tired of jumping at shadows. Tired of being afraid of him. She was going to end this. Now. If she was going out with that bang...this was a start.

Fire or no fire. Wolf or no wolf.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Lupin didn't know whether to be relieved or dismayed that she was somehow still alive.

Surprised, mostly. Shocked she'd managed to survive in her condition, being torn and broken up like she was.

She wasn't even sure if Silas was dead. She hoped so. After the damage she'd given him and then sending him over the edge of the cliff...god, she hoped so. But werewolves were resilient, their bones hard to break. It wasn't impossible a feat, but difficult as hell. She reached a trembling hand up to her stomach, gingerly probed at the torn flesh across her abdomen and bit back a cry. The tears welled up at the corner of her eyes. She knew she needed to patch the wounds up. But, god, she didn't think she had the strength. Not in her right shoulder; it was torn up the same way her stomach was and her left shoulder was dislocated. She also knew she didn't have the strength to pop it back in its socket, and she couldn't make it back to the cabin, even if she wasn't ripped open like she was.

Silas had gotten ahold of her right ankle and she was sure he'd shattered it...right before smashing her headfirst into the mountainside. It hurt enough to drag her sorry carcass back in the alcove, never mind the cabin. She was sure more of her ribs were broken too, thanks to that vicious stab from her own knife...

God, she wasn't sure if the cuff burns, the cut on her face, or the twisting stab wound in her gut was worse. She had a shaky hand hovering over the wound, felt the heat rising from the injury and a little moan built in her throat. Silver was a *bitch*.

She swallowed, and winced. That simple action hurt too. It made her start coughing. No blood thankfully. She was probably a shy inch away from having had her lung punctured. But something else was ruptured, she was sure of it. She couldn't think of anatomy at the moment, couldn't think of any other organs that might've suffered. Stomach? Kidneys? Liver, maybe? It was all fuzzy. And she had very big knives. The silver one, though...she knew it had done more damage to her than if the other had been used. She was kind of wishing it was the other one. At least it wouldn't burn so badly.

She sucked in a breath, held it, groped for her radio. It clattered on the rocks, but she gripped it as tightly as her better arm could allow, brought it up to her chest, let it rest there, struggled to click the button down. She heard it crackle and swallowed again.

“Th-this is Cap’n Ferus...I need a-a medical team down at my location. Homing beacon...follow my beacon. P-please...hurry.” She sucked in a breath, hissing between her teeth, feeling tears prick at the corners of her eyes again. Her hand shook, threatening to drop the radio. “*Please.*”

The radio tumbled from her grip and she gasped in pain when the antennae grazed one of the wounds on her stomach. A whimper rose up and she grit her teeth, biting back a curse.

Shallow breaths.

It still hurt to breathe.

Don’t move.

It still hurt just lying there. She was sure she had a concussion. Maybe a fracture in the skull. The list of injuries kept going. She coughed, felt her breath rattle, felt her lungs constrict, her muscles burning white-hot when her abdomen tried contracting. She dug her hands into the rocky floor of the cave, fighting back a whimper while trying to keep from coughing again. She pried her eyes open, kept telling herself to stay awake. The rain made it hard, falling in that monotonous pattern, lulling her to sleep.

Not long now...

They flew open when she thought she heard a growl, felt the panic grow in her as she scrabbled clumsily for her knife, gripping it hard in her hand. The tape had all but been torn away. She knew her other knife was somewhere...couldn’t remember where though. She gasped for breath, relaxed when nothing came at her from the dark. Lightning darted across the sky, illuminating the cave in a flash. Her eyelids drooped closed.

Bleeding out....shit. Stay awake.

She fought them back open, struggling for breath.

Stay awake...

They slowly closed again, her rigid muscles slowly ebb away in tension and what little strength she had left. She slumped, head lolling, the hold on her knife loosening as consciousness slipped away.

Awake...

OoOoOoOoOoO