

Ronald bade me goodbye; as I stepped over the threshold I wrapped the wool scarf tightly around my neck, the snowy chill of the night already biting my blue lips. The wind snaked silently across my cheeks, whipping the colour from them. Lupus pulled reluctantly on his lead, yearning to stay inside the warm cottage. Turns out I'm not the only one who doesn't like the cold. My curly haired confidante now cantering in circles at my heels, I took a glance behind me as Ron shut the front door, the stabbing cold seeming a poor substitute for the cosy glow of my friend's cottage.

As Lupus pulled on his lead, I slipped, my numbing fingers clasping the fabric – with a glance down I saw the cause – my shoelaces.

Little did I know that my shoelaces would always remain untied.

Steadying myself, a thought crept into my mind – and as I heard the patter of paws on the snow-covered ground – this visitor ruminated in my mind, rolling like a heavy marble to the corners of my brain.

The short cut? After all, it was a long walk – I was new to the village, shunted around from place to place, with only my golden-curl friend as company. I pondered the best course of action, and despite my best intentions, I steered Lupus left, away from the well-walked village track and into where the snow fell heavily.

Trees towered, and frozen rivers snaked like serpents amongst the wilderness, the wind whistling round the thick wooden trunks. Black shadows threatened to engulf me as I wandered unwittingly into their midst... I noticed a change in my dog as we entered – why was he pulling so much? After seemingly hours later, the pulls persisted, the threads of the blue lead crying out for relief. I sped up. I sped up further. Further. Faster. Faster – I was unaware of the fact that I had broken into a run; going faster and further, stumbling occasionally on snowy rocks glazed with ice and tripping over my laces. Suddenly I became aware of the ripping stitch in my side and I had to stop. Gulping mouthfuls of air, I clutched at my waist. Lupus was panting heavily as I made him stop, but still pulling into the darkness. His usually vivacious and lively tail now hanged lifelessly between his legs; flecks of gold glinting in the moon's glow.

I knew I should have stayed to the village path – it was longer, but safer. The village children – vicious, loathsome creatures had told me scary stories about the woods... Ron was about my only friend in the world, except Lupus of course. Bending down to pet him, his soft, warm curls providing relief for my frozen fingers, I could feel a shadow casting darkness over my face. Someone was coming. Rooted like the trees to the spot, I could see a figure out of the corner of my eye. Shoes. Big, heavy brown boots caked with mud. Angling my face upwards, I saw the man.

He was of infinite height, his body a thick tree trunk. He was ghostly pale; bald, but with patched stubble etched across his dented jawline and chin. Thick, heavy, bushy black eyebrows and grey, heavy-lidded eyes were what greeted me. Grey lines of fatigue were carved into his complexion, anguish writhing in the black recesses of his eyes.

Within a moment I was running.

Who was that ghostly apparition? A cold sweat glistening on my forehead, fear gripped mercilessly at my throat, refusing to let go.

Where was he? A stitch burning in my side, and Lupus panting hard, fear stalked my every step, weighing down my ankles to the icy ground, and I could not move.

That was when I saw her. She was tall, not helped by the way she wore sharp black high heels. It unnerved me how she didn't slip on the icy terrain. She had angular, white features, her harrowing cheekbones virtually protruding from her sallow skin. Her jet black hair was pulled tightly into a sharp

bun, each wiry strand upon the rack, yearning and begging for relief as it was put under strain. Beneath her black cloak she wore a patched and tattered grey suit. The skirt wrapped tightly around her legs, the tattered hem reached her angular knees. Buttons hanged off the blazer, with rips in the sleeves.

I remained paralysed, fixed to the ground as she sashayed towards me... Fear rising hot and fast in my throat, I took to my legs. How many of them were there? Then I stopped. My eyes were widening until I could feel my lashes tickling my eyelids. A rustle in the nearby bush. My feet glued to the ground, Lupus yanked on his lead, and the material came free from my hand, as golden fur dived into the bush. I tripped and fell with an almighty crack upon the ground; a bell was ringing in my ears. Wincing at the pain in my head, I arose, feeling the lump upon my skull. Just as I thought – bloodied and bruised.

The feeling dawned upon me – where was Lupus? Too gripped by fear to call out, I scampered over to the bush, and as I came closer, I could see a long piece of blue material. Lupus' lead. Starting at the handle, I followed the material, until I hoped I would find my dog. The material was ripped and torn, frayed at the ends, and as I held it in my fingers, I gripped it tightly with grief in my heart.

Another rustle. I span. Nothing.

A plethora of trees were closing in; fear raining down on me, without an umbrella as a shield. The demon fear was working his will, the cold and snow were merely his helpers. My eyes squinting at the slippery ground, I saw another glimpse of blue. Running to it, I fell to my knees.

A collar, still warm.

As I picked it up, I noticed it was ripped, and it uncoiled like a snake. Stuffing the lead in my pocket, I could hear a flapping sound coming from the sky.

Craning my neck upwards, I could hear wings beating upon a body, and as it flew from the tree, I could see the dove. It was gliding in circles above my head, its soft feathers so out of place in its harsh surroundings. Almost subconsciously, I started following it, seeking momentary footing on the sliding stones. I knew that this dove was going to lead the way, so I kept walking, no longer tripping on my laces. My legs moved mechanically, my swollen eyes focused on the only thing that seemed to bring me solace.

I blinked, and the dove was gone. Hope, gone. Everything seemingly suddenly so trivial and I felt angry at myself for trusting it. Suddenly becoming aware of my surroundings I realised the trees were in a circular formation and I was standing in the centre, the moonlight shining directly down into the exact spot I was standing.

That was when I saw them both. Emerging from the darkness into the glade, the bald man and the sharp woman glared at me, their gazes burning holes through my pupils. I was about to run when I saw a fleck of gold beneath the woman's long travelling cloak. She elegantly yet uneasily lifted her slender hand and lifted up the tattered cloak, revealing the patched grey suit beneath. As she parted the black fabric, I got a second glimpse.

It was Lupus.

He was lying, perfectly still and motionless on the ground at the woman's feet; so helpless. Abandoning the fear that seized me earlier, I ran at the pair, but stopped as the woman lifted a finger to her lips. Trailing her sharp index finger slowly down her throat, she laughed menacingly and she leaned forward slightly.

"He won't wake" she said.

The words appeared to fall from the sky as they hit me like bricks. A huge sound, an eruption of black smoke, and they vanished, and as my head hit the ground, my lids locked over my eyes, threatening to never open again.