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Party**[Sounds of writing]**

Lenore: The darkness seemed absolute. My eyes were already fairly well adjusted to the night-time house, but the room beyond the locked door was outside the reach of windows or moonlight, and it was filled with a deeper black that stopped me just inside the door. I steeled myself, and ventured further in.

Once fully inside, my eyes slowly adapted to the gloom, and I could see dimly. The room was quite small, and the atmosphere was still and close. I could make out a table across the far wall, only four feet away or so. There were two candles on one side, and a little box of matches. I lit them, and the rest of the space was revealed.

The walls were draped in red silk, like my scarlet room upstairs, and there was no furniture except the table, which took up most of the far wall like an altar. Lined up on the table were three boxes, wooden with iron clasps, each maybe a foot wide and 8 inches deep. They looked like tiny treasure chests. I reached out to the one on the left and lifted the lid. It opened as smoothly and easily as the door had.

It was filled with white cloth. At least, that's what I thought at first. I thrust my hands into the box and pulled out the cloth, and it unfolded into a dress. It was a dress I knew, complete down to the great stain of blood across the breast. And underneath, a scattering of photographs and paper. The pictures were all of the woman in the white dress, the woman who had walked through the house and led me to this room. But in the pictures she was smiling, alive, her eyes sparkling above her perfect, unblemished throat. In two of the pictures she was standing with her

arms around my husband. Radcliffe held her in these photographs like she was a trophy, gazing at her with hunger and possession in his eyes.

The papers were announcements and invitations to the wedding, five years ago, of Radcliffe Thorne to H el ene Coutard, in a public ceremony in Lyon.

Why was I shocked? Isn't this what I had known deep down since she first showed me the key? Having a name to call her by made no difference whatsoever.

There were two more boxes. I steeled myself and opened the second one. Another sweep of cloth, this time Nile green. Another stain of blood. Another scattering of photographs and invitations. But these pictures...I could hardly make them out through the tears that filled my eyes. But I knew the bride. I knew her so well.

“You are so much stronger than we were,” said her voice behind me.

I turned and she was there, standing in the doorway. My Bella. She was in the Nile green dress, the same one she had on when I kissed her, the same one I held in my hands. She had taken off her choker, and the blood flowed freely from the ragged wound in her beautiful throat as she spoke.

“It took us so much longer to open the door.”

[Theme music; opening credits]

Bella didn't move toward me. The blood ran down her front and pooled at her feet, just like H el ene's had all those days ago.

“He killed me because I found out about H el ene,” she said. “And he killed her because she found out about him.”

“Found out what?” I said.

“You’ve guessed,” she said, and she smiled that playful smile, sullied now by blood and knowledge. “You don’t want to admit it, but you know. Radcliffe was with you in the woods that night Talbot brought you home.”

“The *loup garou*,” I said. She was right, I knew. “He is the Wolf.”

“He’s one,” she said.

“But it can’t be true! I heard the wolves while he slept in the bed with me!”

She tried to laugh, and coughed on her own gore. “There are many wolves in France,” she said. “And the lesser ones are always drawn to a Wolf King like Radcliffe.”

“There are three boxes,” I said. I had not opened the box on the right. I was afraid of it.

“The third box is empty,” said Bella. “It waits for you.”

“What will happen to me?”

“When he finds out that you’ve learned his secret, he’ll plan to do to you what he did to us. He’ll come to you like a lover, and with his teeth he will rend you.”

I was aware of blood seeping out through her dress. The throat was obvious and hard to look away from, but there was damage below as well, wounds and ruin hidden by the Parisian cloth. My sweet Bella had been torn to pieces. Because she had stood here. Because she had done what I’ve done.

“Then why did you want me to find this? I thought you...I thought we meant more than that.”

“I only tell you what happened to us. But you have something we did not.”

“What is that?”

“My sweet Lenore. You have me. You have H  l  ne. You have the ravens and Talbot and Mrs. Perrault. And you have Him.”

“Who? Radcliffe?”

“No. The Other one. The one in the shadows.”

I knew who she meant. I had never seen him directly, only sensed him, standing in the darkness, or in the waking dream I had when Rev. Baring-Gould visited. I did not want to meet him. As if reading my thoughts, Bella continued:

“He may not seem like a savior, but there aren’t many paths open to you. Your doors began closing the day you married Radcliffe Thorne.”

I sank to my knees, crying openly now. Everything seemed lost.

Bella knelt beside me and for a moment was as she had been that afternoon—no blood, her choker encircling her neck and obscuring the wreckage beneath. She put her arms around me, and I let her, even knowing what it was that held me.

“You must be brave,” she said. “And you must move quickly. Put everything back as it was. Lock the door and return to bed. Don’t let him know what you’ve learned. Tomorrow you can begin to think what to do next.”

I tried to hold onto her, but she stood up and stepped back from me.

“Bella,” I said. “Don’t leave me! I didn’t tell you yet! I need you to know how much…”

“I know,” she said. But her mouth was already filling with blood, and I knew she was going to leave me there.

I did as she said, folding each dress and putting the boxes back just so. I blew out the candles, and even remembered to take the burnt matchstick away with me. I was alone when I used the little brass key to lock the door. I had not seen her go.

This is what it means to feel loss. Not the betrayal by Radcliffe, because men are what men are. Not even the knowledge that I may die. But the feeling that I had finally found something, something I wasn’t even aware I wanted, and then immediately discovering that it had already been taken from me.

Taken from me by Radcliffe Thorne.

[Sounds of writing]

I have not slept. I could not bring myself to crawl back into that bed, knowing what I now know, though I’ll have to do so again if I’m to remain undiscovered. Instead I sat up and thought, and cried, and thought some more. And I have made a decision.

Bella is right. I have friends. I have resources, and I must learn them. The party is in ten days. I can fake a marriage for that long—longer if needed, but it won’t be necessary. In the interim I shall talk with Mrs. Perrault. I am afraid I will not see Bella again, but if I do I will also talk with her. I will make a plan. I’m going to confront Radcliffe, but not before I find a way to save myself. I have firmed my resolve. I will not become fodder for the Wolf.

[Sounds of writing]

A quick note to update. I need to keep a record in case I don't survive. It has been a week since I discovered the truth about Radcliffe. He does not seem to suspect anything. I put the key back in the hidden drawer in his bureau, just in case he thought to look for it. I have played the part of the dutiful wife, and have even endured his lovemaking, though inside I am repulsed by his touch.

I live in a world I would have scoffed at a few months ago. Men who are wolves. Murdered wives. Ghosts. Bella said that my doors began closing when I married Radcliffe, but truly everything changed the day I first saw her standing at the corner of the house. The whole world pivoted, a quarter turn to the left, and I felt it click into place. And now it all feels askew, broken and tilted in way that can never be put right.

I fear she is lost to me forever. And really, she was lost even before I knew her. What I plan is not only for myself. It is for Bella. For H el ene. For whoever would come after me.

A few days ago I confessed what I had learned to Mrs. Perrault. She hugged me tight—held me like a mother would—and stroked my hair, telling me it would be okay, though those are empty words unless we take charge of things. I told her my plan, and she showed me again the knives and other silver objects in the kitchen. They are too large to carry with me, but I have moved them to various places around the kitchen and even hidden one in the parlor. I think I can get to one quickly when and if I need to.

The party is in three days. It is to be an outside affair, starting just after noon. A garden party. I realize now that the moon is nearly full again. Radcliffe has timed the party so that he can slip away if he needs to. Whatever I do, it will have to be before moonrise.

My plan is to expose Radcliffe at the party, when we are surrounded by guests. Surely he will not harm me in front of witnesses. I can show the boxes in the locked room as evidence, and beg not to be left alone with him. Throw myself on the mercy of the villagers. And if that doesn't work, I have the knives.

More later, I hope.

[Sounds of writing]

[Quieter. Lenore is distraught but controlled]

This may be my last entry in this journal. Things could not have gone worse.

Well, Radcliffe could have killed me outright, I suppose. But I think he has something more dramatic in mind. He was always overly theatrical.

In other times, I would be giddy with the beauty and swirl of the afternoon. It was a perfect party. Or it was perfect until I did what I did.

My dress is a deep green silk, beaded and fringed in the same color and shot through with gold thread. Matching gloves that just reach my elbow. I rimmed my eyes with kohl and fastened a peacock feather on the left side of my hair. I looked like I had stepped directly from a fashion magazine. I wish Bella had been there to see.

The garden was resplendent. Talbot had had two pavilions erected in the back garden—one for the food, which was laid out across two long tables interspersed with orchids and from the greenhouse, and one with a wide wooden floor for dancing. A low bandstand at one end of the dancing tent held a jazz combo Radcliffe had hired in Paris. Streamers ran from the pavilions to the arbor above the patio, and servants and musicians moved back and forth across the lawn in

a pleasant hubbub. Beyond the pavilions, the ravens watched from the ash trees.

The guests began arriving just after lunch. I knew very few of them. Madame Millais was there, looking respectable, and Rev. Baring-Gould, looking scholarly and out of place. Some girls I had met while shopping in town. The rest were unknown glittering party-goers, some from Gévaudan, but some from further afield, surely. Feathers and sequins and hats both stylish and outlandish. Men in spats and tails, their wives trailing on their arms like mist. Five or six girls my age, sparkling like stars, though honestly not as brightly as me. Mrs. Perrault had outdone herself: plates of hors d'oeuvres, platters piled with oysters Rockefeller, roast beef with horseradish, chicken à la king. Spiced cake and fresh pineapples. Buckets of ice held dripping bottles of champagne, and what seemed a large portion of Radcliffe's wine cellar stood in rows beside.

The band played and some couples danced. I wandered amongst the guests, making sure everyone's glasses were refilled, listening to women tell me how *enchanting* it all was, how I was the luckiest girl in the world. After Monte Carlo and Paris, I was used to this. Radcliffe was respected by men and desired by women, both for himself and for his wealth. My proper attitude, everyone felt, was one of gratitude. I played the part.

Through the crowd I caught glimpses of Radcliffe. He checked on me several times to make sure I was enjoying my party, but mainly he held court in the food pavilion, surrounded by men and women hanging on his every word. There was a contingent of four or five younger men who had a strange, lean look about them. They may have been related—they all had the same dark eyebrows and blue eyes. These young men were particularly taken with Radcliffe's stories, and laughed and elbowed each other as he regaled them with his tallest tales.

At five o'clock I called the party to attention by tapping a spoon on my champagne flute. The band stilled their instruments and the guests all turned to me. Beside me, on a gilded easel and covered by a white sheet, was my finished painting of Bella, possibly the best and truest image I'd ever created.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began, "thank you for gracing us here at Maison d'Aubépine. I hope you are all enjoying yourselves." I lifted my glass, and there was a chorus of assent from the crowd. I could see Radcliffe eyeing me curiously from the edge of the tent. I held my hand out to him and he approached, a bemused smile on his darkly handsome face.

"I want to ask my dear husband to join me here. He has been so kind to me, and has given me free reign in planning this soiree. Let's thank him, shall we?" Another cheer and some applause from the assembled guests. "I wanted to give something back to him. I fancy my self something of an artist..." —a small cheer from a drunken man at the back of the crowd—"and I have made something. It may not be worthy of the Louvre, but it is quite personal, and I hope that will make up for any artistic deficiencies."

Radcliffe looked enchanted. He kissed my hand, enjoying the attention. I was apparently behaving exactly as he wished.

"So without further ado, I give you...Bella!"

Confusion clouded Radcliffe's face at the name, but before he could properly react I had swept the sheet from the painting, revealing it to everyone. Bella, as if alive, laying at full length on the lawn, more or less where we all stood. I had spent so hours trying to capture the light in her eyes, the curve of her smile. If I say so myself, she looked so real she could have stepped off the canvas and into my arms.

A hush had fallen over the crowd the moment I dropped the sheet. Clearly, more than one of the guests recognized Bella, and the breach of decorum had shocked them to silence. Radcliffe's face darkened through red to nearly black. The silence lasted something between thirty seconds and fifteen minutes. And then everything erupted in chaos.

[Theme music; end credits]