

510:

Loup-Garou

[Sounds of writing]

Lenore: I don't know how long it's been since I wrote those last words. I can't always remember things now. This morning I remembered that I hadn't finished writing down what happened. So after how long I cannot tell, I once again am at the writing desk in my morning room, or so it seems. All the rooms in the house happen at once, like a film projected on a play performed in front of a painting, and the outside world is a kaleidoscope. If I don't look up, I am here, and there is a porcelain cup of coffee by my writing hand. If I don't look up, I can hear Mrs. Perrault humming the kitchen. If I concentrate, I can feel the pen in my hand.

Reading back, I know that I last wrote here when I went to meet Radcliffe as he came down the stairs to find me. I have some time before this evening's party. So I need to at least write the end of that story, in case someone finds this journal one day. And I do remember that ending, more clearly than I'd like. He lets me have that memory, as sharp in my mind as a knife. Or a claw.

The last time I saw my husband. His final full moon.

[Theme music; opening credits]

[Sounds of writing]

The tumult of Radcliffe's transformation faded and what followed was an uneasy silence. I cautiously left the pantry, easing the door open, holding my breath against the possibility of it creaking. As I crept across the kitchen, I heard him on the landing, the low growl of his breathing

and his claws on the hardwood floor. I slipped from the kitchen into the dining room, avoiding the exposed expanse of the foyer. I had taken off my shoes, and I kept my bare feet on the carpet as much as I could. I clutched the handle of the silver butcher's knife so tightly my fingers ached.

Radcliffe moved down the staircase. I could hear his weight settle on each step, and as he moved forward, effectively towards the front of the house, I moved towards the back, crossing from the dining room into my morning room. No lights were on in the house, and the room was crowded with shadow. It was much lighter outside, where the full moon lit the back garden like a spotlight. I moved so slowly, weaving between furniture in the near blackness. I couldn't hear Radcliffe any longer and didn't dare to stop and guess where he was. I wanted only to make it to the French doors.

But then I heard a short snuffling bark behind me. I turned, frantically, and saw something in the darkness of the dining room. A glint of light, waist-high, moonlight on teeth, and the dim amber flash of two canine eyes. Everything else was shrouded in shadow. I backed slowly away, fascinated by the eyes like a mouse watching a snake, terrified to turn my back on him.

And then the doctor kept his promise. Maison d'Aubépine intervened. I heard a scraping, shifting sound, and three chairs toppled over in the dining room, between me and Radcliffe. At the same time, I heard furniture moving behind me, and I turned and ran. The path to the doors was cleared, parted like the Red Sea, and the doors were opening wide to let me pass. I sprinted for the lawn, and behind me I heard the wolf leaping forward, snarling.

Then I felt the grass beneath my feet, and the doors slammed shut behind me, the lock clicking as it engaged. The house, doing what it could to delay the inevitable.

I wasn't trying to "get" anywhere. I simply wanted to be in the open, and in the light. I

wanted a level playing field, where I could see him coming. No dark rooms or walls to hide behind. I ran to what was, as near as I could tell, the center of the lawn. The moon cast strange shadows across the facade of the house, but the grass was relatively well-lit.

I could hear movement in the trees behind me and turned to see a ring of wolves at the edge of the lawn. I assume the strange young men who had crowded around Radcliffe were guarding the exits. Bella said there were many wolves in France. But I didn't fear them. I was meant for Radcliffe. They would not touch the prize of the big, bad wolf.

At that moment a huge crash of breaking glass made me turn back to the house. Radcliffe had leapt through the French doors and stood glowering at me on the edge of the patio.

He was massive. Bigger than any natural wolf could ever be. His dark fur was thick and glossy, swept back from his face to reveal the yellow eyes I had seen shining in the dark, huge and intelligent and focused on me. His great teeth were bared, like a savage grin in the snarling mass of his face. He stepped forward on razored feet, and I could see the muscles in his legs tensing to leap.

And then, with a chorus of raucous cries, the ravens swept down from the trees, encasing the wolf in a cloud of beak and claw. He yelped and snapped at the big birds, snatching one from the air to die crushed in his jaws. They swirled around him, a screaming unkindness, and he charged forward through the chaos. I raised the knife to meet him.

But then, when he was midway to me, something hurtled from the lawn, colliding with Radcliffe's left flank and knocking him aside. The two bodies tumbled across the grass and separated, rising in a fierce confrontation. It was Biscuit, fur bristling, putting himself between me and the beast.

Biscuit growled and barked, standing his ground. The wolf circled slowly to the right,

moving purposefully and silently. I cried out and ran towards them, waving the knife. The wolf glanced at me, and then leapt.

I want to write here that I almost made it. I almost reached my brave beautiful dog before the wolf did. But it didn't matter. Almost means not at all. Radcliffe fell on him, savagely tearing into his neck. I nearly fell, crying Biscuit's name, but then the ravens swooped down again, talons reaching for the wolf, and I heard Bella's voice in my ear: "Run, Lenore!"

I looked wildly around. The younger wolves encircled the lawn, and I would have no chance among the trees. Radcliffe was still brutalizing Biscuit's little body to my right. I ran to the only place open to me—back to Maison d'Aubépine.

I clambered through the remains of the French doors. Candles blazed to life as I went, lighting my way through the morning room into the dining room. Behind me I heard the wolf, crunching through the broken glass, following. I ducked through the door to the foyer, but I turned too sharply, and my hand knocked against the doorframe with a numbing crack, and I heard the knife hit the floor and skitter away. I did not stop to find it.

In my wake I could hear the house helping me, slowing the wolf. A heavy china cabinet crashed into his path. All the glass figurines on the shelf above the dining room door pelted down to shatter around him. As I left the foyer, I saw the grandfather clock begin to rock back and forth, walking forward to block him.

I ran into the kitchen, and as I did all the drawers opened at once. I tried to remember where I had hidden the silver, which drawers and cabinets. I heard the grandfather clock topple over in the foyer behind me, and then the wolf was there.

He was so big, so overwhelming. I could not think. I grabbed a bottle of wine from the rack next to me and threw it as hard as I could. It smashed against the wall harmlessly, splashing

his fur a little. He growled low in his throat, like a laugh, and came for me.

I grabbed wildly in the drawer next to me, coming away with a sharp object I couldn't make out in the dim light, and I then I sprinted around the island, ending up back in the foyer as he struggled to turn in the smaller space of the kitchen.

But he was there too soon, much quicker than I expected, and I didn't know where to go. There was a flicker of movement to my right, and looking up I saw Bella, standing on the staircase and reaching to me. I ran to her, but the wolf caught me a glancing blow, his claws raking down my back and laying open the dress and my skin alike. A warm wash of blood soaked into the silk as I pushed up and away from him.

Bella was no longer there when I raced up the steps, but I kept going, onto the landing, and down the hallway. Radcliffe bounded up the stairs after me, howling in the hunt.

I burst into the scarlet room, where the candles lit themselves in welcome. There was nowhere else to go, except over the balcony to where the other wolves waited. My back was torn and bleeding, throbbing with each frantic pulse.

The moon through the window combined with the candle-light to cast silver and gold flickering shadows on the scene. I could see that what I held was the silver corkscrew, glinting in the spooky light.

I turned to face my husband. Radcliffe stood in the doorway, his fur shining in the moonlight. There was no understanding, no moment for thought or reflection. Our past together was not in the room with us. He bared his teeth and leapt. I felt his teeth sink into my neck at the shoulder. I couldn't draw enough breath to scream.

We toppled backward onto the bed, twisting the black silk sheets beneath us. The headboard creaked and bounced against the wall with our weight, and I felt the fabric beneath me

slicked with my blood. The wolf raised its shaggy head from my neck and looked into my eyes. It looked confused, pained, and a glance down told me why. The corkscrew, still in my hand was stabbed into its chest, buried nearly to the handle.

I looked back at the face of the wolf, the teeth that murdered my sweet Bella now red with my own flesh. I made sure he saw me, that we were truly looking at each other. And then with my final failing strength I pushed forward and twisted. The wolf gave a small whimper, and then he melted into my husband. Radcliffe's eyes, Radcliffe's strong jaw. Radcliffe's naked body ruined and sprawled atop mine, our blood mingling and pooling on the wreckage of our marriage bed.

[Sounds of writing]

Since then it has been moments, and it has been forever. I wear a choker now. I never leave Maison d'Aubépine. All its doors are open to me now, all its secrets. I belong to the House now, and in some ways I suppose it belongs to me. And to the others.

The man in the black suit kept his word, more or less, but not like I wanted. That is the way of contracts, I suppose. Bella *is* here, but I can't talk to her or reach her. I only see her in glimpses, in the mirror behind me, or standing on the lawn when I am on the balcony. And sometimes, when I look at my painting of her, hanging in the parlor, it seems like she's in *there*, that she has just moved, or is just about to. She doesn't see me, though, doesn't know how I ache for her. Biscuit is here, too. At least, I can hear him barking in the house and around the grounds. But when I go to find him, he's gone.

There are others, of course. A woman who dresses like a man and always smells of

smoke. A little boy who plays on the swing on the old oak. A girl a little younger than me in a short skirt carrying an ax. An old woman who carries tarot cards and talks of war. A ten-year-old girl who sits at the window, waiting for someone who never comes. All beautiful, all sad. All broken. And all, like Bella and Hélène and me, perfect and untouched when you look at them, but awash with blood when you look away. From the corner of your eye, everything is blood.

I do get to host parties. He didn't lie. Strange parties full of people in costumes and masks and dancing. I don't know where they come from. But some of them stay. My dress is always lovely, my hair always perfect. It's what I wanted.

And always, the Man in the Black Suit. He is ever in the corners, in the shadows, on the stairs and behind the glass. The House holds him and waits, center of the glittering web.

It's getting harder to hold the pen. My hand is made of gauze. These are the last words I will write; I suppose. I belong to the House now. And I must get ready. There's a party tonight. I hope you'll come.

[Theme music; end credits]

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