

Survivor's Guilt: Padfoot's Tale

by Pica Scribit

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CHAPTER ONE THE CAPTIVE

They were dead. James Potter, his best friend. Lily, James's wife. And Peter had been the traitor. *Peter*. He should have known.

Sirius Black sat in the far corner of a holding cell at the Ministry of Magic, deeply in shock over the events of the previous twenty-four hours.

I suppose I should be glad, he thought in a disconnected way. Voldemort has fallen. Harry's safely with his aunt and uncle. Remus is alive.

Remus. Oh, God! Remus! Remus, out there, thinking him a traitor. He had a sudden memory of his last view of his lover, kneeling on the pavement, a look of horror and disbelief in his eyes.

The the panic of that memory inspired him at last to struggle to his feet. The Magical Law Enforcement squad had chained him heavily, but he was still able to move as far as the door of his cell. He rattled the bars until he got the guard's attention.

"Please," he said, hearing the desperation in his own voice, "I need to see Remus. Can someone get a message to Remus Lupin?"

The guard just sneered at him. "Shut up, Black," he growled. "You've lost your right to make requests."

You wouldn't talk so big if your clothes suddenly shrank down to half their size, thought Sirius. *If I had my wand* But he was never going to have his wand again, he realised. He had watched some Ministry lackey snap it in half no more than an hour ago. The wand he had carried since he had been allowed to own one.

And now they were going to send him to Azkaban, and he would never have a wand again. He sank back down in the far corner of the cell, the horror of that thought stripping away any of his remaining devil-may-care bravado. It made him feel so *naked*. Sirius hugged his knees, hoping to still the trembling.

Think, man! he chided himself. *Think clearly. What happens now?*

Harry. Harry would be safe, and Remus as well, because now Peter would be forced to go into hiding. If he meant to implicate Sirius for his crimes, he certainly couldn't show himself anytime soon, and possibly never again. *No,* thought Sirius, *one day, he'll slip up, and someone will see. Someone will know.* The thought comforted him slightly. *I only hope I last that long.*

The thought of Azkaban terrified him, and his trembling began anew. He'd never been near a Dementor, but he knew all kinds of awful things about them from his Defence Against the Dark

Arts course at Hogwarts. They could suck the happiness right out of a person.

Maybe I deserve that, he thought savagely. After all, I was the one who convinced James and Lily to switch to Peter. How could I have been so stupid? One of us had to be the traitor, and the only one I knew it wasn't was me. Why didn't I realise there was a fifty-fifty chance I was selling them to Voldemort right then and there? Might as well send me to Azkaban; I as good as killed them myself, didn't I? But, oh, Remus, Remus

Hot tears were coursing down his cheeks, and he didn't bother to wipe them away. He didn't want to go to prison. He was young. He hadn't done anything wrong, truly. But Remus didn't know that -- couldn't know that -- and there was no way for Sirius to tell him. No way he would believe.

Maybe Remus will come to me, he thought forlornly. He knew it was a vain hope, though. Remus would hate him now. He'd probably never see him again. Poor Remus. His heart will break, just like mine is now. He thinks I did this to him. Peter's going to pay for that as well

The Dementors would be there for him soon, he knew. He had heard Cornelius Fudge say so to some other Magical Law Enforcement official. They weren't going to give him a trial. No point, they had said. Open-and-shut case, they had said. Too much evidence against him. He'd be in Azkaban before he could

ever get a message to Remus.

I'm about to go to a place where I will never be allowed to have a happy thought or memory again, as long as I live, he thought despairingly. Might as well have a few while I still can.

He closed his eyes and rested his head back against the cold, white-painted stone wall. Still hugging his knees to his chest, he began taking slow, deep, calming breaths. *Remus*

The first thing that came to his mind was the night he had sworn to protect Remus. It wasn't precisely a happy memory, but it was a good one. Though it had happened nearly ten years ago, he tried his best to recall every detail.

His eyes had opened on darkness. For one disoriented moment, he hadn't known what had awakened him. Then he heard it: the soft sound of someone trying to cry very quietly. Remus. Again. He had debated with himself whether he should simply turn over and try to go back to sleep. Obviously Remus was trying not to be heard, and didn't want to awaken anyone. He'd probably be embarrassed if he knew one of his friends had caught him crying like a girl.

But caution had never been a word in Sirius's vocabulary, and, at twelve, he had not really been one for taking the feelings of others into account. Especially when they interrupted his sleep. He turned on his side, facing across the darkened room.

"Remus?" he whispered. The sound stopped abruptly. "Are you ill or something?"

It was almost a minute before a voice dulled by a stuffy nose replied, "No. I'm OK."

Sirius sat up. "No you're not. You can't bullshit a bullshitter, Remus." It had been a phrase he had heard a fifth year Hufflepuff use, and he'd been looking for an opportunity to try it out for a week.

"I'm fine," insisted the quiet voice across the room.

Sirius had plucked his wand off the nightstand. "*Lumos*," he whispered. The faint glow threw shadows against the bedroom walls, but its dim light reflected off the tear-streaked face of his friend on the other side of the room.

Remus quickly and conspicuously rubbed his face with the bedsheet. "Put that out, Sirius," he hissed. "You're going to wake Peter and James."

"I'll put it out if you'll tell me what's wrong," said Sirius, quietly swinging his gangly, adolescent legs out of bed and putting his bare feet on the cold floor. He tiptoed across the room and sat down on the edge of Remus's bed.

Resigned, Remus moved over to make room for him. "It's really nothing," he insisted again, once the wand was put out. "Or nothing to bother you with. I'll be fine in the morning."

"Sure you will." Sirius sounded scepticsceptical. "And next month, you'll go away again and come back and disturb my beauty sleep sobbing into your pillow," he teased, sighing tragically. "I shall be old and wrinkled before my time, and you'll be to blame."

"My mother --" Remus began.

"Is ill. You have to go home and see her. Yeah, I've heard that one before. Tell me another. The 'my mother is ill' excuse only works on Peter and the very gullible."

"But --" Remus tried.

"I wonder," Sirius mused, cutting him off. "It seems odd that your mother urgently has to see you only on the night of the full moon." He felt Remus twitch. "See, I have this theory," he went on, "where it's not your mum who's ill. It's you."

"I'm fine!" Remus said again, but he said it too quickly, and there was no hiding the note of panic and desperation in his voice.

"Come off it, Remus." Sirius was grinning now. He loved being

right. "Illness and absences on the full moon," he counted off on fingers he couldn't see in the darkness. "Moodiness. Pale, ill and *crying* for a day or two after said 'absences'. And do you think even Peter has missed those scars? You're covered in scratch and bite marks. And unless you've got a very unfriendly dog we know nothing about, I'm putting two and two together and getting 'werewolf'."

Remus was silent for a moment before saying, "That's crazy."

"You think you can hide it from us forever? C'mon '*Moony*', I've known for months. James knows as well, and even Peter is going to catch on before long." He could almost feel Remus withdrawing, and it suddenly occurred to him that their friendship had reached a very delicate juncture. "Hey," he said, blindly reaching out a hand and patting Remus awkwardly on the arm, "we don't mind. Really, we don't. In fact, we think it's kind of cool."

"It's not 'cool'," Remus confessed at last, grumpily. "It's about the furthest thing from 'cool' there is."

"No," Sirius assured him, "the furthest thing from 'cool' is definitely Snivellus. You've got nothing to worry about on that score."

Remus sighed. "I guess I was fooling myself that I could hide this from you lot, when we share a room and all. There's really

no room for secrets here, is there?"

"Not a bit!" declared Sirius cheerfully.

"Promise you won't tell anyone else?" Remus pleaded. "Dumbledore knows. And Madam Pomfrey. If you know and don't mind so much, that's OK, but if anyone else found out"

"Your secret's safe with me," Sirius assured him. "On one condition. Tell me what it's like?" he asked eagerly.

And Remus told him. Told him about a terrified six-year-old, bitten by a savage beast. About fearing the waxing of the moon, and about relief at its waning. Told him the fear of harming someone, and the fear that someone would find out. About maybe not being able to go to school or have friends or stay in the same place for very long. And then he told him about the pain and horror of the transformations themselves. About scratching and biting himself until he bled. About waking weak, nauseated and shaking, cold, alone and naked in the morning.

Sirius was sorry he had asked. It sounded horrible. Twelve years of living in the Black family had spoiled his instincts for empathy, and he was not sure what the situation required. However, a new emotion had risen in Sirius Black; something powerful that he had never felt before. He didn't recognize it then, but now he knew it for what it was. It was the need to protect another living creature -- that most basic and primal form

of love. And he hadn't had the first clue what he could do for his friend.

"Don't worry, Remus," he had said doubtfully, patting him again. "James and I will come up with a way to make it better. Maybe we'll be the first to discover a cure for werewolfness."

"Lycanthropy," Remus told him. "It's called lycanthropy. And you won't find one." He was quiet for a moment, then added, "Thank you, Sirius. It feels better that I don't have to keep it secret from you lot. I didn't like to, but I didn't see any other way."

"Think you can let me get my beauty sleep now, Moony?"

"Sirius, don't ever call me that again."

"I swear it on my honour as a Black," Sirius had grinned, bare feet already padding back across the room. He had pulled the covers up over himself. "Good night, *Moony*," he said, but Remus was already asleep.

Alone, in the holding cell at the Ministry of Magic, Sirius felt a hot tear slip down his cheek. *I was going to protect you, Remus. I was going to keep you safe. And now you're alone and I can't even help myself.*

* * *

He must have dozed off, for the next thing he remembered was the guard banging on the bars of his cell.

"You've got a visitor, Black," the guard spat, and then to someone out of sight, "You have ten minutes, Sir. And I'll be just over there, keeping a close eye on this *filth*."

Sirius struggled to his feet. "Remus, I --"

But it wasn't Remus looking at him through the bars. It was Albus Dumbledore, and there was a look of immense sadness in his eyes.

"Sirius --" he began gravely, but Sirius cut him off.

"Professor, I didn't do it, I swear! You *know* me! I *never* would have allowed James and Lily to be hurt! How can you even think --?"

"I hardly know what to think," Dumbledore said sadly. He took off his half-moon spectacles and wiped them on his robes. "I am an old man, and very tired. There was a time when I thought I knew you -- thought I know a thing or two about human nature -- but perhaps I have lost my touch."

"I was never their Secret-Keeper, Professor!" he protested. "Just ask --" But there was no one to ask, he realised. James and Lily

were dead. Peter was in hiding and unlikely to come forwards to implicate himself. Remus had never known about the switch. The only person in the world who might know the truth was Harry, who, at the age of fifteen months, was unlikely to be able to say anything helpful.

Sirius slumped back down to the floor.

Albus Dumbledore looked down at him almost pityingly. "I have no one's word on that matter but yours, lad, which, you must understand, is suspect. James Potter told me himself that you were to be their Secret-Keeper. A street full of witnesses swear that they saw you murder a dozen Muggles, not to mention Peter Pettigrew who was your friend."

"I didn't --" Sirius tried to protest.

"And," Dumbledore said loudly, cutting him off, "unless you wish to implicate Remus Lupin in the matter of the Potters' deaths, you must understand that there is no one else upon whom to place the blame." Dumbledore raised his bushy, white eyebrows inquiringly.

Sirius shook his head, face in his hands. "No," he said softly. "Remus had nothing to do with it. He didn't know anything about the switch. James and Peter and I were the only one who knew."

"I see," Dumbledore's voice was grave. "In that case, you must realise that we have no alternative. The case against you is very strong. There are a number of witnesses, myself included. I must give evidence that James told me you were his Secret-Keeper."

Sirius nodded miserably, not looking up.

"If you were to confess," Dumbledore suggested gently, "then perhaps --"

"Confess?" Sirius laughed bitterly. "Blacks may be a bunch of cold-hearted bastards, Professor, but we're not liars. I'll confess to nothing I haven't done."

"Then there is nothing I can do for you, Sirius." Dumbledore's voice was sad. He turned to go.

"Professor?" Sirius looked up at last. "There is one thing."

Dumbledore looked at him inquiringly.

"Could you please -- I mean -- that is, could you tell Remus that I -- that I'm sorry. That there was nothing I could do. And please -- could you ask him to come see me? I need to talk to him. I need to tell him what happened. Maybe he'll understand. I don't know."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall deliver your message when I see

him. But he may not want to come here, you understand."

"I understand. But please, Professor, make sure nothing happens to him? I need to know he's safe."

"I will do what I can, lad," the headmaster promised.

As Dumbledore turned to go once more, the guard piped up helpfully. "Is that Remus you're talking about the same as Remus Lupin? 'Cos they've brought him in for questioning as well." He waved a long scroll of names vaguely at the headmaster.

"Thank you, young man," Dumbledore bowed slightly. "And could you tell me where I might find him?"

"They'll be interviewing him at the other end of this wing, Sir," he said. "Just down through the security doors. One of the offices on the left. Clark or Murdoch or one of them."

Dumbledore nodded and left, walking purposefully.

A tiny glimmer of hope sparked in Sirius's mind. *He's here*, he thought. *Remus is just down the hall. Maybe he will come, if Dumbledore asks him. Maybe he'll believe me*

And so he sat and waited, stomach churning. An hour passed, and another and another. He got up and paced the tiny cell,

chains rattling, trying to think of the best way to tell his story to Remus. Remus would believe him. He *had* to.

At last the door to the holding area opened.

"Remus --" Sirius cried eagerly, clutching at the bars of his cell.

But it was not Remus Lupin who entered the room. There were two of them. They were tall and hooded, and seemed to drift rather than walk, and they were preceded by an intense cold.

Sirius Black sank down, huddling into the back corner of his cell, as they drew across the room towards him. Remus wasn't coming.

CHAPTER TWO AZKABAN

The fortress of Azkaban towered over the tiny boat and its five occupants. It was a slightly darker grey than the sky behind it, but it was no less grim. Not that Sirius Black noticed this. He was curled up, eyes shut tight, in the bottom of the boat, not noticing anything outside of his own mind.

The boat glided upon the surface of the water, propelled magically, though the choppy waters still tossed it from side to side. The prisoner and the four tall, black-cloaked figures all seemed oblivious to the droplets of freezing rain that struck them from the dark November sky.

With a grating crunch, the small boat ran aground on the bare, rocky island. The Dementors were apparently used to the reaction of new prisoners to their presence, for they did not bother trying to make Sirius rise and walk into the fortress by himself. One of them merely pointed a skeletal finger at him and, chains and all, he rose a few feet into the air and floated, still in a fetal posture, through the great oaken doors and past the rusty portcullis, into his new home.

The four guards drifted eerily along behind him. Once inside, a fifth guard met them with a long roll of parchment, which it held up for their inspection. The Dementor directing Sirius's movement paused and touched the parchment where it said

Black, Sirius - Mass-Murderer - Life Imprisonment. The Dementor with the list nodded slowly, then touched a heavy iron door beside him, which screeched a protest as it opened to admit the new arrival.

Sirius's oblivious form floated down corridor after corridor, each one much like the others, lit only by tiny windows high in the walls, which, on a day like this, allowed only a dim and colourless light. The walls were cold, bare stone, and the inmates, for the most part, sat huddled in the corners of their cells, some rocking, some muttering to themselves, some occasionally giving a shriek of anguish as the four Dementors passed.

At last, they reached an empty cell. One of the Dementors drew a heavy iron key from beneath its robes and turned the lock. Sirius was floated into the cell, and the door clanged shut behind him as he was dumped rather unceremoniously onto the narrow bed. The Dementors drifted away down the corridor, their progress marked by the occasional shrieks of the prisoners.

As the guards retreated, the hold they had upon Sirius's mind lessened somewhat. He opened his eyes for the first time since his arrival, and took in his first view of what would be his home for the rest of his life. Bare stone walls; bare stone floor; a narrow bed with a thin, lumpy mattress and a thin, threadbare blanket, both too short for him; a bucket privy in one corner; a tiny window, high in the wall, through which he could see a

patch of cloudy sky, and feel a constant, chilly draft.

It was clean, but the entire place stank of fear. *And no wonder,* thought Sirius. *This place is haunted by all the terrible memories ever experienced by anyone who ever had to live here.* He shivered. The cell was cold. He tried pulling the thin blanket over himself, but it didn't do much good. He closed his eyes again, and soon fell into a fitful doze.

* * *

Remus was looking at him with sad, sad eyes. "How could you do it, Sirius?" he was saying. "How could you?"

"I didn't," he tried to say, but his mouth didn't seem to want to open.

"James and Lily were our best friends, Sirius. You killed them. And Peter, too." Sirius could tell from the gold colour in Remus's eyes that the full moon would be rising soon. "I guess this proves how little they meant to you. And how little I meant to you."

No! Sirius want to scream, but couldn't. I never did anything! It was Peter! Peter, not me!

But suddenly he was filled with doubts. He couldn't remember clearly. Maybe he had been the Secret-Keeper. Maybe this was all his fault. He had known a moment ago, but now it was

slipping away from him.

Remus looked angry. "You killed them, Sirius. All of them. And now you have to die, too."

Remus was changing. The wolf was coming, and Sirius could not remember how to change into Padfoot. He knew that if he didn't do something soon, the wolf would kill him for sure.

He turned to run, and tripped. He couldn't even remember how to get up again. He tried to open his mouth to cry for help, but his lips were clamped shut. He could feel teeth closing on the nape of his neck.

"You must take your clothes off," said Remus.

"What?!" said Sirius, eyes popping open.

"You must take your clothes off, Prisoner. It is the rules of Azkaban that you must wear this uniform," said the dull-eyed house-elf from the passageway outside his cell.

Sirius frowned. "I thought house-elves couldn't handle clothing," he said suspiciously.

"Only clothing given by the master may free a house-elf, Prisoner," said the creature in a bored voice. "My master is not here. He says we must obey the Dementors, Prisoner, and we

must wash the clothes of the prisoners. You is not our master. The Dementors is not our master. Your clothes will not free us; only clothes from the master." The house-elf gave Sirius a contemptuous look to show him what it thought of such woeful ignorance. "You must take your clothes off now, Prisoner," it repeated.

He thought about refusing, but he had been wearing his clothing for more than two days now, and it was a bit ripe. With a sigh, he stood up and shed the last garments he would ever own, trying to ignore the hard stare of the creature in the passageway. He pushed the bundle between the bars, shivering, as the house-elf passed him a clean but shapeless grey shirt and trousers. He dressed quickly as his attendant and laundry vanished, but the thin garments were little protection against the chill.

A short time later, another house-elf arrived with his supper. It did not speak, and neither did he. Although the food was tasteless, cold, and had an unpleasant texture, he ate it all. He had eaten very little in the past forty-eight hours.

This is my life now, he thought once he had finished eating. The sky outside his window was dark now. I have nothing to look forwards to between now and the day I die. Pray God it will be soon.

* * *

In the days and weeks that followed, he learned that the cold and the grey and the monotony were the least of what Azkaban had to offer its residents. The Dementors patrolled the passageways of the fortress regularly, feasting off the happy memories, positive emotions, and spirit of their victims. Sometimes they would not pass for two hours or more, but often they seemed a constant presence, occasionally pausing outside his cell to devote a little special attention to him. Sometimes there were two or even three of them at a time. In those moments, he would have welcomed the grey and the cold, if he could have remembered them.

It wasn't so much that he remembered the most terrible moments and events of his life, as that he relived them over and over again in his mind. Even if, in reality, there had been some good mixed with the bad, here in Azkaban, it was stripped away. In the beginning, he tried to make himself remember the good bits too -- tried to relive them -- but it was like trying to close his hand around a flame; its beauty glittered at him tauntingly, and he only ended up burning himself -- summoning more Dementors to feed off him.

The most awful events, he relived every day. He had hoped vainly that a kind of numbness might eventually develop around them, but they remained sharp, and cut him anew each time. The only thing that changed, and changed very quickly, was that eventually, he had no more tears to cry.

Sirius Black had never been a crybaby. His mother had broken him of it early. "Blacks don't cry," had been drilled into him from the earliest memories of his childhood. The words had usually been accompanied by a slap. And so he had learned to bury his pain, and hide it behind a joking façade. If he could laugh about something, then he didn't have to cry.

Then Remus had come into his life, and showed him that sometimes it was all right to cry. But he had never been comfortable with it, so it hadn't happened very often. Maybe a dozen times between meeting Remus and landing in Azkaban. Sometimes, there had been rare tears of joy -- that night after he and Remus had first made love; the day James had told him Lily was expecting, and that they wanted him to be the baby's godfather; the day his life had been forever joined with Remus's -- but those were not the occasions the Dementors allowed him to remember.

Sirius had learned to hide his fear early on. Even as a child, he knew that to show such weakness was to give the advantage to the other person. Long before he had ever set foot inside Hogwarts, he had learned to project an air of nonchalance. Anything he could not laugh at, he could show disdain for, and *vice versa*.

Nothing affected him on the surface -- not fear, not pain, not love -- but beneath the surface, he was broken. The image of the arrogant joker was so effective that Sirius Black was lost behind

it.

And then he had come to Hogwarts, and met a remarkable boy named Remus Lupin. Remus, who had cracked his façade with a silent look, who made him feel foolish and awkward in his jokes, who had been the first person besides himself that Sirius had ever truly cared for, and the first person to show him what love and acceptance meant, even in those early, innocent days when it only meant friendship.

The first time he met the wolf, his fear came as close to the surface as it ever did. The wolf scared him. It wasn't Remus. Remus was shy, reserved, careful, thoughtful, sensitive. The wolf was none of these things, and Sirius could see that Remus feared it, and so he feared it, too. But he had learned to bury that fear so deep that even the wolf could not sniff it out by the time Padfoot was born of Sirius's affection and bravado.

Every full moon, Padfoot was there for the wolf, and every time, he was terrified. At first, he had thought his fear was the instinctive fear of a human towards a werewolf, but it quickly became clear that the wolf was not interested in four-legged prey. Still the fear persisted.

The truth of that fear had found him, though, even before he had learned to change his form. One night, a day after the full moon, he had just come into their dormitory after detention to find Remus, pale and tired-looking, sprawled across half a dozen

open books and several pages of scribbled notes, sound asleep, red marks on face and arms vivid even in the dim light of Sirius's wand. He looked so vulnerable that Sirius had nearly been moved to touch him, and in that moment, he had known what it was that he feared, and, simultaneously, what it was that he wanted.

He wanted to protect Remus. He wanted to dispel his fear with a touch, and to stand between him and the darkness. Because what he feared above all else was the thought of losing Remus to the beast. Remus, the thin, pale boy, who wrestled with the monster all night, once a month. What if he should lose that fight one day? What if the wolf decided not to let go with the dawning day, and Remus disappeared forever?

Sirius had studied werewolves and their habits feverishly from the first moment he had learned the truth about his friend, and he knew that his fear was unfounded. But the struggle he saw within Remus was more real and convincing than words on a page, and it was terrifying to watch, time and time again.

Sirius had known little physical pain in his lifetime. His parents had been of the school of thought that deprivation and humiliation were better teaching tools than beatings. But to see Remus's body coming back to itself in the dawning light of those mornings -- bruised, bleeding, huddled, shivering, naked -- brought on near-intolerable physical reaction in him.

He knew in his heart of hearts that he could not save Remus from the darkness, but he swore to himself the first time Padfoot had leant his furry warmth to the unconscious, shaking body, that he would never leave him to face it alone if he could do anything to prevent it.

But now Remus was alone, and would be forever. That Sirius was being punished for something he had not done was bad enough, but that Remus was suffering, too -- *intolerable!* Sirius tried to dispel the thought, but could not.

The only alternative was to face the other possibility: that Remus would *not* be alone forever. That he would find someone else, and forget all about the man he thought had betrayed him. Unbidden, images came to Sirius's mind of Remus lying naked next to a faceless Someone -- touching, kissing, making love. Nothing was clear about this Someone except that he was not Sirius. Such thoughts made him roar with frustration and longing.

Better to imagine Remus alone forever, just like he was.

CHAPTER THREE

TRUE OR FALSE

Sirius Black is eleven years old. He is the pride of the Black family and heir to that family's fortune. His sharp tongue and wicked sense of humour have occasionally earned him a cuff on the ear or a night without supper, but they have also earned him the respect and admiration of his younger brother, Regulus, and many other pure-blood children around his own age. His parents have even begun discussing the possibility of making a proper match for their eldest son, but he is still young enough to wrinkle his nose at the thought of girls.

He has been accepted to Hogwarts, but for a Black, this comes as no surprise. He boards the Hogwarts Express from Platform 9 3/4, walking tall and proud in new robes and his green-and-white Slytherin scarf as Kreacher, the Black family house-elf, totes his luggage onto the train. He has all new books, cauldron and quills, and -- because first years are not allowed them -- a promise from his father that, if his marks are good this year, he will have the finest racing broom money can buy for his twelfth birthday next June.

On the train, he sits with other pure-blood children: his cousins the Black girls; Narcissa's haughty, blond boyfriend, Lucius Malfoy, a seventh year; the Lestrangle boys; and Sirius's friend Peter Pettigrew, a short, anxious-looking blond boy. Sirius regards Peter with contempt and pity. *He'll never make*

Slytherin, he thinks, and tugs at his scarf.

The compartment door opens, and a pale boy in shabby, patched robes looks in nervously. "No room," sneers Bellatrix, looking at the boy's clothes and not his face. In fact, Sirius is the only one in the compartment to see the boy's face at all. He has some odd scarring, and turns away quickly when he sees Sirius looking at him. He walks on without saying a word.

At Hogsmeade Station the older children wish him well as he is rounded up along with the other first years for the journey across the lake. The children around him are buzzing with excitement as Sirius and Peter find themselves a boat, which they share with a sullen-looking black-haired boy and a pretty redheaded girl. He hears all four Houses of Hogwarts being mentioned around him, with varying levels of anticipation and fear. But Sirius isn't worried. All Blacks are Slytherins, just as all Weasleys are Gryffindors. Everyone knows that. Sirius wonders if the red-haired girl in the boat with him is a Weasley, before he remembers that the Weasleys never have girls.

"Who are your family?" Sirius asks her, just to be sure.

She thinks he is being friendly, and smiles at him. "I'm Lily Evans," she says, putting out her hand. "My family are from Surrey."

"Evans," he says thoughtfully, not shaking the proffered hand.

"That doesn't sound familiar. Are you connected with the Weasleys?" Unconsciously, he uses the disdainful inflection with which his parents always say that name.

"Oh, no!" she says with a very pretty laugh. "My family aren't wizards at all! I'm the first."

She looks proud, but Sirius wrinkles his nose. "Muggleborn," he says in disgust, and turns away.

The other boy in the boat is now regarding him with distrust.

"I suppose you're Muggleborn, too?" Sirius says to him.

"No," the boy snaps. "My family's magical."

"Who are they, then?"

"Snape. Sheffield." The boy gives him a contemptuous look, as if daring him to make something of it.

"Never heard of them either. How far back do they go?"

In the end, the sullen boy has to admit that, while he himself is not Muggleborn, his parents are. Silence descends upon the boat for the remainder of its journey.

The excitement rises as the first years crowd together in the

entrance hall. Sirius pays no attention to the explanation of the Sorting ceremony. As far as he's concerned, it's just a formality. He'll go up, put on the Hat, and then walk to the Slytherin table to join the people he will be living with for the next seven years. Slytherin being the largest House, there should be lots of them. Plenty of people for him to make connections with and begin building a successful life for himself.

As they file into the Great Hall, the names are called out alphabetically. His name is preceded by three others; two Slytherins and a Ravenclaw. Back straight, eyes forwards, he approaches the stool, sits, and puts on the Hat that will seal his destiny.

"Oh, ho, ho!" says the Sorting Hat. "A Black, eh? Well, well, well. A clever one, too."

Sirius is waiting impatiently for the Hat to say "Slytherin". Why is it taking so long?

"Oh, so you think you're going to be a Slytherin, do you?" asks the Hat. "I wouldn't be so sure about that! Too much the rebel for House Slytherin, I fear. Now, let me see There's enough loyalty here for Hufflepuff, but not enough hard work and dedication. You're smart, but you don't like to study, so not Ravenclaw either. Really there is only one place I can put you, and it has to be **GYRFFINDOR!**" it finishes, shouting out its verdict for all the hall to hear.

Sirius wonders if he will pass out. There is a stunned silence from the Slytherin table, and confused whispering from the other three. Slowly, he walks down the centre of the room to an empty seat at the Gryffindor table. There is none of the cheering and back-slapping which greeted the three students Sorted before him. Everyone is looking at him. He hears a nasty giggle from the Slytherin table. His cousin Bellatrix.

"I guess he's not one of us after all," she says loudly.

Numbly, Sirius sinks onto the Gryffindor bench, into a space that has been left clear for the newest additions to the House. All down the table, eyes turn towards him. There is no hostility, but there is silence, and wary uncertainty. Sirius's eyes are firmly fixed on the table.

A moment later, someone sits down on the bench next to him.

"Hi," says the redheaded girl from the boat, still trying to be friendly. "Looks like we're Housemates. I didn't catch your name ...?"

"Go away, Mudblood," Sirius growls.

There is a sharp intake of breath from all down the Gryffindor table. The girl doesn't seem to know what the word means, but recognises it for an insult. She stops trying to talk to Sirius, and

even slides down the bench a little. She turns instead to introduce herself to another new girl who has just sat down.

The Sorting continues, and as each new member of Slytherin House is announced, his expression becomes more and more sour, and he slumps lower and lower in his seat. Even a poncy-looking blond boy called Lockhart is sorted into Slytherin while he, Sirius, heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, is stuck in Gryffindor, a House known for being blood-traitors. What will his parents say?

But as he contemptuously watches the blond boy take his seat among the Slytherins, his view is blocked by someone else standing uncertainly across from him. Startled, he looks up to see the pale, shabby boy from the train.

"Is it all right if I sit here?" the boy asks, barely above a whisper.

Sirius nods, forgetting to sulk for a moment. The boy sits down, and Sirius waits expectantly for a moment, thinking that the boy will introduce himself or ask Sirius his name. He does neither.

A few moments later, Peter plops himself down between Sirius and the Muggleborn girl.

"This is brilliant!" he says. "The Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, but I asked it to put me with you, and it said OK."

Brilliant, sulks Sirius. Even Peter had a better chance at Slytherin than I did.

Peter is quickly followed by a thin boy with messy black hair and glasses. He shakes hands with everyone within reach, grinning broadly and introducing himself as James Potter, saying how happy he is to be a Gryffindor. Sirius can tell he is the sort of boy that people take an instant liking to. Sirius stubbornly decides not to like him.

Perhaps if he doesn't get on with the other boys in his dormitory, Headmaster Dumbledore will be forced to transfer him to Slytherin. Instead of introducing himself to the Potter boy, he stares resolutely across the room, just in time to see the sullen, dark-haired boy from the boat being Sorted into Slytherin.

Even common Mudbloods get sorted into Slytherin. Mum and Dad will be furious! Perhaps they'll write to Dumbledore and ask him to move me.

He is silent through the rest of the meal, ignoring the conversation around him, letting Peter introduce him to the others, and replying to any direct questions with no more than a shrug. He eats very little, and when the students rise to adjourn to their common rooms, he trails along behind the rest of the Gryffindors, as if hoping to disassociate himself from them. He barely pays any attention when Gryffindor's prefect, Fabian Prewett, gives them the password, "dragon bogeys", with a

mischievous grin.

His first weeks at Hogwarts are awful. His own family will not speak to him. The rest of the Slytherins make snide or sarcastic comments. His parents write, telling him how disappointed they are that he has not been placed in Slytherin, but do not offer to take steps in the matter. Regulus does not write to him at all, though he had promised to do so. No one looks up to him. No one respects him. No one even likes him. No one except Peter. And what good is that?

Sirius Black remembered all these things with remarkable clarity. He felt again the sharp pain of rejection, shock and horror at realising that everything he was -- or everything he had thought he was -- had been ripped away from him in a heartbeat. The loneliness cut him time and again, amplified tenfold and more by the presence of the Dementors.

He remembered the bare fact that he had become friends with his Housemates eventually, and that the loneliness and emptiness had ended, but he could not for the life of him remember how it had come about. It felt like a dream which slipped away whenever he tried to grasp it.

All that Azkaban would allow him to remember was the jealousy he had felt when Peter had transferred his admiration from Sirius to James. The quiet shadow of Remus Lupin barely brushed his memory, appearing only as a pale spectre, ill and secretive after

each full moon.

And the Dementors added to his memories as well. The laughter of the Slytherins was amplified. Things he had only imagined people thinking now rang in his ears. His Housemates ignored him or joined in the mockery. Sometimes Snape's sneer would appear on Remus's face.

He could not remember at all the day James had come upon Sirius being taunted by a gang of Slytherins, and had bodily dragged him away with the declaration that "No one treats my Gryffindor brothers like that!" or the marvelously-crafted prank that followed, resulting in all the Slytherins' robes turning pink in the wash, and every member of that House suffering terrible flatulence for a week every time they tried to speak. He and James had become inseparable following that incident.

But the Dementors drained away the laughter and boyish glee. They fed on comfort and companionship and any feeling of rightness, and left Sirius with only the cold, the fear, the rejection and the loneliness he thought he had shed long ago.

CHAPTER FOUR LADIES MAN

Sirius is fourteen years old, and there are girls everywhere. They drive him to distraction. Everywhere he looks, there they are, with their giggles and rosy cheeks and blossoming bosoms. One girl in particular has captured his attention: Maggie Lewis. She's everywhere.

She's just turned thirteen, and her bright, hazel eyes are fixed -- on Remus Lupin. Sirius can't stand it. Why is this annoying little girl so fixated on Remus? Why does it bother him so much? Well, Remus is his best friend in all the world, apart from James, and this little minx is going to poison him with one of her love philtres.

The Dementors pause in the passage outside Sirius's cell.

And now Remus is smiling back at Maggie. She is halfway across the room, over at the Ravenclaw table in the Great Hall, but the way they are looking at one another, it is as if they are alone in the world. Sirius punches Remus in the shoulder, trying in vain to get his attention.

"In a minute, Pete," Remus mutters, still staring at Maggie with a look one could pour on a pancake. Maggie's little friends are whispering to one another and giggling.

Sirius slams away from the table and sulks up the stairs, missing dinner entirely. It's bad enough that James keeps talking about that Evans girl all the time, but now he's losing his other best friend to some Ravenclaw wench. It's just not fair.

Like most teenaged boys, he's not much good at soul-searching and self-analysis. The only conclusion he can come to is that he is jealous because everyone has a girlfriend but him. *Well, everyone but Peter, and Peter doesn't count*, he tells himself.

He flops down on his bed and declares loudly to the empty room, "I am going to get the prettiest girl in the school to be my girlfriend, and I am going to be the first one of us lot to get a shag!" Yes, he decides, this will make him feel better.

His first task is to decide who is the prettiest girl in the school. No one under thirteen, he decides, and no one in Slytherin. In the past three years, that House has lost its shine in his eyes, and besides, he is related to too many of them. He rejects this one for being too short and that one for being too tall, another for having no bosom, and yet another for having an annoying laugh. Before long, there's no one left on the list.

He knows he is being too picky, but the truth is that there is no girl at Hogwarts he really wants. *How am I ever going to get a shag, then?* he wonders, disgusted. He decides that, if there's no girl he wants, he will get the next best thing and get the girl everyone else wants. Yes, Ariadne Diggle will do nicely.

Only Ariadne is a sixth year, and won't have him. She giggles, pronounces him "cute", and sends him on his way. He tries again and again, approaching this girl and that, but none of the sixth or seventh year girls are interested in a lowly fourth year, and most of them already have boyfriends.

At last, he catches one of Maggie Lewis's giggling friends in an empty corridor, and turns all his desperate, spotty, fourteen-year-old charm on her. She giggles, and nods, and he grabs her by the arm and drags her to a spot where they are sure to be discovered, hoping to secure himself a Reputation.

But as he rounds the corner, he sees something which makes the bottom drop out of his stomach. Remus. Remus is kissing Maggie Lewis, right there in the corridor, for everyone to see! They break their kiss, and look up at Sirius, matching smug grins on their swollen lips.

"He's mine," giggles Maggie, as Remus wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her close against his side.

And suddenly, all the students and teachers who had paused to watch the kissing couple are looking at Sirius and laughing, as if the look on his face is the funniest thing they have ever seen. James is doubled over, slapping his thigh, tears of mirth streaming down his cheeks.

Sirius looks back at Remus and Maggie, who are suddenly adults. "Maggie and I are in love," he tells Sirius, grinning. "We're getting married."

"Yes," chimes in Maggie. "We're going to have two darling little boys, and name them James and Peter. Isn't that right, my love?"

Remus is gazing at Sirius with pity in his eyes now. "Did you really think I could love you as much as I love my Maggie, Sirius?" he says. "Don't be a fool. A man needs a woman for real love, and we have a duty to bring magical children into the world."

Sirius is back, lying on his bed in Gryffindor tower. He can still hear the laughter echoing in his ears, but now he can't remember if the scene with Remus and Maggie in the corridor actually happened or not. The thought of them kissing is enough to fill him with despair, and now he knows why. He knows why he has made excuses, rejecting the potential of every girl at Hogwarts. He doesn't want them. He wants Remus.

Horror fills him at the notion. He fancies a bloke. Words swirl in his head. *Poof. Queer. Freak.* And many far less innocuous. He can never let anyone know. His family, already disappointed in him for being a Gryffindor and liking it, will disown him for this. He is disgusting. He can never tell his friends. He can certainly never tell Remus.

Remus's face swims across his mind, wearing a look of abject horror and disgust. "Don't touch me!" he is saying. "Don't look at me. Don't ever speak to me again, Sirius Black!"

He'll be thrown out of the boys' dormitory. Now one will want to sleep where he sleeps or bathe where he bathes. He's a nasty, filthy pervert.

There's only one thing he can do. He'll hush it up. Never mention it. Why should anyone have to know? He can pretend he likes girls. Some of them will probably like him. Surely he can kiss them and fondle them and do all the things normal men and women are supposed to do together. He doesn't feel disgust about women; only indifference. Yes. That's the best way. No one has to know.

And it works -- for a while, anyway. Sirius is fifteen years old now, and most of his spots have cleared up. He's letting his hair grow out. Girls are noticing him. Girls are, in fact, being incredibly forward with him. He had thought it was always the boy's job to catch the girl in a corner and kiss her, but more often than not, it is he who finds himself cornered by some determined girl and her breasts.

God! They have *breasts*! And they want him to do something about it, don't they? What is he supposed to do? Squeeze them? Pet them? Say nice things about them? Isn't having to kiss all these girls bad enough?

Smiling blue eyes surrounded by thick lashes are looking up into his. "I love you, Sirius," she says. And then a look of concern fills her eyes. "Don't you love me, Sirius?"

He looks up, and Remus is standing there, giving him a sad look. Every time Sirius kisses a girl, Remus is standing there when he looks up. "Do you love her, Sirius? Does she make you happy?" Remus turns and walks away.

"Remus, wait!" Sirius pushes the girl aside and runs after Remus, but he can't find him. He sprints up one corridor and down the next, searching every corner of the school, but Remus is not there. He's lost him.

Why am I such an ass? he thinks angrily. Kissing girls. Playing pranks. Tormenting Snape. Everything he does is so bloody juvenile! No wonder Remus thinks so little of him. Remus doesn't need him. He's worthless.

The more time passes, the more distant Remus becomes. Suddenly, at the end of fifth year, Remus stops speaking to him altogether. Sirius doesn't even know what he has done this time to push Remus away. The young werewolf becomes almost as withdrawn as he was in their first year. Sirius sometimes catches Remus giving him sad looks, but that is all. *Now we're not even friends*, Sirius thinks in despair.

That summer is horrible. For his sixteenth birthday, his parents arrange a proper pure-blood high society party. What in the old days was called "coming out". His relationship with his family has been rocky since he was sorted into Gryffindor, and this summer, he finds his patience wearing very thin.

He tries to bait and shock them, getting very drunk at the party, and vomiting in the punch bowl. He even considers "coming out" in the modern sense, just to see how they will react. His family hates him. Remus won't speak to him. What has he got to lose?

And it is that line of thinking which leads to Regulus walking in on his brother having a wank to a picture of a naked, wet and grinning Remus standing thigh-deep in the Hogwarts lake, then being pounced upon and wrestled beneath the surface by a large black dog.

Regulus, mouth open, stares incredulously at the scene. Sirius looks back at him, defiant, the photo of the joyful boy and dog in one hand, his cock still in the other. Regulus flees.

A moment later, his parents are standing in his doorway. He is sitting on the bed facing them, still naked, challenging them with his eyes. The photo of Remus lies face down beside him, as if to protect it from viewing the coming unpleasantness.

"Is it true?" his father's voice is like ice. "Regulus says that"

His eyes fall upon the downturned photo on the bed. "Sirius, is that photo, or is that photo not, of a girl?"

"It is not," Sirius says shortly.

His mother screeches loudly and looks as if she is about to launch herself across the room at him.

"No son of mine," growls his father, "will ever...." But he can't seem to find the words to finish this sentence. "Get dressed," he says. "Get out of this house."

"Gladly," Sirius declares. He begins to move about the room, slamming drawers open and shut, flinging clothing and other items into his trunk. He doesn't bother dressing; he wants to make them uncomfortable. "I'm sick of you lot anyway, with all your stupid fucking pure-blood nonsense. You're all just a bunch of fucking sheep, following Voldemort around B-e-e-e-h! B-e-e-e-h! But you're too weak to even declare for him, aren't you?" He gives his parents a contemptuous look. "You're content to just go about saying what wonderful ideas he has and how he's the best thing to happen to the Wizarding world in ages, but you're too chicken to join his little harem!"

His mother grabs him by the shoulder and delivers him such a slap that the room seems to spin, and he nearly has to sit down. He can feel the sting where her long nails have gouged his cheek.

"Voldemort is a great wizard!" shrieks his mother. "He's giving the world back to the pure-bloods. You're just too stupid to understand," she sneers. "You and your Gryffindor friends and your equal rights for werewolves and that Mudblood-loving Potter boy and that half-blood friend of yours and that blood-traitor Pettigrew!" She takes a breath. "Well, Voldemort's coming for you, too. He'll cleanse the world for Mudbloods and traitors and filthy queers like you! Just you see if he doesn't!" And she smiles the nastiest smile a mother ever gave a son. It makes him feel ill inside, because he knows she's right. Voldemort is coming.

"Out," says his father, voice still icy. "You're not welcome in this house. You are no longer my son. Go. Change your name and sink to your own level and never darken our door again."

Sirius has his hand on the doorknob. He's dressed now, and his trunk is packed. The picture of Remus is still in his hand. He gives his family one last smirk, raises the photo to his mouth, and gives it a long, intentional lick.

CHAPTER FIVE PENITENT

Remus won't look at him. Swathed in bandages, lying in the hospital wing, he stares at the wall, not moving, not blinking. Sirius has been sitting beside him all day, not daring to speak or to touch him. "Sorry" doesn't sound like enough after what he's done.

He feels empty inside. Sirius Black, all self-confidence, charm, good looks and wicked sense of humour -- but none of that means a thing if Remus won't *look* at him.

How could he have been so stupid? He had thought it would be funny at the time. *Funny* to send Snivellus off to the Shrieking Shack. Thought he would teach the greasy git a lesson about poking his oversized nose where it wasn't wanted. He hadn't thought -- *But that's just it, you shite*, he told himself. *You never think. You just do whatever you fucking please, because who cares who gets hurt, so long as it amuses you?*

But this time it had backfired in such an unexpected way. All he had wanted was for Snivellus to get the fright of his life and maybe wet himself. Because that would have been funny.

But James had seen the danger of it where Sirius hadn't, and had intervened, though not before Remus, violent and bestial, had caught a whiff of the sour-faced Slytherin's inordinately strong

body odor.

There had been a scene of panic in the passage beneath the Whomping Willow. Snape had made it halfway to the Shrieking Shack before the Marauders had caught up with him. James had shouted for him to stop, just as a howl echoed down the narrow corridor.

James spun Snape around, and had half-dragged him out of the hole, running flat out, and using all the muscle and speed he had gained in endless Quidditch practices to save the ungrateful bastard's neck. They had barely made it out in time, past the protective circle of the violent tree's branches.

Peter had squeaked in terror and instantly transformed the moment he heard heavy paws pounding down the passageway towards them, and Sirius himself had been close enough to see the beast's vicious, bloodshot eyes before he had transformed and thrown himself into the fray.

As Padfoot, he had leapt at the wolf, using the whole weight of his body to hold him back, buying James and Snape a few more precious seconds to escape. The wolf did not recognise him. The strong scent of human in its territory had overwhelmed everything but the need to hunt and kill.

Padfoot had fought him desperately, growling and barking and trying to force him back into the confines of the house. But the

wolf would not go. Instead, it charged the huge black dog, tumbling them both head over tail. Padfoot had landed on his back, throat exposed in forced submission.

Teeth closed beneath his jaw, and even his canine form knew that this was not a fight he could win, or even survive. He took the only option left to him and struggled out from under the larger, stronger beast, and summoning all the speed and strength he could, he had fled.

The Whomping Willow had been displeased by so many disturbances. It expressed its displeasure by walloping the dog soundly in the ribs as he exited. It continued to flail wildly, thwarting the wolf's attempts at pursuit. In the tunnel, the beast howled and threw its body against the walls in frustration.

The dog had limped halfway back to the castle before transforming back to human form.

James had been sitting on the castle steps, looking stunned. "Snivellus has gone to Dumbledore," he said, face white. "Sirius, *how could you?! Snape could have been killed! We would have been responsible!*"

"I thought it would be funny ..." Sirius had said weakly, rubbing his bruised ribs.

James shook his head in disbelief. "Funny! You thought it would

be *funny*? And did you suppose *Remus* would find it amusing as well?"

Sirius had winced, and not from pain.

"I'm going to go see Dumbledore," James said shortly. "Find out what's going on." He turned and walked quickly up the steps, not looking to see if Sirius followed.

Sirius had walked back to the Gryffindor common room by himself, dragging his feet. All that night, he sat staring into the fire. Eventually, James returned and sat down opposite him, but he did not speak.

About dawn, Peter had returned to the tower, looking dirty and disheveled. He looked surprised to see his two friends still awake.

"Are you all right, Peter?" James asked, giving Sirius a look that said, *If Peter's hurt, that's your fault as well*.

"Yeah, I'm OK," Peter replied, but he looked nervous, as if he had more to say but didn't really want to.

"Out with it," Sirius growled at him.

"I saw -- on my way back --" he began nervously, then said in a rush, "Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore were down at

the Whomping Willow getting Remus out. He looked bad."

Sirius could guess just how bad he had looked by how wide Peter's eyes were. In three seconds, he was on his feet and out through the painting of the Fat Lady, walking as fast as he could towards the hospital wing.

His heart had been pounding. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let him in at first. She wasn't done dressing Remus's wounds, and she didn't like an audience, but at last she told him he could stay if he would sit *quietly* and not disturb the patient.

As soon as he saw Remus for himself, Sirius felt something inside him crumble. The pale boy's arms and legs -- even his face -- were swathed in bandages, which were more red than white. He had never seen Remus look so bad after a full moon. Never.

I did this, he reminded himself. *Me*. And he knew at once that his punishment was to be that he would have to tell Remus the whole truth of it. How it had been his fault, how he had been stupid, how sorry he was. *What will Moony say?* he had asked himself, over and over again, all through that night. And now he has found out.

Nothing.

Bloodshot brown eyes stare resolutely at the wall, as Remus

refuses to even acknowledge Sirius's presence.

All day, Sirius sits beside Remus, the silence growing between them.

The only place that isn't silent is inside Sirius's head, where his own voice is shouting at him, *You've ruined us. He loved you, and you've broken his trust and now he's never, ever going to forgive you. Forget lovers; you won't even be friends anymore.*

Towards evening, Sirius falls into an uneasy doze, and when he wakes in the darkness, he is alone. The bed is empty and neatly made.

Sirius stumbles numbly back to Gryffindor Tower, but when he reaches the stairway to the boys' dormitory, James bars his way.

"Leave him alone, Sirius," he says softly.

"I wasn't --" Sirius begins.

"He doesn't want to see you. You'll just have to make do on the sofa for a bit."

Sirius nods dumbly and collapses into a chair. The roaring fire in the hearth is suddenly blurred by tears which he roughly dashes away with the back of his hand. He doesn't deserve to feel sorry for himself.

After a while, he sleeps out of pure exhaustion.

He sleeps in the common room for three nights before James deems it appropriate for him to even set foot in the dormitory once again. Remus still won't speak to him, or look at him, except the occasional reproachful glance.

It is the worst month of Sirius's life. James is civil, but speaks no more to him that civility demands. He and Remus speak softly to one another, as if James is Remus's protector. Sirius tries to squash his anger at James for usurping his place, knowing it is born out of frustration with the fact that he deserves this. Peter, as usual, follows James's lead.

Sirius is exiled and out of favour. Conversations stop when he enters rooms. At meals, he sits several places down from his friends. In lessons, he is forced to partner with other classmates on projects -- usually girls who look at him with big, soft doe eyes and find any excuse they can to touch him, which he hates.

A few days after being allowed back into the dormitory, he rounds a corner to see Remus, pale and tight-faced, speaking to Snape, apologising stiffly to him for what happened.

Apologising! Sirius thinks, *As if it's his fault! That should be me,* he realises. *My punishment should be apologising to Snivellus. Then maybe Remus will speak to me again.* It makes him feel

funny inside to think that Remus will speak to Snape and not to him.

But when Snape sneers and spits, "Get away from me, *freak*," Sirius can't make himself do it.

You got better than you deserve, you little shite, Sirius thinks fiercely. *James saved you. Remus bloody apologised! It's not bloody fair!*

For weeks, Sirius tries everything he can think of. He anticipates Remus's needs, and goes to fetch him things before he can ask, or before he gets up to get them himself. He is a model of good behaviour. He even tidies up his part of the bedroom -- something that had never been done before, except when they were packing to go home.

Above all, he looks and acts the soul of contrition. In those weeks, he never says anything to Remus but "sorry", and he says that a lot. Remus never responds, nor even looks at him when he says it.

At last, in the days before the next full moon, it is clear that Remus has had enough of this behaviour. One afternoon, he rounds on Sirius in a deserted corridor. "Will you bloody stop following me around looking like a kicked puppy?" he growls. "I'm so fucking tired of hearing your 'sorrys'! You're like a bloody broken record!"

Sirius isn't sure what Remus means about breaking records for being sorry, but he doesn't think from his tone that he is making a joke.

"Moony --"

"No, Sirius. I don't want to hear it. Just -- leave me alone," and he turns on his heel and walks away.

Sirius is beside himself. There seems to be nothing left that he can do. No, that can't be. He is *Sirius bloody Black*, for Merlin's sake! When he wants something, he gets it, and that has to include Remus's forgiveness, doesn't it? It is just a question of how.

CHAPTER SIX LESSONS IN LYCANTHROPY

Sirius's heart pounds as he sits gingerly on the edge of the bed in the Shrieking Shack. He quickly gets up again and goes to lean against the wall instead. The bed is the only unbroken piece of furniture in the house, but he thinks he might create the wrong impression if he is sitting there when Remus arrives -- as if proximity to the spot where he and Remus have been so intimate will somehow taint the purity of his errand.

He hears the floorboards downstairs creak, and he begins to sweat. Slow footsteps make their way up the stairs. For a panicked moment, he considers hiding, but it is no use. Remus will know he is there, this close to moonrise.

Remus's eyes find him at once, and a low growl escapes his throat.

"Get out, Sirius," he spits. "Now."

Sirius crosses his arms in front of him. "No," he says simply.

"Why the hell are you here?" growls Remus.

"It's the full moon. Where else would I be?"

"You forfeited your right to be here last month." Remus turns his

back sharply and starts to undress, pulling his shirt off over his head. "I estimate you have about thirty minutes at the most to get out of here, or I can't be held responsible for the consequences."

"Are we through, then, Moony?" Sirius asks softly. "You and me?"

Remus turns, a look of surprise on his face, as if the thought that has plagued Sirius for the past month has never occurred to him.

"I don't know," he says at last, lowering his eyes. "I guess that depends on -- I don't know," he says again.

Sirius takes courage from his indecision and crosses the room to lay a hand on his shoulder. He can see a latticework of new and unfamiliar scars all down the boy's torso.

Remus flinches and pulls away. "Don't touch me," he says, but the anger has gone out of his voice.

"Tell me, Moony," Sirius pleads, voice still soft. "I'm not leaving unless you tell me we're through."

"Look --" Remus begins. Sirius can tell it is becoming hard for him to focus. "Sirius, I -- I can't --" he finally meets Sirius's eyes. "I have to think about it," he says. "I can't decide -- can't think right now." He shakes his head, trying to clear it.

"No, Moony," Sirius puts a hand on his arm, and this time he doesn't pull away. "You don't have to think. You know. And I need to know. What does your heart tell you?" Hesitantly, he lays a hand on Remus's chest.

Remus pulls away at that, and goes to sit on the bed, face in his hands. "Don't do this now, Sirius," he says in a muffled voice. "I'm not ready to forgive you yet. After what you did --" His eyes burn into Sirius as he looks up. "-- using me like that in one of your pranks, for some stupid, petty vendetta against Severus"

"I've said I'm sorry, Moony."

"You're sorry, you're *sorry*," Remus's voice rises, and the growl is back in his throat. "Do you have any idea what you're sorry about? Do you even *know* what could have happened?"

"It was stupid," Sirius admits, hanging his head. "Snivellus could have been hurt or killed. *You* got hurt." He looks up. "I'll never forgive myself for that."

"No." Remus stands and strides across the room, grabbing Sirius by the shoulders and forcing him to look him in the eye. "That is the very least of it, Sirius Black," he says, voice shaking. "Yes, Severus could have been killed. And do you know what would have happened then, Sirius? Did you think about that?"

Sirius looks at him blankly.

"Well, let me tell you, Sirius-my-love. The Committee for the Disposal and Dangerous Creatures would have been called in. There would have been an investigation. You might have got in trouble. Dumbledore would almost certainly have been sacked. And I would have been put down like an animal."

Sirius feels all the blood drain from his face, and he shakes his head, as if to deny the truth of what Remus is saying. His knees buckle and he sits down on the floor with a thump. Remus doesn't try to catch him. He thought he could not possibly feel any worse, but he was wrong. A yawning chasm he had not previously been aware of has opened at his feet. His head swims and he feels sick to his stomach. *Remus. Dead. My fault.*

"So no, Sirius," Remus goes on. "'Sorry' isn't going to be good enough."

"I'm the dangerous one," Sirius whispers through pale lips. "I did it, not you."

"I doubt that argument would have swayed the Committee," Remus says coldly.

Sirius looks up at Remus, eyes wide. "You're *Remus!*" he says. "You're not dangerous! They would have to see"

"Not *dangerous?!?*" Remus explodes. "How can you say that? You, Sirius; you know me better than anyone! At least I thought you did. Maybe we are through" He turns away.

Sirius desperately launches himself forwards to grasp Remus by the ankle. "No, Remus! Please, don't say that! I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll do anything, just don't be like that. Just tell me what you need me to do."

Sirius looks up mournfully to see Remus staring down at him, the wolf burning gold in his eyes. "I need you to understand, Sirius," he says. "But if you don't now, I'm not sure you ever will."

"Teach me, Moony. Please? Make me understand."

Remus narrows his eyes. "All right," he says at last. Reaching down, he grabs Sirius by the shoulder and pulls him to his feet.

Sirius knows he is stronger than he looks, of course, but the effortlessness of the action surprises him.

"Lesson the first," Remus says evenly. "The wolf is strong. Stronger than you. If the wolf wants you dead, there's not much that can stop it. Even armed with silver, you're still pretty much fucked."

Sirius nods. He can't bear the cold look in Remus's eyes. He reaches out a hand to brush a lock of hair away from the boy's cheek.

With lightning speed, Remus spins him around and locks an arm across his throat. "Lesson the second," the cold voice growls in his ear. "The wolf is fast. It acts on instinct. It does not make choices. Pure id, Sirius. And the wolf generally gets what it wants."

Sirius feels teeth close on his neck and holds very still. Remus in this state is unpredictable. He keeps tensed, ready to change when Remus does, otherwise he is dead for sure. As it is, he can barely breathe.

Without warning, Remus grabs his wrists and twists his arms hard behind his back. Sirius bites his lip and squeezes his eyes shut against the pain.

"Lesson the third," the cold voice continues, so close that Remus's lips brush his ear. He shivers involuntarily. "The wolf is not your friend. It exists to hunt and kill. It revels in pain and exults in death."

Remus twists hard again, crushing Sirius's wrists in one hand and forcing him to his knees. He kneels behind him, pressing hard against him so that Sirius can feel his arousal. Reaching his free hand around, he fumbles with the fly of Sirius's trousers.

"Lesson the fourth. The wolf does not ask permission. It takes. It does not love."

Sirius keeps his eyes shut tight, shivering as the cool air strikes his skin. *I won't cry out*, he tells himself fiercely. *I won't ask him to stop. Not that he would anyway.* He resolves to take his punishment like a man. He feels more than sees Remus fumbling with his own trousers. He bites his lip hard as he feels Remus's hard, hot cock pressing against him.

"The wolf takes what it wants." Remus is panting now. "It fucks who it wants." He wraps his free arm around Sirius's throat once again to hold him still, grunting and he shoves ruthlessly into him.

Sirius cannot suppress a strangled cry of pain as he feels Remus enter him. They overbalance, falling forwards so that Sirius fetches up with his cheek pressed against the splintery floorboards, Remus heavy on top of him, thrusting roughly and growling low and continuously in his throat as he sinks his teeth into Sirius's shoulder.

Sirius cannot decide which is worse; the pain in his arms where Remus is twisting and crushing them, or the pain in his arse, but neither can compare to the pain that it is Remus -- his Remus -- who is doing this thing to him. A tear squeezes out from under his eyelid and fades, unnoticed, into the dust on the floor.

What feels like an eternity later, though it is probably no more than two minutes, he feels Remus groan and shudder against him. He is still for a moment before pulling out and away from Sirius, who continues to lie on the floor, eyes shut tight, not moving, hardly daring to breathe.

"Lesson the fifth," Remus's voice is hoarse, and he is still panting. "The wolf is in me, *always*. *I* am dangerous. Never forget that." With that, he turns and strides out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

When he is gone, Sirius transforms to Padfoot, and slinks painfully under the bed, tail between his legs, to wait for the dawn.

CHAPTER SEVEN CASUALTIES OF WAR

Sirius is twenty-one years old. He shares a shabby one-bedroom flat in Muggle London with Remus. It is small but reasonably clean, because Remus cares about that sort of thing, and because he must do something with his time between his infrequent jobs and helping with the Order. He spends a lot of time roaming around the flat.

Sirius has a job with the Ministry. He is a junior Auror, having followed James on that career path once he realised that he wasn't going to see a Knut from his parents, and he really must do something with his life. Being an Auror is exciting, and working for the Order is doubly so, but the excitement is overshadowed by the oppressive sense of doom which permeates the Wizarding world.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters are taking over, slowly but surely. They aren't the majority by any stretch, but there are enough of them, and there seems to be no way to halt their rise without stooping to their methods, and no wizard of conscience can bring himself to resort to an Unforgivable Curse. Good, brave, and even heroic witches and wizards are found dead in their homes. Sometimes entire families simply disappear. The Death Eaters are systematically wiping out any members of the Wizarding community who either openly oppose them or merely pose a threat to their ideals.

But almost worse than this overt terror is the fact that few of those who work for Voldemort do so openly. Most keep their identities hidden, and no individual ever claims responsibility for their crimes. They leave only their Dark Mark, the ghostly green skull and snake, drifting over the carnage they leave in their wake.

No one knows whom they can trust. Even witches and wizards who do not espouse Voldemort's pure-blood philosophy might be frightened or coerced into serving him, with threats against their persons, friends or families. Of those willing to risk such threats, some might yet be put under the Imperius curse and forced to comply, never even recalling the crimes they perpetrated in Voldemort's name.

Everyone is frightened. The Wizarding world appears to be heading down a dark path from which no return seems possible.

James appears to maintain his usual confidence. In a world where suddenly everyone is reluctant to make plans for the future, he marries Lily Evans, and they have a child together. But Sirius can see the uneasiness in James as well.

With growing alarm, Sirius watches the progression of events. Late into her pregnancy, Lily is cornered by Death Eaters. She and James make a narrow escape. At first, it seems a random attack on a wizard couple who are clearly on good terms with

Dumbledore, but as the Potters are targeted a second and third time after the birth of their son, it becomes clear that they are being hunted.

Sirius is terrified for his friends and tiny godson, but is powerless to do anything to stop the attacks. Voldemort and his followers always seem to know where the Potters are and when they are alone. Dumbledore tells James -- and James confides to Sirius -- that he knows why the Dark Lord has taken a special interest in the Potter family, but he cannot reveal the reason just yet. Dumbledore also suggests that someone among the Potters' close circle of friends and family, willing or not, may be passing information to Voldemort.

Sirius is stricken by this idea. He knows it's not himself, obviously. He can't imagine that it's Peter, with his timid nature and hero-worship of James. Besides, Peter has been increasingly absent from their little get-togethers lately. James's father, a Ministry Auror like his son, was killed in the line of duty the previous year, and his mother had been found dead in their home, beneath a smoky green skull. Lily has not spoken to her sister since their parents were killed in an automobile accident during seventh year.

And that only leaves Remus. Remus, who is a quick liar and a natural keeper of secrets. His lycanthropy. His relationship with Sirius. These things are known only to their closest friends, and only because he wishes them to know. Sirius has seen him turn

his easy, charming smile on others -- watched the suspicion fade from their eyes.

But it can't be Remus, can it? Sirius is sure he knows him as well as one person can know another, and if there were a treacherous bone in Remus's body, he would surely know about it. However, Sirius cannot deny that as the situation has worsened in the Wizarding world, Remus has slowly but surely been withdrawing into himself.

He barely speaks to anyone, even Sirius, and has become jumpy and nervous. Every now and then, Sirius catches Remus giving him a long, appraising look, quickly shifted once he realises Sirius has seen him doing so. He is increasingly absent as well. Sometimes he mumbles briefly to Sirius about his missions for Dumbledore and the Order, but more often than not, he goes without a word, and returns days or even weeks later, with no explanation.

Sirius is busy too, of course, but the Ministry and the Order together make less use of him than Dumbledore does of Remus. He cannot bear to think, though, that Remus might be the traitor. It's too painful. He considers the possibility, instead, that maybe Remus is seeing someone else, but that is little better. Besides, Sirius would be able to smell that sort of infidelity on him in his canine form. Best not to think about it at all.

And then James comes to him in October with an idea straight

from Dumbledore, which should, in theory, keep Lily, Harry and himself safe. Only James, with his wicked sense of humour, can't resist adding his own twist to the idea. They need a friend to keep the secret of their location. Everyone knows how close James and Sirius are; they will assume it is him. But it will be Peter. The perfect bluff.

Sirius catches James's excitement while his friend is there, but once he leaves, the implication of the plan hits Sirius full force. If James is confiding this plan in Sirius, then he doesn't suspect him. And if he is using Peter to put the plan into action, then he can't suspect Peter. That has to mean that James thinks Remus is the guilty party, and James would never think such a thing without good reason, even if he has told Sirius not to worry. Perhaps Dumbledore has told him something.

By the time Remus returns that evening, Sirius has managed to convince himself that he must be the traitor. He doesn't ask where Remus has been, and Remus doesn't volunteer the information. He's only been gone for the afternoon this time, and has returned with bags. Perhaps he's just been shopping. Or maybe shopping is simply a convenient excuse to get out of the house and secretly pass on information on the Potters.

Sirius wonders what the Death Eaters have offered him. Maybe they have some Dark spell which can cure or control lycanthropy. Sirius doesn't know if there is any such thing. His research has never turned anything up. But then, he has never

delved very deeply into the Dark Arts.

As the evening draws on and the silence stretches between them, Sirius begins to formulate subtly pointed questions that he could ask to draw Remus out. But when he tries to implement them, they fall short.

"Where have you been?"

"Out."

"What did you do?"

"Had to get some stuff."

The conversation trails off.

As the sun sets, they go about making a silent supper, not touching one another. After the meal, Sirius goes to do the washing up, but Remus stops him with a hand on his arm, then pulls back his hand a bit too quickly.

"I -- I'll do that," he says. "You can go and" He turns towards the sink, not bothering to finish the sentence.

Unexpectedly, anger flares in Sirius, and he storms off to the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. He picks up an empty mug from the bedside table and hurls it against the door, where

it smashes noisily.

That was a mistake, he thinks. Now Remus will come. He doesn't really want to deal with Remus right now. Maybe he should have gone out instead of hiding in the bedroom. Well, too late now.

Only Remus doesn't come. Sirius listens for him at first, but there is no sign that Remus is coming to investigate the noise. Maybe he's gone out again. No, Sirius can still hear the water running in the kitchen. Sirius flops onto the bed and stares angrily at the ceiling.

Well, fuck him! He's a stupid bastard anyway. And maybe he is the one selling out James and Lily. James thinks so. It must be him. Fucking traitor. He deserves ... something. Something bad. One day I'll think of something bad enough and he'll deserve it. Maybe I should just leave.

But he knows he can't leave. Sirius has only known two ways of living: life with his family, and life with Remus. In wartime, when life is uncertain, there is a tendency to cling to the familiar. He doesn't want to be without Remus, whatever Remus may be.

Besides, he rationalises, someone needs to be here to keep an eye on him. I have to protect James and Lily and Harry. It's up to me.

When Remus comes to bed an hour later, Sirius is still angry, still staring at the ceiling, determined to find a way to punish Remus for what he must be doing.

Remus steps over the broken chunks of ceramic scattered over the floor, undresses, gets into bed, and shuts off the light, turning away from Sirius. The full moon was less than a week ago, and it seems to be taking him an unusually long time to recover this time. He doesn't say anything to Sirius as they lie in the dark.

After a while, Sirius gets up and undresses as well. He lies in bed, staring at Remus's back in the dim light of the Muggle street lamps that filters through their thin curtains. He can tell from the set of Remus's shoulders and from his breathing that he is not asleep.

Sirius has a sudden and overwhelming urge to make Remus feel something -- say something. Their life has become grey with silence and suspicion. He longs to just come out and say, *Damn it, Remus! What the hell is going on?!* But he can't make his mouth form the words.

Instead, he says it with his body. He presses up against Remus's back, hot and angry and insistent, accusing and demanding at once. *Prove your innocence*, his body irrationally demands. *Prove you're still Remus, and that this hasn't all been a lie to go along with your other lies -- a way to hide and protect yourself.*

Remus doesn't resist -- doesn't move at all, as Sirius uses him hard for long minutes. Neither of them makes a sound, apart from Sirius's harsh breathing and a brief, choked sob as he comes. Afterwards, he turns away without a word and tries to make himself fall asleep quickly.

If he dreams of a boy werewolf crying quietly so that none of his roommates will hear him, he does not remember it when he wakes.

Sirius shivered in his cell in Azkaban, lost to his memories which the Dementors artfully manipulated to achieve the most delicious emotional responses from their victim. Despair, helplessness, and especially heartbreak were their favourite meal. Sirius didn't even see them anymore. As soon as they approached, he entered a dreamlike state, peopled with a terrible combination of his own memories and finely-crafted nightmares.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DINNER AT THE HOLLOW

Some memories required less alteration than others to delight the Azkaban guards.

James and Lily have invited their friends to dinner at their home in Godric's Hollow. Sirius's impression of the dinner itself is shadowy and dreamlike. Tension, stilted conversations, no smiles. The meal is punctuated by the wailing of little Harry.

Remus sits next to Sirius wearing that jumper that hugs his torso and the jeans that accentuate his arse, and it's not food Sirius is hungry for. *Damn it*, he thinks for the dozenth time that day, *why must I want him, when he's the reason everything is so horribly wrong right now?* And yet he keeps imagining taking Remus aside into a darkened corner, crushing his mouth in a kiss and forcing him back onto their side.

Sirius is angry with himself for thinking such things. Remus deserves to be punished, not kissed and touched and stoked and licked and *No, I mustn't even think it!* Sirius shifts uncomfortably in his chair, trying to think instead about the fact that it smells like Harry is due for a nappy change, in hopes that that will cool him off.

He thinks about the perfection of James's plan. It has to work. Even Remus will think Sirius is the Secret-Keeper. He's

probably just waiting until the spell is done to make his move. Then he'll knock Sirius on the head and drag him to Voldemort. But Sirius won't have the secret, and Peter will have all the time he needs to hide. It's brilliant. Well, maybe it will result in the infuriated Dark Lord blasting him out of existence, but then he can die laughing in Remus's stupid, lying, traitorous face.

The thought fails to give him any joy, and again he glances at Remus out of the corner of his eye. *Remus ... so beautiful Fuck!* He wishes he could stab the part of his brain that keeps thinking these things with a fork.

After the meal, Remus takes Harry out to the garden. Sirius wonders if this is a wise thing to allow him to do, but James and Lily do not seem worried. Lily goes to the bedroom for a bit of a lie-down, and James, Peter and himself gather in the kitchen. The time has come at last for action.

Together, James and Sirius explain the Fidelius Charm and his place in the plan to Peter. If Peter agrees, the spell will be cast tomorrow, and only the three of them will know about the switch. Even Lily will be left in the dark until later. It isn't long before Peter is as excited about the plan as James is. James always comes up with the best plans and pranks. Even in their school days. Sirius wishes he had thought of this one first.

Something is wrong, though. When James goes to take Harry from Remus and say goodbye, there is a depth of emotion in his

voice that even the trickster James Potter could never fake. Surely a sincere smile and a warm handshake or embrace should be enough to convince Remus that he is still a trusted member of their circle? So why the heartfelt "thank you"? Even the look of regret does not quite match what one would expect from a man looking upon someone who was once a friend, but no longer.

Sirius receives a grin and a conspiratorial wink in parting.

All the way home, James's parting words to Remus bother him. In a bout of paranoia, he takes Peter -- who has seen them home before going his own way -- aside, to make arrangements to check up on him in a few days, and make sure he is all right. Peter agrees with a reassuring smile. He's going to go into hiding as a rat in London. He tells Sirius where to meet him, five days hence on Halloween.

That night, Sirius cannot sleep. Upset to the point of tears, Remus points out to him what it has taken until now for Sirius to realise: that the Potters must remain hidden until the danger passes, and who knows how long that may be? Sirius desperately wishes that he had taken the opportunity to talk to James about his suspicions regarding Remus. Now it is too late, and all he can think of are all the important things assumed and left unsaid.

In the days that follow, less and less makes sense. Remus begins talking to him more often. He suggests going into hiding, to

protect Sirius and the Potters' secret with him. And Remus is always there. During that time, he never leaves the house, except to go to the shops, and then he asks Sirius to come with him. It is as though he is afraid that, if he lets Sirius out of his sight, something will happen.

Surely if he were going to deliver Sirius to Voldemort, he would make some excuse to get away for a few hours or make contact with someone. But Sirius can account for all of Remus's time during that week. It is baffling.

Sirius's feeling of unease continues to grow as Remus becomes more openly affectionate and physical than he has been in months. Something is not right. Remus talks about how much he misses James and Lily, and how wonderful it will be when this dreadful war is over, and everything can get back to normal. There is genuine longing in his eyes.

On Halloween, Remus spends all day working on an elaborate anniversary dinner, but Sirius is twitchy. He needs to get away, just for a little while, and make sure Peter is all right. Once he assures himself of that, he will be able to relax, he is sure.

Sirius looks up from where he's sitting, to see Remus, head bent over his masterpiece, hair falling in his eyes, the tip of his tongue just barely sticking out of the corner of his mouth. His chest feels tight.

It can't be Remus, he realises. Never Remus. The only thing Remus ever wanted was to be loved, and Voldemort can't give him that. He has accepted his lycanthropy and learned to live with it. He would not trade in the lives of his friends for a normal life for himself. No more than Sirius himself would trade them in for -- anything, really. There is nothing he wants that badly. No more would Peter trade them in for

Peter's deepest desire is for safety, closely followed by popularity. Sirius tries to imagine what would happen if someone ruthless enough got to Peter, and threatened him. Or offered him some measure of prestige. Or both. A cold feeling washes over Sirius's midsection.

He stands, the scraping of his chair drawing Remus's eyes to him. For a moment, he stares at Remus, as if trying to memorise his features, as if he hasn't long ago. Remus looks puzzled. Sirius strides across the kitchen, grabs Remus by the shoulders and kisses him hard, pressing against him in silent promise. *I am going to fix this. I'll be back soon, and when I do, everything will be all right.* He bites Remus's lip, tasting blood, then turns towards the door, muttering about getting the wine.

As he revs up his motorbike, his mind is racing. Peter was always the one who had cracked under pressure from Filch and confessed everything when offered a lighter punishment, whereas James, Remus and Sirius himself had always accepted the dire consequences of their actions when caught, rather than

implicate their partners in crime. True, it rarely resulted in getting anyone out of trouble, but it was the principle of the thing.

Of all of them, Peter is the only one who might conceivably cave to Voldemort of his own accord. And Sirius has let James make him their Secret-Keeper. He has left the Potters in terrible danger. It may be too late even now. No. He can't think that.

He is halfway to his rendezvous point with Peter before he realises where he is going. If Peter is there, Sirius is going to beat the shit out of him until he gets some answers. But what will he do if Peter isn't there?

He'll go to the Hollow. If he can't see the house when he gets there, then everything is fine. He has read up on the Fidelius Charm, and he knows it involves two people: the Secret-Keeper and the one who lives in the hidden dwelling. This charm will be as much attached to James as to Peter. If James is OK, then the spell will still be in place. If he's not

His motorbike touches down in a narrow, grubby Muggle alley. He's not meant to meet Peter here for another half hour, but surely if Peter is hiding here in his rodent form, he'll see Sirius and attract his attention. The minutes crawl by and Peter does not appear. Sirius prowls the alley, sometimes on two legs, sometimes as Padfoot, nervously flickering between forms.

When the second hand of his silver pocketwatch ticks across the appointed time, Sirius knows he cannot wait a second longer. Peter is not here, which means something has gone seriously wrong. Either Peter is the traitor as Sirius suspects, or Peter is in danger. Either possibility means the same thing in the end: the Potters are not safe.

The engine of Sirius's bike roars into life and he pushes it to its limits, hoping against hope that he will not be too late.

The sun has long since set by the time he catches sight of the winking lights of Godric's Hollow, but he doesn't need light to see the thick cloud of smoke rising over the sleepy little village and blotting out the stars.

It isn't the Dark Mark, but the sight of it still chills Sirius Black to the core of his being. It is not a good sign, he knows. He tries very hard not to see anything or make any assumptions until he's on the ground, but the smoking rubble which only a week before had been his friends' home is hard to miss.

Ignoring the possibility that danger might still be lurking, Sirius runs towards the remains of the house.

"James! Lily!" he shouts, refusing to accept what must be the truth.

A leg protrudes from under a collapsed wall where the kitchen

would have been.

"James!" he cries. "Hang on, mate! Don't move! I'll get you out." At first, he tries to lift the wall with his own strength, but he's not strong enough. He draws his wand and desperately shouts, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Slowly, the wall raises, and he casts it to one side with a flick of his wand before falling to his knees beside the body of his best friend. James's blue eyes are wide and staring, a look of shock permanently etched on his face. His body is bruised and bloodied, and the collapsing wall has broken his nose.

Sirius takes his friend's cold hand in his own and weeps. "James! James, I'm sorry! It was Peter. I should have known. I shouldn't have let you make anyone but me your Secret-Keeper. And now you wouldn't be" But he can't say it. Not yet.

As his voice trails off, he becomes aware for the first time of a sound -- constant, high-pitched -- hanging over the ruins of the house. The wailing cry of an infant.

White with shock, Sirius stands, looking around frantically.

"Harry! Harry!" he cries, knowing the baby won't answer. He begins desperately combing the rubble for the source of the cries. "Please be all right, Harry. Please, God, let him be all right ..." he prays over and over again.

He finds Lily's body before he finds the baby, but he can see there's no helping her any more than James. He touches her cheek and sheds a tear in passing before stepping over her into the remains of Harry's nursery.

His cot has collapsed in, a portion of it shielding him from larger pieces of falling wreckage. Sirius tears away the broken pieces of the bed and sweeps the baby up into his arms, clutching him against his shoulder, eyes shut tight with relief.

"Thank God!" he whispers. "Hush, Harry. You're all right. Uncle Padfoot has you. You're safe."

He holds Harry out at arm's length, just to make sure of the truth of his words. The baby has a nasty-looking gash on his forehead, and blood has matted in the tufts of his black hair, but he seems to be otherwise unharmed.

Sirius sits down amid the wreckage, crooning softly to Harry and rocking him gently. It's too late to help James and Lily, and at this moment, nothing in the world is more pressing than quieting the fears of the infant who now has only Sirius himself and Remus to care for him in all the world.

It is a chilly autumn night, and Sirius leans to free a blanket from beneath a pile of crumbled plaster and broken toys. His eye falls upon the toy Snitch he and Remus gave Harry last

Christmas. He tucks the blanket careful around Harry, then picks up the toy and shows it to him.

Harry's cries are beginning to trail off, and when he sees the favourite toy, he stops with a hiccough, looking uncertain.

Sirius smiles fondly at the boy. "That's right Harry. We'll take your Snitch, and we'll go to Uncle Padfoot and Uncle Moony's house. Do you want to fly on Uncle Padfoot's bike?"

The baby's eyes light up. "Fie?" He has ridden with Sirius a number of times before, shrieking with delight from his carrying pouch strapped to his godfather's chest.

"Yes, Harry. We're going to fly to London tonight. It's a long way, but Uncle Moony will be pleased to know you're all right."

"Moooooony!" crows the baby, clapping his fat little hands together.

Sirius is just standing up when he hears crunching footsteps on the gravel path in the garden. He spins around, clutching the baby to his shoulder with one arm and drawing his wand with the other.

"Who's there?" his voice is hoarse in his throat.

"All righ' Sirius. It's on'y me," says Hagrid. The big man's face is

red and tear-streaked. He is fond of James and Lily, too.

"What are you doing here, Hagrid?" Sirius asks.

"Dumbledore sent me," Hagrid says uncertainly. "To fetch Harry."

"Oh," Sirius says in surprise. He doesn't stop to wonder how Dumbledore knows what has happened. Dumbledore always knows. *Except about Peter. He didn't know that.* "But Hagrid, I'm his godfather. Harry should come with me."

"Dumbledore's orders," Hagrid shrugs sorrowfully. "Says I'm to take the baby to him. He's to live with his aunt and uncle in Surrey."

"Aunt and uncle?" It takes Sirius a moment to realise to whom Hagrid is referring. His mouth drops open in horror. "Not that sister of Lily's! Those *Muggles*? They'll never treat him properly! He's better off with me and Remus."

"You'll have to take that up with Dumbledore," Hagrid insists stubbornly. "Give Harry to me, Sirius."

Tears are slipping down Sirius's cheeks. James and Lily dead, and now Harry is being taken from him as well. The Dursleys will never let them visit Harry.

This is all Peter's fault. Fury flares white-hot in his chest, burning the tears out of him. "All right," he says. "You take him, Hagrid. I have something to attend to."

He gives Harry a final hug, whispering to him, "I'll be looking out for you, Harry. Your Uncle Padfoot won't abandon you to those Muggles."

As he hands the baby over to Hagrid, he says, "Take my bike. I won't be needing it."

Hagrid nods his thanks and bids him farewell. Sirius watches his favourite possession and its precious cargo disappear into the night sky. It is only when they have gone that he realises that he is still holding the toy Snitch.

Sirius searches the wreckage, trying his best to avoid looking at his friends' bodies, until he manages to uncover James's prized racing broom, somehow miraculously undamaged.

He is amazed at how clear his mind is. He has to find Peter, and the broom will be the easiest way. The Marauders seem to have an extra sense when it comes to locating one another, and he can use that sense to guide the broom more easily than he could have on his bike.

He knows he'll have to go to Remus soon and tell him what's happened, but the thought of Remus's reaction to the news is too

awful to contemplate, and so he puts it off.

As the broom carries him over fields, pastures and villages, heading ever southwards, grey dawn begins to tinge the horizon. By the time he is over the city, it is light enough to see the suburban houses gradually giving way to office buildings and shops.

Peter is near. He can sense him. He touches down in an empty street and turns a corner to find a dozen or so vendors setting up their stalls for a street market. As he goes about, asking them one by one if they have seen a short, blond man, or maybe any rats in the street that morning, customers begin to trickle in. No one has seen anyone matching either of Peter's descriptions.

He begins searching dark corners and alleys. Muggles are giving him wary looks, wondering if he's mad. *They're not far wrong.* But he can find no sign of the traitor until --

"Sirius Black," calls a voice.

He looks up. There, standing not ten metres from him, in the middle of the crowded marketplace, is Peter Pettigrew. He looks frightened, and there is a manic gleam in his eyes. His hair is tousled and his clothing ruffled, as if he has slept in it.

Sirius is startled by his sudden appearance, so much that, before he can reply, Peter is speaking again. "James and Lily!" he cries.

"You killed them, Sirius! How could you?"

Sirius stares at him, mouth open in shock. "How could I ...?" The implication of Peter's accusation suddenly dawns on him. "Why, you little ..." he begins, drawing his wand.

But he is too slow. Before he can so much as think of an appropriate hex, there is a flash of green light and a sound like a thunderclap. Sirius is half blinded by the explosion, but doesn't miss the rat scurrying away from the crater in the street, and down into the sewers.

Sirius is still frozen in shock. All around him, Muggles are screaming. There's blood everywhere.

I don't believe it, Sirius thinks. The Fidelius Charm. The Secret-Keeper switch. Letting me find him. Making a big, visible scene. He planned it all. No one knows it was him, and no one knows he's an Animagus. They're all going to think it was me! Even Remus doesn't know.

All at once the lack of sleep, the constant stress, the overwhelming tragedy of the day, and the shock of the situation hits him. He begins to laugh uncontrollably. He finds the whole thing suddenly, horribly and unbearably *funny*. People are staring at him in fear and anger as hysterical sobs of laughter bubble between his lips.

He is still laughing when Magical Law Enforcement arrives. He doesn't even try to resist as they bind him with handcuffs and spells and take his wand from his fingers.

But when they turn him to take him to the waiting Ministry van, the laughter dies on his lips. Kneeling on the pavement, no more than twenty metres away, is Remus. His face is dead white -- *Like James*, the thought comes to Sirius's mind unbidden -- denial is shining from his eyes, and his mouth is open in a silent cry.

Now Sirius tries to struggle -- tries to get away from these Ministry stooges and go to Remus -- take his face between his hands and tell him the truth, because nothing else matters now so long as Remus knows he's innocent. Remus will believe him. He has to!

But the spells bind him too tightly to struggle now, and he can't go to Remus, and Remus does not come to him. Their eyes remain locked until the van door closes, and Sirius does not see Remus again.

CHAPTER NINE AWAKENING

Rejection by his family, quarrels and betrayal from his friends, especially Remus, his own stupid mistakes, and the dead faces of his loved ones. These were the memories which haunted Sirius in Azkaban Prison. There were other, smaller ones, but these, the worst, were by far the most frequent.

Sometimes the memories were confused, and he found Remus and little Harry among the dead in Godric's Hollow. Sometimes he *had* been the Secret-Keeper after all, and James and Lily had died anyway. Sometimes he killed them with his own bare hands, tears streaming down his cheeks, unable to stop himself. Sometimes baby Harry looked up from his arms with accusing green eyes, and said, "You did this, Sirius. It's your fault I have no parents and have to live with Muggles who hate me."

And sometimes, both in the visions brought by the Dementors, and in his own terrible imaginings, he saw Remus take a steady stream of lovers to his bed, and afterwards, he would tell them he loved them, and that he had never loved anyone else before them. He despaired that he could not even remember Remus smiling and happy. Perhaps he never had been. Perhaps his life with Sirius had brought him nothing but misery, and he was glad to be rid of him.

It was unbearable. At first, Sirius accepted that what had

happened really was his fault, and that this, his life sentence in Azkaban, was his just punishment. But one night he woke from a dream of a rat sleeping in the sunlight, and he knew that this wasn't right. He hadn't killed James and Lily; he had made a mistake. Even James and Remus hadn't seen what Peter really was. How could it be right for Sirius to be here, suffering daily torments, while Peter got away with it, when his crimes had been intentional?

From that moment, a tiny seed was planted in Sirius's mind. "I'm innocent," it said. "I don't deserve this." Because it wasn't a happy thought, precisely, the Dementors had no power to take it from him, and he clung to it.

The truth will come out, he told himself nightly. Eventually, Peter will make a mistake -- he has to -- and someone will see. The truth must be told, and I have to be sane enough to tell it when they ask me.

Slowly, day by day, he began to gather together the shreds of his sanity, weaving them around the single idea of his own innocence. But he had been in Azkaban for nearly a year by this time, and it was slow work.

He remembered that he used to be able to turn himself into a dog. Maybe remembering how would give him a focus and help keep him sane. He would never have a wand again, but this was a kind of magic he could do without one. He was not without

some power.

It took months. Too many memories of Padfoot and how Sirius had become him were tied up in moments of joy, and he could not quite bring them to mind. Not without summoning the Dementors to him. But he could recall with some clarity the explanation of the change from *The History and Theory of the Animagus Transformation*, which he had had out from the Hogwarts library for nearly a year. The bare, boring text brought him no joy, and therefore no Dementors.

When at last he managed it, it was almost in his sleep. He lay on his bunk, exhausted from another day of torment and memories, longing for the remembered simplicity of his canine mind, when he slipped forms almost without noticing. It was only when his shackles slipped off his slender hind legs and clanked to the floor that his eyes popped open.

He turned his head, and sure enough, there was the familiar, shaggy body. The fur was a bit matted and he was a bit thinner than he had been, but he was Padfoot again. He barely suppressed a bark of joy.

Rising unsteadily to his feet, he jumped from the bunk down to the floor of the cell and stretched, then shook himself thoroughly. He paused to scratch behind his ear and to think about what this rediscovered ability would mean.

It was doubtful that the Dementors would see the change. Sirius was not even certain they had eyes. They would be able to sense a change in his emotions, though. However, he didn't think they would consider that worth reporting. Probably everyone's emotions changed in this place when they went mad.

He would have to keep his form hidden from the house-elves, though, as well as the regular Ministry inspections. But so long as he could become Padfoot some of the time, that was enough for him, for now. He jumped back onto the bed, pulled the blanket up with his teeth until it covered him completely, and, with a contented sigh, went to sleep.

* * *

It didn't take him long to discover a significant side benefit to his transformation.

The next day, as he felt the cold that preceded a visit from the Dementors, he transformed in fear. Right away, he noticed two things. First, that while the cold decreased with the addition of fur to his body, the scent of the Dementors came to him more sharply; a musty, cold, mildewed sort of smell.

The second thing he noticed was that his fear decreased sharply. While he still felt strongly inclined to retreat to the far corner of his cell and curl up in the shadows, he no longer lost all control over his mind. His doggy thoughts were not subject to the

Dementors' power in the same way as his human thoughts were. The Dementors, for their part, seemed disappointed, and did not stay for as long as they usually did.

Sirius immediately began to use this information to his advantage. He spent the vast majority of his time as a dog, changing to a man and slipping his feet back into his shackles only when he knew he was due for a visit from the Azkaban house-elves, or when he heard the ringing sound of human footfalls within the prison fortress.

The days passed, long and grey, with no way to mark the passage of time, save the length of the daylight which shone through his tiny cell window, and the waxing and waning of the moon in the night sky.

He was always aware of the moon. He did not mark the passage of days on his cell wall, and some prisoners do, but each full moon not spent with Remus was scratched into the wall and etched into his heart. On those nights, he never slept. He simply sat in the tiny patch of light, the moon glinting off his thick fur, unmoving, unblinking, until he could no longer see the shining orb.

When grey dawn tinged the sky once more, he would sigh and transform, as he knew Remus was doing, somewhere out there in the world beyond the walls. Then he would climb wearily onto his bunk, pull the thin blanket over himself, and whisper,

"It's all right, Moony; it's over now."

He desperately hoped that Remus had someone there to care for him by now, at the same time as the jealousy ate away at him. It was on the full moon nights that he cursed Peter most of all. He often fell asleep imagining rodent bones snapping between canine teeth.

* * *

Slowly, the moon marks marched their way unevenly across the wall of the cell. Sirius knew the years were passing, but could not quite fathom how quickly or slowly. Day and night, summer and winter, all seemed to blend together.

When it began to become difficult for him to remember how to turn back into a human, he knew he must stay a man for some time, or remain a dog forever.

During these days and weeks of humanity, when the Dementors weren't present to feed off him, he tried to imagine Harry. How old would he be now? What was he learning? What was important to him? Was there anyone in his life who cared for him? He counted the moons to try to figure out how old Harry was now. Six. Or maybe seven. He wasn't sure of the accuracy of his count.

In a few years, Harry would be starting at Hogwarts. If there was

no one kind and good in his life now, perhaps he would find them there. Sirius fervently hoped so. He wondered what House Harry would be in. Both his parents had been Gryffindors, of course, but that was no guarantee, especially when Harry was being raised by those horrible Muggles.

Sirius wondered if he would ever see Harry, and how old he would be when he finally did. Perhaps Harry would be a grown man by then. In his mind, Harry looked a lot like James. But if Harry was still a boy when Sirius was freed, well, Sirius would see what he could do about claiming custody. Once the truth was told, Harry would believe, wouldn't he? He would want to come live with his Uncle Sirius. And maybe Remus

But as soon as his thoughts went in that direction, the Dementors were there, reminding him of why he would never leave this place, why Remus hated him, why Harry would never believe him.

And thus passed the years for Sirius Black.

* * *

He had succeeded in being Padfoot solidly for a week, hiding beneath his blanket whenever the house-elves arrived with food or a change of clothes, and so he was relatively well-rested on that morning when he awoke to the sound of muffled human voices from somewhere within the fortress. He pricked up his

ears, prepared to shift forms if they came his way.

Recognising one of the voices, he growled, deep in his throat. He listened, as Padfoot, for as long as he could, only slipping on his shackles and changing when the iron door at the end of his own corridor clanged open. He stood, ready to face whomever was coming.

Sure enough, he recognised one of the men. It was that Cornelius Fudge character. The one who had so blithely informed him, years before, that he was going to be sent to Azkaban without trial. Only now, around his neck, he bore the medallion of the Minister for Magic on official business.

Sirius's dislike of Fudge, coupled with his week-long respite from the attention of the Dementors, caused a feeling to well up within his breast that was at once familiar and strange: cockiness. At one time, it had been debatable whether Sirius or James was the cockiest boy at Hogwarts, but it was an emotion Sirius hadn't felt since coming to Azkaban.

Fudge seemed startled to see Sirius standing in his cell, fixing him with a clear-eyed look.

"Minister," Sirius greeted him, bowing mockingly.

"Black," Fudge replied, as if the name tasted foul upon his tongue.

"How pleasant it is to receive such distinguished visitors on so fine a morning!" Sirius declared, delighting in the inspection team's discomfort.

"Yes, well, humph ..." said Fudge uncomfortably.

Sirius's eye fell upon a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in the Minister's hand. If he could just get a look at it, he could learn a little about what was going on in the world outside, and at the very least, he would know how long he had been in here.

He smiled, stepping closer to the bars and exposing all his teeth as the inspection team fell back in horror. "I wonder, Minister," Sirius said in a voice at once both bored and charming, "if you've finished with that newspaper, might I relieve you of it?" He yawned theatrically. "It's just so *boring* here, and I do so miss doing the crossword." He blinked winsomely, in the way that had always made Remus laugh.

"Er ... well ... I suppose," Fudge began, looking startled. "I -- er -- don't see how it could do any harm" His hand trembled slightly as he extended the paper between the bars of the cell.

Sirius snatched it quickly enough to make every wizard present reach for his wand, and then grinned about toothily, making sure to make eye contact with each of them.

"I thank you," he said, bowing once again to the Minister. "I do hope you find my humble home up to standards. I must say, the food is excellent, and the service is without compare. And as for the social aspect" But the inspection team was already hurrying away down the corridor, casting nervous glances over their shoulders. "Toodle pip, everyone!" Sirius called after them, waving gaily through the bars.

Only when the iron door had clanged shut behind them did Sirius sink onto his bunk and actually look at the paper. He knew the system. It would be at least an hour before the inspection team left and the Dementors would have free reign over the corridors again.

The first thing he checked was the date. *5 August 1993*. He had been in Azkaban nearly a dozen years! And that would make him ... thirty-three years old. Not a young man any longer, though he felt much older.

His eyes scanned down the page, tongue stumbling as he read out loud his first words in almost a dozen years. Though the stories were mostly boring reports on the latest news from the Office of International Magical Cooperation, and what was up these days with at the Ministry (not much), he hungrily read every word, slowly at first, and then with increasing speed and he remembered the rhythm of it, drinking in the pictures.

By anyone else's measure, it was a slow news day, but to Sirius

Black, nothing seemed sweeter. He turned the page to read the latest Quidditch scores with delight, and was halfway through the third page, when his eyes stopped dead on a picture of a large family standing in front of a pyramid.

For a moment, he could hardly breathe. *No. It can't be!* But it was. Softly at first, and then gradually increasing in volume, a growl sounded in his throat, and then Sirius Black threw back his head and howled.

CHAPTER TEN

FREEDOM

For the first time in a dozen years, Sirius began to believe in a divine Benevolence overseeing the universe. Or at least a higher power with a sense of humour. He couldn't believe his luck. Not only had Peter let himself be seen, but he had let himself be photographed by the *Daily Prophet* in the very edition which, by divine good fortune, Sirius held in his hand. Well, for all Sirius knew, Peter could have put out his own swimsuit calendar and appeared in every edition of the *Daily Prophet* for the past five years.

He squinted at the text beneath the photo in the dim light. Peter was living with the Weasley family, it seemed, as the pet of one of the children. What little colour he had drained from his face as a word jumped out of the caption at him. Hogwarts. Of course all the children went to Hogwarts. But Harry was at Hogwarts. And that meant Harry was in danger.

Sirius had heard the mad mutterings of some of his fellow inmates. He knew of course that Voldemort had fallen on the night James and Lily had died, and that Harry had been at the centre of that mystery. There were two people hated above all others by Voldemort's followers: Harry Potter, and the one who had sent Voldemort to Godric's Hollow on that night.

The deranged murmurs did not seem to suggest, however, that

Voldemort was dead. No, he was still out there somewhere, waiting. Peter's one chance to live his life in human form again would be to deliver Harry to Voldemort as a show of good faith. Without Harry, Peter's human form would only earn him a life sentence in Azkaban at best, or a slow and painful death at the hands of Voldemort's followers, at worst.

And now Peter was there at Hogwarts with Harry, just waiting for the moment to act, and no one knew. Unless Remus had seen this paper. Remus might recognise Peter. But no, Sirius had only seen because of his desire to soak up every detail of this brief glimpse of the outside world.

It was up to him to protect Harry. But how? He shifted form and paced the cell, trying to think human thoughts in dog form.

He would have to escape. That was all there was to it. But no one had ever escaped from Azkaban before, to his knowledge. *Well, no one has ever stayed sane after twelve years in this place before either, he thought with a bark of laughter. Sane. If you can call me that.*

He knew instinctively that, if he was going to manage an escape, the plan would have to centre around his Animagus ability. It was the only advantage he had over the other mad fools in this place. He was going to have to be as clearheaded and cunning as he had ever been, as well. There was no room for error, and he wasn't going to get more than one chance, if he even got that.

The first trick was going to be to get them to open his cell door. house-elves came in to clean the cells only very occasionally, since most of the Azkaban upkeep could be done by magic. Besides, he could not transform in front of the house-elves without at once blowing his cover and causing an almighty kerfuffle to which the Ministry would be alerted immediately.

He was going to have to think of a way to get the Dementors to open his cell. They were blind and could not detect the difference in his form; only that of his mind and emotions. But how to entice the Dementors to unlock the cell?

He shivered, already knowing the answer -- wishing there were some other way, and knowing there was not. The black-clad guards of Azkaban had come into his cell in the past on a few occasions.

In his first year in the prison, he had naively tried to cloak himself in happy memories, hoping to keep the cold horror and dread of the place at bay. He had tried to call to mind the colour of Remus's eyes and the shape of his smile, the sound of his laugh and the taste of his lips. But such memories proved elusive, and only served to summon the Dementors to him, and they would throng in close, sating themselves on those happy recollections before he himself could touch them.

Eventually he learned to discipline his mind somewhat. For

more than ten years he had done his best not to think about Remus at all. He was not uniformly successful, of course, but he had learned to shy quickly away from the more pleasant recollections.

Remus. Thoughts of Remus would be enough to bring the Dementors into his cell. But would he be able to summon the presence of mind to transform with those horrors crowded in close around him?

He had to try. Quaking with dread, every muscle in his body clenched, he set about removing the lock on the door inside his head labeled "Remus John Lupin".

At first, nothing came. *It's been too long*, he thought despairingly. *I've forgotten too much*. But then, before his closed eyes, he saw a pair of long-lashed hazel eyes gazing back at him. Hazel eyes, their corners crinkled with laughter, and below them a grin tinged with just a touch of wickedness, which only Sirius ever got to see. Sunlight filtering through honey-brown hair. The curving shadow of a collarbone glimpsed within a casually unbuttoned shirt collar. Warm, calloused fingers brushing against his throat

When the cold closed in, making the breath catch in his throat, he tried to ignore it at first. He gritted his teeth when his mind tried to shy away, and ruthlessly forced himself to think about tracing the scars on warm, pale skin which shivered beneath his

touch.

He could hear the rattling breath of the Dementors in the passage outside his cell, and the anguished cries of his fellow inmates up and down the corridor, but he pushed them from his mind. Instead, he focused all his attention on recalling Remus's soft voice. "You smell like chocolate, Padfoot," he said with a soft laugh.

A heavy iron key scraped in a rusty lock, and Sirius unclenched his jaw enough to say, "I love you, Remus." He opened his eyes. "Kiss me." Three Dementors stood between him and the open door to his cell, rapidly becoming obscured by white mist.

He looks down in front of him, to where Remus had been lying when his eyes were closed. Remus is still there, but pale as death, hazel eyes fixed and sightless. Sirius is standing amidst the wreckage of James and Lily's house in Godric's Hollow. Five open graves gape at his feet. "Put them in," says a cold voice behind him.

He spins around and sees a tall, silver-haired wizard with cold eyes and a cruel set to his mouth is standing with one arm around Peter, who has his wand trained on Sirius. "My Master said put them in, Sirius," says Peter, flicking his wand off to one side.

Sirius follows the wand with his eyes, and then he sees them.

James, Lily holding little Harry, and Remus, leaning back-to-back, heads lolling. Sirius picks up Harry in his arms. The baby's body is cold and inert. Gently, he lowers him into the smallest of the graves. It is harder work dragging James, Lily and Remus to their graves. At last, only one is empty.

"That's yours, mate," says Peter smugly. "Get in, already." Peter pokes him with his wand and Sirius falls backwards into the cold, dark earth. He is trapped. Peter is burying him alive. He has to escape. There's something he has to do, if only he can remember. He'll have to dig his way out. Dig in the earth, like a dog. With his paws. Paws?

With a yelp, he slipped forms, just as he felt icy breath against his face. A Dementor bent over him, its hood lowered and mouth gaping. It paused, apparently confused by the sudden change in its prey.

Sirius wasn't about to wait around for it to make up its mind. Gathering his feet under him, he dodged the creature's clutching grasp, skidded around the two other Dementors and slipped out into the passageway.

There, he paused, suddenly realising he was not just going to be able to avoid the guards. His paws were useless for opening heavy doors, and he could not risk transforming again inside the fortress, now that he was out of his cell. He was going to have to follow these foul creatures until he found a way out.

Sirius watched as the three Dementors drifted out of his cell, pressing himself against the cold stone wall as they passed, hackles raised, suppressing a growl. Dementors were not, so far as he knew, deaf. When they opened the door out of the corridor, he followed them on the silent feet for which he was named.

* * *

It took him less time than he had anticipated to find his way out of the fortress. If the Dementors could not recognise the prisoner Sirius Black in his canine emotions, they could certainly recognise that Sirius Black was no longer where he was supposed to be. They communicated in eerie silence, but their agitation was clear. Sirius knew they would be informing the Ministry of his disappearance shortly. He hadn't much time.

It seemed, however, that none of the usual Wizarding methods of communication suited the Dementors. They did not speak, so neither Floo powder nor fire-to-fire communication would work for them. Nor did they possess any owls; no living creature would go near a Dementor if it has a choice. They would have to send one of their number to the Ministry with the news.

Sirius followed them down dank stone steps and through endless identical corridors. He slunk in the shadows next to the walls, with every step fighting his canine instincts which told him to get as far away from the horrible cold things as possible.

At last they came to a corridor that smelled strongly of the sea. When the great iron door at the end creaked open and watery white sunlight poured through, Sirius lost his head. He bounded towards it, knocking over the Dementor which had opened the door and running right over the top of it, out into the misty, late morning sunlight.

He did not pause to bask, however, for he had seen the horizon for the first time in a dozen years, and knew what it meant. Freedom. He had to get there. Without hesitation, he plunged into the chilly waters of the North Sea, and began to paddle towards the distant coast of England.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ABSOLUTION

A lump of sodden black fur lay on the pebbled beach, spent and gasping. Sheer desperation had driven him through the cold waters when he might otherwise have slipped gratefully into oblivion with a bubbling sigh of relief, content in the knowledge that he died free. There was no strength left in him now, and even breathing was painful.

He lay for over an hour before the twin impetuses of the incoming tide and the setting sun forced him to legs shaking with exhaustion, to find a warmer resting place. He might have dried more easily without his fur, but he lacked the strength to change. Besides, he could not risk it until he knew where he was.

Just beyond the beach stood a small copse of trees, and he dragged his aching body towards it. Once in their shade, he discovered a small stream trickling back towards the sea, and collapsed gratefully next to it, plunging his salt-encrusted snout into the cool water. It tasted sweet on his tongue.

Somewhat restored, he raised his head and sniffed the air. It smelled of trees, young grains, and the lingering warmth of a summer evening. There were no humans nearby. It would be safe to sleep here. He stood, stretching his still-quivering legs, finally feeling strong enough to shake much of the sea water

from his fur.

He found a patch of summer grass at the foot of a tree, which still caught the last rays of the setting sun, and curled up on it with a sigh of contentment. Sleep was not long in coming.

* * *

He opened his eyes as the first rays of daylight filtered through the boards of the Shrieking Shack's windows. Slowly, still aching from Remus's harsh treatment of him the previous night, he crawled out from under the bed. He padded down the stairs, not knowing what he ought to do.

Remus was lying with his back to him on the cold floorboards in a corner where not even the weak rays of dawn sunlight had penetrated. Silently, Sirius turned around and padded back up the stairs, returning a moment later dragging the dusty comforter from the bed behind him. As a dog, he was too clumsy to properly cover Remus, so he changed from the relative safety of his Animagus form, tentatively tucking the ragged coverlet around the other boy.

He could tell from Remus's breathing that he was still deeply asleep. His lips were white and bloodless and there was a smear of blood on his neck and a troubled expression on his face. Helpless to know what to do, Sirius did as he always did; silently undressing and lifting the cover to offer his own warmth

to the other boy.

He put an arm around Remus, cradling him against his own body, and drifted off again, wondering if this would be the last time he would ever hold the other boy.

It was not long before he woke again to find Remus silently looking at him, eyes desolate, one tentative finger tracing the bruises on Sirius's arms. Sirius flinched involuntarily, and Remus drew his hand away.

Closing his eyes, Sirius drew a deep breath. "I -- I'm sorry, Moony. So sorry. What I did, telling Sniv -- Severus to come here. It was stupid. It was beyond stupid." He opened his eyes. Remus was still looking at him. "I don't expect -- not right away, anyway -- but maybe some day you might forgive --?"

"No!" Remus looked horrified.

"Oh," said Sirius, voice toneless with devastation. "Right. I understand. I -- I'll just go then"

He sat up and began to turn away. But there was Remus's hand on his arm, preventing him. He turned back to see Remus half sitting up and trembling with the effort, eyes bright with tears.

"No, Padfoot. I didn't mean -- all I meant was that you shouldn't be the -- the one apologising. I should. After what I did to

you" He took a deep, shaky breath. "Sirius -- Padfoot, I am so sorry."

"Moony, you don't have to apologise," Sirius said desperately. "It was my fault. And I'm sorry --"

But Remus shook his head, still looking down at the grey coverlet. "What I did to you -- I -- I was scared. I don't think that -- you know -- before Severus -- I don't think even I knew what the wolf was capable of. It scared me. I was afraid I'd -- afraid I'd hurt you." He looked up at last, eyes shining with tears. "I couldn't bear the thought of it. What I did to you last night -- I wasn't just trying to teach you a lesson. I wanted to hurt you. I was so angry -- so scared. I wanted to punish you, but I -- I also wanted to scare you away. So I wouldn't be able to hurt you anymore."

He reached out a tentative finger to brush a lock of hair out of Sirius's face. Sirius noticed that his hand was shaking, and he grabbed it and held it tight. "Moony, it's --" he began softly, but Remus interrupted.

"It was such an awful thing to do. I don't expect you to forgive me, Padfoot. Not -- not yet." He swallowed, looking away again. Sirius could feel his whole body trembling. "I just want you to understand. I know it was terrible, what I did. And I'm sorry," he finished lamely.

Sirius let go Remus's hand and reached down to draw back the blanket.

"What -- what are you doing?" cried Remus in a panicked voice.

"Hush, Moony," Sirius replied softly, lying down beside him. "I'm forgiving you."

Remus held his breath, not moving, as Sirius gently traced the marks on his body. The old, familiar scars first. Then the new ones, from last month's moon. And at last, the fresh marks, dark with dried blood.

"I love you, Remus," he said at last, hands coming to rest cupping the boy's face. "There is nothing you could possibly do that would hurt me enough to change that." He bent his head and kissed him softly on the mouth. When he drew back, Remus's eyes were closed. "Do you forgive me?" he asked softly.

"Oh, Padfoot! Of course --" his voice broke, and a tear leaked out from beneath his eyelid.

Sirius, alarmed by the degree of his trembling, gathered the young werewolf into his arms and held him close. Remus buried his face in Sirius's neck. "Hush, Moony. It's all right now. You can rest. Everything's going to be fine."

* * *

Sirius, clothes almost dry, gazed into the sky, pink with dawn, still caught halfway between dreaming and remembering. It had been Madam Pomfrey who had found them an hour later. Remus had blushed weakly and would not meet her eyes, but Sirius had done so defiantly, arms still tight around the other boy.

She had raised her eyebrows slightly, but all she had said was, "Come now, boys. Let's get you dressed and back up to the school. I expect you'll be wanting some proper rest." She had offered no challenge, nor had she ever mentioned it again. Poppy Pomfrey was nothing if not discreet.

But that wasn't important. What was important was the fact that Remus had forgiven him. Remus had loved him. In Azkaban, it had been nearly impossible to recall Remus smiling, happy, loving, until Sirius had almost been convinced that he had made the whole thing up. But out here, under the trees and the sky, he could remember. It had all been true. Some of it had been bad, surely, and Azkaban had played on those memories. But so much of it had been so good. How could he have forgotten?

As the world began to warm to another glorious summer day, he closed his eyes and simply let the memories wash over him, reveling in them as they came flooding back.

He recalled the Marauders, who had been the first people in all the world to accept Sirius for who he was, rather than what he

was. James Potter, his best friend, who had drawn out the sullen boy with patience and gentle teasing, and showed him that things like wealth and the purity of one's blood mattered far less than companionship and living life to the fullest, or the delicious rush of excitement that came from executing a finely-crafted prank.

And among the Marauders, he had also, quite unexpectedly, found love. Remus Lupin -- the first person in his life Sirius had cared for besides himself -- that calm and constant presence, patiently explaining, making sense of the chaotic world of adolescence, ever forgiving, ever loving. Sirius had always considered Remus the first great miracle of his life, from the exciting tingle in his belly in the days when he had come to realise and accept his true feelings, to the wonder and amazement when those feelings were returned, to the contentment and satisfaction of building a life together.

The second great miracle had come after he and his friends had left Hogwarts, unexpected in the midst of a dreadful war where there was so little good to cling to. The pride he had felt at being named godfather to the mysterious lump beneath Lily's dress rose within him once again. His hands moved involuntarily as he remembered how it had felt to hold that tiny, precious bundle for the first time. Harry had been less than an hour old, and Remus had still been breathlessly awaiting his turn with the baby.

Sirius reflected that now he had perhaps experienced the third

great miracle of his life: he was free. He had thought his life over when the doors of Azkaban had clanged shut behind him at the age of twenty-one. But it was not, and now he could start again, rebuilding the life left behind so long ago.

He shifted to Padfoot and stretched his muscles, still aching after yesterday's long swim. As he set off to discover where he was, birds sang in the trees around him and insects buzzed in the grass. For the first time in a very long time, it felt like a new day. He had people to find and his good name to clear, but for now the most pressing issue was the whereabouts of breakfast.

CHAPTER TWELVE

QUEST

It took much of the morning to orient himself and formulate a plan of action. England looked at once familiar and alien to him, he had been gone from it for so long. Padding through the coastal farmland, he saw few people and fewer road signs, and stopping to ask for directions with his faded, salt-soaked clothes and wild appearance was just not an option if he did not wish to draw attention to himself.

He knew of course from the copy of the *Daily Prophet* he had seen that it was nearly August. Hogwarts was not in session until September first. This gave him a few weeks before Harry was in real danger. What should he do first?

As he saw it, he had three options: he could try to find the Weasleys and Peter before term even started, he could see about finding Harry wherever he was now, or he could try to find Remus.

This was the first time since his escape that it had occurred to him that he was actually afraid to look for Remus. Having his happy memories back had been such a wonderful distraction that he had not until that moment considered that twelve years had passed, and while he had been counting the moons in Azkaban the rest of the world had been getting on with things. Remus might be with someone new. Or dead.

No. Sirius shied away from the idea. No, he's out there somewhere. And I'll find him. Just -- just not yet. He knew he was being cowardly, but he was not yet ready to have his memories, so newly regained, disrupted by the reality of the here and now.

So that left Harry or the Weasleys. And he had no idea where the Weasleys lived. They might still be in Egypt, for all he knew. Harry on the other hand

All he really knew was that Harry had been sent to live with Lily's sister and her family, and that had been many years ago. He remembered Surrey, and felt sure that if he saw the name of the town again, he would recognise it. Little ... something. And Lily's family had been just the sort of Muggles who dislike disruption and change. There was a very good chance that they were still there. It was just a question of getting there from here, wherever "here" was.

* * *

There were two advantages to traveling incognito as Padfoot, he learned. The first, which he already knew, was that his canine body tired less quickly and required fewer comforts. The second was that only two people alive knew that Padfoot and Sirius Black were one in the same. Of course he knew that as well, but

it was a couple of days before he realised how important this fact was.

Sirius had always been opposed to stealing. Too many of his own precious things had gone missing over the years, either pinched or through his own carelessness, and it was not always possible to tell just by looking at something what value it held for its owner. This meant he would not take anything along his journey that was not either freely given to him ("Nice doggy! Want summa my sammich?"), or clearly had been thrown away.

The second category included old newspapers. Of course the *Daily Prophet* was going to be hard to come by, but even Muggle newspapers could tell him something about the current state of the world.

What they told him on the second day startled a yelp from him: his own name gracing the front page of a *Muggle* newspaper! And ... *Is that a picture of me?!* How could this have happened? Clearly the Ministry of Magic considered him dangerous enough that they had informed the Muggle government and press of his escape. So now he could not even show his human face in front of Muggles without the authorities being alerted. *That could be inconvenient.*

Still, he could travel faster as a dog, and there was no real reason to appear in human form once he found out where he was. It took a few miles of determined trotting down the main road

away from the coast before he found a helpful road sign. It pointed to Yarmouth in one direction and Norwich in another. Once he knew he was in Norfolk, he turned his shiny black nose to the southwest and padded with steady confidence towards his destination.

He was in no hurry, really. Harry was in no danger until he reached Hogwarts, so Sirius could take his time on this journey. He stopped to rest whenever he felt he needed it, reveling in the novel joy of peaceful sleep, and he begged for food frequently. Apparently the infamous Black Charm translated well into canine form.

When he could manage it -- when he found someplace he felt safe enough -- he slept as a human. Doggy dreams were very simplistic, and it was important to him to remember the feel of being a free man.

Early one bright summer morning, he woke from a very pleasant dream to a strange tingling sensation between his legs. He squinted down in surprise.

"Hullo there, Professor!" he said. "I thought you'd died."

Professor? Where had that come from? And then a long-forgotten memory came floating back to him: sitting on James's bed in Gryffindor tower, laughing his arse off because James had just referred to his "equipment" as "Accio Evans".

"Well, what do you call yours?" retorted James, once he had got his own giggles under control.

"I dunno," Sirius frowned. "Never really thought about it before. Hey, Moony!" he called across the room.

Remus was sprawled out on his back on his own bed, head and shoulders hanging off one side, reading a book. "Hmmm?" It was the sound he made when he pretended to be listening to James and Sirius's most recent foolishness.

"My cock needs a name. What should it be?"

Remus didn't even look up. "Professor," he mumbled.

James had collapsed in another fit of giggles. "Perfect!" he declared, gasping for air. "No wonder Moony gets along with it so well!"

Sirius had laughed, too, and his ears had turned as pink as Remus's. They had never ended up using the name, and Sirius had not thought about the conversation since then until that moment.

But the unexpected sensation had surprised the memory out of him. It had been a very long time since he had felt even the vaguest hint of arousal. Good feelings were as alien to Azkaban

as happy thoughts, and for twelve years his plumbing had been used solely for the elimination of waste. After a while, it hadn't seemed important anymore. It was not like he was going to get a chance to use it ever again. But now, maybe ... well, maybe not.

Experimentally, he laid his hand on the slight bulge, but the reaction to the dream was already fading. Oddly, it still didn't seem all that important to him; it was just nice to know he wasn't entirely broken.

He sighed and got up, transforming as he did so. Finding southwest from the newly risen sun, he set off down the dusty road.

* * *

He headed southwest until he reached the river Thames. By skirting around Greater London, slinking past Heathrow, he knew he had at least ended up in the right county. It took him nearly a week to get that far, but there was no real urgency in his errand. He merely wanted to get a good look at Harry before he turned northwards to Hogwarts. Now all he needed was to remember the name of the town. Little ... something. Now would have been a good time to have a map.

He wracked his memory, trying to find that one elusive word. He had laughed the first time Lily had mentioned where her sister lived. It had been a funny name. "That's appropriate," Remus

had said drily. But how was it appropriate?

Sirius sat in a park on the bank of the Thames, staring blankly out over the water. Every now and then, children would try to engage his attention and try to make him play or chase sticks, but the large black dog was lost in thought almost until sunset.

He had only met Petunia once. She had reminded him oddly of a younger version of his own mother. What sort of town name would be appropriate to someone like that? *Little ... Bitching? No, that's not it. Little Moaning? Little Complaining? Little Arrogant Judgmental Cow? Little Whining? Hang on a minute Whining, whining ... whinging?*

He gave a bark of triumph, and took off in a victory lap around the park. *Little Whinging!* That was it! At last he slowed to a trot. The only question now was finding it. He had no idea where in Surrey *Little Whinging* might be, and without a map, it might take ages to find.

As the sun sank below the horizon, the park began to empty. Families with small children and elderly folk out for an evening stroll departed, and finally all that were left were young lovers, lingering on benches and picnic blankets, and a cluster of boisterous teenagers laughing and smoking furtive cigarettes under a stand of trees.

Did he dare risk asking for directions? If it got back to the

Ministry that he had been spotted in Surrey, they might assume he was after Harry.

He stared speculatively at the teenagers. Kids that age were not known for their attentiveness to current events, and so far as he knew, his face had only graced the front page of the Muggle newspapers the one time. And even if they did recognise him, would anyone believe them? These did not exactly look like the sort of reliable witnesses people tended to believe.

He padded behind a large tree, glanced around once in the gathering darkness, and shifted forms. Stepping out into the open, he cleared his throat.

"Excuse me," he said in as polite a voice as he could muster.

The teenagers jumped and turned to stare at him with wide eyes. Most of them eyed him warily in a there's-a-crazy-homeless-guy-talking-to-us way, but one or two mouths dropped open in astonished horror.

Before things could get out of hand, he plunged on, "I was wondering if any of you fine young folks could point me in the direction of Little Whinging?"

For a moment, there was silence, then a girl replied in a high, terrified voice, "I ... um ... I think that's just up the M25 from here. Sir."

Sirius raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Er ... North." Her arms drifted upwards and she pointed away from the river, not taking her wide eyes off him. "It's not far," she added.

"Ta!" Sirius grinned and blew the girl a kiss. Then he turned back to Padfoot and raced away into the darkness. It was a risk, he knew, changing in front of people, but he thought that if the teenagers' story ended with, "and then he turned into a dog!" it would be less likely to ever reach the wrong ears.

It was after midnight by the time he reached Little Whinging. Exulting in a goal nearly reached, he curled up and slept under a hedge.

* * *

The feeling of exultation began to fade following a scavenged breakfast the next morning. Little Whinging was not as small as Sirius had expected. *And what is wrong with Muggles anyway? All the houses are exactly the bloody same!* He wandered in despair up one street named for a plant and down the next. It seemed endless, and he was sure he ended up on Forsythia Lane more than once.

How was he to find Harry amidst all this Muggle mess? He

didn't even know what the boy looked like, he realised. In his mind, Harry looked a lot like James, and he had certainly had the same wayward black hair, even as a baby. But he might just as easily favour Lily's side of the family.

In a vain hope, he raised his shaggy snout into the air and sniffed. But last time he had *smelled* Harry, he had been a baby, and had smelled largely of powder, milk, and frequently-changed nappies. He might smell a bit like either of his parents now, but not enough to help Sirius locate him. He'd have to be bloody close anyway, even to get a whiff of the boy.

It was well past noon and his paws were beginning to ache when he stopped to rest. Forsythia Lane again. He sighed.

If only I had a wand, he thought longingly. *A quick Locator spell; that's all I'd need. I used to be able to find the others quick as anything* -- But he hadn't needed a wand for that, he realised. Never for finding his fellow Marauders. The bond they had shared had been strong enough for any of them to sense without the need for anything other than their own innate abilities.

Perhaps it will work on Harry too, he thought with sudden hope. From the first second he had known of Harry's existence, when the boy had been no more than an unobtrusive bump on Lily's otherwise slim physique, Sirius had loved him every bit as much as he had loved James. And while that bond might be lost to Harry, perhaps Sirius's love would still be enough to carry him

to his godson.

He closed his eyes and sniffed again, at the same time opening his mind and his heart, trying to take in his surroundings as a whole and find that one glimmer that denoted a person who Really Mattered. *There*. Faint yet distinct it came to him -- the smallest twinge in his breast -- and he felt again the weight of a tiny and helpless body in his human arms.

With a soft whine he turned and followed the pull. He was moving slower now than when he had been frantically searching random streets, but he moved now with purpose, ever closer to his goal. Every now and then, he paused to find the spark that was Harry again, making sure he was heading in the right direction.

By the time the sun had dipped to touch the tops of the houses, he knew he was close. Harry burned bright as a star in his mind, a constant presence. *Somewhere on this street*, he thought. *One of these houses. But which one?* He paced up and down the street restlessly, stopping and turning back whenever the spark began to fade. Unless Harry came out into the open, Sirius could not be sure of his exact location, and he did not wish to draw too much attention to himself by peering in at windows.

At last he found himself a comfortable, relatively well-hidden spot under a bush from which he could view much of the street, and he lay down to wait. Harry would have to come out

eventually, or there would be some clue as to his whereabouts. Maybe not tonight. Certainly tomorrow. He could be patient.

Amazingly, though, he had been watching the street barely an hour when the hint came, subtle as a parade. It began with a muffled shout from inside one of the houses a little way up the street. Sirius raised his head, ears pricked forwards. As the shouts continued, accompanied by feminine shrieks and a great deal of banging, Sirius slunk along the flowerbeds of Privet Drive to get a closer look at the source of the noise.

He ducked for cover as, with a great deal of clattering, a large trunk, an empty cage, and a short, skinny boy with glasses and messy black hair exited one of the houses across the street.

"I'm going. I've had enough," the boy declared angrily, slamming the door behind him.

Sirius pressed himself flat against the ground as an overwhelming sense of *deja vu* swept over him, so overpowering it made him feel mildly dizzy.

There could be no mistaking it. The boy looked just like James had at the age of thirteen. The voice was the same as well. But not the tone and not the facial expression, though Sirius recognised those as well. They were his own. In that moment Harry Potter, son of Lily and James Potter, undeniably resembled no one so much as his own godfather, running away

from home at the age of sixteen.

Sirius's heart swelled with the sudden and unexpected connection he felt with the boy. He felt as if it were divine providence which had brought him here at exactly this moment, when he and Harry suddenly had this significant and defining experience in common. He longed to go to the boy -- to put an arm around his shoulders and say "well done!" -- but he knew he could not.

He kept himself well hidden as Harry began determinedly dragging the heavy trunk down the street. He followed at a safe distance, wishing every moment that he could help in some way. At last, Harry dropped the end of his trunk and collapsed onto a low wall, still scowling as fiercely as any Black. Sirius's tongue lolled out in doggy pride.

But then the anger on young Harry's face began to fade as he took in his surroundings, and was replaced by a look of fear. *Of course, Sirius realised. When I left home, I went to James's place. But where can he go? He's got no other family, and the Restriction of Underage Wizardry effectively keeps him from contacting anyone useful.*

He watched the panic rise in his godson, watched him as he stared at his wand, watched as he got up from the wall and began rooting around in his trunk. *Don't do anything stupid, Harry,* he pleaded silently. If there was anything of James in

him, he was surely about to do something rash. *Maybe I should go to him. Distract him. Do the whole "friendly neighbourhood stray" routine. Maybe then he'll calm down and think for a minute.*

He had just risen to his feet when Harry's head and wand hand snapped up. He froze. After a moment, the boy's attention returned to his trunk. *If he's that edgy, I'd better not sneak up on him,* thought Sirius. He was just about to move again when Harry's head whipped around to stare directly at where he was standing.

"*Lumos.*" The light was so bright it nearly blinded him. For a split second the boy and dog stared at one another with twin looks of startlement. Harry took a step backwards and fell over his trunk. Sirius was just springing to go to him when there was a deafening BANG and an enormous purple triple-decker bus appeared out of nowhere, screeching to a halt in the exact spot where Harry had been.

Sirius paused just long enough to make sure Harry was all right, and then he fled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN HOME AND FAMILY

The Knight Bus. Sirius almost laughed out loud at the familiar, long-forgotten sight. Harry would be safe. He breathed a sigh of relief as soon as he allowed himself to stop running. The Knight Bus would be able to take Harry to anyone in the Wizarding world. He would be safely among friends for the duration of the summer.

This left Sirius free to ... *do what?* he wondered. It was still over three weeks before he needed to be at Hogwarts. He expected that a friendly-looking dog might be able to find a ride for at least part of the way. He had some time to spare.

Remus. The thought came unbidden to his mind. There was now nothing and no excuses left preventing him from spending a few days at least looking for Remus. He felt the fear rising in him once again, but he stiffened his resolve. *You're on an adventure, Old Boy,* he told himself. *Show a little backbone.*

Tentatively, he reached out with all his senses as he had done when he was searching for Harry. At first he could find nothing. Fighting down the panic this caused, he forced himself to relax and try again. He closed his eyes and turned his shaggy head from side to side.

It was less than a spark when he found it, but it was definitely

there. Sirius breathed a doggy sigh of relief. Remus was alive, at the very least. And if he was alive, then he was Somewhere and Sirius could find him.

The problem with this sort of searching was that the sense of a person gave no directional indication at all; only a sense of "nearer" or "farther away". It was well enough for short distance searches such as finding Harry in a single town, but was unlikely to help him find Remus in under a week, even assuming he was in England, which he might not be.

Instead, Sirius set out to check the old familiar haunts, just on the off-chance. He was already near London, so the logical place to begin was the flat they had shared. There was a very remote possibility that Remus had stayed there. He skulked and slunk through the suburbs of Greater London all that night, avoiding densely-populated areas. A large dog roaming free in the city was likely to draw unwelcome and unhelpful attention of the Men With Nets variety.

It was after dawn when he finally reached the dilapidated and unfashionable street where he had once lived. But of course Remus wasn't there. Sirius had known he wouldn't be. His spark still registered as distant in Sirius's mind. Even the building where their flat had been was gone, replaced by a boring-looking office block. Sirius whined regretfully, but did not linger there.

He turned north after that, figuring he might try Remus's family's

home, if they were still alive and if they still lived in the same place. He thought it unlikely that Remus would be with them.

They had been disappointed, to say they least, when they had learned that their son was, to put it delicately, unlikely to provide them with grandchildren. A rift was created in the family that had not healed as long as Sirius had known them. Remus had not precisely been disowned, but his family's strong opinions about such things made visiting uncomfortable, to say the least, and he had not been in contact with them much.

Remus loved his family, and their lack of acceptance had not only hurt him deeply, but had shaken him to his very core. Of all the people in his life, his family were the only ones he had been certain would unreservedly give their blessing to his choice of partner. After all, they had been nothing short of wonderful about his being a werewolf since he was a small child.

But when he had finally brought Sirius home to meet his parents during the summer between their sixth and seventh year, his announcement had been met with tears from his Muggle mother and a stony, "I don't accept that," on the part of his wizard father. They had refused to discuss the matter any further. Sirius had been pointedly directed to the guest bedroom, and everyone had been chillingly polite for the rest of the week-long visit.

Remus's younger sister Natalie had been only thirteen at the time, and had not entirely understood what was going on. She

hid in her room a lot and burst into tears at the dinner table one night.

Natalie was a Squib, and had not attended Hogwarts. Remus had missed her dreadfully. She had kept in touch by Owl Post frequently (Remus had saved up and bought her her own owl), but while she was sympathetic to her brother's distress, she seemed to side with her parents on the matter. It had been she who had explained years later in a rare revisitation of the topic that, while his parents could accept he was a werewolf through no fault of his own, they very much viewed his lifestyle as a conscious choice with which they could not agree. They kept hoping he would see the error of his ways.

Sirius had been disappointed, too. He had always liked Mr and Mrs Lupin, and they had always been very warm towards their son's friends -- almost grateful, which was not all that surprising under the circumstances. They had been his favourite parents after Mr and Mrs Potter. The loss of their good wishes had not cut him as deeply as it had cut Remus, but it had cut him nonetheless.

Remembering all these things, he had not been paying attention to where he was going, and it was only the realisation that his surroundings were familiar that jolted him back to the present.

He raised his hackles and bared his teeth instinctively. He did not like this place. But why? It was a rundown cul-de-sac in the

northern part of London, crowded with shabby houses left over from the last century, shouldering for breathing space. The street sign caught his eye. Grimmauld Place. The human groan emerged as a growl. *Home sweet home*, he thought. He had not been here since he was sixteen.

Reluctantly, he approached Number Twelve. It looked just as shabby as the others, but it always had, even under the ownership of his proud parents. The shabbiness was a front to stem any Muggle curiosity about the place. It looked, however, as though no one had lived there for some time.

He dimly recalled receiving notice from the Ministry while he was in Azkaban, informing him that his mother had died, but he could not remember how long ago it had been. He wondered who owned the house now. Whoever it was, he knew that no good could come of encountering any of the remaining Blacks, and he did not linger.

* * *

As expected, there was no hint of Remus at the Lupin ancestral home, though his parents were still there and very much alive. Sirius felt some qualms about begging for his dinner there, and the Lupins were quite willing to attend to the needs of a friendly stray.

It was a jolt seeing them again. Teenagers do not tend to look for

a resemblance to a lover in the face of the older generation. It struck him now just how much Remus looked like both his parents. His father's nose and chin, his mother's ears, long lashes and the shape of her skull. That tilt of the head belonged to his father as well, and the laugh was his mother's. It was unsettling enough that he did not wish to stay long, though he was there long enough to see framed photos of Natalie with her husband and disturbingly-familiar-looking ten-year-old son.

There was only one photo of Remus. He was five years old in it, a gap-toothed grin on his face as his smiling parents helped him to awkwardly hold his baby sister. It was the face of a child who had never heard the word "werewolf", and it made Sirius's heart ache to see it. He turned away and set off again without looking back.

* * *

When he left the Lupins' home, it was mid-August and very much time to start taking his journey north to Hogwarts more seriously. He was still no closer to discovering Remus's whereabouts, but there would be time for that later, he supposed, once he had dealt with the matter of Peter Pettigrew.

He was still only just starting to get used to the idea of having his whole life ahead of him again. The average Wizarding life span was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 120 years, which meant that he had almost a century ahead of him to make up for

all the time lost in Azkaban. Plenty of time to find Remus, make him understand what had happened, and perhaps, just perhaps, make a new start of things. With a regretful sigh, he turned his nose northwards again.

The journey took him longer than he had anticipated. He had wasted too much time in his search for Remus, he knew. He only hoped that this small self-indulgence had not cost him his chance to find Peter before it was too late.

He covered as much ground as he could, mostly traveling by night now to avoid attention. He paused to eat or sleep only when absolutely necessary, but the first of September came and went before he even managed to cross the border into Scotland.

If he had not worn himself into a state of complete exhaustion, he might have made it to Hogwarts without ever once being spotted, but his desperation caused him to make a single near-fatal mistake not far outside Langholm.

He still slept as a man when he thought he could risk it, his human dreams being so much richer than their canine counterparts, but two nights before he reached the school, he chose his sleeping place with less care than he should have. Collapsing in exhaustion, he did not bother to check the wooded area he had chosen for human habitation, and perhaps because he was so tired or perhaps because he was dreaming of Remus, he slept too deeply to hear the footsteps of the approaching

Muggle. It was only half an hour later when two sets of footsteps and agitated whispers could be heard on the nearby path that he came awake with a start.

He slipped forms at once, slinking quietly into the underbrush and pricking up his sharp ears to catch their conversation.

"Saw him with me own eyes, officer. Asleep he was, under a tree," whispered a man's voice.

"Perhaps you'd better stay back here while I investigate," said a second voice in a tone that suggested the speaker would rather be doing just about anything else. "They do say he's armed and extremely dangerous."

"There's a reward, though, isn't there?" asked the first voice, and Sirius could hear the tinge of greed.

"Aye," said the second man. "Still, carefully does it. Reward does you no good if you get yourself killed by a madman."

Sirius did not need to hear any more. Mentally cursing himself, he made a quiet exit.

* * *

The repercussions of his carelessness came haunting him before sundown the next day. He felt them before he saw them:

Dementors -- three of them -- gliding silently through the green, leafy wood. They would have looked out of place, but for the fact that everything around them seemed to wither and turn grey in their presence. The birds began to sing again only once they were long gone. Sirius crouched silently, eyes closed, his dark fur blending with the shadows, until they had passed.

Nor were they the last he encountered. The closer he got to Hogwarts, the more frequent they became. *So they are waiting for me*, he thought. *They think they know what I am about. I wonder if Harry knows? I wonder if he is frightened of me?* When he slept, cold fingers brushed his doggy dreams a dozen times or more. He awoke shivering, but knowing the Dementors' presence meant one thing: he was nearing his goal.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN THE UNKNOWING ALLY

The castle came into view over the tops of the trees late in the morning of the next day. Something stirred within him at the sight of his first true home. Within a couple of hours, he sighted the castle gates with their cold, inhuman guards. He was going to have to go right past them in order to get in. It took him nearly half an hour crouching in the bushes to work up the nerve to approach. In the end, he took a deep breath, fixed his eyes beyond the Dementors, and passed between them at a steady trot. They did not pay him more than an incurious glance.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he stopped several metres beyond the gates and looked around. From this distance, the only smells that came to him were those of the Forbidden Forest. Good enough. That would be a reasonably safe place for him to lie hidden while he formulated a plan to get into the castle and bite that rat in two.

He padded around the edge of the grounds, keeping to the wall until the trees began, then ducking into the safety of their shade. He passed the Whomping Willow, swaying gently in the early autumn breeze, and wondered idly if he could find a way to prod the secret knot in his current form. The Shrieking Shack would undoubtedly make a fine hideout. Although less so if he broke half his bones getting there.

He was not far past the Willow when the first familiar scent assailed him. He stopped and sniffed again before starting slowly forwards. There. Just at the edge of the forest, about fifty metres away stood a lumpy, familiar-looking hut. *Hagrid*, he thought. *Hagrid is still here*. The realisation gave him decidedly mixed feelings. On the one hand, Hagrid was the one who had taken Harry from him. Not really his fault, but still On the other hand, Hagrid had been a friend and was a kindly man, and he did love animals, didn't he? The bigger and more vicious the better. Sirius bared his teeth in a growl that was half a laugh. It was an idea.

Moving through the trees, he was able to approach fairly near the hut without being seen. And there was Hagrid, looking much as he ever did. The same moleskin coat, the same tangled beard, the same good-natured voice with its own ideas about the English language. And he was ... *teaching?! It looked very much as though Hagrid was leading a Care of Magical Creatures lesson*. Sirius wondered what had happened to old Professor Kettleburn.

Sirius sniffed hopefully, but Harry was not in this lesson. These were older children, possibly fifth or sixth year students. They looked decidedly dubious about their teacher's abilities.

"Come closer," Hagrid was saying, "they won' hurt yeh." But the deep roar which followed his words suggested to the students that perhaps the prudent course of action was to back away.

Hagrid looked worried.

Sirius waited until the end of the lesson, during which Hagrid utterly failed to get any of his pupils to approach the crate, before he decided it was safe to leave the safety of the trees.

"On'y manticore cubs," Hagrid was mumbling grumpily to himself. "Thought th' kids'd like 'em. They're cute little blighters an' all."

Sirius waited patiently before the hut steps, tongue out, the very picture of canine joviality. At last Hagrid turned and noticed his audience "Hallo, wee dog," he said, holding out his knuckles to be sniffed. Sirius politely accepted. "Lost, are yeh? Well, ye've come teh the righ' place." He held open the door. "Come in an' meet th' boys."

The boys? Sirius peered cautiously into the hut. A large boarhound stopped mid-bound at the sight of him and cocked his head with a sharp whine, as if to say, "friend or foe?" Sirius whined in return and let his tongue loll out some more, which he found usually stood him in good stead with other dogs.

"It's all righ', Fang," said Hagrid indulgently, scratching the big dog behind the ears. "This pooch is jus' 'ere for supper. Beaky, come meet our new friend."

A strange, birdlike *quark* came from the shadows beside the

stove, and into the middle of the room stepped a large creature with not a few sharp points. Sirius's first instinct was to hide behind Hagrid, knowing the kinds of things Hagrid considered to be harmless house pets.

"He won' hurt yeh," Hagrid told him. "Beaky's jus' stayin' here a while until we get some matters wi' th' Ministry cleared up. Ah, yer a friendly brute, aren't yeh?" he continued, turning to the creature called Beaky.

This all sounded fairly ominous to Sirius, but he tentatively wagged his tail, and the Hippogriff consented to sniff him in a reasonably benign manner before returning to his corner to gnaw on a very large bone.

Sirius realised Hagrid was looking at him thoughtfully. "Yeh know, there used ter be a dog jus' like you hung around here, oh, years ago." Then he grinned. "Ah, but that would be back before you or Fang or Beaky was ever born. I'm gettin' old. Jus' listen ter me!" he said, tying on a floral apron.

Hagrid was bending over the stove, humming to himself, when there came a sound at the door. "We have another guest for tea!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together.

When the door was opened, in walked the ugliest cat Sirius had ever seen. He was excessively fluffy, and had a face that looked as though he had seen a few brick walls up close. The creature

eyed Sirius dispassionately and Sirius got the impression that the cat was not fooled by his disguise in the slightest.

"Ere, Pooch," Hagrid was saying. "This is Crookshanks. He's Hermione's friend. Likes to play at being a cat. Well, we'll keep 'is little secret, won' we?" He chuckled good-naturedly.

The not-a-cat apparently decided Sirius was harmless enough, and ignored him in favour of twining himself about Hagrid's ankles, shamelessly begging for scraps. Sirius, on the other hand, gazed thoughtfully at the creature. *Hermione's friend, eh?* he thought. He had no idea who Hermione might be, but chances were, she -- and presumably this furry friend of hers -- resided in the castle. Human friends were not going to be much help. The four-legged variety on the other hand Now, that idea had possibilities.

* * *

Sirius knew that being on good terms with Hagrid and his non-human friends was likely to be the key to finding his way inside Hogwarts, so he cultivated these friendships. More often than not, tea time found him in the hut, sharing a meal with Hagrid, Fang and Buckbeak, and whatever other "friends" Hagrid had visiting that evening.

It was from Hagrid that Sirius learned Dumbledore still presided over Hogwarts and that Harry was in Gryffindor, as well as

some of the surprising adventures Harry and his friends had had since they began at Hogwarts. Sirius was grateful for Hagrid's habit of talking to all animals as though they could understand. Hagrid, it seemed, was very friendly with Harry, and Sirius knew he would have to be careful. Harry had seen him in Little Whinging, and if he saw him again, he might put two and two together. He carefully avoided Hagrid's anytime he smelled human guests present, and he usually hid deep in the forest during the Care of Magical Creatures lessons, since sometimes the classes penetrated the forest's perimeter.

Because of this, it was not until the third week of the term that he learned about Ron Weasley. He had forgotten there was a lesson that afternoon, and did not have time to slink out of the hut and into the trees without being seen, so he decided to watch the lesson surreptitiously out the window.

"Want ter go out, boy?" Hagrid asked him, holding the door open, but Sirius stayed where he was. Hagrid shrugged and went back to feeding Buckbeak.

Harry was in this class. Sirius saw him just as he came out of the castle, walking between a tall, red-haired boy and a girl with bushy brown hair. The three were talking and laughing and Sirius was very pleased to see that Harry clearly had at least two good friends here. Friendship was, after all, what had made Hogwarts the best time of his own life.

Hagrid had just opened the door again to go join his students when Sirius saw the rat. A nose, whiskers and two tiny pink paws, one missing a little rat toe, peaking out of the pocked of the tall, red-haired boy's robes.

Sirius snarled and leapt for the door, but as he passed, Hagrid, with amazing presence of mind, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hurled him back into the hut. He yelped as he bounced off a chair.

"Now, stop that, pooch," Hagrid admonished. "Them's nice kids out there. Don' you give 'em no trouble." With that, he turned on his heel and closed the door behind him. Sirius was just about to slip forms, risking all to go after him, when he heard the key scrape in the lock. He was trapped, and Harry was out there with that rat.

He went back to the window and stared fixedly at the children. Gradually, he managed to relax a little. Harry and the red-haired boy were clearly friends, and if Peter had not made a move before now, there was no reason why he should today. Harry was likely in no immediate danger. Still, he watched for any further sign of emerging whiskers, but apparently Peter had decided that Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures lesson would be a poor place to show himself. Many of Hagrid's favourite creatures would likely find fresh rat a tasty treat.

* * *

Six weeks into the term, he was still no nearer to finding a safe way into the castle. The only time he saw Harry and his friends was during their lessons with Hagrid, but now Hagrid was wary of him around the children, and kept him locked up in the hut until all the students were safely back up at the castle.

He watched these lessons with growing anxiety. What if Peter caught a whiff of him with that sharp little nose? Surely by now he must know that Sirius was looking for him. His own presence was putting Harry in greater danger than ever, and every day he waited to make his move was one day closer to "too late".

What he really needed was a state of disruption at the school; a time when people's minds would be off him and on something else exciting. He tried desperately to remember what special occasions were celebrated on the Hogwarts calendar. He sat with his muzzle on his paws, looking between the trees at the grey autumn sky. No help there. But when he lowered his eyes, they fell upon Hagrid's vegetable garden, which at this time of year was filled with giant pumpkins.

How could he have forgotten Halloween? Granted, for a dozen years he had had no calendar available to him and no cause to celebrate, but Halloween had been one of the great Marauder holidays. James had almost always come up with some ingenious prank to celebrate, and they had had a running competition to try to make McGonagall laugh at their choices of

costume.

Halloween was perfect! Not only was there the feast, but there was a Hogsmeade weekend as well. Half the students and probably half the staff as well would be down in the village. If he wanted to slip into the school unnoticed, clearly that was the time to do it. It was a good plan, he decided. He was ready. How could it possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN TRICK OR TREAT

Once it was decided, the hardest part was waiting for the holiday to come. Halloween was a full two months into the school year, and in that kind of time, anything might happen. He divided his time between Hagrid's companionship and the edges of the forest. He knew if he ventured too deeply, he would run afoul of some of its nastier residents. Only rarely did he use his human form. The Dementors were never far away, and occasionally patrolled the forest. Being a dog was just safer all around.

But patience is not a doggy virtue, and they do talk about dog's years. With growing impatience, he watched the leaves of the forest turn and begin to fall, making his best hiding place a little less safe; fewer places to hide and more crunchy underbrush to wade through.

But at last the day dawned cold but bright, and he made his preparations. Hagrid left early for the Three Broomsticks, singing at the top of his considerable lungs. Sirius waited, watching as the flood of students leaving the school slowed to a trickle.

At last he judged it was time. Rising onto his hind legs, he grabbed a sharp-looking knife down from a hook above the stove. Clutching the knife in his jaws, he nosed open the door and trotted up towards the castle.

Luck was with him and he was not seen. It seemed most of the school's population, apart from the first and second years who were not allowed, had taken advantage of the holiday to get away from the castle for a day. He risked flickering forms long enough to pull open the castle doors (he could push his way out again), and to secure the knife with the piece of rope that served him for a belt, effectively making it part of his person when he transformed. "Trick or treat," he muttered with a grin.

He was exulting in his own cleverness at managing thus far without being seen when something stopped him dead in the entrance hall. That smell. *No. It can't be.* It had to be a smell left over from days long gone. But it seemed so sharp and fresh in the air. *Remus.*

But how? Where? Why? He could not think clearly. Suddenly all his certainty -- all his ability to reason -- went out of him. What was he supposed to do now? *Remus* was here, somewhere, for some reason, it did not matter.

He realised he was standing in the middle of the entrance hall, staring up the great staircase, as though waiting for someone -- for *Remus* -- to find him. But did he want to be found? *No. Can't be found. Must hide.* He slunk into the shadows behind the stairs to give himself a chance to think.

It was midmorning. Harry and the boy with the rat were both

most likely in Hogsmeade having a good time. They would not be back until the late afternoon, and the feast would commence sometime between five and six o'clock. The best time to slip out again, once he dealt with the rat, would be under the cover of darkness.

He should hide until the evening. But *Remus* was here. He checked, just to be sure, trying to catch that sense of him -- that spark -- with his mind. And it was there, strong and bright and heart-achingly familiar. There could be no doubt. But he could not go to the man. Remus would call for backup before he said so much as a word. Unless

Yes. Tonight is the full moon! He wondered if Remus would spend it in the Shrieking Shack, as he used to. Sirius could go to him there. Remus could not call out for anyone. He would have to listen, and maybe it would be long enough to explain. Perhaps Sirius could even enlist his help against Peter. Not tonight, though; Remus in his pre-wolf state might kill him on sight. But in the morning, he would be alone and weak. That was the time.

In the end, he spent most of the day hidden in the shadows under the stairs, trying to think of the exact words to use that would convince Remus of the truth, and make everything wonderful again. By the time the first students began to trickle in, forcing him to draw back, deeper into the shadows, he still had not thought of the right ones.

The Great Hall gradually filled with chatter and laughter and the flicker of candles and the smells of autumn foods. Sirius was surprised to catch sight of Harry slumping down the stairs alone. *Wasn't he in Hogsmeade with the others?* But he met his two friends at the doors to the Great Hall, and when Sirius sniffed, he could detect no trace of rodent in the air, apart from a slight, lingering scent which clung to Ron's clothes.

Peter must be upstairs in the dormitory. This was the chance he had been waiting for. It was almost too perfect. As soon as the doors to the Great Hall closed on the feasting students, Sirius bounded up the stairs. He got a bit turned around, and had some trouble initially trying to remember the way to Gryffindor Tower, but between his nose and his memory, he finally managed to turn down a corridor ending in a full-length portrait of a large woman in a pink silk gown.

The Fat Lady. He cursed himself. He had completely forgotten he would need a password to get into the tower. But he had to get in there. Nothing for it but to use the notorious Black charm. He quickly shifted forms before she caught sight of him. It would never do for her to blow his disguise.

His heart was pounding as he approached her. Would she scream? Call for help? Activate a silent alarm elsewhere in the castle? But she just looked down at him imperiously, making him feel thirteen again. "Password?" she intoned.

Sirius gave his most devilish, irresistible grin. "My dear lady," he said, bowing, "if I had the password, I would surely give it to you, but I confess I do not have it. However, I do have important business with House Gryffindor, and I must humbly beg entrance." He took a step back and waited, blinking innocently.

She rolled her eyes. "Mr Black. I should have known. Has it truly been so long that you've forgotten the rules? No password, no entry."

Well, at least he now knew that no one ever bothered to tell portraits the news. He forged ahead. "Your devotion to your post and to the rules of Hogwarts is indeed admirable, my lady, but can you not just make one tiny exception? After all, you know me, do you not? You know me to be a Gryffindor. Surely my place is within this hallowed tower." His voice remained calm, but the sweat was beginning to trickle down the back of his neck. The longer he stayed in human form, the greater his chances of being caught. He had to do this quickly.

"Your flowery speech does not move me, Mr Black. The rules are what they are, and I have kept to them as long as I have hung here. I shall continue to keep to them until I am retired from this position. You'll just have to wait for someone to let you in."

"Please," he begged, desperation creeping into his voice. "You must let me in. A boy's life may be at stake. Surely you wouldn't want one of your precious charges to be killed?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "But if such a tragedy were to occur, it would not happen through dereliction of duty on my part. Only those with the password may pass."

He tried. Really he did. He gave every password he could ever recall from his time at school, plus a whole lot more, including some very unlikely ones that he had suggested Remus implement as a prefect or James as Head Boy. But when when even "trick or treat" was rejected, he gave up in despair.

"Let me in!" he cried, glancing anxiously over his shoulder. He had to be gone before the students came up from the feast. There was not much time. In desperation, and almost without realising it, he had drawn the knife.

"What do you propose to do with that?" the Fat Lady asked sharply, but there was a hint of a quaver in her voice.

"If you won't let me in," he said recklessly, "I'll make my own way!" He had only meant to frighten her into opening for him, but with a shriek, she fled her frame and was gone.

Bugger. She'll raise the alarm. He had to act quickly. With no tool to hand but the knife, he began to slash savagely at the painting and through it, at the door behind it, but the blade made very little impact on the age-darkened surface. Within minutes, the canvass of the portrait lay in shreds around him and he was

gasping and cursing with with frustration.

Suddenly, through the darkness behind him, he heard a sound that chilled him to the bone: laughter. And then a voice he knew all too well said, "Very naughty, Mr Blacksie! Mustn't muss up the portraits."

Peeves. Arse. Peeves was most likely to do whatever would cause maximum fuss. Does he know I'm a wanted man? If he doesn't, he might only try to bring Filch up here, assuming the old bastard is still alive.

His answer was not long in coming. "I hear Mr Blacksie has been a very naughty boy indeed," Peeves intoned in a singsong voice. "Wouldn't the Professorhead be interested to know he was here? Or maybe the guards from Azkabanny-wanny? Shall I go fetch them?"

Sirius broke and ran. But there were footsteps coming up the stairs. Dozens of them. Too late to escape that way. Running as fast as he could, he turned down a darkened corridor only a few paces ahead of the poltergeist and swiftly shifted, fur blending with the shadows. He held perfectly still, trying not to breathe. Could poltergeists see in the dark?

Apparently not. After a quick pass through the corridor with an increasingly annoyed look on his face, he departed, Sirius hoped, forgetting the entire incident in favour of breaking

something elsewhere. But just in case he was going to tattle, Sirius thought he had better find a more secure hiding place. Having been witnessed inside the castle was likely to lead to a very thorough search.

He trotted swiftly from one dark corridor to another, down this or that staircase, unsure where he was going, smelling only dust and disuse. And Remus. Without his willing it, his nose had been searching for Remus. And he was nearby. No, his rooms were nearby. It was too much of his scent to merely indicate his passing this way. Sirius sniffed along, ears pricked for sounds of disturbance upstairs, but he heard nothing yet.

Here, his nose told him at last. *This door*. He sniffed and listened carefully, but the room was unoccupied. Remus had probably already gone to the Shack for the night. Surely he could find somewhere to hide here. And maybe Dumbledore would not go so far as having the professors' rooms searched, since that was clearly what these were, he realised, glancing around.

He jumped up onto the bed. He would have a little while at least before they looked here, if they did at all. *Remus, a professor*, he thought with a doggy grin. *God, he must love that! He's in his element. Good to know Dumbledore's still standing by his friends. He must've had to jump through a dozen hoops to get a job like this for a werewolf.* It gave him some hope that, if he could only convince Remus, Dumbledore might believe him as well.

First thing first, though, he had to find a hiding place. However, before he could so much as turn around, he heard running feet in the corridor. Maybe only one set, but with the echo, it was hard to tell. No time to hide. He would have to go over whoever it was, and just do his best to make a break for the castle doors.

But when the door banged open, it was a golden-eyed ghost who slammed his way into the room, throwing the door shut behind him and fumbling the key into the lock as his robes slipped off his shoulders. But no ghost ever breathed so harshly.

Sirius must have made a sound, for suddenly Remus whirled to face him. Their eyes locked for a single instant, and then Remus threw his head back and *howled*.

The change was upon him, and at once Sirius was entirely Padfoot again, whose sole purpose and reason for existing in the first place was to give comfort and companionship to this other creature in his hour of need. He leapt off the bed and waited for the change to complete itself.

But something was not right. Or rather, something seemed not as bad as it ought to be. Remus's transformations used to cause him intense pain, Padfoot remembered, but, while the change was clearly uncomfortable, he was not making nearly as much fuss about it as he had. *And why's he changing in his rooms? Isn't he worried about wrecking his precious books?*

Something had clearly changed since their last full moon together. Padfoot was glad at least that, even if he had not been able to be with Remus during the intervening years, someone had obviously done something to make his transformations more bearable, and he wuffed out a doggy blessing upon them.

At last, the wolf rose to his feet and confronted the black dog with eyes like molten gold. Padfoot held perfectly still, unsure what the larger beast would do. The wolf drew back his lip, exposing his canine teeth, and growled deeply, then leapt upon him. They rolled about the room, snapping, biting, growling and knocking things over, even tearing all the bedclothes off the bed, but it took only a moment for Padfoot to realise they were just wrestling; this was no life-or-death struggle.

It ended as it always had, with the black dog on his back, throat exposed until the wolf gently nipped him, letting him know he had permission to rise. The wolf did not seem especially inclined to violence. In fact, he seemed *sleepy*. Remus *never* slept during the full moon.

But apparently that had changed, too. He whined again and curled up on the hearth rug. He looked expectantly at Padfoot until he settled down to join him. He buried his nose in the wolf's grey fur, breathing deeply, inhaling the long-lost, longed-for scent of love, and then, trusting that Dumbledore would let no one disturb a sleeping werewolf, he too went to sleep.

He awoke at dawn to find Remus cold, pale and still asleep, but restored to his true form, still lying on the hearth rug. He looked so *grey*. There were lines around his eyes and mouth that had not been there before, unfamiliar scars on his body, and threads of grey in his hair. He did not wake when the black dog dragged the quilt over him, whether to hide him or to warm him.

Maybe if they had been in the Shack, Sirius would have stayed and tried to explain things when Remus woke, but he knew he had to get out of the castle before too many people were up and about. He was human only long enough to unlock the door and bestow a chaste kiss upon the forehead of the man he still loved.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SCENT OF THE WOLF

The scent of the wolf was on his clothes. He had managed to make it out of the castle and back to the forest without being seen, but he could not escape that scent. It filled his head and caressed his flesh like the hands of a lover. He closed his eyes and again saw eyes like molten gold staring back at him, wide with shock. He could not remember the last time he had been so aroused. If the tingling he had felt before had comforted him that he was not broken after all, this sensation unsettled him deeply, and he knew it was not going to go away on its own.

He let his shaking hands find their way to the lacing of his torn and filthy trousers, and with his eyes still closed, head resting against the rough bark of a tree, he imagined Remus's fingers and not his own stroking hot, sensitive flesh. Not Remus as he had seen him this morning, all grey and worn from a lifetime of sorrows, but a Remus who was as young, fresh and alive as he had been that first time in the Shrieking Shack.

He remembered it as if it were yesterday. Remus's sixteenth birthday. He had thought about it for months, but when the day finally came, he had almost been too afraid to go through with it. They had spent the summer in a haze of joy fueled by kisses and mostly-innocent touches, but on that night in September, it had been Remus who had suggested they go somewhere more private than their dormitory.

Sirius had been almost sick with fear and anticipation as they made their way down to the Whomping Willow huddled under James's Invisibility Cloak, their clasped hands slicked with sweat. He knew what he wanted to do; he just hoped to God that Remus did too, but unwelcome imaginings clouded his brain in which Remus looked at him in disgust and said, "You want to do *what?!*" It had only been when they had arrived in the Shack, and he had finally made himself look directly into those golden eyes and seen the same hunger there that he felt, that he had known for sure that it was going to happen.

"I want you to be my first," he had said, his voice hardly quavering at all. *I want you to be my only.* But he did not say it. Not then.

They had gone to the bed then, but were both too nervous at first to do more than lie with their arms around one another. But he could not be frightened for long; not with the comforting presence of Remus there with him. Hesitance quickly gave way to passion. Clothes were ripped and buttons popped in their eagerness for one another.

Sirius remembered how Remus had looked then: skin flushed, eyes bright, the goosebumps on his skin as Sirius had traced the scars on his torso. And he remembered most of all the small, soft sounds Remus had made when Sirius had taken him in his mouth for the first time. Sirius tasted that hot, eager flesh on his

tongue once again and moaned in the back of his throat.

And how he had looked after. *Oh, God!* Tousled and spent and blissful, his skin slick with sweat. "I love you, Sirius," he had said then. It was the most beautiful thing Sirius had ever seen, and he treasured it, reliving again the joy of being loved by Remus Lupin.

"What do you want me to do now, Birthday Boy?" he had asked then.

"Well ..." a slow smile tugged at Remus's mouth. "You are wearing far too many clothes, Mr Black. Much as it pains me, I shall be forced to take points from Gryffindor if you do not remove them immediately."

Sirius grinned. He was halfway out of his trousers when he paused. The grin faded from his lips.

"What's the matter, Padfoot?" There was concern in Remus's voice.

Sirius blushed. "It's nothing. Just -- well, mine's not -- not quite as big as yours, is all."

Remus burst out laughing. "Oh God, Padfoot! Are you really worried about that?" But then he caught sight of Sirius's face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have laughed." He sat up. "Padfoot --

Sirius -- look at me." Sirius did so, slowly. Remus looked directly into his eyes which widened in surprise as Remus's hand came to rest between his legs.

"Does it give you pleasure when I touch you like this, Padfoot?" he asked seriously. Sirius nodded mutely. "And do you think maybe I enjoyed what you just did?" A small smile flickered at the corner of Sirius's mouth. "Then there's nothing to worry about. Now get naked, or I'll make it ten points from Gryffindor."

The grin was back on Sirius's face as he shed the rest of his clothing. In truth, he was not that much smaller than Remus, and certainly well within the realm of "average". His size had never really bothered him; he had just worried that it might bother Remus.

"What do you want me to do?" he repeated, lying down beside the other boy and gently biting his damp shoulder.

"What do you want to do?" Remus replied, his fingers resting lightly on Sirius's thigh.

Sirius swallowed. He knew what he wanted to do, but this was the bit he was worried Remus would not like. To cover his confusion, he took Remus's hand and placed it on his cock. Remus's fingers were warm and calloused, and Sirius pressed himself eagerly against his palm. The words somehow came

easier with Remus touching him like that.

"I want --" he gasped. "I want to -- to be inside you, Moony." Remus's hand stilled and Sirius looked up nervously into his eyes. "I mean -- if you don't mind. I'd just -- just like to, is all," he finished lamely.

Remus licked his lips nervously. "All right," he said. "What -- what do I have to do?"

"Um," said Sirius, fumbling for his clothes. "Just lie down, I guess. And -- um -- put your knees up." He found what he was looking for in the pocket of his discarded robes: a tiny blue bottle which he had purchased from a Very Discreet shop in Diagon Alley two weeks before. He pulled out the cork and poured a few drops of the potion on his fingers. It was warm and oily and smelled very pleasant.

"What's that?" Remus asked nervously.

Sirius smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. "It's just a potion I bought. It's supposed to -- er -- make things easier."

"Oh," said Remus. Without another word, Remus sat up and took Sirius's hand, smearing the warm oil onto his own fingers. Then he reached down and began to massage it into Sirius's cock.

Sirius closed his eyes and moaned. "God, that feels good, Moony."

"Well, it had better not feel too good yet," replied Remus with a smile in his voice. His hand left Sirius and moved between his own parted legs.

Sirius watched, wide-eyed as Remus rubbed the potion into his pale skin. He took Remus's hand and moved it to one side, pinning his arm to the bed and he got between his thighs. His own skin seemed so hot that Remus's felt chilled by comparison. He could see the fear in the young werewolf's golden eyes, inches from his own. Very gently, Sirius kissed him. "Tell me if it hurts?" he said. "I'll stop. I promise." He hoped he would be able to.

Remus's eyes closed as the tip of Sirius's cock pressed against him. Sirius could feel his heart racing. He could not wait another minute. Remus lying under him, completely submissive and waiting for him, was doing things to his senses that just imagining this scenario had not prepared him for. Remus tensed as Sirius applied a little more pressure. His eyes sprang open wide as the head of Sirius's cock entered him.

"Are you okay?" Sirius gasped. It was all he could do to keep himself in check.

Remus nodded. "It's all right. Just odd." Remus hesitantly ran

his hands over Sirius's shoulders and down his back. "Go on, Padfoot," he urged, giving his buttocks a gentle squeeze.

It was all the encouragement Sirius needed. With a groan, he sheathed himself to the hilt. Remus gave a strangled cry, but Sirius could not stop. It was too good. The ancient, mindless rhythm of sex possessed him and he was thrusting into Remus again and again, unintelligible sounds of pleasure escaping his throat.

He was really doing it! He could hardly believe it! And it was better than he had ever imagined it could be. He felt as though his brain had melted, and all that was left was a mindless need to join with the Other -- to give all he had and to expend his life force, if need be -- in this one glorious moment of --

"Oh God, Moony! I'm going to --" An exultant cry burst from the lips of Sirius Black as he sat beneath a tree in the Forbidden Forest, his fist wrapped tightly around his cock as he jerked and moaned and spilled twelve years of pent-up longing over his fingers.

Afterwards, he lay in the cool dawn air, his heart rate slowly returning to normal. And he remembered. He remembered opening his eyes and seeing the shy smile on Remus's face. He remembered collapsing against him in a heap of sticky bedsheets and sweaty limbs. He remembered Remus lifting the damp hair from his neck. He remembered the stirrings of Remus's arousal

beginning again against his stomach.

"Oh, you liked that, did you?" he echoed his own words of so long ago. And then he slept and dreamed of the glorious night that had followed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN THE LURE OF THE PITCH

The unexpected discovery of the presence of Remus at Hogwarts, and his subsequent encounter with him, left Sirius deeply shaken, and for a short while even managed to distract him from his plans concerning Peter. But after several nights of intermittent sleep populated with unsettling dreams, he slowly began to regain focus. Harry's safety, after all, was the important thing. Once he saw to that, there would be plenty of time to sort out the jumble of feelings that threatened to overwhelm him.

Security on the castle would be tighter now. He would have to wait a while before he risked another break-in. There would certainly be no getting into Gryffindor tower without the password, and unless he could get that, his chances of cornering Peter were slim. He would have to formulate a better plan next time. In the meantime, he waited and he watched.

He was close at hand for every one of Harry's Care of Magical Creatures lessons, making sure of his welfare. It disturbed him that Harry was clearly close friends with the redheaded boy who "owned" Peter. But if Harry's friendly associations were worrying on the one hand, they were unexpectedly helpful on the other.

Sirius had eventually discovered that the beast Crookshanks belonged to Harry's other close friend, a bushy-haired girl with

prominent front teeth. He had also learned that Crookshanks was much more intelligent than the average house cat. If he could somehow get the animal to trust him, and communicate what he needed, it might be an invaluable ally. After all, the thing lived in Gryffindor tower; surely it would know the password. It was definitely a possibility worth considering.

A week after Halloween, however, another event occurred which distracted Sirius from his plans. The Quidditch season had begun, and when he saw the entire school heading down to the pitch that morning, he could not resist sneaking in as Padfoot to watch.

To his delight, Gryffindor were playing against Hufflepuff. But that was nothing compared to Sirius's excitement at discovering that Harry held the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor team. *No surprise there, really*, he thought. *Prongs being who he was.* He settled into a fairly empty area at the back of the stands, with only a few quizzical glances aimed his way before the match began and no one had attention for anything but the action of the game.

The weather was dreadful and the players were soaked to the skin within minutes, random gusts of wind frequently forcing them off course. Thunder boomed ominously from the lowering sky. Sirius was glad of his coat of thick black fur, but looked longingly at the brightly-coloured umbrellas thrown up over huddled groups of students all around the stadium.

During an early time out, he caught himself checking to see if Remus had come to watch the match, but could find him in neither the Gryffindor stands nor the section reserved for Hogwarts professors. Remus had never been quite as interested in Quidditch as the rest of them, but Sirius was surprised that he had not come to see Harry play.

The electricity in the air from the storm seemed to heighten the excitement of the match, and Sirius found himself caught up in the action, as if he were swooping and diving along with Harry through the driving rain. He followed Harry with his eyes, tongue lolling in a grin of paternal pride. *You watching this, Prongs?* he thought. *I think the kid's got you beat.*

A flash of lightning illuminated the stadium, burning the shapes on the pitch into his retinas. Fourteen players, one referee, and a lone hooded figure near the entrance to the grounds. A wave of cold swept over Sirius. A Dementor. Another joined the first one, and then a third. Instinctively, Sirius threw himself down, cowering between the rows of seats. Wave after wave of cold assailed him, and he knew that more Dementors were arriving. He pressed himself against the cold, wet boards of the stands.

Suddenly a scream split the air. More screams and gasps quickly followed. "Oh my God!" shrieked a girl. "He's falling!" Sirius looked up, and indeed, far out across the pitch, a tiny, dark-haired figure had tumbled from his broomstick fifty feet above

the ground. The broomstick sailed away out of the stadium as a whine of fear escaped Sirius, and he tensed himself to spring, to run and help his godson, even though he knew there was no way he could reach him in time. As often happens when one witnesses something horrible and unpreventable, time seemed to slow for Sirius.

No, he realised; Harry was actually falling more slowly. Sirius pricked up his ears in surprise. Then he caught sight of a tall figure with a long silvery beard striding out onto the pitch. Dumbledore. And in a towering rage, from the look on his face. Sirius gave an inward sigh of relief. Harry was safe.

He made a hasty exit in the chaos following the Dementors' retreat. Even from the back of the stands he heard Dumbledore's ringing tones ordering the Azkaban guards back to their positions at the entrance to the grounds. Harry was lying unconscious on the soggy pitch, but there was nothing Sirius could do to help him. Perhaps he could find Harry's wayward broom for him.

As he left the Quidditch stadium, violent movement caught his eye. The Whomping Willow's branches were flailing in the storm, pounding the ground near its trunk. When Sirius went to investigate the source of its agitation, a flash of lightning revealed the remains of a broomstick, pulverised nearly beyond recognition. He could be of no help there either.

* * *

For days Sirius was wracked with guilt. He knew of course that the Dementors were responsible for Harry's fall and the subsequent loss of his broomstick, but still he suffered from the guilt felt by every parent who is unable to prevent some harm from befalling their offspring. He was frantic to get word of Harry's welfare, but knew he could not risk sneaking into the castle again so soon after his Halloween adventure.

Instead, he returned to Hagrid's hut, whining and scratching at the door, but of course Hagrid had been at the match and would not be back until things had calmed down. He could hear Fang barking on the other side of the door, and decided he would simply have to wait for Hagrid's return. He paced back and forth in front of the step, too worried to sit still. At last Hagrid came down from the castle.

"Ah, poor beast," he said, patting Sirius's head. "Yer soaked through. Why don' yeh come in an' sit by the fire?"

Sirius whined gratefully and entered the hut. He and Fang sniffed one another benignly, and he shook the worst of the water from his coat while Hagrid removed his own moleskin overcoat and knelt down to add wood to the fire. With the fire blazing merrily, Hagrid sat back on his heels.

"We had some excitement today at the Quidditch, boys," he said

to Sirius, Fang and Buckbeak. He shook his head. "Dementors on the pitch. Dumbledore was righ' furious, an' no wonder! Nasty, cold things. Scared poor Harry righ' off his broom. Though' me heart had stopped when I saw him fall. But Dumbledore says he'll be all righ'. Great man, Dumbledore." He shook his head again.

Sirius sighed with relief. Harry was going to be fine. Apart from the loss of his broomstick. Sirius remembered well the close personal relationship James had shared with his own racing broom. He could well imagine how he would have felt at being suddenly deprived of it. There would clearly be no fixing the broom, even if all the pieces could be retrieved. *I wish I could get him a new one*, he thought.

There was a scratching at the door and Hagrid opened it to reveal the ugly, squashed face of Crookshanks. Sirius began to have an idea.

* * *

It was not easy making Crookshanks understand what he wanted. It was clear from the cat's interactions with Hagrid that he understood human speech reasonably well, but Sirius was not sure he could risk changing in order to explain things. For one thing, the change would probably startle the animal and cause it to run off, and for another, he was not sure he wanted to blow his cover even in front of a cat.

He was at a loss to know how to communicate without speaking. There was only so much information one could glean from expression and body language, and very little of it included the dangers of an Animagus rat or the finer points of mail order. He wondered how dogs and cats normally communicated with one another before realising that it probably involved a lot of growling, barking, hissing and chasing, not to mention sharp claws. Not helpful in these circumstances.

He had never been terribly good at Legilimency or its opposite, Dictamency, the ability to project one's thoughts into the mind of another, but he could think of nothing else to try. Experimentally, he focussed his eyes and his mind on the furry, ginger lump curled up on the hearth rug. With all his might, he willed the cat to look at him.

For a moment it seemed not to be working, then the cat's head snapped up and it looked around warily, trying to identify the source of the disturbance. Sirius watched as the cat's eyes scanned the room, finally meeting his own.

He could sense the cat's thoughts. They were made up not of words, but of feelings and images. The thoughts he could sense now were imperious, but filled with curiosity. He sent imploring thoughts back, asking the cat for help. In return, he got only disinterest as the cat began to wash himself.

In desperation, he sent Crookshanks an image of the rat, colouring it with feelings of sneakiness and danger. That got the cat's attention. It sent back an image of the rat in Ron's hands with a delicate inflection of feeling that clearly made it a question. Sirius blinked in agreement, and sent again the image and feeling of *Bad Rat*.

Crookshanks rose and stretched, then deliberately approached Sirius, settling again much closer, though not quite touching the dog. The gesture was unmistakable. *Tell me more*, it said.

* * *

It has taken a while and been a frustrating process in places, but in the end, he and the cat had reached an understanding. Crookshanks had already known the rat was no good, and was pleased at having been proved right. He had agreed to bring it to Sirius alive, if he was able. He had also agreed to try and find a way to get Sirius into Gryffindor tower. That had been trickier to explain. The cat had no concept of "password", and it had taken several repetitions of the image of the Fat Lady's portrait and students speaking to it in order to make Crookshanks understand.

It has been simpler explaining about how to Owl Order a broomstick from the post office in Hogsmeade. He had only needed to indicate that he would need the cat to deliver a message to the building in the village which smelled of owls.

Sirius lay on the grass in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest, pleased with his own success. He now had an ally inside the castle -- inside Gryffindor tower itself -- close enough to Harry to keep watch when he himself could not. He felt more relaxed than he had since his escape from Azkaban. The problem with Peter was as good as dealt with.

But he had a new problem now. Winter was coming on swiftly, and tempting as the idea was, he knew he could not spend all of it in the cozy warmth of Hagrid's hut. He needed a secluded place in which he could be human from time to time.

It would have to be the Shrieking Shack, he knew. It would not be terribly warm this time of year, especially with no wand to light a fire, nor any of the odds and ends Muggles used to keep warm, but at least it would be shelter. He could go there and be human for a while and work on Remus's Christmas present.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

Snow began to fall the Saturday before Christmas. Sirius watched through chinks in the boarded-up windows of the Shrieking Shack as the light, soft flakes covered the village of Hogsmeade, making it look like a Christmas card. He was desperately jealous of the students as he watched them trickle down from the school into the town.

He had not realised how much he had missed snow until he saw it. As a boy, he had awoken each winter morning and eagerly looked to see if the ground had turned white in the night. But the snowfall he remembered best was Padfoot's first, during the winter of their fifth year.

As a black blur, he had raced across the moon-bathed grounds of Hogwarts towards the short, plump, blond boy and the skinny kid with dark, unmanageable hair and glasses who were helping a third boy down the castle steps. It was the night after the full moon, and Remus Lupin would have been more than happy to still be sound asleep in his bed, despite the insistence of his friends. That is, until he had seen the dog.

Snowflakes had caught in his thick dark fur, and he had slithered on the ice beneath his huge paws as he skidded and tumbled about with all the grace of an excited puppy. He had tried to pick up a mouthful of snow without success, then rushed back to the

tall, pale boy leaning heavily against his friends. He planted his front paws square on the boy's chest and stuck his ice-cold nose unapologetically against his neck, startling a laugh from him.

"Padfoot, it's only snow," Remus had chided affectionately, wrapping his arms around the dog's neck.

But it was not only snow. It was winter and Christmas and cold and excitement and singing and togetherness and presents and cozy fires and mulled mead. *Oh, what I wouldn't give to be down at the Three Broomsticks right now.* Madam Rosmerta's mead had always been the best.

It was cold in the Shack, and his fingers ached with it. They were cramped from working on Remus's present, but it was almost done. He looked proudly at the tiny wooden dog. He had carved it using a knife borrowed from Hagrid's hut. Only one final touch remained. He had thought long and hard about it, and he knew it was a dangerous thing to do, but he had made up his mind. Carefully, he raised the knife and cut a lock from the long tangle of his hair, then he threaded it between the carving's wooden jaws. Perfect.

He thought he might go back to Hagrid's to return the knife and see about maybe getting a warm meal. Also, he was expecting delivery of Harry's Christmas present any day now, and he should go check the spot in the forest which he had specified in the note which Crookshanks had delivered to the post office for

him.

He supposed he could have had the broom delivered directly to Harry's room, but it was often hard finding an owl to make a delivery on Christmas morning. Sirius also wanted to have a look at the broomstick. He had once made the Gryffindor Quidditch team, but his frequent absences from practice due to detention had cost him his place. Of course, James had missed almost as many practices, but he had had the natural talent to balance it out. Still, Sirius could appreciate a finely-crafted broomstick.

He had just exited the Whomping Willow and was heading for Hagrid's hut when he noticed the figure. Fortunately it was facing away from him or it would have seen him already. His thick black fur offered no camouflage against the snow. Quickly he dove into the shadows of the trees.

From his hiding place, he saw that the figure was Remus, and he cowered lower. Remus, it seemed, was also on his way to visit Hagrid. Sirius watched as the man waded through the snow, the collar of his threadbare cloak turned up against the icy wind. Remus knocked at the door of the hut, and Sirius was close enough to hear Fang's booming barks, but the door did not open. Hagrid was either up at the castle, or in Hogsmeade, enjoying a tankard of Madam Rosmerta's finest.

Sirius sighed. No hot lunch for him. He watched longingly as

Remus trudged back up to the castle, wondering what it would cost him to run after the man. Too much, he knew. Remus already knew he was nearby, and knew his disguise as well, but he was unlikely to just stand there if Sirius put in an appearance. He watched Remus's thin shoulders, hunched against the cold, until he disappeared through the doors of the castle.

To cheer himself up and take his mind off his growling stomach, he sought out the place where Harry's present was to be delivered. It had arrived. Excitedly, Sirius slipped forms, checking quickly to make sure there were no witnesses. He carefully untied the string and unwrapped the paper that protected the broomstick.

It was quite possibly the most magnificent thing Sirius had ever seen. He ran his hands over the sleek handle and wondered if he dared take it for a spin. Probably not, he decided regretfully. After all, it had been many years since he had ridden a broomstick, and he was not sure he would be able to remember how to control it. He could not afford any accidents. With a sigh, he tied it back into its paper, then carried it back to the Whomping Willow to hide it in the secret passage beneath the tree.

* * *

In the winter in Scotland, night falls early, but with snow on the ground and a nearly-full moon in the sky, it seemed almost as

bright as day. Sirius knew it was a risk to enter the castle again, but he felt in his heart of hearts that Christmas presents really ought to be delivered in person. He only hoped that his sentimentality would not get him killed.

At least most of the students had gone home for the holidays; all but a few windows of the castle were dark. He crept silently across the grounds, keeping to the shadows wherever he could, and reached the castle doors fairly certain that he had not been spotted. He flickered to human form to open the great doors of the castle and sneak inside.

The broomstick was too large to become a part of him for the purposes of transformation, so he had to half-carry, half-drag it in his jaws. He hoped he was not leaving tooth marks on the magnificent handle. The corridors of the castle were dark and silent, and to his ears the dragging broom made a tremendous racket as its paper wrapping scuffed along the floor, but no one came to investigate.

It seemed to take forever to get the thing up to Gryffindor tower, but he arrived there at last without incident. The Fat Lady's portrait had been replaced with that of a knight who rested with his head against his sleeping pony's side, snoring so loudly that he drowned out the rustling of paper as Sirius approached.

Quietly, Sirius placed the broom in front of the entryway, then became human just long enough to remove a piece of paper

from his pocket. *Please deliver to Harry Potter*, it said. He knew that the house-elves would be here in a few hours to sweep the corridors and stoke the fire in the common room. They would see that the package made it to Harry.

* * *

His paws made no noise on the castle's floors. He made his swift and silent way through the darkness, treading the same path he had followed on Halloween. His heart quickened with the knowledge that Remus was close.

But when he turned the corner in the corridor, the scent crashed over him like a wave. Not Remus, though his scent was there as well. Alcohol. Lots of it. The sharp scent stung his sensitive nose, and he sneezed. Someone nearby was very, very drunk, and he did not need three guesses to figure out who.

He paused outside the door. A narrow band of light showed under it. Remus was awake and drinking. That changed things. He had thought to leave the tiny carving on the nightstand and go, capturing only the briefest glimpse of his sleeping love. He wondered exactly how drunk Remus was. If he were a little drunk, his reactions would be slowed, and even if he sought to raise the alarm, Sirius might still have time to escape. If he were more than a little drunk Perhaps now would be a good time to explain things.

Sirius shrugged mentally and slipped into his human skin. He closed his eyes in prayer, commending his soul to whatever benevolent deity might be watching over him, and pushed the door open.

Remus stood with his back to the door, swaying as he fumbled with the gramophone.

*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 ...*

The music was unfamiliar to Sirius, but he recognised the style. If that was what Remus was in the mood to listen to right now, then he must be feeling sentimental. All to the good.

"Been enjoying yourself?" he asked softly.

Remus turned around so fast that he lost his balance. The sight of him blinking stupidly up at him from the floor was almost enough to make Sirius laugh. Instead, he strode across the floor towards the drunken man.

"Mumble mumble dreams, Sirius," Remus slurred. "Mumble mumble tonight mumble Erised mumble mumble. Mumble mumble girl mumble Lollia. I'd've called 'er Lollia. Or mebbe Erised. Mumble mumble mumble mumble"

At this, Sirius did laugh. He reached down and helped Remus to his unsteady feet. "Christ, you're drunk! What on earth are you rambling about? Erised? Girls?" He grasped Remus by the shoulders. Now was the moment, if Remus was not too drunk to take it all in. "Remus, I came to explain, if you'll let me. I need your help"

Remus continued to mumble unintelligibly about dreams again and batted at Sirius's hands on his shoulders.

"Poor Remus," he said ruefully. "What's become of you with no one to look after you?" He helped Remus over to the bed and knelt down in front of him, looking for some sign of alertness in his eyes. Finding none, he sighed. "I can see that you're in no state to hear me out." Instead, he began to help him off with his shoes.

"Stoppit!" said Remus, pulling away. "Just bugger off, Sirius!"

Sirius had to grab him again before he fell over. He sat back on his heels and put his hands up. "All right, Moony Old Man, I'm sorry. It just looked like you could use a hand."

"Sorry? You're *sorry?!'*" Clearly some of his coherence was returning. "You killed them, Sirius -- killed me too ... Mumble mumble mumble mumble Voldemort? Just get the fuck 'way from me! Mumble mumble mumble."

Sirius could have wept. He had known, of course, that Remus would see things this way, but hearing it from Remus himself was more dreadful than he had expected. But as Remus's eyes at last seemed to focus, the expression in them softened.

"M'sorry, Padfoot. Mumble mumble." There were tears in his eyes. "It's just been so mumble mumble mumble. Do'mind s'much."

Sirius reached up and took Remus's hands in his. A tiny fountain of joy welled up inside him at the sensation of being able to touch those hands again and not have them pulled away. "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." But he could see that Remus was quickly losing his ability to focus at all. Nothing would be resolved here tonight. "I could smell the liquor on your breath from all the way down the hall," he continued doggedly. "And, well, I knew there wasn't much chance of you turning me in if you were already that drunk. But I guess there wasn't much chance you'd understand either." He squeezed the rough and calloused fingers in his own and added softly, "How could I not come see you, Moony? It's

Christmas."

For a moment, it seemed as though Remus might say something. He opened his mouth, then changed his mind and closed it again, lying back on the bed.

Sirius sighed. "Poor Moony. I can see you're in no state for company." He bent his head and removed the other man's shoes and socks, then helped him fully onto the bed, lifting his head to place a pillow under it. He could already hear Remus's breathing relaxing into the rhythm of sleep when he leaned down and planted a brief kiss on his forehead, tucking the blankets up under his chin. "Good night, Remus," he whispered. "Merry Christmas"

*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 ...*

The record finished up, and Sirius quietly went over to turn it off. He then turned around, and with a sigh surveyed the wreckage of a room that had clearly seen a long night of nostalgia. He corked the remainder of the firewhisky and put it away on a shelf, rather wishing that he could have a drink, but knowing that as long as he was inside the castle, he must keep his senses sharp. Leaning down, he picked up the leather-bound book that had been lying on the room's only chair.

It was a photo album. Lovingly nestled between its pages were images he remembered well. James, Lily, a tiny baby Harry, Remus, Peter of course, and himself. It gave him a bit of a jolt to see himself in those pictures. He went over to the mirror that hung on the wardrobe door and held up a photograph of himself next to his face.

Not so pretty anymore, he thought. There were dark circles under his eyes, lines of hardship framing his mouth, and his hair was an unwashed tangle. He wondered fleetingly if those things would matter to Remus, but then roughly reminded himself that, compared with betraying his friends and getting them all killed, having messy hair was not likely to make much of a difference. He sighed and put the photo album away. What use was there in dwelling on the past? It was the future that mattered, after all. Tomorrow and the day after and next week and next year

He looked down at the man on the bed, a smile of tenderness lighting his face. Tomorrow Remus would wake with a dreadful hangover and some very confused memories of the night before. "That's no way to keep Christmas, Moony," he said softly. Well, there was something he could do about that, in any case, if only Remus stocked the right ingredients.

He opened a cupboard that smelled of green herbs and began sorting through the contents, trying to remember the recipe. Fortunately, everything he needed was there, including the powdered dragonbone and all-important chocolate.

The rich, spicy scent of the brewing potion soon overwhelmed the alcoholic fumes in the room, and Sirius triumphantly placed the steaming goblet on the nightstand where Remus would be sure to see it, first thing tomorrow. Next to it, he placed the small wooden box which contained the carved dog and its precious lock of hair.

He hoped Remus would understand. With a lock of hair, one could perform a number of spells. Entrusting such an item to another person, especially in the current circumstances, was a huge risk, but Sirius took it willingly. At least some of those spells might be able to prove his innocence, if only Remus knew to ask the right questions.

He knew he should go. Though it was winter and dawn was still a long way off, the house-elves would be coming soon to light the fires. But Sirius could not bring himself to leave just yet. Instead, he lay down on the bed next to the unconscious Remus and put an arm around him. Sirius buried his face in his neck and breathed his scent, sweeter than chocolate, more intoxicating than firewhisky.

It took Sirius a moment to realise that he was weeping. And when at last he did realise it, he was so surprised that it took him another moment to notice he was kissing the pale, lined face of the sleeping man beside him and murmuring, "Oh, Moony, Moony, Moony"

Fortunately, Remus was sleeping very deeply and did not even stir. But Sirius knew he must go now or risk disturbing that peaceful slumber. Filled with regret, he left the bed and closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN PLEASURES OF THE FLESH

Sirius tried to feel pleased that it was Christmas. After all, he was free and there was snow on the ground in the Forbidden Forest. He frolicked halfheartedly through the white drifts for a while during the few hours of wintery daylight, but only ended up feeling cold and wet and lonely.

He had considered keeping Christmas with Hagrid, but a few days previously, Hagrid had received the bad news that his Hippogriff, Buckbeak, would be put on trial for attacking the Malfoy boy. Sirius had observed Draco Malfoy while keeping an eye on Harry's Care of Magical Creatures lessons. He had also spent a great deal of time in Buckbeak's company, and was privately of the opinion that Malfoy had probably had it coming to him. Watching Hagrid get inconsolably drunk was not Sirius's idea of a merry Christmas, however.

As the weak sunlight began to fail and the chill in the air became pronounced enough to penetrate even his thick coat, he knew his only remaining option for the night was the Shrieking Shack. It would be cold and lonely but it would be shelter, and perhaps it still held enough happy memories to keep him company.

He dropped down into the secret passageway beneath the Whomping Willow and froze, sniffing the damp air. The tunnel smelled primarily of damp and decay, but his sensitive canine

nose picked out the other scent immediately. Remus. Remus had been here, and within the last hour. And tonight was the full moon. He had gone to the Shrieking Shack to change.

Sirius made his way down the tunnel at a brisk trot, stopping occasionally to sniff the air. He was unsure whether he would prefer to encounter Remus before or after moonrise. It had to be close; it had been nearly dark when he had entered the tunnel, but he could not yet smell the sharp animal musk of the wolf.

At last he exited the passageway. He hesitated then shifted forms. If Remus was still human, then it would be best to face him man to man, as it were. He could hear the creaking of the floorboards overhead. Cautiously, he took a step towards the stairs, and then another. The pacing in the room above stopped abruptly. Sirius froze. Then there was the sound of running feet, a door crashing open, heavy footsteps on the stairs.

Without pausing, Remus launched himself from the stairs directly at Sirius, knocking him to the floor and crouching over him, a steady growl coming from his throat. His eyes shone molten gold in the darkness, and Sirius knew the wolf was rising in him. The moment of change would be upon him soon. With a claw-like hand, Remus tore at the neck of Sirius's shirt, ripping the tattered fabric and leaving red welts where his nails raked Sirius's skin. And then the wolf surfaced and Sirius quickly shifted, growling right back at the great, grey beast.

Sirius was afraid. Not that the wolf would hurt him; the Halloween full moon had shown him that the wolf knew nothing of such human ideas as betrayal, and knew instinctively the difference between friend and foe. No, what terrified him now was the scent hanging in the air around the wolf. He remembered it well, but now it caught him off guard: the wolf meant to claim his mate.

Reflexively, he defended himself from the onslaught of teeth and heavy paws. He could fight, he knew, and maybe escape, but did he truly want to? He had allowed himself to imagine since his flight from Azkaban what it would be like when he found Remus and all was well between them again, and they had all the time in the world to rediscover one another. But not like this.

Remus had taught him long ago the painful lesson that the wolf would take what it wanted, consequences and the wishes of others be damned. Remus would be unlikely to remember the event in the morning, but Sirius would remember everything. Which would he regret more? Fighting and the slim possibility of escape? Or submitting to his demands? The wolf in this state was more unpredictable than usual; resistance could lead to injury or even death.

They were wrestling and growling and snapping at one another, but Sirius could tell the wolf was only playing, so far.

A choice between what one wants and what one knows one

ought to do is often a difficult one, but in this instance, Sirius had no time to make such a choice. While he was distracted by sharp, glistening teeth, a great grey paw collided with the side of his head, stunning him momentarily. Without thinking, he rolled over and tried to crawl away until he could recover his senses.

The wolf's teeth closed on his neck, and the great shaggy body rose over his own. He knew he could not escape, could not fight. Sirius closed his eyes and held his breath.

The wolf was neither slow nor gentle. He staked his claim on the black dog hard and fast, a deep growl of satisfaction rising in his throat. Sirius let out a yelp of pain and struggled weakly, but the teeth kept their grip on his neck, holding him still.

Sensation and memory flooded Sirius's mind, overwhelming him. This was neither the first nor the most unexpected time the wolf had dominated him like this. The occurrence had once been almost as regular as the full moon, and after the first shock, James and Peter had learned to give the two canines their space until the moment passed.

His heart pounded and his breath came in a stuttering pant. He had forgotten what it felt like; the excitement, the danger of being thoroughly and completely possessed by the wolf. Remus was reminding Sirius physically, almost brutally, that his soul was not his own, and Sirius gave himself up to that sensation, whining and howling with the joy of it.

* * *

The dog watched the grey man as he slept upon the hard floorboards of the Shrieking Shack, and wondered at the power of the wolf within him. How could a creature so capable of mayhem in the dark hours look so finished and vulnerable by the light of dawn? *Last night he half-killed me, and now he looks like he couldn't raise his own head if his life depended on it.*

He knew Remus would wake soon, and that when he did, he should be gone, but he could not make himself go. Remus needed him. How many mornings had the young werewolf awoken, cold, stiff, sore, and oh so grateful for the warmth of his own black fur? He took Remus's discarded wand in his mouth to prevent any accidents and settled himself beside the sleeping man, offering his body as freely as he had the previous night.

With a sigh, Remus turned towards him, wrapping an arm around Sirius's middle and burying his face in the dog's thick coat. All was wonderful peace and stillness for a moment. Then, with a sudden cry, Remus tore away, throwing himself backwards against the rough wall, looking around wildly.

His eyes met the dog's and he froze, then slowly rose to his feet, pale and shaking. Sirius also rose and faced the man, unsure what he ought to do. He shook himself. What he really ought to do was get out of here. But as he looked at the wary and

uncertain man pressed naked against the Shack wall, an almost human smile curved his lip. *I feel like I should offer to make him breakfast.* He wondered if Remus remembered or suspected anything of the previous night.

Regretfully, Sirius turned away. He paused in the doorway and, casting a longing look back at Remus, he placed the wand carefully on the Shack floor.

He left the Shack, regret weighing heavy in his heart. It should not have gone like that. It never went that way in his head. When he had imagined it, it had always included tenderness and soft words and above all, forgiveness. There had been none of that. It wounded him deeply that this first encounter had amounted to little more than meaningless sex, at least on Remus's side of it.

It had been far from meaningless to Sirius, though. He shook himself, unable to even think of the events of the previous night without all the same sensations washing over him again. His chest felt tight and he tried to ignore the growing arousal stealing over him once more. *Christ! Can I not even see the man without needing a wank afterwards?*

Well, perhaps after last night it was understandable. Whatever the wolf might have wanted of him, it would never submit -- never allow the black dog a position of power. Full moon nights had always left him with a pair of aching bollocks. The wolf

would tease him and use him mercilessly, but never allow him release.

Sirius sighed. *Well, it's not like I've got anything better to do today*

CHAPTER TWENTY DESPERATE MEASURES

With the passing of Christmas and the coming of the new year, the delights of winter definitely began to wear a little thin for Sirius. Snow was all well and good when it was fresh and new, but once the novelty has worn off, one begins to crave the coming of spring, especially when one spends most of one's time outdoors.

The only thing apart from spring that Sirius really looked forwards to was the resumption of Gryffindor's Quidditch practices. He was eager to see how Harry would handle his new broom. But in that, he was sorely disappointed. Harry was not riding the Firebolt. Instead, he was using an old broomstick that seemed to have trouble getting up to speed and listed slightly to the left.

What had gone wrong? Could it be that the house-elves had failed to deliver the gift? Then his heart sank. Someone must have realised who had sent the broom and confiscated it. Or perhaps Harry himself had been suspicious and turned it in. Sirius sighed at the thought of all those wasted Galleons. He hoped he had not frightened the boy too badly.

A new factor also arose following the Christmas holidays which complicated matters still further for Sirius: the frequent presence of Crookshanks' mistress in Hagrid's hut. Hermione visited

Hagrid several nights each week now, helping him prepare a defence for Buckbeak. Sirius thought it would be better for the time being if he avoided Harry's friends. After all, if Peter thought Sirius was getting too close, he might do something rash.

Once or twice, he was caught unawares, unable to make a timely escape when the girl appeared. On those occasions, he quickly hid himself in the shadows behind Hagrid's bed. Hagrid, wrapped up in his concern for the unlucky Hippogriff, took no notice of this odd behaviour.

Though hiding behind the bed was uncomfortable and inconvenient, he was interested to learn what kinds of people Harry kept close. This girl seemed intelligent but slightly bossy, with a deep-seated belief in playing by the rules. *Her sense of humour doesn't seem to be up to much either*, he thought critically. *But then maybe she's just worried about Hagrid*. All in all, she seemed the kind of girl with whom Sirius would have had no patience in school, but she reminded him more than a little bit of Lily, and that made him smile. He wondered exactly how much like his father Harry was in that respect.

Sirius was still working with Crookshanks in whatever time he could on a way to get himself into Gryffindor tower, but they had had no luck yet. The great ginger cat was very concerned about the threat the rat might pose to his mistress. The problem of communicating the password was more difficult than Sirius

could have guessed. The cat communicated with him primarily in images, of course, but the password was either too abstract or too complicated for Crookshanks to relay it to him. All exercises in this direction ended with both of them seriously frustrated, their fur standing on end.

Also making things difficult was Sirius's state of mind. His Christmas encounters with Remus had broken his ability to concentrate. No matter how hard he thought, or how much he plotted and planned, his mind would continually wander back to those stolen moments.

All right, he thought grimly. If I can't stop bloody thinking about the man, then what about thinking of ways he might help?

The only thing he could think was to write Remus a letter, explaining everything. He even had Crookshanks bring parchment and quill to the Shrieking Shack, showing the cat how to still the Whomping Willow by pressing a certain knot on its trunk.

But it was no good. He scribbled and scratched and wrote and crossed out, but the words would not come. There was simply too much to tell. How could he hope to explain in a way that Remus would understand -- that he would believe? At last he gave up the exercise in despair. *If only he'd use that damned lock of hair I gave him. That could tell him everything.*

Something happened in early February, however, which turned his frustration to fear. He was dozing in front of the fire in Hagrid's hut one morning when he heard a sound of grim satisfaction come from the direction of the table where Hagrid sat reading the *Daily Prophet*. Sirius raised his head.

"Listen ter this, boys," Hagrid said, speaking to the two dogs and the Hippogriff. "The Ministry o' Magic has given the Azkaban guards permission to perform the Dementor's Kiss when they catch that bastard, Sirius Black."

Normally, hearing Hagrid relate the latest news and gossip about himself only amused Sirius. Knowing how badly the hunt was going and how frustrated the Ministry was becoming helped his peace of mind. But this news froze the blood in his veins.

"Serves him righ'," Hagrid was saying grimly. "All them people he killed. An' Lily an' James, an' all! Still, them Dementors" He shuddered. "Hard ter believe anyone deserves that."

Sirius had to agree. The Dementor's Kiss was the most extreme form of punishment legal in the Wizarding world, and was reserved for only the worst criminals. If they had reserved that fate for him, he was as good as dead, unless he did something to clear his name, and quickly. The thought of his last conscious moments being surrounded by Dementors while one of them sucked out his soul through his mouth made him sick to his stomach. He felt trapped in the tiny cabin, and the air seemed so

stuffy he could not breathe it. He scratched at the door to be let out.

Once outside, Sirius filled his lungs with the cold winter air. He leapt off Hagrid's step and began to run. He ran as if all the Dementors of Azkaban were on his heels, not pausing until he was deep in the Forbidden Forest. At last he stopped, forcing himself to think clearly.

They'll never find me in this form, he reminded himself. Remus is the only one who knows, and if he hasn't turned me in yet But that was nothing to count on. Just because Remus had not yet told anyone that Sirius was an Animagus did not mean he never would. Then I must make Remus understand sooner rather than later.

He cursed Peter's name between panting breaths. *I'll kill him. I'll get the bastard to show himself, and then I'll kill him. Then everyone will see his body, they'll figure out the truth. Remus will know, and he'll tell Dumbledore, and -- and everything will be all right,* he thought lamely. *Won't it?* But he could not be sure, and for now, he could not trust anyone -- at least, not anyone human.

All he knew was that he must get into the castle, and soon. Only the truth would save him now.

* * *

Sirius barely slept over the next few days. Most of his time was given over to pacing, staring moodily up at the castle, and casting hunted looks over his shoulder as he imagined the Dementors creeping up on him to perform their horrifying Kiss. He wondered how Remus felt about the news, or Harry. He wondered if Peter knew -- if he were at this very moment gloating in Gryffindor tower, thinking his secret would soon be safe forever.

I'll kill him, he thought again, savagely. *They might take me afterwards, but if I kill him first, it won't matter so much.* But it would matter. It would matter most dreadfully if he lost his soul, and Remus and Harry never knew the truth.

He watched the students exiting the school and heading towards the Quidditch pitch, and wondered if the Dementors would appear again, or if Dumbledore's wrath would keep them at bay. His heart lifted, though, when he caught sight of Harry, swooping and diving over the pitch. He could barely see the boy at this distance, but could clearly see he was riding a superior broomstick. *He got it back!* Sirius panted with pleasure at the sight.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Crookshanks. The cat held a roll of parchment in his mouth and wore a very smug expression on his face.

No more write, Sirius thought impatiently at the cat.

Crookshanks looked still more smug, and replied with an image of someone standing in front of the entrance to Gryffindor tower and saying words, then the image of himself grabbing the list off someone's nightstand. He batted the roll of parchment towards Sirius, then began to wash himself.

Sirius looked at the cat in disbelief before snatching up the parchment and trotting deeper into the forest. Once he was out of sight of the preening cat, he shifted forms and eagerly unrolled the scroll. *I'll be damned! He got the whole bloody list!* The days of the week were printed on the left in neat, unadorned writing, and to the right of each one was a word or phrase.

Silently, Sirius blessed the clever cat and tucked the list into his shirt. The castle would be empty just now. He could find himself a hiding place, and make his move once night fell.

* * *

It was harder than he had expected to move around the castle by night without being seen. Almost every corridor, it seemed, contained a patrolling professor or prefect, alert for anything suspicious or out of place. He only just managed to avoid one such student who was fortunately distracted by Peeves before he could catch sight of the lurking black dog.

He managed at last to reach his goal without incident. In the shadows, he quietly shifted forms, then approached the painting of the knight which guarded the entrance to the tower.

Sirius was sweating, wondering if the painting had been instructed to raise the alarm, but the knight merely said, "Stand and unfold thyself, knave!"

Sirius bowed to the knight and replied in as calm and respectful a tone as he good muster, "Good evening, Sir Knight. I beg leave to enter yonder tower."

The knight seemed satisfied with this form of address. "Have you the password?" he inquired.

"I have, good Sir." Sirius drew out the parchment with flourish, and began to read down the list. When he reached "Craven Varlet", the knight bowed to him and the portrait swung silently open.

Sirius knew he should not linger any longer than necessary in the corridor, but the knight might be able to help him further.

He cleared his throat. "Before I take my leave, Sir Knight, would you perhaps be so kind as to direct me to the room where I might find the red-haired boy who owns a rat? I believe his name is Ron Weasley."

"Aye, I know well the lad you mean," replied the knight. "I am very much afraid, kind Sir, that I know nothing of the rooms within the tower. My place is here, guarding the entrance against those who mean my charges ill." He drew himself up self-importantly, then added conversationally, "I don't think the boy has the rat anymore. I haven't seen the beast for quite some time."

Sirius set his mouth grimly. "We'll see," he said. He bowed to the knight again and stepped through the portrait hole, closing the portrait silently behind him.

The common room looked very much as he remembered it. A bittersweet wave of nostalgia overwhelmed him as he viewed the remains of what must have been a very good party. Clearly Gryffindor had won the match today. *No doubt thanks to Harry and his world-class racing broom*, he thought proudly.

He caught himself staring at a sofa where he and Remus had once dared to He shook himself. He had work to do, and quickly. Hanging about waiting for someone to show up and raise the alarm would not do at all. He slipped forms again and quietly made his way through the celebratory detritus and up the darkened staircase that led to the boys' dormitory.

Sirius paused on each landing, sniffing around the edges of the door for the scent of rat and Harry. Regretfully, he passed by the room he had shared with his fellow Marauders and continued up

the stairs.

There. This one. He knew it right away, but sniffed again anyway, just to be sure. But the scent was unmistakable. Like all the other rooms opening off the spiral staircase, this room smelled of young male, but it also smelled of rodent and specifically of the one young male whose scent he had made sure to learn.

He shifted again, heart pounding, and slowly, silently turned the door handle. The door swung open with barely a sound. All around him, he could hear the steady breathing and snores of healthy young boys, deeply asleep.

Sirius's hands shook as he drew the borrowed knife from his belt rope. His goal was near. Peter was somewhere in this room, and by God this thing was going to be resolved one way or another here, tonight. But he must take him by surprise. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes and turned towards the bed he knew it must be.

With a sudden movement, he slashed aside the curtains. He raised the knife over his head as moonlight flooded the bed and the suddenly wide eyes of Ron Weasley. He had a split second to notice something was very wrong before Ron's scream rent the air.

He turned and fled, slamming the dormitory door behind him,

tearing down the stairs and out the portrait hole before changing forms and running flat out for the entrance hall and the safety of the night beyond. Only one thought existed in his mind besides that of escape: the rat was not there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD

The rest of that night and all the next day, Sirius cowered under a bush in the Forbidden Forest, shaking with reaction. It had been a near miss, and all for nothing. There had been no squeak of alarm, no reek of rodential fear, no telltale scurrying movements. The rat had most definitely not been there.

He knew he dared not enter the castle again. Even the portraits would be alerted to his presence after this. He could imagine how the whole thing must have looked from Ron's point of view. He shuddered. Where was the damned rat?

It was almost night again before he got his answer. Crookshanks came down from the castle, heading towards Hagrid's hut. Sirius barked once, sharply, to get the cat's attention and then pressed himself to the ground once more. The cat changed course and headed into the forest towards him. As he came closer, Sirius could see his ginger fur standing on end and a hunted look in his eyes.

Sirius had no patience for whatever the cat's troubles might be. Forcefully, he shot an image of the rat at Crookshanks, colouring it as an interrogative. In answer, Crookshanks showed him stained cloth and the smell of blood and an angry Ron aiming a kick at the cat.

Sirius sent another image, this time of a rat being eaten by a large, fluffy cat.

In answer, Crookshanks hissed and flexed his claws; an emphatic "no".

The dog shook his head in disbelief. *The bastard's faked his own death again!* And this time he had framed poor Crookshanks for his murder. Sirius growled. *He's doing the same thing to Harry's friends as he did to us when he killed James and Lily. Well, this time he's definitely not getting away with it.*

But there was nothing to be done for the moment but to lie low. People would be watching more carefully now than they had been before. It would behoove him to avoid being seen by anyone for a while. In the meantime, Crookshanks would search the castle for any sign of the wayward rat, and Sirius would search the grounds. As plans went, it was unsatisfactory, but there were no other options at present.

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It did not help Sirius's already-agitated state that spring chose that week to arrive. In Azkaban, the difference between the seasons had been almost imperceptible, and like all other things inside the prison, had showed itself in varying shades of grey. Sirius had nearly forgotten the rush of joy that came with the first appearance of snowdrops carpeting the forest floor, that first

hint of warmth in the air, the lengthening of the days as the sun stretched and yawned and cast pointed looks at the remaining patches of snow.

Spring fever thrilled in his blood, but under the circumstances, served only to make him jumpy and irritable. He wanted nothing more than to lie in the sun and let his worries evaporate with the snowmelt, but he knew he must not -- and indeed, was not able to -- relax his guard even for a moment, lest the rat slip by him unnoticed. If he could not enjoy the beautiful weather, he sure as hell was not going to let Peter do so either.

He wondered if anyone else could sense the oppressive feel of the air. Maybe Hagrid, bidding himself and Fang farewell as he and Buckbeak boarded the Knight Bus for the Hippogriff's hearing in London. Despite the huge man's optimistic words, Sirius could smell the fear on him. He whined as comfortingly as he could, and licked Hagrid's hand. He had no love for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures himself; their treatment of werewolves particularly set his teeth on edge. Sirius had grown fond of Buckbeak over the past few months, and he hoped that the Hippogriff might be pardoned, considering how weak the case against him was, but he could have wished not to have this extra helping of worry on top of his own troubles.

The following day marked a week since the rat's "death", with no sign of Peter either within the castle or without. At a loss of

what else to do, when Sirius viewed the students exiting the castle *en masse* for a day in Hogsmeade, he opted to tail them. If Harry was among them, perhaps Peter would take the opportunity to make a move outside the circle of Dumbledore's protection.

He followed unnoticed at a safe distance, steeling himself as he slipped past the Dementors, and padded down into the village. Slinking from building to building, he sought sight or scent of the skinny boy with messy black hair and glasses, but could not find him. He saw Hermione walking alone, and a few minutes later spotted Ron, also by himself. Harry was nowhere to be seen.

Sirius was just circling the post office when something rather like a feathery Snitch hit him between the eyes, making him blink and step backwards in surprise. On the ground before him lay a very small and slightly stunned owl with a minuscule scroll tied to its leg. The tiny bird recovered quickly, hopping to its feet and then taking off again with a shrill, whistling hoot. It circled Sirius several times before landing on his head, digging tiny talons into the dog's black fur. Clearly it thought that running headlong into another creature meant that they were now the best of friends.

Sirius shook his head irritably. He did not have time for tiny owls now, no matter how friendly they might be. For a moment, he thought he had caught Harry's scent. The last thing he needed

was for everyone in Hogsmeade to be staring at the very large black dog with the very small owl on its head.

He attempted to communicate this notion to the owl, which was so startled at the intrusive urgency of the thought that, with another high-pitched hoot, he tumbled to the ground again. Sirius looked imperiously down his long, canine snout at the bird. *Go away*, he thought at it.

But it was no use. Almost at once, the owl was in the air again, hooting excitedly and communicating by means of flickering bird-thoughts its desire to help.

Not now, Sirius thought fiercely. *Don't you have a letter to deliver? You can help me some other time.* The little owl whistled with joy and zoomed away. Sirius watched him go, buffeted and occasionally turned head-over-tail feathers by the strength of the spring breezes. *Can't hurt to have another ally*, he thought. *I hope.*

He turned, trying again to catch Harry's scent among the thronging Hogwarts students and Hogsmeade residents. *There.* He had the scent but could not pick the boy out of the crowd. Sniffing carefully, he edged closer to the street. The scent was stronger there, but still no Harry.

Then he spotted Ron again, still ostensibly alone, but talking rather conspicuously out of one side of his mouth, and casting

very shifty glances at the air beside him. Sirius had to stifle a bark of laughter, remembering a number of occasions on which Peter -- and probably himself as well -- had worn that very expression. *So Harry has James's old cloak.* He was pleased to know that it had been passed on to the boy; James had been extremely proud of the garment, which had belonged to his own father before him. Then a shadow passed across his thoughts. *I wonder if he's wearing it because of me?* The thought that James's son must be frightened of him filled him with sadness.

Carefully keeping himself out of sight, the dog slunk along the street, following the boys, visible and invisible, from shop to shop. He continued to sniff carefully for any scent of rodent in the air, but there was nothing save the occasional flickering of a mouse in the shadows.

After leaving Zonko's, the boys' footsteps carried them out of the village. Sirius found it much easier to avoid notice amongst the trees that lined the muddy lane, despite the early spring lack of vegetation.

On the hill above them loomed the dark outline of the Shrieking Shack, and Sirius felt a mild internal thrill at the memories it held, from weeks and years ago. Sirius's sharp ears caught the sound of voices even before the boys ahead of him could hear, and he hid himself quickly behind a bush, his attention turned to the three boys approaching the Shack from another direction. Draco Malfoy and his lackeys. Sirius growled low in his throat.

This boy was the cause of Hagrid's distress, and the presence of a Malfoy had never boded well for anyone for whom Sirius cared.

Unsurprisingly, Malfoy seemed to be gloating over his "victory" against Hagrid and Buckbeak. However, once he noticed Ron leaning, apparently alone, against the fence, he broke off and a nasty smile uncurled across his face. Sirius growled softly again as Malfoy proceeded to lay into Ron with remarks which echoed words Sirius could remember Draco's mother, his own cousin Narcissa, had used to mock Remus's shabby appearance and secondhand belongings during their own school days.

He was almost considering springing to Ron's defence when, out of nowhere, a clot of mud exploded against the side of Malfoy's face. Sirius had nearly forgotten Harry's presence. He remained hidden, panting with amusement as more muck scooped itself off the ground and leapt through the air at Malfoy and his cronies. *James couldn't have done it better.* And there had been more than one occasion on which this same cloak had been used for just such a cause.

When Harry's head appeared suddenly and the three Slytherins fled in terror, Sirius was forced to turn tail and flee as well, running for long minutes until he was well and truly alone. Only then did he throw back his head and howl with laughter.

* * *

By the time he returned to the village, it was late afternoon. He performed a quick sweep of the streets, but could not pick up Harry's scent anywhere. *Probably went back up to the castle*, he thought. It had occurred to him that perhaps the reason Harry had worn the cloak today was not because of himself at all, but rather because Harry might not have permission to be visiting Hogsmeade under the present circumstances. After all, he had detected no trace of fear in the boy's scent.

If Harry had been in Hogsmeade without permission, then the incident with Malfoy had probably sent him scurrying back to Hogwarts just as quickly as the Slytherins, in which case, he was safely within the circle of Dumbledore's protection once again.

Sirius took his time in returning to the castle. It was a pleasant early spring afternoon, though the presence of the Dementors at the gates chilled him. They paid him no heed, but still he quickened his pace as he passed them, shuddering with horror and loathing. He could not go near them without recalling with ice-cold clarity the chilly stones of Azkaban.

I'll never go back there, he told himself grimly. *I'll clear my name or they'll perform their damn Kiss. Either way, I've seen the last of that place.*

Few inmates had received the Dementor's Kiss during his time in prison, but he was aware that, once they had been drained of

their souls, victims were usually released to the care of their families or St Mungo's. With no soul to torment, they no longer held any interest for the Azkaban Guards.

The chill of the Dementors had penetrated his thick fur, settling into his bones, and the air was cooling as well in the soft spring evening. Perhaps he would go to Hagrid's; it was always pleasantly warm there, and he might even find himself a hot meal. He hoped that Hagrid would bring good news back from London, but he knew it was a faint hope at best.

Sure enough, it was a red-nosed and tearstained Hagrid who answered the door at his scratch. Sirius was quite taken aback when the huge man fell to his knees and gathered him into a despairing embrace as if he were little more than a puppy, sobbing into his thick black fur.

"It's horrible!" Hagrid's voice was muffled against Sirius's side. "Those bastards on th' Committee are goin' ter have poor Beaky executed!"

Sirius whined and wuffed sympathetically, but struggled out of Hagrid's grasp nonetheless. He looked around the hut and noticed Buckbeak lying in his usual corner, looking remarkably unimpressed by the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures' decision.

Hagrid blew his nose long and loud in a large checked

handkerchief. "They've let me bring him back here until they can set a date," he gulped. "I made a right mess o' things. 'S all my fault. That Lucius Malfoy" He collapsed into a groaning chair, sobbing into the handkerchief, unable to continue.

Sirius gave Hagrid's hand a token lick, then curled up under the table with a doggy sigh. He knew that with Hagrid in this state, he would find no dinner here. *Well, at least it's warm*, he thought, closing his eyes. Worn out by anxiety and lulled by the comforting confusion of warm animal scents in the hut, he quickly fell asleep.

* * *

The tension in the air surrounding the castle continued to mount as the days and weeks passed. This phenomenon was highlighted when Hermione, of all people, slapped Malfoy full across the face following a Care of Magical Creatures lesson during that first week of warm weather. Sirius was deeply gratified by the event, and even caught Hagrid smiling over it.

Serves him right, he thought smugly. *He should know better than to aggravate a woman during that time of the month*. He had learned long ago to keep his mouth shut when he scented the sharp increase in Lily's hormonal levels. He still cringed at the memory of one or two of the tongue-lashings he had endured at her hands.

As the world warmed and the Forbidden Forest waxed green with new growth, Sirius began to find it difficult to sleep or eat or even be indoors. Stillness was anathema; he wanted to be moving, doing, solving. And still there was no sign of Peter. He had apparently vanished without a trace. Sirius spent his days watchful and his nights prowling the grounds for any rat-like sight or scent. But there was nothing.

The days grew longer. The school cleared for the Easter holidays, and then filled again. Tension mounted. Sirius witnessed more than one fight break out in the grounds between students of rival Houses. Even the teachers seemed edgy. It felt as if the world were holding its breath, waiting for something to happen, unsure whether that something would be good or bad.

One night, a week after the students had returned from their break, Sirius cornered Crookshanks at the edge of the forest, demanding to know what was happening inside the castle. The cat shrugged mentally, indicating that all had been ominously quiet for some time. Sirius could see, though, that the cat looked just as frazzled by the tension in the air as everyone else. His wayward ginger fur was standing on end, and his eyes were round and haunted.

I need that rat, Sirius thought at him fiercely. *Alive, for preference.*

Crookshanks replied irritably that he knew that, but he had no

more idea where Peter was than Sirius did.

There must be someplace we've missed, he thought. Look again.

The cat laid back his ears in disgust, but agreed. He turned back to the castle, his bottlebrush tail twitching.

* * *

The following day, Sirius watched the school empty into the Quidditch stadium. He considered sneaking in to watch the match -- Gryffindor v. Slytherin was almost always worth seeing -- but he knew his inability to keep still would spoil his enjoyment of the match, and possibly draw unwanted attention to himself. He wondered if he dared attempt another incursion into the castle, and decided against it.

He thought about going to the Shrieking Shack, but what purpose would that serve? He had not visited the old house in more than a month. For a time after Christmas, he had gone there almost every day, knowing he should not, but hoping he would find Remus there. Their encounter after Christmas still haunted Sirius's dreams when he managed to sleep. But Remus had not come again. Sirius had seen no more sign of him than of Peter in the intervening months.

Sometimes he thought he would go mad with the knowledge that only a stone wall stood between him and the man he loved, and

yet he was as inaccessible as when Sirius had been in Azkaban. Before long the school year would be over. *What then?* Sirius wondered. *How can I track Peter across Britain if I can't find him at Hogwarts?* But perhaps over the summer he could go to wherever Remus went, and enlist his help -- make him understand. The thought gave him hope, but he knew that if he did not deal with the matter of Peter Pettigrew before the summer holidays came, he might never get another chance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DEFENCE

June came at last, and still there was no sign of Peter. Sirius began to despair of ever clearing his name. Between his anxiety over the continued presence of the Dementors, his frustration at the apparent failure of his quest, and the perpetual daylight that was summer in Scotland, he hardly slept.

The ever-present sunlight also meant that the castle grounds were frequently scattered with students enjoying the glorious weather. In consequence, Sirius was forced to spend much of his time lying hidden in the Forbidden Forest, which only served to increase his anxiety and frustration. Not that his regular nighttime patrols had turned up so much as a whiff of rat-scent.

He remembered with disgust the euphoria he had felt less than a year ago, upon his escape from Azkaban; how sure he had been that finding Peter and clearing his name would be a simple matter once he reached Hogwarts. He should have known better. A man who had spent twelve years well-hidden enough to convince the world that he was dead clearly knew a thing or two about not being found. And if Remus had not sniffed him out either But then, Remus had not been looking for Peter. There was not so much to distinguish the scent of one frightened rat from another.

It was early one bright morning in June that Sirius saw a familiar

figure exiting the castle. He had not seen Remus in nearly six months. Sirius could see the lines of tension in Remus's body even from his hiding place at the edge of the forest, and when Remus paused to sniff the air, Sirius flattened himself among the bushes, though he was sure that, even on the day before the full moon, Remus would not be able to scent him from so far away.

Apart from Remus, the castle grounds were deserted at this hour of the morning. Sirius watched warily as Remus looked around and then strode decisively towards him. He tensed himself to flee; if Remus came too much closer, he would definitely be able to detect Sirius's presence. But Remus stopped still well beyond the limits of his senses.

Sirius watched in puzzlement and then in growing pleasure as Remus drew his wand from beneath his robes and began using it to mold the landscape, removing chunks of earth, summoning water from the lake with a casual gesture, and at last calling a number of jars and heavy glass tanks filled with strange creatures down from the castle.

It had been some time since Sirius had seen magic being used casually and competently. He noted with approval that Remus's confidence in his own abilities had grown considerably over the course of the intervening years. At one time, Remus would have taken forever to do things the Muggle way, hesitating to use magic in case it got away from him. Remus had always been very conscious of his own self-control and its limits. But now

his hands moved surely, fingers curved in casual elegance as he nudged his strange landscaping experiment this way and that. Sirius had always loved those hands.

Sunlight was streaming across the castle grounds by the time Remus nodded with satisfaction and put his wand away. Sirius had no more idea of what he was up to than when he had begun, until several students exited the castle and slouched down the grounds towards them, looking exhausted and nervous, and then he remembered that it must be exam week. He suddenly realised he had never thought to wonder which subject Remus taught at the school.

It was with amusement that Sirius heard Remus welcome the third year students to their Defence Against the Dark Arts examination. *He's taken the Defence position, eh?* He wondered, as he had not for some time, if there were any truth to the rumours that the position was cursed, and whether Remus had been teaching at Hogwarts longer than a year. If the same pattern held true from his own school days, then Remus might not be back next year. Sirius's amusement faded him as he recalled the strange mishaps which had befallen a number of his old professors, including likable old Professor Seagram who had taught Defence during their sixth year, and who had left the school abruptly in late spring. There had been rumours of a scandal involving the professor and an unnamed Slytherin, though Seagram had claimed to the last not to recall the incident.

Sirius was not a superstitious man by nature, but it was undeniable that things tended to happen to those who took the Defence position at Hogwarts. He was assailed by worry that something might suddenly happen to Remus, and looked around nervously. But the sky was clear and the sun shone brightly on the pale, nervous-looking students and the Hogwarts lake. He could see nothing more dangerous than the few small creatures Remus had brought out for the examination, and none of these would prove deadly to an experienced wizard.

What if it's me? he wondered suddenly. *What if something's going to happen to do with me, and Remus will be forced to leave?* The thought gave him a tiny, internal twinge of excitement. The "curse" of the Defence position did not always bring harm to those who filled it. But then his thoughts darkened again. *What if it's Peter? He's proved that our lives don't mean much to him.* The thought that Peter might try to harm Remus brought a soft growl to Sirius's throat.

As the students, one by one, took part in Remus's obstacle course examination, Sirius's worry faded slightly, and he pricked his ears forwards with interest. Harry was among the students participating, and Sirius was curious to see a practical demonstration of his godson's magical skill. He could hear very little of what was going on, but he saw Remus beaming with pride and fondness as Harry completed the series of challenges, and the answering grin from Harry. A tiny weed of envy sprang up inside him at the rapport Remus and Harry clearly shared, but

he quickly stamped it out. He desperately hoped that one day Harry would look at him that way. And Remus too.

* * *

A hush lay over the Hogwarts grounds. The exam-weary students had long since trooped back inside. Remus had returned his creatures to the safety of their portable homes and carefully readjusted the earth and grass where they had been, until it was indistinguishable from the greensward around it. With regret, Sirius had watched Remus return to the castle, wondering when, if ever, he would see the man again.

Early afternoon sunlight streamed down into the grounds, and made Sirius sleepy in spite of himself. He felt his eyes drooping, felt the cool earth of the forest floor under his chin, and wondered if there was any point in staying. For all he knew, between his own presence and Remus's, Peter might have decided that Harry was not worth the trouble. He could be anywhere by now, an anonymous rat in the wilds of Scotland. If he had, then there was no reason for Sirius to stay, and plenty for him to follow Peter's example. No reason except one: this was where Remus was.

He had nearly drifted off when movement caught his eye. Three people were exiting the castle, making their way slowly down the grounds. As they drew closer, Sirius recognised one of them as Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic. He was puzzled as

to why Fudge should be visiting Hogwarts until he caught sight of the second man. Tall, straight-bodied and in his middle years, Walden McNair carried an axe on his belt. Sirius had heard Hagrid mention after the hearing that McNair had been appointed the Committee's executioner, and the identity of the third man confirmed their errand.

Abraxas Malfoy, chairman of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, looked unwell and much older than when Sirius had seen him last. Sirius bared his teeth in dislike. This Malfoy was perhaps his least favourite of the lot, having used his position to make Remus's life difficult, filled with red tape and pointless bureaucracy, dished out with a smile that never reached his eyes. The only one in the department who might possibly have been more unpleasant had been Malfoy's secretary, a toad-like woman who smiled blandly and pretended not to hear or understand when Remus had spoken to her, requiring Sirius to act as translator for the "unintelligible growls" of the "half-breed".

The three men disappeared into Hagrid's hut, and Sirius slunk closer along the edge of the forest, hoping to hear something of what was going on inside. His sharp ears could pick up nothing more than the low murmur of voices, however, even when he risked a short excursion into the pumpkin patch around back of the hut, where Buckbeak was currently tethered to the fence. The Hippogriff was oblivious to the fact that his fate was at that very moment being decided. He lay in the sun, his great orange

eyes half-closed. Sirius gave him an encouraging whine and a lick before retreating to the relative safety of the forest.

The outcome of the hearing was not long in coming, and when it came, it was clear to Sirius what had been decided. A great howl of anguish boiled out of the hut, and then there was silence. A moment later, the door opened and Fudge and the two Committee representatives returned to the castle looking grim.

Sirius put his head on his paws with a little moan of pity, both for Buckbeak and for Hagrid. As another creature who had been condemned for something which had not been his fault, Sirius had a great deal of fellow-feeling for the Hippogriff. He wished there were something he might do to save Buckbeak from his fate, but he could never manage the chain in canine form, and appearing in human form would be risking his own life. All he could do was remain nearby and hope that an opportunity for rescue would present itself.

When Hagrid came out into the pumpkin patch, a white-faced barn owl on his arm, Sirius trotted out of the woods to meet him. He waited patiently for Hagrid to release the owl on its errand before nuzzling the huge man's limp fingers.

Hagrid started. "Oh. It's you," he said dully, giving Sirius no more than the briefest glance. His thoughts were clearly elsewhere. He sat down heavily on the ground next to the Hippogriff. Buckbeak nudged Hagrid hopefully with his great

steel-coloured beak, and Hagrid produced a rather bedraggled-looking dead ferret from inside his coat.

As the Hippogriff happily devoured his treat, Sirius lay down on Hagrid's other side, and laid his muzzle on Hagrid's knee.

"Ah, ye're a good beast," Hagrid said, scratching Sirius fondly behind the ears with a surprisingly-gentle hand. "Yeh both are. If them Committee bastards can' see it Don' see how they can' see it," he finished thickly. He pulled out a large and very crumpled handkerchief, and blew his nose so loudly that a flock of geese were startled from the surface of the lake in the distance, and took to the air, honking just as noisily.

Hagrid had brought a bottle with him, to keep him company. He uncorked this now and took a long swig from it. Both the dog and the Hippogriff sneezed explosively as the alcoholic fumes hit them, and Hagrid managed a small, watery chuckle.

As the level of the bottle sank, and the warm summer sun moved across the sky, Sirius dozed, his head resting on Hagrid's knee, soothed by the rise and fall of the huge man's voice, by turns verbally abusing the Committee, telling Buckbeak what a wonderful Hippogriff he was, drunkenly wheezing out slow, sad songs of loss and regret, and occasionally lapsing into a woeful, sniffling silence.

Sirius dreamed. In his dream, he had found Peter. The rat's fear

was sharp in his nose, and the crunch of slender bones between his teeth and the coppery tang of blood seemed real and immediate. He laid the still and mangled creature at the feet of Remus and Harry, and they beamed at him with fondness and pride.

He awoke disoriented, the scent of the rat still in his nose, lying in the pumpkin patch. He shook himself and looked around quickly, sniffing the air, but the cacophony of animal musks which surrounded Hagrid's hut was too chaotic. He had probably just dreamed the scent along with everything else. Hagrid had gone, and Buckbeak was dozing lightly. An evening light was falling as the edge of the sun touched the trees of the Forbidden Forest, and the air was noticeably cooler.

Sirius had no idea how long he had been asleep, and cursed himself silently for letting his guard down. The Minister and the Committee representatives would be back at sunset to see to the execution, and he did not want them to see him, whether they recognised him or not. He looked warily up at the school just in time to see the great oak doors open and close. No one came out. A moment later, they opened again. It was not the Ministry embassy, but Harry and the girl Hermione.

Sirius quickly made for the cool, green safety of the forest, then turned back to watch. What he saw puzzled him. Harry and Hermione moved quickly and stealthily through the long shadows of the grounds, from time to time glancing nervously

over their shoulders. *Not so surprising*, thought Sirius. *Won't be the first time a boy and girl have sneaked out of Hogwarts on a summer evening.* But if that were the case, why were they not holding hands, or even walking close together? He followed their progress with his eyes as they made a wide circle around the greenhouses, down the grounds almost at a run, and past the Whomping Willow, entering the Forbidden Forest not very far from where Sirius lay hidden.

He could hear them moving through the brush. They were coming towards him. He lay very still. Hidden among the green leaves of summer, he would be little more than a shadow to them. Unless they stepped on him. He held his breath. They passed within five feet of him, unknowing, and stopped on the other side of a large tree close enough that he could hear their harsh breathing. What were they doing? Not what he had thought at first. He could smell the fear on them.

A faint knocking sound distracted him. He had been so busy watching Harry and Hermione that he had not noticed the arrival of the Ministry officials. But when he turned back to Hagrid's hut, he saw no one there.

"It's us," called a voice from the general direction of Hagrid's front door. "We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

Sirius started in surprise. That was *Harry's* voice! But Harry

was It was all he could do to stay still. *What in God's name is going on here?!*

Hagrid opened the door and stood back, saying something too soft for Sirius to catch, and then closed it again.

"This is the weirdest thing we've ever done," said Harry's voice off to Sirius's right.

"Let's move along a bit." Hermione's voice was breathless. "We need to get nearer to Buckbeak."

Sirius heard them moving away from him, wishing he could move silently enough to follow. He was desperately confused, and worried that some Dark Magic was afoot, targeting Harry. If he could only hear what these two were saying, they might offer him some clue as to the nature of the threat.

He could hear them arguing in hushed voices, but could pick out no more than snatches and stray words. A crash from inside the hut startled him, but not as much as what he heard next.

"I'm going to find Scabbers in a moment --" Hermione whispered somewhat shrilly.

A shriek of surprise rent the air, somewhat muffled by the walls of the hut.

"Hermione," replied Harry's voice, filled with barely-suppressed excitement, "what if we -- we just run in there, and grab Pettigrew --"

Sirius thought his heart had stopped beating. *Pettigrew. Peter Pettigrew. Here? In Hagrid's hut? And Harry -- if it was Harry -- knew about him?* The evening was growing stranger by the minute. Perhaps he was going mad at last. He had no real reason to believe Harry's astounding revelation to be true, but what if it was?

He could no longer hear the voices of the two children in the woods. All he could hear was his heart pounding, the blood rushing in his ears. Something was going on. Something to do with Peter. He must think clearly -- take decisive action -- figure out what the hell was happening.

The castle doors opened once again. This time it was the Ministry officials, and Dumbledore as well. A moment later, Sirius saw Hagrid open the back door of the hut, and usher the second Harry and Hermione, along with Ron, out into the dusk. He had a brief glimpse of something struggling in Ron's hands before the Invisibility Cloak settled over the three teenagers.

This was it. He must somehow intercept them on their way back up to the castle, but without giving Peter too much warning that he was coming. He cast his eyes frantically across the grounds, but there was very little cover between Hagrid's hut and the

castle doors. Only one tree stood on the open grounds of the school: the Whomping Willow. As his eyes fell upon the tree, he thought he saw a ginger shadow slide beneath its branches. Yes. He could hide between the roots of the tree. And if he hurried, he could get there long before the three children, hampered by the Invisibility Cloak, would reach it.

On padded paws, he slunk from his hiding place, and away from the other Harry and Hermione, who were too caught up in watching the drama of the Hippogriff unfolding to notice him. He quickly skirted the shadows along the edge of the treeline, then, gathering his paws under him, made a quick dash to the relative shelter of the Whomping Willow, approaching it from the opposite direction from the cloaked teenagers.

He had expected to have to avoid the tree's vicious branches, but evidently someone had already seen to the secret knot which stilled the tree. He sent a brief thought of thanks after the fluffy ginger hindquarters of the cat, which crept through the grass, stalking his invisible prey, bottlebrush tail twitching.

Sirius would have a few minutes before the tree regained its fighting spirit. He huddled in the opening to the secret passage, eyes fixed intently on the empty lawn before him. Somewhere in that space, there were three hidden children and a very imperiled rat.

Where are they? Sirius bared his teeth in frustration. Darkness

was beginning to fall, making it even harder to pick out such things as grass crushed flat by a passing footfall. He heard a rustling sound -- *Is that them?* -- and then a cry of pain, quickly stifled. Movement caught his eye, and he noticed Crookshanks slinking through the grass. Could the cat sense them in some way that he could not?

There was another cry, and a sudden explosion of movement. Crookshanks leapt at something, moving faster than Sirius would have believed possible. Ron appeared out of nowhere, and took off after the cat at a dead run, shouting at the top of his voice. Sirius was finding it very difficult to sort out in the gathering darkness, but he thought he knew what the cat was doing: Crookshanks was herding the rat towards the Whomping Willow. *Good cat!* he thought, and prepared himself to spring.

Harry and Hermione had appeared, chasing after Ron. Before they could come within reach of the tree, though, Ron had caught up with Crookshanks and tumbled over him, making a wild grab in the darkness. "Gotcha!"

Harry and Hermione were looking at Ron and Ron was entirely focussed on subduing the squeaking lump in his pocket. It was now or never. Commending his soul to what he hoped would prove to be a benevolent deity, Sirius sprang from his hiding place and rushed at the three huddled figures.

Three pairs of eyes were suddenly on him, three mouths hung

open in shock, but there was no room in Sirius's mind for any thought beyond that he must get to the rat -- it must not elude him again. He pushed past Harry, half falling over him with the inertia of his movement, and seized Ron's arm in his jaws, pulling the boy roughly off his feet.

The other children tried in vain to grab hold of him, but he dragged the redheaded boy and his rodent cargo relentlessly back towards his hiding place. In the midst of their struggle, however, the Whomping Willow came back to life, and Sirius only narrowly avoided being knocked insensible by its flying branches. He had to get to the Shrieking Shack, he knew. Even a rat would not be able to hide there for long, and the whole place had long ago been sealed off, both magically and physically, by Albus Dumbledore. There was only the one entrance. Peter would not escape again.

At last he tumbled into the cool dark of the secret passage, dragging Ron after him. There was a moment of resistance, a sharp cry in the darkness, and then Ron went limp. Sirius got a better grip on his arm and began to make his way resolutely down the passageway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE TOGETHER

Time was behaving strangely in the passageway. It shuffled, it plodded, it occasionally rushed past in great, breathless lumps. As Sirius dragged the semiconscious form of Ron Weasley through the tunnel beneath Hogwarts, he felt at once as though the journey took seconds and as if he had spent all his life trying to reach the end of it. The horrors of his past fell away, as did any thought of the future. All that mattered was the present and what would happen next.

He burst through the trapdoor into the dusty downstairs room of the Shrieking Shack, dragging Ron behind him. Impatiently knocking aside broken furniture from the disorder in his path, he dragged the boy ungently up the uneven wooden staircase.

He did not pause to think why the confrontation must take place in that upstairs room. If he had, he might have rationalised that the farther Peter was from the only way in or out of the house, the easier it would be to prevent his escape. But that was not it at all. It must be here, in this safe and sacred space, surrounded by memories of love, devotion, passion -- all the things which Peter had taken from him -- all the things he meant to take back.

The light inside the house was very dim. It filtered through the cracks between the boards covering the windows from the summer night outside. At this time of year, even at midnight, a

twilight glow suffused the world, and even this windowless room would never be fully dark. *Still*, thought Sirius, *it would be nice to have a little light to see by.*

He deposited Ron's limp form next to the bed and began nosing about hopefully, searching for a wand. He could smell rodent fear, strong in his nostrils, but the rat had clearly burrowed deep into the boy's clothing. In the darkness, with Peter in his present form, it would be nearly impossible to locate and remove him.

At last he found what he was looking for in Ron's back pocket. He silently shifted forms and drew out the slender wooden rod, whispering his first spell in almost thirteen years. "*Lumos.*"

The boy on the floor flinched as the light struck his closed eyes, and turned his head away.

"Where are you?" Sirius's eyes swept hungrily over Ron's body, searching for signs of the rat's hiding place.

At the sound of the voice, Ron's eyes flew open, and then went wide with horror. He scrambled backwards, pressing against the bed, heedless of an obviously broken leg, away from the filthy, wild-eyed man bending over him.

"Y-you get the hell away from me!" he cried, his voice cracking and squeaking with fear. His eyes cast wildly about the room for something -- anything -- he might use as a weapon, but his wand

was in Sirius's hand and there was nothing here that would be of any use against that.

"The rat," Sirius croaked eagerly. "Where's the rat?"

"You'd better let me go!" Ron shouted, clearly hoping that sheer volume would make him sound braver. "My friends will be along in a minute, and --"

"Do you really think so?" Sirius asked curiously. He hoped they would, but it would take a special kind of courage for the two young wizards to pursue their friend to the Shrieking Shack in the darkness, not knowing what lay at the end of the tunnel. "Would they really do that for you? You think they'll get past the Whomping Willow and crawl through a dark tunnel after a large, vicious dog?"

"Yes!" Ron declared loudly. "They're my friends. And they've faced worse than you before. They -- they'll kill you if you kill me! Just you see if they don't."

"I'm not going to kill you, boy," Sirius said impatiently. "I just want the rat."

Ron goggled at him, uncomprehending, and in that moment of silence came the creak of a floorboard somewhere downstairs. Man and boy froze. Then Ron opened his mouth wide and drew a deep breath.

"Hush!" Sirius hissed before he could call out. He pointed the wand straight at Ron's chest, and Ron seemed to reconsider his plan of action.

Sirius moved quietly to the door and peered out through the crack. He could hear soft footsteps in the room below, but could see nothing in the darkness. Then two wandlights appeared at the foot of the stairs, illuminating two pale, frightened faces and two sets of wide, fearful eyes. Harry and Hermione. Sirius felt his heart squeeze with pride at their bravery. He flattened himself against the wall and waited, eyes fixed on Ron in a look of warning.

Sirius held his breath as an almost tangible silence descended over the room. Then the door burst open and Harry and Hermione flew to Ron's side, their hands reaching out to him, their voices filled with concern. Ron's eyes never left Sirius.

"He's the dog ..." he muttered through teeth gritted in pain. *"He's an Animagus"*

As Sirius reached to shut the door, Harry spun towards him, eyes wild, wand in his fist. But Sirius was ready. *"Expelliarmus!"* Harry and Hermione's wands arced gracefully through the air towards him, dropping neatly into the palm of his hand.

The magic came back to him naturally, despite years of disuse.

Things were finally going right for Sirius. He had finally found Peter. Harry was here and would have to listen to him -- have to believe at last. He felt as if a fire had been lit inside him, driving back all fear and despair. Now they would know. Now they would have to.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said approvingly. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful ... it will make everything much easier"

Something moved in Harry's eyes. A flash of cold fury that made Sirius take a step backwards, and brought Ron and Hermione to their friend's side, holding him back.

Ron was pale and sweating, but the arrival of his friends had strengthened his resolve. "If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us, too!"

Sirius felt a hand clench around his heart to see the level of devotion Harry inspired in his friends, just as James had done. But to see such hatred directed at him from a face that so resembled James as well was almost more than he could bear.

Instead he looked at Ron. "Lie down," he said. "You will damage that leg even more."

But the red-haired boy stubbornly kept his feet, leaning heavily

on Harry for support. "Did you hear me?" he said. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

"There'll only be one murder here tonight." Sirius smiled in grim anticipation. Peter would be revealed. The truth would be told. Sirius would at last be able to clear his name and present Harry with the body of the one on whose head the deaths of James and Lily Potter lay.

"Why's that?" said Harry angrily, stepping forwards. Ron and Hermione were barely able to restrain him. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

Sirius winced. Hermione was begging Harry to be quiet. Ron was simply hanging on like grim death, face white beneath his freckles, lips pressed together in pain. But Harry was having none of it.

"HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!" he yelled.

Sirius had no time to raise a hand in his own defence as Harry wrenched away from his friends and threw himself at Sirius. He was dimly surprised at the strength Harry possessed for his age and size before a hard-knuckled fist rocked his head sideways and he fell, bashing his head against the wall. He could not break Harry's grip on the wrist of his wand hand, but threw up his free hand, trying vainly to fend off the pummeling blows.

This was not right. It was not supposed to go like this.

"No," he muttered. "I've waited too long --"

At last his flailing hand closed around something. Harry's throat. His fingers tightened as he made a move to push Harry off of him, and he saw the boy's eyes bulge slightly an instant before Hermione's foot connected with his ribs. He gasped and let go of Harry. Then something -- Ron -- landed heavily on his wand hand. His fingers sprang open with the shock of the impact, and the three wands skittered across the floor into the shadows.

For a moment, all was darkness and confusion, grunts of effort and cries of pain. Then, suddenly, it was over. The struggling teenagers let go and backed away from him. Sirius lay gasping on the floor, eyes slightly unfocussed. A small light floated into his field of vision, and he stared at it, trying to puzzle it out. At last the tip of a wand came into focus, illuminating the flushed face of vengeance beyond it.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered hopelessly. He saw no way to stop the boy, and if he died, the truth would die with him, and he would be condemned as a traitor until the end of time.

"You killed my parents." Harry's voice shook with cold fury.

Sirius could not look away from that face as the sadness bloomed inside him, sending shoots and tendrils out to the

extremities of his body. He remembered James's face, lit with excitement and laughter as they explained the Secret-Keeper switch to Peter. He remembered Lily's eyes, so trusting, and her smile, so brave. In a way, it had all been his fault.

"I don't deny it," he said at last, softly, then rallied himself. "But if you knew the whole story --"

"The whole story?" Harry's voice was incredulous. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know!"

I'm dead, he thought bleakly. *He's really going to do it*. "You've got to listen to me," he pleaded with James's avenging ghost. "You'll regret it if you don't ... you don't understand"

"I understand a lot better than you think," Harry gritted at him between clenched teeth. "You never heard her, did you? My mum ... trying to stop Voldemort killing me ... and you did that ... you did it"

Something hit Sirius in the chest. For a split second, he thought Harry had cursed him. But then he saw the outline of the fluffy, ginger cat, dark against the wand's light. Crookshanks sat smugly and defiantly in the middle of his chest, as if daring Harry to do something about it. He could not bear the thought of this noble beast being harmed for his sake, after all the help Crookshanks had provided him. Sirius tried to push the cat away, but he would not go.

Harry stood over him, hesitating, clearly not wanting to harm the animal, and unsure how to proceed. But not for long. Sirius saw the resolve steal back over the boy's pale face, saw the wand raise slightly. And still nothing happened. Utter stillness hung in the air as the man and boy stared into one another's eyes.

A sound. Footsteps on the floorboards below. Hermione gasped. Harry's eyes flickered towards the closed door. Sirius felt his heart skip a beat. *It can't be ...* Could it? He raised his long, sensitive nose and delicately sniffed the air. There was no way to be sure. The scent of frightened teenagers, cat, rat and dog were strong in the room. No chance of picking up a scent from downstairs on the other side of a closed door. And yet, who else knew the way into the Whomping Willow? Who else might guess where they were?

Hermione's shriek broke the stillness in the room. "WE'RE UP HERE! WE'RE UP HERE -- SIRIUS BLACK -- *QUICK!*"

Forgetting all about the vengeance-maddened boy holding him at wandpoint, Sirius moved convulsively towards the door, just as it burst open in a shower of red sparks, followed by the agitated figure of Remus Lupin.

Remus, golden eyes flashing around the room, searching, seeking, finding Sirius. Their eyes met. Stillness.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Remus cried. Every wand in the room leapt to his hand as he stepped into the room, but his eyes never once left Sirius's face. His expression was unreadable.

"Where is he, Sirius?" Remus's voice shook. With an inaudible click like the turning of a key, Sirius's world tumbled back into place, and everything went out of focus except for Remus. Remus was real. Remus was here. And Remus *knew*.

It took Sirius a moment to regain enough self control to raise a hand and point in the direction of Ron and his treacherous cargo.

"But then ..." Sirius stared at Remus's bloodless lips as they murmured fragments of thoughts, putting together the truth at long last, golden eyes going wide with understanding.

Harry was speaking, but neither Sirius nor Remus was listening, and the boy's question died in his throat as Remus strode across the room and pulled Sirius to his feet and into a warm embrace.

The rest of reality slid away, as if it were no more substantial than a morning mist. Remus was here. Remus -- awake -- sober -- touching and touching him again, looking into his eyes. Surely the children would notice. How could they not notice? *I don't bloody care if they do.*

Remus was here and understood, and now, together, they would draw Peter out and kill him. Sirius did not have to think any

longer -- did not have to plan or defend or explain. Remus would take care of things, like he always had. Nothing else mattered besides that.

Remus, talking -- explaining. How he loved the sound of that man's voice! Soft, powerful, compelling, humorous -- but now with a ragged edge and a trace of bitterness which Sirius sorrowed to hear. And how he moved his hands, gesturing as he spoke. Sirius loved that too. Graceful movements, eloquent and nuanced. Expressive hands made for speaking, for magic, for pleasure.

The children, disbelieving. Their voices a confused babble, out of which Sirius could pick only the occasional word. Sirius's gaze fastened upon the squirming lump of terrified rodent. Himself, impatient. *Do it now!* Remus's arms around him, soothing, gentling him with a touch and he strove towards the boy holding the rat.

Remus's soothing words telling that wonderful story -- the tale of the Marauders' years at Hogwarts. His spirit quietened to listen to the soft rise and fall of Remus's words, his eyes still fixed on the rat. Remus speaking of the Prank -- the one that had sent Severus Snape into the Whomping Willow -- speaking of it as coolly and evenly as of everything else, betraying no hint of the horror, the anger, the passion that had followed in its disastrous wake.

Snape. What was he doing here? He had no place, no right. Snape -- threatening -- sneering -- threatening Remus. *Not on!* A wand, black and menacing in his face. He would do it, Sirius knew, given the slightest provocation, and then who would help his poor Remus?

The children -- speaking -- arguing. Arguing with Snape. *That's good, isn't it?*

Snape arguing back. *Stupid git.* Threatening. A kiss. Dementors. *He wouldn't.* But he would.

The children, defending Remus. Angry words. wands pointing. Snape sneering. Snape on the floor -- bleeding -- unconscious. The children's stunned faces. Remus -- Remus choking -- struggling against ugly, black cords. His own hands, moving over Remus's flesh, loosening, helping, soothing.

The children, suspicious, Maybe -- *maybe* -- beginning to believe at last. Remus explaining, explaining, compelling belief, fighting on the battlefield of logic as on the battlefield of love, his mouth and hands his only weapons. Those eloquent hands! That beautiful mouth!

And when the memories threatened to overwhelm him, drowning him in tears, Remus was there to protect him. Remus knew when enough was enough and it was time to take action. Bring the enemy out in the open. Yes. And then destroy him.

"Together?"

"I think so."

A flash of light. Peter standing before them, sniveling, pathetic, disgusting, terrified. Remus, toying with him. *Toying with him?* A look. Remus, flushed but in control. Sirius relaxed. *It's all right.*

Peter, accusing -- cajoling -- convincing no one. The children, looking disgusted. *I am free.* A look at Remus. *We are free. Together? I think so.*

The feelings washing over him in a rush. Waves of anger, hatred, relief, fear, calm, lust, rage, gratitude, contempt, righteous anger. Overwhelming completion as belief finally dawned in Harry's eyes.

Peter, begging -- pleading -- to each of them in turn. Finding no quarter. Reaping what he had sown.

"Shall we kill him together?"

"Yes, I think so."

Peter, confessing. Confessing before witnesses -- before Remus and Harry and his friends. His living presence was proof enough

of Sirius's innocence, but the confession was sweet to hear, although the facts of the crimes choked him with rage.

A touch. Remus's arm against his own. Conviction and execution. Triumph and closure. And Harry -- Harry standing in the way.

Harry begging mercy -- no, justice -- for the creature who showed none for James and Lily. But it was his right. Harry's right to say, as much as his or Remus's. More, perhaps, for what he had lost had been taken from him before he had known what it was. *All right.*

Peter, bound and shackled to Ron and Remus. Snape, floating comically -- grotesquely -- head lolling.

Cool night air in the tunnel, filling him, exhilarating him. His freedom. Remus's trust. Harry's smile. Rewards enough for a lifetime. James and Lily's son, to come into his home and be his son as well. And Remus's too. Remus's too.

The open air of the Hogwarts grounds, lifting him -- buoying him up on the summer night's air. Shifting light, flowing silver across the grounds, illuminating. Chilling. Catching Sirius's breath in his throat. *No.*

"Run," Sirius whispered to the children. "Run! Now!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR KISS AND TELL

Golden eyes. Toying with his prey. Sirius should have known -- should have realised. Somehow, in all the excitement, he had managed to forget that tonight was the full moon, and apparently so had Remus. Without hesitation, Sirius transformed and flung himself at the great snarling wolf. In the presence of the children, the wolf would think of nothing save prey -- the hunt and the kill. It was up to Sirius to draw him off long enough for Harry and his friends to make an escape.

Heedless of the fact that the wolf was both larger and stronger, he clamped his jaws about its neck and wrenched it backwards. The wolf turned on him, snarling, teeth bared, and they were at each other's throats, ripping, tearing, snarling, growling. Sirius barely felt the werewolf's teeth and claws sinking into his flesh. All he knew was that he must keep fighting. Survive if he could, yes, but that was not as important as fighting for as long as he must.

The wolf threw him off, and Sirius landed hard on his back, knocked breathless by the impact. It was over. The wolf would go for his exposed throat and tear it out before he had a chance to recover.

But instead, the great grey beast paused, scenting the air, long muzzle pointed in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Surreptitiously, Sirius turned himself over and tensed, ready to spring in whatever direction seemed likely to do the most good. Instead of returning to the fight, however, or throwing itself upon the children, the wolf raised its head and gave a spine-chilling howl that reverberated in the buried unconscious all living creatures possess, which still knows itself to be prey. And then the beast turned, all grey shadows and silver moonlight, and loped off into the trees.

Why? More prey? Who would be abroad in the forest so late at night? But then he remembered the other Harry and Hermione he had seen, and a chill washed over him. The night had still more mysteries to reveal, but now was not a time to ask questions.

Harry's frantic voice interrupted his thoughts. "Sirius, he's gone. Pettigrew transformed!"

Sirius rose, shook himself, and set off in the direction Harry had indicated. The boy was right. Finding the rat was the important thing. Without Peter, how could he hope to clear his name with the Ministry? He must find the rat if he could, and hope that whatever it was that the werewolf had scented was armed and knew how to climb trees.

He galloped across the moonlit castle grounds, blindly following the faint scent of rodent fear hanging on the chilly night air. The air grew colder and colder as he approached the lake, and he was

dimly aware of the crunch of frost beneath his paws, but there was no time to think of that. He must find Peter before it was too late, before he escaped, before --

Sirius skidded to a halt. Lying half-submerged on the shore of the lake, empty eyes staring up into the face of the full moon, lay the body of Remus Lupin. He yelped and shifted form, scrambling on hands and knees towards the still, pale figure.

No! his mind kept insisting. *No, it can't be! It can't! It's the full moon!* Even if Remus were to die tonight, he would die a wolf, and the bones of the wolf would lie in the ground. But Sirius's silent denials did not make the apparition seem any less real. He reached a hand out to touch the face, so beloved -- to gather the body into his arms -- but his hand passed through the pale flesh as though it were mist, and as he looked up, he saw them standing all around him.

At first he thought he knew them by their faces -- dead friends and disapproving family, cold eyes filled with judgment -- but then he saw that these were merely shadows. Dozens of forms surrounded him, with more drifting in all the time. Black cloaked, cold and deadly, the breath rattling beneath their hoods. The Dementors of Azkaban had caught up with him at last.

"*Nooo,*" he begged his merciless captors. "*Noooo ... please*"

But he knew it was hopeless. Their trap had been neatly laid,

and he was caught. He tried desperately to remember how to change, but Padfoot had left him. He was alone, wandless, and completely at the mercy of beings who had none. He could feel their exultation as they drained away all the feelings of triumph and relief that had possessed him that night. All was lost. It was too late. Dark spots swam before his eyes as cold breath caressed his cheek, and he knew no more.

* * *

Voices raised in argument. He could hear them, but could make no sense of what they were saying. Then he heard his own name. *Black*, and the names *Lupin* and *Potter*. What had happened? Had a prank gone wrong? He lay on hard stone, his hands bound tightly behind him, a gag tied hard between his teeth. His body throbbed painfully in at least a dozen places. And then he heard another word he recognised: *Dementors*.

Dementors. Dozens of them. Crowding close around him, and the phantom of Remus's death laid out before him in the moonlight.

He must have made some involuntary movement at the memory, for one of the voices nearby said, "It looks like he's waking up. Do you want me to stun him again, Headmaster?"

"That won't be necessary, Severus," replied another voice, gently but firmly. "I'm quite certain we are in no danger for the

moment. Black is already bound and unarmed."

Sirius kept his eyes closed. He had no wish to see the expression of sneering victory on Snape's face. It was enough to hear it in the man's voice.

"I wish you'd have let me take him to my office instead, Headmaster," he was saying. "The lies he's been spewing I want to hear him confess before the Dementors have him. I happen to have a bottle of Veritaserum which I think should do the trick."

"Do you really?" said a third voice. "How fascinating! I've never seen it used. The Ministry has very strict guidelines regarding its application, you know. But I think that under the circumstances, you're quite right. We should really have a confession before the Kiss is performed. For form's sake, you know."

"Severus," said Dumbledore, "if you and the Minister would be so kind, I would prefer you to visit the hospital wing. See how the children are faring and bring back some of that lovely soothing ointment Poppy makes. You might also want her to have a look at that cut, Severus. It looks painful."

Fudge gasped. "You're not actually going to -- to -- tend Black's wounds, surely Headmaster?" There was horror and revulsion in his voice.

"Indeed, I intend to, Minister. I am Headmaster of this school, and as such, have the authority to say how those within its walls shall be treated, even prisoners. Once the Dementors arrive, I shall not stand in their way, Minister, but until that time, please allow me to do with this man as I see fit. And now, I want a word with him, and I wish for the two of you to leave us in privacy."

Some outraged spluttering from the Minister followed, but Snape only said icily, "As you wish, Headmaster."

Sirius heard a door open and close. For a moment there was silence, then Sirius dared to open his eyes. Albus Dumbledore was looking down at him, wearing a speculative expression. Then the old man sighed, clapped his hands sharply once, and Sirius's bonds fell away. Sirius was so startled that he could do nothing but continue to lie on the floor, staring up at the headmaster.

At last he said in a very hoarse voice, "Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I was hoping you might share a drink with me first, and that you might illuminate one or two points for me. If you wish to kill me afterwards, I shall worry about it then." He turned away and bent to open a low cabinet, out of which he drew a bottle and two small glasses.

When he turned back, Sirius was still lying on the floor. "I think you'll find the chairs rather more comfortable, if small."

Sirius awkwardly rose to his feet and rubbed a couple of tender places, looking around the room for the first time. Now that he was standing, he noticed the oddness of the furnishings. Everything in the room was small or low to the ground.

"Where are we?" he asked in puzzlement.

"We are in the office of Professor Filius Flitwick, Charms master of this school. I think you will recall him? Short chap. Easily levitated. But I seem to recall he took it well." There was the twinkle again. Clearly the headmaster remembered one or two of the Marauders' schoolboy pranks.

Sirius squeezed himself into a chair while Dumbledore poured out a measure of firewhisky for each of them. "Why?" he asked. "Why here, I mean. I would have thought your office, or Snape's."

Dumbledore smiled, passing Sirius a glass. "Professor Snape and the Minister would not hear of your being brought to my office. Too many important things you might damage. For the sake of their peace of mind, I agreed. As to the other, well, I exerted my not inconsiderable influence and had you brought here instead. No windows in the dungeons, you see."

Sirius did not see at all, but it was true that this room had a couple of narrow windows through which the pale face of the full moon could be seen.

"Sirius." Dumbledore drew his mind back from where it roamed the shadows of the Forbidden Forest. "Sirius, there are things you must tell me, and quickly. It won't be long before they bring the Dementors into *my school*."

Sirius heard the edge in the headmaster's voice at the last words. "What do you want to know, Headmaster? I can only tell you the same story you didn't believe thirteen years ago."

Dumbledore did not look away. Sirius felt his blue eyes searching the depths of his soul. "Tell it," he said.

So Sirius did. All of it, from the beginning: the Animagus transformation and the love and friendship behind it, years of joy followed by years of mistrust and suspicion, the Secret-Keeper switch, Peter's betrayal and framing of Sirius in the Muggle marketplace, Azkaban and its horrors and Sirius's own feelings of guilt, his escape and the reason for it (here he drew out the ragged and much-creased sheet of newsprint), his coming to Hogwarts, the attempts during the year to find Peter before it was too late, the climactic events of the evening, and the escape of the rat into darkness.

"But they've seen him," he finished. "Harry and his friends. And

Remus. They've all seen him. They'll tell you." He tilted his head back for a last swallow of firewhisky.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "I imagine they will," he said at last.

Sirius blinked. "You believe me, then?"

"Too many things didn't fit," the headmaster said, shaking his head tiredly. "At the time, I couldn't believe you had done it, but I also didn't see how you could not have. But if it is as you say Show me your Animagus form."

Sirius transformed briefly into Padfoot and back again.

Dumbledore nodded. "To become an Animagus requires a great deal of dedication. The animal form is not chosen by the wizard, but reflects deep qualities he possesses. James Potter as the proud stag, Prongs. Now I understand Harry's Patronus. Peter the rat, seeking only to save himself. And a great black dog, fiercely loyal in love and friendship, and blind to the faults of his friends. You could not lie to me if you wished to. I see that now."

Sirius's heart was beating fast. His palms were sweating as he gripped the empty glass. Dumbledore believed him! Dumbledore would convince the Ministry he was innocent! Even without Peter "But sir, if you didn't know I was

innocent until I told you just now, then why did you untie me? Why did you want to talk to me?"

Dumbledore gave him a long look. "On the night of February the fifth of this year, you found your way into Gryffindor tower, made your way to a specific dormitory room in the dark, and stood over a bed with a raised knife."

"And that proved my innocence to you, did it?" Sirius grinned.

"You made sure you had the right room. Surely before raising the knife you would also have made sure you had the right bed, if you meant to kill Harry. And if you meant to kill indiscriminately, you would not have hesitated, then fled, when Ronald Weasley raised the alarm. Those actions make no sense for a deranged killer. If one can speak of sense and deranged killers in the same breath." He smiled at Sirius. "I knew then that something did not add up. Also, I trust Remus Lupin."

"What?" Sirius was startled by the sudden change of topic.

"Remus loved you," explained Dumbledore. "He probably still does," he added. "But he loves Harry, too. If he had rushed to the Shrieking Shack tonight to save Harry and his friends from you, I do not think he would have hesitated to overpower you and bring you to me. Over an hour and a half elapsed between the time I saw him leave the school and the time Professor Snape returned with his unconscious entourage."

"Don't assume he didn't try to overpower me," Sirius said wryly, holding up an arm bearing three long scratch marks, visible through the tattered and bloody sleeve.

The twinkle was back in Dumbledore's eyes. "Dogs are not the natural prey of the werewolf. I am certain they prefer the tender flesh of young humans. You must have ... got in the way?" he suggested, eyebrows raised.

Sirius lowered his eyes. "He would have killed them all," he said softly.

"And if Sirius Black does not want Harry Potter dead, then the Ministry's entire case falls apart," Dumbledore concluded. "You are innocent."

Sirius felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Thank you, Headmaster," he said humbly.

Dumbledore smiled. "Since you are no longer my student, nor yet a deranged murderer, you may call me 'Albus', as my other friends do."

Sirius nodded. "I'll do that, then -- Albus." The name felt strange in his mouth, unbracketed by the words "Headmaster" and "Dumbledore". He looked up into blue eyes filled with wisdom. "What must I do now?" he asked. "You won't really let the

Dementors have me, will you?" He shuddered at the thought.

Dumbledore glanced out the window, as if gauging the time by the position of the moon. "No," he said at last. "You must just wait here. I will go and exercise my considerable influence once again. I'll see if I can't get us a little more *time*."

* * *

Time did indeed seem to slow to a crawl once the headmaster had taken his leave, locking the door carefully behind him. Sirius paced the tiny room like a caged beast awaiting the arena and death on a gladiator's spear.

Dumbledore would not let the Dementors have him. He believed Sirius. He had said so. He would never stand by and let an innocent man suffer such a terrible fate. Sirius tried to remain calm and have faith in the old man, but he did not see what power Dumbledore had to save him now, and life had played too many horrible tricks on him already for him to trust in anyone or anything.

Except Remus. Remus would save him if he could. If he were not at this moment roaming the Forbidden Forest, a mindless beast, snapping at shadows. Remus could not save him either, through no fault of his own.

Sirius poured himself another dram of firewhisky and tossed it

back, hoping to settle his nerves slightly. *Maybe you don't notice when they Kiss you if you're dead drunk.* Somehow he doubted it. Unless one was dead, he did not see how it would be possible not to notice losing one's soul.

Another shot of firewhisky and he was pacing again, walking to and fro, trying to formulate a plan even though he had *no bloody idea* what was going to happen to him.

Could he duck out past them when the door opened? No. They would have their wands out and ready, and the Dementors not far behind. Out the window? No, he must be well more than fifty feet above the ground here, and nothing to break his fall. Even his Animagus form was useless to him now.

He sank back into the too-small chair, looking down at his hands, remembering the feel of holding a wand again. If only he had one now.

A sudden, sharp sound from behind made him jump and spin around. His jaw dropped in shock. Hanging outside the window in midair were the pale but smiling faces of Harry and his friend Hermione and fierce, orange eyes of Buckbeak the Hippogriff.

He rushed to the window and tried to wrestle it open, but it was firmly locked.

"Stand back!" he heard Hermione's voice, muffled through the

glass, as she drew her wand, one arm maintaining a death grip on Harry's robes. "*Alohomora!*" she cried, and the window's catch leapt aside, allowing the window to slide open easily.

"How -- *how* --?" Sirius mouthed uncomprehendingly, staring at Hagrid's erstwhile pet.

"Get on!" Harry shouted. "There's not much time. You've got to get out of here -- the Dementors are coming. McNair's gone to get them."

Recovering quickly from the shock of his rescuers' sudden appearance, Sirius squeezed himself through the frame of the narrow window. He threw a leg over the Hippogriff's back, and perforce laid a steadying hand on Hermione's waist, though she seemed untroubled by this familiarity.

"OK, Buckbeak, up!" Harry cried. "Up to the tower -- come on!"

With a great downward sweep of grey wings, they leapt into the air, and a moment later, alighted with a clatter of claws and hooves at the top of the West Tower of the castle. Harry and Hermione dismounted and turned to Sirius, who was fumbling for the rope which served as a rein.

"Sirius, you'd better go, quick," Harry said breathlessly. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment, they'll find out you've gone."

"What happened to the other boy? Ron?" Sirius asked. He was sure Dumbledore would have mentioned if any of the children had been seriously harmed, either by the Dementors or by Remus in his current state, but he could not leave without being sure.

"He's going to be OK," Harry assured him. "He's still out of it, but Madam Pomfrey says she'll be able to make him better. Quick -- go!"

"How can I ever thank --" Sirius began, a lump rising in his throat for these brave children -- for this son of his best friend -- who had risked all for him tonight, and believed.

But they shouted, "GO!" and he knew they were right.

"We'll see each other again," he said with a smile, knowing it to be true. "You are -- truly your father's son, Harry"

He tightened his grip on the Hippogriff's sides, and the great beast rose swiftly into the air, moonlight glinting silver off its wings. As the moon hid its face behind the clouds, he reined Buckbeak in, and swooped low over the Forbidden Forest. He still had one more goodbye to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE NIGHTSWIMMING

The moonlight glinted off the surface of the lake as Sirius shrugged out of the rags that had been his only clothing since escaping Azkaban nearly a year ago. He stretched luxuriantly, able to almost *feel* the cool, blue light washing over his naked body. *I'll never wear those bloody things again*, he thought, giving the pile a contemptuous kick. He could barely bring himself to touch them. But he knew that he couldn't just leave them lying about to be found by anyone who happened by. With a sigh, he transformed to Padfoot, and began to dig.

It was a warm, clear June night, and the water felt good against his skin when at last he waded in, hip deep, and then dove under. So long as he stuck to the shadow of the trees, he wouldn't be seen from the castle. He came up spluttering and shaking the water from his eyes.

What he really wanted to be doing tonight was running through the Forbidden Forest by Remus's side -- one night together in canine companionship, before he had to go back into hiding. But Remus would be deep in the forest by now, and at this time of year, the nights were short. In a couple of hours, he would be a man again, and then Sirius would go to him.

For now, a bath was what he needed most. Lacking a wand, or even soap, he did the best he could, running his hands through

his hair and over his body, rubbing away the worst of the grime. Until now, there had been more important things to worry about than personal hygiene, but now there was time.

He gargled lake water, swishing it repeatedly in his mouth, trying in vain to remember what it felt like to have clean teeth.

When he was as clean as he was going to get, he swam back and forth a few times, pulling at the water with long strokes, enjoying the feel of it rushing past his body, and the chance to give his muscles a proper stretch.

He changed to Padfoot in the water, and splashed about, paddling in circles. The dog was a strong swimmer, and that skill had saved his life and carried him away from Azkaban, nearly a year past. But what he remembered now, trotting up out of the water and onto the bank, shaking droplets of water from his thick coat, was Padfoot's first swim.

He had spent the summer between fourth and fifth year working feverishly on the Animagus spell with James. The previous spring, he had finally realised the power Remus held over him, and it had spurred him to figure it out once and for all.

He won't ever want me the way I want him, Sirius had thought then. He can't. He knew the odds were against Remus returning his affections, so he became determined to show the boy his love in other ways. We'll do this spell, and Remus will never have to

be alone again. I can give him that.

He spent most of the month of August with James, living at the Potters' house. During that time, he barely slept -- barely ate. James had been surprised by his obsession. Never before had he seen Sirius work so hard on a spell that wasn't designed to cause hilarity and mayhem.

It had been difficult. There was Divination involved, and Sirius was terrible at Divination. But it was vital to the spell, as it would show a wizard his true animal form. This, however, was one of the early steps, and they had done it the previous year, guided by Peter, whose only perfect mark was in Divination. He had showed James and Sirius their animal natures -- the stag and the dog -- and his own, a rat, as well.

Sirius could not have been more pleased. *A dog. A dog to run with the wolf. It's too perfect!* But he had just grinned and joined in teasing James that his Animagus form should have been a peacock.

Peter, of course, had been disappointed at first in his own form, but they had joked that size didn't matter, and consoled him that there would probably be loads of advantages to being small, like sneaking into the girls' showers and spying on them. James told him to take notes, especially on the Evans girl, who had really started to blossom that year, her skinny frame filling out into womanhood, and distracting James from his studies and all-

important pranking.

Once the animal form was discovered, one had only to chew twingeberries (gathered beneath a full moon, ironically, for maximum potency) and concentrate on being the animal: how it would think and feel and move. What it would be like to have hooves or paws or antlers or a tail. What the world would look like through its eyes.

The only problem was that, when one was chewing twingeberries, it was nearly impossible to concentrate on anything else. They were nasty, sour, bitter things, and tough as well, and the seeds had a tendency to become stuck between one's teeth.

No matter how much research they put into learning everything they could about the animals they wished to become, it wasn't enough. Teenage boys simply did not have the determination and discipline of mind necessary to complete the spell for its own sake. Something more was needed.

And it had been in Remus that Sirius had found that "something more". Seeing him, sprawled out on his bed, face pressed against the crumpled page of his Transfiguration textbook, sound asleep, had moved Sirius in a way he had not thought possible. In that moment, he had seen into his own heart, and it had lit a fire under him to figure out the transformation at last.

So it was that, in August, he had actually made himself spend a week thinking, acting and living as a dog. The Potters raised their eyebrows, but they were tolerant parents, and happy to indulge the best friend of their beloved son in his "game" or "experiment" or whatever other lame excuse they had presented.

The constant stream of twingeberries had soured his stomach and caused his tongue to go numb, but at last, on the seventh night, making a complete and utter fool of himself finally paid off.

Sitting out in the back garden beneath the waning moon, he was overwhelmed by the sudden urge to howl -- not because it was what a dog would do, and so he ought to do it, but because it felt *right*. He had thrown his head back, and a deep, keening sound had risen from his throat.

When he lowered his head, James was staring at him, eyes wide with shock. His face had gone white -- no, grey. And his clothes were grey and the house behind him was grey, and in fact there were no colours in the world but grey and black and white.

"James --" he had said. Or tried to. What actually emerged from his mouth was a low, barking sound. He tried to turn, to look at himself, and caught a glimpse of a long, plumed tail. He spun around and around in a circle, trying to get a better look at the tail.

It was in that moment that he was overwhelmed with the realisation that he had done it! He began tearing about the garden, barking joyfully.

"Sirius!" James was calling to him, "Sirius, hush! You'll wake Mum and Dad!"

The dog bowled into the boy, knocking him backwards, and fetching up with his paws planted on James's chest. He gave his best friend a slobbery lick, knocking his glasses askew and startling a giggle from him, before launching himself into another lap around the garden.

This is so great! he howled up at the silent moon. *This is wonderful! This is amazing! I can't wait to show Remus! Remus, Remus, Remus, Remus!* He longed for September and the full moon to hurry up, so he could finally give his gift to the young werewolf.

At last, he had worn himself out, and trotted back over to where James was standing. James knelt down beside him.

"Can you understand me, Sirius?" he asked curiously.

Sirius barked to indicate that he could.

"Well, I hope so," James said, "because now we have to figure out how to change you back.

The dog shut his mouth and sat down in surprise. He had never really thought about that part of it.

James went into the house and got the book they had stolen from the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library. Remus would have had a fit if he had known they had it. Being in the Restricted Section without permission he would understand. Removing a book without checking it out properly he might let slide. But removing Hogwarts property from school grounds An unforgivable crime in Remus's eyes.

"It says here," said James, "that all you need to do is remember what it feels like to be human again."

This seemed easy enough to Sirius. He lay on the grass and closed his eyes. He thought about standing up on two legs, about having fingers, about not being covered in thick, black fur, about the red and gold of Gryffindor and about the soft hazel of Remus's eyes.

"Oh, good," said James. "You're back."

Once he knew the feel of being the dog, the change became easy for him. He could switch back and forth in a heartbeat, and he was able to begin explaining to James something of what it felt like.

"You need to find the animal that's already in you," he told James. "Not all the stuff in your brain about the eating habits and natural habitat. It's not in your brain; it's in your heart and your balls and your gut and your soul." He blushed. Like any fifteen-year-old boy, he found it difficult to speak so plainly about such a deeply personal feeling, even to his best friend.

"It's in you," he pressed on. "You are already the stag; you just have to find that bit inside, and draw it out, until the outside has no choice but to match."

James had listened intently, taking this understanding and adding to it the desire not to be outdone, even by his own best friend. Within three days, he too had experienced life as a quadruped.

In a state of intense excitement, they had invited Peter up for the weekend before school began, and showed him their new abilities. The short boy had not managed the change that weekend, but Sirius had seen the resolve in his eyes. He knew that behind it lay Peter's usual desire to try his damndest to prove he could do anything James could.

He went home again, promising to continue to work on it. And he had done it. Ten days into the school year, they were all able to make the transformation with ease.

Remus, meanwhile, had grown increasingly bewildered, quiet,

and miserable at what he perceived as being more or less completely ignored by his friends. Sirius felt guilty about this, but they had all agreed that not a word of their secret was to be breathed to the young werewolf until they were all sure they could do it. So Sirius had waited, in relative patience.

The night before Remus's fifteenth birthday, the three of them had sneaked away to discuss how they would reveal their "gift" to him. Skinny-dipping had been James's idea, and Peter, surprisingly, had giggled and agreed at once. It was Sirius who had hesitated, unsure how wise it would be to expose his unpredictable teenage body to Remus's, but at last he too had consented, knowing he could escape into the safety of the dog to hide any embarrassing insubordination from his body.

It was also James's idea to pretend they had forgotten Remus's birthday. Sirius thought this was an unusually cruel idea, but James talked him into it.

"Think about it, Sirius," he had said. "On all our birthdays, we usually wake each other up with prezzies first thing in the morning. Well, we haven't got him any prezzies this time; we've got him *us*, and we're not showing *us* off until tomorrow night." And so Sirius had reluctantly agreed to this as well.

The next day was almost as horrible for Sirius as it must have been for Remus. At least Sirius knew the indifference was feigned. But the guilt piled up around him as he caught glimpses

of Remus out of the corner of his eye and through his lashes, a sadder and sadder look in his beautiful eyes, and saying nothing.

That evening, they waited for Remus in the Gryffindor common room. And waited. And waited. And waited.

"Bloody hell!" said James at last, around 10:00 PM. "Where is that boy?!"

"Dunno," said Sirius, casting a worried look towards the tower entrance.

"He's probably hiding out in the library," Peter suggested. "Isn't that where he always goes when he's feeling miserable?"

The three boys exchanged a guilty look before jumping out of their chairs and hurrying from the tower, huddling together so that James could throw the Invisibility Cloak over them.

Remus was, as advertised, hiding in the library. He was alone, and reading by the dim glow of his wand. At least, it looked like he was reading. As Sirius watched, he thought he saw a single tear slide down the boy's nose to land on the open page before him. Remus sniffed and blotted at the page with his sleeve.

Sirius's throat tightened, and he couldn't stand it any longer. He threw off the cloak and went to the startled boy.

"Sirius, what are you --?" Remus began.

But then James and Peter were there as well, grabbing him by the arms and hauling him out of his seat.

"C'mon, birthday boy!" James declared. "We're going swimming!"

Sirius cast Remus an apologetic half-smile and shrugged. James threw the cloak over the four of them, and they made their clumsy yet relatively quiet way out of the library, through the corridors, down the stairs and out the castle doors.

It had been unseasonably warm, even for September, and the waxing moon, still a week away from full, was low in the sky, but cast plenty of light for them to see by as they bundled their way down to the lake.

"But -- I didn't bring any swimming trunks," Remus protested weakly, as they reached the water's edge.

"Don't need any," Peter grinned wickedly, waving a camera in one hand and his wand in the other. "*Disrobilius!*" And the four of them stood, naked as jay birds, their clothing puddled around their feet.

"Hey!" said James, "You said you were practicing that one to use on girls, mate; not against us! I thought we were friends!"

"Into the water, birthday boy!" Sirius shouted, grabbing Remus's arm and trying to cover how flustered he was to be suddenly naked in his presence. Remus was *staring* at him!

He propelled the unresisting boy to the water's edge and gave him a playful shove. Remus, grinning at last, dove in and swam out a few metres.

"C'mon in, guys!" he called back to them. "I'm sure the giant squid is probably asleep at this hour!"

"Wait until he ducks under," James muttered under his breath, not looking at the others. "Then change. Sirius, you swim out to him and pounce on him when he comes up."

The second Remus's head disappeared under the water, Sirius was on all fours, plunging in. Water streamed and swirled through his thick, black fur as his paws churned furiously beneath him.

When his head broke the surface again, Remus had only a split second to register the large black animal face-to-face with him, before it plunged him under again.

No, it's too much! Sirius suddenly realised. He was much heavier as the dog, and had forced Remus down farther than he had intended. He could feel the boy's flailing limbs in the water

beneath him, and without a second's thought, he dove down, buried his teeth in an arm, and swam for the surface for all he was worth. Remus came up coughing and spluttering, and Sirius almost instinctively gripped his shoulder in his jaws and dragged him back to shore, trying very hard to ignore the disconcerting thought that the only thing separating Remus's bare skin from his was his own shaggy fur.

Remus sat on the bank, head bowed, coughing for a full minute. At last, he looked up, confused, to find himself in the company of a dog, a stag and a rat, and his friends nowhere in sight.

"Sirius?" he called out, looking nervously at the large dog. "James? Peter? Where the hell are you guys?!"

Sirius couldn't resist. He padded forwards and licked the boy from chin to forehead.

"Hey!" Remus giggled, batting ineffectually at the dog. But his hand came down on the bare skin of a human shoulder.

Sirius grinned at Remus.

"What the fuck --?" Remus looked up, utterly confused, to see Peter and James were there once more.

"It's your birthday present," Sirius explained. He shifted briefly back to the dog. "We're all Animagi. We did it for you -- for full

moons. So you don't have to be alone anymore."

Remus sat, his mouth hanging open. In his eyes, Sirius saw the look of disbelief change to amazement as James and Peter transformed once more and drew nearer to him.

"Happy birthday, Moony," Sirius said softly, and shifted again.

Remus sat on the grass, speechless, surrounded by animals. His mouth opened and closed as if he were trying to remember how to speak.

At last, he said, "Sirius -- you guys -- this is amazing! You did this for me?" His voice had cracked and, unexpectedly, he had flung his arms around the dog's neck, burying his face in the thick fur. "Thank you," he had whispered, so softly that only Sirius could hear him. From the soft sounds he was making, Sirius could not be sure if he was laughing or crying or both.

I'm never going to be able to top this gift next year, Sirius remembered thinking. He laughed as he lay on the same patch of grass twenty-odd years later. He stayed a while longer, watching the eastern horizon begin to glow, and remembering the rest of that night, and wondering if Remus had kept any of the photos.

It had felt almost unreal -- one of those perfect nights of which one's youth is meant to be composed, but which so rarely happen in reality. They had swam and splashed about and

laughed and posed for silly photos until they were all exhausted. Sirius was amazed to find that, as a dog, Remus had no compunction about touching him, despite his nudity, and he happily played the exuberant puppy, pouncing, licking and nuzzling with impunity.

I could get to like this, Sirius thought. He considered making the change permanent and living out his life as Remus's pet. *We could be together then*, he thought with longing.

Back in their dormitory, as dawn had approached and the air was filled with the the gentle sound of James's snoring, and the less gentle sound of Peter's, Sirius and Remus had sat on the latter's bed, laughing quietly. They were still drunk on the heady, magical feeling of the night, and were leaning together in one of those rare moments of intimacy sometimes shared by close friends late at night.

"Isn't this great?" Sirius had said, staring at Remus's hand, resting casually on his thigh, and idly wondering what would happen if he just took it. "Now we can have a secret, too. No one will know we all have alter egos."

"It's wonderful," Remus agreed. "I never thought I would say this, but I'm almost looking forwards to the full moon. I -- I think it will be good for the wolf. To have friends," he added.

Sirius knew Remus didn't like talking about the wolf, so he

changed the subject.

"We should all have code names. You already have one, but the rest of us need them too."

"What shall I call you, then?" asked Remus obligingly, resting his head on Sirius's shoulder.

"Why don't you name me, Moony?" Sirius suggested, his exhaustion allowing a note of unguarded affection to slip into his voice. "It's only fair. I named you, after all."

He was gratified by the genuinely touched look on Remus's face. "I think I'll call you ..." he looked at Sirius consideringly. "You're 'Padfoot'," he said at last, with a nod of satisfaction.

"Why 'Padfoot'?" Sirius asked sleepily.

Remus lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. "Because," he said in a dreamy voice, "when I was little, back even before I was bitten, I used to dream about a big black dog who would come and keep me safe, and his name was Padfoot."

Sirius felt his heart squeeze. "I'd be honoured to be Padfoot for you, Moony," he said.

But Remus was already asleep.

Sirius got up quietly, turning towards his own bed, but then he hesitated. Bending over the sleeping boy, he kissed him very gently on the forehead. A tiny smile curved Remus's lips in his sleep.

"Happy birthday, Moony," Sirius had whispered, and then he had gone to seek his own troubled dreams.

Sirius smiled at the memory. There were so many things he had forgotten, or simply been unable to remember, while he was in Azkaban. But now they came to his call, and he could remember even the smallest details once more. He reveled in such memories.

But now dawn was breaking. It was time for him to go and find Remus at last. He shifted, and padded off in the direction of the Shrieking Shack, to find his mate.