

Survivor's Guilt: Moony's Tale

by Pica Scribit

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PROLOGUE

He awoke disoriented and sweating, at once trying to recall the dream and cursing himself for having it at all. Damn him! He could still feel the bastard's touch on his skin!

It was hot and stuffy in the room, and he went to open the window. The cool air of the summer night felt good against his skin, and the moon was a reassuring sliver, low in the sky. He breathed the cool night air in deeply, willing his heart to slow. Dawn would be breaking soon, and he knew that, with it, the memories would recede to manageable proportions once again.

But in the darkness, he was still very much at their mercy. The dreams came less frequently than they once had, but they were still unsettling, and left him feeling guilty and uneasy until he slept again.

Twelve years it had been. Twelve years since that dreadful day. Betrayal, murder, loss. He had often reflected that they had all died that day, not just Lily, James and Peter. That bond of friendship shattered by an act as horrifying as it was unexpected. Sirius in Azkaban for life -- *not that he didn't deserve it*, he thought savagely -- and himself exiled to this living death. Remus Lupin shook his head to clear it.

He was the only one left of that great friendship, and the knowledge of that loneliness had held him captive a dozen

years. He had drifted, living hand to mouth, living for nothing and no one. He had learned to hide his true nature well enough, but he still never kept a job long -- his immense sadness made people uneasy.

Then, just last week, there had been a letter. Albus Dumbledore had written, inviting him to take the vacant Defence Against the Dark Arts post at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had mentioned that young Harry was now a student at the school. It had been a friendly, formal letter, but Remus had seen between the lines. Dumbledore, great man that he was, knew the broken life he lived, and was offering him a chance at something else -- to have something to live for again.

Harry. That one remaining bit of goodness to come out of the tainted memory of the Marauders. Dumbledore had chosen him to come help and guide Harry, who had also come from a place of being alone in the world, without family -- and at one time without friends -- to care for him.

But the reason for the offer. It had been the reason for the dream as well, he knew. The story and the picture in the *Daily Prophet* had coincided with Dumbledore's letter. Remus shivered. He had almost turned past the story when it had first appeared, not recognising the wizard in the picture. But then a name had jumped out at him from the text of the article -- a name that haunted his dreams and conflicted his soul -- Sirius Black.

How a dozen years in Azkaban had changed the man he had once loved! The face he had known better than his own was gaunt, pale, with shadowed eyes, the hair a long, greasy tangle. He certainly looked the part of the vicious killer now, as much as he had not before. He seemed barely human.

And now he had escaped. How? It had never been done before. Remus actually had a vague inkling about how it might have been done, but why now? Why come after Harry after all this time?

He sighed. Whatever the reason, he now had a job to do, and he would do it. He would protect Harry from this madman who had destroyed all either of them had held dear. Even if it meant killing the man he had loved, or dying himself, he would do it.

CHAPTER ONE BACK TO HOGWARTS

A month later found him boarding the Hogwarts Express from platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Station, as he had not done since he was a boy. He had known it would be difficult. The memories he had been trying to evade for years had come flooding back over the past few days. Last night he had been unable to sleep because of them. Now, exhausted, he had arrived early, in the hopes that he could secure an empty compartment. He did not feel in the mood for talking to anyone, and everywhere he looked seemed to be full of memories.

Here, the compartment where James and Sirius had set off a load of dung bombs under a sleeping Severus's seat. Here, the compartment where they had played Strip Exploding Snap for the first time, and been caught and reprimanded by the witch with the food cart. Here, the compartment where he had walked in on James and Lily's first kiss. And here ... the compartment where he had met Sirius Black for the first time, over 25 years ago. He hurried past that one, and at last found a memory-free compartment near the front end of the train. There, he pulled his cloak up over his head and went to sleep.

* * *

He awoke disoriented this time, not because of disturbing dreams, but because it was very dark and very cold. The train

had stopped and the lights were out, but he could hear children's voices calling to one another, asking what was going on. Many of them sounded frightened. There were children in his own car from the sound of it. Two boys and a girl, he guessed. Two more children entered, tripping over the others, and exchanging hurried apologies.

"Quiet!" he told them, quickly making a light, "stay where you are." He was just about to head for the door when it opened. Standing in the corridor was the very thing he had known it must be, but had hoped it wouldn't. A Dementor.

The temperature dropped even lower in the compartment as the tall, black clad creature inhaled, as if it were sucking all the warmth from its surroundings. By the dim light, Remus saw one of the boys drop into a dead faint. The other children were clearly terrified. Remus was not sure he felt much braver than they did, but he knew that, as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, he must do something.

He bravely took a step over the prostrate form of the boy, and looked the Dementor squarely in what he supposed must be its face, and said, "None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go." He felt his heart skip as he said the name he had not voluntarily said in twelve years. The thing did not move. Well, if it didn't understand his words, he knew one thing it would understand. "*Expecto Patronum*," he muttered softly, pointing his wand at the thing in the doorway. There was a blinding flash

of silver light, and the Dementor turned and quickly retreated down the corridor, taking some of the cold with it.

There was silence in the compartment for a moment. He could feel all their eyes on him. Then the train shuddered. The lights came back on and they began to move again.

"Harry!" cried one of the girls suddenly, crouching beside the prone form on the floor. "Harry! Are you all right? Wake up!" The other children also crowded around the unconscious boy.

Harry. So this was the boy he was living for. And now that he had a good view of him, there was no mistaking who he was. Even without the telltale mark on his forehead, the boy looked so like James that Remus experienced a mild sense of *deja vu*.

The boy was coming around. Everyone was asking him if he was all right. He looked very pale. No one was paying any attention to the man standing near the door, which gave him a chance to collect himself. Harry was asking about someone screaming. Remus couldn't remember anyone having screamed. He shook himself. Chocolate. That was what was needed in situations like this.

He took a large slab of the stuff from his bag and broke off a big piece for Harry. "Here," he said. "Eat it. It will help." Everyone was looking at him again. He began handing out smaller bits of chocolate to the other children as he explained to them what

they had just seen. "I need to speak to the driver," he lied, and left the compartment.

What he really needed was time alone to collect himself. No, there had been no mistaking James' son, nor Lily's either, once he had opened those green, green eyes. It was as if their ghosts had walked into that compartment and spoken to him. Well, perhaps they had been there as well. He had a duty to them. He must protect their son.

* * *

Remus's reintroduction to Hogwarts continued to be both disorienting and bewildering. In a way, it felt like coming home. Not only was he amidst familiar surroundings, but he was properly back in the Wizarding world for the first time in more than a decade. He had lived for so long as an outsider -- almost a ghost -- that just hearing so many voices and being surrounded by so many people felt strange.

The children looked at him with either speculation or outright mistrust. They surely all knew which post he had come to fill, and he had heard their previous experience of Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers had been less than confidence-inspiring. Understandable that they should view a newcomer with suspicion.

In a way, coming back to this place made him feel more like a

ghost than ever. He was still an outsider. When last he had walked these halls, they had been filled with friendly, or at least familiar faces. These children were strangers to him. Some of the professors he knew -- some he would rather he didn't -- but all in all, coming back was a very lonely feeling.

He drifted into the Great Hall, and found his place at the head table among the other professors. There was Professor Dumbledore, looking very much as he had in Remus's days as a student -- a cheerful man with twinkling eyes, and of an indeterminate but decidedly elderly age.

And there was Severus. It had been many years since Remus had seen him, but he looked just as Remus would have expected him to look by now: bitter, sour, unwashed, and beginning to age ungracefully. A pity, he reflected, as he had often done before; Severus could have been a very attractive man, but for his personality and grooming. The black-haired professor met his eyes, and they both looked away quickly in dislike.

Remus's feeling of otherness was not to last long, however. Or at least, his isolation from his surroundings cracked and crumbled a little when Dumbledore -- old, familiar, warm, funny Albus Dumbledore -- rose to make the start-of-term announcements. Of course, these started with the bad news about the presence of the Dementors and their search for Sirius, but those thoughts were never far from Remus's mind, so they caused him little discomfort.

But when Dumbledore announced his own arrival, the halfhearted applause of the students was broken by enthusiastic cheers and clapping from the middle of the Gryffindor table. Remus looked more closely and he saw young Harry and his friends beaming down the table at him. At once the whole feel of the place changed for him. It felt somehow warmer, more inviting, more like home. These children -- and especially that child -- were glad he had come to Hogwarts, and suddenly, so was he.

* * *

The feeling of tentative optimism was nearly lost to him in the hours following the banquet. He had been prowling the corridors in a much better frame of mind, remembering the happy and innocent moments of his early days at Hogwarts, helped along in these thoughts by the clusters of first years, discovering the wonders of the castle for the first time.

Then he had turned down a corridor, deserted but for one person. Severus Snape.

"Remus," Snape acknowledged stiffly, nodding, though a twitch of his lip betrayed his barely-concealed dislike.

Remus sighed. He knew this could go one of two ways. Either they could spend the rest of the year pretending not to know one

another and avoiding all contact, or they could acknowledge the long-standing animosity and deal with it like adults.

"Severus," he said at last. "The years have not been kind to you."

"Nor to you, I think," replied Snape. His eyes flicked over Remus, taking in his shabby, dusty appearance, the lines of hardship and old grief on his face and the premature greying of his hair.

"Severus --"

But Snape cut him off. "Never forget, Remus; I know what you are. I know what you've done. And yes, I know who you've loved as well. Dumbledore may trust you, but the old man can be a sentimental fool. I know you. Make no mistake, I saw enough during our school days, and heard enough after to know that you're a man to be watched, now that the name of Sirius Black is being whispered again. I'll make your damnable potion, because someone has to for the sake of this school, but know this: I shall have my eye on you." And with that, he turned on his heel and strode away down the darkened corridor, his robes billowing in his wake.

Remus closed his eyes and shook his head. Apparently schoolboy grudges were not to be forgotten, at least while the two of them were still within the walls of Hogwarts. It was going to be a long year.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BOGGART LESSON

He woke a few days later with something like anticipation -- a feeling he had not experienced for some time. He had taught a few classes already this week, but this would be the first one with Harry in it. He found himself anxious for the boy to like him, but knew better than to expect a boy of thirteen to have any regard whatsoever for a taciturn and anti-social teacher approaching middle age.

Still, he had planned his first lesson carefully to capture the attention and interest of the class. He was going to let them try their luck against a real, live boggart, since one had been found living in a wardrobe in the staff room. Boggarts weren't terribly dangerous, but they could be very tricky, and more harm was usually caused by the stampede to get away from them than by the boggart itself.

However, it had occurred to him, partway through his lesson plan, that it might be a dangerous thing to have *Harry* come up against one of these creatures. After all, most teenagers feared things like being humiliated in front of their friends, or looking funny, or heights, or spiders, or any number of fairly harmless things. However, Harry had met He Who Must Not Be Named face-to-face on more than one occasion, and had a better idea about where the real dangers of life lay than many much older witches and wizards did.

To have the Dark Lord suddenly appear in the middle of the Hogwarts staff room ... well, it was perhaps not the best idea. Perhaps it would look strange if he let all the other students but Harry face the boggart, but it was something he could not risk, so it would simply have to look strange, and that was that.

He arrived at the classroom a few minutes late, but resolved about what he was going to do. The students seemed puzzled at the idea of a practical Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson, especially so early in the term, but they followed him through the corridors of the school without protest. He even managed to gain a tiny bit of admiration from the group on the way there, through a brief encounter with Peeves and a wad of chewing gum.

He actually smiled to himself as he continued down the corridor, remember how, in his younger years, there had been some debate as to whether Peeves or the Marauders caused more trouble in the school. The smile quickly faded as he remembered that one of the Marauders at least had caused more trouble than Peeves could ever dream of. He shook his head to dispel the thought.

It felt odd going into the staff room. It had been as forbidden for students to enter it in his time as it was now. Not that there weren't legitimate reasons for students to be there, such as now, and not that he and his friends had not visited the room in the

course of a prank or two in their time. In fact, there had been that time he and Sirius had had to hide quickly in the very wardrobe that now rattled with its imprisoned boggart.

How young they had been! And how Remus now cherished those precious memories. On the day they had hidden in the wardrobe, their feelings for one another had been only recently discovered, and they had shared a few shy kisses there in the dark, waiting for a safe moment to steal away unnoticed. Remus was still certain that, in those days, there had been no evil in Sirius; only the usual boyish mischief and high spirits. He felt no guilt in loving the boy, though he felt it deeply when he thought of the man he had become.

Severus had been reading in an armchair by the window, apparently ignoring the boggart's rattlings. When he saw that the class filing into the room contained both his least favourite colleague and his least favourite student, he rose, made a snide comment and left in his usual billowy manner. Remus smiled tiredly at the class, hoping that they had learned to ignore their other teacher's rude behaviour, and switched on an old phonograph in the corner. He brought the needle down onto the crackling strains of a swing record -- an old favourite of his. He had found that many of life's lessons went more smoothly when set to an upbeat and steady rhythm.

The boggart lesson went well, he thought. The children were nervous to start with, and he thought he might dispel some of

those nerves by choosing the most nervous of the lot of them, a boy named Neville, to try the lesson first. After that, the children seemed to gain confidence, and some even seemed to be enjoying the exercise, treating it like a game and trying to make the boggart appear as silly as possible.

Remus kept glancing at Harry out of the corner of his eye, gauging the boy's reactions. He started off looking as nervous as any of the other children, but also thoughtful. But as one by one his classmates were called upon to face the boggart and he himself was not, his expression changed to impatience, and finally puzzled bewilderment as he realised Remus did not mean to call on him at all.

At one point in the lesson, Remus was forced to step in and confront his own fears when the boggart manifested as a large spider, which seemed to be a particularly common fear among this class, and caused no small amount of panic. Remus reflected that he was lucky on two counts. Firstly, that the full moon in and of itself is not a particularly frightening thing, though, seeing it, he felt the same tingling sensation at the back of his neck as he always felt when the change took him. Secondly, he was fortunate that the boggart chose that shape rather than that of his other great fear: of meeting Sirius Black face to face again in this life.

He glanced around to see if any of the children had taken any notice of what the boggart had become for him, but most of

them seemed to be too busy reiterating and exulting in their own triumphs with their friends to pay attention. Only Harry, his little friend Hermione and another girl called Lavender seemed to be casting him curious looks. He cast about the class again for Neville to finish the lesson before the boggart changed its mind about what might scare him.

At the end of the lesson, Harry tried to say something to him about not giving him a turn with the boggart, but Remus gave him a vague excuse about answering questions correctly, and hurriedly dismissed the class. Harry looked disappointed as he left the room with his friends, and Remus felt a sudden surge of guilt for lying to the boy. Perhaps he would explain the truth to him another time, but not in front of the whole class. What he really needed was a chance to talk to Harry alone.

* * *

It was dark. He could tell from the close feeling of the space around him that he was in the wardrobe, and he knew that the boggart was in there with him.

"Lumos," he whispered into the darkness, though he was not holding his wand. And suddenly he could see. The enclosed space was dimly lit, and he was not alone.

"Remus," said a voice he had not heard in the waking world for many long years. Sirius Black stood not two feet from him, a

look of tenderness in his mad eyes. This was not Sirius as Remus had known him, but the stranger on the front page of the paper, and in the "wanted" posters that now littered the Wizarding world. He felt terrified -- as if he could not breathe. He wanted to get as far away from this wreck of a man as possible. And yet

Those eyes still captivated him. He felt as though he were falling into them. Were they really so different from the eyes that had looked into his in his youth? The longer he looked, the less different they seemed to be. And suddenly he was no longer looking at the ragged stranger, but at a handsome, dark-haired youth in his school robes, a mischievous smile flickering across his lips. Remus looked down and saw that he, too, was wearing his school robes, with scuffed sneakers peeking out from under the hem.

"Remus," said the voice again, younger this time; lighter and more compelling than ever. He found himself looking into that face again with a hunger he had not known in years. The other boy was reaching his hand out to him, touching his face, running his fingers through his hair. The boy Remus made a soft, anguished sound in his throat and closed his arms around his love, burying his face in his neck.

"Sirius, Sirius, tell me it was all a mistake! Tell me you never meant for any of it to happen!" He knew he was weeping, but he could not stop. He felt the hot tears flowing against the tender

skin to which his face was pressed. He could taste the salt of them as well as the taste of the boy's sweat.

"Hush, hush now, Remus," murmured the dark-haired boy, enfolding him in his arms. "Don't you see, Remus my love? I saved you. You were never meant to be a part of it, so I kept you out of it -- kept you safe. You lived. I wanted you to live." He began to run his hands over Remus's torso.

Remus pulled back, but not out of the circle of Sirius's arms. "Sirius, I loved you! And I trusted you. We all did. Why?"

The other boy looked at him with pity in his eyes. Suddenly his face was very near. Remus closed his eyes, and then there were soft lips against his own, a wicked tongue flicking teasingly against his mouth. He should be trying to get away, he thought dimly. But the sweetness of it, at once so familiar and so long lost to him, overwhelmed him, and he surrendered.

He opened his lips, accepting and hungrily returning the kiss. He could feel the rough boards of the wardrobe against his back, the arms around him squeezing tighter and tighter, the kiss no longer playful, but rough, and suddenly hard, bristly stubble against his tender young face. He gasped, shoving the leering madman of Azkaban away from him, but the arms would not let go.

"I love you, Remus. I am coming to find you. I promise we'll be

together soon."

He tried to fight, but he could not get his arms free. He could not find his wand. He could not breathe.

There was a sudden jolt, and Remus Lupin found himself lying on the stone floor of his bedroom, tangled in his blankets, hot, sweaty and once again middle aged. He threw off the covers and continued to lie there in the cool, still darkness, waiting for his heart to slow to its normal pace.

After a time, he climbed back onto the bed, and lay staring up into the darkness. He tried not to think of the bed as lonely. He tried not to think of Sirius Black at all; neither as the youth who caused his blood to stir still, nor as the haggard lunatic. It was too disturbing to acknowledge, even to himself, how much he still wanted the man, despite his horrific betrayal of all Remus held dear. At last Remus closed his eyes, but he knew there was little chance he would sleep any more tonight.

CHAPTER THREE

A CHAT WITH HARRY

It was several weeks before Remus found an excuse to talk with Harry privately. He hadn't wanted to take the boy aside in front of his friends, nor yet to send for him to visit his office. Dumbledore may have asked him there to keep an eye on Harry, but there were others who remembered the strong association between the names Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, and sometimes they conveniently forgot that the Potters had been friends with both. He didn't want to draw attention to the fact of his particular interest in the boy.

The other professors were either very polite to Remus, or ignored him altogether. Only Dumbledore was openly friendly, and he was a very busy man. The upshot of all this was that Remus was very rarely privy to the discussions the other professors shared, even in the staff room. He knew, of course, that much of the talk these days was about the search for Black, and whether he was, in fact, after Harry. He gleaned this from snippets of conversation he heard before entering rooms or rounding corners. All talk of the escaped prisoner stopped dead the second his own presence was noticed.

But one bit of conversation he had managed to catch told him something very important: Harry, for whatever reason, had been unable to obtain his aunt and uncle's permission to go on the regular Hogsmeade outings the children were allowed. He

overheard Professor McGonagall saying so one day in the staff room, with great relief in her voice. It was one less thing to worry about, she had said. Much better that Harry should be safely in the castle instead of out wandering where anything might happen.

So it was that, on Halloween, Remus Lupin finally got his chance to speak to Harry away from prying eyes and ears. It took him some time to find the boy. Hogwarts was a large castle, and there were many places where a thirteen-year-old boy might go to be mopey and dejected about not being allowed out on an adventure, however small, with his friends.

Remus felt deeply sorry for the boy. He remembered all those times in his first few years at the school when he had been forced apart from his nearest and dearest by the necessity of the full moon, back before they had learned to change and join him, before they had even learned his fearful secret. He had always felt, on those nights, like he was missing out on something wonderful. And sometimes he had missed some merry caper or adventure or particularly delicious prank, but most times he had only missed a night spent talking or studying or playing cards or board games. Yes, he knew just exactly how Harry felt.

But try as he might, he could not find the boy. Eventually, he found himself in the corridor which contained his own office. Perhaps Harry wasn't sulking around the castle after all. Remus had heard stories of the boy's resourcefulness and that he had a

remarkable ability to turn up in unexpected places without being seen, and to get ahold of information that had been intentionally withheld from him. James had had that uncanny ability as well, but Remus was one of the few who had known his secret: the Invisibility Cloak. And come to think of it, he'd never heard what had become of the thing after James and Lily's deaths. He wouldn't be surprised to find it had found its way to their son, in rather the same way James's nose for mischief had. And if he had the cloak, and knew half of what the Marauders had about the secret passages of Hogwarts, there was every chance the boy was in Hogsmeade at that very moment.

Remus sighed and went into his office. He had sincerely hoped he would be able to find Harry. Talking to the boy would have helped take his mind off some of the dark thoughts that plagued him today.

It was Halloween, and the twelfth anniversary of James and Lily's deaths. It had been one of their favourite holidays as children, he remembered with a sad smile. There had been the Hogsmeade trip, of course, and the Halloween feast, but their little circle had always managed to arrange an unsanctioned adventure or prank on that night.

Some of their adventures had been silly things, like putting on silly and scary costumes and riding their brooms past the first years' windows at midnight, shrieking their heads off. Others, he now was able to reflect, had been a bit stupid. Like that one with

Severus and the Whomping Willow. That could have ended up going so badly, he knew. He was glad James had changed his mind.

But there had been no Halloween pranks or even company in twelve long years. And this year would be worse than most. Or better. He couldn't decide. For tonight there would be a full moon. He sighed. At least there were no pranks to be missed because of his unwilling transformation. In fact, he was beginning to think the full moon would be a blessing this time. Most Halloween nights of recent years had been spent awake and alone with memories, some sweet and some deeply bitter. At least this way, he would sleep, and would not remember anything when he woke.

But that was hours away, and until then, he had nothing to do but remember. Just then, he heard slow footsteps in the corridor. Well, any distraction would do. He put his head out of his office and blinked to see Harry walking past.

"Harry?" he said incredulously. He had half convinced himself that the boy really had done as James would have, and gone to Hogsmeade regardless of rules and warnings. *This is not James*, he reminded himself sternly. He looked around just to be sure they were alone, inquiring after the whereabouts of Harry's little friends, Ron and Hermione. When Harry confirmed in a dejected tone that they were, in fact, not in the castle, Remus invited him in, with the excuse of looking at his newly-arrived grindylow.

He offered Harry a cup of tea as the boy examined the ugly little water demon, and invited him to come sit down across the desk from him. "I've only got teabags, I'm afraid -- but I daresay you've had enough of tea leaves?" Remus allowed himself a tiny smile. He had heard about Sybil Trelawney's dire predictions regarding Harry from Professor McGonagall. He gathered she was rather a staff room joke, since she never went there. Still, it was understandable that Harry would feel a little uncomfortable. Death omens, however dubious the source, have a way of unsettling people.

Remus could see that the boy had much on his mind, but was at a loss as to what to tell him, or how to begin. Maybe he should start with a question, and see where Harry's thoughts were. "Anything worrying you, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, then after a moment, "yes." As Remus had known he would eventually, Harry asked him about the boggart and why he hadn't been allowed to face it. He explained to Harry his thoughts about what a bad idea it would have been for Lord Voldemort to suddenly materialise in the midst of a group of students. But it would seem he had misjudged the boy.

"I did think of Voldemort first, but then I -- I remembered those Dementors."

Well, that was interesting. While nearly everyone in the

Wizarding world feared Voldemort, and most who had met him face to face feared him more than anything, this boy did not. His fear was much more abstract; he feared fear itself. The more Remus learned about Harry, the more he felt sympathy with the boy. His own fears were just as abstract, but in his case, it was love, and not fear that terrified him.

Harry seemed to cheer up as he realised that his teacher had not actually thought him incapable of successfully performing the lesson, but had been concerned for the other children.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Severus Snape carrying a steaming goblet. Remus groaned inwardly. It was bad enough depending on Severus for his monthly potion, but he had not really wanted Harry to see this. Also, he had seen over the past weeks how Severus regarded the boy -- another thing they had in common -- and he felt badly for drawing any individual attention to him. He knew the Potions master would watch the boy more suspiciously than ever if he started to suspect a friendly association between Harry and his erstwhile classmate.

He decided to treat the situation as casually as possible, smiling and thanking Severus for his potion, and telling the man that Harry was just visiting to see the new grindyflow. Severus was not to be affected by pleasantries. His eyes flicked back and forth suspiciously between the two people he disliked so much. He scowled and reminded Remus that the potion was best drunk

sooner than later, and while hot.

Severus departed quickly and without any sort of valediction. Harry looked after him curiously, and then at the steaming goblet on his teacher's desk. Remus could tell from the boy's look that he didn't trust the Potions master very much more than Remus himself did. But at least Remus knew, as the boy didn't, that Severus did what he must for his great debt to Dumbledore, and that included keeping the school safe from the likes of him.

He explained the potion to Harry in the vaguest possibly terms, hoping the boy would lose interest and maybe even forget about it. "I've been feeling a bit off-colour," he told Harry as he took a sip. He shuddered. It was nasty, bitter stuff. Harry was still eyeing the goblet mistrustfully.

"Professor Snape is very interested in the Dark Arts," he said at last, giving Remus a significant look, as if hoping that the teacher would catch his meaning.

So that was it. Harry thought Severus might try to poison him to get his job. Remus had to admit that he had forgotten what a talent the other man had had, even as a boy, in Defence Against the Dark Arts. And that would certainly explain the overwhelming loathing and disdain with which the Potions master regarded him. It was not just a festering schoolboy grudge, but also the disappointment of a man who had yet again failed to get the position he wanted -- not only that, but lost it to

someone he already disliked. Remus actually felt a small amount of pity for the man.

Remus felt the back of his neck beginning to tingle a little. Outside the window, the autumn sun was just touching the horizon. He had better hurry up and finish his potion; it would stall the onset of the change, for a few hours anyway. But in the meantime, the tingling was very distracting, and made him very poor company; he had a difficult time focussing on anything Harry was saying.

He drained the goblet and quickly dismissed the still puzzled-looking boy from his office. The timing was such a shame, really. He should have liked to talk to the boy a little longer. Well, at least talking with Harry had kept him distracted from the usual run of dark thoughts about the significance Halloween held in his mind. He looked across the smoking, empty goblet and watched Harry hurry away down the corridor, looking thoughtful.

As soon as the boy was out of sight, Remus headed down the corridor towards his rooms. He would just have time to get changed before the Halloween feast, and he needed something to get the taste of the potion out of his mouth. He should be fine, he thought, until the end of the feast.

CHAPTER FOUR HALLOWEEN

The feast itself went well enough. Nothing really tasted just as it should on these nights, but he knew if he didn't eat now, he would be ravenous in his wolf form. The potion not only slowed the change, but usually caused him to sleep through his time as a wolf. Or so he had been told. He could never really remember much of anything that happened during his transformations. But if he was hungry tonight, well, locked in his room, he shouldn't be a danger to anyone, but he might make a mess of the room out of frustration. Also, he would wake tomorrow faint with hunger. Better to eat now, even if it didn't taste quite right.

During the Hogwarts ghosts' hilarious re-enactment of Nearly-Headless Nick's near-beheading, he felt the tingling sensation beginning to spread, and thought that he had better be getting back to his rooms pretty soon. He knew from long experience that the change in sensation meant that he might have as little as half an hour before the change was upon him. He thought maybe he could make it to the end of the feast. Things seemed to be wrapping up.

The ghosts' show ended, and all the children applauded. Remus could see Nearly-Headless Nick beaming with pride at his part in the performance, and bowing to the audience, carefully holding his head in place. The children stood and began filing out of the hall, back towards their respective Houses. He smiled

and waved to Harry, who waved back, and leaned to whisper something in his friend Hermione's ear. She also turned and looked towards Remus as well, then realised he was watching them, and waved awkwardly. Then they and Ron headed out the door.

He was just beginning to think he should make a quick exit out a side door rather than waiting for all the students to clear the hall, when suddenly a breathless first year came bursting back through the crowd. He saw Remus, and grabbed the sleeve of his robe.

"Professor Lupin, Sir, have you seen Professor Dumbledore? Only, he's needed right away at Gryffindor!" The boy scanned the crowd frantically, looking for the silver beard, half-moon spectacles and comforting face of Albus Dumbledore. Remus had the advantage of height, and caught sight of the headmaster much more quickly. He pointed him out to the boy, then followed to see what was so urgent that a first year -- usually so meek and easily cowed -- would seek out and speak to the headmaster.

He caught up with the boy just as he was saying, "slashed clean in half, Professor. I saw it, Sir. Me and Aurelia were the first ones there, and I came right down to find you, Sir."

Professor Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Thank you, Julius, you did the right thing coming to me." They were already walking

towards the stairs that led up to Gryffindor tower. Remus' legs were long enough to keep pace with the headmaster, but Julius and several other curious students were having a hard time keeping up. Remus followed Dumbledore up the stairs, and noticed out of the corner of his eye that Professors McGonagall and Snape were hurrying after him.

The crowd of students at the tower entrance seemed to part easily for the headmaster, but Remus and the rest had to push their way through. When he finally made it through, and saw what all the excitement was about, he went pale. The portrait that was the entrance to the tower was slashed to ribbons, its occupant vanished. He could hear his blood pounding in his ears, drowning out all other noise. The tingling was beginning to spread down his back. The only thing he heard before he turned and hurried away down the corridor was a voice saying, "nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

Once he was out of sight of the students, he practically sprinted back to his rooms. He wanted to stop, just for a moment, to think about what this meant, but he could feel the change beginning. He slammed the door behind him and fumbled for the lock. With Severus's potion in his system, he wasn't a danger to anyone, but he did not want anyone seeing him like -- well, like that.

He rested his forehead against the door, breathing hard. Any minute now. His senses were becoming sharper. His hearing, his sense of smell. Suddenly, he knew he was not alone in the room.

He turned around slowly, and just had time to register the large, black dog lying on the bed, looking at him with big, yellow eyes, before the change took him.

* * *

Light. Sunlight. Light falling across his eyes, waking him. He had dreamed *No*. He opened his eyes far enough to squint, at the same time putting up a hand to block the dawning daylight streaming into his room. He was lying naked on the cold stone floor, and the room was a mess. He sat up.

Must have been a full moon last night. Yes, that was it. It was coming back to him, slowly. He remembered taking his potion. Harry had been there. He remembered the feast. Things got a little confused after that. He knew there was something important. Something he must remember.

Eyes. Yellow eyes looking at him. No, that must have been a dream. But then the image of the slashed portrait came floating to the surface of his mind. *Sirius*. Sirius had been in the castle last night. And he had been in this room. Remus turned his head so quickly, he felt his neck pop.

He half expected to see the black dog still lying on the bed, yellow eyes taunting and tongue lolling in that sardonic doggy grin he had once known so well. But the bed was empty. Like everything else in the room, it was in complete disarray -- the

blankets, sheets and pillows torn off, bunched up or strewn around the room. It looked almost as if He cut the thought off with guilty shock. *No. Surely not.*

He picked up the quilt from the floor and drew it back across the bed, over the crumpled sheets, hiding them from view. Smoothing the quilt into place, Remus encountered a sprinkling of shiny, coal-black hairs clinging to it. Instinctively, he reached out trembling fingers to touch them.

Damn him! It wasn't fear or anger or hatred that caused his trembling. Love still owned him, and the longing to touch that one still beloved ran deep with Remus Lupin. He traced the curve of a single hair with the tip of his finger. Then he lay down on the bed, wrapped the quilt around his naked body, buried his face in its folds, and wept for Sirius Black, his love, his betrayal, one more time, until the relief of sleep found him again.

* * *

Remus Lupin knocked on the door of Professor Dumbledore's office. A cheery voice from within invited him to enter, and he did so, closing the door behind him. The headmaster sat at his desk, and Professor McGonagall was seated across from him.

"Remus, dear fellow!" exclaimed Dumbledore. "I trust you're feeling better today? You seemed not quite yourself yesterday evening, but I suppose that's understandable."

"Yes, thank you Professor Dumbledore. I am much improved today." He attempted a weak smile.

"Dear boy, you really must start calling me 'Albus'. You're not a student anymore." He beamed at the younger man. "I've just been having a chat with Minerva about one of our young wards. I think you'll know the one." He winked at Remus.

Lying on his bed after he woke for the second time, he had thought a great deal about what he was going to say to Dumbledore. Everyone already knew Sirius had been in the castle. The halls were buzzing with the whispered news this morning, and the students kept glancing nervously over their shoulders, as if they expected him to pop out from behind the nearest statue. He'd heard a dozen whispered theories about how Sirius had got into the castle, just on his way here. So was there really any need to tell the headmaster that he had had an unexpected visitor the previous evening?

But what it came down to was shame. Everyone -- well, the professors anyway -- already knew of the close association between himself and Sirius. And if anything had ... *happened* last night, well, he would rather no one found out about it.

Really the only concern was for Harry, and that was the reason he had come to Dumbledore this morning.

"He must be told the truth," he told the headmaster in a firm voice. "Harry deserves to know all of it. We're all being so careful of him because of ... well, because of how things are right now, but he needs to know that Sir- er, Black is after him." He looked pleadingly from Dumbledore to Professor McGonagall. "I have every confidence that, if the boy only knew the danger he might be in, he would not put himself in harm's way. He should be on his guard. Surely you can both see the wisdom in that?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I was just saying something very similar to Minerva. You are right. Harry must be told. Not all of it; I think that would be folly. The boy does have a tendency to go out and find trouble as soon as he knows enough about where to look for it." The headmaster smiled ruefully and shook his shaggy head. "I have known a few students in my time with such a nose for trouble." His eyes twinkled over his half-moon spectacles.

"As the head of his House," said Professor McGonagall, "I shall take the responsibility of informing the boy. I'll be sure to tell him as much as I think it is prudent for him to know."

Dumbledore nodded. "In that case, Minerva, I leave the matter entirely in your capable hands. I have never found myself to be in the wrong, trusting in your good judgment. Does that satisfy you, Remus?"

"Thank you, Professor -- Albus," he replied, and with a nod to both, he left the office, closing the door behind him, descended the phoenix staircase and headed back to his rooms.

CHAPTER FIVE THE SECRET PASSAGE

Remus Lupin wandered the deserted corridors of Hogwarts. No students were allowed to walk the halls unescorted, or without good reason, since the incident with the portrait. It made the castle seem a quiet and lonely place. He walked up one corridor and down the next, not really going anywhere, but looking vaguely around as he allowed his mind to wander.

He thought he understood now how Sirius had managed to get past the Dementors twice, when no one else had ever managed it. It must have something to do with being an Animagus. If so, he knew he should probably inform Dumbledore of Sirius' abilities. But he couldn't. They had sworn, the four of them, never to tell. They had sworn in blood and magic -- as close as he had ever been to performing Dark Arts himself -- and they had all taken that oath very seriously. If any one of them ever betrayed that secret to bring harm upon one of his fellows ... well, Remus didn't really want to think about what might happen. He wasn't even certain Lily had ever known.

He had been walking the halls aimlessly for nearly an hour before he realised what he was doing. He was hunting. He was looking for Sirius Black.

He knew that the castle had been thoroughly searched the previous night, and that no sign of the man had been found. *If*

they had only come to my rooms, he thought, *what might they have seen?* He didn't really want to think about it. But Dumbledore had likely covered for him, great man that he was. He was doing an excellent job of protecting Remus's secret, and it would not have done for anyone to walk in last night and discover him like that.

And who knew how long Sirius had stayed? He had only seen him for a few seconds. He might have left right after Remus transformed, or he might have stayed the whole night. *He knew he could hide there*, Remus thought savagely. *He knew it was the full moon, and that I could do nothing, and that it was the one place in the castle no one else would come to.* The man he had known would never have taken advantage of his weakness like that. But then, the man he had known would never have slashed a portrait to ribbons in an attempt to kill a child. The man he had known would not have murdered a street full of people in cold blood.

But no, he suddenly realised there were other places that no one would have known to search: the secret passages beneath the castle and the grounds. He was certain that, in his days as a student, the Marauders has been the only ones to know about those passages, and they had kept them a closely-guarded secret. Dumbledore knew about the one beneath the Whomping Willow, of course, since it was he who had originally come up with the ingenious solution for Remus's problem.

But what about the one that opened behind the statue of the one-eyed witch? If any teacher had known about that one, the entrance would be guarded. He turned his footsteps down a side passageway, and through a low doorway and a room filled with rusty suits of troll armour, ducking behind a tapestry, and up a rickety flight of stairs. It amazed him how well he still knew his way around the castle. At last he found the corridor he had been looking for.

No, no guards were posted around the innocent-looking statue -- well, as innocent as any of the Hogwarts statues ever looked. He looked up and down the corridor, listening for footsteps. When he was certain no one was coming, he stepped up behind the statue, tapped it with his wand, and whispered, "*Dissendium*." The entrance through the witch's hump swung open, and Remus quickly ducked into the cold, dank, dark passageway.

"*Lumos*," he murmured, causing his wand to cast a faint glow upon his surroundings. Looking around himself, he paused. He was unsure how to proceed. He supposed he should search the passageway from end to end, but he was already fairly certain that, if Sirius had been in the passageway, he wouldn't have any reason to hang about there. What he really wanted to know was if Sirius had been there at all.

If only there were some way to take advantage of the keen eyesight, hearing and sense of smell that were available to him in his wolfish form Well, why not give it a try? And then

Remus Lupin did something he had never done before. He called on the wolf. He willed his eyes stronger, his ears into long points, he twitched his nose.

Gradually, his perception of the space around him changed. He could hear insects on the walls, and mice or rats somewhere further down the passageway. The light seemed to grow stronger. But it was the smell which filled his nostrils that told him the most. Between the smells of damp and dirt and mildew, there was a strong animal smell, and it was the one he knew it would be.

He had almost dared to hope there would be no sign of Sirius in the air but ghost-scent. After all, this had been a favourite trysting place for the two of them, and there had been many a time when it would not have taken a wolf's nose to know they had been there. And certainly he thought he caught a faint whiff of those long-past times, but the animal scent which hung heavy in the air now was recent and unmistakable. Sirius Black had been here, and no more than a few hours ago.

For several moments, he simply closed his eyes and breathed the scent, almost as affecting for him now as it had been this morning on his bed. But the cold of the place dulled it enough that he was not undone by it. His breathing turned to shuddering gasps -- the ghosts and memories of sobs -- but no more, and he brought his emotions back under control very quickly.

Really, Remus now knew all he needed to know, but still he crouched low to the ground, searching the damp earth. He found them almost immediately: paw prints, circling, pacing, and finally leading off down the long, dark passageway.

He took a few steps to follow them, but suddenly his courage deserted him. What was he to do if he did, in fact, encounter Sirius there in the darkness? The knowledge of what he would *have* to do, and the fear of what he *might* do in that case were too much for him, and he turned his face and his heavy footsteps back towards the castle.

CHAPTER SIX ANOTHER CHAT WITH HARRY

It really was like being back at school, he reflected ruefully, nearly a month later. Every time the full moon came around, some excitement happened and he missed it. He had entered his rooms yesterday regretting the fact that his transformation would deprive him of the opportunity to see Harry in action on the Quidditch pitch for the first time this year. He had heard the boy's talent as a Seeker put even James's abilities to shame. He would have liked to see that for himself.

The potion had taken him rather funny this time, as it sometimes did, and he had been unable to hold the class on hinkypunks he had been planning. It was especially a shame, because he did not even get a chance to wish Harry "good luck" before the match against Hufflepuff.

But when he left his rooms exhausted the following afternoon, he learned that the excitement he had missed had been of an entirely different and more sinister nature. The Dementors had invaded the pitch mid-game, drawn, it was to be supposed, by the emotional excitement and energy of the crowd. They had come to feed. And Harry's response to them had once again been to faint dead away, only this time the boy had been inconveniently placed for such an episode, and had fallen over fifty feet.

Thankfully Dumbledore had been there -- angrier than anyone had ever seen him, Professor Flitwick confided -- and had arrested the boy's fall and called the Dementors off him. Unfortunately, Harry's broomstick had not survived the incident, having sailed directly into the branches of the Whomping Willow. The irony of the situation was apparent to Remus; the presence of the Dementors was doing as much harm as good. They might protect the boy from Sirius Black, but they seemed just as likely to kill him as a side effect. There had been no sign of Sirius at the school since the incident on Halloween.

Remus had wanted to speak with Harry again. He was becoming more and more concerned about the boy's reaction to the Dementors, and he was curious to know how much Professor McGonagall had told him. But every time he put his head into the hospital wing that weekend, Harry was either with his little friends, or he was sleeping, and Remus was loathe to wake him. He seemed well enough, though; none the worse for his fall.

He was very glad on Monday to see Harry out of bed and back in class, but his attention was occupied by the class in general's grievance about the homework Severus had apparently assigned in his absence. It seemed that the Potions master had seen fit to assign an essay on the very advanced subject of werewolves. Remus groaned inwardly. Severus was prevented from revealing his secret overtly by the headmaster's injunction, but it seemed he was doing his level best to get one of the students to come up with the answer independently.

He quickly assured the class that they would not be expected to turn in any such essay, much to their relief. And much to his own relief, it seemed that most of the students had not even started on the assignment. Only the Granger girl seemed disappointed, saying she had already finished the essay. That was worrying. If anyone in the class was likely to put two and two together and come up with "werewolf", it was she. Well, he would just have to hope that she wouldn't make that leap.

He quickly turned the class's attention to the subject of hinkypunks and their misdirecting habits, explaining, among other things, their relation to will o' the wisps. The students seemed much happier with this.

When the lesson was over, Remus called Harry back for a private word. He expressed his sympathy over the fate of the boy's broom. "They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts," he said, unsure why he should be telling the boy such a thing. But if Harry wondered why anyone would ever plant such a tree on school grounds, he didn't ask. It seemed something else was occupying his mind.

"Did you hear about the Dementors, too?" Harry said stiffly.

Remus acknowledged that he had. He could tell the subject troubled the boy deeply. It was pretty clear why.

"*Why?*" Harry finally asked. "Why do they affect me like that? Am I just -- ?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," Remus told the boy. He explained the nature of Dementors to Harry, glad that his background in Defence Against the Dark Arts gave him greater knowledge of and insight into these creatures, grateful that his knowledge could help this boy who was obviously so desperately hungry for answers.

No, it was not weakness that led Harry to lose consciousness in the presence of the Dementors; it was simply that their purpose was to drain away every happy thought and memory, leaving only the worst of a person's experiences. And the worst of Harry's experiences went far beyond those of most children his age. For that reason, the Dementors had a much greater effect on Harry.

To be sure, many adults, especially the ones who had lived through the war against Voldemort, had experienced things as terrible, and occasionally much worse than Harry had, but adults were more able to face that sort of darkness. Harry himself would harden to it with age, but for now it was an inconvenience to him, as well as a source of embarrassment. Remus resolved to do whatever he could to help the boy.

"When they get near me -- " Harry paused. "I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."

Lily. Remus hadn't been expecting that. He reached out a hand to touch Harry's arm, but drew back. While he might think of the boy as family, certainly Harry regarded him as nothing more than a teacher, and such a gesture would have been out of context.

He had been avoiding thinking about Lily. It was bad enough thinking about Sirius all the time, without adding her to it. But seeing this boy, looking into those green, green eyes, it was impossible not to call her to mind. Sweet and gentle Lily. The first person at Hogwarts to whom he had ever told his secret. The first person to whom he had confided his love for Sirius Black. She had been his truest and first real friend.

He had met them all around the same time, shortly after his arrival at Hogwarts, but he had grown close to her first. Later, he had attached himself to the boys, and she to a group of girls, but by they end, they had all been such a cohesive group that most people outside of it could not sort out the dynamics. The fact of it was that, by the time they all left school, there had been two couples, and two sets of best friends. James and Lily had got together only a little while after he and Sirius had discovered their own love, but Lily had always been Remus's best friend, as Sirius had been James's.

Only poor little Peter Pettigrew had not had someone to confide in above all others, Remus reflected. He had often felt badly for

the boy, who had so looked up to James, and (Remus had often suspected) had a crush on Lily. He wondered if Peter had ever felt jealous of the bonds the rest of them shared. Poor Peter, who had died for his love of James and Lily -- died at the hands of Sirius Black.

The worst of it for Remus had, of course, been Sirius's betrayal of their love and trust, but his murder of Lily had been a very close second, in his mind, depriving him of lover and friend in one terrible stroke. And now this boy had revealed that he remembered her death -- those last horrible moments which Harry, only a baby at the time, was the only witness to. A small part of him was hungry to know how much Harry remembered -- to know some truth that might have been missed -- but his more prudent self knew that it would be better for them both not to dig too deeply into the events of that night, and besides; how much could a baby truly remember?

Harry was speaking again, asking why the Dementors had to appear just then, in the moment when the Snitch was within his grasp. Remus shook himself, then explained to Harry about the joy the Dementors had come to feed on.

"Azkaban must be terrible," mused Harry.

Remus nodded. He had often thought about the place over the past decade and more. Sometimes he felt he was trapped there as well, inside his head. Of course, he had never seen it with his

own eyes. No one went there unless they had business there, or no choice in the matter. But knowing that Sirius was there had led him to think about the place often, and wonder what it must be like for the man he had loved.

The Dementors would have drained away every happy thought, feasted on their love -- always assuming Sirius really had loved him, he thought bitterly. He would have been left with ... with what? Remus wondered what grim and horrible thoughts plagued Sirius, alone in his cell. Did he feel remorse for what he had done? Loneliness? Did he remember Remus at all anymore, or had he lost the last shreds of his humanity in that dreadful place?

He found himself explaining the nature of the place out loud, more to himself than Harry. If he could just think about the place, and think about it in the most basic terms possible, forgetting about the man for a moment, maybe the tightness in his chest would go away. "The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."

"But Sirius Black escaped from them," said Harry. "He got away ..."

Remus was so startled that he dropped his briefcase. So

Professor McGonagall had told the boy, true to her word. But how much? To hear that name spoken aloud with such bitterness by the son of Lily and James Potter Obviously she had told him enough. While the idea of an escaped murderer might be interesting and maybe a little scary to a boy, only the knowledge of at least some part of the truth could engender such tones of hatred and bitterness.

Sirius Black had taken Harry's parents from him, and Remus couldn't blame the boy for the way he felt. But Harry had never known Sirius, Lily or James -- not like Remus had -- and he could not begin to understand the complexity of sorrow and confusion that Remus felt. He wished he could tell the boy more, but he knew he would not understand. He was much too young to realise the possibility of loving someone even when they have done unforgivable things. Maybe when he was older Remus could explain to him, but not now. The thought of the look of loathing and disgust the boy would likely give him was unbearable.

"Yes," he said finally. "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible" It was incredibly hard to mention his name in front of the boy. Harry was tied up in all this, the last great good left of that wonderful friendship, and Remus longed to speak to him about the great love they had all shared, including Sirius, but it was impossible. "Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long"

"You made the Dementor on the train back off," Harry exclaimed. It was becoming increasingly apparent to Remus that the boy was much more concerned about the Dementors than he was about Sirius Black. He wasn't sure if that was wise or not. However, he didn't really know what to say to the boy that would help him on the subject of Sirius Black. On the other hand, he knew a trick or two that might help against the Dementors.

Ten minutes later, Harry left the classroom content in the knowledge that he would soon be taking anti-Dementor lessons with Remus, while Remus himself was left once again to his thoughts.

* * *

There was another Hogsmeade visit planned for the students on the last day of term before the Christmas holidays, and Remus was looking forwards to tracking down Harry for another chat with him. He found he enjoyed talking to him, and it had been so long since he had really been very interested in talking to anyone. It might be good behaviour to encourage in himself, he thought.

But, try though he might, he was unable to locate Harry anywhere in the castle or on the grounds. He even went down from the castle, through the snow, to ask if Hagrid had seen the

boy, but the large gamekeeper was not in his hut. When Remus knocked, there was a scrabbling sound and then a large dog began to bark inside. For a moment -- just a moment -- Remus thought he might open the door for a look at the dog, just to see if it might be But no, that wasn't Sirius's bark. Sirius had always been a quiet dog; not one for barking just for the sake of barking. And it sounded as if there might be other large animals in the hut. Remus had little desire to encounter any of Hagrid's other "pets". He remembered only too well the gamekeeper's penchant for collecting "interestin' creatures".

Remus had often visited Hagrid with the Marauders, back during their school days. The big man had always enjoyed hearing the tales of their pranks and adventures. But Remus had not renewed that friendship since returning here. He had meant to, but in the very first week of term, he had overheard Hagrid declaring his vehement hatred for Sirius, and Remus did not feel like subjecting himself to that. Hagrid was not a man to hide his feelings, and his feelings were decidedly anti-Sirius. Remus felt that his own presence in Hagrid's hut would only serve to remind the gamekeeper of the Marauders' visits, and inevitably of the events which came later.

As he turned back towards the castle, feet chilled from snow melting into his shabby, inadequate footwear, he found his eyes turning towards the Forbidden Forest. If Sirius was still around -- if the theory that he was after Harry was true -- then wasn't that the most likely place for him to be lying hidden? Perhaps he

was nearby right now, watching him from the shadows.

Remus shivered and pulled his thin cloak more tightly around his shoulders. The snow was beginning to fall again, swirling softly about him, the wind tugging at his hair. He could go look, he thought. It would be a simple matter to find and follow paw prints in the snow.

He had caught himself having similar thoughts many times over the last weeks. Sirius was nearby, he was sure of it, and he could no longer deny to himself how much he longed for another glimpse of the man. When he had transformed at the end of November, he had awoken almost hoping for some sign that the black dog had visited him again, but there was none.

Two things stopped him from searching every time: firstly, someone might ask, or even guess, what he was looking for. Secondly, he had no idea what he would do if and when he found Sirius. He knew in his heart he could not just callously turn the man over to the law. Perhaps that was weakness, but Remus had always been one to acknowledge and accept his own limitations. He knew that what he longed for was simply the nearness of a loved one, but what could be done when that loved one was in the grip of madness and violence?

He stood there, gazing thoughtfully into the forest for some time before he shook himself and began the long trudge up the hill to the castle, his search for Harry forgotten.

CHAPTER SEVEN ERISED CHRISTMAS

Christmas was a hard time for Remus. He was a bit of a traditionalist, and had certain ideas about how Christmas should be, mostly involving being surrounded by friends and family, warmth and love. Of course, he had not had a Christmas like that in thirteen years.

That last Christmas had been wonderful. He and Sirius had spent it with James and Lily and baby Harry over in Godric's Hollow. Peter had been invited as well, but he said he had already made arrangements to spend Christmas with his mother.

Remus remembered with longing the twinkling tree with presents heaped around it (most of them for Harry, of course), and its moving ornaments which had so captivated the baby. The house had been filled with the scent of Christmas dinner cooking, and later, Lily's special cookies: tiny red and green cinnamon-flavoured reindeer that actually walked about on slender legs, their red noses glowing and blinking. Lily had always been a great one for charms.

Remus could remember how she had beamed with pride when she brought them out. Harry had crowed with baby delight and grabbed for one, which had skittered out of his reach to the other side of the plate. He had looked like he was just about to start wailing when his father had swooped in and grabbed one,

presenting it directly into Harry's fat little hands. Remus remembered the toothless baby grin as Harry put the cookie in his mouth, not noticing that, as he did so, it became as inanimate as any other cookie.

James had looked up at Lily then, with love in his eyes, and taken her hand. "They're brilliant, Dear," he had said. "You're brilliant. Honestly, Lily, you should write your own cookbook." He had grinned, "Really, Sirius, she comes up with such clever ideas. She's going to make me rich someday!" And then he had grabbed her around the waist, making her squeak as he pulled her into his lap. "That's my girl!" he'd said. "She makes wonderful squeaking noises as well, but those are just for me!" Baby Harry screeched and giggled at his parents' antics, drooling cookie crumbs all down his front.

The scene faded in Remus's mind, and his smile with it. It was cold in his rooms. There were no decorations, or really any indication that it was the holiday season, only that it was deep, dark winter. He shivered. This time of year, there was hardly any daylight at all so far north, and the cold was a damp one.

He had considered joining in the Christmas Eve feast for those few who had decided to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays. Harry would be there, he knew. But he didn't feel like very good company tonight. He would have liked to spend Christmas with Harry, but he knew that the last thing a thirteen-year-old boy would want at Christmas was one of his teachers hanging about.

Harry had friends of his own, and they were bound to have a better time without having an depressed adult impose upon them.

Besides, Remus told himself, he hadn't even got the boy a present. For one thing, he'd had no idea what boys of thirteen liked these days, and for another, he had little enough money as it was. Thirteen years ago, he and Sirius had got Harry a toy Snitch. But they had had the Black fortune at their disposal in those days. Of course, Harry had been much too young for such a toy, though it was larger, softer and slower than a real Snitch, but James had been delighted with the gesture, and had spent hours trying to teach little Harry to catch it.

They had all hoped he would grow to love and appreciate the toy. James had felt sure that Harry was going to play for England one day, and he often said he looked forwards to box seats at the Quidditch World Cup in his old age. In fact, James had joked once that in 20 years time, they would have to rename the England team "the Potters", because he was going to teach all his children to play Quidditch, and of course they were going to be phenomenally talented. He and Lily had already been talking about having another baby when Well, it hadn't happened, and the England team was just going to have to do without all that amazing Potter talent.

Remus sighed. *I'd be alarmingly bad company tonight*, he thought. *Best thing if I don't inflict myself upon people*. He

started a fire in the hearth instead. It looked like another Christmas alone for Remus Lupin. Well, he was used to it. And even if his mood improved tomorrow, he would have to miss Christmas dinner on account of the full moon.

He stood up, shivering. It would be some time before the fire succeeded in heating the room. Perhaps he would go for a walk around the castle and try to warm up. He thought if he stayed in the north part of the castle, he'd have less chance of encountering anyone, so he headed out in that direction, walking quickly.

He slowed his steps when he reached the base of the North Tower. If he remembered correctly ... He checked behind one of the tapestries that hung near the stairs, and found a door. It was locked, but a quick "*Alohomora*" gained him entrance, and he was standing in a cold, dark and musty-smelling corridor. This part of the castle was not currently in use, which meant he was almost guaranteed his solitude.

He walked down the dusty hallways past disused classrooms -- some of which were now being used for furniture storage, he could see -- around shadowed corners, up uneven steps, stooped through low doorways and tried all the time to think of nothing at all.

He had managed to live his life wrapped in numbness for the past several years. The pain was no longer sharp, but more of a

dull, throbbing ache that underlay his every waking moment. But the combination of being in this place, of seeing Harry -- so much like James -- and most especially of being confronted almost daily with both talk and images of Sirius Black had brought the pain to the surface of his mind once more. There was very little he could think about or remember without feeling his throat tighten, his chest ache, his eyes burn. So now as he walked, he allowed his mind to think only of the hardness, the colour, the age of the stones, the scent of dust and damp, and nothingness.

He was more or less successful in this until a flicker of motion caught his eye through the partially-open door of one of the dark rooms. Hoping to find something to engage his attention for a few moments perhaps, he went to the door and pushed it open. What he saw caused the blood to drain from his face and weakened his knees almost to the point of collapse.

There was a single object in the room: a mirror.

Erised, he thought at once. He should turn around and walk away, he knew. He should go back to his rooms and lock the door and forget he had ever found the damn thing. But the mirror drew him. What would he see this time?

But this time, looking in the mirror, he already knew what he wanted: Sirius. But a brave and loyal Sirius -- the Sirius he had thought he'd known -- the one who would rather have died than

to see his friends hurt and do nothing. He wanted James and Lily alive and well and raising Harry. He wanted the last twelve years of his life back, damn it! Full of at least as many happy memories as sad ones. Just a normal life, complete with friends, family, love, small daily triumphs and tragedies. He wanted this great, gaping loneliness to leave him.

The images that swam to the surface of the Mirror were not really in any way surprising to him. But thinking a thing is very different from seeing it. At first what he thought he was seeing was that Christmas long ago in Godric's Hollow. There were the four of them, sitting around the tree, their head bent close in talk. Then, a dark head raised, and Sirius Black looked out of the mirror and directly into his eyes, and smiled. That wonderful, mischievous smile of his; those sparkling eyes under dark, expressive brows.

But it was not Christmas of thirteen years ago, for there was Harry, come to sit between his parents, looking very much as he did now. No, there were differences. The first thing Remus noticed was that there was no scar on Harry's forehead. His glasses were new, and of a shape and style that suited him. His hair was a bit longer as well.

And now that he looked at them closely, he saw that they were all older as well. Lily and James. Was this truly how they would look if they were alive today? Lily did not look so different from how he remembered her, though she was obviously now more

woman than girl. She was still pretty and slim, but her hair was cut so that it brushed her shoulders, rather than falling nearly to her waist. James's hair seemed to be lying reasonably flat, and was going attractively grey at the temples. He had just opened a package which contained a shirt in Gryffindor colours. He hugged his son, who looked pleased and embarrassed at the same time.

He saw himself, sitting next to Sirius, his hand resting casually on the other man's thigh, and Sirius's arm around his shoulders, the most natural thing in the world. In the Mirror, Remus's hair was less grey. There were fewer lines around his eyes and mouth. His clothes were well-fitted, and looked new. And every now and then, he and Sirius would glance at one another and smile, or Sirius would say something, and he would laugh. He wished he could hear what they were all saying. And now, Sirius leaned over and whispered something in his Mirror-self's ear, and that Remus Lupin gave Sirius a sideways glance and smiled shyly. Sirius grinned and gave his shoulder a squeeze.

Sirius looked much more like the young man Remus had known than like the haggard stranger in the papers. His hair was still black, and for this occasion, had been neatly brushed and tied back at the nape of his neck. The shining curls fell halfway down his back. Remus's fingers twitched. He longed to run his fingers through that hair. Something told him that, in the Mirror's world, it had been he who had brushed those shining tresses and tied them back, planting a kiss on that neck as he did

so. There were no shadows under this Sirius's eyes, he was clean-shaven, and like the Remus Lupin in the mirror, there were fewer telltale lines, denoting the passage of a difficult life.

And now more people were appearing in the scene. Three younger children ran between the adults, giggling and chasing one another. There was a girl who looked like Harry and was about ten. She had freckles, and her hair was in two neat braids. Coming after the girl was a small boy of about seven who was the spitting image of Lily. Harry grabbed the boy as he went by, and proceeded to incapacitate him with tickles, and he giggled and shrieked and appeared to beg his mother to save him.

But the third child puzzled him. A girl of eleven or so, with long, blonde curls and big, brown eyes. She was wearing flannel pajamas in Ravenclaw colours, and she looked like neither Lily nor James. She had been chasing the other two children, brandishing a sprig of mistletoe. When she got to Harry, she stopped, held the berried twig over his head, and kissed him unabashedly on the cheek, then ran away, giggling. Harry looked so stunned that he let his little brother go. He blushed furiously.

The girl ran back through again, going the other direction and barreled directly into Sirius, who caught her and kissed her forehead. Then she held up the twig again, this time between Sirius and Remus's Mirror-self, and as the two men in the glass leaned in to kiss, Remus saw the girl's mouth move, and form the word "daddy".

Remus Lupin sat down hard on the cold stone floor, mouth open, eyes fixed on the scene in the mirror. The Mirror knew, even when he had not let himself think for years

They had talked about it. Shyly, that first time, when they had been helping Lily and James decorate the nursery that was to be Harry's in a few months. Then, after Harry has been born, it had been a frequent topic on conversation. They could adopt a child. God knows, there had been enough families in the Wizarding world that had lost both parents in those dark days. They would be good fathers, they had thought. After all, once Harry had been born, they had both said they would gladly protect him with their lives. Well, Remus had meant it, even if it had turned out Sirius hadn't. Remus loved the boy like his own blood kin, even now when he was almost a stranger.

They had gone so far as to obtain the appropriate paperwork from the Ministry that fateful October. In fact, the night before Halloween, they had lain in bed, talking about the possibility. That was when Sirius had mentioned to him that, should anything happen to James and Lily, Harry would come to them. But Remus had told him that was an eventuality too horrible to contemplate. Sirius had put his arms around him then, cradling Remus's head against his chest, and said, "I know it is, but James told me before they went into hiding, and I thought you should know." They had been silent then, each with his own thoughts.

Now he gazed into the enchanted Mirror, seeing another possibility -- a life that could have been. This child sitting in his Mirror-self's lap, gazing up at him, handing him presents. What was her name? What her story? He could well understand how the Mirror could drain a man's life away, while he sat transfixed, not noticing. Now the little girl was pulling on a grey hood, tying it under her chin. The hood had wolf-ears on it. She dropped to all fours and howled, then pounced on the Mirror-Remus. Sirius, turning to a large, black dog, did the same. The three of them tumbled and wrestled and laughed and licked one another's faces.

Remus could not bear it any longer, looking into this life that could have been -- that could never be -- his. He stumbled to his feet and fled.

He hurried up one corridor and down the next, seeking the exit at the North Tower, wanting only to put distance between himself and that accursed Mirror. He wanted to erase those too-sweet visions of longing from his mind. He wanted the safety and relative comfort of his own rooms.

It seemed to him to take forever before he found himself at the base of the North Tower again, and when he did, he was startled to find he was not alone. He had nearly run headlong into Professor Trelawney. He stopped short, wanting to get away quickly, but constrained by instinctive politeness.

"Professor," he gasped. "Good evening. It's, ah, unexpected to see you."

"But I was expecting to see you, Professor. The crystals do not lie." She peered at him mistily through those thick glasses that made her look like a huge insect. "But, my dear Professor Lupin, are you quite all right?"

"Ah, no," he said quickly. "No, I don't feel quite myself this evening, I'm afraid."

She pursed her lips and nodded with excessive sympathy. "If you would like, Professor, I should be happy to crystal gaze for you, and see if I can't find the source of your turmoil?" She raised her brows inquiringly. "Some of these things are only to be perceived by those of us who are masters and mistresses of the exalted art of Divination, you know."

"Thank you, no, Professor," said Remus, casting about for a hasty exit. "I, ah, I think I'll just go back to my rooms and have a bit of a lie down. Thank you. Goodbye, Professor." And with that he hurried off down the corridor, casting glances over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed.

CHAPTER EIGHT TOO MUCH WHISKY

Arriving back at his rooms, Remus Lupin closed the door behind him and sagged against it, eyes closed. Such a backhanded Christmas gift the Mirror had given him! To show him that beautiful scene, full of light, love and happiness, but at the same time, the knowledge that it could never be, for any of them--that none of them could hope for anything half so good. Well, maybe one day there would be a happy ending for Harry, poor boy, but not for the rest of them. James and Lily dead, Sirius a madman, murderer and fugitive, and himself a prisoner to this unending loneliness.

How fortunate the people who looked into the face of Erised and saw that their heart's desire was an achievable thing! Something they could work for and attain. That had been him once, the first time he had seen the Mirror. Though what it had shown him then had surprised him, and taken a while for him to accept.

Remus went to the cupboard beneath the windowsill, took out a bottle of whisky, and poured himself a generous drink. He felt he deserved it. He was shaking.

He had been fifteen years old, he remembered. He'd had a general discontentment with his life, filled with angst, frustration and confusion, that is the malaise of the fifteen-year-old boy. He'd felt grouchy for a long time, and snappish with his friends,

especially Sirius. He'd said intentionally hurtful things to all of them, without knowing why. At one point he'd yelled at Sirius for teasing him about his grouchiness and saying it was "that time of the month". Of course he had felt badly about it after, but his pride would not let him apologise.

He'd thought long and hard about why he was so unhappy. What did he *want*? He didn't know. And then he had heard a whisper about an enchanted mirror -- a mirror that would show you exactly what you wanted. Well, that sounded like a good thing to young Remus Lupin. All he had to do was find this magic mirror, see what he wanted, and do something about getting it. Simple enough!

Of course, the person who had mentioned the Mirror to him hadn't said it was in the school. That was no problem. Remus knew there was a secret, magical room in the school as well, and that, if you could find it, whatever you needed would be there inside. All he had to do was figure out where the secret room was, and when he did, he knew it would contain the Mirror.

At first, Remus borrowed the newly-finished Marauder's Map off James, hoping that he could search it for clues to the room's location. The boys had actually managed to stumble onto the room once or twice before, but the trick of finding it was that one could not be looking for it. This is always a very hard thing to do. It was like one of those Muggle picture puzzles -- the kind that only reveals the picture when one's eyes are out of focus.

Remus had to do just exactly that with his mind. It took several weeks of searching the castle, mind unfocussed, but eventually he managed it.

In fact, when he finally found it, he did so by accident. The Marauders had been up to their usual antics, sneaking about the castle at night. He couldn't even remember what they had been up to on that particular night. Probably just testing the map. But Filch had nearly managed to corner them, and they had all taken off in different directions, still knowing that, even if only one of them were caught, it would still implicate the other three in Filch's mind.

Remus had gone tearing off down a side passage, trying doors along the way, until he found one that was unlocked. He ducked in and shut it quietly behind him. And then he turned around and saw the Mirror. He had blinked at it stupidly for a moment, he now recalled. After spending weeks looking for the thing, to have it appear so unexpectedly was a trifle unsettling. But he saw the first word of the inscription, *Erised*, and knew it had to be the one. He had approached it nervously, unsure of what he might see.

At first, he thought there must be some mistake, for at first glance in the dim room, it seemed like any other mirror. Then he realised that the person reflected in the Mirror was not himself, but Sirius Black, looking into his eyes and grinning back at him. He smiled hesitantly, not really sure what this meant.

Sirius-in-the-Mirror raised his hand, and Remus, powerless as a reflection, did the same, reaching towards the surface of the Mirror, until their fingertips met against the glass. In that moment Remus, so full of the innocence of youth, began to understand.

The Mirror seemed to work in the same way dreams did -- a series of images strung together, without much real continuity. Now he could see himself and his friends lounging beside the lake on their spread-out cloaks, enjoying the sun of a spring day. He saw Sirius turn and say something to Mirror-Remus, and he saw himself blush and try to hide a tiny smile. He saw Sirius's hand casually brush his own, and felt his own real fingers tingle with the touch.

The Mirror worked its magic on him. The more he saw, the more the truth dawned on him, the more he wanted. The tingling in his fingers had moved to his chest, and was spreading through his limbs. He *felt* different, as if something had clicked inside him, and now the world made a great deal more sense.

Now he saw himself and Sirius sitting on his own bed, talking and laughing, the fingers of both hands interlaced. Then Sirius leaned in and kissed Remus's Mirror-self on the mouth. The Mirror-Remus looked surprised for a second, then as the kiss continued, appeared to be enjoying himself. Remus saw his own fingers run through Sirius's dark curls, caress Sirius's neck, slide

around Sirius's waist and pull him close.

The boys in the Mirror were now lying on the bed together, lips locked, hands moving over one another's bodies, exploring tentatively at first, and then more boldly. He saw his own hand slide up under Sirius's shirt, and knew in his heart that he longed to feel that smooth, warm skin beneath his fingers. Without transition, they were naked from the waist up, their bodies pressed urgently together, lips trailing to each other's neck and shoulders, kissing and biting.

Remus had stayed and watched, enthralled as scene after scene of passion, affection, love, unfolded before him. He had still been standing there, fingers against the glass, when Filch finally found him. He had blushed a deep crimson then, forgetting that only he could see his own desires. Filch had grabbed him by the ear, effectively ending the sensations that were coursing through his young body, and dragged him to his office where the other three Marauders were sitting, looking sullen.

Without his willing it, his eyes had sought Sirius's, and their gazes had locked for a brief moment, Remus searching, Sirius puzzled by the look his friend was giving him. Then they had both quickly looked away. Remus had glanced back a moment later, under his lashes, and he could almost have sworn he saw a faint blush on his friend's cheeks.

Well, Filch had railed at them all a bit, threatening them with the

usual range of unlikely punishments, and had kept the map, which he had found when he caught Peter (thereby enabling him to catch the rest of them as well). It had been a damn shame to lose such a fine piece of sorcery as that map, and so soon after it had been finished, but James created a diversion, and Sirius had been able to tap the parchment quickly with his wand, whispering "*mischief managed!*" They had all agreed afterwards, during the following week of detention, that it was unlikely Filch would ever figure out how the thing worked.

Even after seeing the truth in the Mirror, Remus reflected, it had taken him nearly six months to work up the courage to do anything about it, though he had taken Lily aside before the summer break and confided in her. He had spent so much time with the boys that year, he worried that they might not still be friends, but much to his relief, she had been very understanding, and had hugged him and told him he would find a way, and that he deserved to be happy. Then she had complained about James, who only days before had been taunting Severus again, just after they had all finished their OWLs.

Remus shook his head at the follies of his boyhood, smiling slightly, but the vision he had seen in the Mirror today, and the recollection of the vision he had seen on that day more than twenty years ago would not leave him.

Well, it was going to be a long Christmas Eve whatever he did. Might as well spend it remembering happier times. He crossed

the room to his gramophone, and selected an LP which he knew, under the circumstances was a bad idea. He set the needle down on the second track (an even worse idea), and as the music started, he went to pour himself another large whisky. Then he settled back into his chair, pulling a large leather-bound book from the shelf beside him.

*I loved you for a long, long time
I know this love is real
It don't matter how it all went wrong
That don't change the way I feel*

The leather cover was scuffed and worn, and darkened with age and much handling. There were no words printed on it. Remus opened it to the first page, revealing it to be a photo album. It was filled with pictures of the young Marauders, some from their school days, and more from their early-to-mid twenties. It stopped abruptly in October twelve years ago, with nearly a third of the pages still empty. Remus had not taken a single picture since that day, nor had a moment he felt worth remembering.

*And I can't believe that time's
Gonna heal this wound I'm speaking of
There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure for love.*

He had been able to look at the photo album in recent years without feeling too much pain. Sometimes he could pretend that they had all died that day, including Sirius, and that the memory of those events was far enough removed from him that he could remember the good times with bittersweetness. The photo album had not been opened, however, since the day Remus had learned of Sirius's escape from Azkaban. It was no longer possible to pretend the man was dead when there was the possibility that one might catch a glimpse of him around a corner or through a window.

*I'm aching for you, baby
I can't pretend I'm not
I need to see you naked
In your body and your thought*

Remus turned the pages slowly, every now and then pausing to tenderly trace the features of one long dead, long lost. He absently poured himself another drink.

There. That picture. The picture of Sirius as he so often remembered him, young, handsome and smiling, wicked eyes dancing, wicked smile full of fun. He was dressed in very formal, very well-cut black robes, looking sharp and sexy as anything.

*I've got you like a habit
And I'll never get enough*

*There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure for love.*

The day that picture had been taken was still firmly etched in Remus's mind, and he knew it would be with him until the day he died. Halloween, a year to the day before his world had fallen apart. It had been the day of Harry's christening, when James and Lily had named Sirius Harry's godfather. It had been a small, private event, with only the four of them and baby Harry present, and Dumbledore officiating. Sirius had teased Remus about being Harry's "fairy godmother", and Lily had given her son's new godfather a playful smack.

*I don't need to be forgiven for loving you so much
It's written in the scriptures
It's written there in blood
There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure,
There ain't no cure for love.*

And then there had been another ceremony -- short and equally private -- an exchange of words and promises and rings and a kiss, Dumbledore presiding again, James and Lily witnessing, and Harry asleep in his mother's arms. It hadn't been a secret, really. Such things were certainly permitted in the Wizarding world, but many old houses, including House Black, were staunch in their disapproval of such ideas. It was enough for

them to do the thing, though. They didn't need anyone to know but their nearest and dearest. They would have invited Peter as well, of course, but he had been so busy in those days.

*If you want a lover
I'll do anything you ask me to*

They hadn't really worn the rings much. They had talked about it, and decided that, while the symbolism was nice for the ceremony itself, they weren't really practical for daily wear on a shape-changer. There was too much risk of them getting lost or damaged. Instead, they had decided on tattoos as an indelible mark of their love. Though Sirius had already had a great deal of body art done by then, Remus to still only had the one.

*If you want a partner
Take my hand
Or if you want to strike me down in anger
Here I stand
I'm your man*

Unconsciously, he put his hand over his heart, where he still carried a gothic-scripted letter "S". He would bear that mark until the day he died -- see it every day -- and even if he could have removed it, he would not have. His heart still belonged to Sirius -- had since that first dawning moment of realisation before the Mirror of Erised -- and he was powerless to change that. He still kept the rings as well. Both of them were in a small

pine box which he kept in the drawer of his nightstand.

*Ah, the moon's too bright
The chain's too tight
The beast won't go to sleep
I've been running through these promises to you
That I made and I could not keep*

Quite a lot of the pictures in the album were from that day. Remus gazed at the happy, glowing faces, so young, so full of life. It had been such a good year, despite the war, and the horrors Voldemort had perpetrated. But a year to the day later, it had all been smashed to pieces. Remus poured himself another drink and then another as he gazed into the laughing eyes of Sirius Black. "Why did you do it, Sirius?" he asked the picture softly, tracing over and over again the line of that jaw with his finger.

*I'd crawl to you baby
And I'd fall at your feet
And I'd howl at your beauty
Like a dog in heat
And I'd claw at your heart
And I'd tear at your sheet
I'd say please, please
I'm your man*

He lost track of the passage of time, simply staring at the pages

of photos and occasionally noticing with some surprise and puzzlement that his glass was empty again. He finally realised that the record had finished some time ago, and got unsteadily to his feet to turn the LP over.

*Yeah I loved you all my life
And that's how I want to end it
The summer's almost gone
The winter's tuning up
Yeah, the summer's gone
But a lot goes on forever
And I can't forget, I can't forget
I can't forget but I don't remember what*

He stood, swaying alarmingly over the gramophone. Perhaps he had had a bit too much to drink, he thought slowly. He looked around to check the level of the whisky bottle. The room seemed to spin and wobble in odd ways. Nothing looked quite right.

"You always did have excellent taste in music," said a rough voice from the doorway.

Remus spun around, overbalanced, and sat down hard on the stone floor. He squinted blearily at the man standing by the door looking at him warily. Ah, so that was it. He had fallen asleep and was dreaming. That's why everything looked so funny.

"Stay out of my dreams, Sirius," he slurred at the thin, ragged

figure cautiously approaching him. "I knew I was going to dream tonight. Knew it. Erised always does that," he nodded, causing the room to wobble alarmingly. "But I thought I'd dream about the girl. Lollia. I would have called her Lollia. Or maybe Erised. 'S a pretty name. Sweet little thing. And maybe she and Harry"

He looked down in puzzlement to see that there was a bony hand on his arm, and found himself being pulled to his feet.

"Christ, you're drunk! And what on earth are you rambling about? Erised? Girls?" Sirius Black held him by the shoulders to keep him from swaying too much. "Remus, I came to explain, if you'll let me. I need your help"

"Go away, Sirius. Leave me alone," Remus said dully. "I'm tired of dreaming about ... about you all the time." He tried ineffectually to shake off the other man's grip.

"Poor Remus," said Sirius with a trace of humour in his sad voice. "What's become of you with no one to look after you?" He guided Remus by the arms, until they were standing by the bed, where Sirius made him sit down. He sighed. "I can see that you're in no state to hear me out." He knelt and began to remove Remus's shoes.

"Stop that! I don't need ... I don't want ... Just fuck off, Sirius!" He pulled away but nearly lost his balance, and had to grip the

bed with both hands to remain upright.

Sirius sat back and put his hands up. "All right, Old Man, I'm sorry. It just looked like you could use a hand."

"Sorry? You're *sorry*?! You killed them, Sirius! And you killed me too! You sold us all, and for what? A pat on the head from Voldemort? Just get the fuck away from me! I don't want you anywhere near me." But as he said this, he looked down into the saddest eyes he had ever seen, and the anger drained away. "I'm sorry, Padfoot, I didn't mean that," he mumbled tearfully. "It's just been so hard for me. It's all right if you visit my dreams. I don't mind so much."

Still kneeling on the floor in front of him, Sirius took his hands in his. "I wasn't going to come down here tonight," he said at last. "I knew it would be too risky with the full moon not until tomorrow, but I had to come, on the off-chance that you might listen to what I have to say." He looked up hopefully at Remus then, but apparently failed to find what he was looking for. The corners of his mouth drooped. "I could smell the liquor on your breath from all the way down the hall and, well, I knew there wasn't much chance of you turning me in. But I guess there wasn't much chance you'd understand either." He squeezed Remus's hands, then said softly, "how could I not come see you, Moony? It's Christmas."

Remus Lupin frowned. This was a very strange dream, he

decided. He'd never had a dream where Sirius had behaved in quite this fashion. Nor could he remember ever smelling anything in a dream, and the man at his feet certainly smelled as though it had been some time since he'd had proper bathing facilities, or a change of clothes. Remus thought that, if he could just get his mind to focus, he could figure this all out -- what the dream meant, why he was having it -- but he felt so tired. Maybe he'd just close his eyes for a bit. He lay back on the bed.

Dimly, he heard Sirius sigh. "Poor Moony. I can see you're in no state for company." Remus felt his shoes and socks being removed, but didn't struggle this time. He felt thin but strong arms swing his legs up onto the bed, and lift his head to put a pillow under it. A blanket was tucked up under his chin, and he could feel himself beginning to drift into unconsciousness. The last thing he felt before descending into sleep was a brief and tender kiss on the forehead, and the whispered words, "Good night, Remus."

*Well my friends are gone and my hair is grey
I ache in the places where I used to play
And I'm crazy for love but I'm not coming on ...*

CHAPTER NINE

PADFOOT'S PATENT HANGOVER CURE

The light was a painful shade of red, but he knew that if he opened his eyes, the dull throbbing in his temples would change very quickly to needles of agony. He moaned and turned over, burying his face in the pillow. Images of the night before came swimming to the surface of his brain. *Erised*, he remembered. *And whisky. Far too much whisky.*

And he had dreamed Sirius had been there. But such a strange dream it had been. Not at all the sort he was used to; neither the burning passion of days long gone nor the dark, nightmarish scenarios in which Sirius betrayed and killed them all over and over again, each time leaving Remus a little less alive, a little more alone.

He turned his head away from the window and risked opening a single eye. It hurt, and the room took a while to come into focus. His brows drew together in puzzlement at what he saw. There was a gently-steaming goblet on the nightstand beside his bed. *Potion*, his brain told him. That was it. Severus must have brought in his potion while he was asleep. Damn it. The thought of that man seeing him in this state irked him. He was sure to hear about it later. Well, there was nothing to be done about that now.

Very slowly, he sat up. The room would not hold still. He closed

his eyes again and put both hands on his head, as if to keep it in place. *God, I hope I can keep this down*, he thought, reaching for the goblet. But when he brought it to his mouth, the smell of the potion wasn't right. Remus's eyes popped open and he peered suspiciously into the cup. Breathing in deeply through his nose, he realised that he recognised the scent. It took him a moment to place it, though.

It smelled of rich chocolate, fresh ginger, honey and a mixture of spices and some other things including what Remus had thought might be powdered dragonbone, but had never been able to identify for certain.

"It's a secret," Sirius had said to him once, long ago. "Drink up, Moony; it will make you feel better." Padfoot's Patent Hangover Cure, they were going to call it. Yet another in the line of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers the Marauders has planned to sell and get rich. But the chocolate -- Sirius had made it chocolate-flavoured just for him.

It hadn't been a dream. Sirius *had* been here. Remus glanced across the room to the cabinet where he kept a small supply of herbs, spices and various other ingredients for potions. The cabinet doors stood open, and the countertop above it was littered with bits and pieces, powders and leaves.

He knew from personal experience that this was a quality product which always got good results. But how far could he

trust the man who had made it? A madman and convicted mass-murderer? A betrayer of friends and lovers? And yet, if Sirius had wanted to kill him, he could easily have done so last night without Remus putting up much of a fuss. He sniffed the potion again. No, it smelled just the same as he remembered it. His head was aching fiercely now; he would have to take *something* for it.

Only one way to find out, he thought. And with that, he lifted the goblet to his lips and drained it. The cool, rich potion flowed through him, sending soothing tendrils through his body from the moment it touched his tongue. Within seconds, his head had begun to clear, and in under a minute, he felt as good as he had all week.

For the first time, he noticed that the goblet had not been the only unexpected object on the nightstand. There was a small wooden box, tied with a black silk ribbon as well. Tucked into the ribbon was a scrap of paper with his own name on it. Remus pulled it out and unfolded it. It bore only the words, *Soon you'll understand, I swear to you.*

With trembling fingers, he untied the ribbon and fumbled the top off the box. Inside lay a tiny dog, roughly carved out of wood. Remus gently picked the carving up, and cradled it in the palm of his hand. He noticed that the dog had something in its mouth. Remus took it over to the window to have a better look at it in the winter sunlight. What he saw caused him to make a tiny,

involuntary noise in the back of his throat.

Between its jaws, the dog carried a lock of black hair.

Remus looked at the dark curl blankly. *Why -- ?* There were so many spells that could be done to a person with this key ingredient. Spells of revenge, of location, of love. One of the first things young wizards were taught at this very school was that they should never entrust anyone with such a token, because it could so easily fall into the wrong hands, with disastrous results. To break that stricture was an act of madness -- or an act of absolute trust. And if what he remembered of last night was anything close to what had actually happened, Sirius had seemed as sane and rational as he ever had.

Remus's train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. Guiltily, he dropped the little dog into his pocket before saying, "Who is it?"

"I've brought you your potion," said the grudging voice through the door.

He sighed and crossed the room to open the door only just as far as necessary to allow Severus to pass him the smoking goblet. "Thank you, Severus," he said. "You may tell Professor Dumbledore I shall not be at supper tonight." And he closed the door on the Potions master without waiting for a reply.

* * *

After he drank his potion, Remus spent the rest of Christmas afternoon pacing his rooms, trying to make sense of it all for the thousandth time in twelve years. He had to admit to himself that it just didn't add up. If Sirius really was a crazed murderer, then his behaviour of the previous night made no sense, anymore than his behaviour right up to that dreadful night more than a decade ago.

Remus would swear on anything that he had known Sirius -- really known him -- better than anyone, and as well as one person *could* know another, and never once in Remus's presence had Sirius been anything other than, well, if not utterly sane, at least not unhinged. His only madesses, Remus was certain, had been those of a wicked sense of humour and irrepressible high spirits.

But if Sirius was sane, he could not have done what he had done. And if, supposing for a moment, he had not been the betrayer, where was the proof? Someone had to have done it, and there was no one else. Sirius had been James's best friend and the Potters' Secret-Keeper. And the Potters had been betrayed and murdered. And there was no denying that an entire street full of Muggles had seen Sirius kill Peter and a dozen other people. He had seen the devastation himself.

No, he just could not see any other way it could have been. It

didn't make sense, but there was only one person he could ask for the answers he could not seem to find, and that was Sirius himself. But could he trust the man? He didn't see how he could. He'd never heard that Sirius had confessed to anything, so chances were, he would say he hadn't done it whether he had or not.

He shook his head. He had been going around and around in the same senseless circles for years. Perhaps if he had ever been able to convince himself completely that the man was guilty, he could have eventually got on with his life. But he hadn't been able to. Nor had he been able to come up with any evidence for his innocence. And that was why Remus Lupin had lived the last twelve years of his life in bondage to doubt, unable to move forwards, unable to undo or make sense of the past, living the grey existence of one whose life is no life.

If he was honest with himself, he knew that, regardless of whether Sirius Black was innocent or not, he *wanted* him to be innocent -- wanted to find that evidence to convince himself that it had all been a mistake, and that the great love he had known had been a real thing. He knew that was a dangerous way to think, because it put him in a position of wanting to trust someone who, by all accounts, was not worthy of the least shred of trust, and that by trusting him, he could be putting not only himself, but Harry and all the other students at the castle in danger.

He knew that what he should really do was go to Dumbledore, confess everything, including the secret of the Animagi, and hand over the lock of hair. His fingers curled impulsively around the tiny, carved dog. He should turn towards the door now. He should walk down the hallway. He should go to Dumbledore's office. But he couldn't. It was weak of him, he knew, but he just could not do it.

Sirius's actions of the night before, insofar as he remembered them, had said one thing very clearly to Remus. Whether or not Sirius was guilty of the crimes put to his account, the man still, on some level, loved him. And even if it was possible for Sirius Black to betray that love, Remus Lupin never could.

Please, God, he begged silently, let someone else be the one to do this thing. Let someone else catch him. Don't let it be me.

Perhaps he should leave the castle tonight, before the change came upon him. Go down through the snow to the Whomping Willow, and through the passage to the Shrieking Shack. If Sirius meant to come to him again tonight, at least that way he would not be coming into the castle. He would be able to smell where Remus had gone, and he would not be near Harry. That was better, wasn't it? He did not even allow himself to have the shameful thought that he was following that course of action because it would be less likely that Sirius would be caught.

Decision made, Remus pulled on his shoes and his thin woollen

cloak, and quietly made his way down the empty corridors of Hogwarts and out of the school into the frost-filled winter twilight, hand resting on the tiny wooden dog in his pocket.

CHAPTER TEN

FIRST LOVE

Feeling like a fugitive fleeing the scene of a crime, Remus Lupin made his guilty way down to the Whomping Willow through the gathering dark, every now and then glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching. It was a foolish fear, really. All the windows of the castle were dark, save those of the Great Hall, where even now, those few professors and students who remained at Hogwarts over the holidays were gathering for their Christmas feast. Casting a quick "*Immobilus*" on the tree, he ducked beneath the bare, rustling branches and lowered himself into the hidden entrance of the secret passage.

It was pitch black in the tunnel, but Remus didn't need light to find his way. How many times had he travelled this path in his school day? How quickly it all came back to him. He ducked suddenly, remember just in time a place where a large root grew down through the low ceiling. He had to walk bent almost double now. The passage had seemed bigger when he was a boy. But then, of course, he'd had that last growth spurt near the end of his seventh year that had made him almost a head taller than any of his friends.

It suddenly occurred to him that Sirius could be here, in the tunnel, and he stopped short, willing his heart to quiet its pounding so he could listen. No, he couldn't hear anything moving in the dark. Well, perhaps to be on the safe side, he'd

better have some light. "*Lumos*", he whispered into the darkness, drawing his wand. The glow would light the passage to about ten metres ahead of him on the straight bits. He continued through the tunnel at a more cautious pace.

The passage from the Whomping Willow to the Shrieking Shack was nearly a mile long, and as Remus emerged at the end, he straightened painfully. He had a crick in his neck and an ache at the base of his spine. As he stretched, he paused to listen again. No, there was no sound of anyone or anything in the house.

Most people in the Wizarding world, he knew, would be terrified to find themselves in this place. Its haunting was legend, and even the boldest and most foolhardy of teenagers hesitated to approach, even on a dare. It was silly of them really, Remus thought. After all, there were dozens of ghosts at Hogwarts and hardly anyone there ever turned a hair. But it suited him just fine that people avoided this place, because that made it one of the safest places in the world for him. He had always felt at ease here. It almost felt like home, coming back.

At first, it had only been his place, arranged by Dumbledore for his monthly transformations. But his friends had been clever boys, and they had figured out his secret within months. After weeks of pestering, he had finally agreed to bring them down here. And after that, it had become their place as well. It was a place where they could all relax and be themselves, hide and plan mischief, and, as they grew older, arrange romantic trysts.

Here was the room where his friends had first revealed to him that they had become Animagi. Here, where he had first voiced his feelings about Sirius to Lily. And here the bed where

The Remus Lupin of a few hours ago may have glanced away from the bed in guilt and shame at the thought, but it was as if he could feel the wolf rising in him, and now he stared thoughtfully and the large, dusty four-poster, remembering hungrily the scenes that had taken place there, especially the first time.

In a way, it had been a long time coming, and in a way, it had happened quite suddenly. In the spring after fifteen-year-old Remus had seen what the Mirror of Erised had to show him, things had become awkward between himself and Sirius. He could feel himself withdrawing, becoming more thoughtful, often unable to meet Sirius's eyes. And he had noticed Sirius becoming more arrogant, standoffish and occasionally downright rude. He had hated how it was between them then, but was at a loss to know what to do about it. They had gone home that summer barely speaking to one another.

And then in July, James had sent Remus an owl telling him that Sirius had run away from home, and had come to stay with the Potters for the rest of the summer. He had been glad to hear this, since the Potters lived closer to him than the Blacks did, and were much more pleasant to visit. Also, Remus had spent most of June thinking about things, and trying to decide what he

should say to Sirius if he ever got the chance. They were friends, after all, and good friends, and now that Sirius was away from the stresses of dealing with his family and school, he might be more relaxed and open to what Remus had to say.

Not that Remus had been planning to proposition him, but he thought he might be able to bring the conversation around to the topic, and see if he could feel out what his friend thought about ... certain things.

Well, the three of them had spent most of the rest of the summer together, and Sirius did indeed seem friendlier and more relaxed, but it still took Remus a few weeks to work up the courage, find the right conversation opener, and find a time to say what had to be said when James wasn't around to hear it.

At last, he had invited Sirius to come stay with his own family for a week in August. The Potters had been planning a holiday in France, and while they said they would be delighted to have Sirius along, Remus desperately hoped he might consider the alternative of spending some quality bonding time with his fellow canine. And much to his surprise, Sirius had quickly accepted.

But Remus, being awkward and not-quite-sixteen, had fumbled the smooth, well-planned conversation he had gone over time and again in his head.

"Sirius," he had said one lazy, hot afternoon, as the two were lounging in the grass on the bank of a river near his home, "what do you think about ... girls?"

Sirius's brow furrowed, but he didn't open his eyes. "They're all right, I suppose," he said at last. "That Evans girl is a bit stuck up, but she seems all right. James fancies her like anything."

Remus was not sure where to take the conversation from there, and was so busy trying to think of what to say next that he failed to notice what an odd answer it was that Sirius had given to his question.

"Yeah, Lily's great," he agreed vaguely. "I can really talk to her about ... stuff. Y'know?"

Sirius nodded, eyes still closed.

"I mean," Remus pursued, "it's not that I don't think I can talk to you and James. And Peter, of course. But Lily, well, she *understands* about ... stuff." He stared very hard at a single blade of grass, willing himself not to sound like an idiot.

"Moony," said Sirius in an admonishing tone, finally opening one eye and fixing it on his friend, "have you got a crush on Evans? Because if you've been messing about with her, you'd better not tell James ..."

"No, no! Nothing like that," Remus replied quickly. Then after a moment's silence in which Sirius closed his eye again, he added, "But ... that's the kind of stuff she understands about. Crushes, I mean." He blushed furiously and continued staring hard at the blade of grass.

"Mmmm ..." said Sirius, frowning. "So you *have* got a crush on someone, Moony? Why didn't you say so? Need me to talk to her for you?"

Remus suddenly decided that there really was no smooth, casual way to find out or say the thing that was on his mind. Best to just out with it, then. He took a deep breath.

"Sirius ... no, I don't need you to ..." he gestured helplessly. "I ... it's not ... Sirius, it's not a girl I've got a crush on," he said at last in a rush.

Sirius's eyes popped open at that. He squinted at Remus down his long nose. There was a look of puzzlement in his eyes, and something else too, though Remus wasn't certain what.

"Have you got a crush on *James*, Moony?! Is that why you're talking to Evans?" Sirius whistled softly. "Damn it! James is so bloody popular! What is it about him?! People are always falling all over themselves to do things for him. Everyone's got a crush on him. You, Evans, Peter" Sirius sat up and ran his hands through his hair.

"No, Sirius --" Remus began.

"Moony, you're one of my best friends, so I will tell you this as gently as I can," Sirius looked like he might be on the verge of shouting, so Remus shut his mouth. "James doesn't swing that way. You know he's all for Evans. I tried to tell Peter as well, but you know how he is. And I'm not getting involved in a three-way tug-o-war with you lot over my best friend. There are just some things that go beyond the bounds of friendship."

Sirius was looking at him, expecting some sort of response. Remus was stunned. Sirius was not at all bothered by the idea that he might be that way inclined, and he hadn't realised that Peter was. Maybe the next thing he had to say wouldn't be so hard. But Sirius was still looking at him with those dark eyes under those straight, black brows

"Sirius," he began softly, "Padfoot, I think you mistook my meaning." Suddenly, words failed him. All he could do was look pleadingly into Sirius's eyes. He laid a hand on the other boy's knee.

"Oh," said Sirius quietly, a look of sudden comprehension dawning in his eyes. "I see" It seemed forever that they sat like that, still and silent, gazing into one another's eyes, Remus's hand on Sirius's knee. Then Sirius looked away. Remus felt a deep disappointment well up inside him. He drew back his hand.

"Did I ever tell you," Sirius began, then cleared his throat. "Did I ever tell you about when we all became Animagi?" He glanced quickly back at Remus, who shook his head, and then looked out over the river again. "It was my idea, to start with. I thought it must be fun, being able to be an animal once in a while. I know," he said quickly, though Remus hadn't been going to say anything.

"I was naive then," he continues. "I didn't realise how the transformations hurt you. I just thought it seemed like you were out having fun while we were all holed up in the castle. I wanted ..." he smiled a bit ruefully. "I wanted to come out and play with you, I guess. I got the idea when Hagrid had that litter of hellhound pups. Watching them play-fight and tumble over one another. I thought it would be fun to have litter mates -- to have a pack. I thought you'd like it, too." He blushed.

"So I started doing research into Animagi. It was complicated stuff. Advanced incantations, rare ingredients and lots of mental discipline. I eventually told James what I was doing, and he agreed to help. Then Peter found out. Well, we spent those full moon nights for three years researching, preparing, gathering ingredients, when you weren't there to see. I don't think I ever slept on the night of a full moon all that time. James and Peter did, but I never did. It was like an obsession with me.

"I wanted to be out there with you, running by your side in the

moonlight. And for the first couple of years, I never asked myself why I wanted that so much. But then, one night, I got in late after detention, and you were sprawled out on your bed with open books and bits of parchment all around you, sound asleep, and I looked at you -- really *looked* -- and I *knew*."

The glimmer of hope inside Remus's chest had brightened. If Sirius was saying what it sounded like he was saying "What did you know, Padfoot?"

Sirius looked at him and smiled shyly. "I knew -- I knew it wasn't pack mates I wanted. It wasn't running through the woods in the moonlight -- it wasn't the prestige of being an Animagus. It was you, Moony," he said simply. He reached over and squeezed Remus's hand. "I wanted to go where you went and do the things you did because I didn't like being apart from you."

Remus's chest felt tight, and his head swam as if he weren't getting enough oxygen. He turned his fingers over, and squeezed Sirius's hand back. They both sat, looking at their intertwined fingers as the sun began to set.

"When did you know?" Sirius asked.

Remus looked into the other boy's eyes and smiled. "Last spring," he said. "Ever hear of the Mirror of Erised?" Sirius looked at him blankly. "Never mind," said Remus. "It's not important." After a moment he added, "Padfoot?"

"Hmmm?" inquired Sirius, once again looking out over the river at the sunset, this time thoughtfully.

"Would you mind -- I mean, would it be all right -- Can I kiss you?" He blushed deep crimson at the awkwardness of the question.

Sirius said nothing, but turned to look at him again. Then, very slowly, he leaned towards him. Remus closed his eyes as their lips met, soft, boyish mouth to soft, boyish mouth. They were both awkward, and their teeth clicked together, but they didn't stop. Tentatively, they tasted and explored one another for the first time. Sirius tasted like that Muggle cigarette thing he had been trying to smoke earlier, which was odd, but not entirely unpleasant.

It was long moments before they had finally drawn back from one another, blushing and grinning, their hands still clasped together. "Let's not tell James just yet," Remus had said. And Sirius had nodded, the wicked smile of a co-conspirator on his swollen lips.

CHAPTER ELEVEN HAPPY BIRTHDAY, REMUS

The last few weeks of summer had been spent brushing fingertips and sharing secret smiles and stolen kisses when no one was looking. Of course James, not being stupid, cottoned on to the fact that something was up, and confronted them in the week before the beginning of term, on what was possibly the dozenth occasion he had seen them jump guiltily apart as he entered a room. They had confessed, and he had laughed and slapped them both on the backs as if it were the best joke he had ever heard. But then he had sobered up and told them with heartfelt sincerity that he was really pleased for them. And then, unexpectedly, he had hugged them both.

The second they had boarded the Hogwarts Express, though, on September 1, and headed back to school, Remus realised that it was going to be difficult to keep their secret surrounded by a few hundred nosy teenagers, and also that not everyone would be as understanding about their new bond as James had been. Of course Remus told Lily right away, and she was every bit as pleased for him as James had been. She had squealed and hugged him, and promised to try harder that year to get along with Sirius, and even James, if he would stop being such a bastard to Severus.

Peter had found out in short order as well, though no one ever really officially told him. He wasn't stupid, and when four boys

share a room, and two of them share a secret, well, before long they are all going to be in the know.

James was very good about knocking, but Peter would forget to. Not that they really got up to much at first. Kissing, mostly, and maybe a little cautious groping, but they never let things get too far, because they were jumpy about being walked in on. Sure, it would just be one of their friends, most likely, but that would still be embarrassing. And on the off-chance that someone else came for a visit one day Well, they were cautious.

But as the first full moon of term approached, Remus had an idea. They had just come up from supper in the Great Hall on Remus's sixteenth birthday, and James was in the Gryffindor common room, "helping Peter with his homework," he had told them with a wink before shoosing them upstairs. The two of them had been lying on Remus's bed as usual, kissing and touching until their faces were flushed and their breath came in gasps.

Remus broke their kiss. "Padfoot," he murmured.

"Hmmm?" replied Sirius, trailing his fingers across Remus's back, under his shirt.

"I was just thinking," he began slowly, planting a kiss on Sirius's forehead. "Tomorrow's Saturday, and I thought maybe we could ask James if we could borrow his Invisibility Cloak tonight and ... um ... go visit the Shrieking Shack." He raised his

eyebrows hopefully at his boyfriend.

A slow smile spread across Sirius's face. "All right," he said immediately. "Let's go ask him."

They had adjusted their clothing and run fingers through their hair to make themselves look more presentable, and headed down to the common room. James and Peter were not the only ones there, of course. There was a group of first years playing Exploding Snap in front of the fire, and giggling frequently. Sirius had quietly taken James aside to make his request. And of course James had grinned and gone immediately upstairs for the object in question, and within ten minutes Remus and Sirius were on their way to the Hogwarts entrance hall.

The three-quarters-full moon hung in a cloudless sky, bathing the Hogwarts grounds in cool, blue light. It was warm for September, and it was stifling under the Invisibility Cloak. Remus gripped Sirius's right hand in his left, sweaty fingers intertwined, and they held the cloak shut with their free hands. Remus could feel his heart pounding, and wondered if Sirius could hear it, or if Sirius felt half as nervous as he did. If the other boy's grip on his hand was any indication, he probably did.

What am I doing? Remus had wondered. He hadn't really thought about it until then. At least, not in anything but the most general way. He knew he liked being with Sirius, and that it was hard to get any private time together, without fear of being

interrupted. Well, now they would get that chance, and he found he was terrified.

When they reached the Whomping Willow, Sirius had ducked out from under the cloak, changing immediately to a lanky black dog. He was faster that way, and could hit the secret knot to still the tree before it hit him first, if he was lucky. Well, that time he had been lucky, and Remus had followed him into the secret passage. They had hurried along the tunnel, impatient for -- *What?* Remus continued to wonder.

He knew about sex of course. He wasn't *that* innocent, he told himself. But he had always imagined it happening differently, and of course until recently, he had thought it would be with a girl. He'd never thought of it as something that would just *happen* one day. Somehow he had thought there would be some sort of planning or preparation or progression towards it. *But isn't that what we've been doing all along?* he suddenly realised. *Heading towards it?*

And now he was scared. He was so young, really, and he had never done anything like this before. But then he looked at Sirius, a little ahead of him in the tunnel, and he felt better. He wasn't alone in this. He had his good friend Sirius Black here with him. It would be all right.

They had finally arrived at the entrance to the Shrieking Shack. Remus had felt both as though they must have been walking all

night to get there, and that they had arrived in no time at all.

Standing on the dusty, creaky floorboards, Sirius had turned to him and grinned. "We're alone, Moony," he'd said unnecessarily, taking Remus's hands in his own. Then he looked into his eyes, and his expression changed to one of concern. "Are you all right, Moony?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Remus replied, his voice unusually high. He cleared his throat. "I'm just ... a little nervous," he confessed with a shy smile.

"Me, too," Sirius confided. "I've never ... I mean, I'd always hoped ... Moony, I wanted you to be my first." He blushed. "Happy birthday," he added with a nervous smile.

Remus looked at him, stunned. Surely Sirius Black, at sixteen easily the best looking boy at Hogwarts, with his tumble of black curls, his dark eyes, his full lips, his straight nose, his wonderful, dusky skin, had done *something* at some point with someone! But now that Remus thought about it, if Sirius had been involved with anyone to that degree at any time during their school career, he would have known about it.

"Sirius -- Padfoot -- I ... I ... I don't know what to say," he stammered.

"Then don't say anything," Sirius had told him, and kissed him,

slowly, passionately, thoroughly. They had been of a height in those days, which made such things easy. Then, wordlessly, eyes never leaving his, Sirius had taken both his hands and led him into the bedroom.

Sirius sat down on the bed and began to take his shirt off. Remus could see the pulse leaping in his throat.

He put a hand on his arm to stop him. "Padfoot, we don't -- you don't have to do this."

Sirius gave a tiny smile, but Remus could see fear deep in his eyes, "I know I don't have to. But Moony, I *do* want to!"

"I know. So do I. But it doesn't have to be now," he said quickly. "We've got all night. There's no hurry."

Remus could *see* the fear go out of Sirius as he let out the breath he had been holding. Remus sat down on the bed next to him and put his arms around him. Sirius said something so quietly that he didn't quite catch it.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I said, I'm sorry," Sirius replied. "I didn't expect -- I didn't think I'd be so damned scared," he said at last, in a voice that sounded almost angry.

"Padfoot, it's all right. I'm scared, too. Look, why don't we just lie down for a bit?"

And they had. For a while they had just lain together, arms around one another, Sirius's head resting on Remus's shoulder. But the nature of teenage boys tends towards desire, and before long, their hands began moving slowly over one another's bodies, exploring, and their lips met again, nervously as the first time, then hungrily.

Neither of them had realised how the assurance of not being discovered would affect them, and they were both startled by their boldness. It was only a few minutes before Sirius was lying on top of Remus, pressing against him and now fumbling impatiently with his shirt. Remus had helped him wriggle out of it and then Sirius had attacked the buttons of Remus's own shirt, accidentally popping one of them off in his eagerness.

As Sirius spread his shirt open, Remus pressed up against him. "Please, Sirius," he murmured. He was hard and aching with desire, but he wasn't sure what exactly he wanted Sirius to do about it. But apparently Sirius had a good idea. Bare skin to bare skin, Sirius's lips left off their assault on his own and descended instead to his left ear, licking, nuzzling, nibbling, until Remus, much to his surprise and Sirius's pleasure, let out a moan, pressing more urgently against the boy on top of him.

As if that had been the signal, Sirius began to wriggle down

Remus's body, still licking, kissing and biting as he went. Bewildered and helpless in his desire, Remus watched as Sirius settled himself between his legs with the grin Remus knew meant he was about to pull one of his most outrageous stunts. He gasped as he felt the dark-haired boy's hand move up his thigh, and come to rest on the bulge in his jeans. Making an inarticulate noise in his throat, he pressed against Sirius's hand. Still grinning, Sirius began to unbutton Remus's jeans, then he slowly drew down the zipper, exposing his dark blue boxers.

Remus closed his eyes. He twitched when he felt Sirius's fingers brush his stomach, and then shivered as they slid lower, into his boxers. When they closed around his swollen cock, he moaned again. It felt good. Better than good; it felt bloody amazing! The calloused fingers moved against his sensitive flesh in firm strokes.

He was so wrapped up in the sensation that he almost didn't notice when Sirius urged him to raise his hips so he could slide his jeans and boxers down over them. The cool air striking his flushed and damp skin was not as much a surprise for him as the sensation that had come next.

His eyes flew wide with shock, and he stared incredulously at Sirius, lying between his legs, lips wrapped around the head of his cock. "Sirius!" he gasped, moving his hips.

Sirius raised his head. "You like that?" he said in a low, teasing

voice.

The shock was wearing off quickly. "God, *yes!*" And then, "don't bloody *stop!*" His world had shrunk to a single point that was Sirius's hands on his thighs, Sirius's curls brushing his stomach, Sirius's mouth engulfing him, Sirius's tongue, moving, flicking, caressing.

It hadn't taken long. He had been sixteen, after all. Within seconds, he was bucking his hips, his hands tangled in Sirius's dark, silken curls, and it was barely a minute later that he was tasting himself on Sirius's lips. It was all he could do to return the kiss. He felt as though his body had melted, or as if all his bones had been removed.

"I love you, Sirius," he'd said, then, eyes closed, as soon as he had remembered how to speak, and as soon as Sirius had broken that kiss. He'd said it almost without realising what he was saying.

Sirius was very still for a moment, not even breathing, then in a rough voice had said, "I love you, Remus Lupin."

There had been no doubt of that fact from that moment until the terrible night, more than a decade later. The bond forged between them that night in the Shrieking Shack had been a permanent one, and obvious to anyone who saw them, though many misinterpreted its nature.

They had done many other things that night. There had been pain and even tears and there had been pleasure beyond anything either of them had imagined, and none of what they did had involved sleeping until nearly dawn. They had neither of them been virgins any longer when they sneaked back into the castle, sticky and disheveled, sometime after breakfast the next day. And they hadn't been caught, either, though Remus had always been privately of the opinion that, even if they had, that night would have been worth any punishment Filch could devise.

And now Remus Lupin stood staring at that selfsame bed, more than twenty years later, eyes unfocussed, the wolf already prowling his thoughts, his instincts already more animal in nature than human. Where was Sirius? Damn the man, would he not show himself?! Just remembering the events which had taken place in that room had brought him to a point of painful arousal. If Sirius were here now ... well, what he wanted to do with the man need not involve trust.

He sniffed the air. Yes, Sirius had been here recently. Unconsciously, he growled deep in his throat. His hand was in his pocket, clutching the little carved dog. He could summon Sirius with that lock of hair. He could do all manner of things to the man with it. He would get his wand out any second now and summon him, he decided. If only this damnable tingling in his neck would stop long enough for him to focus!

He fumbled for his wand, but it dropped to the floor with a clatter. Dammit! Why were his hands so clumsy? Picking it up again, he took the little wooden dog from his pocket. He pointed the wand at the dog, and stood for a moment, holding one in each hand, trying to remember a spell, any spell. He shook his head, once, twice, trying to clear it.

And then he stood perfectly still. There it was. That sound. Footsteps. Footsteps on the creaking wooden floorboards of the rooms beneath this one. And another sniff of the air around him confirmed exactly who it was.

The wolf won out. Instinct took over, and in a heartbeat, Remus Lupin was out of the room and flying down the stairs, knocking Sirius Black to the floor, and crouching over him, growling. For a moment, he registered a flash of fear in Sirius's eyes, and then he was looking into the yellow eyes of great black dog, who was growling right back at him. And then he was Remus Lupin no more.

CHAPTER TWELVE HARRY'S FIREBOLT

"Professor Dumbledore has every confidence in you, Professor Lupin, and that being the case, so have I," said Minerva McGonagall, giving him a look that belied her words.

He nodded tiredly, but said nothing, instead taking another long swallow of honeymarrow tea, savouring the flavour of something beneficial which did not carry the bitter aftertaste of wolfsbane.

"Now, Professor," continued Professor McGonagall, "Gryffindor's chances are really quite good this year, and I am sure Potter will want his broom back as soon as possible. That is, *if* you're certain there's nothing wrong with it." She gave him a steely look. "Please do take extra care in examining it, Professor. I have good cause to think that --" she paused, looked around, and lowered her voice, "*Sirius Black* may have sent it to the boy. In which case it is most assuredly a danger with him. Undoubtedly full of Dark magic."

"Certainly, Professor McGonagall," he said with an inward sigh. "I shall do all within my power to discover whether this broom is dangerous to Harry or anyone else. I'll have to run a few tests, to be sure, but I should be able to give you a full report of the matter in about a week's time." He put out his hand to take the broom. McGonagall hesitated before handing it over.

She didn't trust him. So few of the older teachers did -- the ones who remembered the boyhood bond between Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. She knew he was good at his job, and that if the broom had any secrets, he should be able to discover them. But he knew she had only come to him because Dumbledore had suggested it. And he also knew that, once he made certain of the broom's safety or lack thereof, she would still take it to Filius Flitwick to run yet another series of tests. Harry would be lucky to have his broom back by spring.

"We are *all* concerned for Harry's safety, Professor," he reminded her quietly. "James and Lily were my friends as well."

Her eyes softened a little at that. Finally, she laid the gleaming broomstick in his hands, gave him the tiniest of smiles and a nod, and hurriedly left the room.

After she had gone, Remus returned to his desk, and, leaning the broom against it, poured himself a fresh cup of tea. The honey was soothing to his raw throat, and the magic with which it was infused radiated through his body, numbing the ache of his muscles, the pain of the new, raw marks on his arms. But the tea unfortunately did nothing to assuage the weariness. His mind felt dull and his limbs heavy.

It had been a hard night. They all were. But usually he felt better than this by late afternoon the next day. He closed his eyes and

massaged his throbbing temples. If only he could remember what had happened.

He remembered going to the Shrieking Shack. Or maybe he didn't, and only thought he remembered it because that was where he had awoken. He had been lying on the hard, bare floorboards, naked and shivering. And there had been a familiar scent -- a comforting scent -- and suddenly the familiar feel of thick fur against his skin, and then there had been *warmth*. Still mostly oblivious with exhaustion, he had turned instinctively towards the great black dog, burying his face in its fur.

It was mere seconds before consciousness began to invade his brain. The first switch that went on said, "*No!*" before he even remembered why, and he was scrambling backwards on hands and knees until he fetched up sharply against the wall, casting about frantically for his wand.

The dog turned and looked at him, looked with those piercing, yellow eyes. Remus went cold. Between the dog's jaws was his wand. Slowly, Remus got to his feet, back and hands still flat against the wall. The dog stood, too, still facing him. It shook itself, then gave him an appraising look from head to toe, something very like a doggy smirk evident on its face. Remus felt a faint blush tinging his cheeks, and had a sudden urge to cover himself.

But then the dog had turned and trotted towards the door. In the

doorway, it paused to look back at him, almost regretfully. Then it carefully laid the wand on the floor, and padded away down the stairs and out of the house. Remus sank back down to the floor and closed his eyes.

In his weakened state, he would have been no match for Sirius, especially without his wand. Why the man had come to him again, and gone again without a word was still a mystery to Remus, and it was a mystery that had only deepened when he had returned to the castle an hour later, and had met Professor McGonagall waiting for him in his office.

Harry, it seemed, had been given a new broomstick for Christmas, evidently to replace his beloved Nimbus 2000, which had fallen prey to the Whomping Willow that autumn. But the source of the new broom was unknown, and therefore suspicious. McGonagall suspected Sirius, and Remus couldn't deny that that seemed the most obvious explanation. While many people were undoubtedly fond of Harry, few could afford to express that fondness with the gift of a Firebolt, which, Remus had been informed, was the very latest thing in Quidditch brooms, and thus, terribly expensive.

Sirius could afford it, though, with access to the Black family fortune. *But could he get access to the money? Remus wondered, and if so, how had he gone about getting his hands on the broom without being recognised? And above all, why? Surely a cold-blooded killer like Sirius Black can think of a less*

complicated and expensive way to eliminate Harry, if that is his goal.

Well, there was one mystery he could solve easily. Checking to make sure his office door was shut, he knelt beside the broom, put his long nose to it and sniffed all down the length of it. Yes, definitely from Sirius. So he hadn't been the only one to get a Christmas eve visit. He took out his wand.

Remus spent an exhausting afternoon and evening performing every test he could think of on the broom. He checked it over, inch by inch, twig by twig. Midnight came and went, and still he neither ate nor slept. There *had* to be something here. He just had to keep looking.

But in the end, he was baffled. The broom was clean. Either that, or his skills and powers were failing him. Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps he *hadn't* really smelled Sirius on the broom. Maybe the scent had come from his own robes, which were the same ones he had been wearing the night before, when he had gone down to the Shrieking Shack. Maybe it had come from the lock of hair still in his pocket.

Why would Sirius send Harry, the person he apparently loathed most in all the world, and wanted dead, an expensive and untampered broomstick? It was yet another piece of the Sirius Black puzzle which did not fit.

He was tired. Perhaps he could not trust his nose right now. But there was another way.

Again, he drew his wand, tapped the broomstick and whispered, "*Tactus amatori.*" At once, softly glowing blue spots appeared all along the handle of the broom. Sirius's fingerprints were all over the damn thing.

But the blue glow was not confined to the Firebolt. His wand glowed blue where the dog had held it in its mouth. His hands glowed from being buried in the dog's fur. The glow of the tiny wooden dog and its precious keepsake was visible through the threadbare material of his robe.

Eyes unfocussed, he stood. Slowly, he drew off his robe and laid it over a chair. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and removed his trousers, folding them neatly and laying them on his desk. At last he stood naked in the center of the room.

He turned to face the scrying glass on the wall. It was not large enough to see all of himself, but he could see enough. The entire front of his body glowed, of course, from his momentary, semi-conscious cuddle of the dog. But what made his eyes go wide were the lip-shaped marks on his face, and the fact that his own mouth was glowing a bright, steady blue.

* * *

Remus spent the better part of a week working with Harry's mysterious new Firebolt. He tried every spell he could think of to look for curses, to discover the broom's secrets. The library, even the Restricted Section, yielded nothing helpful, despite long hours of research. At last, baffled, he gave up. The broom was clean.

There was no real explanation for it. Of course, Sirius had no wand. His own had been destroyed when he was sent to Azkaban. He had no way to perform curses and jinxes himself. *But, thought Remus, he's had plenty of chances to steal a wand. He could have taken mine the other morning in the Shrieking Shack.* At first, he had thought that had been Sirius's intent, but he had later realised that all Sirius wanted was for the wand to be far enough from Remus that he could make a safe exit. *And even without a wand, a man like Sirius Black, with connections to ... those kinds of people, could find someone to perform curses for him.* But he hadn't. The Firebolt was truly clean.

Remus closed his eyes and let years of prejudice and suspicion fall away. His Sirius, the Sirius Black he had known and loved, would indeed have given Harry fine, expensive gifts like this. The gesture was not at all out of character for the man he had been -- or the man Remus had thought he had been.

Sirius had loved buying people presents, and under Wizarding law, a portion of the Black family fortune had been his by rights. Remus had always been too embarrassed by his own lack of

resources to let Sirius buy him things outright, but there had been many expensive Christmas, birthday, St Valentine's Day, anniversary, and "just because I love you" gifts. The old gramophone had been one, and his second wand, the one he still used, had been another.

Of course, after Harry was born, Sirius had showered him with gifts as well. There was no exciting new toy, no state of the art baby equipment that was too much for his little godson. He would have bought Harry a broom for his first birthday, if Lily and Remus hadn't talked him out of it. Harry was far too young for such a thing, they had told him. And besides, by the time he could use it, it would be outdated. Better to wait until he was old enough, and then get him the best broom money could buy.

So instead, Sirius had taken to giving Harry rides on his flying motorbike. "Once he has a taste of flying," Sirius had said confidently shortly before Harry's first birthday, "he'll never be content to live earthbound all his days." And Harry had loved it. Remus had been there when they came back from Harry's first ride, shrieking and grinning and clapping his fat little baby hands.

Sirius had been right. After that first time, Harry had been lost. "Bike" quickly made his short list of new words, and "fie" ("fly" was too difficult for him to pronounce), and when Sirius came over to visit, Harry would reach for him and say them over and over again until he relented and took him up for a ride.

Remus smiled sadly to himself. The bike had been the only expensive present he had ever got for Sirius. He hadn't finished making the payments on it until three years after Sirius had ended up in Azkaban. He probably should have sold it, he reflected, after Hagrid had returned it. But Sirius had loved it so much that Remus couldn't bear the thought of giving it up. *Sentimental fool*, he chided himself. But neither could he bear to look at it, because every time he did, he remembered Sirius in his leather Muggle clothes, smiling and holding a joyful baby Harry, and the image was too much for him. So the bike had been in storage many long years.

Maybe Harry would like it one day, Remus thought. Yes, it would be good for the bike to go to someone Remus loved who would love it, rather than just rusting away and falling apart. *Not yet, of course*, he supposed. *He wouldn't understand such a gift from me right now, and besides, he's far too young. Maybe once he's left school.* The sad smile returned. *You were right, Sirius. The boy does love to fly. You gave him a great gift.*

He looked at the broom again. There was nothing further he could do with it, and while part of him kept telling himself that the Firebolt *couldn't* be safe, most of him had already accepted that it was. The best thing to do, in that case, he supposed, was to see that Harry got it back sooner rather than later. He could only imagine how a thirteen-year-old boy would feel to receive such a gift and then immediately have it taken from him.

"*Nox*," he muttered, and the room went dark. He wanted to make

sure that the Lover's Touch spell had worn off completely before he went to give his report to Professor McGonagall.

* * *

On the first day of the new term, Remus could tell from Harry's glum mood in Defence Against the Dark Arts that he had not yet had his Firebolt returned to him. After class, he arranged their first Anti-Dementor lesson with the boy for the following Thursday, and that seemed to cheer Harry up a bit. He wished there were something more enjoyable he could do for Harry than teach him how not to faint from fear before those cold creatures, but this was what he needed right now, and it was something useful Remus could do for him.

He'd still have to figure out a reasonable substitute for a Dementor, since he would rather not subject Harry to the real thing any more than strictly necessary, and Dumbledore wouldn't allow them inside the castle. Still, he had a few days to work something out.

As he was gathering up his notes, he glanced to the door and saw that Harry and his friends were standing in the corridor just outside, talking in low voices. Out of curiosity, he quietly went to stand by the door, just out of sight. Harry and his friends weren't the Marauders, but he felt a sudden longing for those days -- to be thirteen again -- and to hear the sorts of plans that were made when there were no adults to overhear.

It was Ron's voice he heard first. "I said I wonder what's wrong with Lupin, and you --"

"Well, isn't it *obvious*?" replied Hermione, and Remus's heart sank. She'd figured it out. He had known she would.

Damn Severus and his bloody essay! He could trust Dumbledore to keep his secret, and the other Professors to do so out of respect for Dumbledore, but once a student knew, there was no way his secret could remain secret for long, and once it was out

"If you don't want to tell us, don't," Ron bit out.

"Fine!" declared Hermione, and Remus heard her ringing footsteps moving quickly off down the corridor. He breathed a sigh of temporary relief.

"She doesn't know," he heard Ron confide to Harry. "She's just trying to get us to talk to her again." And their footsteps headed off more slowly in the opposite direction.

Remus's brows drew together. He hadn't realised that the children had had a falling out. But now that he thought about it, he realised that today in class, Harry had sat between his friends, whereas it was usually Ron who sat in the middle. He hoped it was nothing serious. After all, children had fights and made up all the time. He supposed that it was his own oversensitivity on the subject, but he hated to see normally good friends fighting. Especially Harry's friends. Harry needed all the love and support

his friends could provide, and that his family could not. *Thanks to Sirius*, he thought with uncharacteristic heat. *But at least as long as they're fighting*, he thought selfishly, *my secret is safe*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN THE PATRONUS LESSON

When he arrived at the History of Magic classroom the following Thursday just after 8:00 PM, Remus found Harry already there, waiting nervously for him. He looked relieved when his professor explained to him that they would be practicing on a Boggart instead of a real, live Dementor.

Remus drew his wand, and Harry hesitantly followed suit. "The spell I am going to try to teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry," he admonished. "Well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm."

Harry nodded. "How does it work?" He eyed the packing case containing the Boggart nervously.

"Well," he said slowly, trying to find the best words to explain something as complicated as this spell to an impatient thirteen-year-old, "when it works correctly, it conjures up a Patronus, which is a kind of Anti-Dementor -- a guardian which acts as a shield between you and the Dementor." He hesitated. That was, of course the basic function of the Patronus. It was much more complicated than that, but he wanted to explain as much of it to Harry as he could in the simplest terms possible. The better the boy understood what he was trying to achieve, the greater his chances of success.

"The Patronus is a kind of positive force," he continued. "A

projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon -- hope, happiness, the desire to survive." All the things which had been taken from Remus Lupin without a Dementor coming within ten miles of him. Sometimes he thought he might as well have ended up in Azkaban himself. "But it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the Charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

A look of determination entered Harry's eyes. How like James he looked! James, who had never let a spell defeat him, once he had put his mind to learning it. From that look alone, Remus knew that it would only be a matter of time before Harry was able to conjure a creditable Patronus.

"What does a Patronus look like?" Harry asked.

Of course. Harry had been unconscious on the train when Remus had conjured his own Patronus. But even that would have told the boy little enough about them. Remus had once been able to conjure a very impressive Patronus, which took the shape of a large and familiar-looking dog. But since that terrible Halloween, he had been unable to produce anything more than an indistinct silvery cloud. Because, of course, to conjure the Patronus, one needed a happy thought, and on that night, all of Remus Lupin's happiness had been ripped away from him, and what memories he still carried had been tainted forever.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it," he told

Harry. He was curious to see what Harry's Patronus would look like. He had no doubt that he would find out before long. He wished he could instill that confidence in Harry.

"And how do you conjure it?" Harry was asking.

"With an incantation," Remus told him, "which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory." Suddenly he wondered if Harry would have a happy enough memory available to him. Parents dead, raised by Muggles who hated him and feared magic, he hadn't had much good happen to him at all until less than three years ago. Remus Lupin desperately hoped that something extremely good had happened to Harry at some point in his life. Something that he could remember, since the love of his family, which Remus himself had witnessed, was beyond the grasp of his memory.

Harry looked as though he was thinking very hard. The longer he thought, the sadder it made Remus feel to watch him. *Think of something, Harry, he begged silently, or I fear that what's left of my heart will break for you. Lily and James's son deserves so much better.*

At last, Harry nodded, a doubtful but once again determined expression on his face. "Right," he said, looking to Remus for further instruction.

"The incantation is this --" he cleared his throat, "*expecto patronum!*"

"*Expecto patronum*," Harry muttered, memorising the words. "*expecto patronum*."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?" Remus reminded him.

"Oh -- Yeah --" Harry replied, becoming suddenly flustered, and garbling his mumbled words.

That was the trick to it, really. In theory, it is easy enough to point one's wand and say some words, but a spell like this one required a high degree of mental discipline. One had to remember the words, remember the happy thought, believe in the Patronus, and all while facing at least one Dementor. No surprise if it was a difficult spell to master.

Harry kept trying the words over and over, looking hopefully at his wand. Suddenly, what looked like a tiny curl of silver smoke drifted out of the wand, quickly disappearing into the air.

"Did you see that? Something happened!" The look of surprised joy on Harry's face was enough to cause Remus himself to smile. He hadn't conjured more than a wisp himself before he was seventeen.

"Very good," he told Harry. "Right then -- ready to try it on a Dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, somewhat defiantly. Looking very pale, he moved to the centre of the classroom, and squarely faced the

packing case, feet planted, wand at the ready.

Remus looked at the boy for a moment. The expression on his face was unreadable. Well, there was only one way to find out if he was ready. Standing behind the desk, opposite Harry, he put both hands on the lid of the packing case and pulled.

The Dementor rose from the box, looking very real. Remus backed up until his back met the wall, holding the lid of the packing case to his chest like a shield. His eyes rose with the Dementor facing Harry. Immediately, all the heat was gone from the classroom. The lights guttered and extinguished themselves.

Remus tore his eyes from the cold thing to see Harry frantically waving his wand and shouting, "*Expecto patronum*," over and over again. His green eyes were visibly losing focus, and each time he spoke the incantation, his voice sounded a little weaker. He took a step back, and then another, looking more and more frightened, more and more lost. His eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped.

Remus vaulted over the desk, putting himself between the Boggart and Harry. The Dementor turned its head towards him, and suddenly Sirius Black was grinning at him, holding out his arms towards Remus. "*Riddikulus! Get in your sodding box!*" he shouted. *Please, God, don't let Harry see this!* He forced the Boggart back into the packing case, then waved his wand vaguely at the lamps in the room to re-light them as he turned to

deal with Harry.

He was sprawled on the floor, perfectly still and white as a sheet, sweat standing out on his face.

"Harry! Harry!" Remus called, shaking him. *He'll be all right. He'll be all right*, he kept telling himself. *Arse! Why did I let him do this?!*

Harry's eyes popped open, darting about the room until they fixed on Remus's face, leaning over him. Remus could almost see the boy's memory returning.

"Sorry," Harry muttered, sitting up much more quickly than Remus would have liked, and groping for the edge of a desk to pull himself to his feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked Harry in a worried tone, fumbling through the pockets of his robes for chocolate. His fingers brushed the little wooden dog and he drew his hand out of that pocket quickly to search another.

"Yes ..." Harry leaned heavily against the desk, still gripping it with both hands. Remus really wished he would sit down.

"Here," he said, handing the boy a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before --" he had been planning to send the boy back to Gryffindor tower, to the company of his friends and the warmth of his bed, but now he met Harry's eyes, and saw the look of determination was back, and the colour was returning to his

cheeks. "-- before we try again," he finished. Then added, "I didn't expect you to do it first time. In fact, I would have been astounded if you had." That was true enough. He didn't really expect Harry to get much of any result while facing the Boggart tonight.

"It's getting worse," said Harry through a mouthful of chocolate. "I could hear her louder that time -- and him -- Voldemort --"

Remus felt all the blood drain from his face. *Lily screaming*. It would have been too much for him. How could he expect her son to bear it, to face it again? *I was wrong*, he decided. *I should have sent him to bed*. "Harry," he began, "if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand --"

"I do!" declared Harry, his cheeks burning, the fire back in his eyes. He swallowed the rest of his Chocolate Frog quickly. "I've got to," he continued, looking at his professor with pleading eyes. "What if the Dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can't afford to fall off again. If we lose this game, we've lost the Quidditch cup!"

That was what Harry cared about. Of course. Remus mentally kicked himself for forgetting that Harry was only thirteen -- that his priorities were not those of an adult. The terror of the Dementors, his parents' murder, the fact that Sirius Black was after him; none of those things mattered as much to Harry as the prestige of winning the Quidditch cup, or the humiliation of losing it. It wasn't Harry's fault, he reminded himself. He

remembered being thirteen as well, when full moons were an annoyance because they meant that he couldn't be with his friends, rather than that there was a dangerous monster living inside him.

But that didn't make it any less important for Harry to be able to drive off the Dementors. "All right then," he said at last. "You might want to select another memory, a happy memory, I mean," he said quickly, "to concentrate on ... that one doesn't seem to have been strong enough"

He watched in sympathy again as Harry wracked his brains for another, happier memory. At last he smiled, and Remus sighed with relief. Harry was not without happy occurrences in his life. Knowing that made him feel ever so slightly better. Not everything good about the Marauders had died that night, and the proof stood before him, looking to him with trust, if not love.

Harry squared his shoulders and faced the packing case again.

"Ready?" Remus asked him, hands on the box lid.

Harry nodded. "Ready," he said, aiming his wand and staring hard at the box.

"Go!" he heard himself say, and off came the lid.

Again the room went cold and dark almost at once. Harry was yelling the incantation over and over again, but the Dementor-Boggart kept on gliding towards him, and once again Remus

saw the boy's eyes lose focus and his knees buckle.

Once again Remus set himself between Harry and the Boggart, who now looked like a wounded Sirius, begging for his help. He closed his eyes, picturing something -- anything -- that was not Sirius Black, and shouted, "*Riddikulus!*" Opening his eyes, he saw the full moon with Sirius's face grinning down from it. He smiled humourlessly. *Why not?* he thought wryly, *you both torment me.* He brought the lid down on the Boggart.

Harry looked even worse this time; not just pale, but positively grey. Though he was unconscious, there were tears running down his cheeks, mingling with the sweat. He could only imagine what the boy had seen and heard, but imagining was enough. His own eyes stung. He wished he could take Harry in his arms, and protect him until all the horrible thoughts went away, but he knew that it was hardly a gesture that a thirteen-year-old boy would appreciate.

Instead, he took Harry's hand in his own, and patted it. "Harry?" he inquired tentatively at first, then, when there was no response, he said a little bit louder, "Harry?" Still nothing. The tears still flowing down his cheeks were upsetting Remus. He wanted to get Harry awake and get some chocolate into him as quickly as possible. He smoothed the sweat-soaked hair from his forehead, gently tracing the lightning bolt scar with a finger. *I suppose that night had to leave a mark somewhere,* he thought, wondering anew at the miracle of this boy's survival.

Harry still showed no sign of coming around. His eyelids twitched as if he were dreaming, and from the set of his mouth, it was not a pleasant dream. Remus shook him, calling his name again, and still got no response. "Come on, Harry," he muttered, "don't do this to me."

Shaking was having no effect. At last Remus sighed and drew his wand. It was not good to force the body's natural state with wand magic. Healing was best done with potions and infusions of herbs. He tapped Harry's forehead with his wand. "*Exanimatus finis.*"

Harry's entire body twitched, and his eyelids began to flutter. Remus put his wand away. "Harry," he urged the boy gently, "Harry ... wake up ..."

Harry's eyes opened. He lay on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, making no attempt to move, and clearly having no understanding of why he was there in the first place. *I should have let him wake up on his own*, Remus thought, angry with himself. *It's so jarring to be woken with wand magic. But damn it! He gave me a scare!*

At last, he slowly turned his head to look up into the face of his very worried teacher. "I heard my dad," he said, in a very groggy voice. "That's the first time I've ever heard him. He tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it ..." Harry sat up to wipe his face on his robes, but Remus barely

noticed.

He stared over Harry's shoulder, through a window, out into the darkness of the January night, not seeing it. *Just like James*, he thought. *Always so full of reckless bravado, and nothing in this world more important to him than Lily and Harry. We always said his overconfidence would be the death of him.* He looked at Harry, who appeared to be fiddling with an already-tied shoelace. *He really does remember, doesn't he?* he thought with wonder. *He's not just imagining this stuff. He never knew James -- not like I did -- but he knows exactly how he'd act.*

But the horror of the memory was with him as well. With no witnesses to their deaths, save Harry, all Remus had known was that they had died. But now the scene was becoming clearer and clearer in his mind. James barring the door, wand in his hand, shouting to Lily to go. Lily reaching for Harry in his cot, looking to James in terror. Both of them knowing that they had been betrayed, and by whom, and that they were going to die. But not without a fight. Never without a fight. And their courage had somehow saved their son, and brought about the downfall of Voldemort.

And now their son sat at Remus Lupin's feet, pretending he wasn't fighting back tears, because his only memory of his parents was at the moment of their deaths, and they had both died to save him. He had a kinship with this boy. For who else had lost so much on that night which had caused the rest of the Wizarding world to rejoice? If he had been alone, Remus would

have wept as well, for pity. But he couldn't let Harry see that, so he held himself firmly in check.

"You heard James?" he asked, knowing his voice sounded oddly choked.

"Yeah ..." Harry finally looked up. His eyes were red. "Why -- you didn't know my dad, did you?" he asked suddenly.

Remus was flustered by the unexpected directness of the question. "I -- I did, as a matter of fact. We were friends at Hogwarts." He really didn't feel like he could handle discussing James and Lily just at the moment, so he changed the subject. "Listen, Harry -- perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced ... I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this ..." *Or me, for that matter.*

"No!" said Harry, struggling to his feet once more. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is ... hang on ..." His brow furrowed, and he pressed his lips together, tapping his fingers on the desk. At last, he took a deep breath, let it out, and faced the packing crate once more.

"Ready?" he asked Harry from behind the desk, wishing very much that he had followed his first impulse to send the boy to bed with a large supply of chocolate. "Concentrating hard? All right -- go!"

Once again, the Dementor rose between them, and once again Harry raised his wand, looking pale but determined. His hair

was standing on end, just like James's always had when he was agitated, Remus thought absently.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled over and over again, shaking his wand as the lights flickered and died and all heat left the room once more. The Dementor advanced, but Harry stood his ground.

Concentrate, Remus thought hard at him. *You can do this, Harry. I know it!*

Harry's eyes got bigger and bigger as the Dementor approached, but he never stopped shouting, or waving his wand, and he never took a step backwards. The Dementor stopped.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry shouted one last time. And then a huge, silvery cloud burst from the end of his wand. It hung in the air between Harry and the Dementor, and the three of them -- Harry, Remus and the Boggart -- stared dumbly at it for a second.

Then Remus saw Harry beginning to sway, and leapt forwards, shouting, *"Riddikulus!"* The Boggart once again turned into a tiny full moon, emblazoned with Sirius Black's face, laughing cruelly at him, but he was pretty sure Harry was too far away to see that as he forced it back into the packing case.

When he turned to face Harry again, the cloudy Patronus had vanished. "Excellent!" he told Harry in heartfelt tones. He strode

across the room and sat next to the exhausted teenager. "Excellent, Harry," he repeated warmly. "That was definitely a start." He suppressed a strong urge to give Harry a hug. James and Lily would have been so proud! *He* was so proud!

"Can we have another go?" begged Harry. "Just one more go?"

"Not now," he said with a smile, rummaging through the pockets of his robes again. "You've had enough for one night. Here --" He gave Harry a bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate, which he had been saving for just this occasion, though admittedly, he had thought it would be several weeks away. "Eat the lot," he admonished, "or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood." Harry looked as though chocolate was a poor substitute for another chance to conjure a Patronus, so Remus added, "Same time next week?"

"OK," Harry replied, seeming satisfied with that. He unwrapped the chocolate and began to nibble at a corner of it as Remus wandered around the room extinguishing the lights. "Professor Lupin?" he said after a moment. "If you knew my dad, you must have known Sirius Black as well."

He stopped dead, facing the wall, very glad that Harry could not see the expression on his face. He hoped that, in the now-dim light, Harry hadn't seen the stiffening of his shoulders at the mention of that name. He spun around, unconscious that he was glaring at the boy. "What gives you that idea?" he asked, no

trace of his normally mild manner in his tone.

Harry looked alarmed at his teacher's sudden change in demeanor. "Nothing -- I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts, too ..."

The tension left his body. Obviously Harry wasn't drawing any of the same suspicions or conclusions as the adults at the school were. But it was still difficult to talk about Sirius in front of anyone, especially Harry. "Yes I knew him. Or I thought I did." He felt suddenly very tired. "You'd better get off, Harry. It's getting late."

Harry gave him a worried look before hurrying off towards Gryffindor tower. He listened until he could no longer hear the boy's footsteps in the corridor before he gathered up the Boggart's box and headed back to his rooms, hoping vainly that sleep would find him tonight.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SOULLESS

Five weeks later, a very pale Remus Lupin sat staring in shock at that morning's edition of the *Daily Prophet*, no longer seeing the words printed on the page.

"*Black to Receive Dementor's Kiss*," read the headline. The article went on to say that the Ministry of Magic had given permission for the Dementors of Azkaban to perform their "Kiss" on Sirius Black, when they found him. It was only a short article, and tucked away at the bottom of the fourth page, at that. It did not even give an explanation of what the "kiss" entailed. It only suggested that it was a nasty, distasteful thing, and that the Wizarding public really didn't want to know the unsavoury details.

But Remus knew. In his days at Hogwarts, there had been a two week long unit on Dementors as part of his Defence Against the Dark Arts studies in his sixth year. He'd been a good student, and could still remember many of the topics covered on the course. However, Professor Seagram, who had taught Defence Against the Dark Arts in those days, had glossed over the Dementor's Kiss.

It had only been later, after Sirius had been sent to Azkaban, when Remus had developed a morbid fascination with the place and its fearful guards, that he had learned what the "kiss" truly

was: a loss of self -- of soul or mind or memory or whatever else one chose to call it. The Dementors sucked it right out of their victim's mouth. It was the most extreme form of punishment permissible in the Wizarding world.

Remus had always disapproved of its use on principle. It seemed too close to the "unforgivable" class of curses. True, it was only reserved for the most unrepentant, irredeemable law breakers -- generally the sort of people who had performed at least one Unforgivable Curse -- but could anyone really deserve to lose his soul?

And now the person in question was Sirius. Did he deserve it? He thought of all Sirius had done -- what he had done to James and Lily, to Peter, to Harry, to all those unnamed Muggles, and to Remus himself. Dreadful things. But that terrible kiss would destroy not only the violent madman, but the man he had been, and the boy. The troublemaker. The practical joker. The rebel. The lover. That reserve of inner strength and that capacity for vulnerability. His own dear, beloved Sirius. None of those aspects would exist within Sirius's mind any longer. *Maybe some of them died long ago, thought Remus, but they are still there somewhere -- their crypts and graves. Once the kiss is performed, everything he was and is will be gone forever. He will only exist in my memory.* Once the kiss was performed, there was no chance of redemption. No soul to redeem.

He could not help but imagine one of those cold creatures,

swathed in its black robes, bent over a helpless and terrified Sirius, its -- mouth? against those lips Remus had kissed myriad times in tenderness and in passion, that had spoken words of love, laughter, hope and the future, and that had given him his first taste of carnal joy. He imagined the light slowly dying in those dark, beautiful eyes, all memory draining away. Memories of the Marauders' great friendship and small pranks, memories of every spell he had ever learned, from his hangover cure to his ability to become Padfoot, memories of Remus himself and the love they had shared, from the first tender crush and tentative kisses to the nights of earth-shattering passion that had left them both bruised and aching the next day. All would be gone forever. Sirius Black would be dead, and all that would be left was an empty shell that moved and breathed and resembled him.

Once the kiss was performed, Remus supposed that they would release him to the care of St Mungo's. After all, with all thought, feeling, hope, desire drained away, there would be nothing left in him for the Dementors to feed upon. There would be no point to keeping him in Azkaban any longer. *I'd go to him then, Remus knew himself all too well. I would go and collect him and find a safe place, and I'd care for what was left of him the rest of his days, for the sake of what we once had. Hell, I'm already a social pariah. What would it matter? It's not like I've had anything else to do with my life.* He wondered if doing so, and having some purpose to his life, however meaningless, would make the immense loneliness better or worse, or only change its nature.

Harry, he thought. Harry would never understand. He might even hate me, and then I'd never see him again. Remus knew that, now more than ever, he could not be the one to hand Sirius over to the Dementors. It seemed, however, that he was being given every opportunity to do so. Was Sirius taking advantage of that weakness? Using him in order to ...? To what? Three times now, he had come to Remus -- an action more rash than mad -- and done nothing which had proved him either insane or violent in Remus's presence. He had made himself easy for Remus to find and follow. He had come to his rooms twice, left an obvious trail in the secret passage only they knew of, and come to find him in the Shrieking Shack. *He's hiding from everyone but me,* he realised. *He knows I'm no betrayer. I'm too sentimental. I'll risk all on the man he was, and he knows it.*

His eyes returned to the article. There was a small photo of Sirius next to it. Remus made himself really look at the photo for once. The long, tangled, dirty hair; the gaunt, thin face; the dark circles under those once-beautiful eyes. He knew what he was doing. He was looking for some trace of his Sirius in this stranger. Some sign that the man he had loved -- the man he loved even now -- was still in there somewhere. As the head in the picture turned, he caught glimpses: The line of the jaw, the shape of the nose, the curve of an ear. But it wasn't physical recognition Remus sought.

But why look for Sirius here, in this picture taken in Azkaban

Prison, where all men were madmen? He now had more recent impressions and memories of Sirius to draw upon. There it was. A brief spark of memory: Sirius kneeling at his feet, looking up at him with sad, sad eyes. He frowned, trying to place the image. When had Sirius come to him as a man, and not Padfoot? *It must have been Christmas Eve*, Remus thought. *How bloody drunk was I?* The night was still coming back to him in bits and pieces, but even six weeks later there were definite large, mysterious gaps in his memory.

He tried once again to piece the night together, to fit this new image into context. Sirius had been there, and it hadn't been a full moon. He wasn't hiding, since there had been no word from anyone else that he had been in the castle that night; only the later suspicion based on Harry's new Firebolt. So why had Sirius come to his rooms? He replayed as much of the scene as he could recall in his mind. Whisky. Music. A kiss on the forehead. A wooden dog with a lock of hair and a hangover cure when he had awoken. And now this sudden image of Sirius kneeling at his feet, looking as sorry as a person ever looked.

There had to be something more -- something else. Remus wracked his brains for some detail he had forgotten. Something Sirius had said. And then the words came floating back to him. "I need your help," he had said. "I came to explain."

Explain. Had he said more than that? Remus thought through the evening over and over again, but if Sirius had said more,

Remus's brain had not been able to hold onto it. Sirius had come offering answers, the thing Remus hungered for above all else, and he had been in no position to hear them. But what could Sirius have told him? Protestations of innocence on the word of a man who had spent twelve years in prison for committing terrible crimes? Either Sirius was innocent and had come to tell the truth to the only man left in the Wizarding world who wouldn't turn him over to the Dementors, or he was guilty and had come to enlist the help of the only man left gullible enough to believe him.

Remus Lupin a dozen years ago would have believed that Sirius Black would never lie to him, but that was before the facts of betrayal and murder had cast so much doubt over their affair, so far into the past. When had the lies begun? Had it been easy for Sirius to tell them? Now, doubt was all he had. Without knowing for certain that Sirius was guilty, he could not condemn him, and without certain knowledge of his innocence, he could not help the man.

How many times had he thought through the events leading up to the night his world had ended? Painful as it had been at the time, he had found out everything he could. He had gone to Godric's Hollow, to the location of Sirius's arrest, to the Ministry of Magic. He'd found out every detail the Ministry had allowed the public to know, and through a few bribes that had emptied his Gringotts account, a few they hadn't. He'd carefully tried to remember everything Sirius, James, Lily, even Peter, had said in

that last month. Still the picture was confused. Was it his own denial that such a betrayal was possibly which fueled that confusion, or was there truly something missing from the picture?

Remus closed his eyes and prepared to go into that dangerous part of his mind where the detailed account of those events was kept. A pity it was too early in the morning for anything stronger than tea. No, he needed a clear head for this. How had it gone? Ah, yes

He and Sirius had gone over to visit Lily, James and Harry in Godric's Hollow in mid October. Those had been such dark times. There had been none of the banter and laughter that usually marked their gatherings. Peter had been there as well that time, he remembered. That had been a rare thing by then. Poor Peter. His mother had been ill, and he had had to spend a lot of his time with her. He barely saw his old friends anymore.

Remus wondered now, as he had then, whether any mistrust had existed between James and Lily, as it had between himself and Sirius. After all, one of the five of them had to be the traitor. He supposed that hiding under the same Fidelius Charm was a good indication of trust, but then he and Sirius had been planning on hiding as well. Of course he hadn't thought Sirius was the guilty party then -- no, that wasn't entirely true. He hadn't wanted to believe it was possible.

If he had had to put his money on one of them in those days, he might have said Peter, but that was probably because Peter had all but been replaced by Lily in their little circle by then -- he had been so busy with his sick mother -- and he couldn't bear to think that one of the three dearest people in his life might be a traitor. But then had come that terrible day. Peter had acquitted himself like a hero, and died in the attempt.

Everyone had been so tense at that last gathering. They had all known for some time that Voldemort was looking for at least one of the Potters, though none of them was really sure why, except that they were close friends of Dumbledore. James had looked grim. The only trace of his usual good humour had been a few bitter jokes that had made no one laugh. Lily was never more than an arm's reach from him, and they were constantly touching one another for reassurance. Lily's eyes had been big with fear, and she kept looking to James with a trust that had broken Remus's heart.

Harry had been crying, Remus remembered. He was usually such a quiet, happy baby, but even he could detect the tension of the adults around him, and he had wailed and wailed until Remus had offered to take him outside for a bit and walk him around the garden. Lily and James had nodded tiredly. They had to talk to Sirius, they'd said.

Remus had taken Harry outside, into the garden, and tried humming soothingly to him and bouncing him on his knee, to no

avail. The baby had continued to cry and squirm. At last, Remus had simply sat him on his knee and begun talking to him. He was not sure to this day what had possessed him to do so, nor was he certain of what he had said, but he had poured his heart out to the uncomprehending infant, tears running down his cheeks -- his fears, hopes, sorrows -- and gradually, Harry had quieted, looking up at Remus with round, trusting green eyes.

At last, he had taken Harry back into the house to his parents. James had taken Harry from him. "Thank you, Remus," he'd said, an emotion Remus couldn't quite name in his eyes. "Thank you for everything." And Lily had come over and given him a hug, and he had *known*. In that moment, he knew that he was never going to see them again, and that this was goodbye.

The shock of that knowledge had kept him from weeping until he was home. Peter had seen him and Sirius home, and had hugged them both, looking sorry and regretful, and then he had gone as well. It was the last time Remus had seen any of them. The Fidelius Charm had been performed the next day.

He had wept unashamedly that night, and Sirius had held him, white-faced and murmuring into his hair that they would be all right. He'd known that was a lie, but it had been a comforting one. He hadn't known the rest of it was a lie as well. Sirius had said they would go into hiding, that Voldemort would come looking for them if he thought they knew where the Potters were. He'd made some arrangements with Dumbledore, he had

said.

In the days that had followed, they had spoken of James and Lily and little Harry often. Remus had been jealous, he admitted to himself now. Sirius was their Secret-Keeper, and could go see them anytime he liked. But every time Remus had said something to that effect, Sirius just shook his head and changed the subject. Remus had been so concerned -- had known what Voldemort would do to get the secret of the Potters' whereabouts -- but he was also so proud of his own brave Sirius.

They had tried to continue to live as normally as possible in those last days. Sirius had said that he wouldn't go into hiding until he was sure there was a danger, because he didn't want to draw unwanted attention to himself and Remus. So instead, they had planned a celebration of their own one year anniversary on Halloween.

Remus had decided to prepare the dinner without the use of magic. He had lit candles and put on soothing music, but the air had fairly crackled with tension, and Sirius had simply sat on the sofa, gazing moodily out the window, thoughts obviously far away. When Remus put a hand on his arm, Sirius had jumped, and then given him a weak smile, but just shaken his head in response to Remus's queries about what was troubling him.

Remus was just putting the last touches on supper when he heard Sirius come into the kitchen. Turning around, he saw

Sirius looking at him oddly. He opened his mouth to tell the other man that dinner would be ready in a few minutes, but the words died on his lips and Sirius strode across the kitchen, took Remus in his arms and kissed him hard enough that he tasted blood. He pulled away, and looked searchingly into Remus's eyes. Remus had thought he was about to say something, but then he let go, and hurried to the front door of the flat, grabbing his leather jacket as he passed.

"Sirius, where ...?" he had started to say.

"I'm just going to get the wine," he had said brusquely. "I'll be back in a bit." The door had slammed shut behind him, and a moment later, Remus had heard the motorbike roaring to life. The sound faded away into the distance as he continued to stand shocked in the middle of the kitchen, still tasting blood, staring at the unopened bottle of Goblin's Reserve on the table.

He had waited. At first he had told himself that it was just the hard times getting to Sirius, and he needed some air. But as it grew dark, and the candles burnt down an inch and then another, he began to worry. What if something had happened to Sirius? He was so reckless, and his mind obviously wouldn't be on his flying tonight. Anything might happen. He could have an accident. Or Voldemort's followers could have found him -- could even now be prying the secret of James and Lily's whereabouts from him. But that thought had been just too horrible to contemplate, so he had sat until nearly midnight,

watching dinner grow cold, untouched, and trying to think of nothing at all.

He must have dozed off, for he had been awakened between 2:00 and 3:00 A.M. by voices in the street outside the flat. The candles had guttered out, and the room was dark, so he could see the scene outside clearly by the Muggle street lamps. There was a group of about five people in the pool of orange light, and they looked to be wearing wizards' robes. They appeared to be talking excitedly, but Remus couldn't tell what they were saying through the glass, so he got up and went to open the door.

They all turned and looked at him when they heard the door open, and he instinctively reached for his wand. He had an absurd urge to call out, "Friend or foe?" but instead he said only, "*Lumos*," so that they could see he was a wizard like they were, despite his Muggle clothing.

The shortest of the group, an auburn-haired young witch in a purple velvet top hat, broke away from the group and hurried towards him. He could see she was smiling, but when she got close enough to see who he was, her face fell.

"Remus Lupin?" she asked tentatively. She reached out, as if to shake his hand, but instead, she simply held it and didn't let go. Her eyes were troubled.

"Maggie ... Lewis?" he guessed. She gave a tiny nod. She had

been a Gryffindor as well, a couple years behind him and the other Marauders at Hogwarts. He looked over at the others, but saw no one else he recognised. They were all looking at him curiously.

"Remus," Maggie began, and then faltered.

A feeling of dread was welling up inside him. Something had happened. Something big, to get wizards wandering Muggle streets in packs, undisguised, in the middle of the night. Given the state of the Wizarding world at the time, he had known better than to hope it was anything good.

"What's happened?" he asked quietly. He could not read the look in her eyes.

"Vol -- You Know Who -- he's gone!" Her tone of voice said that she did not quite believe what she was saying, and was a little shocked to hear it being said out loud. "His power has broken, and he's fled. I heard there's people who were under the Imperius Curse who are waking up all over the country. Some of his true followers have even killed themselves!"

He couldn't believe his ears. This was wonderful news! But she was still looking at him with eyes that said not everyone was celebrating tonight.

"What else?" he asked a little more sharply than he had

intended. The knot of dread within him was quickly transforming into a lump of ice-cold fear.

"I -- they -- he --" She tried to let go of his hand then, but he held her fast.

"Tell me, Maggie."

She took a deep breath, and spoke quickly, but could no longer meet his eyes. "You Know Who -- he went to Godric's Hollow. He was looking for the Potters." She glanced up at him, and he nodded. She would know that he had been friends with James and Lily. "He -- they were -- they're dead, Remus," she finally managed. "I'm sorry." She squeezed his suddenly-numb fingers, then pulled her hand from his and backed away.

No! his brain screamed at him. No, it can't be true! If Voldemort is gone, then James and Lily are OK. We're all OK. If he's gone, we're all going to be fine! But if it were true There was only one way Voldemort could have got to James and Lily, and that was through Sirius. He had a sudden vision of Sirius, surrounded by Death Eaters, in the agonising throes of the Cruciatus Curse, being forced to reveal the Potters' whereabouts.

The group of wizards was walking away from him by then, every now and then casting a worried glance over a shoulder at him. He ran after them, and grabbed Maggie Lewis, spinning her around.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Sirius Black!" he shouted. "Where is he? What's happened to him?" *Please don't let him be dead too*

But Maggie was shaking her head. "I don't know! I don't know! I haven't heard anyone say anything about him! Please, let me go!" She looked utterly terrified of Remus, and he realised dully that he was behaving like a madman. He released her at once.

The other witches and wizards were staring at him again. He raised his hands and backed away from them, to show he meant no harm. Then he broke and ran back to the flat.

He had to get to Godric's Hollow. Maybe it was all a mistake -- some silly rumour blown out of proportion. He'd go there, and see for himself that James and Lily were all right. Or at least that their house was nowhere to be seen, still under the protection of the Fidelius Charm. He had wanted to Apparate and get there at once, but he was too agitated to do so safely. It would have to be by broom, then.

It was two hours' flight from London to Godric's Hollow, and by the time he got there, he could see the first signs of grey dawn on the horizon. The starlight was dim, but the darkness could not hide the truth from his eyes, as much as he longed to deny it. Where James and Lily's house should have been -- or not been, as the case may be -- was little more than smoking wreckage.

As he drew nearer, he could see that Ministry officials were already crawling all over the scene. He touched down in the street and was almost immediately approached by a grim-looking witch.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to clear the scene. We're very busy here."

"Please," he began, "the Potters are friends of mine. Tell me ..." but the words died in his throat, for he had just looked over the witch's shoulder to see two still forms decently covered in black cloaks next to the smoldering remains of the house.

"I'm sorry, sir," the witch was saying in a softer tone. "James and Lily Potter are dead."

"I know," Remus replied. His voice sounded very small. *It's true. They really are gone.* He sat down suddenly on the pavement, unable to tear his eyes away from those silent, cloaked shapes.

The Ministry witch was patting his shoulder awkwardly. "Can I get you anything, sir? A drink of water?"

He shook his head, and with a last glance of concern, she turned and went back to work.

After a moment, Remus made himself get to his feet. He was shaky, and he could feel the cold sweat standing out on his face. He made as if to take a step towards the place where the bodies of his friends lay, but he couldn't do it, so he wandered across the yard in the other direction, not wanting to leave, but not really wanting to see whatever other horrors this place might have to offer.

The entire scene hummed with the power of the curse that had been cast. The lawn was strewn with bits of household items, broken furniture, a splintered thing that might have been a wand, and Harry's toys.

Harry. Harry's not here, Remus had suddenly realised. "James and Lily Potter are dead," he had been told. He risked a glance, and still saw only two still forms on the grass. *Where is he?*

And then, at his feet, he saw something that made his heart skip a beat: a single tire rut on the lawn, running twenty feet or so, and stopping abruptly at either end.

Sirius. Sirius must have come here to check on them, seen they were in danger and taken Harry away with him. But that wasn't right. The Potters couldn't have been in any real danger until Sirius gave the Death Eaters their location, so why would they have had him take the baby away? A thought had dawned in his mind then that he had wanted with all his heart to deny: that Sirius had given up his information voluntarily. That he was the

traitor in their midst. That he had come here with Voldemort, and taken Harry away with him. But why? And where did Voldemort's downfall fit into the sequence of events? *I have to find them*, he thought. *I have to know*.

Remus had got shakily back onto his broomstick. Once in the air, he drew his wand. "*Amatori invenio*," he said, his voice cracking. He took his hands off the broom handle, and let the locator spell lead him. He knew it was dangerous; wherever Sirius was, he was either a traitor or in grave danger. If he was in danger, Remus had to go to him, and do what he could. If he was a traitor, Remus needed to know, and needed to do what he could to save Harry.

Dawn was breaking, and below him, he could make out houses and farms. Gradually, the farmland gave way to suburbs, and after an hour and a half's flight, he was over narrow city streets, crowded from the early Muggle commute. Still the broom led him onwards. He didn't care if Muggles saw him; things were too dire to worry about that now.

The broom began to descend on a busy Muggle market street. Remus had wondered dimly for a moment what city he was in. He hadn't been paying attention to where he was going. And then he saw Sirius standing no more than fifty metres away, his back to him.

Remus had glanced around, but he had not seen baby Harry.

What he had seen was Peter Pettigrew. Then he had seen Sirius pointing his wand at Peter. Then he had seen a smoking crater, a plume of black smoke, Muggles screaming, blood everywhere, Sirius laughing ... *laughing*. Remus had fallen to his knees on the pavement. *No!* he had screamed silently. *Sirius, no! Not you! Anyone but you!* His body rebelled, physically denying and rejecting what he had just seen. But he had not eaten since lunch the previous day, and the spasms that wracked his body brought up very little.

He had looked up again in time to see members of the Magical Law Enforcement squad tackle Sirius. They had grabbed the wand from his hand, and *still* the man was *laughing*. And then suddenly he had caught sight of Remus, kneeling on the pavement, horror and anguish in his eyes. He had stopped laughing then; his face had become blank and unreadable, and his black eyes had not left Remus's grey ones until he had been hustled into the waiting Ministry van, and the doors shut and locked behind him, and then dizziness had overcome Remus, and his world had gone black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN THE WEREWOLF IN QUESTION

He was probably only out for a few minutes, but he came back to consciousness reluctantly.

"Here's another one," said a voice somewhere nearby, and then someone put a hand on his neck. "No, this one's alive. Get one of those Obliviators over here. We're going to need another memory charm in a minute when this one comes around."

"Shouldn't we question him first? After all, he is a witness."

"No, I think we've got enough witnesses. Not much point; they're all saying the same thing, anyway."

"Hang on a sec. He's got a wand. We've got a *wizard* witness!" There was a laugh with little humour in it. "Imagine if we Obliviated a wizard! Armstrong would wring our necks!" The owner of the voice began shaking Remus's shoulder. "Sir? Sir, can you hear me?"

No. Go away, thought Remus fiercely. *Just leave me the fuck alone.* If what he thought had happened had really happened, he didn't want to be conscious. He just wanted to lie here, not remembering, not thinking, until he died. As soon as he showed signs of consciousness, there would be questions. They would expect him to talk about what he had seen. They might give him

an hour or so if he was in shock, which he suspected he was. He felt so cold. But before long, they would want him to talk. Wizard witness, they'd said. And once they found out he knew Sirius

Sirius! Just thinking his name sent white-hot needles of agony into Remus's heart. James and Lily being dead, that was tragic, but everyone had to die sooner or later. What Sirius had done was went so far beyond that that there was no comparison. *I'm broken*, thought Remus. *I'm broken and I'll never be whole again. Half of me is torn away.* A single tear slipped silently down his cheek.

His anguish must have showed on his face, because one of the voices had said, "Look, I think he's coming around. Here, Sir. You're all right now. Can you sit up?"

Reluctantly, Remus had opened his eyes then. A kindly-looking, middle aged wizard in Ministry robes helped him into a sitting position, then called to his partner to bring Remus a cup of water, which he considerately waited for and pressed into Remus's hands before asking him any questions. Remus drank deeply. His throat felt as though he had been screaming, but he was pretty sure that had only been in his head. He still felt as if he might start, if he had to think too hard about what had happened.

"There you are, Sir. Feel any better?" The man's voice was full

of kindness and sympathy.

Remus shook his head, not trusting his voice. The man looked at him, eyes full of understanding. *You think you know, but you don't*, thought Remus angrily.

"My name's Johnson," said the man. "I'm with the Ministry. Did you see what happened here?"

Remus opened his mouth to reply, but no sound emerged. He closed his mouth and then opened it again, with no better results.

"Poor bloke's in shock," said Johnson's partner. "And no bloody wonder if he is! Terrible thing to see." He shook his head sadly.

"Well," said Johnson slowly, "if he saw what happened over yonder we'll have to take him in anyway for questioning, being as he's a wizard."

I don't want to go to the Ministry, Remus thought desperately. They'll have hard questions. They'll want me to talk about Sirius. And when they find out I know him, they're going to want me to talk about James and Lily and Peter as well. But he could not make even the smallest sound of protest. Instead he looked at Johnson pleadingly and shook his head.

"Sorry, mate," said Johnson sympathetically. "Rules is rules. We gotta take you in."

They had helped him to a Ministry van, and within fifteen minutes, he was walking -- or, more to the point, being walked -- through the doors of the Ministry of Magic. He had been in the Ministry a number of times before, but in his shocked state, nothing looked familiar. His eyes slid across people, objects, walls, floors, recognising nothing.

They had gone up one corridor and down the next, past doors with important-looking signs on them that all looked the same, until at last they came to something that looked like a waiting room, filled with uncomfortable chairs. His guide had sat Remus down in one of these chairs and left him, saying only that someone would see him shortly. About half the chairs in the room were filled with white-faced, tired-looking witches and wizards.

Remus wasn't sure if he sat there, willing his mind to think of nothing at all, for five minutes or five hours. One by one, the other people in the room were called through a door, into an office of some kind. At last, a thin, balding man in his mid-thirties beckoned Remus through the door. According to his name tag, this was A. Murdoch. He got to his feet with difficulty, amazed that he could stand at all, wondering if he should use this surprising ability to make a run for it, and went into the office. His legs felt weak and shaky, and he was grateful to be able to collapse immediately into a chair once more inside the small room.

A. Murdoch sat down across the desk from him and peered nearsightedly at a piece of parchment. "Hmmm ..." he said. "You were present for the ... unpleasantness in the Muggle marketplace this morning?"

Remus nodded.

"Name?" said the man, not looking at him.

Remus had tried to reply, but still no sound emerged from his mouth. After a moment, A. Murdoch looked up at him. Remus tried to say he was sorry, but he could not speak. The Ministry official looked annoyed.

"Can you write it down for me?" he asked. He got out a quill and a bit of parchment and pushed them across the desk towards Remus. He picked up the quill to write his name, but he suddenly could not remember how to hold a quill. His hands felt clumsy and he kept dropping it.

A. Murdoch's expression of annoyance deepened. After a few moments of watching Remus fumble the long plume, he got up abruptly and left the office by a different door than the one through which Remus had entered.

Remus could hear him talking to someone in the next room. "No, can't speak a word," he was saying. "Can't write it down

either. How much of my time am I supposed to waste on this one? I've still got half a dozen others to see this afternoon."

"The poor man's in shock, Artemis," replied a woman's voice. "You have to be gentle in these cases. Employ a little kindness. I know that's not your strong suit."

"You're welcome to try, Cassandra," Murdoch replied in defeated tones. "Just, get him talking, will you?"

The door had swung open then, and a witch had strode into the room ahead of Artemis Murdoch. She stopped short when she caught sight of Remus.

"Merlin's beard!" she exclaimed. "It's you!"

Remus looked at her without curiosity, and of course said nothing.

The Ministry witch had pulled the other chair around the desk to sit beside him, and covered one of his hands with her own. "We met this morning, Sir," she said in a gentle voice. "In Godric's Hollow?" If she was looking for some spark of recognition in his eyes, she found none. "I'm Cassandra Clark," she continued. "I am helping with the investigation of the ... incident that occurred in Godric's Hollow last night. You said you were a friend of the Potters?"

Remus nodded dully at her.

"*And* you were in the marketplace this morning? No wonder you're in shock!" She clucked at him like a mother hen, then turned to Artemis Murdoch, who was hovering impatiently nearby, having no other chairs in his office. "He's not going to be able to answer any questions in this state," she admonished him. "He needs rest. Find him a place he can sleep for a bit, and bring him some sleeping draught."

Murdoch looked nonplussed. "The longer we leave this, the more likely he is to forget the details of what he saw," he protested.

Not bloody likely, thought Remus. *I doubt there's a chance in hell that I will be lucky enough to ever forget the least little thing I have witnessed today.*

"Really, Artemis!" Cassandra Clark was saying, patting Remus's hand absently. "You're not going to get anything out of him until he rests, no matter how many questions you badger him with. What do you suggest?"

"All right," Murdoch snapped. "There's a sofa in Jacobsen's office, and he's out sick today. You can stick him in there for a couple of hours. Now, will you just get him out of here so I can get back to doing my job?"

Cassandra Clark tutted at Murdoch as she rose and ushered Remus from the room. She took him to an empty office a few doors down. "Now, Sir, you just make yourself comfortable, and I will be back soon with that sleeping draught."

Remus had lain numbly on the sofa, staring at the ceiling, thinking that he was unlikely ever to sleep again. He felt cold. He hadn't felt warm since Sirius had left the flat the night before.

I mustn't think of Sirius, he told himself. *Not until they make me. It's just too* But he couldn't even think of a word to express how it felt to think of Sirius now. It went so far beyond pain that to call it "painful" was almost laughable.

Thankfully, at that moment Cassandra Clark returned with not only a steaming mug, but a frayed woollen blanket. "Here now, Sir," she said kindly. "Drink up, and then have a bit of a rest." She drew the blanket over him as he forced himself to swallow the potion. It didn't taste of anything, but he could hardly remember how to swallow. "Now," the witch was saying, "someone will look in from time to time to check on you, and once you're awake, maybe you'll feel a bit more like talking?"

He had nodded slightly, and she had patted his hand again, with a look of maternal sympathy before leaving the room. Even as the door clicked shut, Remus could feel his eyelids drooping. The strains of the day, on top of the fact that he had hardly slept in twenty-four hours, was enough to wear a person out, and as

soon as the sleeping potion was added to that, he was gone.

He had dreamed of Padfoot. Of the loyal, black dog who had helped him through his transformations -- had fought to be with him -- for nearly ten years. Padfoot, who had run with him as pack and been his mate, had been there after every hard, moonlit night, and lain next to him as he woke, to lend warmth to his cold, aching and torn body. Padfoot, who had existed only to be helpmate to the wolf inside, and to protect him from himself. He woke clutching the rough, woollen blanket, his tearstained face buried in its scratchy folds. Padfoot was gone.

He had lain there for several moments, trying to get the trembling under control, willing the tears to stop falling. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Lupin*, he told himself fiercely. *They're going to want to talk to you in a minute. You can mourn for them all later. Yes, there will be plenty of time for that.*

He managed to get himself under some semblance of control before a young wizard he didn't recognise -- some sort of Ministry page, he assumed -- stuck his head in and saw he was awake. He was then led back to Murdoch's office, where Murdoch, Cassandra Clark, and now another unknown wizard were waiting for him. They all looked at him grimly as he entered.

"Is your name Remus Lupin?" asked the unknown wizard sharply.

They knew who he was now. *And probably plenty else besides.*
He cleared his throat. "Yes," he said softly.

"Have a seat please, Mr. Lupin," he said, eyes never leaving Remus.

Remus sat, wondering where the questioning was going to begin.

Murdoch and the other wizard took turns asking him questions, while Cassandra Clark mostly cast troubled looks in his direction and took notes on a long sheet of parchment.

"You had some association with the Potters?"

"Yes."

"What was the nature of this association?"

"We were friends."

"I see. How long had you known them at the time of their deaths?"

"About fourteen years. We went to school together."

"And you went to school with Sirius Black as well?"

"Yes." His voice was barely audible.

"What was that, Mr. Lupin?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes."

"And would you say you were friends with Sirius Black as well?"

The question startled a mirthless laugh from him. "Friends?" he asked. "Oh, yes. I would say that we were. We ... lived together," he clarified without, he hoped, being too clear.

Cassandra Clark's eyebrows snapped together and she looked at him sharply. *Looks like she just jumped to the right conclusion,* he thought.

"And Peter Pettigrew? Was he a friend also?"

"Yes." Again his voice was quiet.

"Were you aware of Black's involvement with the people who called themselves the Death Eaters?"

"No."

"No? You say you lived with him. You were friends. Are you

saying you had no idea he was involved with ... the Dark Lord?"

Remus thought it funny that even Ministry officials at their most professional could not bring themselves to speak Voldemort's name. "No," he said. "I had no idea he had fallen in with Voldemort." He was slightly gratified to see them all flinch at the name.

"But you knew that the Potters were going into hiding. That ... the person you mentioned was looking for them?"

"Yes, I knew. We all knew."

"Who 'all' knew?"

"Me, James, Lily, Peter. Sirius."

"And were you aware that it must have been someone close to the Potters passing information to the so-called Death Eaters?"

"Yes. We knew it had to have been one of us."

"Were you aware of the precautions the Potters had taken to prevent being found by ... You Know Who?"

"Yes. They performed a Fidelius Charm a little more than a week ago."

"And do you believe Sirius Black to have been their Secret-Keeper?"

"Yes. He must have been. James trusted him above anyone."

"Did Sirius Black at any time tell you that he had been made the Potters' Secret-Keeper?"

"I -- no. No, I don't believe he did." That memory surprised him. But then Sirius had avoided talking about many things in those last few weeks.

"But it is your opinion that he was?"

"Yes."

"Where were you between 8:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. last night?"

"I was at home. My flat in London."

"Is there anyone who can confirm your whereabouts?"

"No, I was alone."

"Can you tell us at what time you last saw Sirius Black last night?"

"He left the house at ... ummm ... about 7:30 P.M."

"I see. And did you know at the time where he was going?"

"No. He said he was going to go get a bottle of wine."

They changed tack then. "Have you at any time been approached for recruitment by the so-called Death Eaters, or worked for the Dark Lord or any of his followers in any capacity?"

"What? No!"

"You seem very sure, Mr Lupin. Please explain your answer."

"Well, it's well known that they usually recruit only pure-bloods. My mother was a Muggle."

"I see."

Just then, the door had opened, and the Ministry page who had brought him came in. He apologised for interrupting, and hurriedly dropped a note onto the desk in front of Murdoch before hastily departing.

"We've been running a background check on you," said Murdoch, opening the note. "Your close association with the ... suspect. You understand." He glanced at what was written on the parchment, and his eyes snapped back to Remus at once.

"*Werewolf?!!*" he exclaimed incredulously. "Is this true, Mr Lupin?"

"Yes. I was bitten when I was six."

"You understand it is a very serious offence to withhold information from Ministry officials during questioning?" said Murdoch angrily.

"I didn't withhold. You didn't ask. And I didn't think it was relevant."

"Not relevant? Of all the impudence! Not relevant! Tell me, Mr. Lupin, how is it *not relevant* to be a vicious monster associated with a Death Eater and mass-murderer?"

"I didn't know!" His tone of voice went rapidly from dull to desperate. They couldn't think he had anything to do with what had happened! But people had certain ideas about the habits and personal associations of werewolves. "Please, check your records," he begged. "I've never bitten anyone. I've never knowingly associated with a Death Eater. I would never have done anything to hurt Lily and James!"

He realised he was dangerously close to tears. He did not want to cry in front of these people. He wanted to be somewhere safe. He wanted someone to hold him while the sobs wracked his body. But there was no one. There was nowhere he could go for

comfort any longer, and there was no one to hold him or protect him. A tear spilled down his cheek.

The Ministry wizards were talking amongst themselves. "I say we lock him up now Too big a risk Known werewolf associating with Sirius Black If we let him go now, there will be a public outcry."

"Please," he croaked in a small voice. They didn't hear him, but continued debating his fate. "Please," he tried again a little louder, "where's Harry?" They looked at him blankly. "Harry. The Potters' son. Where is he? Is he safe?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Cassandra Clark, realisation dawning. "Yes. Of course. Harry. Umm ... we're not at liberty to disclose his whereabouts, but I can tell you that yes, he's safe." They went back to their discussion.

Remus sagged back into his chair. Harry was safe, and as long as that was true, it didn't really matter what happened to him. Three of his best friends were dead and the fourth was no longer a friend. As far as Remus Lupin was concerned, there wasn't much left worth living for. He wondered vaguely if they would put him down as a dangerous beast. *I wish they had Obliviated me,* he thought. *Maybe they could obliterate all my memories back to the day I first laid eyes on Sirius Black.*

It sounded as though they were just coming to the conclusion

that they really should lock him up, just in case, when the door opened again, and into the room swept the comforting presence of Albus Dumbledore.

He looked around the room, from Remus, grey-faced, hollow-eyed, damp of cheek and trembling, to the three Ministry officials crowded around the bit of parchment with the incriminating word "werewolf" printed on it.

"I demand an end to the questioning of Remus Lupin," he said coolly.

"May I ask why?" said the Ministry wizard, staring at Dumbledore narrowly.

"The boy is in shock. Three of his friends have been killed in the last twenty-four hours. Can you not see that? I know Remus. He is an honest boy, and if he knew anything worth telling, he would have told you by now."

"He withheld the fact that he is a werewolf."

Dumbledore looked down his long nose at the man. "And have there been any werewolf attacks central or peripheral to this investigation?"

"Well ... no."

"Has this man been accused of anything?"

"No...."

"Then I submit that, if you have any further questions for him, they can be asked at a later date, and he should be allowed to go home and rest."

The Ministry wizard rose and cleared his throat. "Very well," he said. "But we shall be keeping Mr Lupin's file open. If we have any questions for him, we shall be in touch." He shifted his gaze from Dumbledore to Remus. "Don't," he said in tones that implied terrible things if disobeyed, "think about leaving the city without express permission from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Remus had nodded, then rose and followed Dumbledore numbly from the room. Once in the now-empty waiting room, he let the elderly wizard guide their Apparition back to his flat.

They arrived in the middle of the sitting room, and when Remus saw dinner still sitting on the table, the bottle of wine still unopened, he sagged, and would have collapsed if Dumbledore had not caught his arm. The old man guided him to the sofa, and sat him down, carefully facing him away from the table and its memories of the previous night.

Remus looked out the window instead. It was dark again. It had

been a whole day since the door slamming behind Sirius had acted as a catalyst for his crumbling world. This time he let the tears come, and they came hot and fast. He felt a hand come to rest between his shoulders as he buried his face in his arms against the back of the sofa. The man next to him -- the man who had made it possible for him to have a normal childhood, to go to school, to make friends -- radiated calm, tranquility, and understanding.

"They're dead, Professor," he sobbed. "Lily. James. Peter. Me and Sirius, as well."

"You loved them well, Remus. You have one of the greatest hearts I have ever known. Such a capacity for love." He was silent for a moment as Remus continued to shake, then he added, "You should know as well as I, dear boy, that death can never truly take those we love from us. Lily, James and Peter will always be with you, so long as you remember them. And Sirius."

Remus rocked back and forth, shaking his head, though he didn't know what he was denying. "*Why*, Professor? Why did he do it? How could he? Was I so blinded by love that I just didn't see?"

"Love can make us blind, Remus. It would not be your fault if that were the case. But I think this came as a shock to all of us. As to why and how Sirius could do such a thing, I do not know." He hesitated, as if unsure he should add the next words. "I spoke to him today."

Remus raised his head from his hands and looked at Dumbledore with bloodshot eyes. "You saw him?" he asked in a small voice.

"Yes. They're holding him at the Ministry for the moment, but I fear they will be taking him to Azkaban very soon. There is no trial scheduled."

"Then he -- he's confessed?"

"No," Dumbledore looked pityingly at him. "No, he's denied everything, up to and including the fact that he was James and Lily's Secret-Keeper. Damn," he said, almost to himself. "I told them I'd do it for them. James said he'd ask me if he had any doubts about Sirius."

"How can he deny it?" asked Remus despairingly. "I saw him do it -- kill Peter and all those Muggles. Professor, I was there!"

"I don't know, Remus, lad. He seemed very wild when I saw him. As if there were some madness in him." He hesitated again before adding, "He asked me to tell you ... he wants to see you. He wants you to come to the Ministry and hear what he has to say. Will you see him? Perhaps he will tell you something."

Remus stared at him for a moment, speechless. "No!" he said at last. "I won't! I can't! I can't see him. I can't talk to him. I can't

look at him after what he did. How could he ask that? Does he mean to kill me, too?" Then he added, with a conviction he didn't feel, "I never want to hear the name of Sirius Black spoken again."

"Of course you don't have to see him," said Dumbledore in reassuring tones. "It's entirely understandable that you would want to stay away. No one would blame you. In fact," he continued, "it might be better for you to avoid contact with him. The Ministry will most assuredly have you under surveillance for some time, and the less you do to arouse their suspicions, the better."

Remus nodded. "Professor?" he asked after a moment of silence. "Is there -- is there a spell you could do? Something to make me forget, or -- or hurt less?"

Dumbledore put both hands on his shoulders, with a look of absolute sympathy. "Dear lad. There are spells and spells. But memory charms would have to root out every trace of Sirius, James, Lily and Peter in your mind in order to be effective. Otherwise the memories would only come back in time. You would lose half your life. And your nights under the full moon should have taught you by now that the pain is part of the healing. It would be a grave disservice to those you love to forget them, or to feel their deaths any less deeply."

Remus closed his eyes. He knew Dumbledore was right. He

could never forget. And in time the pain would lessen. "I wished I would die today, Professor," he admitted.

"I can understand that, lad," he replied. "But you won't. Because one day, Harry will have questions. He'll need you. And you are the last one left who knew his parents well. You'll live for him." Dumbledore took an hourglass from his pocket then. It was an odd thing, with purple sand which flowed up rather than down. "Speaking of which," he continued, "I fear I must go now. I have to go see Harry safely to his new home."

"Can't --" Remus cleared his throat. "Can't he come stay with me?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Remus, but no," Dumbledore said sadly. "I know you love him, but you'd be raising him by yourself. And I know that you haven't got any work at the moment. Besides, what would you do with him during the full moon? No, Remus, I'm sorry, but Harry is better off with his aunt and uncle. And don't go looking for him. I'm putting something like the Fidelius Charm on their house to protect Harry. When he's old enough, he'll come to you. You can be sure of that."

Remus nodded and Dumbledore went to stand in the centre of the room. "Thank you, Professor. If there's ever anything I can do for Harry -- or for you -- please, let me know." Dumbledore had smiled at him and nodded, before a tiny *pop!* signaled his exit.

Sirius had gone to Azkaban. Remus hadn't gone to see him. The Ministry had called him in, time and again, and questioned him. Sometimes exciting, new questions, but usually just the same ones over and over, searching for inconsistencies in his story. At last they had given up, disappointed that they couldn't seem to find anything on "Black's pet werewolf". Once given permission to leave the city, he had sold the London flat -- too many memories -- and moved to a small, shabby place on the edge of a small, shabby city, the first of many such moves, since it was hard to find work as a known werewolf.

At least they never found out I was Sirius's lover, he thought, as he looked down at his copy of the Daily Prophet again, and sipped his now-cold tea. I'd never have worked again. He stared thoughtfully at the article. How a dozen years can change a man, he mused, and he didn't mean the picture of Sirius before him. Back then, I was hurt and angry enough that I would have set the Dementors on him myself. Why should I hate him less now? Why have I never been sure?

Emerging within him now was a new feeling, overwhelming the doubt: curiosity. After a dozen years, Remus wanted to hear what Sirius Black had to say.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN HARRY'S PATRONUS

That evening was Harry's fourth Patronus session with Remus. Though still preoccupied with thoughts of Sirius and the Dementor's Kiss, he could see that Harry was frustrated by the fact that, so many weeks on, he was still only managing to produce an indistinct, silvery cloud, rather than a true Patronus. Remus, on the other hand, could not have been more pleased.

"You're expecting too much of yourself," he told Harry over some chocolate after his third attempt of the evening, during which the Boggart-Dementor had again simply hung between them, neither advancing nor retreating in the face of the Patronus. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?" he added reasonably.

Harry scowled. "I thought a Patronus would -- charge the Dementors down or something," he said, flopping into a chair. "Make them disappear --"

"The true Patronus does that," Remus told him, sitting on the desk next to him. "But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time." He tried to think of something to say that would cheer Harry up. "If the Dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, you will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground." *OK, that doesn't sound*

very cheery.

"You said it's harder when there are loads of them," Harry pointed out sullenly.

"I have complete confidence in you," Remus said, giving Harry a smile which, he hoped, reflected that confidence. Actually, he was fairly certain the boy could hold his own against as many as three real Dementors, so long as help was near at hand and quick in coming. He didn't anticipate any further Dementor-induced, near-fatal accidents on the Quidditch pitch. But instead of giving voice to doubts and half-hearted reassurances that might damage Harry's confidence, he thought a distraction was in order.

"Here -- you've earned a drink. Something from the Three Broomsticks, you won't have tried it before --" He reached over and pulled two bottles of Butterbeer from his briefcase. He had loved the stuff as a boy, and hoped Harry would as well.

"Butterbeer!" exclaimed Harry, his eyes lighting up. "Yeah, I like that stuff!"

Remus gave Harry a look. He had actually suspected Harry had been sneaking into Hogsmeade with his friends since the day he had been unable to find him in the castle, but Hogwarts was such a sprawling place, and Harry could have been anywhere. Remus hadn't liked to assume on so little evidence.

"Oh --" Harry was saying, covering quickly and badly for his slip. "Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade."

Not half the liar James and Sirius were when they were caught at something, Remus thought, raising his eyebrows and trying hard not to smile. "I see," he said at last. "Well -- let's drink to a Gryffindor victory against Ravenclaw! Not that I'm supposed to take sides, as a teacher" Though I'd be one of the few that didn't. Doesn't everyone favour their own old House?

Harry clinked his bottle against Remus's, and then drank, looking thoughtful.

I should really say something to him about sneaking off to Hogsmeade. After all, it could be dangerous for him. I'm pretty sure he has James's Invisibility cloak, but if I know about that, so does Sirius. Remus drank his own Butterbeer, still gazing thoughtfully at Harry, who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. Still, if I confront him about that, it might make him nervous. I want him to trust me.

"What's under a Dementor's hood?" Harry asked suddenly, interrupting Remus's thoughts.

Remus himself had been thinking about just that, earlier that day, and the truth was, he didn't honestly know the answer. "Hmmm ... well," he began carefully, "the only people who

really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the Dementor only lowers its hood to use its last and worst weapon." *God, I've gone into Professor mode, thought Remus. All technical, emotionless answers. I sound almost as bad as old Professor Seagram.*

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," he continued, pursing his lips and suppressing a shudder. "It's what Dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and -- and suck out his soul." His voice trembled and cracked at the end, and he pressed his lips together, hoping Harry hadn't noticed and not trusting himself to continue right away. His mind was once again filled with the image of Sirius, helpless, terrified, at the mercy of one of those cold things, light dying in his eyes.

But Harry was too busy trying to wipe sprayed Butterbeer off himself to notice the lapse in his professor's usually-calm demeanor. "What -- they kill --?" he was sputtering.

"Oh, no," Remus said, forcing iron control back into his voice. *Did part of me want to talk to Harry about this?* "Much worse than that," he continued. "You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no ..." he

grasped for a word. "Anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just --" *God, get me through this without breaking down.* "... exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone for ever ... lost."

He took a drink of Butterbeer then to give him a moment to collect himself. *Does Sirius still have a soul to lose?* he wondered suddenly. Then he continued recklessly, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the *Daily Prophet* this morning. The Ministry have given the Dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Harry looked stunned. *Why did I tell him that? Remus chided himself. Do I need someone to talk to about Sirius Black so badly that I'm ready to pour my heart out to a thirteen-year-old boy? And one who will never understand, in any case? Or is it only that I want to hear his reaction?*

"He deserves it," Harry's voice was strong with emotion.

"You think so?" Remus asked, consciously trying to keep emotion out of his voice. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes." Harry's tone was defiant. "For ... for some things"

What was I hoping he'd say? Remus thought, staring at the boy, who was blushing and looking at his shoes. *He obviously knows*

about enough of it to hate Sirius. And he'd hate me too, for anything I could tell him to try to change his mind. After all, Sirius is the reason he has no parents.

He couldn't think of anything further to say to Harry at all, in fact, and when Harry swallowed the last of his Butterbeer and got to his feet, Remus was so deep in his own thoughts that he barely had the presence of mind to wish the boy good evening.

* * *

A few days later, at a quarter to eleven in the morning, Remus Lupin joined the crowd of students and staff heading down to the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch. He had seen Harry practicing with the rest of the Gryffindor team the previous evening, the spitting image of James, and was pleased to see that the young Seeker was back in possession of his new broom. He wished he could tell Harry where the broom had come from, but since he couldn't explain why, or even how he knew, he refrained. Besides, he doubted Harry would react well to the news.

He was glad to finally be getting a chance to see Harry play. He hoped that, for the remainder of the year, the Gryffindor Quidditch schedule and the dates of the full moon would work in his favour. He could almost imagine, at this distance, that it was James out there. And if he could imagine that, he could imagine that he was a teenager again, and that if he reached out his hand, he would find the fingers of Sirius Black not far from

his own -- could turn his head and see Sirius leaning forwards, eyes intent on the pitch, cheeks flushed and lips parted in anticipation. But instead he found himself seated in the professors' box next to Severus Snape.

Instead, Remus turned his eyes forwards, just in time to see the teams entering the pitch. There was Harry, crimson robes flowing, broom in hand, striding confidently to the centre of the pitch. Even his walk reminded Remus of James. Harry was looking at the Ravenclaw Seeker, a petite and pretty girl named Cho Chang. Remus knew her from his class. Her performance in Defence Against the Dark Arts was decent. He nearly laughed at the look Harry was giving her. He eyed his Ravenclaw counterpart with frank interest, and when she smiled at him, he unconsciously reached up a hand and ran it through his hair, making it stick out in all directions. Remus felt a shock of recognition at the gesture. *So like James*, he thought for the millionth time, amazed that Harry had managed to inherit that mannerism from the father he had barely known.

The teams mounted their broomsticks, and took off at the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle. He watched with pleasure as Harry soared around the pitch, eyes questing for that elusive flash of gold. *What became of the toy Snitch we gave you for your first Christmas, Harry?*

Remus was deeply amused by the commentary provided by one of the Gryffindor boys. Instead of commenting on the match, he

kept going off on tangents about the qualities of Harry's new broom -- and being repeatedly told off by Professor McGonagall. Remus had to admit that, based on Harry's performance, the broom was impressive. Of course, plenty of that was Harry's own talent, but the speed and the cornering could only be down to the quality of manufacture.

After a few moments of watching Harry, Remus found himself getting caught up in the game, forgetting himself and cheering when Gryffindor scored their first goal. He blushed and sat down quickly as Severus gave him an acid look, but he noted that both Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were sporting the red and gold. *So much for not playing favourites*, he thought with a smile. He felt no further compunction about cheering over the team's next seven goals.

There was a gasp from the crowd as Harry went into a dive, closely followed by Cho Chang. Remus thought he saw a glint of gold near the ground before a bludger heading directly for Harry distracted him. *Duck, Harry!* Remus half stood up, intent on the action. Harry swerved at the last second, and Remus let out the breath he had been holding, sitting back down. But the Snitch had vanished.

Ravenclaw had gained thirty points by the time Harry sighted the Snitch again. Remus again held his breath, but then the Ravenclaw Seeker appeared out of nowhere, directly between Harry and his objective. Instead of barreling right through her,

he swerved to his left. Remus could see the Gryffindor captain yelling and waving his arms at Harry. He grinned. *I guess Harry knows which game is more important.*

The girl was now following Harry around the pitch. *The mark of a lesser Seeker*, thought Remus, *but also an excuse to keep an eye on Harry. He's inherited James's charisma, all right. I wonder if he has the confidence to back it up?* Harry was leading Cho on a merry chase, circling, swooping and diving, perhaps trying to fake her out, but to Remus, it looked suspiciously like flirting.

Harry was just hurtling towards the Ravenclaw end of the pitch when something on the ground below caught Remus's eye. Three tall, black, hooded shapes. At first glance, Remus thought they were Dementors, but then he caught sight of the flicker of a badly-cast illusion spell. *Someone has a nasty sense of humour.* He hoped Harry wouldn't panic. *Don't look down, boy. Just get that Snitch!*

The Ravenclaw Seeker saw them first, and gave a squeak of surprise as she pointed, distracting Harry, who could see her out of the corner of his eye. He glanced down. *Don't panic, Harry!* Remus thought at him urgently. *You don't feel any cold, you don't hear any voices. Please, realise they're not real.*

But rather than turn tail or try to land safely, Remus saw Harry reach into his robes and whip out his wand. With only half an

eye to his spell, and the rest of his attention still focussed on the hovering Snitch, Harry roared out the words of the Patronus Charm. There was a sudden dazzling, silver-white light, which half-blinded the spectators.

And then Remus Lupin saw something that made his breath catch in his throat. Galloping away from the end of the unheeding Harry's wand, through the air and down to the earth, was a huge, shining silver stag. "Prongs," Remus said aloud in disbelief, without realising he had done so. Dumbledore and Severus both gave him curious looks, but everyone's attention was still on the magnificent Patronus, charging down a group of terrified students in Dementor costumes. It bowled them over as it reached them, so that they landed in a tangled heap of black robes, and then it dissipated. Remus saw that it was the Malfoy boy and a couple of his Slytherin friends.

There was about a second and a half of stunned silence from the crowd before someone in the Gryffindor section raised a cheer that was quickly taken up by the rest of the red and gold supporters. Looking up, Remus saw the rest of the Gryffindor team had completely surrounded Harry, who was triumphantly holding the Snitch aloft. As they dragged him down to the ground, many members of Gryffindor House left their seats and began hurrying down to the pitch. Rising from his seat, Remus went to join them.

"Glad to see you in such good spirits, dear boy!" called

Dumbledore as he hurried past. "Going to congratulate young Harry on his ... remarkable achievement?" The old man raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Remus nodded. "Indeed, Professor." He called back, grinning. "All of Hogwarts should be proud to have such a talented Seeker among them." And with that he hurried towards the exit.

I don't know why I should be surprised at the form his Patronus took, thought Remus, as he pressed on through the crush of students. After all, who in this world or beyond it would be the first to protect Harry, if not his father? Still, the appearance of the stag had given him quite a turn. I've come back to Hogwarts. Sirius is here, or somewhere nearby. Now Prongs has put in an appearance. Next thing you know, Peter will be showing up!

It took some work to get through the crowd to Harry, but being a professor had some advantages, such as students being less inclined to jostle one. Within moments, he was standing behind Harry. Leaning over and speaking quietly into his ear so as not to be overheard, he murmured, "That was quite some Patronus." Had Harry seen the shape it had taken?

The boy turned around and grinned at him, cheeks nearly the colour of his Quidditch robes. "The Dementors didn't affect me at all!" he exclaimed. "I didn't feel a thing!"

Remus smiled. "That would be because they -- er -- weren't

Dementors," he told Harry, hoping the revelation wouldn't damage Harry's confidence. "Come and see --"

Harry struggled free of his admirers and followed Remus out into the clear.

"You gave Mr Malfoy quite a fright," he said with a twisted half-smile. He knew he should be angry at the Slytherins for pulling such a malicious prank, but the sight of the half-stunned boys still trying to disentangle themselves was really rather funny. *They got what they deserved*, he wanted to tell Harry. *They won't be trying that one again.*

Harry looked momentarily stunned as he suddenly realised exactly what had happened. As Professor McGonagall, livid with fury, hurried over to the prostrate boys, Harry began to laugh. Ron appeared at his side, also hooting with laughter. Before long, tears were streaming down both boys' faces.

Remus had heard that Ron had recently lost his pet rat, and had been going to offer his condolences on the occasion of their next meeting. Ever since Peter, he had always had a soft spot for rats. But now he thought better of it. It wouldn't do to spoil this moment for the boys by reminding them of something sad.

Besides, any minute now, Hermione would be there, chastising them for laughing at the Slytherins, as Lily had always done when the Marauders had given Severus a hard time. *Not that I*

don't think they're entirely justified in this case, thought Remus. *That was a really dirty trick for them to pull*. But Hermione did not appear. Remus looked around curiously, but could not see that telltale bushy hair anywhere among the swarm of red and gold. *I hope they're not still fighting*, he thought.

The Gryffindor team rejoined Harry, and the lot of them, followed by the rest of their House, headed back to the castle to celebrate their victory. Remus trudged slowly up after them, mind still on the magnificent silver stag and on the nature of friendship.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN THE INTRUDER

It was dark. Remus lay in his bed, trying to remember what had awakened him. He had been having a lovely dream. He and James and Peter and Sirius had been teenagers, playing every-man-for-himself Quidditch, zooming about on their old brooms, laughing, casting careless hexes, and wrestling the Quaffle away from one another.

James had always won when they had played in real life. He was the superior athlete among them, though Sirius usually gave him a run for his money. Remus and Peter had been poor Quidditch players, but had always enjoyed playing just for a laugh.

In his dream, Sirius had been trying to wrestle the Quaffle away from him. They were both laughing. Somehow, they managed to lose hold of the leather ball, but still Sirius tried to wrestle him from his broom, tickling him, and grabbing at his wrists. At last, they had tumbled off, and Remus had lain sprawled in the grass, with Sirius half-lying across him, pinning his arms to the ground.

James and Peter were swooping overhead, teasing and whistling and making catcalls, but Sirius just grinned. "Ignore them," he said. "They're just jealous 'cause you're mine." And then he had bent down and pressed his lips against Remus's mouth, the kiss saying "you're mine" as clearly as his words had, and those were

the words still echoing in Remus's mind when he woke.

There were voices in the corridor, and hurried footsteps. Remus fumbled in the dark for his wand, then used it to light the candle on his nightstand. He got out of bed and hurriedly pulled on his robes before heading out into the dim and drafty corridor.

In the darkness, he nearly ran headlong into Severus Snape.

"Remus," he said, a sneer twisting his mouth. "You've saved me the trouble of waking you. Or perhaps someone else did?" He raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and made a motion towards the door to Remus's rooms. "Had any late-night visitors? Or perhaps you're just out for a stroll?"

Remus was glad the darkness hid his guilty blush. He surreptitiously sniffed the air before answering. No, Sirius wasn't nearby, nor had he been that night, he decided. *Nothing to feel guilty about. This time.* "I heard the commotion in the corridor and merely came out to see if anything was wrong, that's all, Severus," he said in as neutral a tone of voice as he could muster. "Has something happened?"

"Oh, no," Potions master replied, still sneering. "Only, half the castle felt like having a 2:30 A.M. stroll, is all. Thought perhaps the ... moonlight might do us some good."

Remus sighed. "Look, Severus, I don't feel like playing

schoolboy games with you tonight. If something's happened, just tell me, will you?"

"As it happens," Severus replied, half-suppressing a nasty smile, "Black has been in the castle tonight. Attacked a student in his bed." He watched Remus's face intently as he said this, as if looking for some hint, some clue, some hidden emotion. Remus tried very hard to give him none.

"Has he?" he inquired as casually as he could. Cold dread was taking up residence in the pit of his stomach. "Is Harry hurt? Has Black been captured?"

"The castle is currently being searched. I'm confident Black's hiding place will be discovered before long," said Severus, clearly enjoying Remus's fear. Finally, he added, "and *Weasley* is quite well. It seems that, when Black discovered he had the wrong boy, he made a run for it." The black-haired wizard looked disdainful. "Odd, isn't it, that a man capable of murdering a dozen Muggles, as well as his supposed friends should balk at sticking a knife in a helpless boy, simply because it wasn't the one he wanted?"

Strange indeed, thought Remus, though that wasn't a conversation he felt like having with Severus Snape now or ever. It was definitely food for thought for later.

"Well?" said Severus sharply. "Are you going back to bed, or are

you going to help us search the castle for your *boyfriend*?" The nasty smile was back, but Remus didn't give him the satisfaction of reacting. "I have orders to search every room in this wing of the castle." He made as if to move towards the door to Remus's rooms again.

And you came to mine first, of course, Remus thought with an inward sigh. What if Sirius had been there this time? "You're welcome to search my rooms, Severus. I have nothing to hide," he lied. "I'm just going to see if I can't have a word with Professor Dumbledore." He started down the corridor, then turned back to the other man with his hand on the door handle. "Just don't ... touch anything," he said.

* * *

He didn't manage to find Dumbledore, but he met Professor McGonagall, still in her tartan dressing gown, outside the entrance to Gryffindor tower. She appeared to be applying the sharp side of her tongue to the painting which guarded the way into the tower. Remus noted that the Fat Lady was still not back, and in her place was a rather chubby and foolish-looking knight, who seemed quite taken aback at Professor McGonagall's outrage.

"Professor," Remus addressed her, gallantly ignoring her unscholarly nightwear, "Professor Snape tells me there's been some excitement, but he was reluctant to part with the details.

Can you please tell me what's happened? Is everyone all right?"

McGonagall's lips were pressed together in as thin a line as he had ever seen them. "One of the students was slack-witted enough to -- to leave a list of the Gryffindor passwords lying about!" she exclaimed. "Black sneaked into the castle and got hold of the list, which of course got him free entry to the tower, because this -- this *numbskull* didn't have enough sense not to admit unwashed madmen with knives in the middle of the night!" She flashed a deadly look at the knight in the painting.

"Dear Lady, I assure you, it was not my intent --"

"*Silencio!*" cried McGonagall, pointing her wand at the painting, where the knight continued to gesticulate and move his mouth, but now without making a sound. "I'm having him removed from this post as soon as can be arranged. We really must step up security before -- No, it's too terrible even to think about." Her shoulders sagged, and she suddenly looked very old and very tired.

"But the students," Remus urged. "They're all right?"

"Oh, yes," McGonagall answered. "It's a miracle no one was hurt. Weasley -- Ronald Weasley, that is -- says he woke to see Black standing over his bed with a knife in his hand! Well, naturally the boy cried out, and woke the rest of his roommates, and the commotion caused Black to take flight without harming

anyone. I've tried to get the students to go back to bed, but I fear they won't sleep much tonight."

"Do you know which student it was that wrote down the passwords?" Remus asked.

"Yes, it was Longbottom. Foolish boy." McGonagall shook her head in disbelief.

"Neville? Frank's son?" Remus felt he should be surprised by this, but really he wasn't. Neville, poor boy, was terribly bumbling and forgetful. It was entirely believable that he could do such a thing.

"Indeed." McGonagall pursed her lips.

"Er ... Professor, would it be quite all right if I question the painting? I'd like to know a bit more about ..." he trailed off, not really sure what he could say here that didn't sound like, "I want to hear about my boyfriend."

But McGonagall waved her hand at him tiredly. "Ask him whatever you like. I was only out here because I didn't want the entrance left *unguarded*." She threw the knight another poisonous glance, but he was now sitting on the grass, arms folded, obviously sulking, and didn't notice the look. "I'm going to go try to find Filch, and see about getting this painting replaced before morning. Would you mind staying until I can

manage a replacement guard?" she looked at him hopefully.

"Not at all, Professor," he replied. He was tired, but he was used to being tired, and he had too much on his mind at the moment to sleep in any case.

McGonagall gave him a tiny tired but grateful smile, and turned down the stairs.

Remus took the Silencing charm off the painting. "Sir Knight, would you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"They've already asked me all manner of questions," sulked the knight, not looking at him. "And they've all yelled at me. If you're going to yell at me, too, I don't think I feel like answering anymore questions."

"I promise not to raise my voice, Sir," said Remus. "Will you tell me your name?"

The knight got reluctantly to his feet. "Sir Cadogan, at your service." He bowed.

Remus gave him a slight nod in reply. "Sir Cadogan, is it not your job to guard the students of Gryffindor tower and keep out those who have no business there?"

"It is indeed, good Sir. But my instructions were to grant those

who knew the day's password entry to the tower, and the gentleman in question did indeed have the day's word."

"Did you not wonder why a man not dressed as a professor, and carrying a knife might want access to the students' rooms in the middle of the night?" Remus asked, careful to keep any anger he felt out of his voice. This stupid painting had nearly been the death of Harry.

"Good Sir," the knight protested, putting up his gauntleted hands, "I was charged only with admitting those who possessed the password, and no more. I own that perhaps I should have inquired as to the intent of one who was a stranger to me, but it was not my duty to ask."

"Indeed," said Remus dubiously. "Be that as it may ... well, there is nothing more to be gained by that line of questioning," Remus shook his head. "Tell me instead ... tell me, what did Si -- what did Black say to you, exactly?"

"Oh," the knight suddenly became more talkative. "He was most genteel. He addressed me with all due respect and courtesy. He read the week's passwords off his list until he found the right one, and then asked me in which room he might find the boy with the rat."

"The boy with the rat?" said Remus in surprise.

"Aye, the tall, redheaded lad. Well, one of them," the knight nodded. "But I told him the boy didn't have the rat anymore. And anyway, I don't know who is in which room. I've never been inside the tower. Well, he thanked me most politely and went through to the other side. Came back out again in quite a hurry about five minutes later. Didn't so much as bid me goodnight."

"The boy with the rat ..." Remus said again, thoughtfully. *Ron, not Harry*, he thought. *Why? And when Ron woke up, why run rather than kill him?* Remus sighed. Yet another piece of the puzzle that didn't make sense.

"Thank you, Sir Cadogan," he said at last, spotting McGonagall and Filch rounding the corner at the end of the corridor. "Good night to you."

"Good night kind Sir," said the knight. "Thank you for not shouting."

Remus was already heading towards McGonagall, but he waved at the painting in a "think nothing of it" gesture.

"Professor," he nodded, "Mr. Filch. Any news of Black?"

Filch eyed him suspiciously -- the same look he had always given him as a boy when the Marauders had been up to their usual late-night mischief -- but Professor McGonagall merely

replied, "No, Professor Lupin. No word at all. I fear he has eluded us yet again." She shook her head in bafflement. "Though I can't imagine how he's managing it. Every painting -- well, nearly every --" She shot Sir Cadogan another dirty look, "in the castle knows what Black looks like. Those Dementors are patrolling the grounds day and night. Everyone is on the lookout, and yet he does something like this --" Again she gestured at the painting, "under our very noses. I just don't understand it."

I know, thought Remus. I could tell them. I could give them the crucial bit of information that would have him caught before the sun set again. But I can't. I can't be the one. Instead of answering, he simply shook his head. "Shall I join in the search?" he asked, hoping that the answer would be no.

He was not disappointed. "Thank you, Professor Lupin, but no. I fear we will find nothing tonight. If he hasn't been found by now, chances are, he is no longer in the castle. No, go back to your bed, Professor. Try to get some sleep. I shall do the same, once I am sure of the guard on this entryway."

Remus thanked her and headed back to his rooms, still thoughtful and very, very confused.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN THE MARAUDER'S MAP

About a week later, Remus was pacing his office, still confused. The students were on another Hogsmeade trip, and yet again he had been unable to locate Harry. He'd even gone up to Gryffindor tower and asked a rather sulky looking Neville Longbottom if he knew where Harry was.

"He went to the library. Said he'd left his vampire essay there," Neville had said. "But that was ages ago."

He'd been short with Neville, partly because he was still upset with the boy for his part in Sirius's abortive attack on Ron, but also because being in the Gryffindor common room was difficult for him. Much of the furniture was still the same as it had been in his school days, and it was unsettling for him to think that, on that very sofa, he and Sirius had dared a time or two But there was nothing to be gained by such thoughts, and he left the tower quickly.

He had gone to the library next, vainly hoping that Harry actually had gone there, but when he asked Madam Pince if she had seen the boy, she merely pursed her lips and shook her head. Since nothing happened in Madam Pince's library (at least during the day) that she did not take notice of, Remus knew Harry could not have been there. And if Harry was lying about where he was, then he must be somewhere he was not supposed

to be.

I should tell Dumbledore, he thought as he made his way back to his rooms. He had a residual schoolboy dislike of being known as a tell-tale, and he didn't want to get Harry into trouble, but the danger to the boy being what it was Is he in danger? a small part of his mind wondered. Sirius has been in the castle three? four? times this year. He's got himself into Gryffindor tower with a knife. And yet Harry has not suffered any harm. And so far as Remus knew, Sirius had not tried to lay hands on a wand.

Remus knew himself to be no fool. He'd been a bright and dedicated student -- occasionally brilliant -- he'd never found his wits to be lacking. They had stood him in good stead for nearly forty years. And yet he was baffled by this. He could not make it add up, even with the information he harboured to which no one else was privy. *Or perhaps because of that information, he thought. Everyone else is so certain he's guilty and that he'll stop at nothing to kill Harry. I'm the only one who's not sure. But I'm the one who knew him best, and the only one left who knows he's an Animagus.*

He shook his head to try to clear it. He needed a drink. It was only early afternoon, but he had begun drinking more this year than ever before. *I really should try to cut back, he told himself as he poured himself a tot of whisky. He drained the glass, thinking, I'll just have to keep my eyes open for clues. "Constant vigilance!" as old Mad-Eye would say. Somehow, this all makes*

sense, and I'm just not seeing it. He wondered if he should take his doubts to Dumbledore, but quickly decided that that would still mean revealing what he knew, and he wasn't prepared to do that just yet.

He was just about to pour himself a second drink when a sudden burst of green flame from the fireplace made him leap backwards in surprise. Then the voice of Severus Snape boomed into his room, "Lupin! I want a word!"

Remus sighed. Severus sounded as though he was in a rare fury, but if he was actually demanding the presence of the only person in the castle he despised more than Harry, it must be important. He grabbed a pinch of Floo Powder from the mantle and threw it into the fire. "Professor Snape's office," he intoned clearly as he stepped into the green flames.

The spin of Floo travel in conjunction with the whisky that was just hitting his system made him feel a trifle nauseated, and he stepped out of the Potions master's fireplace a little unsteadily. He brushed the ash from his robes, noting that Harry was also present. *Could it be that he didn't get to Hogsmeade after all?* "You called, Severus?"

Severus was clearly in the grip of a cold fury. "I certainly did. I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this." He gestured at something on his desk with his wand.

Remus blinked with shock, which he quickly suppressed, trying desperately to hang on to his mask of calm unconcern. Lying on the Potions master's desk was the Marauder's Map. He hadn't seen the thing in nearly twenty-five years, but there could be no mistaking it. His name -- all their names -- was right there, staring him in the face. And Severus knew it. Even if he didn't know the reasons behind three of the four names, he knew to whom they referred. Remus experienced an unpleasant sinking sensation. *I wonder how Harry got his hands on that?* He thought vaguely.

Severus was waiting impatiently, tapping his wand against the desk, but Remus barely noticed. "Well?" he said at last.

This can't go well, he thought. Severus is likely to say anything at this point, secrets and loyalty to Dumbledore be damned. Best thing to do is probably to get myself and Harry out of here as quickly as possible.

"Well?" Severus repeated. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?"

So that's your game, he thought. You're going to try to get me to incriminate myself in front of Harry. You bastard. You know he won't believe anything you would tell him, so you want me to do it for you. Well, damn it, I'm not going to give you that kind of satisfaction.

He half-glanced at Harry, hoping vainly that the boy wouldn't interrupt or ask any awkward questions. It was a delicate situation. "Full of Dark magic?" he enquired as mildly as he could manage. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who tries to read it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke-shop --"

"Indeed?" Severus cut him off. Remus knew it was a dangerous game he was playing. Both he and Severus knew exactly where this particular Aid to Magical Mischief Makers had come from, and Severus had nothing to lose by letting something slip "accidentally". "You think a joke-shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it *directly from the manufacturers*?"

Two of whom have been dead since Harry was a year old, one of whom has been locked up since then, and one of whom is standing in this room? Does he think I gave Harry the map? Remus tried very hard to look puzzled. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of his neck. "You mean, from Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he turned to Harry. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry, looking confused.

"You see, Severus?" He managed a slightly smug smile at the

other professor. "It looks like a Zonko product to me --"

There was a sudden sound of footsteps pounding down the corridor outside. A second later, Ron burst into the office, red-faced and panting. Clutching at his side, he managed to get out, "I -- gave -- Harry -- that -- stuff. Bought -- it -- in -- Zonko's -- ages -- ago"

The lie wouldn't have convinced the most gullible first year, but Remus was impressed, nonetheless. *Brave of Ron. It's pretty clear these boys don't like Severus anymore than he likes them, or anymore than he liked us, back in the day. And he has authority over them.* He decided it was time to make an exit.

"Well!" he exclaimed with as genuine a smile as he could manage. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I?" He swiped the map from the desk and tucked it into a pocket, mentally cursing himself for his slip in using the word, "back". He hoped the boys hadn't noticed. "Harry, Ron, come with me," he said. "I need a word about my vampire essay. Excuse us, Severus." He nodded to the still-furious Potions master and ushered the boys out of the office.

There was no real reason to take Ron and Harry back to his own office, which was a long walk from where they were, at any rate, so instead, he turned left, heading for the entrance hall, which was likely to still be deserted at this time on a Hogsmeade day. As they walked in silence, he thought about the map burning a

hole in his pocket. *Harry should know better*, he decided. *I can understand a bit of recklessness or high spirits from a boy of his age, but an item like this falling into the wrong hands! It's ten times worse than Neville leaving that list of passwords lying about.*

"Professor, I --" Harry began, as they reached the entrance hall.

"I don't want to hear explanations," Remus told the boy sharply, glancing around to be sure they wouldn't be overheard. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr Filch many years ago," he continued in a low voice. "Yes, I know it's a map," he said when the boys registered twin looks of surprise. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession," he went on. *Well, I do, but that would be asking Harry to incriminate himself.* "I am, however, *astounded* that you didn't hand it in." *James and Sirius wouldn't have either*, admonished a tiny voice in the back of his mind. *And neither would you, at that age.* "Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Harry." *But, God help me, I can't destroy it either. I only hope I can keep it safe for the time being.* He was more fearful for Harry's safety than angry, but he knew how it must sound to the boy.

Harry reluctantly nodded, obviously disappointed to be losing such a treasure, but then he asked, "Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because ..." Remus knew he was treading on thin ice here. *Go carefully, Remus old man.* "Because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it extremely entertaining." *And that's no lie,* he told himself. *Harry would easily have been one of the gang.*

"Do you know them?" Harry asked, wide-eyed with admiration.

And this is where I make my exit, Remus thought to himself. *Harry knows all he needs to know about this matter for now. Maybe someday I'll be able to tell him more.* "We've met," was all he said.

He drew his eyebrows together as he continued to look at Harry, who was obviously keen for further explanation. How to make the boy see the gravity of the situation they were all in? "Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry," he finally said. *I only did it this time because the map was involved.* His hand went to his pocket, and he fingered the worn parchment gently. "I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the Dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you." *Who am I kidding? He's thirteen. Weren't we all forgetful, resilient and convinced of our own immortality at that age?* "Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them -- gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks." It was harsher than he had intended, but he didn't know what

else might make an impression on Harry.

Ron looked exceedingly uncomfortable, and Harry hung his head, blushing furiously. Remus didn't know what else to say to them. He'd made his point, and anything he could say now would only soften the sting of it, and he wanted them both to learn from this experience, so he simply turned around and walked away.

Arriving back in his rooms, he collapsed into the armchair next to the large window. He looked thoughtfully at the drink he had poured himself before Severus had called him away. *Maybe later.* Instead, he reached into his pocket and drew out the map, unfolding it across his knees. Now that the tense circumstances had passed, he allowed himself a chuckle at the words still scrawled across the parchment.

"Mr Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business," he read, shaking his head. Well, it was the sort of thing he would have said back then, and the sort of thing that even now, he tended to think without saying.

He took out his wand to wipe the parchment with the "mischief managed" incantation, and then hesitated. When they had made the map (James and Sirius's idea, originally), instead of filling it with stock phrases to insult the uninitiated, they had invested it with a little of each of their teenage personalities.

Remus gave in to temptation. Instead of clearing the page, he tapped it lightly with his wand and said softly, "Mr Moony greets his old friends and hopes they enjoyed their little joke on Professor Snape."

The words before him faded away, and were replaced by the legend, "*Mr Wormtail greets Mr Moony, and hopes that he also enjoyed the joke on that slimy git. He wonders if Snivellus is still as much a drama queen as ever?*"

"Mr Prongs tips his hat to Mr Moony -- excuse us -- Professor Moony, and wonders how Hogwarts is getting on without the rest of us?"

"Not what it was, Prongs, old man," Remus whispered sadly. "Not for me. You and Peter gone; Sirius beyond redemption."

"Mr Moony greets his aged self, and wonders if Headmaster Dumbledore has really gone batty enough to hire me on as a Professor?"

Remus smiled slightly at that, but the next words would not allow him to maintain the expression.

"Mr Padfoot warmly embraces Professor Moony, and wonders if he is still the same handsome devil he always was?"

Remus shook his head. He really shouldn't have given in; the parchment was only able to interact with the reader so far -- far enough to bring on a massive bout of nostalgia, but not far enough to bring him any joy. Perhaps he'd have the drink after all. "Goodbye, lads," he whispered, and tapped the parchment. "Mischief managed."

* * *

Harry's Patronus lessons continued through the early spring. Remus could see Harry's increasing frustration, however, that he was never able to replicate his achievement on the Quidditch pitch during these lessons.

"Don't worry about it," Remus told him one day before the start of Easter break. "Harry, at least you know you can do it if you need to."

"I know, Professor," Harry said glumly. "I just don't understand why I can't do it whenever I want."

"Well," he began carefully, "the true Patronus is not there to come when called, but when it is needed. You can't just summon something as powerful as that any time you feel like it."

"But," Harry protested, "I didn't *need* it the day we played Ravenclaw. Those weren't real Dementors."

"You didn't know that, Harry," he reminded the boy. "You believed that they were, and it was your belief in the need for your Patronus that summoned it. Now that you know you can do it in times of need, isn't that enough?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Harry, in a tone that said he didn't think it was nearly enough.

"Harry, you have made such progress this year. I have to say I am really impressed with the quality of your work and your dedication to it." Remus smiled. "Your parents would both be very proud of you."

"You think so?" Harry asked, looking a little more cheerful.

"I know so. I knew them both very well, Harry. They had such high hopes for you, but I think you have managed to exceed even their expectations."

"Thanks, Professor!" he definitely looked as though he felt better now.

"In light of your progress, Harry," Remus continued, "I think perhaps this will be our last Patronus session. There really isn't any more I can teach you about the Patronus, and I shall be very busy after the Easter break writing exams."

"Oh." Harry looked disappointed.

Remus gave him a tired smile. "Come now, Harry. Haven't you got enough on your mind these days? The Quidditch final is just around the corner. It's no wonder if you're having trouble focussing on something as discipline-intensive as the Patronus Charm."

Mention of the Quidditch final was sufficient to distract Harry from his other concerns, and the two spent a pleasant half hour discussing Gryffindor's chances at the Quidditch cup, which had only been won by Gryffindor three times since Remus's own school days.

Remus was slightly taken aback at the depth of Harry's anti-Slytherin feelings, but he understood them, given the appearance of the fake Dementors at the last match, and a couple of Malfoy's other stunts Harry mentioned to him. He knew from firsthand experience in the classroom how rude and obnoxious Draco could be, and he had developed a well-suppressed dislike for the boy. Unlike Severus, he tried not to play favourites in the classroom. Such behaviour was unprofessional.

The tension between Slytherin and Gryffindor was palpable throughout the school, heating up noticeably in the last two weeks before the match. The tension did not just focus on Harry, either. All the students from both Houses were infected with it. The air fairly crackled between them, and there was more than one less-than-amusing hex cast as the big day approached.

Remus Lupin felt the tension in the air like a storm about to break, and he thought perhaps it ran deeper than a mere House rivalry. *Something is going to happen soon*, he decided. *Something big, and not necessarily good.*

Indeed, the Quidditch final came and went without incident -- fortunately for Remus, not coinciding with another full moon -- the cup going to Gryffindor after another impressive Snitch capture by Harry, yet the tension in the air did not seem to lessen at all. At least not for Remus. He found himself becoming increasingly nervous and jumpy, and barely able to focus on the end of year exams he was meant to be writing.

In the end, he decided on a practical exam for his students. Their two previous Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers had been pretty hopeless, he understood, and many of the students were well behind where they should have been for their year. This turned out well for Remus, since it meant he could give more or less the same exam, with only a few small adjustments, to all of his classes. He also thought the students would appreciate being able to do their exam outdoors, in the early June sunlight, rather than locked away in a stuffy classroom.

Harry took the exam on the morning of the last day of the exam period. With Quidditch over for the year, and confidence in his ability to hold the Dementors at bay, it was clear that he was able to concentrate on his studies once again. Remus was

impressed with Harry's performance, and would have been glad to award him full marks, even if he hadn't been his favourite student. He even managed to do better than Hermione. Remus wondered if Harry still saw a Dementor when he looked at the Boggart, but he didn't ask, after the boy emerged from the trunk trying to look cool, but barely suppressing a triumphant grin.

After Harry's class was through, there were only the fifth years to left to take the exam that afternoon, and then the academic year was officially over. Remus was amazed by how quickly it had gone by. *Faster than any year since -- well* He would miss Harry and his friends, would miss the castle and the grounds, would even miss teaching. He marveled at how good it felt for his life to have some purpose again. *I can survive a summer*, he thought. *Before I know it, it will be September again.*

He wondered if Sirius would have been captured by then, but tried very hard not to think about it. Alone and friendless, it was astounding that he had not yet been caught. Really, it was only a matter of time. *If only he would leave off his obsession with Harry -- just disappear*, thought Remus desperately. Surely that would be the best thing for everyone. Maybe he had disappeared; after all, there had been no sign of him in months, even though Remus had taken to spending full moon nights in the Shrieking Shack again.

Seeing the students leaving their last exams, racing through the corridors of the school and demonstrating bouts of high spirits,

reminded him of that feeling of the last day of term as a boy. The excitement that he and his friends had made it through another year, sadness that they were parting for the summer, nostalgia remembering all that had happened over the last nine months.

He was still feeling pretty good when he reached his rooms. His eye fell on the Marauder's Map, lying blank and neatly folded on his nightstand. *What the hell*, he thought recklessly. *Might be interesting to have a look. See what the kids are up to.* He spread the map out on the bed, tapped it gently with his wand and in ironic tones, declared, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

* * *

He became so engrossed in the map -- in watching the students and teachers and trying to guess what their various movements meant, and marveling anew that he and his friends had managed to create such a complex artifact as students -- that he nearly missed the feast. Instead of putting the map away, however, he gently folded it and put it in the pocket of his robes. As he did so, his fingers brushed the tiny wooden dog he still carried there.

Sirius, he lamented. *How often have I thought of you this year?* And yet, for all his thinking, he had managed to come to no conclusions that made any sense; only implausible theory upon implausible theory. *Perhaps human nature cannot be so easily explained, and I am looking for sense where there is none. I*

want Sirius to be innocent -- for there to be some mistake, he reminded himself. Wanting a thing does not make it so.

The Great Hall was lit with late-afternoon June sunlight, pouring in through the enchanted ceiling. It gave the feast the relaxed atmosphere of a summer picnic. Once seated, Remus noted that the place at the teachers' table that was usually filled by Hagrid's bulk was instead occupied by the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and an elderly gentleman in Ministry robes whom Remus did not recognise. When he greeted them, the unknown gentleman smiled cordially enough, but Fudge only gave him a brief and unconvincing half smile before leaning over to whisper in the other man's ear. The Ministry official nodded, then gazed speculatively at Remus, and he realised who the man must be and why he was there.

He had heard, of course, about the trouble that year involving a Hippogriff of Hagrid's and that little shite, Malfoy. He had forgotten, though, that the beast's appeal was scheduled for today. He shuddered at the thought. As an occasional beast himself, he was not unaware of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, nor was he unaware of their reputation for disposing first and asking questions later. Or not at all. That would explain Hagrid's absence. The gentle giant would want to spend the evening with the unlucky Hippogriff.

He nodded to the Committee Member, who was still looking at him. *Yes, I'm Dumbledore's werewolf*, he thought grumpily, but

said nothing. After a moment, the man finally turned his attention to his meal. Remus tried to eat as well, but the Ministry presence turned the excellent fare tasteless in his mouth.

After the feast, Dumbledore took him aside. "Remus, I'd like to speak with you, if you have a moment?"

He was mildly surprised. "Certainly, Professor." They left the Great Hall and headed for Remus's office.

"I'm afraid I can't tarry long, dear boy," said Dumbledore as they walked. "That unpleasant business with the Ministry, you know."

Remus merely nodded.

"I do feel sorry for poor Rubeus. He has something of a blind spot where his creatures are concerned, but I really do think that, in this case, the Hippogriff is blameless." The headmaster sighed. "Not that there is much I can do to change their minds. It would seem that poor Buckbeak has run out of *time*."

Remus looked at Dumbledore, wondering if he was supposed to understand some sort of hidden meaning in his words, then decided that the headmaster's inflection was merely a part of his oddness -- perhaps a joke that only he himself was in on. "Well, Professor," he said instead, "I'm sure you know my feelings on such matters."

"I do indeed, Remus," the headmaster nodded gravely. "You are not a supporter of the more extreme measures of the law, are you?"

"No, Sir," Remus shook his head. "It is my firm opinion that some forms of 'punishment' are never justified." They had reached the door to Remus's office, which he held open as the older man entered, closing it firmly behind them.

"Even in the matter of Sirius Black?" Dumbledore asked shrewdly, turning towards him.

"Even in the matter of Sirius Black," he replied firmly. *Especially in the matter of Sirius Black*, he did not say. "The loss of soul -- how can we even know what that does to a man? Only those who have experienced it can truly know, and they are in no state to say. Can such a thing be justified?"

"Dear Remus, your heart is as soft as Hagrid's," said Dumbledore with a smile. "But I do not think you are wrong. I myself have had words with the Ministry on that policy, as you may know, but to no avail."

The two men sat, and Dumbledore removed a long-stemmed pipe from his robes, which he lit with a wave of hand. Remus watched him puff away on it for a moment before asking, "Do you think Black will be caught?"

Dumbledore looked down his long nose at the younger man, eyes thoughtful. "You don't have to pretend with me, Remus," he said at last. "This business of calling him 'Black', as if the two of you have never met -- you must see how silly it sounds. Of course I understand that it might help you to distance yourself from the matter. But I suspect you've found that, in some cases, distance is an illusion?"

Remus looked down shamefacedly at his desk. "It is, Professor," he whispered.

"Poor Remus," Dumbledore said sadly. "Even as a boy, you felt everything so deeply. It is not surprising that one such as yourself should have known great love, and it is a terrible thing that you had to know great betrayal as well," he sighed. "There are those who would condemn you for loving Sirius still." Remus nodded. "But I am not one of them. To me, it only shows your heart to be as pure and true as ever it was. Such people are rare, Remus, and a man may count himself lucky to have such a one among his friends." The old man's eyes twinkled.

"Thank you, Professor," he said quietly, still looking at his desk.

"Harry is lucky to have you in his life as well," Dumbledore continued, "though he may not know it yet. One day he will."

At last Remus raised his eyes to meet Dumbledore's. "Thank you," he said again. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity

to know Harry. To teach. To have some purpose to my life."

"I am glad to have been of help," said the headmaster. "It has not been an easy year, though, has it? Sirius's proximity has no doubt had an impact on you."

"It has, Professor," Remus sighed. "But in a way, I am glad of it. I've had a chance to think about things, and have had opportunity to make myself think about things I once thought too painful."

"And have you found some measure of peace?" By Dumbledore's tone, he might have been inquiring about the weather.

Remus thought for a moment. "No," he said at last. "Only more questions."

Dumbledore smiled. "As long as a man can ask questions, he is still alive. Are you still alive, Remus?"

"You know, I think I am, Professor." He felt suddenly a little bit lighter.

"Well, I hope for your sake that you find some answers to those questions of yours," the old man said as he rose from his chair. "If ever there was a man who deserved some measure of peace, it is you, Remus Lupin."

"I think I agree with you, Professor," he said, extending his hand. "It has been a pleasure to be back at Hogwarts. I suppose you have to go now?"

"I'm afraid so, my boy," said Dumbledore regretfully. "I promised Hagrid I would be there, and I have a suspicion young Harry and his friends may try some daring stunt to spring the Hippogriff. I wouldn't want to miss that." He shook Remus's hand warmly. "It's been a pleasure having you on the staff. I'm sure most of us will be glad to have you back in September," he said, then departed, closing the door behind him.

Remus sat down behind the desk again, and put his head in his hands. *Answers*, he thought. *Where do I find answers? All I have are questions. I want to know. I have to know, before they catch Sirius. That's the only way I'll find peace.* But he didn't know any more about where to find his answers than he had before supper. At a loss as to what to do next, he took the Marauder's Map out of his pocket again, and unfolded it on the desk. Just as Dumbledore had predicted, three little dots labeled "Harry Potter", "Hermione Granger" and "Ronald Weasley" were moving in the direction of Hagrid's hut.

CHAPTER NINETEEN REVELATION

Once the children were inside Hagrid's hut, they were too clustered together to make much sense of the names or of what might be happening there. He wished vaguely that he could see where the Hippogriff Buckbeak was, but animals did not show up on the Marauder's Map, though Animagi did. He cast his eye about the map, grudgingly admitting to himself that he was looking for Sirius, but the grounds were so vast, the details so intricate, and the people so many that it was difficult to find an individual without some idea of his location.

And maybe he's gone, Remus thought hopefully. No one has so much as glimpsed him since February. Perhaps he's given up and gone into hiding. For whatever reason, he could not locate Sirius anywhere on the map.

After a few moments, he saw Dumbledore and his Ministry entourage exit the castle and head down to Hagrid's hut. *The kids had better be gone by the time they get there, or there will be trouble,* he thought. He continued to watch, silently urging the children to leave before they were discovered. Just as the Ministry officials arrived at the front door of the hut, Remus saw the children begin to emerge from the back. He closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, silently chiding himself for being silly enough to get caught up in that moment of drama.

When he opened his eyes and looked at the map again, his mind went numb with shock. At first, he could not make any sense of what he was seeing. Harry, Ron and Hermione were still clustered together, but now that they were out in the open, he was able to read their names clearly from the map, moving away from the hut and up the slope towards the castle. He was also able to read a fourth name, labeling a dot almost on top of the other three: Peter Pettigrew.

It can't be, he told himself. There must be something wrong with the map. But it was too curious a malfunction to dismiss. Maybe it has something to do with the bit of Peter's personality that was bound up in the map when it was created, he tried to reason.

Suddenly the dot labeled "Peter Pettigrew" broke away from the others. That could still have been a malfunction of the map. But when Ron's dot gave chase, Remus knew there must be more to it. The children were interacting with the Pettigrew dot.

Out of nowhere, a thought drifted across Remus's mind. *I never told Ron I was sorry for the loss of his rat.* Then his brain simply froze. *Rat, it said again. Rat, rat, rat.* He knew it meant something, but he could not make himself think what.

On the map, Harry and Hermione had lit out after Ron, who was still following the mysterious dot. Ron's dot eclipsed the one labeled "Peter Pettigrew", and Harry's and Hermione's were soon on top of them as well. Still Remus sat frozen.

A movement off to one side of the children caught Remus's eye, and his entire body seemed to twitch as he saw a fifth dot, labeled "Sirius Black" emerge from the Whomping Willow. It was heading towards the other dots at an alarming rate.

And as suddenly as it had frozen, Remus Lupin's mind became clear. He didn't yet understand what the map was showing him, but he knew it was showing him something important. Something he had been missing. *This means something*, he thought. *Answers.*

On the map, the dots representing Sirius, Ron and Peter were moving into the Whomping Willow passageway. Without another thought, Remus was on his feet, out of the office and hurtling through the twisting corridors of Hogwarts castle.

Staff and students alike stared, open-mouthed, after him, but he barely noticed them. He half-registered a startled-looking Dumbledore and shocked-looking Cornelius Fudge as he passed them, flying around a corner, but was not about to stop. When it felt as though he had been running forever, and would never emerge from the castle at all, he suddenly found himself bursting through the main doors in the entrance hall.

As he pelted down the castle steps, and then down the slope towards the Whomping Willow in the gathering darkness, he thought his heart might burst. *If I live just an hour more, that*

will be enough, he thought. *I'll know something more than I did.*
And then, God, I hope I don't break my neck!

He pulled up short at the Whomping Willow, forced to stop and think how to get past the lethal, flailing branches. Casting about frantically, it was only seconds before he found a stick long enough to prod the knot that would still the tree's movements, but to Remus's racing mind, it seemed to take years. *Harry -- Sirius -- Peter -- Answers!* his brain was screaming at him.

He was lucky. His shaking hands managed to hit the knot on the first try, before the tree could break the branch he held. As soon as the Whomping Willow's motion subsided, he practically dove into the hidden opening between the roots. *Come on, come on!* he urged himself, trying to run at a crouch in the space allowed by the passage. The thought that there was something going on in the Shrieking Shack -- something important -- and he was missing it, was maddening. He felt he had aged ten years in the time it took him to reach the shabby floorboards of his destination.

He pulled himself up through the hole in the downstairs room, and followed the imprints in the dust out the door and to the foot of the stairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" called a girl's shrill voice, desperate with panic. "WE'RE UP HERE -- SIRIUS BLACK -- *QUICK!*"

Remus pounded up the stairs and threw himself at the door across the landing, shouting "*ianuam apertio!*" his wand showering red sparks with the force of the spell as he burst through the door.

Time seemed to stop. He took in the scene laid out before him. Ron, white-lipped with pain from an obviously broken leg, sitting by the bed. Hermione, crouched near the door, holding two wands. Harry, standing, staring at him, wand pointed at a crumpled and bleeding shape on the floor -- a shape dressed in filthy rags, with tangled black hair, Hermione's cat on its chest, and long-lashed grey eyes, looking directly into his.

In that moment, Remus learned that years of suspicion, mistrust and doubt are no match for instinct. All he knew was that, guilty or not, Sirius was hurt, Sirius was in danger, and needed his help. That being so, there was only one thing Remus could possibly do.

"Expelliarmus!" he shouted, slashing his wand at Harry and Hermione. The wands they were holding leapt from their hands, and he snatched them out of the air. His eyes never left Sirius's. *The eyes are the windows to the soul, his mind whispered, and he still has mine. But I still have to know. About Peter. Peter is the missing piece to all this.*

In a voice that shook, though it was as calm as he could make it, he spoke to the man who had been in his lover for the first time

in nearly thirteen years -- not in a dream or drunken stupor --
"Where is he, Sirius?"

Sirius did not speak. His eyes still held Remus's, but after a moment, he slowly, almost painfully, lifted a hand and pointed at Ron.

"But then ..." Remus began, only half hearing what he was saying, "... why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless --" Suddenly the pieces began to fall into place. He remembered vividly the scene in the Muggle marketplace so long ago. The moment his world had crumbled. He heard again the echo of Peter's words. But if Peter was alive -- alive, but in hiding -- it could mean only one thing. Not Sirius, Peter. Peter had been the Secret-Keeper. The traitor. The enormity of that meaning was making Remus lightheaded, making his heart beat faster. "-- Unless *he* was the one ... unless you switched ... without telling me?"

Sirius nodded, eyes bright with a look of tentative hope.

Harry was speaking, but Remus did not even register what he said. Only one thing mattered now. Without a word, he walked across the room, took Sirius's hand in his own, and pulled him into a warm embrace.

"Sirius, oh God! Sirius ..." he whispered, arms tight around the bedraggled and shockingly-thin body. *I'll never let go again*, he

swore to himself.

"Forgive me, Moony," Sirius murmured in his ear. "I tried to tell you."

"I'm so sorry, Padfoot." Another moment and he would be weeping. "I should listened to you. I never gave you a chance to tell me."

"Not your fault, Moony," Sirius was mumbling into his shoulder. "Moony, Moony, I lo --"

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione's shrill voice went through him like an electric shock. He spun around, moving instinctively to put himself between the girl and Sirius -- to defend his mate.

Hermione sat near the door, wild-eyed with anger, but also with fear. "You -- you --"

"Hermione --" he began, putting a hand out to her. *We have to explain, and quickly, before someone else gets hurt.* He noticed he was the only one without blood on him. He could smell them all -- their blood and sweat, their fear.

"-- you and him!" Hermione was stuttering.

Oh, God! She hasn't figured that out as well, has she?

"Hermione, calm down --"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you --"

"Hermione, listen to me, please!" *I should be the one to tell Harry -- Sirius and I both.* "I can explain --"

But now Hermione's anger had infected Harry as well. "I trusted you," he shouted, eyes blazing, "and all this time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," Remus tried to tell Harry. *Whatever I have been to Sirius all these years, there was no friendship in it.* "I haven't been Sirius' friend for twelve years, but I am now ... let me explain ..."

"NO!" Hermione's voice was still shrill. "Harry, don't trust him," she begged. "He's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too -- *he's a werewolf!*"

Oh, is that all she's figured out? To Remus, it seemed the most insignificant part of this situation for the moment. But after all, he'd had thirty-odd years to get used to the idea. *I suppose I can still see how it would be shocking to the children.*

Everyone was looking at him. Sirius hadn't yet looked away since he had entered the room, but now the children were all staring at him as well. Ron's eyes looked confused, Harry's eyes

asked him to deny it, Hermione's eyes dared him to deny it. But it was in Sirius's eyes, of all places, that he found peace. *It doesn't matter*, he thought. *Sirius is innocent. Nothing else matters.* The thought made him feel lightheaded and giddy, and just a wee bit reckless.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said at last. He was slightly worried that he might start giggling hysterically. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle," *unless you count by not mentioning to Dumbledore that he's an Animagus.* "And I certainly don't want Harry dead ..." the hysterical giggles nearly got away from him. He took a breath to re-compose his features. "But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

It was unbelievably hard to say. He was so used to keeping the fact a secret, and he hadn't spoken so openly about it with anyone in a dozen years. But now that it was out, he remembered how liberating it felt to be able to just say it. He saw the ghost of a smile twitch at the corner of Sirius's mouth. *He still knows exactly what I'm thinking*, he realised. His throat felt tight.

Apparently the effect of his revelation on the children was anything but liberating. Ron was struggling to stand, despite the obvious pain of his leg. When he collapsed, Remus put out a hand to help him, but the boy cried, "*Get away from me, werewolf!*" He froze, hand still extended. He hoped desperately

that the vehemence of Ron's words was due to the pain he was in, rather than the prejudice against werewolves he was used to. He did so want Harry and his friends to like him

"How long have you known?" he asked, turning to Hermione.

"Ages," Hermione whispered, not meeting his eyes, tongue flicking out experimentally to taste the blood on her split lip. She was frightened of him and he could smell it on her. A werewolf trying to hide his nature is safer than a werewolf with his cover blown. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay ..."

Bastard. Got just exactly what he wanted. You'd never get him to admit out loud that she's a clever one -- clever as Lily ever was! -- but he knew she'd figure it out. Remus pursed his lips. "He'll be delighted. He set that essay hoping someone would realise what my symptoms meant. Did you check the lunar chart and realise I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realise that my Boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said softly, still looking down.

Not entirely Severus's fault, I suppose. The clues are there for anyone who cares to see them. He laughed humourlessly. "You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," she whispered, finally turning terrified brown eyes

upon him. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are."

Because, whatever might have happened then, at least now you wouldn't be stuck in a room with a werewolf, a convicted mass-murderer and no wand in your hand, eh? He allowed himself a slightly smug smile. "But they already know. At least the staff do." *Bitterly as it may gall some of them.*

Ron gasped. "Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf?" he asked incredulously. "Is he mad?"

What a funny question! "Some of the staff thought so," he admitted. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy --" *Or at least that I won't bite Severus in his sleep. Too greasy.*

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry had finally regained his ability to speak for the first time since Remus's revelation, and used it to capacity. "YOU'VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!" He was pointing at Sirius, who was now sitting on the edge of the four-poster, face in one shaking hand, and Remus got the distinct impression that, had he still had possession of his wand, there would have been nothing left of the man on the floor but a scorch mark.

Remus gazed at his former lover a moment, and thought he saw droplets of moisture running between his fingers, dripping from

his knuckles. He longed to go to the man -- to put his arms around the bedraggled figure and offer what comfort his presence could provide. But he could not. Not just now. Instead, Crookshanks jumped into Sirius's lap, purring and butting his head against the thin chest. Slowly, Sirius's other hand descended onto the cat's head and he patted it gently. Ron, still seated on the bed as well, looked askance at the pair of them and edged farther away.

"I have not been helping Sirius," Remus said again, turning his eyes back to Harry. "If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look --" One by one, he tossed each of the wands he held back to its owner. Harry looked as startled, as if the wand now in his hand had sprouted leaves, unbidden. "There," Remus said, looking down to tuck his own wand into his belt. "You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?" He was beginning to get impatient to hear what Sirius had to say. Nearly thirteen years he had been waiting for answers, and now if only these kids would be quiet for ten minutes --

"If you haven't been helping him --" Harry flashed a poisonous glance at Sirius, "-- how did you know he was here?" His tone suggested the possibility seemed remote to him.

"The map," he replied. "The Marauder's Map." At this, Sirius slowly raised his head and looked incredulously at Remus over his fingers. Remus gave him a quick eyebrow raise. *Yes*, the tiny expression said. *Harry had it. Imagine that!* The corner of

Sirius's mouth twitched again. "I was in my office examining it --"

"You know how to work it?" Harry interrupted.

"Of course I know how to work it; I helped write it," Remus replied with an impatient wave. Harry's eyes widened. "I'm Moony -- that was my friends' nickname for me at school." *Enough reminiscing already; I want my answers.*

"You wrote --?"

Remus cut Harry off, the infinite patience of Professor Lupin finally running out. "The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his Hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I?" *Well, Dumbledore was,* he amended silently. He was now pacing from sheer impatience.

He stopped and looked directly at the green-eyed boy who looked so like his old friend. "You might have been wearing your father's old Cloak, Harry --"

"How d'you know about the Cloak?" Harry asked, startled.

Same way Ron and Hermione know about it. We were bloody friends! I've said it often enough, haven't I? "The number of

times I saw James disappear under it" He gestured impatiently again and resumed his pacing. *Time to get this conversation back on track.* "The point is, even if you're wearing an invisibility cloak you show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the ground and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back towards the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else," he finished, rounding on Harry once again.

"What?" Harry was looking at him as if he were mad. *Maybe I am.* "No, we weren't!"

Remus was getting a little tired of being interrupted by thirteen-year-old wizards who knew even less of what was going on here than he did. He chose to ignore Harry's interruption and continue pacing. "I couldn't believe my eyes," he went on. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?"

"No one was with us!"

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast towards you, labeled Sirius Black ..." he went on, eyes faraway as he tried to recall exactly the details of what he had seen. *I don't want to miss anything this time. I want to understand exactly what is happening.* "I saw him collide with you, I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow --"

"One of us!" This time the interruption came from Ron.

Remus finally stopped pacing turned to look at the red-haired boy, pale and sweating with pain, and sitting as far as he could from the other person on the bed. "No, Ron," he said quietly. "Two of you." *And now there are six of us here in this room. Where is he?* He looked Ron up and down. "Do you think I could have a look at your rat?" he asked finally, surprising himself with the coolness of his tone.

"What?" Ron looked surprised. "What's Scabbers got to so with it?"

"Everything," Remus replied with conviction. "Could I see him, please?" he asked in his Professor voice; the one which was not expecting the answer "no".

Ron knew the tone well, and, given that his mother was Molly Weasley, his instinctive reaction to it was unsurprising. With barely a second's hesitation, he reached into the front of his robes and drew out a large, bedraggled and violently-thrashing rodent.

Remus moved towards Ron, holding his breath. For now that he had seen "Scabbers", there could be no doubt. To most men, one rat looks very much like another, but Remus had no trouble recognising the face and markings of his old friend. *What a shame I didn't catch a glimpse of him on the train last September,* he thought incongruously. *Would have saved us all a*

lot of trouble.

"What?" said Ron again, rather sharply, and Remus realised he had been staring at the squirming creature for nearly a minute. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," Sirius's voice sounded odd, partly from lack of use and partly because it was shaking with some strong emotion. He, too, was staring at the animal in Ron's hands.

"What d'you mean -- of course he's a rat --" Ron might have quelled under the intensity of the twin gazes from the alleged mass-murderer and werewolf, but he was too busy clutching at his pet, trying at once to make him hold still and shield him from the two men who were looking at him almost hungrily.

"No, he's not," Remus said softly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said the strange voice, close beside him, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

CHAPTER TWENTY MOONLIGHT AND ANIMAGI

"You're both mental," Ron declared, finally looking up at the two men whose eyes were fixed on his hands.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead! He killed him twelve years ago!" Harry said, pointing at Sirius, who flinched at being so addressed by his own godson.

"I meant to," he growled, eyes still fixed on the struggling rat, "but little Peter got the better of me ... not this time, though!"

Crookshanks leapt from Sirius's lap as the man dove across the bed, trying to make a grab for Ron's pet. He missed and fell across Ron's leg, forcing a yelp from Ron which made Remus wince in sympathy.

"Sirius, NO!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around the other man and dragging him back. "WAIT!" he insisted. "You can't do it just like that -- they need to understand -- we've got to explain --"

"We can explain afterwards," snarled Sirius, trying ineffectually to break Remus's hold on him and get to the squeaking, struggling rat.

In his weakened state, Sirius was no match for him, though. He

held on tight, resting his cheek between Sirius's shoulder blades as he held him tightly. *Never let go again ...* "They've -- got -- a -- right -- to -- know -- everything!" he panted as Sirius continued to fight him. It was as if actually seeing the rat had flipped a switch in Sirius, and all his reason had left him. "Ron's kept him as a pet!" Remus pleaded. "There are parts of it even I don't understand! And Harry --" he grasped at the one thing that might make Sirius see reason, "you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

At last Sirius stopped fighting. Though his eyes never left the rat, he sagged against Remus, who was shocked at how little weight there was to him. Remus held him a moment longer, whispering soothing nonsense, until he felt that Sirius could again support his own weight, and let him go.

Sirius swayed slightly. "All right, then. Tell them whatever you like," he said in uncharacteristically harsh tones. Then a pleading note entered his voice, "But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for" His eyes never left "Scabbers" as he said this, and Remus's throat closed again at the bitterness of Sirius's last statement.

"You're nutters, both of you," said Ron, struggling to rise from the bed and pocket his rat at the same time. "I've had enough of this. I'm off."

"You're going to hear me out Ron," Remus said softly, removing his wand from his belt and pointing it at the rat. *So much for*

"*you're armed and I'm not,*" he thought. But he and Sirius had business to attend to here, and it was essential that Harry know the truth about what had happened to his parents, that Ron understand about his pet, and that Hermione be there to hear, too, because she would be the quickest to understand, and once she understood, the boys would be sure to follow. "Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen."

"HE'S NOT PETER, HE'S SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, still trying to shove the rat into his pocket. Ron lost his balance, but Harry was suddenly there at his arm and caught him, helping him sit back down on the bed.

Then Harry rounded on Remus. "There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die," he declared defiantly. "A whole street full of them ..."

"They didn't see what they thought they saw," Sirius growled, baring his teeth.

Remus nodded. *I was there, and if that's Peter in Ron's hands, then I certainly didn't see what I thought I saw.* "Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter. I believed it myself -- until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder's Map never lies ... Peter's alive. Ron's holding him, Harry." *Believe,* he begged the boys silently. But he could tell from the look Ron and Harry exchanged that they still weren't convinced.

Neither, apparently, was Hermione just yet. "But Professor Lupin ..." her voice trembled and it was obvious that she was still frightened. She was standing near the door, and was quick enough to escape, but Remus was pleased to see that she had no intention of leaving without Ron and Harry. "Scabbers can't be Pettigrew ... it just can't be true, you know it can't ..."

"Why can't it be true?" he asked in as reasonable a tone as he could muster. *Believe, one of you, please!*

"Because ... because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus."

So that's it, Remus realised as Hermione babbled on about everything she had learned about Animagi from her studies. I had forgotten how rare a talent that is. Sirius and James and Peter spoiled me, I guess. No wonder she doesn't believe! Seven official Animagi this century -- how could she believe that three reckless, foolish teenage boys managed something obviously so difficult?

He began to laugh, causing Hermione to stop short in her recitation of Animagi facts and figures. "Right again, Hermione!" he said, favouring her with a smile. "But the Ministry never knew that there used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts." *Believe* he urged her silently again. *Come on; you know Sirius is an Animagus and that he's not registered. Believe the rest of it as well.*

"If you're going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus," Sirius interrupted him. From where he was sitting, Remus could hear the soft, constant growl coming from deep in his throat. "I've waited twelve years. I'm not going to wait much longer."

Twelve years. The thought broke Remus's heart all over again. Imagining Sirius alone and friendless in Azkaban for twelve years, knowing what he knew, believed by none. *I didn't even visit him,* Remus thought again with guilt. *I could have. He asked for me, Dumbledore said. I abandoned him.*

"All right" His voice was soft and nearly cracked with emotion. He almost reached out to cover Sirius's hand with his own, but then thought better of it in the present company. "But you'll need to help me, Sirius," he said softly, and at last Sirius dragged his eyes away from the rat to look at him. *Those eyes are still beautiful.* "I only know how it began ..." and he didn't only mean those last days before the world fell apart.

He could see in Sirius's eyes the acknowledgment of times long past as well. Sirius opened his mouth as if to say something. His hand raised, and he might have been about to reach out and touch Remus, when suddenly a loud creak from the direction of the door caused them all to freeze.

Regretfully, Remus rose from his place next to Sirius and went to the now mysteriously open door and peered out onto the dim

landing. "No one there ..." but his wolf senses denied the evidence of his eyes, and he felt the back of his neck prickle.

"This place is haunted!" Ron declared, looking even paler than before, if such a thing were possible.

"It's not," said Remus distractedly, still peering into the darkness, feeling the *wrongness* of it. "The Shrieking Shack was never haunted" He said it slightly louder than was natural, as if he was suddenly unsure of the fact, and must now convince himself. "The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me."

He pushed his hair up off his forehead. His head felt hot. His ears were pounding. The room felt cramped and crowded. *The excitement of the night must be getting to me.* As always, he sought calm in reminiscence. "That's where all of this starts -- with my becoming a werewolf. None of this could have happened if I hadn't been bitten ... and if I hadn't been so foolhardy"

The children were actually listening now. None of them looked ready to make a break for it or to attack himself or Sirius any longer, which was a relief. He let himself relax a little. It had all started so long ago that, telling the story now, he suddenly felt a million years old.

They sat, rapt and wide-eyed, as he recounted the events of his

youth. From the bite at the tender age of six -- *it's still a wonder that beast didn't tear me to pieces. If my father hadn't been there ...* -- to his family's concerns that he would not be able to have a normal education, and the kindly and timely intervention of Professor Dumbledore. He told them about learning to keep secrets and trust no one, and then about the wonder of finding friendship and learning to trust again.

He glanced around the room, at each pair of eyes fixed on his. The children's looks of suspicion, wonder, fear, curiosity. And then he looked at Sirius. Even someone who knew the person and mannerisms of Sirius Black less well than Remus Lupin had would have been able to see how highly strung the man was at that moment. He sat perfectly still, eyes on Remus, but there was a tenseness in his posture, and the fingers of his right hand were twitching, as if they longed to grasp a wand once more.

Help me tell them the story, Sirius, he begged silently. *The vengeance is Harry's as much as it is yours and mine. He needs to understand first.* He knew he had to get Sirius's attention on the story. So he told about the pain of his transformations, and Sirius's nervous movements stilled.

"But apart from my transformations," he went on, "I was happier than I had ever been in my life." As he said these words, he looked directly into the eyes of Sirius Black, and saw that he remembered the truth of them. "For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black ..." he shifted his eyes

to Ron's hands, "Peter Pettigrew ..." his eyes moved at last to meet Harry's, "and, of course, your father, Harry -- James Potter."

He told them of how he had first tried to hide his secret from his friends, but that they had seen through his prevarications and guessed the truth. And, rather than abandoning him as he had expected, they had instead given him two great gifts -- first, they had accepted him for who he was, beast and all, and second, they had become part-beast themselves -- and he could think of no greater gesture a friend could make, bar giving up life itself. And he would have done so for these friends happily.

"They became Animagi," he said, and he could not keep a note of pride from his voice.

Harry's eyes were round as saucers. "My dad, too?"

"Yes, indeed," Remus favoured Harry with a smile, remembering the first time he had seen the magnificent young stag take the place of his tousle-haired friend. Proud, antlered head, delicate hooves, and a graceful arrogance of movement.

He could tell from the look on Harry's face and from many hints over the past year, just how much Harry admired his father, and it suddenly occurred to him that Harry himself might now wish to try to become an Animagus. *Not something to be entered into lightly, my boy*, he thought, as he explained to the children just

how difficult the spell was to learn, and how it could go wrong. *Like poor old Mrs Norris*, he added silently, for she must once have been human to show up on the Marauder's Map. *Now she's stuck as a cat forever.*

When he saw Hermione nodding slowly, he knew with relief that, should the boys ever begin talking about becoming Animagi, she would be there to discourage them. *She might just be able to manage the spell herself, though*, he thought. *Clever girl that she is. It's a wonder she's not a Ravenclaw.* With Hermione's silent acknowledgment of the dangers of the Animagus spell, Remus returned to his story.

"Finally in our fifth year, they managed it," he continued. "They could each turn into a different animal at will."

"But how did that help you?" asked Hermione.

He explained to them the influence the large, sapient animals had had on his own werewolfish nature, curbing his animal instincts enough to significantly reduce the danger he posed to humans -- a werewolf's only prey. How grateful he had been to them! And how foolhardy they had been.

Sirius interrupted his thought. "Hurry up, Remus," he growled. He was staring at the rat in Ron's hands again. Clearly the story he knew so well was only going to keep him distracted for so long.

"I'm getting there, Sirius, I'm getting there ..." he promised. He told the children about leaving the Shrieking Shack on those moonlit nights, of discovering the secrets of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, of the creation of the Marauder's Map. He tried to keep the facts as bare and simple as possible, but the truth was that Remus loved telling stories, and he couldn't help throwing in details here and there to see the look of wonder on Harry's face as bits and pieces of his father's youth and personality unfolded before him. "Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs."

Harry's eyes were wide. "What sort of animal --?" he began before Hermione cut him off.

"That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf!" she scolded, and out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Ron rolling his eyes. "What if you'd given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?"

"A thought that still haunts me," Remus replied heavily, with an internal shudder. "And there were near misses," he admitted. "Many of them." He remembered the guilt that he had felt on those mornings, unable to remember the events of the night, but waking to see his friends scratched, bitten and bleeding, and knowing what must have happened -- that they had nearly lost control of him again. "We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless -- carried away with our own

cleverness."

The guilt had not only been for what he had unwittingly done to his friends, however, but about what he had knowingly done in betraying Dumbledore's trust, and he told his audience about that as well. "And I haven't changed," he said savagely. "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admitting that I'd led others along with me..."

Well, that's one reason, he amended silently. We did also swear that oath that if any of us ever revealed the secret of the Animagi to anyone with the intention of causing harm, the traitor would suffer some terrible fate, and I didn't feel like testing that. But above all, he had to admit to himself that the reason he had kept his silence was that he had not wanted to be the one responsible for the capture of Sirius Black. And now, how glad he was that he had not spoken! For if he had, Sirius, his own dear, innocent Sirius, would now be worse than dead.

So instead, he told the children of his loyalty to Dumbledore, which they would understand, when they would not comprehend the rest of it, but his eyes were on the man still staring at the rat, and he hoped that Sirius would know the words he did not say. "And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using Dark Arts he learnt from Voldemort," he said,

silently excusing himself for the half-truth which took less explaining than the real truth. "That being an Animagus had nothing to do with it ... so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along." *I really have been the one letting my boyfriend into the school all year.*

"Snape?" said Sirius, looking up at him in surprise and confusion. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius," he replied with an internal sigh, knowing that, when it came to Severus, even the adult Sirius he had known twelve years ago had been as petty as any teenager with a grudge. Still, if it distracted him for a few minutes from his murderous intent "He's teaching here as well."

He turned back to Harry, Ron and Hermione then, to explain that Severus had been at Hogwarts with the lot of them, and that there had been bad blood between them from the first. He was glad that he was the one telling this story, since, although he had had no liking for Severus, among his friends he had been the most tolerant and the least likely to bear a grudge. Only he was able to tell the story of the Infamous Whomping Willow Prank in a neutral tone of voice, devoid of any strong feeling. He saw Sirius hunch his shoulders, though, and ball his hands into fists as he told of that particular occasion.

"He was forbidden to tell anybody by Dumbledore," he finished. "But from that time, he knew what I was"

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," Harry said, a look of dawning comprehension on his face, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," said an all-too-familiar, all-too-unwelcome voice from about five feet behind Remus.

He jumped and spun around, the back of his neck prickling, and a soft growl escaping his throat. There, leaning casually against the wall, wand in hand and an insufferable smirk on his face, was Severus Snape.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE RAT

Everyone in the room nearly jumped out of their shoes. Hermione screamed. For several seconds, chaos reigned in the Shrieking Shack. The expression on Severus's face did not change at all. He kept his wand carefully trained on Remus's chest. *He wouldn't. Not in front of the children, surely?* But he knew that vindictiveness ran deep with Severus, and that a chance to kill someone he despised in the name of defence was not something he was likely to pass up.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," he said when all was quiet again, and he saw he had their full attention. He tossed something Remus recognised as James's old Invisibility cloak aside like so much dirty laundry. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you"

I knew it! thought Remus. *Harry had to be using that old thing to get into Hogsmeade! But Harry, how could you be so dumb? Leaving it out there for anyone to come along and take* He was fairly sure that James would never have been so careless, but he wouldn't have wanted to put money on it.

The smirk seemed to be a permanent feature of Severus's face. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" He looked exceedingly proud of himself. "I've just been to your office, Lupin ..."

The map! Remus realised it before Snape even said it. *Arse! I guess Harry wasn't the only one to do something stupid tonight. How could I just leave it lying around? I should have brought it with me! I could have used it to prove the rat is Peter.* "Severus --"

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you've been helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof." His tone scarred the word "friend" slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched as he said it.

Don't you dare out us to the children! He flashed Severus a warning look. *It should be our job to tell them when the time is right.*

But Harry and his friends didn't seem to notice the subtle slur. "Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout," Severus continued.

"Severus, you're making a mistake," Remus interrupted him. He had been oddly unconcerned that his old schoolboy adversary might harm him. Something of the residual feeling of "Sirius is innocent; I can die happy", he supposed. But it suddenly occurred to him that Severus might do something to hurt Sirius. The truth had to be told, and told quickly, and until it was, Remus had to keep Snape's attention on himself. "You haven't heard everything -- I can explain -- Sirius is not here to kill

Harry --"

But Severus was not listening to a word he said. "Two more for Azkaban tonight," he declared, almost gleefully, and Remus got the feeling that, if he hadn't been holding his wand, he might have been rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this ... he was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin ... a tame werewolf"

This was too much for Remus to bear. He could understand Severus's feelings about himself and Sirius, but to wish ill of Albus Dumbledore, the man to whom Remus knew for a fact Severus owed his job, his good name, his freedom and possibly his life, as much as Remus himself did, was simply beyond the pale.

"You fool," Remus hissed, all the pleading and reasoning leaving his voice. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

But Severus was apparently done talking. With a *bang*, binding cords shot from the end of his wand and twined themselves around Remus's body, gagging him and rendering him utterly helpless. He fell to the floor, unable to move -- barely able to breathe. In the blinking of an eye, Sirius leapt towards Remus's attacker with a vicious growl which the canine part of Remus's mind recognised as meaning, "how dare you touch my mate?!"

It was heartening to see Sirius leap to his defence like that, and he might have smiled if the cords had not been cutting into the corners of his mouth.

But Severus got his wand up just in time, and Sirius stopped dead, going oddly cross-eyed to look at the point of the wand, just beyond the tip of his nose. Remus saw Severus's mouth move, but the cords were wrapped around and poking into his ears, and the pain of the tightening bands around his body made it difficult to concentrate on anything but breathing. All he could do was watch the scene unfold before him.

Sirius was flashing Severus the infamous Black look. *Poor Sirius*, thought Remus, *he hates feeling helpless. I bet Severus can sense that. He never could resist toying with any of us when he got the chance.*

Harry and Ron stood just as frozen as Sirius, with confused expressions on their faces. *This could actually be to our advantage*, he realised. *They hate Severus. And now they have to decide whether they are going to side with him or us.* He saw Hermione step towards the Potions master, her hands out in a gesture of supplication. She was obviously trying to reason with him, but by the look on his face, he was having none of it. *Good girl, Hermione!* he thought at her. If she was saying something he disliked as much as he appeared to, she must finally be coming around to Sirius's version of events.

Severus's face had gone from pale to livid white. He looked like he was yelling. Sparks shot from the end of his wand into Sirius's face. Instinctively, Remus tried to struggle to his feet, to come to Sirius's aide, but even the slightest movement caused the cords to cut into his body, and cut off his meager air supply. Severus was talking to Sirius now. Sirius looked resolute, then Severus said something with a nasty smile that made his eyes go wide and his face go blank with shock. He kept talking, though, a look of terror dawning in his eyes.

Always a brave one, my Padfoot, thought Remus. *Just get me out of this and I'll take care of that greasy git for you.*

Severus jerked his head towards the door, looking at the children now. He snapped his fingers and the ends of the cords binding Remus's body were in his hands. He tugged at them, and Remus gasped. Or tried to. He couldn't breathe. He was suffocating. Harry was standing between Severus and the door, wand in hand. There was some kind of confrontation going on. Dimly, he saw all three young wizards raise their wands. As his vision went black around the edges, Severus dropped the bonds he held, flew back against the wall, and lay still on the floor.

He had to breathe. Had to get air soon, or he would die. He fought his bonds, ignoring the pain, knowing he could never free himself on his own. And then Sirius was there, kneeling beside him, tearing the black cords away from his body, and he could breathe again. He gulped in precious oxygen and sat up, giving

Sirius a look of gratitude.

Rubbing his tender arms to try to get some circulation back into them, he thanked Harry. He knew it must have taken courage for the boy to stand up to a teacher who obviously despised him.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," Harry replied, but there was less conviction in his voice now. Remus sighed with relief, and winced as his lungs pressed against his aching ribs.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Sirius. He gave Remus's shoulder a squeeze before turning back to the children. "You, boy -- give me Peter. Now."

Ron still looked undecided -- unready to relinquish his pet to someone he considered supremely untrustworthy. "Come off it," he tried to reason. "Are you trying to say you broke out of Azkaban just to get your hands on Scabbers? I mean ... OK, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat -- there are millions of rats -- how's he supposed to know which one he's after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

Boy's got a point, Remus realised. Peter did his best to make himself hard to find, and Sirius did it from in there? "You know, Sirius, that's a fair question. How did you find out where he was?"

Sirius met his eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched. *You're*

going to love this one, his expression said. From the folds of his robes, he drew out ... a newspaper clipping. A photo from the *Daily Prophet* of the Weasley family, of all people. And there was Peter, plain as day, sitting on Ron's shoulder.

Remus's jaw dropped. "How did you get this?"

Sirius's expression was almost smug. He explained about Cornelius Fudge's visit to Azkaban the previous summer, and how he had realised that, with Peter at Hogwarts, Harry would be in danger.

Remus shook his head in disbelief. "My God." He looked at the picture, then at the rat, then the picture again. And there it was, the truth staring him right in the face. "His front paw"

"What about it?" Ron's tone was defensive.

"He's got a toe missing," said Sirius. Definitely smug.

"Of course." The pieces were all falling together in Remus's mind. He had to admit a grudging admiration for Peter's escape. "So simple ... so brilliant ... He cut it off himself?"

Sirius nodded. "Just before he transformed." Their eyes met. *I should have seen*, Remus berated himself. *I was too busy looking at Sirius. As always.* The corner of his own mouth twitched, as Sirius continued, telling them all what Remus now

knew he had seen: Peter's crime, not Sirius's. Peter's cowardly descent into the sewers of London. Sirius being left to take the blame. It all finally made sense.

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" He turned to the only one of the children who had been raised in the Wizarding world -- the one who would have heard this story repeated from his cradle -- the one whose father would have been there in the marketplace on that awful day, and who had taken home a pet rat for his son. "The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger." *There are three Unforgivable curses, my boy, and not a one of them will do that to a man.*

Harry and Hermione were by now staring at "Scabbers" with looks of dawning comprehension, but Ron was still in denial. "Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right --"

"Twelve years, in fact." Remus quirked an eyebrow at the redheaded boy. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We -- we've been taking good care of him!" But a note of doubt was beginning to creep into Ron's voice.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" Remus pressed. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again"

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" Ron glanced at the entirely sane-looking ginger cat, purring on the bed.

"This cat isn't mad," Sirius reached out a hand to pat the ugly beast fondly. Crookshanks, Sirius told them, had in fact been Sirius's eyes and ears inside the castle. *A shame Severus isn't awake for this*, Remus thought, with a glance towards the unconscious figure in the corner. The cat had apparently aided Sirius not only in hunting down Peter, but in supplying Sirius with Neville's list of passwords, which the boy hadn't left carelessly lying around after all. But then Peter had vanished, leaving nothing but a smear of blood on the sheets, trying to frame Crookshanks for his demise as he had once framed Sirius.

"And why did he fake his death?" Harry interrupted, tone sharp. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No. Harry --" Remus put out a hand towards the boy, but Harry ignored him.

"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have." Sirius was looking not at Harry, but at the rat again, with murderous intent in his eyes.

"Then I should have let Snape take you!" Harry declared.

Remus tried quickly to reason with him. "Harry, don't you see? All this time, we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down -- but it was the other way around, don't you see? Peter betrayed your mother and father -- Sirius tracked Peter down --"

But Harry -- who had seemed so close to believing only moments ago -- who had attacked one of his own teachers in order to hear this story -- was apparently beyond reason.

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" yelled Harry. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP, HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

Remus looked to Sirius, who had sunk down on the bed once again, staring into his hands with tear-filled eyes as he shook his head remorsefully. "Harry ... I as good as killed them." The guilt hung on him, thick as cobwebs, as he told them about talking James and Lily into switching Secret-Keepers at the last moment, so that no one knew -- providing Peter with just the opportunity he had needed to get away with his betrayal cleanly.

His voice broke as he talked of seeing their friends' bodies, and of the discovery of that betrayal, and Remus remembered his own feelings on that night, seeing those still forms, pursuing answers through the skies and the marketplace in Muggle London. Only he had had Dumbledore to comfort him at the end

of that terrible night, and Sirius had had only the Dementors.

They had both lost everything that night, he and Sirius. Friends murdered, betrayal by a lover and by a friend. *I betrayed him, thought Remus remorsefully. He never betrayed me, but I betrayed him. I didn't go to see him. I didn't try to find out why. In one stroke, Peter broke the circle of our friendship and threw away our love. And I let him.*

Sirius's voice spoke the same measure of guilt Remus was feeling himself. He felt responsible for James and Lily's deaths, as Remus felt responsible for the murder of their love. *It's not our fault.* Remus looked at the rat again. *Why should we suffer any longer for what he's done? Let him reap what he has sown.*

"Enough of this." At last, Remus's slow temper had reached its boiling point. It was time to deal with the true culprit. There was none of his usual gentle tone in his voice as he said, "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

Remus's voice brooked no opposition, yet still Ron hesitated. "What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?"

"Force him to show himself." Remus gritted his teeth, making himself stay rational, forcing down the beast, growling with impatience and bloodlust within. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

At long last, the redheaded boy held out his pet to the man he had trusted all year to teach him to defend himself. The rodent was terrified, and the blood was singing in Remus's ears. He smelled blood, and animal fear and Sirius. He looked up at the other man, holding the rat out to him. "Ready, Sirius?" he asked, softly.

Sirius was clutching Severus's wand clumsily, as if he had forgotten how to hold one, but he pointed it determinedly at the rat, taking a step closer, eyes intent. "Together?" he whispered hopefully, grey eyes into brown.

Are we? Remus wondered briefly. *We pledged "forever" once. I guess the term of the agreement is not up yet.* "I think so." The corner of his mouth twitched slightly. *There is so much that needs to be said,* he thought, *but not now.*

He turned his eyes reluctantly from those beautiful, grey pools, to fix them once more upon the bedraggled rat. *This is for Sirius Black. This is for twelve years of his life spent in Azkaban. This is for twelve years of my life spent mourning you and hating myself for not hating him.* "On the count of three," he nodded. "One -- two -- THREE!"

The blue-white light of the Reveal spell hit the rat from both directions at once, pinning him briefly in the air, before letting him drop to the floor. A second flash enveloped the squirming

creature, and he began growing -- sprouting limbs and shooting upwards -- grotesque shapes resolving themselves into human form for the first time in a dozen years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

If they hadn't known he was Peter, they might not have recognised him. *He doesn't need to be a rat any longer to live in disguise*, Remus thought. The man before them looked lumpy and unwell. He was balding in an unattractive and undignified way, and his features struck Remus as being even more ratlike than he ever remembered -- perhaps the result of living that way for so long. And had Peter ever cringed so?

"Well, hello, Peter," Remus said, surprised by how calm his voice sounded. He felt oddly light-headed. "Long time, no see."

"S-Sirius ... R-Remus" His voice was higher and squeakier than Remus recalled. His eyes darted about the room, most frequently to the door. "My friends ..." he tried nervously. "My old friends"

Sirius, fury burning in his eyes over this man of all people calling him friend, would have blasted Peter at once, but Remus stepped closer to him, and grabbed him by the skeletal wrist, forcing the wand down. *Not yet, Sirius*, he shook his head slightly. Sirius lowered his hand, and Remus let go reluctantly with a tiny squeeze.

He turned back to Peter, voice still calm. "We've been having a little chat, Peter," he said, "about what happened the night James

and Lily died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed --" He noticed remotely that he was speaking to Peter as he had not spoken to anyone since his school days. The dignity of adult phrasing seemed to have deserted him.

"Remus," Peter squeaked pathetically, latching on to what appeared to be the more rational of the two adults present, "you don't believe him, do you ...?" His eyes flicked to Sirius and he visibly cringed again. "He tried to kill me, Remus"

"So we've heard," Remus replied, voice chilly. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'd be so --"

"He's come to try to kill me again!" Peter broke in shrilly, obviously mistaking Remus's courtesy for a desire to hear his own version of events. He pointed an incriminating finger at Sirius -- incriminating, but not to Sirius. It spoke volumes of evidence, which Remus could see reflected in the children's widened eyes. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to kill me, too ... you've got to help me, Remus"

Help me, Remus. How many times had Peter appealed to him with those words, the victim of James and Sirius's latest prank? And Remus had always gamely rallied to his cause, imploring the other two to be nicer to Peter, though it had resulted in much mocking of his person and his character *So that's how it is,* Remus thought, still calm. *I was his champion, and he tried to*

repay that by leaving me out of his betrayal. James dead. Sirius imprisoned. Myself the only one untouched -- at least, physically. But I am done "helping" you, Rat.

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," he said, voice still chilly. He was gratified by the dawning horror in Peter's eyes as he realised that he would get no sympathy from that quarter.

"Sorted things out?" he squeaked, eyes darting to the door again. "I knew he'd come after me! I knew he'd be back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

Peter had to know he was trapped now. He had always been a terrible liar. It had been his weak testimony which had incriminated the Marauders in many a prank. His poor logic was no match for his far cleverer and very angry classmates.

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" Remus gave Peter a very skeptical look. "When nobody has ever done it before?" Peter's marks in History of Magic had always been poor, but that fact was well known to all wizards, especially those born into the Wizarding world.

"He's got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Peter was now attempting to make up for his lack of credibility with volume, shouting to make himself heard in the quiet confines of the dusty house. "How else did he get out of there? I suppose He

Who Must Not Be Named taught him a few tricks!"

Sirius was laughing, but hollowly, and without humour. Peter looked scared. "Voldemort, teach me tricks? What, scared to hear your old master's name?" he taunted as Peter flinched. "I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with you, are they?"

"Don't know -- what you mean, Sirius," Peter mumbled, earning himself twin looks of contempt.

"You haven't been hiding from *me* for twelve years," Sirius spat at him accusatorially. He had obviously had a long time to think about what Peter had done, and why, and all the implications of his actions. Peter paled as Sirius told him exactly what Voldemort's supporters thought of the Rat who had brought down their master. "If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter --"

"Don't know ... what you're talking about ..." Peter insisted again lamely. Desperate eyes turned to appeal to Remus once again. "You don't believe this -- this madness, Remus --"

Remus pursed his lips, as if considering Peter's words. "I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat."

"Innocent, but scared!" Peter's voice was shrill and insistent. "If

Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban -- the spy, Sirius Black!"

Remus could feel his face go white with anger, his jaw clench. *Vermin!* He nearly lost control then, and would have leapt on Peter himself, had Sirius not spoken.

"How dare you," he growled between clenched teeth, and Remus suddenly wondered if the line between man and dog was as clear as it had once been. "I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter -- I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us ... me and Remus ..." the cold, grey eyes filled with sorrow again for a moment, "and James."

He's right, thought Remus. We should have known. Why did we never see it? Too wrapped up in the fear of it being each other, I suppose, but still ... someone should have seen. James should have seen. How could he not have?

But Peter still seemed determined to protest his own innocence. "Me, a spy ... must be out of your mind ... never ... don't know how you can say such a --"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it," Sirius spat. "I thought it was the perfect plan ... a

bluff"

As Sirius spoke, Remus wondered how Sirius had talked them into it. James would certainly have found it a wonderful joke, but Lily had been more cautious. It was unlikely she would have agreed to something so risky purely at Sirius's suggestion. *It all happened so quickly*, he recalled. *That sort of decision making just doesn't sound like Lily at all.*

Remus also noted, while Sirius was speaking, that since the rat had become Peter, the three children had been looking at him with increasing suspicion, not one of them remotely convinced by his increasingly lame denials.

Of course it was Hermione who spoke first. "Professor Lupin?" He was gratified to hear the return of a respectful tone to her voice. "Can -- can I say something?"

"Certainly, Hermione." He tried to give her a smile, but the atmosphere in the room was too charged for that.

"Well -- Scabbers -- I mean, this -- this man -- he's been sleeping in Harry's dormitory for three years. If he's working for You Know Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?"

"There!" Peter cried shrilly. "Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry's head! Why should I?"

Peter, you should be ashamed of yourself, thought Remus. A thirteen-year-old girl putting up a better argument for your defence than you can manage after twelve years of thinking about what you'd say?

But Sirius had had plenty of time to consider Peter's motives himself, and it was he who answered the question. "I'll tell you why. Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you."

He's right, Remus knew. Peter would never stick his neck out for anyone, unless he was sure that person could give him a safe place to hide after. And why risk anything when he already had safety?

Peter did not appear to have an answer for this.

Hermione spoke again, this time addressing Sirius. "Er -- Mr Black -- Sirius?"

Sirius jumped, and Remus nearly giggled. He wondered how many times in his life Sirius had ever been referred to as "Mr Black". The urge to laugh left him as he wondered when the last time was that someone had spoken to Sirius with any level of respect or kindness.

"If you don't mind me asking," Hermione continued, "how --

how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark magic?"

"Thank you!" Peter began praising Hermione's defence again, but Remus gave him his best Professor look, and he closed his mouth.

"I don't know how I did it," Sirius began, frowning slightly, as if trying to find the best words to explain.

It was not quite as Remus had expected. He had thought that it might have been Sirius's ability to become Padfoot that had saved his mind from the ravages of the Dementors, but that wasn't all of it. The knowledge of his own innocence had protected him. Truth is not the same as happiness. The Dementors could not feed on it. And Sirius had held onto that truth -- his rock in the raging river of fear, despair and self-loathing that would otherwise have swept him away.

But even if the usual madness induced by Azkaban had not been his lot, Sirius's experience of the place sounded horrible enough. Remus was once again overwhelmed by guilt. *I did nothing. I should have been that rock. I didn't even try to see him.* He wanted to reach out, not only to comfort the man he loved, but also to reassure himself that the terrible loneliness of the past twelve years was really over. *Not now*, he thought. *There will be time for that later.*

"But then I saw Peter in that picture ..." Sirius continued,

explaining how the realisation that Harry was in danger had lit a fire under him, forcing him to action. Sirius caught Remus's eyes briefly, and Remus read the look loud and clear. *As long as Harry was safe, I knew no one on the outside needed me*, it said. Remus looked away first, ashamed.

"I've been living in the Forest ever since ... except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course ... you fly as well as your father did, Harry"

Remus blinked. *Quidditch? He came out of the Forest to watch Quidditch?! Actually, that sounds just like Sirius* He smiled at the other man, but Sirius was looking intently at Harry.

"Believe me," he implored. "Believe me. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

Remus felt a lump in his throat, as he watched man and boy, staring at one another. He saw the mistrust draining from wide, green eyes. *I should have known. I should have*, he berated himself yet again. *How could I, of all people, ever have thought him a traitor?*

Remus thought for a second that Sirius was going to reach out and touch the boy, but before he could move, Peter broke in, wailing, "No!" He fell to his knees and moved towards Sirius, pleading, "Sirius -- it's me ... it's Peter ... your friend ... you wouldn't"

Sirius kicked at him, and he slunk back. "There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," he said coldly.

Desperately, Peter searched the room for a still-sympathetic ear. "Remus!" he cried, prostrating himself in front of him. "You don't believe this ... Wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?"

I only wish he had, thought Remus. *Things might have gone differently if he had.* He hoped the children wouldn't catch on to the implication that he and Sirius had shared a bond close enough for the sharing of such secrets. "Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter." His eyes met Sirius's over Peter's prostrated form. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he inquired, trying to keep his voice as neutral and free of emotion as possible.

"Forgive me, Remus," was all Sirius said, but Remus could see the regret in his eyes.

"Not at all, Padfoot, old friend," he reassured him. Remus pushed the sleeves of his robes up over his elbows. "And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing you were the spy?"

"Of course." A faint smile and a look of relief washed over Sirius's face, and he followed suit, rolling up his dirty, torn and bedraggled sleeves. "Shall we kill him together?" he added.

"Yes, I think so," said mild-mannered Remus Lupin. For a man usually so quick to forgive and eager to be liked, his own response startled him slightly. *Peter deserves this*, he thought savagely as Peter squealed and begged pathetically. *As long as he lives, he is a danger to Harry and to all of us. If we show him mercy, he will only sell us to them again to save his own miserable skin.*

Peter could see his former friends were lost to him, so he began trying to appeal to the children instead.

"Ron ... haven't I been a good friend ... a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you ... you're on my side, aren't you?"

But Ron's lip curled in a look of disgust. "I let you sleep in my bed!" he cried, outraged.

Oh, that's not very promising, thought Remus as Peter continued to crawl and plead and generally humiliate himself.

"If you made a better rat than human," cut in Sirius, "it's not much to boast about, Peter."

Seeing he would get no help from Ron, Peter switched to Hermione. "Sweet girl ... clever girl ... you -- you won't let them ... help me ..." But Hermione backed away, looking only slightly less disgusted than Ron.

At last, Peter turned his now hopeless eyes on Harry, his last chance for survival. "Harry ... Harry ... you look just like your father ... just like him"

Sirius was beside himself. "HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?" he shouted, voice cracking. Remus wondered how long it had been since he had last dared to speak so loudly. "HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?"

"Harry," begged Peter in despairing tones, hands outstretched in a gesture of supplication, "Harry, James wouldn't have wanted me killed ... James would have understood, Harry ... he would have shown me mercy"

It was too much for both of them, to see this man, responsible for the deaths of two of their best friends, begging for his life from their young son. As one, they moved forwards, grabbed him by his shoulders, and threw him onto his back, away from Harry. He lay, blinking in terror, hands before his face, as if to ineffectually defend himself.

"You sold Lily and James to Voldemort," Sirius said in a voice which shook with cold fury. "Do you deny it?"

A sob welled up in Peter's throat, and he lay on the floor, blubbering, wailing and contemptible. "Sirius, Sirius, what could

I have done? The Dark Lord ... you have no idea ... he has weapons you can't imagine ... I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen ... He Who Must Not Be Named forced me --"

"DON'T LIE!" Sirius shouted, rage turning his eyes to a dangerous silver which sent a chill down Remus's spine. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE JAMES AND LILY DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!"

"He -- he was taking over everywhere!" said Peter, his weak defences running out. "Wh-what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who ever existed?" Sirius's quiet fury was even more terrible than his raging. "Only innocent lives, Peter!"

"You don't understand!" squealed Peter. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" Sirius was shouting again. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"

Peter's eyes flicked fearfully to Remus, but found no quarter there, as Remus stepped in to present a united front with Sirius, shoulder to shoulder, their arms brushing. Remus thought for a

second that he saw a spark arc between their raised wands. *Love and War*, thought Remus. *That's what it all comes down to.*

"You should have realised," Remus spoke in quiet agreement, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Goodbye, Peter."

Their wands were pointing at the cowering form, the Unforgivable Curse rising in the backs of their throats. In this one act, they would be reunited, and put right so much of what had gone so wrong.

But suddenly, there was Harry -- James's face, Lily's eyes -- standing between them and their revenge, and saying, "NO! You can't kill him! You can't."

Remus was so surprised he nearly lost his balance. Next to him, Sirius looked as though he was about to collapse from shock.

"Harry," said Sirius sharply, "this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents."

Peter always hated when James and Sirius used to tease him and call him vermin, Remus remembered as Sirius spoke. And I used to defend him. But they were right.

"I know. We'll take him up to the castle," Harry implored. "We'll hand him over to the Dementors. He can go to Azkaban ... just don't kill him."

"Harry!" Peter clutched at Harry's legs, groveling. "You -- thank you -- it's more than I deserve -- thank you --"

It's exactly what you deserve, Remus thought. Smart boy, Harry. Death is too easy an end for him. Give him to the Dementors and let him suffer for what he did. Only he's too stupid to realise what this means.

"Get off me." Harry kicked Peter away from him, voice filled with scorn and loathing. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because I don't reckon my dad would've wanted his two best friends to become killers -- just for you."

So that's it. Harry finally understands that Sirius and I are his only real link to his parents. If we kill Peter, we'll be sent to Azkaban for murder. Even if the truth comes out, there's no war on now. He looked at Sirius, who was looking back at him, questioning. It's Harry's revenge as much as ours. Do we have more right to choose than he?

As if he heard the thought, Sirius lowered his wand. Remus brought his down as well. Sirius turned to Harry.

"You're the only person who has the right to decide, Harry. But think ... think what he did ..." he said gently, his words surprising Remus. To give up his revenge -- their revenge -- because he thought Harry deserved it more, well, Remus was the

only other person in the room who truly appreciated what that meant.

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry said again. "If anyone deserves that place, he does"

Remus held his breath until he saw Sirius nod ever so slightly. The decision was made. "Very well," Remus said at last. "Stand aside, Harry." When Harry didn't move, he added, "I'm going to tie him up. That's all, I swear."

Harry stood aside, and Remus stepped forwards. He knew the spell as well as Snape did. The bonds he placed on Peter were nearly as tight and just as inescapable. Unless one happened to be a shapeshifter.

Sirius saw that risk as well. "But if you transform, Peter, we will kill you," he said, Snape's wand still pointed at the man's chest. "You agree, Harry?"

Harry looked at Peter and nodded.

We'll have to warn the Ministry and the guards at Azkaban about that little talent of Peter's, thought Remus. Special allowances will have to be made. I wonder if there's a way to stop him from changing?

He suddenly realised that the sooner they got out of there and

got the whole mess straightened out, the sooner he was likely to have a chance to talk to Sirius privately. And that was something he wanted very badly to do. "Right," he said, turning to Ron. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing." He placed a quick *ferula* spell on the damaged leg before helping the boy to his feet.

"That's better, thanks," said Ron, and Remus was once again flooded with giddiness.

Sirius was innocent, and they had Peter to prove it. Harry and his friends believed them. Life was never again going to be as lonely as it had been. Things could now begin Getting Back to Normal.

"What about Professor Snape?" Hermione's voice interrupted his thoughts.

Suppressing an expression of distaste, Remus bent over to lay two fingers on the Potions master's limp wrist. "There's nothing seriously wrong with him," he said, feeling the strong, slow pulse. *Who knew? He has a heart after all.* It suddenly occurred to him that this was the first time he could actually recall ever touching Severus Snape, and he quickly drew his hand back, wiping his fingers inconspicuously on the sleeve of his robes.

He looked up at Hermione and smiled. "You were just a little --

over-enthusiastic. Still out cold. Er -- perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safely back in the castle. We can take him like this." He pointed his wand at the prone figure. "*Mobilicorpus.*"

Slowly, the unconscious man was raised into an upright position. The invisible force supporting his weight made Remus think unpleasantly of the posture of a hanged man, and he worried that the children might find the effect equally creepy. To cover his unease, he bent down to pick up the Invisibility cloak, stowing it safely in the inner pocket of his robes.

"Two of us should be chained to this, just to make sure." Sirius was poking Peter with the worn toe of his shoe, voice still scratchy with disuse.

"I'll do it," Remus said quickly, catching and holding Sirius's eyes. It wasn't that he didn't trust Sirius not to harm Peter on the way back to the castle, so much as -- *well, I wouldn't blame him if he did, but best not to take chances.*

Sirius nodded slowly, just as Ron piped up, "And me." He was looking at Peter still with disgust as he limped gingerly forwards on his bandaged leg.

Sirius waved Snape's wand, and heavy manacles appeared out of nowhere. Remus blinked in surprise. It was a very complex spell, which required a great deal of concentration and power.

Magic still had to observe the law that matter cannot be created nor destroyed, so the manacles obviously came from somewhere. Remus knew that the only way to summon an object in this way was to hold a perfect image of it in one's mind.

These will be the chains he wore for twelve years. Remus swallowed. *He knows every scrape and nick and rust spot better than he knows his own face. Or mine.* He didn't want to touch the cold, black things which had held his lover all those years when he had not, but he bravely put out his arm and allowed Sirius to clamp the cuff around his wrist.

The bedraggled man caught the question in his eyes as he looked up from the chain, and he nodded, giving Remus's hand an imperceptible squeeze, before turning to secure Ron's chain.

At last, following the lead of Hermione's cat, they were ready to leave the confines of the Shrieking Shack.

About bloody time, too! thought Remus. The place felt hot and stuffy, cramped and close. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of his neck, making the skin prickle. *The excitement of the evening must be getting to me. I just need some fresh air.* The cold iron on his wrist was making his skin crawl.

It was a struggle getting through the tunnel back to the Whomping Willow, chained together like they were. Even

unencumbered, Remus had a difficult time negotiating the passage quickly, his height and the low ceiling forcing him to walk nearly bent in half. And now, chained to the reluctant and still-sniveling Peter, and the injured Ron, Remus was beginning to think it would be daylight before they emerged from the earth.

He was trying to focus not only on getting through the passageway, but on keeping his wand trained on Peter, but if the shack had seemed close, the tunnel made him feel downright claustrophobic. For a moment, he felt Snape's bonds around his chest and throat again, and had to pause, gasping for air he *knew* to be there.

Don't be a fool, Lupin, he chided himself. You've been through here a thousand times or more. You know every stone, every turning. Why lose your nerve now? He steeled his resolve. You have a job to do. Get these children safely to the castle. Deal with Peter. Clear Sirius's name. Hold yourself together, man! The night's not through yet.

"You know what this means?" he heard Sirius say.

"You're free," Harry's voice replied.

Free. Sirius, free. Remus's heart lifted, and he felt able to draw breath again. A smile slowly began to spread across his face, tugging slightly at old scars, as he listened to Sirius nervously raise the possibility of Harry coming to live with him, and

Harry's eager acceptance. *With us*, he thought firmly, though Sirius did not, of course, mention that part. Remus was sure the omission was only due to the fact that Sirius had not discussed the plan with him yet, and that this was surely not the time to broach that particular subject with the boy.

He never doubted that Sirius meant to live with him again, to pick up where they had left off, all those years before, and live this unexpected, inexplicable second chance to the fullest. *We deserve a happy ending after all this*, he thought. *Don't we? We've earned it.*

Moments later, Remus felt with relief the breath of cool night air on his too-hot face. The stress and excitement of the night had taken their toll, and he could feel his hands shaking as he emerged behind the cat, who had cleverly planted his paws against the tree's secret knot.

He waited with growing impatience as, one by one, the others rose from the depths. He fancied he could almost hear the blood pounding in his ears.

The night was warm and dark and full of the sharp scents of late spring as they made their awkward, silent way back towards the lighted windows of the castle. Remus felt uneasy. Something was about to happen. He jerked rather more roughly than necessary at the chain that bound him to his former friend. "One wrong move, Peter..." he growled threateningly.

He had been about to say, "and I'll tear your throat out," but he stopped himself, shaking his head. No, that wasn't right. It was an unnecessarily violent thought, alien to the calm and friendly person of Professor Remus Lupin. And it might frighten the children. *Why would I say such a thing?*

And then, suddenly, and with horrible cold clarity, a light came on in Remus's head, and in the same moment, cool, pale moonlight washed over him. He froze, forcing those bound to him to halt as well. Something bumped into him from behind, but his mind was racing too quickly for him to take notice.

Heightened senses, prickling skin, touchy temper, trembling. Not the symptoms of an overexcited middle-aged man. His mind went white with dread. He hadn't taken his potion. In all the excitement since seeing Peter's name appear on the Marauder's Map, he had forgotten for the first time since he was six years old the fact that tonight was the full moon.

The dim, moonlit world around him began to swirl. He could hear nothing but the sound of his own blood rushing through his veins. Pain lanced through him and his body began to change, and with his body, his thoughts became simpler; more animal.

Hunt. Bite. Blood. Tear. Rend. Kill....

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A FEW PRECIOUS HOURS

Cold, stiff and sore, Remus Lupin, man-shaped and weak once more, swam reluctantly towards consciousness. This was always the worst time, when it was all he could do to find his bed and sleep until the afternoon. His head ached and he knew that as soon as he tried to move, there would be pain.

Last night had been worse than any full moon had been in a long time. *I wonder if the potion makes it easier or if dependence on the potion makes not having it harder?* he thought fuzzily. He wondered how long he could get away with not opening his eyes.

He could tell from the feel of the air and the ground beneath him that he was outdoors. Even though it was early June, there was a chill in the air, and the birds were singing loudly enough to hurt his tender head, so it must be not long past dawn.

A sound, a twig snapping nearby, and his eyes popped open, unfocussed. The sight that greeted him made him think for one absurd moment that he was seventeen again. What else could it mean that he was lying cold and naked in the Forbidden Forest, with a large, black dog warily approaching him?

"Padfoot," he croaked, his tongue feeling dry in his mouth.

The dog stopped, and stood perfectly still, watching him.

Gingerly, he pushed himself upright. He had been right; it did hurt, but he managed to manoeuver himself into a wobbling crouch. He extended his hand in a loose fist, palm down, as he had been taught to do when meeting a strange dogs for the first time.

The black dog slowly resumed its approach, until it was close enough to sniff Remus's outstretched fingers. After a moment, it gave the man's knuckles a tentative lick.

A dry sob that Remus had not known he was suppressing welled up in his throat, as he fell forwards, arms tight around the dog's shaggy neck. Burying his face in the thick, black fur, he breathed in the doggy scent, feeling his own tears dampen it into spikes and clumps as he sobbed painfully against the beast that had stalked his dreams so many years, only to disappear upon waking.

"I'm sorry, Padfoot -- Sirius --" he gulped when he had breath enough. "So sorry"

He drew back, tears blurring his vision as he stroked the familiar, long-muzzled face. He was so close he could see white hairs sprinkled among the black, marking the passage of time. A warm tongue flicked out to taste the salt tears on his cheek.

Remus made a choked sound that was somewhere between a laugh and another sob. He fell backwards from his crouch, and ended up with his back and head resting against the tree he had awoken under, with Padfoot playfully licking his face. "Aren't you going to say something?" he laughed.

The dog backed up and transformed into a stark naked Sirius, grinning sheepishly. Remus blinked. It was the nature of the spell that, when an Animagus transformed, he kept the clothes he had been wearing. If he had been wearing any.

"I went for a dip in the lake while I was waiting for you," Sirius explained, grinning wider. "Buried my clothes. Once I had them off, they really didn't seem worth putting back on again."

"And here I thought it was that the wolf had gone back to sleep that was making you smell better," Remus said with an answering smile.

"Well, I didn't get much of a wash," Sirius shrugged. "I mostly had to do it as Padfoot, since it was starting to get light out, and I feel the cold water less that way, so I guess I just rinsed away the worst of it. I was hoping --" He stopped and blushed.

"What?" asked Remus. *I'll give you anything, if only you'll ask it*, he wanted to say, but it was too soon, and he was too shy.

"I went back to the Shack while you were sleeping. I thought

maybe you might still keep a spare set of robes there. I brought them for you." Sirius inclined his head off in the direction he had come from, and Remus could see a rumpled pile of clothes. "I found your wand in the grass while I was there. Brought that too," he mumbled.

Remus narrowed his eyes. The wand would have been much closer to the castle than the Whomping Willow. Sirius was taking a risk by venturing out in the open like that. But all he said was, "Thank you."

Sirius blushed again. "So I was hoping that, maybe, if you knew a charm ... It's just been so long since I've been clean that I've forgotten what it feels like."

Remus laughed outright at this. "All right," he said. "But you'll have to bring the wand to me, Sirius. I haven't the strength to make it all the way over there just yet."

Sirius jumped up and eagerly scampered on all fours, as if he hadn't quite let go of Padfoot, over to where he'd left the wand and robes. He was a comical sight, naked, bony, with his pale arse stuck up in the air, but Remus only smiled.

Sirius returned with the clothing over his arm and wand in his hand at a sedate walk, obviously realising how foolish he must have looked. He handed the wand to Remus.

When Remus had performed the cleaning charm, Sirius asked shyly, "Do you need help getting dressed?"

"No," Remus replied. "Well, yes. But I'm not ready to get dressed just yet."

Sirius flopped down beside him, leaning up against the broad trunk of the tree. "Merlin, it feels good to be clean!" he declared, stretching luxuriantly.

Remus enjoyed this performance out of the corner of his eye, but Sirius caught him looking. Remus tried to smile, but he felt suddenly awkward, and he could see that Sirius did as well.

"I'm sorry," said Sirius softly, looking down at himself. "I guess I'm not much to look at anymore."

You're always beautiful to me, Remus wanted to say, but he felt too shy. Instead, he reached out to lay his hand over Sirius's, squeezing gently. Sirius looked up to meet his eyes again, and Remus held his gaze, trying to say with his eyes what he couldn't with words just yet, and Sirius seemed to understand. The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips, and he squeezed back.

"Tell me --" Remus cleared his throat. "Tell me what happened last night. After I ... well"

Sirius told him about Peter's disappearance and the Dementors

and Harry's Patronus, which he hadn't seen for himself.

"It's a stag," Remus interrupted. "Harry's Patronus."

Sirius was still. "Prongs?" he said at last, voice catching in his throat.

Remus nodded, squeezing his hand again. "Go on," he encouraged.

Sirius continued his tale of the events of the previous night. The long, confession-filled talk with Dumbledore, the argument between the headmaster, Snape, and Cornelius Fudge over what should be done about him, and finally, the daring double rescue perpetrated by Harry and Hermione.

Remus smiled. "They managed to save you and the Hippogriff as well? If those two didn't get along so well, I would swear they were James and Lily reincarnated."

Sirius nodded. "Clever, brave and reckless. Gryffindor through and through." He sounded proud.

"So where's the Hippogriff now?" asked Remus curiously.

"Oh, I chained him up back near Hagrid's hut. Seems he doesn't like the smell of werewolf very much," he added apologetically.

"He may just have to get over that," Remus replied. "So, er ... what happens now? I assume you're not going to make me a cup of tea?" They both grinned at the memory.

"You and your Muggle tea," said Sirius, shaking his head.

"Remember how I used to get up in the morning while you were still asleep, and make the tea?" Remus asked dreamily. "And then I would bring it back to you, with the *Daily Prophet* crossword puzzle, and we would drink it in bed." He smiled at Sirius. "I wish I could do that now. Earl Grey was your favourite, I remember. I got you addicted to Muggle tea as well. I always drank Constant Comment, and you always had Earl Grey with just a touch of honey."

"You must be getting old, Moony," Sirius teased. "You forget that, on the first day of the month, it's my job to make the tea. God, I could kill for a spot of Earl Grey just now!"

The mutual remembering felt good to Remus. He could see that they obviously couldn't just pick up where they had left off, but they weren't starting with nothing either.

"So what does happen now?" Remus asked again gently.

Sirius looked uncomfortable. "I suppose I'm on the run. Without Peter, I haven't got anything but the word of a werewolf and three teenagers that he's still alive, even if Dumbledore does

believe me." He shook his head. "I guess I'll have to go into hiding."

Unconsciously, Remus clutched at Sirius's hand, holding it tightly. *No*, he thought. *It's too soon. You can't go away again!*

Sirius seemed to read his thought and looked up into his panicked brown eyes. "It's all right, Moony. It's not forever." He patted Remus's hand with his free one. "Peter's out there, and now that I'm not the only one who knows it, he can be found again. And for now, I can be content with knowing that my name is cleared as far as you and Harry are concerned."

Harry. It was easier to talk about Harry than about each other. "He's a clever boy," Remus said. "Lily and James would have been proud."

"Tell me about him?" Sirius asked. "What's he like? And his friends. Are they -- close?"

Remus knew what Sirius was asking. Both men had known hard lives and loneliness, and the thing that had saved them both from themselves had been the miraculous bond of the Marauder friendship. That Sirius would want such a thing for Harry was understandable.

"Yes," he replied confidently. "Those three go everywhere together. I fear those Muggles Harry grew up with -- Lily's

family, you know -- were the really awful sort. But now he's here, and he's safe, and he can build his own family, as we did." By now all four of their hands were laced together.

"And the girl?" Sirius asked. "You said she's like Lily. You think she and Harry will --"

"No," Remus grinned wolfishly. "Hermione's all for Ron. The pheromones the two of them give off around one another! It's a wonder they can't smell them!"

Sirius laughed. "You and your werewolf senses. You should set up a dating service. Or at least a 'knocking people on the head and pointing out the obvious to them' service. It's a wonder you never guessed about me, back when"

Remus was still grinning. "It's a wonder I never did. Well, what did I know back then? Who isn't hopeless about such things at that age?"

"Who indeed?" Sirius smiled up into the branches of the tree overhead. "Well, they're young yet. Plenty of time for them to figure it out."

Remus frowned then, looking at their intertwined hands. "I wonder if Harry will hate me now that he knows what I am?"

"You forget, Werewolf," Sirius scootched a little closer so that

their shoulders were pressed together. "Harry was raised in the Muggle world. He doesn't have werewolf prejudice. No, he's more likely to hate us for what we are."

"Do you think he will?" Remus asked nervously.

"You know, I don't think so." Sirius said thoughtfully. "It might take him a while to get his head around the idea of his professor and his godfather being, well." He shrugged. "But you said yourself, he's a clever boy. And that Hermione's sharp as a tack; you think she'll let her boys get away with having stupid prejudices if she can talk them out of it?"

Remus sighed. "I hope you're right."

"Of course I'm right," Sirius teased. "I'm always right, aren't I? If the two of us can convince Harry in an hour's space that I'm not actually a mass-murdering psychopath, to the point that he'll agree to come live with me, well, I don't think we have anything to worry about. Werewolf, poof, whatever. He'll love you. What's not to love?"

"Sirius, I --" Remus faltered.

"What's wrong, Moony?"

It was no good holding back, so he let it all out in a rush. "Sirius, what if it's been too long? What if we've left it too late? I mean,

so much has happened. We're both different people than we were back then. I wouldn't want to assume --"

"Moony," Sirius said, quieting him. He turned so that he was kneeling beside Remus, looking him square in the eye. "Do you still remember the words we said that day?"

Remus knew the day he meant. It had been the same day as Harry's christening. He nodded.

"As long as the moon waxes and wanes," Sirius began. "As long as the stars shine from the heavens"

"As long as I bear this mark on my body," Remus said softly, and reached out a tentative hand to trace the scripted "R", stark black against the pale skin of Sirius's breast, "I am yours."

"I had a little window in my cell," Sirius said softly, "and I used to sit at night in the moonglow, and remember those words. We are still bound, you and I. I know you're scared. I am too. But we still have to try, don't we?"

Remus's throat felt dry and he had to blink away moisture from his eyes, but he nodded wordlessly.

"But there's no rush, is there?" Sirius said, sitting down beside him again. "After all, we have the rest of our lives."

"No rush," whispered Remus, moving to lean against the other man's bare shoulder.

Sirius put an arm around him, and pulled him down against his thin chest. Remus closed his eyes and listened to the slow sound of his heartbeat, at once both familiar and strange.

"You're right, Moony; I'm a changed man. For one thing, I've finally learned patience."

Remus could feel the laugh in his chest that didn't quite escape his mouth. The old Sirius had never known patience. He wanted what he wanted now, and if he couldn't have it, he was moody and impossible to live with until he got it.

"For twelve years, I had nothing to do but think," he continued, "and most of the time, I thought about you. James and Lily were dead, and that was terrible. Peter was a traitor, and I wanted to kill him for it. But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was knowing that you were out here, thinking I had done this thing -- that you hated me, when I never for a moment stopped loving you."

Remus wrapped an arm around Sirius's waist. "I never hated you, Padfoot. I always thought I should, and I felt guilty when I didn't. I could never make it make any sense, though. My heart was broken, and my soul was torn out of me, and I never understood why. The pieces never added up. It was never hatred

or anger I felt; it was confusion. Confusion that you could have done such a thing. Confusion that I -- I could never stop loving you."

Sirius was silent at that, but the statement didn't seem to require verbal acknowledgement. Instead, Remus felt a hand against the back of his head, stroking his hair.

"Maybe it's wrong that I can hate Peter for what he did, and want him dead," Remus murmured, "but I was never able to hate you."

"I guess this is one less thing to hold Peter accountable for," Sirius said at last. "We seem to have found something he didn't manage to destroy. Though not for lack of trying. He stole a piece of our lives, but he can't take our future."

Remus nodded, eyes closed. "It was bloody irresponsible of me to go off like that last night," he said. "Without taking Snape's blasted potion. But damn it, Sirius --" He raised his head to look into grey eyes. "I *had* to see you -- had to know the truth of it from your own lips."

"I wanted to leave you a letter," Sirius confessed. "I wanted to find some way to tell you, without the risk that you might turn me in. I'm sorry," he added, "but I wasn't sure you wouldn't."

"That's all right, Padfoot," Remus reassured him, once again

laying his head against Sirius's chest. "I didn't know what I would do either. Why didn't you write the letter, though?"

"I could never find the time to get all of it down," Sirius replied. "I tried, but I'd spent so much time as a dog that, as a man, my hands were weak and not accustomed to writing. They cramped up. And it was so hard to find the words in any case. I guess my brain was getting doggy, too," he confessed sheepishly. "I didn't seem to be any good at thinking in complete sentences or forming detailed explanations."

"But surely you could have found a way --"

"I tried," Sirius said. "At Christmas, when I gave Harry the broom, I left you that lock of hair. I wanted to prove I trusted you and that you could trust me. We'd lost so much trust, even in the months before -- I just wanted to show you that the trust could be there again."

"I kept trying to come up with explanations," Remus confessed. "I couldn't make any of it make sense. I was worried that you were trying to appeal to me because I was the only one gullible enough to believe in you, but that didn't seem to fit either."

"I had hoped --" Sirius began tentatively. "I thought maybe, with the hair, you could do some sort of spell. You know; to show whether the person it came from was trustworthy."

"I'm sorry," Remus whispered again. "I should have thought of that. And I should never have doubted you. And I bloody well should have gone to see you after --" He found he could not say "Azkaban". "-- after you went away. I should have at least heard your side of things. But I was such a coward. Dumbledore wanted me to go to you. He thought you might confess something to me."

Sirius was silent for a moment. "The only times I ever considered confessing," he began slowly, "were when they asked me about you. Because if I could say I had done it and it was all my fault, then I could say it wasn't yours -- that you had had no part in it."

"Ever-faithful Padfoot. How could I have doubted you?"

"It's not your fault, Moony." Sirius's hand traced down his spine, making him shiver pleasantly. "Peter's not stupid. He planned it well, and he broke us both. I used to hope, after a while, that you'd been able to get on with your life. I tried to get word, whenever someone visited -- that place. But either they wouldn't talk to me, or they just gave me a blank look. With no news of you for twelve years, I didn't even know if you were alive."

Remus shrugged. "*I* didn't know if I was alive. I was numb for so long."

"I kept hoping to find some sign of you or hear word of you after

I broke out, but there was nothing," Sirius continued. "I had to get to Hogwarts and protect Harry, so I wasn't able to spend a lot of time looking. On the way up, I kept promising myself that as soon as I took care of Peter, I'd come and find you."

He wriggled down into a more comfortable position, pulling Remus close beside him until their hips and knees touched and their feet tangled together. "But as soon as I came into the castle that first time, I could smell you. I thought at first it was a ghost scent -- my wishful thinking and you having been there so long ago -- but it was too strong, and I knew you were there somewhere, and I had to see you."

Remus remembered waking in his room on Halloween morning, black dog hairs clinging to the bedspread, and how it had affected him. "I'm glad you came that night," he whispered, "and Christmas as well. I've been so lonely, Padfoot --" His voice broke and a hot tear slid down his cheek.

Suddenly warm lips were there, kissing it away. Remus drew back in surprise and stared into Sirius's questioning grey eyes. *I could kiss him right now*, he thought. *I want to. But if we start down that road -- there's no time.* Reluctantly, he laid his head against Sirius's chest again and listened to the now-rapid beat.

After a moment's silence, Remus spoke, trying to find a way to answer the question he had seen in Sirius's eyes. "You said you'd hoped I had got on with my life. I didn't." He struggled to find

the words. "I've been alone so long. There's been no one since you, Padfoot."

He felt rather than heard Sirius's sigh of relief.

"I thought for a while that maybe I should try to find someone," he continued. "Just someone to be with for a while, to not be alone. I thought it might help me -- get over you." The words sounded like a confession.

"But?" Sirius asked softly.

"But in the end I realised that I didn't want to get over you," he said. "I didn't want to wipe you from my memory. I wanted to be able to remember the good things and not desecrate them, I suppose, by bringing someone else to my bed. It didn't seem right. And I would only have been using them, anyway."

"I'm sorry," Sirius murmured into his hair. "I'm sorry you were alone for so long. That's another thing Peter will pay for when the time comes," he said firmly. "But I'm glad," he added. "I'm glad that, even then, you were mine. I guess I'm just selfish that way." There was a smile in his voice.

"I love you, Sirius," Remus replied simply. "Sorry, glad, selfish, absent; I'm always yours."

"And I love you, Remus," said Sirius. "Even when you're

blubbing like a girl all down my front."

Remus choked back a laugh, sniffed and wiped his eyes. "That obvious, eh?" he grinned. "Well, I believe I have good cause. You're here and you're innocent. I am very much inclined to believe that all is well with the world."

"Well, I don't know about innocent," said Sirius, a wicked, teasing edge to his voice. "I prefer to think of it more as 'not guilty'."

"Just like you to go and spoil the moment with unsubtle innuendo," Remus chided.

"Give me a chance, Moony; I'm rusty. I'm sure before long I'll remember exactly what sorts of things I used to say to get in your pants -- er -- when you were wearing them, that is."

"Sirius, it's not that I don't -- I mean -- I still -- " He blushed and took a deep breath before starting again. "It's too soon, Sirius."

"I know." Sirius gave him a squeeze. "You're right. You're always right about these things." He sighed. "But you would?"

"Drop it, Sirius," Remus warned with a playfully punch in the shoulder. "You're not allowing me much room for maintaining mystique."

"Well, I suppose I can survive being deprived a little longer." He sighed again, this time more dramatically.

"I wonder what time it is?" Remus said at last, reluctantly.

"Well," Sirius began, "it's June, and we're well north, and it was about sunrise when I had my swim, so now it would be ... sometime after that. Sorry, Moony, I guess I've lost all track of the time."

"Maybe --" Remus said, then stopped.

"I know," Sirius said heavily. "I should go. You need to get back to the castle before questions start getting asked and someone comes looking for you. And Buckbeak and I need to be away from here soon."

"Where will you go?" asked Remus.

"I don't know. I'll have to leave the country, I expect. Get far enough away from here that I won't be recognised. Being cleaned up a bit will help with that," he gazed thoughtfully into a spot of sunlight. "I'd like to go someplace warm, I think. Spending twelve years in a cold, damp cell on a rock in the North Sea has given me a longing for the tropics."

"I wish you didn't have to go again so soon," Remus said. "I'm not ready to lose you."

"Lose me?" Sirius sounded genuinely surprised. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"Well -- I -- that is -- I hadn't thought --"

"Not right away, of course, I suppose," Sirius mused. "That would look suspicious. But the school year is over. What were you planning to do over the summer?"

What indeed? thought Remus. *Go back to my lonely, dingy little flat?* He was amazed by how far removed from that life he had become in the past twelve hours. A smile blossomed on his face. "I suppose you're right. I could just fancy a holiday, and I should be getting paid for this year's teaching soon."

Sirius gave him another squeeze and kissed the top of his head. "Then that's settled," he declared. "But I won't tell you where I'm going, in case they ask you. I'm sure you'll be able to find me."

"No doubt I will." Remus sat up and pulled Sirius into a warm embrace.

When he drew back, there was Sirius's face very close to his own, a searching look in his eyes. Again, the thought of kissing him entered Remus's mind. *Should I?* he wondered. *No. Not with both of us -- like this; it would just lead to -- it's too soon.*

He blushed and pulled away, making a bigger production than necessary of getting to his feet to hide the fact that it was fairly obvious -- and must have been to Sirius as well -- that they shared similar thoughts.

He picked up his clothes from the ground and shook them out, handing Sirius the outer robes. "Here, you can wear this," he said, not quite meeting his eyes. He hastily pulled on the shirt and trousers as Sirius swirled the robes about his shoulders. Once they were decent he felt able to meet Sirius's eyes again.

Remus raised his eyebrows at the other man. "Shall we?"

Arm in arm they walked through the woods towards Hagrid's hut. Along the way they pointed out to one another spots of special significance where the escapades of yesteryear had taken place.

At last Remus caught sight of Buckbeak through the trees. "I'd better stop here if he doesn't like me."

Sirius nodded. "So I guess this is goodbye. For now." He looked suddenly helpless and uncertain.

"Better than last time." Remus attempted a smile. "There wasn't time for goodbye then."

Sirius looked as if he was going to say something but Remus turned back to Buckbeak. "I think I can spell him not to be seen, at least temporarily. I'll just strengthen the spell that makes it so Muggles can't see him. It should last until tonight at least. But what can I do about you?" He looked at Sirius consideringly. "I can't make you invisible, and you'll look a bit odd just flying through the air on your own." He tapped his lips. "Ah, I have it!"

He looked around until he found a straight branch of a good thickness, about five feet in length. "From far enough away, this should look like a broom. Just keep a good grip on it."

Sirius took it from him, still looking uncertain. He did not say anything as Remus augmented the spell on Buckbeak, making it so that only he and Remus could see the Hippogriff, and that only because they already knew he was there.

At last, Remus turned to him. "Here," he said, pressing his wand into Sirius's hand. "You'll need it more than I will, and I can get another one without too much trouble."

Sirius opened his mouth, but at first no sound emerged. "Thank you," he managed at last. "Remus, this --" a tear spilled down his cheek.

"Go," Remus urged him gently.

He nodded, turning towards Buckbeak. He had taken only a couple of steps before he turned back.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?" he asked.

In a heartbeat, Remus had closed the distance between them. He cupped Sirius's face in his hands and tilted his chin up. Their eyes met as they hesitated, both of them realising how long it had been since they had done this, and then Remus pressed his lips against Sirius's.

After a moment of complete stillness, Sirius's tongue flicked hesitantly against Remus's lips. His lips parted, and with that tiny motion the floodgates which had held his passions in check for a dozen years opened. He moaned against Sirius's mouth, tasting him, and Sirius responded hungrily, pressing against him. Sirius. Warm, alive, innocent, *present*.

At last, Remus reluctantly broke the kiss.

"Well," said Sirius breathlessly, "I guess that's one less thing we have to worry about."

"God, I wish I could keep you here," Remus growled. "Term technically lasts another week, but I suppose it will look just as dodgy for me to be nipping off to the forest all the time as it would if I left early." He sighed.

"A week," Sirius promised. "Maybe two. Then you'll find me and it will be all bright sunlight, sandy beaches and drinks with

little umbrellas in. We'll get Muggle jobs. You can be a bartender, and I'll be a sexy cabana boy." He grinned.

Remus nodded. "Soon," he promised. "I will find you." He let go of Sirius and stepped back.

Sirius smiled weakly then turned once more towards Buckbeak. He bowed to the Hippogriff, who was still eyeing Remus suspiciously, but returned the bow after a moment. Sirius approached and patted the beast's shoulder before swinging a leg over.

He waved to Remus. "Until we meet again, Moony!" he called, and then they were rising into the air and out of sight beyond the treetops.

Remus walked back to the castle whistling. It looked like it was shaping up to be a beautiful day.

EPILOGUE

Two things quickly became apparent to him upon reentering the castle. The first was that it was later than he had thought, as he had clearly missed breakfast. Students were pouring out of the Great Hall. The second was that Something had Happened.

As soon as the students caught sight of him, they drew up short, and began whispering to one another. Some of them hurried away, ducking into side corridors, and sending nervous glances over their shoulders.

Remus sighed inwardly. Severus's work, no doubt. Even though his wolf senses had receded in the wake of the full moon, he did not need to overhear their whispers to guess what the commotion was about. With a slightly martyred expression, he made his way through the sea of students, who fell back to leave a clear path for him.

He had just turned down the corridor to his rooms when he caught sight of Professor Dumbledore.

"Remus, dear lad!" the headmaster beamed. "Good morning! I was just beginning to worry. I'll have Severus call off the search party, shall I?" he chortled.

Remus returned the smile tiredly. He was about to ask Dumbledore if he might have a word with him in private, but a

quick glance around showed him that the corridor was suddenly, mysteriously empty of students.

"Headmaster," he said, "I couldn't -- er -- help but notice"

"That the students are not precisely welcoming the returning hero of last night's adventures with open arms? Yes, well It seems Severus -- er -- 'accidentally' let something slip this morning over breakfast." Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Dear, dear. Very upset, he was. Fudge was all set to declare him the hero of the piece and award him the Order of Merlin, but then Black escaped." Dumbledore gave him a shrewd look. "I wouldn't suppose you would have heard anything about that, would you?" he asked.

"No, no. Nothing. Of course not," Remus assured him quickly, glancing around.

"I see." Dumbledore nodded and clicked his tongue. "So very careless. I can't imagine how he managed it. Without help, that is."

"Yes, of course," Remus suppressed a smile. "Most puzzling, Professor."

Dumbledore continued to nod, looking Remus up and down a moment longer. At last, he said, "You look tired, dear boy. Have you considered maybe going away for a bit?"

Remus never could understand how Dumbledore managed to be so perceptive. All he could do was be glad that such a man was on his side. "I had -- thought about it, Professor," he said guardedly.

"I imagine this has been a very trying year for you, Remus." Dumbledore patted his shoulder. "And what with Severus's careless little blunder, well, perhaps it would be best if you, ah, left at once?" He raised white eyebrows over half-moon spectacles.

Remus grinned outright at that, but quickly wiped the expression when he saw Hagrid round the corner. "Yes, yes of course, Headmaster," he said in a raised voice, nodding emphatically. "In fact, I think I really should resign at once! After all, I can't risk an ... incident of this kind happening again!"

"No, indeed not." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "But you really have done a wonderful job with the students this year, Professor. I am very pleased with their progress. In fact, I mean to see if I can't arrange some sort of bonus for you. No, no, dear boy!" he went on, as Remus opened his mouth to protest. "I insist! You've earned it."

"Thank you, Headmaster," he murmured. "I'll just be -- er -- in my office. Packing, you know. No need to delay."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall summon a carriage for you at once. I'll let you know when it arrives.

Dumbledore turned to Hagrid then, who had been rocking back and forth on his feet some distance away from them. "Is there something I can do for you, Rubeus?" Dumbledore asked as Remus turned to go.

"Actually, Professor Dumbledore, Sir, I was jus' wonderin' if -- ah, that is, I jus' wanted to ask Professor Lupin if he might have -- eaten anythin' las' night?" His ears turned red. "On'y, yeh know, Beaky got away, an' I was worried"

"No, Hagrid," Remus gave him a reassuring smile. "I didn't eat anything last night. In fact, I was quite sorry to have missed breakfast."

Hagrid nodded. "I'm glad ter know that, Sir. An' I was sorry to hear that Sirius Black escaped. I jus' know yeh would have caught 'im if it hadn' been the full moon."

"Indeed, Hagrid." He wrestled down another smile. "Such a shame. Well, who knows? Perhaps I shall have another chance to catch him one day?"

Dumbledore gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "Perhaps," he said. "But now, lads, I have things to do, and I know you'll be wanting to be away soon, Professor." He

nodded cordially to Remus and headed down the corridor.

"Good day, Headmaster. Good day, Hagrid," Remus nodded, and continued down the corridor in the opposite direction.

* * *

He packed relatively quickly, but without his wand, it was still slow going. It took him nearly three hours to pack up his rooms and office. He hoped he would have enough time to say goodbye to Harry, but he knew that the three teenagers had spent the night in the hospital wing, and he thought maybe it would be prudent to pack before risking the wrath of Madam Pomfrey, so that at least he could make a quick getaway.

The Marauder's Map was still lying open on his desk. *Just as foolish for Snape to leave it lying about as for me*, he thought, shaking his head. *I really should have brought it with me last night*. He peered closely at the parchment, watching the little labeled dots move about. Snape hadn't known how to shut the thing off, and he didn't have his wand to do so, so he merely looked at it.

There were very few student dots in the castle. It was a hot June day, and many of them had gone into Hogsmeade. Of the ones who had stayed behind, most of them were out enjoying the sunshine. He saw the dots labeled "Ron" and "Hermione" side by side next to the lake, but couldn't find Harry anywhere near

them.

At last he located the "Harry" dot, moving swiftly through the corridors of the castle towards his own office. He heard running footsteps in the hallway outside his office, then a pause followed by a tentative knock, though the door was already ajar.

Remus looked up at Harry. "I saw you coming." He smiled and pointed at the map.

"I just saw Hagrid," Harry burst out without preamble. He was slightly out of breath. "And he said you'd resigned. It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," Remus told him, quickly going back to packing up his desk to cover the sudden tight feeling in his chest. He hadn't thought how hard it would be to leave Harry. *He's safe*, he reminded himself. *Peter won't come near him now, and Dumbledore's watching out for him. He doesn't need me.* It was always hard for Remus to remember that, while he considered Harry family, Harry only saw him as a teacher, and maybe now as an old family friend from the remote past.

"Why?" Harry was asking desperately. "The Ministry of Magic don't think you were helping Sirius, do they?"

Remus quickly went to close the door. Sirius's innocence was obviously not common knowledge, and wouldn't generally be

believed even by those who had heard the story. While it was all right for Harry to go about protesting Sirius's innocence, it would be that much the worse in the eyes of the world for Remus to be not only a werewolf, but the friend of a convicted murderer.

"No," he said once the door was closed. "Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives." He sighed. "That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he -- er -- accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" Harry cried.

Remus smiled and shook his head. *Life is so simple for the very young. Good guys and bad guys, and the good guys always triumph, despite adversity. They don't really understand things like prejudice. But he's right; that's not the only reason I'm leaving.*

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents," he told the boy gently. "They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you ... that must never happen again." It was a convenient excuse, but a chill ran down his spine at the thought.

"You're the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher we've

ever had!" Harry said plaintively. "Don't go!"

Remus pressed his lips together and shook his head, trying hard to focus on the task of emptying his desk to dispel the moisture from his eyes. *Harry, he wanted to say, you are the son of my two dear friends, and if not for Peter, it would have been me and Sirius raising you. You would have been my son.* But he couldn't.

I must leave him now, but it's not forever, he told himself. I'll go and find Sirius, and we'll get this whole business sorted out. Peter will be found. Sirius's name will be cleared. Harry will come to us. He believed it simply because so many terrible things had already happened. Surely it was time for something to go right for all of them.

At last he managed to force back the tight feeling in his throat far enough to break the silence. "From what the headmaster told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I'm proud of anything, it's how much you've learned." *Well, it's true, he told himself, and if there's one thing Harry needs, it's for people to be proud of him.* He cleared his throat. "Tell me about your Patronus."

He realised it was a slip as soon as he'd said it. It was Sirius who had mentioned the Patronus, and Sirius was meant to have been over the hills and far away by the time Remus came around this morning.

Harry gave him a sharp look. "How d'you know about that?" he asked.

Remus covered quickly. "What else could have driven the Dementors back?"

Harry's explanation of events was unexpected, to say the least. *Sirius never mentioned time travel! But then, maybe he didn't know. I'll have to tell him that bit later.* It seemed that, not only had Harry saved Sirius twice over, and the Hippogriff as well, but he had also driven back a hundred or more Dementors, thereby saving his own life, in addition to Ron, Hermione and Snape.

He heard the catch in the boy's voice as he spoke of his Patronus, and his sudden realisation about the source of his father's nickname from his school days.

Remus was gratified to see Harry so moved by the presence of the stag. *He's growing up, he thought. He's starting to realise that these things mean something.* "Yes," he said. "Your father was always a stag when he transformed. You guessed right ... that's why we called him Prongs."

He removed the last few books from his desk and added them to his case before turning back to Harry. "Here," he said, handing Harry his Invisibility cloak. "I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night."

He had actually stopped to pick it up that morning. It had been spotted with dew from lying in the grass all night where it had fallen when Remus changed. He had also retrieved the tiny wooden dog and lock of hair from the pocket of his ruined robes.

"And ..." he paused, as if not sure how to say what he wanted to say. At last he merely held out the Marauder's Map to Harry. "I am no longer your teacher," he said with a smile, "so I don't feel guilty about giving you this back as well." He caressed the aged parchment gently before handing it over. "It's no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron and Hermione will find uses for it."

Harry grinned down at the map with undisguised delight. "You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs would have wanted to lure me out of school ..." he said with a slightly puzzled look. "You said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have done," said Remus, closing his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle." *He is very much his father's son.*

A knock came at the door, and Harry shoved the map and cloak inside his robes, but it was only Dumbledore.

He smiled at Harry before saying, "Your carriage is at the gates,

Remus."

"Thank you, Headmaster," he said, glancing once more at the boy, who was still staring somewhat guiltily at the aging professor. He picked up his suitcase and Grindylow tank.

But he still had to say something to Harry. "Well -- goodbye, Harry." He smiled affectionately at the boy. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you," he said sincerely. "I feel sure we'll meet again sometime." He transferred his gaze to a very amused Professor Dumbledore. "Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage"

"Goodbye, then, Remus," Dumbledore said as Remus adjusted his luggage so that he could shake hands with the man who had protected not only himself, but Sirius as well.

We are fortunate to have such a great friend, he thought gratefully.

With a last smile and nod to Harry, he was away, hurrying through the school. As he emerged into the mid-afternoon June sunlight, he felt light as the air. The whole world seemed brighter and more colourful than it had the previous day.

As Remus Lupin pulled the carriage door closed behind him, he heaved a huge sigh of contentment. Sirius was out there somewhere, waiting for him. And with him waited a whole new

life, shining with possibilities.