



THE *FUR*
AND THE
WEREWOLF

A TWISTED FURRYTAIL NOVELETTE

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Author's Note

This novelette is intended for most general audiences. It was written as a submission to a scary story contest with the intention of eventually going into an anthology of seven short reads. This version is suitable for young adults and older and is rated 1 spicy pepper out of 5; however, a mature audience version will also be published.

I would like to thank my 9-year-old daughter and my 13-year-old son, who helped me brainstorm this idea in the car on the way to their tutoring sessions. I would also like to thank “Everything Fe,” who is a social media influencer and makeup artist. She inspired Scarlett’s look. I could not use her likeness on the cover due to copyright reasons, but she is absolutely stunning!

Au

It was 3 a.m., and I had just locked up the bakery after setting the yeast donuts to rise. I needed to return in two hours to pop the delectable treats into the oven. I usually went back to bed during this interim. Unfortunately, I had run out of black food dye and needed more for the royal frosting embellishments for my fall-themed creations. I could have sworn I ordered extra from my supplier; however, it was not in the pantry.

Flipping my black and red curly hair over my shoulder, I hurried to my car on the brisk autumn morning. I wished I had remembered to put on a hat to cover my ears against the wind. My oversized red, puffy jacket would need to suffice. It was my old standby and showed its wear and tear. It was cozy and reminded me of days with my grandmother sipping hot cocoa and eating warm chocolate cookies on the porch while watching the dried leaves blowing about in the breeze. I couldn't bear to part with it.

Reaching my beat-up old Beetle, I got in, buckled my seatbelt, placed the key into the ignition, and turned. The grinding from the ignition made my heart sink into my stomach. It is the epic sound of waves crashing against the shore on the rocks of my life.

"No, no, no, not today. I don't have time for this." I tried again, firmly putting the clutch as far down as it would go, but still no love from my bug.

"Craptastic," I cursed under my breath. "I can do this."

The nearest all-night supermarket was a mile away. I could walk there and back quicker than calling a rideshare or getting a delivery. I knew walking in the wee hours of the morning in the city was a bad idea, but it was either walk or open late. As the sole proprietor and employee, everything depended on my ability to persevere through any obstacle. Muttering to myself, I started walking and chanted inside my head that I was a bad 'ass-pirin,' vixen who enjoyed Zumba and aerobic kickboxing class. I was large and in charge.

My cross-body bag only had room for my cell phone, cards, and chapstick. Usually, I clipped my keys to the strap with a carabiner, but it would be wiser to hold onto the pepper spray just in case I ran into a mugger, rapist, or ax murderer. I reassured myself I was prepared should any monster of any variety jump out of the movies at me.

I hurried along and in the back of my brain, I remembered that thick girls do not walk to the grocer for food dye in the middle of the night or any time. My thighs were already beginning to chafe in my jeans. I was not a living large lady because I was lazy and had gained weight from

overindulgence. This viewpoint is the way most of society sees obesity. Genetics was not my friend in the form of low metabolism and extra adipose tissue; plus, I owned a bakery, meaning extra sugar and carbs. I was built like my Italian grandfather. His wife, my grandmother, taught me how to be a pastry chef before I went to school in Paris. Any good chef knows they must taste-test their products. I only took minuscule nibbles from each pastry, cream, or confection. Those bites added up. Mostly, I loved my curves. I just would rather have a working car at this moment.

I made it to the store and bought every container of black and orange dye so I did not have to make another unexpected visit before my emergency ‘Zon order came in. I made a note on my phone to order extra green and red in November. I refused to be facing another crisis come the Christmas season.

I hurried out of the store with my purchase. It was a little before four, so I had plenty of time to make it home and get the fresh donuts into the fryer and the sausage rolls into the oven before I opened at 5:30. I only had a few regulars so early. I smiled at the thought of one in particular. The man came in every morning right as I was opening the bakery. He always ordered two sausage rolls and a large black coffee.

I was deep in thought about my favorite customer. I was next aware of hearing a low growl coming from a dark alley. I picked up my pace, but the biggest dog I had ever seen jumped out at me as I walked. I turned and took small steps backward in the direction I was headed, wondering if I should run or stand still. Because I now thought it might be a wolf hybrid, the hound followed me tentatively while making a humongous, noisy ruckus. Instinctually, I sprayed it in the face with my pepper spray and did a front high kick in the kisser. I ran back to my shoppe as quickly as my chubby legs could propel me. My shaking hand slid the key into the lock. Several false attempts scratched the metal, which made it look like someone had tried to break in. Once I opened the door to the familiar and comforting bell jingle, I threw the deadbolt and sank to the floor, trying to breathe through burning lungs.

In 60 seconds, the security alarm started blaring. I had to haul my ample body back up and over to the keypad. I entered the code wrong the first two times but successfully got it on the third. A moment later, my phone rang. It was the security company.

“This is Scarlett,” I answered breathlessly.

“This is Ace Security. We noticed your alarm and entry codes were compromised. Our policy is to check in on a third attempt before alerting the police. Please state your password if everything is okay. If not, repeat the statement, ‘Your order will be ready at six.’”

“Nine tails is the password, and everything is secure. Thank you for checking in.”

“No problem, ma’am. If you feel your safety may be compromised, please sound the silent alarm.”

“Yes, sir!” I huffed out, feeling like my lungs were still on fire but better than before. Thank goodness for my aerobics classes at the YMCA I attended four days per week!

Inevitably, the time to open came around, and I managed to have the necessities done and in the display case. I unlocked the door and flipped the ‘open’ sign. I had just reached the sales counter when the first customer entered.

“Good morning, Romulus. The usual?”

“You know it, Scarlett!”

I bagged up his order and went to hand it to him when I noticed his eyes were puffy and bloodshot. His jaw had a large dark purple bruise across the lower mandible. I moved around the counter and ushered him to a small table, sitting him down.

“Shiitake mushrooms, what happened to you?” I laid one hand on his shoulder and lifted his chin to examine the damage. Romulus grabbed my hand and pulled it gently away while hissing a little on an exhale.

“It’s not too bad. It probably looks worse than it feels. I just had an accident at work,” Romulus said but did not let go of my hand. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Nothing little about that. Have you iced it? Let me get you some,” I moved to pull away, but he did not let go of my hand.

“I am fine. I am a fast healer. It will probably be gone by tomorrow.” He smiled at me and I could feel the warmth radiating from his hand into mine.

I sat down across from Romulus and looked into his eyes. They were a beautiful shade of violet, but I suspected once the red came out, they would be blue, similar to my own eyes. His hair was straight, long, blond, and styled in a low ponytail. He wore way too tight black jeans and a red flannel shirt buttoned over a white undershirt. He had his sleeves rolled up loosely to his elbows. He was staring back at me as I stared at him, and I wondered what he saw. Did he see the phat, multiracial girl with cocoa butter skin, with her huge Afro pulled into a puff, or did he

see just a fluffy baker with flour on her apron? I hoped for the former. There is so much more to me than just a good donut.

We both realized the moment had passed, and I regretfully pulled my hand away. The bell chimed the arrival of a customer, and I automatically said, “Welcome to Kitsune’s Tasty Tricks. I’ll be right with you.” I pulled my pen out from behind my ear and wrote my phone number on a napkin.

“Call me later so I can check on how you are doing. Do not forget to file an accident report for worker’s comp!”

I slid the napkin across the table without looking at him, knowing a blush was rising in my cheeks. He could either take my bold move as a concerned barista/pastry chef or as the invitation to move to a personal level in our relationship. The worst that could happen was that I would be embarrassed every morning as he came in for breakfast for the rest of my life.

The customer who walked in was wearing a slick business suit and tie. I couldn’t recall seeing him before, but something about his cologne registered with my senses. I did not like it at all.

“What can I get for you, sir? If you're interested, I have fresh sausage rolls straight out of the oven. Coffee is fresh and hot.”

“Just a cup of joe. Large. Black. That is how I like my women and my coffee.”

I inwardly rolled my eyes while I got his drink. I had heard it all. So many men think they’re intellectual masters and a riot regarding pick-up lines. The stranger reached into his jacket pocket for his wallet, and I thought I saw a holster. The man handed me a \$10 bill and his business card while telling me to keep the change. He turned his back and left.

I glanced at the business card, which read Dante Moriarty, Business Consultant. I rang the coffee up, putting the money in the till and the change in the tip jar. The business card went in the trash.

Romulus watched the transition intensely before pocketing my number. “I’ll call you later,” he waved and left.

“What a day and it is only six in the morning,” I mumbled to myself.

At 3 p.m., I closed the shop and headed to my apartment over the bakery. I was exhausted, and as soon as I opened, shut, and locked the door, I kicked off my shoes. Feeling the

lush carpet beneath my toes, I sighed with contentment. I placed two fingers on my lips, kissed them, and placed them on the picture frame on the Davenport near the entrance.

“Hi, Grandma, another great day downstairs at the bakery.”

I untucked my T-shirt and stripped out of my tight jeans. It was technically too early for wine, but I poured myself a glass anyway and went to draw a bath. Bedtime no later than 8 o'clock every night because of my early wake-up call. Tonight, I was more than exhausted. I put lots of extra bubbles into my bath and just relaxed as the water heated my limbs and soothed the ache out of my muscles.

After getting out of the tub, I decided not to get dressed and started my transformation into my other half. My nose and mouth elongated while my ears grew to a point. My limbs shortened as my bones rearranged themselves. My fingers and toes grew into claws. I was covered in rust-colored fur with a black belly and tip of my tail. I jumped on my sofa and circled a cushion several times before finding a perfect spot to curl up. I wrapped my fluffy tail around me and placed my head on my paws.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew, I could hear my phone chime, indicating I had a text message. I stretched and started my transition back. I would've liked to have gone for a run, which I usually did on my non-gym days. With my car broken down, I wasn't sure how to get to the woods outside the city limits. I picked up my phone and smiled at the message.

“This is Rome. I feel better already. I hope you are well. I'll see you in the morning.”

I pondered how to reply since his message could be taken platonically or with more interest.

“I'm so glad you're feeling better. Come a few minutes early, and we can have a cup together.”

The following morning went so much better. I still needed to deal with my car, but it could wait until my day off. I closed the bakery every Monday. Most of the time, I did not need my car in Chicago, with readily available public transportation.

At 5 a.m., Romulus knocked on the window. I let him in so we could have our drink together. He brought a small bouquet of sunflowers and handed them to me.

“These are for you.”

“Thank you so much,” I handed him his coffee and sausage rolls. “Try this pumpkin tart and tell me what you think. I am working on a new recipe with Italian meringue.”

“Oh,” he groaned. “I have died and gone to heaven.” His eyes rolled and I felt myself warm with his praise. “Where did you learn to do this?”

“Officially, Paris. My great-grandma taught me informally. She was Ethiopian and learned to cook for my Italian great-grandfather. Her recipes were better than anything I learned to do in pastry school.”

“That is an interesting combination,” Romulus replied.

“Their relationship was due to the Italian occupation before World War I,” I chuckled. “Legend has it that coffee originated in Ethiopia. So I like to say, ‘I make a mean java and sinful cannoli,’” I laughed.

“What about the fox with all the tails?” Romulus commented on the bakery name and decor.

“Kitsune means ‘fox’ in Japanese. My father was an immigrant from Tokyo. So, I am a first-generation American on both sides. The mythos of Kitsune takes on different variations. He can have a different number of tails depending on the story or how powerful he becomes. According to legend, Kitsune can shapeshift into human form to trick others. I particularly like the Vulpix Pokemon inspired by the beastie. I enjoy some of the anime fandoms. The ‘No Fox Given’ pun is particularly clever and fun.” I shrug my shoulders. “I changed the bakery's name when I inherited it from my grandmother to try to tap into the kitsch market.”

“That makes sense!”

“What about you? You must work close by. You are here every morning,” I inquired.

“I own the butcher shop a couple blocks from here. I...” Romulus got a scowl on his face and looked towards the door.

“Ugh, I am not open,” I murmured under my breath when I noticed Dante shaking the door handle. “I will be right back.”

“You don’t have to answer that,” Romulus reached over and placed his hand over mine.

“It’s fine,” I plastered a smile on my face and opened the door. “Mr. Moriarty, you came back. Just a black coffee this morning?” I went around to the counter and poured it for him without waiting for a response. “Large and black!”

“Yes, like I like my women.”

“So you said. I’m on a diet.”

He just chuckled at that.

“Was there anything else? We are on a date, and the shop does not open for another 10 minutes,” Romulus interrupted while standing up to his full height. He was something to behold at well over 6 feet tall, with a barrel chest and muscles bulging from his flannel.

“I’m sure there will be. I always get what I want.” Dante pulled his jacket aside, showing the grip of his holstered gun, and slammed a \$100 bill down on the counter. He winked at me and sauntered out.

“Can you believe that guy? He has some audacity!” I rang up the coffee and put the change in the donation cup for the local animal shelter, not wanting his insulting tip in a lousy attempt at seduction. I turned back to Romulus, seeing him struggling to keep calm.

“Hey, it’s okay. That man is just a creep. Seriously, Rome, it’s fine,” I talked to him calmly. I took him by the hand and brought him to the back so we could have privacy away from the storefront. “He is just strutting his stuff to make up for other deficiencies,” I joked.

I reached up and put my arms around him for a quick hug. He smelled like the woods I liked to run in: pine trees and moist, rich, dark soil. He wrapped his arms around me and inhaled the aroma of my neck while I was in his embrace. As a shifter, I didn’t think anything about it. A scent is a more critical and sensory experience than sight or hearing. I pulled back and he seemed much calmer.

“How about I take you on a real date? Dinner after you close?” he asked.

“That would be wonderful. I should be done by three.”

“Be careful. I don’t like that guy.” He kissed my cheek and left.

I only let myself feel excited for a few minutes before I went back to my day. I had not been on a date for a while and was pretty sure I had no idea what to wear if it required more than jeans and a chef’s coat.

That afternoon, I was taking out the end-of-the-day trash when I smelled sick, cloyingly sweet cologne. “Mr. Moriarty, I’m sorry. I am not interested.”

“That is too bad because I plan to take you to dinner.”

“I appreciate the offer but I already have plans.”

“They have changed,” he said, grabbing my arm. “You would do well to be with me. I am a powerful man in Chicago. My brother heads the Italian Family.” I could feel my canines lengthen and my claws emerging as my body instinctively started to shift into my animal counterpart.

That is when I heard a snarl. That colossal dog was in the alley and did not look happy. In the light of day, I was confident he was a wolf. He jumped and bit into the bicep of the arm that held me. I pulled away and fell to the ground. I scrambled backward away from the beast who hunted me and the wolf.

The animal let go and growled at Dante. It jumped on him and knocked him down. He was on the mobster’s chest with saliva dripping from his jaws. After giving the warning, the wolf let Dante up and growled again. Dante grabbed his gun, waved it, and took a shot into the air, then took off down the alley. The wolf approached me and licked my face before taking off in the opposite direction of Dante.

I pulled myself to my feet, using the fire escape to support me. I hurried back inside and locked the back door. My breaths struggled in and out in a staccato rhythm. I was unharmed but confused, wondering what the heck that wolf was doing around again.

The front doorbell chimed. Cursing silently over forgetting to lock it, I called out, “I’m closed!” as I walked through the kitchen.

“Good, because I was planning on taking you out.”

“Oh, Rome, thank goodness it’s you. You will never believe what just happened. I have to change, then I will tell you about it. Come on up,” I invited him up to my apartment.

We climbed the stairs and I kissed grandma’s picture like I always did. My hands were shaking now that the adrenaline in my blood was flowing. Romulus noticed. My whole body started to shake, with nothing to occupy my mind except what had just happened. He pulled me into an embrace and led me over to the sofa.

“You’re okay. I am here now. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He rubbed my back and offered soothing words.

When I calmed down, I told Romulus what had happened. “Dante can’t seem to take no for an answer. It’s like he is hunting me,” I sobbed.

“Scarlett, he is hunting you. He is a narcissist and a stalker. We will figure this out. I got you.”

“I’m sorry. Look at me. I am an emotional mess when we should be going on our date. The jerk ruined our first date. Now, Stupid is ruining our second before it even started.”

“That guy has not ruined anything. We are still going to go out.” He rubbed his thumb over my tear-streaked cheeks and kissed my lips chastely. Butterflies hit my stomach while my body warmed to his touch.

“Okay then. Where are we going so I know what to wear?”

“I thought we would get out of the city. I brought a picnic. You might want to dress comfortably in layers.”

I changed into clean jeans and a T-shirt. After lacing up my hiking boots, I pulled on an orange sweater and grabbed my red puffy jacket.

Romulus led me to a motorcycle parked just around the side of my building.

“Have you ever ridden before?” he asked, handing me a helmet.

“Does a moped in Europe count?” I joked while fastening the chin strap.

“Only if it was a Harley,” he smiled back at me. I held on tight to his waist while we rode. The adrenaline that hit me from the fast ride made all the stress just melt away. This man was safe and his steady heartbeat against my cheek soothed me. Before long, we rolled to a stop. I opened my eyes and realized we were in my favorite part of the woods.

“This is amazing!” I gushed as Romulus helped me off the bike. He then dug into the saddle bags for our meal. He spread a throw blanket onto the ground and laid out a charcuterie spread and sparkling cider.

“I was not sure if you drink, so I played it safe,” he supplied.

“You did good! I do sometimes in the evening, but it’s not necessary.”

The blanket was small enough to fit in the bike’s saddlebags, which gave us the added bonus of requiring close proximity while we dined. We talked and got to know each other better. Once we finished eating, we went for a walk.

“I love coming out here, Scarlett. It just makes me feel at home.”

“Me too. There is something about the open air that speaks to my soul.” I shivered, and he put his arm around my shoulders.

“This was lovely. I would love to do this again sometime if you are open to it.” I said before stifling a yawn. “I’m sorry. I start work so early. It has been a trying day.”

“I would love to keep seeing you here or anywhere. Let’s get you home.”

Upon arriving back at my place, I was nearly asleep. Romulus walked me up to my apartment. I opened the door and he leaned in to kiss me goodnight. Before his lips met mine, he growled deep in his throat and shoved me behind him. He rushed inside and I saw him shift into the giant wolf I had seen twice before. His flannel spit up the back, and his jeans tore at the seams.

Dante was standing in my living room, pointing his gun at me. “I want you! If I can’t have you, then nobody can!” he spat out the cliché, seemingly not noticing the enormous wolf that suddenly appeared between us.

Shifting into my fox form, I made myself smaller and deadlier. Romulus went low and tackled Dante. The gun went off and I jumped for the madman’s face. Between the two of us, we took care of the intruder. He was not going to get up again. My hunter was no more.

I shifted back and stood in my living room naked. Romulus transformed back to his human form more slowly, and he moaned while holding his hand to his hip, which was bleeding through his fingers.

“Are you shot?” I gasped and rushed to his side.

“Yes, I think I am okay though. Do you have a first aid kit?”

“You need a doctor, not a first aid kit,” I replied dryly.

“I’ll be fine. Help to the bathroom so I don’t bleed all over your carpet.”

“Huh, like Dante, here?” I chided. Romulus just shrugged his shoulders.

I reached for him and put his arm over my shoulders. I was strong from hefting 50-pound bags of flour and sugar. We made it to the bathroom, sitting him down on the edge of the garden tub. I reached for a towel, tossing it to him so he could cover his lap, and then put my bathrobe on to cover my exposed body.

Looking at his bullet wound, I could only see the entrance, not an exit hole.

“The bullet has to be in there. You need to go to the hospital,” I implored Romulus.

“I can’t go. That means questions and blood work. Both are bad for me. You are a chef, and I am a butcher, meaning we are both good with knives. We can do this.”

“Fine, but I reserve the right to say I told you so if you end up with a hellacious scar or gangrene and lose your leg.”

“Ladies love scars, right?” he joked, and I dumped a bottle of rubbing alcohol over the makeshift surgical instruments before pouring the rest on his wound. He made a sibilant whistle but did not move.

“I prefer a living man versus a dead one. Thank you very much. Putting on a fresh pair of sterile gloves, I pressed gently against the wound, looking for obvious signs of the bullet. I plunged my eyebrow tweezers in and grabbed the fragment without too much searching. It was almost like his body was rejecting the projectile on its own and looking for the path of least resistance.

“Stitches or stop the bleeding and let it heal?” I asked him.

“Do you have any superglue?”

“Be right back.” I retrieved the adhesive. Romulus pinched the wound closed while the glue dried, holding the laceration in place. I put a large band-aid on it and went to clean up. He stood and reached for my hand, making his towel fall off. “Thank you.”

I nodded and continued my task. “I think you should stay here tonight so we can monitor for fever and infection. I am sure I have a shirt and sweats that will fit you. I like them extra roomy for obvious reasons.” I waved my hand down my body, not wanting to meet his gaze.

“Hey, we both have secrets we need to discuss soon. Seeing you like this is incredible.” He placed his hands on my hips and pulled me to him. “I still owe you a good night kiss.”

That kiss was searing hot. Had I not had a dead mobster in my living room, I might have noticed more intensely that a naked man was in my apartment, and I was only wearing a bathrobe that barely concealed my curves. Shifters do not get overly excited by nudity, especially when they are part of a group. Being in my residence and treating his wounds was a more intimate encounter than the fact we were naked; still, it had been a while since I had been in a skulk.

After a moment, we both pulled away. I got Romulus the promised clothes. He pulled his phone from his destroyed pants and called someone he knew to help with the body since the Chicago Police Department did not deem investigating gunshots in my neighborhood a worthwhile activity. I dressed in my least frumpy pajamas and cleaned furiously. I did not want to know what was happening. Ignorance would be bliss. I went downstairs and put a ‘closed for

business' sign up for the next day with some free coupons to ease the sting of inconvenience. I changed my voicemail to indicate I had a 24-hour flu and was resting.

I was needlessly scrubbing pristine counters when I felt two strong arms wrap around me from behind. I turned around and Romulus lifted me onto the counter like I weighed nothing at all.

"Rome," I started looking him in the eyes from my new vantage point.

"I am a wolf. I have been coming here every morning for weeks because I like you. That creep, Moriarty, has been stalking you for over a week."

"The alley coming home from the store?"

"Yes, he was there. He disabled your car and followed you. I followed him. It was at that point I knew things were getting dangerous. I knew he was unraveling when he finally came inside and hit on you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"About Moriarty? I thought I had it under control and did not want to scare you."

"No, that you like me," I laughed.

"How could I know how you would react to my wolf? I was not aware of your fox. You don't smell like other shifters."

"It is Kitsune. I am only half Japanese, so my inheritance is complicated, especially when my second tail gives me attitude."

"I understand. I deal with the whole lycanthropy curse. I get impacted by the full moon but can transform at will other times, too. I am just not as strong or mean."

"If I have only seen the smaller version of you, then I can only imagine what big teeth you must have with the lunar one. Let's go back upstairs. My bed is calling me, and you need to rest." I hopped off the counter and took him by the hand.

"I am too wired to sleep," Romulus replied.

I looked up at him from beneath my lashes and said, "Me too!"