

# CARTOGRAPHER'S CRAFT

SAM STARBUCK

*Circumnavigate this body  
Of wonder and uncertainty  
Armed with every precious failure  
And amateur cartography*

– The Weakerthans, “Aside”

*As I have not worried to be born, I do not worry to die.*

– Federico Garcia Lorca, the inspiration for Ellis Graveworthy

## CONTENTS

### PREFACE

### CHAPTER I

*"Is this supposed to happen?" Remus asked, cautiously.*

### CHAPTER II

*"You're my godfather," Harry said.*

*"Rubbish."*

*"You're also dead."*

### CHAPTER III

*"It's mine," Harry said.*

*"It's mine," Sirius corrected.*

### CHAPTER IV

*"Back to Hogwarts? What, nobody's going to notice Sirius bloody Black running around the school?"*

### CHAPTER V

*"What does it do?"*

*"It kills people. That is its sole purpose; it is created to do nothing but destroy."*

### CHAPTER VI

*That was Reg, all right; stupidly romantic about everything, morbidly overdramatic, and he always had to have the last bloody word.*

### CHAPTER VII

*"How much do you know about Grigori Rasputin?" Remus asked.*

### CHAPTER VIII

*"There's no life line," Harry said.*

### CHAPTER IX

*"You'll never defeat the Dark Lord lying in bed all day."*

### CHAPTER X

*"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins," he said, crouching to touch the floor. "I'd like to take my home back now."*

### CHAPTER XI

*You will find what you seek not in battle but in books.*

**CHAPTER XII**

*"You're not well yet."*

*"I've never been well; it's never stopped me before."*

**CHAPTER XIII**

*"Is there a problem, Mr. Padfoot?" McGonagall called.*

*"Not anymore, Headmistress," Sirius answered.*

**CHAPTER XIV**

*We hide things where we think people won't go, and we think people won't go where we're afraid to go ourselves.*

**CHAPTER XV**

*"Send the pack-traitor away from the school before the next moon, or we find a child to replace him."*

**CHAPTER XVI**

*"I think it would be...unwise to determine your future based on the past of a man who spent twelve years in prison and died rather tragically and unnecessarily at the hands of a piece of architecture."*

**CHAPTER XVII**

*"Dare you to climb it," he said.*

*"That's Godric Gryffindor's grave marker!"*

**CHAPTER XVIII**

*"Oh yes, I know that story, Riding Hood. I like that story."*

*"Doesn't end well for the wolf."*

**CHAPTER XIX**

*I will destroy anyone who hurts the people I love.*

**CHAPTER XX**

*"Stop shouting!" Harry shouted.*

*"I'm not shouting!" Sirius shouted back.*

**CHAPTER XXI**

*"You should know better than to think a son of the House of Black would ever be any man's servant. I would rather face death, as I am sure I will soon."*

**CHAPTER XXII**

*"Because you are unique. Men don't become like you are without having a history."*

**CHAPTER XXIII**

*"If I'm going to die for a cause, I'm going to drink and eat and fuck first."*

**CHAPTER XXIV**

*"A folk saint, but nevertheless a symbol of great compassion for those who yearn for forgiveness."*

**CHAPTER XXV**

*"What is the difference between the lake and the sky?"*

**CHAPTER XXVI**

*Is it not strange, Harry, that your father's generation should produce so many brilliant minds and yet lose or cripple so many, so young?*

**CHAPTER XXVII**

*"Do we talk now?" Sirius asked softly.*

**CHAPTER XXVIII**

*"They don't teach us that in the history books," Sirius replied.  
"There are many things humans do not teach one another," Firenze rumbled.*

**CHAPTER XXIX**

*"That's your secret weapon?" McGonagall asked. "A Jack Russell?"*

**CHAPTER XXX**

*"You do know how to set the world on fire, Harry Potter," Sirius said in a low voice.*

**CHAPTER XXXI**

*Trust not in trinkets but in men;  
Trust not in heat but in flame.*

**CHAPTER XXXII**

*"I've always liked the name Ichabod. Or Pulcherrima, if it's a girl."*

**CHAPTER XXXIII**

*"But if you do side with us, you also have hope."  
"I can't feed my children on hope."*

**CHAPTER XXXIV**

*"I have the Dark Lord's trust, but I think we may both agree that he is notoriously...fickle in such things."  
"I think paranoid and sociopathic are the words you're looking for."*

**CHAPTER XXXV**

*"You're talking about Galleons while they're standing there – "  
"Standing there doing what? Being gay? It's not something they're doing on purpose to annoy you, I'm sure."*

**CHAPTER XXXVI**

*"Igor Stravinsky – The Fire Bird," Fred read. "Nineteen-ten complete ballet score."*

**CHAPTER XXXVII**

*"I wonder about horcruxes," she said.*

*"You'd do much better not to."*

**CHAPTER XXXVIII**

*"He'll still be Glastonbury when he hatches, won't he?"*

**CHAPTER XXXIX**

*"If I ever learn your name I will make sure that every single member of my family spits on your shadow and murders your relatives."*

**CHAPTER XL**

*"Bow," Voldemort said. "You are in the presence of an immortal."*

**CHAPTER XLI**

*"Redeem the mistakes of your father and uncle. Join me, Sirius Black."*

**CHAPTER XLII**

*My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died.*

**CHAPTER XLIII**

*"It's not happily ever after, Polaris, but I hope it will do."*

**EPILOGUE**

*Whenever anyone asked him if he was bored with his life, he smiled.*

**APPENDICES**

The rules of "Emperors"

The Collected Works of Ellis Graveworthy

Selected poems from *The Yearly-Dying Grain*

## PREFACE

*Cartographer's Craft* was originally posted to the now-defunct Pretty Little Oojahs fanfic archive sometime in 2004, if I recall properly. It was based around the idea (then as now) that if Voldemort could stash part of himself in a journal, Sirius—being one of the smartest wizards of his generation—could probably do the same.

It stood at around six chapters and had been abandoned for the better part of a year by the time *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* came out, and in some ways I thought HBP would be the nail in this fic's coffin. Clearly Sirius would never make a horcrux as Voldemort had done. And yet, when I went back to see if *Cartographer's Craft* could be made canon-worthy, I found that in fact that the concept of the horcrux enriched the fanfic in many ways. The search for the horcruxes gave the story a backbone of plot around which I could write what I really was interested in writing: the experience of Sirius Black as a teenager who was twenty years out of place.

The six chapters I'd had were reduced to three by all the alterations I had to make—just as an example, only about 300 words from the original Chapter One survived the change. Every scene with Snape in it, of course, had to be cut and reshuffled; Dumbledore had to be removed and McGonagall or some other authority figure put in his place, except where his presence was vital. At that point, like a ghost, I had to write around him, slicing out large portions of text and finding other ways to present the information that he, being dead, could no longer supply. Death is no bar to having a bit of quiet fun in JKR's world, but it does put a damper on expository usefulness sometimes.

On the other hand, rebuilding those three missing chapters' worth of scenes was not as difficult as one might expect. I had the chance to deal with the Harry/Ginny situation, and I now had canonical support for the tentative, blossoming romance that Remus and Tonks had been enjoying in the original—a romance which could become a fully-fledged love affair in the revised version.

*Cartographer's Craft* was revised and expanded between July 22 and December 18, 2005. It was a strange journey, full of incredible bursts of creativity and inspiration, and it is by far the most complex and original thing I have written in the twelve years I have been a fanfic writer. I am immensely proud of it for any number of reasons—not the least of which is the existence of Ellis

Graveworthy, whose voice echoes throughout the story as more than just a character.

I hope you will enjoy reading *Cartographer's Craft* as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

## CHAPTER I

The map was going to be their finest creation, the capstone of their years at Hogwarts.

That was what Sirius said, anyway, with his usual grandiose dramatics. He'd said the same thing about their Animagus transformations, though James was willing to concede that in that instance it was probably to bolster James' flagging enthusiasm for the project after a solid year of work. Oh sure, being Animagi was loads of fun, but they'd paid for that fun in their own after-class hours in the library.

The Marauder's Map, on the other hand, was pure unadulterated fun. They'd taken what they already knew about the castle and grounds, including Remus' unparalleled knowledge of secret passageways and how to find them, and drawn it out on a parchment one night early in sixth year when none of them could sleep. James had insisted that it ought to be accurate, with his usual attention to detail, and found a cartographer's charm in one of Remus' books, casting it as casually as a Muggle would swat a fly.

(Sirius didn't swat flies. That was unimaginative. He transfigured them so that they flew around squeaking *Snivellus Is A Sod!* until Evans made him stop).

Aside from correcting Sirius' handwriting into a passable drafting script and regulating the walls and rooms to proper scale, the charm had apparently taken a peek around their dormitory room—and *added* things.

Sirius and Remus had immediately caught onto the possibilities of *this* charm on *that* map, and James had given Remus a significant look, which Remus returned over the rims of his glasses. Peter, brow furrowed, was tracing the lines with his finger.

"I didn't draw that there," he said, pointing to a door-symbol behind his bed.

All four of them looked at Peter's bed.

In a minute and a half they'd levitated it out of the way and found a hidden panel that hinged outwards; it let out onto a small porch hidden between two gables, encrusted with gargoyles. Remus, who'd snatched the map off the table, held it up and ordered James to cast the charm again. Immediately the porch appeared on the map, just outside the panel.

"Wicked," Sirius announced.

"Brilliant," James agreed.

"That explains the draft I'm always feeling!" Peter beamed.

"Is this supposed to happen?" Remus asked, cautiously.

They mapped the entire Gryffindor tower that evening, using a combination of James' invisibility cloak and Sirius' innate doggy stealth; Peter, clutching the map in rat-teeth, crept up the steps into the girls' side of the dormitory – they'd learned early on that animagi didn't trigger the alarm – and came back looking self-satisfied, having found three secret entrances to the dormitory that didn't require going up the booby-trapped stairs.

That full moon, they expanded the map out to the Shrieking Shack and even parts of Hogsmeade.

Sirius was the one who had the bright idea, during their evening forays out into the castle, to enchant it to show where everyone was so that they could explore without worrying about getting caught or having to wear the invisibility cloak full-time. That was a complicated bit of charmwork, and took all four of them working together to figure out the chain of nested spells required to make it function properly.

Only Remus noticed that after each mapping session, they were always tired; it wasn't just that they mapped at night, he was sure, since on weekends they all slept during the day ahead of time specifically so that they could stay out all night...

...and yet they usually had to go back to the tower by three or so and go to bed. Sometimes Sirius didn't bother to undress and Peter fell into bed with his shoes on. Which is when Remus read the fine print on the spells they were doing.

He kept the information to himself, because James and Sirius would call him Perfect Prefect Lupin and Peter would just get anxious and obnoxiously neurotic; besides, they'd learned in Defence class that intention was nine-tenths of Dark Arts and, unless you were dealing in really heavily dark things, "bad" spells could be put to good use with little harm to the user.

Remus trusted James and Sirius to keep him safe. He had for a long time: first to keep his secret, and then for this past year to physically keep him from harming anyone on their full-moon rambles. They were powerful wizards already; they knew what they were doing. They wouldn't dabble in Dark Arts if they couldn't control it, and these spells weren't so very dark, after all.

They'd put a password on it long ago, right before they added the people-finder to it; unless the proper phrase was uttered while touching a wand to the page, nothing would appear. Then one night, Sirius touched his wand to the map

and said "I solemnly swear that I am Sirius Black", much to the surprise of his fellows, and something different showed up. It was about half a page of scrawled notes in Sirius' handwriting.

"I added...well, it's sort of like those invisible journals the girls all keep, only...more," Sirius said proudly. "This way we won't have to all go out together. I can make a note, see..." he wrote 'Sirius Black was here' below the earlier notes, then cleared the page with a quick "Mischief Managed". He turned to James. "And then if you get into your journally bit, you can read what I wrote. I stole some from your book about Pensieves, I think it'll work all right—it sort of takes a little piece of you with it, so that if someone has a question, they can ask, and I'll answer. Well, I won't, but the parchment will, pretending to be me."

"It takes pieces of us?" Peter asked anxiously.

"Just a little, Wormtail, it's nothing to worry over," Sirius said confidently. "Go on then, you try."

Peter touched his wand to the blank page. "I solemnly swear that I am Peter Pettigrew," he said, and Sirius' notes appeared again, in a lighter shade of ink and off in one corner.

"Here's the best part," Sirius said, clearing the map again. He struck a pose, touched his wand to the page, and said "Show me your secrets, you blank piece of parchment!"

*What are you on about, Sirius Black?*

Remus stared.

"You try," Sirius urged. James took his place.

"Hallo Parchment, tell me what you know," he said.

*Come on Prongs, you know the password,* replied the map.

"When you've all written a bit, all four of us should respond," Sirius grinned mischievously. "Imagine what it would say if one of the professors found it—everything you ever wanted to say to a teacher but knew you'd get stabbed with chalk for..."

They broke out into laughter then and, though Remus still had his reservations, he wrote as much as anyone; little notes on new passageways he'd found, questions about where they should meet the next full moon, where he'd be that afternoon if anyone wanted to meet to study.

The map wasn't even near completion at that point, of course, and it took them several months to finish it to James' exacting satisfaction. But one night late in the autumn term they all bent over the map, examined the castle from

dungeon to spire, and agreed that it was complete. The troubles with “naming” animagi had been ironed out after Sirius noticed the map froze up whenever Professor McGonagall transformed; the secret passageways were all accounted for, the tracking charms were in place, the journals were filled with notes and jokes and conversations. It was finished.

Pads was entrusted with the keeping of it, officially, since Wormtail would have lost it and Prongs would sooner or later have tried to use it to impress Evans and Moony said he never slept well when it was nearby. Sirius sort of knew the feeling, though he actually felt better being the official keeper; there were things he'd written in a secret, locked away place on the map, things he didn't want anyone to be able to find. Just his thoughts, really, about how he wasn't like the other boys, though their voices-in-the-map all promised him they didn't care if he fancied blokes or was still afraid of Bellatrix. It was reassuring to be able to tell them anything without the real Prongs and Moony and Wormtail actually knowing.

He folded the map up, the creases already beginning to be a natural part of it, and tucked it into a hidden box behind his headboard after the others had doused their candles and were sleeping quietly.

The next morning he woke to an excruciating pain in his head and the sound of James pleading—begging—for Remus to wake up. He pushed himself up on one elbow, bruising it when he assumed wrongly that he was still in his bed, and searched blurrily for James. There—undoubtedly James, he would know those broad shoulders and that messy hair anywhere, but the man James was trying to wake couldn't possibly be Remus—three decades too old at least. It could be Remus' father, Mr. Lupin...

James gasped and turned to stare at him and Sirius stared back, shocked and frightened now—that wasn't James' face. There were subtle differences, this boy wore glasses and had a scar over one eye—

One *green* eye.

\* \* \*

“Harry?”

Harry, still in his pyjamas though it was nearly lunchtime, looked up from the bed where he was reading. He hadn't been expecting a guest, but when he saw who it was, he smiled.

"Hi," he said. Professor Lupin—Remus, he was Remus now, though old habits died hard—smiled back at him, leaning in the doorway. He looked better than he had in the infirmary on the night Dumbledore had...on the night Bill had been attacked. He had looked as though he were on the mend at the funeral, but the hollows in his cheeks had filled out a little since then. "I didn't expect you here."

"Neither did your uncle and aunt. They're downstairs with Tonks."

"I bet that's an interesting scene."

"You would think," Remus said, grinning. "As it turns out, she's quite as imperious as her mother, and has your aunt serving her tea while your uncle dances around in what I must say is a very imbecilic manner. Enjoying your holiday?"

Harry shrugged. "It's what I have to do."

"Yes...Hermione said you'd say that," Remus answered. "I've brought you a birthday present, by the by. I know it's a day early..." he reached into his pocket and pulled out something secured to his belt loop by a thin gold chain, "...but you'll be needing it."

His fingers unclasped the chain and looped it around a small steel ring on which hung a series of keys. He held it out to Harry.

"Twelve Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked. Remus nodded. "What about the *Fidelius*?"

"Broken when—well," Remus said hastily, "Broken and replaced."

"Are you my secret-keeper?"

Remus nodded. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Oh?" Harry asked. He studied the keys, curiously. Then it occurred to him. "Oh. I guess so."

"The good news is, I'm more or less indestructible and I seem to have a track record of survival. If you'd like to choose someone more appropriate, however—"

"No, that's fine," Harry said. He closed his book and set it aside. "Can I go today?"

"Of course. I was going to suggest it; you'll be protected there when the blood-shelter spell breaks tomorrow. That's why we've come."

Harry nodded and kicked open the trunk next to his bed. Lupin helped him pile up his books and clothes, packing them away. This time he would not

leave anything behind; it took a couple of shrinking spells from Lupin's wand to fit everything in, but the room was still too bare too quickly.

"I'm never coming back here," Harry said. Lupin merely nodded. "I won't miss it."

"You'd be surprised what you miss," the older man answered. "Though I hope you never do."

They descended the stairs, Harry dragging his trunk and Lupin following after, carrying Hedwig on his shoulder and her cage in his hand. In the kitchen, Tonks was talking blithely to the Dursleys over a cup of tea.

"And so then I said, well, what's a little pixie blood when you get down to—oh, wotcha, Harry," she said, smiling at him. "Coming along, then?"

"Yes," Harry answered. Tonks took his trunk from him.

"Thank you for the tea," she said to Petunia.

"We'll be outside, Harry," Lupin added, clapping him on the shoulder and following her out.

Harry was left in his still-too-large denim jeans, the frayed and oversized t-shirt, the worn belt that hardly held the jeans over his hips, all hand-me-downs from Dudley.

"Goodbye, then," he said.

Dudley stuffed a biscuit in his face.

"Goodbye, boy," Vernon said, shortly.

"I won't be back," Harry repeated.

"I should think not," Vernon grunted. Dudley slurped his tea.

"So you won't see me again."

Vernon merely huffed. Petunia hadn't yet looked up from her tea.

"Bye," Harry said, feeling stupid.

"Harry—wait," Petunia said. She looked up. "Be—be a credit to your mother," she said. "And brush your teeth."

Harry wanted to laugh at sixteen years of proper mothering being condensed into three seconds of advice, but she looked hurt and regretful, so he didn't.

"I will, Aunt Petunia," he said.

\* \* \*

It wasn't far to London and they went by car; it was odd to see Lupin behind the wheel of a giant black Vauxhall with government plates, operating a

gear stick as if he didn't spend most of his time in wizarding robes with a wand in one hand.

"Ministry lent it to us," Tonks said, leaning forward over Harry's shoulder from the backseat. "Scrimgeour still trying to get on your good side, I think. He's trying to bribe Arthur Weasley now too."

"The result of which is mainly that Arthur is enjoying himself immensely," Remus added. "Scrimgeour's after Bill just as much as you; he's a decorated hero."

There was a bitter tinge in his voice which surprised Harry until he realised that Bill was, at least in part, a werewolf now – and yet he enjoyed all the prestige of a normal human, while Remus was still clearly struggling just to survive.

"I didn't know you knew how to drive," Harry said uncomfortably.

"Advanced Muggle Studies NEWT," Remus answered. "I've kept it up when I can. It's a useful skill."

"Remus likes to be useful," Tonks said teasingly, but she was met with a grave look in the rear-view mirror.

"Yes," Remus said. "I do."

They arrived at Twelve Grimmauld Place before evening had full set in. Kingsley Shacklebolt was waiting outside, and Remus handed him the car keys. Harry turned to watch Shacklebolt drive away, then realised the other two were waiting for him.

"Go on," Tonks said, squeezing Harry's shoulders. "Unlock it, then."

Harry couldn't summon up the excitement she clearly felt; this might be a house for him to live in, but it was hardly a home. Still, he lifted the heavy, solid key and slid it into the lock, which snicked open with freshly oiled ease. He pulled it out and pushed the door open, stepping inside.

It was quiet inside, echoingly so, and Harry bit his lip. It felt as though someone had died.

Someone had. Too many someones. Not just Sirius who had owned the house or Dumbledore who had filled it with the Order, but Emmeline Vance and Amelia Bones and too many others.

He would not cry in front of Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks. That would be ridiculous and embarrassing.

"We thought you'd like a quiet night before everyone arrived," Remus said softly. "And you and I have a few things to discuss."

Harry turned to shoot a questioning glance at him, but Remus merely gestured him into the kitchen. There was soup warming on the stove and fresh bread in the oven; they helped themselves and sat down. Harry saw Tonks sit so close to Remus that he could hardly move his arm, but he simply switched hands and continued to eat.

"I know you told Dumbledore that the house could still be used as headquarters, and so we have," Remus said, dipping some of his bread in the thick soup. "Things are changing, however, and now that you're of age and without a home other than this..."

"It's fine," Harry said.

"You do understand that I have been living here?"

"Yeah."

"You don't mind?"

Harry shrugged. "S'got like...four floors, doesn't it?"

"Basement, three floors, and an attic. I've been staying on the ground floor, but I can move if you'd prefer it."

Harry shook his head. "Stay where you are. You know the place better than I do. I'll take my old room on the first floor."

"There's a better—a suite of rooms..." Remus said, gesturing over his head with his spoon. "Bedroom, sitting room, and bath. You might like the privacy. More suited for a bachelor than a schoolboy," he added.

"Ron and Hermione told you," Harry said.

"That you're not returning to the school? Yes."

"You're not going to be tiresome about it, are you?" Harry asked. Remus laughed.

"Harry, you forget who you're talking to, I think. It's a miracle I wasn't expelled from Hogwarts with Sirius and your father any number of times. It's not my place to lecture you. I don't think it's terribly bright to skip your last year of school if you plan to become an Auror, but your becoming an Auror is predicated on your survival, and you are at war. Why should you spend another year playing Quidditch and going to lessons? You know what needs to be done."

Harry ducked his head. "Yes. I do."

"So..." Tonks spread her hands. "We're here to do what you need done."

"Oh."

"The problem, Harry," Remus said, "with acting like an adult, is that people are liable to treat you like one. I'm afraid the Order needs someone who knows what they're doing, and you may be it."

"Oh bollocks," Harry said, alarmed. "I'm only sixteen, you know."

"Seventeen, in about twelve hours," Tonks put in.

"I don't know what I'm doing!"

Remus dabbed more soup up with his bread. "Better learn how to fake it then, hadn't you?" he asked. "Ron and Hermione intimated that you had a plan of a sort."

"Well, sort of."

"Let's hear it. If you like, I can pretend I know what I'm doing, too. I'm very good at it."

Harry hesitated. He had sworn to Dumbledore not to tell anyone other than Ron and Hermione, but he needed real adults, too, people who had fought in the last war and who knew more than he did about magic one couldn't teach in schools.

"Would you rather wait?" Remus asked. Harry nodded.

"Tell me what you've been doing, instead," he said. "Once I know what I'm going to do, I'll tell you the rest."

"Well, Tonks has been busily infiltrating the lower levels of the wizarding underworld," Remus said. "I don't know that Knockturn Alley has ever seen anything quite like her, when she's in disguise."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Tonks grinned at him.

"A lot of people have been...carrying on, I guess you'd call it," Remus continued. "Doing what they'd been told to do before."

Before. *What a tidy way to divide it*, Harry thought. *Before and After*.

"And you?" he asked. Remus frowned.

"I...I have to confess I didn't see the point of carrying on. I wasn't doing any good with the werewolves, not really," he said. "I've been here, taking in reports. Making things ready."

"For what?" Harry asked.

"You," Remus said briefly, then spoke again before Harry could say anything. "I think Hedwig might like to stretch her wings – mind if I send off a note to the Weasleys to let them know you're here?"

He didn't really wait for a reply, but hurried off while Harry was still staring at him over his soup bowl. Tonks watched him go.

"Sorry about that. He knows it isn't fun," she said. "Having everyone looking to you, I mean. He's been trying to talk people round to appointing Arthur or Mad-Eye head of the Order, but Mad-Eye's...well, insane, and Arthur's a bit gormless, when you get down to brass tacks."

"But I'm *seventeen*..."

Tonks shrugged. "Don't look at me. I don't do politics. I'm throwing my lot in with you and him," she said, tilting her head in the direction Remus had gone.

"Doing all right then, are you?" Harry asked, grateful for a thread of conversation that didn't involve his immediate destiny. Tonks flushed and looked down.

"Guess so," she mumbled.

"Not too old or too poor or too dangerous?" he asked. She grinned.

"Not too old, or too poor, or too dangerous," she agreed. "You know what's really funny?"

"What's that?"

"I think he wants your permission. To, uh. Well, to court me, I guess is the old-fashioned word for it."

Harry dropped his spoon. "*What?*"

"Well, Mum has always said it's patriarchal for my boyfriends to ask Dad's permission but she also says any man who has to ask a woman's mother for permission doesn't deserve her, and any woman who lets him doesn't deserve a man at all, so there's not really anyone for him to ask even if he got up the guts to tell my parents we're involved. It's all very feminist," Tonks said vaguely. "But he does *want* to ask and, well, you're technically the heir of the house of Black, so it's either you or aunt Narcissa, and for obvious reasons—"

"Right."

"So if at some point you wouldn't mind telling him you think I'm grand and we'd make a good pair, that'd be nice," she said. Harry couldn't help but grin. "I don't personally care, but he'd like it."

"So noted."

"Harry," she said, cautiously.

"Mm?"

"I'm glad you're here. I sort of think we can win, really."

Harry nodded. "That's a big part of the plan, winning."

\* \* \*

That night he had gone up to bed early, leaving Remus and Tonks by the living-room fire with plenty of occupation if they so chose; he heard an occasional laugh from downstairs, mostly Tonks, and Remus' deeper voice echoing up. It was...nice, in a way. That was how a house was supposed to sound. Comforting.

The rooms that Remus had clearly prepared for him were large, filled with the most comfortable of the house's furniture. There was the sitting room with bookshelves lining the walls and books that Remus had probably thought he'd find useful. There were thick Persian rugs on the floor, rescued from the attic, and an enormous empty roll-top desk near the window.

The bedroom had an elderly wardrobe and two bedside tables as well as another, smaller desk. It also had the bed, a monstrously big four-poster piled with blankets and pillows. Candles burned brightly in brackets all round the room, and Harry felt oddly secure undressing and changing into a pair of pyjamas. He walked back into the sitting room, studying the books in the shelves, not quite ready to sleep yet.

This was his. All of this; he owned it. His.

Not his home, but nevertheless a place he could come, a refuge. Hogwarts had been taken from him with a flash of green light atop a battlement, but he had Twelve Grimmauld Place, the last remnants of Sirius, even if it was only because Sirius had hated it.

Eventually he drew the sitting-room blinds and blew out the candles; next went the candles in the bedroom, and he slid between the crisp white sheets with an oddly calm feeling.

\* \* \*

He was not as calm when he woke the next morning, but that was because he woke to someone leaping on his stomach.

"OI BLOODY HELL!" he shouted, all the breath whooshing out of him. There was a laugh as the curtains slid back, blinding him.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter!" cried a voice, and Harry threw one arm over his eyes.

"Language, Harry!" an older voice scolded.

"Oh, let him swear, does the lad good," a third voice chimed in.

Eyes adjusting slowly to the light, Harry pushed himself up on his elbows, confused, to find Ginny sitting happily on his stomach.

"Morning!" she said cheerfully.

"No it's not," Harry declared, and pulled a blanket over his head.

"Birthday!"

"Isn't!"

"Yes it is!" she sing-songed, pulling the blanket back. Tonks appeared, upside down.

"Sorry," she said unapologetically.

"Bugger off."

"Temper," Hermione said disapprovingly.

"He always had one," Molly added.

"Nothing wrong with a little temper," Mad-Eye Moody, who had given him permission to swear a few minutes earlier, grunted.

"You'd better just give up," Lupin said sympathetically. "They're not going anywhere until you open your presents."

Harry groaned and wriggled upright, shaking his head to try and clear it. A good two thirds of the Order had to be in his bedroom, and the foot of his bed was a veritable mountain of gifts. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Fleur were all sitting on the bed; Bill stood behind Fleur, the twins were standing on the ceiling...

("Stickyboots," Fred said, waving. "New invention. You've got a pair in the green box.")

...Mad-Eye Moody was watching the doorway, Kingsley Shacklebolt was watching the windows, Arthur was sitting on a footstool with Molly nearby, Tonks was leaning over the headboard, and Remus had propped himself on the desk.

"Open mine first," Ron commanded, passing Harry a badly wrapped, slightly squashy package. Ginny punched her brother and presented Harry with a smaller, rather more professional-looking box. Ron rolled his eyes and waved his hand.

There were gifts from everyone in the Order and quite a few people who weren't; Professor Slughorn had even sent him a bottle of firewhiskey and an invitation to dinner. There was a package from the Minister himself. Charlie Weasley had sent greetings from Romania.

“Well, it’s not every day you turn seventeen,” Molly said, when Harry expressed a certain amount of bewilderment at the sudden shower of gifts.

It was certainly a very crowded birthday; after gifts there was a mass breakfast downstairs at which Harry’s health was copiously drunk with champagne and orange juice. There was all kinds of catching-up to do with Ron and Hermione—and Ginny, who carefully did not sit too close or smile at him too much. There were Order matters to attend to, and Remus was right: in the way people deferred to him, in the way questions were asked and answered, in the way they looked at him, Harry could see that he had become *de facto* leader of the Order. It would have been absurd if it weren’t so awful.

People finally began to drift away after lunch, and though he invited Ron and Hermione to stay, Molly wanted them safely back at the Burrow and under her matriarchal eye. She told Harry he ought to come too, but Harry felt an odd reluctance. The silence that had oppressed him last night now seemed desirable, and he wanted nothing more, by afternoon, than to go up to his rooms and curl up in one of the chairs and contemplate being an adult.

It was funny, then, that by the time he had said goodbye to everyone and assured himself that nobody had any further questions for him, what he did when he got to his rooms was take the Marauder’s Map out of his trunk and lay it carefully on the desk.

He wanted to see Hogwarts again. He didn’t know why; perhaps because he might never see it again. He unfolded the map and touched it with his wand. The words sounded childish even to his own ears when he spoke them: *I solemnly swear I am up to no good.*

When the map appeared, spreading out across the parchment like fast-growing black moss, he watched the names that appeared too: Headmistress McGonagall pacing in Dumbledore’s—in her own office, Sinistra in the Astronomy Tower, Hagrid in his vegetable garden.

It was like something out of another life, and Harry rested his head on his folded arms and simply watched for a while, as enthralled as any child.

## CHAPTER II

Harry wasn't sure how long he'd simply sat, staring at the map of Hogwarts, the map his father and Sirius had masterminded. He knew that the shadows in the room were lengthening when Remus cleared his throat from the doorway.

"Come in," Harry said, kicking out the other wooden chair near the desk. Remus caught it in one slim hand and turned it around, sitting down and resting his arms on the chair's back. "Anything wrong?"

Remus shook his head with a small smile. "Just checking up. Enjoying your gifts?"

Harry's eyes drifted to the doorway to the bedroom where most of the gifts still sat, unwrapped but untouched.

"They're all very nice," he said truthfully. "It's just a little..."

"Overwhelming?"

"Difficult. Right now. All this."

Remus nodded, eyes drifting over the map. He frowned slightly.

"I guess you noticed the, ah...conspicuous absence of a gift from me," he said. Harry had, but he hadn't thought it would be polite to mention it. "I thought about borrowing a bit off Tonks, but that's...not exactly wise, that sort of thing."

"You didn't have to get me anything. You gave me the keys," Harry said, gesturing to where the house keys sat, in a little pigeonhole in the desk.

"Well, I thought I might have something that you're going to value a lot more than objects, in the coming days," Remus said. "Most of what we're going to deal in, during this war, is information. I imagine you know that."

Harry nodded.

"And this isn't exactly *helpful* information, but it's..." Remus shrugged. "I've been wondering if I ought to speak with you about it sooner, but last year wasn't the time. Now you're of an age to make your own decisions."

Harry found himself wondering, not for the first time, if Remus sometimes avoided looking at him while talking because his eyes reminded Remus of Lily. He understood that people had become used to him looking like James, because it had been years since his father died and longer still since he'd been sixteen, but he knew sometimes his eyes caught people – especially friends of his mother – unawares.

"I heard, not long after your second year, about Tom Riddle's diary," Remus continued. "About what it did to Ginny. That's why I haven't told you either. I wanted you to grieve for Sirius, Harry, not to find substitutes."

"I know," Harry said. "You'd know more about grieving than I would, anyway."

"Probably so, but I've lived a good deal longer than you." Remus stood and pushed the chair away, leaning against the desk. One hand touched the ragged edge of the parchment. "May I see the map, Harry?"

Harry laughed, a little bitterly. "It's yours by right."

"No; I think not. Sirius was always our official keeper until we passed it on. He left everything he had to you. Therefore..." Remus smiled and shook his wand out of his sleeve, tapping it on the parchment. "Mischief managed," he said. "Now, Harry, watch closely. Not me; the map."

Harry looked down as Remus spoke again.

"Hello, Prongs," he said. Harry winced, but read the words that spiralled up.

*Same old face as ever, Moony.*

"The parchment wasn't designed to insult people," Remus said with a small smile. "It's just us, the way we'd react—and we'd have insulted the majority of people who tried to get in. Go on," he said.

Harry drew his wand out of one of the other pigeonholes in the desk, touching the map.

"Who's there?" he said, feeling foolish.

*Mr. Prongs would like to point out what a handsome young man Mr. Potter appears to be.*

*Mr. Moony would like to express his belief that Mr. Prongs is an egotistical bastard, and thinks the best attribute of Mr. Potter is his eyes.*

Harry glanced at Remus, who grinned.

*Mr. Padfoot agrees with Mr. Moony about Mr. Potter's eyes, but thinks Mr. Moony is being a stick in the mud.*

*Mr. Wormtail*

Remus lifted his own wand from the map and knocked Harry's away in the process. The ink faded down, like afterimages of a bright flash of light on the eyelids.

"There's no need to hear *his* opinion," he growled. Harry waited patiently for him to continue." We taught the map to react like we would have—as we

might have when we were sixteen," Remus said, circling his finger on the empty page. "I thought you ought to know. I thought if you wanted to know what your father was like when he was your age, you could ask the map. It might even help, one never knows."

Harry glanced at Remus, his hair prematurely and now almost completely grey, face lined with care beyond his years, and wondered how long it had taken him to decide this. Years, clearly. After all, he could ask the map questions about Moony as easily as Padfoot or Prongs.

Or Wormtail.

"I trust you with this, Harry," Remus continued, finger still circling, drawing an invisible whirlpool on the top pages of the folded map. "Because you deserve to know your roots and because you are a man not just in name." He smiled at Harry. "Your father would have wanted you to know."

Harry nodded, then glanced back at the page.

"Remus," he said quietly. Remus looked down.

An inky mirror-finger had joined his on the page, and was following his movements. He pulled his hand back as if burned, and the finger on the page shattered into flecks of ink, then into words.

*Wotcha, Moony.*

Both of them stared at it.

"But it shouldn't..." Remus murmured. "Not without a wand touching it..."

*Nothing to say to your old Padfoot?*

Remus, perplexed, picked up his wand slowly, eyes never leaving the text.

"It's not supposed to do that, is it?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No, it's not..." he said, touching his wand to the page, avoiding the black ink. "I solemnly swear that I am Remus Lupin," he said, and the ink vanished; in its place four columns of text appeared, each in a different handwriting and a different colour: red, gold, blue, and black.

"These were our notes to each other..." Remus said, scanning the text. "Peter, myself, Sirius, and James. But..."

His eyes widened as he followed Sirius' handwriting. "Did you ever give Sirius your map?" he asked Harry abruptly.

"No—well, we looked at it together once or twice, but he never had it when I wasn't there, not that I know of," Harry answered. "He didn't seem to

like it, actually. You know how he got when people talked about history. He never told me about the notes...what's going on?"

"I'm not sure. Lean back a bit, Harry," Remus pushed him away, gently, and Harry was reminded of the supernatural strength in his underfed body. "I need to try something..."

He spread the map on the floor and knelt in front of it, touching his wand to the text of Sirius' notes. "I think Sirius may have done something to the map...*reveal, Padfoot,*" he said.

Harry watched as the other journals swirled into each other, red and gold and black all pooling together and vanishing as row upon row of scrawling blue text filled the page. Remus, hands spread on the map, gasped and stiffened; there was a flash of blue light, and then Harry was moving, throwing himself forward into the older man and knocking him away from the map, rolling with Remus' shoulders in his arms as a blinding light filled the room.

He ended on top, Remus limp as a rag-doll beneath him, and he crouched over the unconscious man, brushing the hair out of his eyes and checking for a pulse with one hand while he tapped his cheek with the other, hard.

"Remus, wake up – Remus, please...Remus, please wake up..."

There was a rustle behind him and Harry turned, realising the map was between them and his wand, still sitting on the desk. He was prepared for Voldemort or Wormtail or anything to come rising out of the map...

He was not prepared for a young man, pushing himself up off the floor, looking as confused as Harry felt.

When the other – not a man, barely more than a boy really – saw him, he scabbled backwards until he bumped into the wall. Harry put himself square between Remus and this new intruder, and for a few seconds they stared at each other across the now-empty parchment.

This new boy couldn't be much older than Harry himself. He had blue spatters of ink on his face and hands. Black hair hung across cheekbones, which rose sharply under wide eyes. Harry saw, on the edges of his vision, that the floor was covered in flecks of drying blue ink – as was the crisp white Hogwarts shirt the boy wore.

No.

No, it wasn't. Couldn't be.

Harry's brain shut down but his instincts kicked in the same time the boy's did, and Harry leapt for the desk and his wand at the same time the boy

fumbled in his pocket for one. Harry was faster, and found himself straddling the stranger's chest with his wand aimed at the other boy's throat. Slowly, the other boy relaxed and held up his hands.

"I give," he said. "Don't hex me."

Harry took the wand from his hand warily and threw it away behind him. He could hear Remus' breath rattling in his throat, which at least meant he was alive.

"Who are you?" Harry demanded. "How'd you get here?"

The boy gaped at him. "Has anyone ever told you you're a dead ringer for James Potter?" he asked.

\* \* \*

The first few seconds of Sirius' arrival in this new place had been intensely confusing; he'd recalled dreams of being made of ink and paper, and flying apart in a windstorm, and then to arrive here, and be leapt upon by what was clearly Prongs' evil twin...

Well, he did the only thing that came naturally and was guaranteed to stop the Evil in their tracks. Not that he'd come up against Evil with a capital E, yet, but clearly he was going to one day, and it worked on the lesser evil-with-a-lower-case-e Slytherins.

He piffled.

"Has anyone ever told you you're a dead ringer for James Potter?" he asked the boy sitting on his chest.

It did make the other boy pause, and lean back slightly.

"I promise I won't try to kill you?" Sirius tried.

"Who are you?" the boy repeated, more uncertain now.

"Sirius Black," Sirius said, gathering all the dignity that he could muster while having his chest sat on. Surprisingly, it was still considerable. "Of the most ancient and noble house of Black, if you don't mind, and I'm not accustomed to being prodded in the throat with other people's wands."

The boy leaned back further, then climbed off him slowly.

"If you move I'll hex you into next week," he said fiercely, and went back to the man lying on the floor—really, he did look an awful lot like Mr. Lupin, except Mr. Lupin would never have dressed that shabbily. Mrs. Lupin, of whom Sirius was extraordinarily fond, would never have allowed it.

"Is he all right?" Sirius asked.

"I don't know – shut up!" the boy snapped. "Don't move and don't talk."

"Oi, *you* brought *me* here, you know," Sirius snapped back.

"I did not!"

"Well, I didn't bloody come here on my own, did I?"

"Will you shut up?" the boy snapped. "He's breathing. He's got a pulse...Remus...wake up...please wake up..."

Sirius could hear the panic in the boy's voice, and he resolutely ignored for the moment the name he was calling. "Can I help?" he asked, crawling forward.

The boy's head lifted and his wand shot out. "I told you not to move," he snarled. "Come near him and I'll kill you."

Sirius held up his hands. "My wand's next to your shoe. What'm I supposed to do without it, talk him to death? He needs a Healer."

The boy bit his lip, looking uncertainly towards the door, and only then did Sirius realise where he was. Every muscle in his body tensed.

"Is my family here?" he asked.

"What?"

"My family, if they catch you here – if they catch *me* here –"

The boy gave him an irritated wave. "Your family's not here and will you please shut up and let me think?"

Sirius, whose distress at the whole situation was overwhelming, pulled his knees up against his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He watched the boy consider him, and then the man on the floor, and then the door.

"I'm going downstairs," he said. "I'm calling help. If you so much as breathe on him I swear to god it'll be the last thing you do."

Sirius nodded. He had no desire to move at all. If his family heard his voice or his footsteps, they'd find him, and his father had promised to kill him if he ever set foot in the family home again. He'd do it, too.

The boy took Sirius' wand and left, Muggle trainers squeaking on the old wood floors. Sirius sat hunched against the desk and rocked back and forth a little. He could hear the man's laboured breathing, and he longed to turn into Padfoot, but the boy clearly had some sway over the family somehow and it would be bad to reveal himself.

Instead he studied the man's profile, trying to calm down. Definitely a Lupin. Probably an uncle, hadn't Moony said he was named after an uncle or something? All the Lupin men had R names, he knew that because he'd made

fun of Remus first day in classes and Remus had calmly turned to him and given him a lecture on the Lupin wizarding clan that had made Sirius feel about six inches tall, even in the face of a puny, funny-haired, half-breed little kid. How many R names were there? Ronald, Richard, Remus of course, Romulus – uch! Rufus, Randall, Roger, Ramsey, Raymond, Randolph, Rudolph, Riley...Regulus, of course.

Clearly he was hysterical. He was reciting names in his head, for Merlin's sake.

Gosh, there were a lot of R names.

He had the same skinny build as Remus' father, and Remus' high forehead and somewhat unfortunate chin. And the boy had looked so much like James...

He hadn't gotten the boy's name, he realised, and for all he knew he could be summoning the rest of the Blacks even as he sat here and contemplated his companion, this new Remus (Raymond, Reginald, Regis, Rhett...)

Well, there wasn't much to be done, really. All he could do was sit here and, if his father did show up, turn into Padfoot and bite the living hell out of him.

Not such a bad plan, really.

\* \* \*

Tonks was downstairs, industriously conducting an entire armada of scrubbing brushes as they washed the dishes and packaged up the birthday cake into neat packets for the chill-charmed cupboard that took the place of a Muggle fridge.

"Hiya, Harry, how's –" she stopped when she saw his face, and her wand hand dropped. Most of the scrubbing brushes seemed to pause in anticipation.

"My map exploded," Harry blurted. "It hurt Remus somehow and there's a stranger in the bedroom and he says he's Sirius – I told him if he moved I'd kill him so Remus ought to be safe enough –" He took hold of her sleeve and tugged her towards the staircase. The plates and brushes clattered down as she followed him.

"Who did you tell?" Tonks asked confusedly as they climbed the stairs two at a time. Harry pushed open the door to his bedroom while Tonks stood in front of it, wand at the ready. She burst inside as soon as it was open, and Harry followed.

The boy—Sirius—was right where he'd left him, curled up in a small, anxious-looking ball. Remus was still breathing heavily, but his fingers were twitching. Harry hoped that was a good sign.

"Sirius?" Tonks asked, and Harry turned to look at her, surprised.

"Who're you?" the boy replied. "I didn't touch him, I swear—"

Harry watched Tonks kneel by Remus, her face gone very pale. He slid down next to her as she took his pulse and began muttering an incantation over him. After a second his breathing eased and his fingers stopped twitching.

"Only a werewolf," she sighed, almost affectionately. "He seems all right, and the charm should keep him stable for now. *Mobilicorpus*," she added, and he rose off the ground. She levitated him easily through the door and onto the bed while Sirius—the boy—ducked out of her way hurriedly. When he was settled, she turned to regard their intruder gravely.

"Right then," she said. "If you're polyjuiced I'll just strip it out of your system with a very painful blood-cleansing charm and if you've got some sort of masking charm on I'll just tear it right off your skin. I'm told it feels like having tape ripped off every inch of your body."

Sirius didn't move.

"But I'm not going to do it here," she decided. "I don't want the screams waking him." She reached down and hauled Sirius to his feet, shoving him towards Harry, who darted backwards. "Into the kitchen with both of you while I floo for Pye to have a proper Healer look at Remus."

They trooped downstairs and Tonks floo-called for Augustus Pye, an Order recruit who was not unfamiliar to Harry—one Christmas he had helped treat Arthur Weasley's snake-inflicted injuries. The Healer gave Harry a friendly smile as he came through.

"Stay here and don't get into trouble. Harry, if he starts something—well, you're a big boy now. Bash his head in," Tonks said, leading Pye up to the room.

Harry and Sirius sat and stared at each other across the table.

"Are you really Sirius?" Harry finally asked.

"Were you trying to summon someone else?" Sirius demanded. "Who was that witch?"

"That's Tonks," Harry answered. "She's an Auror."

"I saw that," Sirius said scornfully. "Tonks, eh? My cousin married a Tonks. Got a kid about six years old. Metamorphmagus. Sent my mum into a right snit, Andromeda marrying a Muggle-born and then putting out the most

magical kid we've had in four generations..." he paused. "My family really isn't here?" he asked.

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen, how old are you? What's your name, anyhow?"

"Well, that's taken care of," Tonks said brightly, reappearing in the stairwell. She put her hands on her hips and stood in front of the two boys, looking down at them thoughtfully. "I've scheduled a full-on panic attack for later, so as long as the adrenaline's still running you might as well explain yourselves. Not you," she added, pointing to Sirius. "Harry, you tell me what happened."

Harry hesitated.

"Remus made my map explode," he blurted. "And then he was just *there*."

Tonks glanced at Sirius, who shrugged. "I went to bed last night and woke up covered in ink in a guestroom with people jabbing me in the throat with wands, which I still don't appreciate," he added to Harry.

Tonks delicately put her hand over her eyes.

\* \* \*

"All right," said Kingsley Shacklebolt, his deep voice echoing a little in the kitchen, "I'd like to see if I understand this properly. For the last three years, Harry has been in the possession of what is possibly the most unique map in my experience, designed by his father, Lupin, and Black—"

"—and Peter Pettigrew," Sirius added, continuing to be mystified by their apparent inability to remember Wormtail's name.

"And, as you say, Peter Pettigrew," Shacklebolt acknowledged. "In addition, it contains..." he looked at Harry, briefly, "According to Lupin, a journal charm not dissimilar to Tom Riddle's."

"Who's that?" Sirius asked.

"This is not for your benefit, Mr. Black," Shacklebolt replied. "A little patience, if you please, and shortly everything will be explained."

Sirius subsided meekly; it was all very well to strut and shout in front of professors and students, but this was an Auror, and even Sirius had a healthy respect for Aurors.

Especially tall, extremely muscular ones like Shacklebolt.

"You weren't aware of the journals, Harry?" Tonks asked. Harry shook his head.

"And they're not...exactly the same as the diary," he said slowly.

"How do you know?"

Harry looked uncomfortable. "I know things. About the diary, I mean, and I don't think they would have done...what Tom did to make the diary. Anyway, the Twins probably never found the journals—they told me once it took them three months to get into the map alone," he answered. "The names let you into the journals, but they wouldn't have known who Padfoot and Moony and the rest—"

"Hey!" Sirius yelped. "How do you know—"

"Mr. Black, if you cannot remain quiet, I will remove you," Shacklebolt said.

"But he—"

"Quiet, please."

Sirius crossed his arms and glared across the table at Harry.

"And Lupin opened up the journals," Shacklebolt recited, "And then...?"

"He said 'Reveal, Padfoot'," Harry answered. "And there was a flash of light, and Remus passed out. And next thing I know *he's* here."

Sirius opened his mouth to protest again, but Shacklebolt stopped him with a warning scowl before turning to Tonks. "How's Lupin?" he asked.

"He seems all right. He's sleeping upstairs. Pye says there's nothing we can do for now—he doesn't want to move him to St. Mungo's."

"Listen, I'd like to know what's going on here," Sirius complained.

"As would we all, Mr. Black, but I'm afraid it appears the man to best answer our questions is unconscious," Shacklebolt replied. "Unfortunately, we cannot wait for him to regain consciousness to inform you of some rather unpleasant truths, from your perspective."

"What's he on about?" Sirius asked Harry, who frowned.

"Mr. Black, you are...sixteen, correct? For you the year is nineteen-seventy-six?"

Sirius looked at him suspiciously.

"However, for the rest of us, the year is nineteen-ninety-seven," Shacklebolt continued. "And you are not, in actuality, Sirius Black at all. You are a memory of him, trapped in the map he helped to create. And have been, for the past twenty years. Give or take."

A Muggle might have shouted and ranted and scoffed, but Sirius had read a lot of books and studied the functions behind the Marauder's Map. He merely

sat thoughtfully for a while. He couldn't, for the life of him, think of anything to say, other than –

“Send me back,” he ordered.

“I doubt it's possible. Technically you don't exist. You're a manifestation of the map, given life. I imagine the only reason your resurrection didn't kill Lupin is that he's not human –”

“Then send me back into the map.”

“I wouldn't have the first clue how,” Shacklebolt said, infuriatingly reasonable. “Would you?”

Sirius scowled and turned away.

“So...he really is Sirius?” Harry said.

“Not your Sirius, Harry,” Tonks said gently, and Sirius turned back.

“What do you mean, his Sirius?” he demanded. “I've never seen him before in my life.”

“You're my godfather,” Harry said.

“Rubbish.”

“You're also dead.”

“Shut up!”

“He's right,” Shacklebolt agreed, and Sirius wanted to punch him. “The Sirius who put you into the map grew up and became Harry's godfather. Harry's parents are Lily and James Potter.”

Sirius let out a bark of laughter. “Not Lily Evans? She wouldn't give him the time of day!”

“Lily Evans,” Shacklebolt confirmed. “She and James Potter are also dead.”

Sirius, struck dumb, looked at Harry. Harry nodded slowly.

“Voldemort,” he said, and Sirius winced. “He killed them. Wormtail was a traitor, but you were blamed.” Harry bit his lip. “Things went badly.”

“How badly?” Sirius asked, in a hoarse whisper.

“Sirius was sent to Azkaban for their murder. It's complicated; perhaps we should wait,” Shacklebolt said. “For now, what you need to know is that he was innocent, that we were unable to exonerate him, and that he was murdered himself, a little over a year ago.”

Sirius, still attempting to digest the murder of his best friend...as well as his own death...had a sudden thought.

“Then the man upstairs...that's Moony,” he said.

"That is Remus Lupin, yes," Shacklebolt said.

Sirius bolted for the kitchen door instinctively. If Moony was the only one left, then to Moony he would go. Moony would know what to do, he always did, even if he was twenty years older. Shacklebolt almost caught his arm but he shrugged it off and pelted up the stairs. Halfway up, on the landing, Tonks caught up with him and kept hold of him.

"Let me go!" he shouted. "I want to see him!"

"Shut UP shut UP!" she hissed, but another screaming voice was drowning her out, and Sirius backed away from it, terrified, shoulder blades pressing up against a wall in panic. His mother's voice, aged but perfectly recognisable.

"BLOOD TRAITOR AND TURNCOAT! ALLOW MUDBLOODS AND MONGRELS INTO MY HOUSE, A HALFBLOOD THE LORD OF MY HOUSE, A SHAME ON THE FAMILY –"

Shacklebolt and Harry arrived at that point and thrust the curtains closed on a hideous, gaping-mouthed portrait of his mother hanging in the front hallway. Sirius felt his hands shaking and hated himself for his cowardice. At least the horrible voice was silent.

"If you keep quiet, you can see him," Shacklebolt said in a low, urgent voice. "If you try a stunt like that again I'll stupefy you until we can properly lock you up."

There was a hand on his arm and he flinched; Harry had touched him to get his attention.

"This way," he whispered, and led the way up the stairs as if Sirius didn't know his own family's house.

He'd studied the man when Harry had gone to fetch the Aurors, but then it had been as a curiosity; now he looked on the lined face and grey hair and wondered if his older self had looked like that, wondered what had happened to Moony to age him so quickly. If the year was ninety-seven then he was only in his late thirties; old to a teenager, yes, but hardly ancient.

"I did this," he said, staring at the shallow rise and fall of Moony's chest.

"He'll be okay," Harry said, but he didn't sound as if he knew for sure either.

"I didn't mean to." Sirius had never felt more like being Padfoot in his life; James was dead and James' son was here telling him that he himself was dead, and this grown man was Moony, and the world had moved on.

But if they knew the name Padfoot, then they almost surely knew he was an Animagus. He glanced at Harry, who seemed to read his mind and took his hand off his shoulder.

Sirius felt his bones shift and change, the ecstatic moment of transformation sweeping over him, and then Padfoot lifted his muzzle in a solitary, wailing howl. There was no doubt this was Moony now; he smelled like Moony, and this boy's scent was similar to James'. Padfoot rested his head on the bedspread and felt arms encircle his neck as Harry slipped to the floor and leaned against him, a comforting, human weight, a face buried in his shaggy fur.

\* \* \*

Tonks watched as Sirius transformed, knowing that normally the change from man to dog was a private thing best done in solitude, but she understood the need, as well, to hide from the world under another face. The howl he released chilled her and she saw Harry flinch; then Padfoot leaned against the bed and Harry slid down with his back to it, below Remus' too-still shoulder, and wrapped his arms around the big dog's neck. She was surprised Sirius allowed it, given the confusion of the day, but the dog was stoic and still.

There was a sound not unlike a sob from Harry, but his face was pressed into Padfoot's fur and she couldn't be positive. She felt she ought to leave them, but that was Remus on the bed—Remus, who had only just a month ago finally given in to her persistence—

She let her hand drift down to stroke Harry's head, whispered a reassurance, and sat on the bed to touch Remus with her other hand. Her fingers rested on his wrist, counting out the steady beat of his pulse, one, two, three. She saw Padfoot's eyes on her but they weren't accusatory, as their Sirius' had sometimes been when she sat with Remus at dinner or spoke to him after meetings. Those eyes were merely curious and frightened.

She lifted her hand from Harry's head to scratch behind Padfoot's ears but he jerked away, distrustful, and nuzzled against Harry instead, lapping at his ear before returning to his head-on-blanket vigil.

### CHAPTER III

Shacklebolt left soon after Sirius changed, presumably gone to fetch other members of the Order. It wasn't long before Harry sat back from the enormous, slightly gawky black dog and announced that they had better find somewhere to talk. The dog trotted obediently at his heels, head and tail hung low, as Harry removed a large brown book from his trunk and passed into the other room, closing the door behind him and leaving Tonks in his bedroom with Remus.

Harry flung himself down on a sofa, opening the book and balancing it on his lap while Padfoot carefully and gingerly hoisted himself up next to him. The enormous dog tucked his nose in his paws and regarded Harry with sober, watchful eyes as he sketched out the history of the last twenty years.

Most of it was grim. In a few brief sentences he explained the rise of the Dark Lord and his subsequent unexpected defeat; how the Death Eaters had merely lain low until Voldemort showed signs of regaining power, and how they were now in a war that had already claimed Dumbledore and Sirius' own older self. Once in a while Harry would show him a photograph to prove his point—James and Lily at their wedding with Sirius nearby, or Harry himself and Sirius, sitting together in front of the Christmas tree in Grimmauld Place the year before last. The photographs, difficult to understand with doggy vision, prompted Sirius to change back, but he didn't speak.

Harry seemed disinclined to mind; he merely continued talking—now about his life with the Dursleys and the too-brief holidays he was allowed with his godfather. Sirius studied the photographs; that was indubitably him, standing between James and Evans at what was clearly a wedding. And there was Evans cradling a baby boy that would be Harry, and there was James, arm slung around Moony's shoulders while Moony held the baby, before it opened its mouth in a silent wail and James took it back.

Sirius listened more and more raptly to Harry's story, an angry fire burning behind his eyes at each new betrayal and atrocity committed in the name of Voldemort. When he finally stopped, Sirius watched him for a few moments before speaking.

"Thank you," he said. "For...telling me all of it. I guess you probably don't like me much. For, um...I mean it sounds like I was a bit of a rotten godfather."

"Sirius was a great godfather," Harry said sharply.

"Oh." Sirius digested this. "Well, that's...good."

There was an awkward silence then, which was interrupted by Shackbolt's return and Tonks' emergence from the bedroom.

"I've sent out messages to the Order," Kingsley said to Harry. "I'm scrambling most of them for a meeting tonight. Better we do this once with almost everyone here than over and over again with every single person. The ones who aren't there can get it from the others."

"Might be better if we told them," Tonks said thoughtfully. "It'd be sort of awful to make Sirius stand up and recite, you know. He's too young to join the Order, besides."

"Excuse me, but I don't believe I've left the room," Sirius said loudly, and they both gave him a sharp look.

"It won't be business as usual," Harry said. "I'll be there. Sirius should too."

"We're going to have to decide what to do with him," Kingsley said.

"Do with me?" Sirius interrupted. "I'm not twelve, you know."

"You're still not of majority age – you're still in *school*," Tonks said.

"I've passed my OWLs." Sirius glared at them defiantly. "I was head of my year."

Tonks and Kingsley exchanged a look.

"You certainly are Sirius Black," Tonks sighed.

\* \* \*

Sirius, under protest, finally agreed to wait in the kitchen while the rest of the Order assembled in the large sitting room. Kingsley paced the floor; Harry stood guard near the kitchen door, and Tonks greeted people as they came. When most of them had assembled, Kingsley looked to Harry, who shrugged and moved forward. Silence naturally followed. Tonks gave him a slightly admiring look.

"Thank you for coming back," Harry said. "We wouldn't have called you if it wasn't important. There's been an accident."

A murmur went round the room; he could almost see them taking a head count and finding Lupin missing.

"Remus – has been injured," Harry said, stumbling over calling him something other than "Professor Lupin" to this many people. "Augustus Pye says he's all right, anyway. He's sleeping upstairs."

"Should make a full recovery," Pye confirmed. Harry saw Tonks slip into the kitchen.

"Most of you," Kingsley said, taking up the story, "are familiar with the story of Tom Riddle's diary, and the dangers inherent in it. A second and similar magical tool has come into our possession. Lupin's experimentation with it has led to his injuries. Fortunately, he is...sturdier than most humans. As a result, we have managed to recover a younger version of the artefact's author."

Worried murmuring swept the room. Surely not another Tom Riddle?

"Tonks...?" Kingsley prompted. Most of the Order looked to where she was emerging from the kitchen, trailed by a dark-haired boy who strutted just a little.

"This is Sirius," Harry said.

"Or rather, a copy of him made at the age of sixteen," Kingsley added.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Molly Weasley asked. "I don't find it in good taste at all."

"Unfortunately not," Kingsley replied.

"I think it's pretty bloody fortunate," Sirius retorted.

"No offence was meant," Kingsley said mildly. The twins were staring at Sirius as if he were some kind of new life form they couldn't wait to dissect.

"How very interesting," Professor McGonagall said, leaning forward in her chair. "Mister Black."

"Professor," Sirius muttered respectfully.

"Headmistress," she corrected. He gaped.

"Shall I explain the Map Diary, Sirius, or would you prefer to do it?" Kingsley asked. "It is your creation, after all."

Sirius crossed his arms and lifted his chin. "How do I know I can trust all these people? Harry told me some of them thought I was a murderer. And that some woman named Molly still doesn't like me."

"Harry!" Molly said scoldingly.

"Well, you didn't much," Harry answered, unrepentant.

"I believe you know Bill Weasley, Sirius?" McGonagall asked.

"Titchy little first-year?" Sirius said indifferently. "Sure."

Bill stood up. He was taller than Sirius by a few inches and his scars, though healed over, stood out white on his freckled skin.

"All right, your point's made," Sirius rolled his eyes. "I haven't got a choice and whatnot. Cheery bunch you are," he added.

"I really do think someone should explain things," Tonks said in a reasonable voice. "Since Sirius seems to be in a foul mood, which I think everyone would agree is only natural after being stuck in a diary for twenty years, I'll just tell the story, shall I?"

Everyone turned to look at the pink-haired witch, who gave them all a bright smile before settling into the narrative.

\* \* \*

After the meeting had disbanded, with promises of updates on Lupin's condition and the situation with Sirius, a small knot remained in the meeting room—McGonagall and Kingsley, Tonks, Harry, Sirius of course, and Moody, who kept examining Sirius with his magical eye, as if he suspected he might be able to see through him if he waited long enough.

"Very well handled, Nymphadora," McGonagall said briskly, and Tonks visibly stifled the urge to correct her. "Good to have this out in the open, if only amongst the Order. Now then, there are one or two remaining questions to clear up."

She turned his gaze to Harry, who looked back defiantly. "I believe, Harry, that we must collect that map."

"It's mine," Harry said.

"It's *mine*," Sirius corrected.

"The questionable ownership of the map is an issue for another time. Clearly it is a powerful and possibly harmful tool in the hands of the inexperienced."

"I'm very experienced with it," Sirius objected.

"He has a point," Harry said. "If anyone's going to figure out how this happened, it'd be Sirius. He wrote it."

McGonagall studied Sirius' youthful face. "Yes; breaking two dozen school rules in the process. I am loathe to leave a powerful tool in the hands of—"

"The person who created it?" Harry asked abruptly. She looked taken aback. "It's my inheritance and I'm not a student anymore. You can't confiscate it from me."

He turned to Kingsley, who took the map out of an inside pocket in his robe.

"I, however," Kingsley said, smoothing out the folds, "can confiscate it as an Auror. I would prefer not to. I should therefore like your word that you will not remove the map from this house, nor will you allow anyone but myself and Harry access to it."

"I'll want a look at it," Moody grunted. Sirius, taking the measure of this peg-legged, crazy-eyed old man, nodded carefully and accepted the map from Kingsley.

"We must also ensure your own safety," McGonagall continued, apparently determined to ignore Harry's backtalk entirely. "I think it would be wise if Sirius remained –"

"–because that worked so well last time," Harry snarled. McGonagall looked at him over the tops of her glasses.

"–Sirius remained in Grimmauld Place as much as possible," she finished. "For his own safety, Harry."

"Nobody knows who I am," Sirius said. "I don't see why –"

"Because you are young and impetuous and recognisable," she said sharply. "Harry may not be my pupil, but you are not yet of age. Do you wish to defy me, Mister Black?"

Sirius looked away. "No, *Headmistress*," he muttered. Harry opened his mouth, but a warning look from Moody made him shut it again.

"As clever as you may be at...improvisation," McGonagall continued, "You cannot use your magic outside of school. You are underage still, and not yet a fully trained wizard –"

"My OWLs –"

"Will be consulted, no doubt, before you return to school in September. Presuming the school still exists in September, something the Board of Governors has not yet agreed to."

Harry and Sirius both stared at her, dumbfounded.

"What, as a student?" Tonks asked curiously. "You don't think someone's going to ask questions when, you know, Sirius Smith shows up as an extra Gryffindor sixth-year?"

"Hogwarts'll be safe, at least," Moody grunted.

"Something could undoubtedly be arranged," Kingsley rumbled. "Certainly young Black is enough of a...self-starter to conduct his own course of studies without regular classroom appearances? As I recall, Hogwarts did once have a tradition of resident tutors."

Moody chuckled. "Ah yes, I remember, didn't the one bloke get fired over—"

"Be that as it may," McGonagall cut him off, "Perhaps it is time we reinstated the fellowship and invited Sirius to study independently while he is assisting the younger students."

Sirius was staring at her, round-eyed.

"I don't want to go back to school," he said finally. "I want to stay here and fight. Harry told me about it—about everything. I'm already a better wizard than some ever will be—"

"But you're not of age, Sirius," Tonks reminded him.

"Since when has that ever stopped me doing anything?"

"It should have," McGonagall said sharply. Sirius looked at her. "You were a fool twenty years ago and you're a fool now and I won't have anyone else dying because of your impetuous bad judgement—"

"That's enough, I think," Kingsley interrupted. Both Harry and Sirius looked furious.

"It might be useful," Tonks said quietly.

"What?" Sirius turned to her.

"Well, the Death Eaters already have children doing their dirty work all over the school. Why shouldn't we? A fellowship tutor would be able to go where other students can't and talk to all the students, not just the ones in their own house."

"It'd be like...spy work," Sirius said thoughtfully. Deep in his eyes, a spark gleamed.

"You could, of course, remain here at Grimmauld Place."

"*That is not a choice. That's a sentence.*"

"As you wish, then. We shall have to provide you with an alias—"

"You'll pay me."

McGonagall looked at him, surprised. "Pay you?"

Sirius nodded. "If I work at the school. You'll pay me."

"You will be receiving a continued education—"

"But not in classes, and on my own time, isn't that it?" Sirius gave her a shrewd look. "You want me at Hogwarts where you can keep an eye on me, but I'll go on my own terms."

"The usual fellowship is barely fifty Galleons above what tuition would cost—"

"Then you'll pay me those Galleons. If I'm going to be imprisoned at least I'll be paid to keep my peace."

"Will you keep your peace?" Moody asked.

"If I'm fairly paid and respected," Sirius answered. "I *am* the youngest Animagus in the world. It's not as though I won't actually be able to tutor people."

"Yes, well, we shall see once we look up your History of Magic scores," McGonagall said. "Agreed, then. You will remain here until the start of school, at which point you will accompany the other students north on the Hogwarts Express. You will be provided with separate rooms and a marginal salary in return for which you will follow courses of study laid out for you by your professors, and make yourself available as a tutor and adjunct instructor."

McGonagall held out her hand, and Sirius shook it cautiously.

"Who wants cake?" Tonks asked brightly.

\* \* \*

Harry was almost asleep that evening—exhausted after the day's events, plus an hour spent listening to Moody and Kingsley argue politics—when there was a gentle scratch at his door.

"Who is it?" he asked, sitting up in bed. Remus' bed, in fact; it seemed only a fair trade.

"It's Black, can I come in?"

"Door's unlocked."

Sirius appeared in the doorway, face lit eerily by the candle he carried. He paused on the doorstep.

"This used to be my brother's room," he said.

"Well, it's not my normal room," Harry answered, peevisish at having had his sleep delayed. "Remus still has mine."

"Yeah, that was a guest suite."

"Are you going to stand there letting the draft in?"

Sirius came into the room, closing the door behind him. He set the candle on the bedside table.

"Did you need something?" Harry asked.

"Bill Weasley got tall, didn't he?"

"He's always been that tall to me."

"I think Remus put on a few extra inches too. He'll be all right, won't he? That Pye chap's trustworthy?"

"Yeah, he's decent. He fixed Mr. Weasley up a while ago when a snake got at him."

"That's all right then." Sirius stared out the window, through a gap in the drapes. "Listen, this place is a bit creepy, would you mind if I bunked in here? I'd have gone to Moony's room only I didn't want to bother him. He looks awful."

"There's just the one bed," Harry said dubiously.

"Oh, I'll sleep on the floor—or the chair," Sirius added. "Padfoot, you know."

"I always called him Snuffles."

"*Snuffles?*" Sirius demanded.

"Well, yeah, that's what you told me to call him."

"I never would!"

"It was just code," Harry said, exasperated.

"All right, well, can I or can't I?"

Harry looked at Sirius, actually studying his face for the first time since he'd come into the room, and realised that there was a quiet desperation in the other boy's eyes; he had run away from this house not even a year ago, in his personal timeline, and now he had come back to find it drastically changed, and a strange boy sleeping in his brother's bed.

"Look, if you're going to be shedding everywhere anyway you might as well sleep on the bed, I can wash the duvet but the chair's a bit harder to clean," Harry said. "Mrs. Weasley's mad for keeping things clean."

"You sure?"

"It's big enough."

Sirius gave him a dubious look, but blew out the candle and crossed his arms. "Well, are you going to stare while I do it?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"Fine." Sirius turned his back and a moment later Padfoot leapt up onto the bed, making the springs creak. Harry scooted over to give the enormous dog some room, and Padfoot circled a bit before settling down among the blankets, nose on bottom, and heaving a great doggy sigh.

"I hate this house too," Harry said, adjusting his head on the pillow and curling his legs around the bulk of Padfoot on top of the blankets.

\* \* \*

Had Sirius gone to Harry's bedroom, where Remus was still sleeping, he would have found company at any rate, though less inclined to share than Harry probably was.

Tonks had seen her partner and Moody off and said goodbye to McGonagall before fixing herself a cup of tea and having a nervous breakdown. She'd had to administer first aid, manage an emergency situation, lead a meeting, and speak in public. She felt she was entitled to a bit of quiet in which to hyperventilate.

It had been so quiet in the kitchen, though, that she'd felt rather like an intruder in the big old house. So she'd taken her cup of tea upstairs and found herself outside of Harry's room, where she could hear soft breathing—Remus, asleep in Harry's bed, monitored by medicharms that would alert Augustus Pye if anything went wrong in the night. Not that she thought anything would. Pye knew what he was doing and Remus, for all he sometimes looked like he might blow over in a strong wind, was a resilient sort. He'd had to be, after all.

She pushed the door open quietly and crossed the floor, rearranging the drapes slightly so that she could sit on the window seat, her back to one of the walls, and watch him. He wasn't moving; he hadn't even shifted position.

She slid forward on the window-seat and leaned over to brush back some shaggy hair that had fallen in his face. It wasn't a handsome face—too much nose, too many lines, and the occasional scar—but it was friendly and familiar, and she rather fancied it. Of course he was too old for her and all that sort of thing, but her mum had been forcibly engaged to a man yonks older than her before she ran away to marry her dad. She'd tried that out on Remus one time, when he gave her the too-old excuse, and he had infuriatingly pointed out that Andromeda had *run away*.

Given the chance, Remus would probably have given up his life to bring Sirius back to them. She'd seen him watching Harry and Sirius during holidays, seen the obvious pleasure he took in their getting along; they were really all the family he had. Whether he would have given his life to bring a rather arrogant, sulky, impulsive sixteen-year-old out of the past was another story. She certainly wouldn't have advised the trade, for all she had loved Sirius and mourned his death.

Sirius had better be bloody grateful when Remus woke up.

\* \* \*

"I need a name," Sirius said at breakfast the next morning.

Harry had awoken to find Padfoot's reassuring bulk gone already; he'd stumbled downstairs to find Tonks fixing breakfast—or rather attempting to, while Moody ordered her around and Bill Weasley watched in amusement.

"Morning—Ron and Hermione are coming this afternoon," Bill had said, by way of greeting. "You still haven't let them in on your great plan."

"I'm still working on it," Harry replied, accepting a glass of milk. Sirius stumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen just then, looking sleek and washed, still wearing the blue-speckled white Hogwarts shirt and uniform trousers he'd arrived in. He hadn't spoken much until breakfast was fully laid out.

"A name?" Tonks asked Sirius, pouring syrup on her waffles. "I think maybe you need some new clothes more."

"Aye, I went looking for some," Sirius replied. "What's happened to all the things?"

"What things?" Bill asked.

"Everything. It's like a hotel upstairs. All the books and Dad's collections and everything."

"We got rid of the dark artefacts," Tonks said matter-of-factly, "and most of the Dark books. You said to," she added. "Well. Our Sirius did."

"Oh," Sirius said, and glanced down at the waffles in front of him.

"There's some books still. Remus kept them," Harry volunteered sleepily.

"It's just...different, that's all." Sirius picked up his fork and began to cut his waffles into tiny pieces. Harry, remembering other breakfasts with his Sirius, his godfather Sirius, grinned.

"What?" Sirius asked, as he continued to cut the waffles up.

"Sorry, it's just...you always do that," Harry said, pointing at the waffles. Sirius looked confused, then stopped and began eating the bite-sized bits, almost defiantly.

"You were talking about a new name?" Bill asked, to cover the awkward silence.

"Oh..." Sirius nodded. "Yeah, Professor McGonagall said I needed a new name because they can't have Sirius Black running around the school."

"What about a middle name?" Bill asked.

Harry coughed something that sounded very much like "Aedelbert."

"You shut your mouth!" Sirius cried. "Nobody knew that!"

"You told me," Harry shot back.

"Traditional Wizarding name," Moody said approvingly. "You could do far worse."

"Yes, like Bilius," Bill murmured. "Anyway, there's all sorts of associations with the dog star to be made. I mean, it's the basis of the whole Egyptian lunar calendar."

"Oh yeah?" Sirius asked, apparently genuinely interested.

"Course they called it Sopdet, which is no good, she's a goddess, that'd never work for you," Bill said with a laugh. Sirius was drinking in his words interestedly. "She was married to Sah – that's Orion – and their son was Soped."

"Soped?" Sirius wrinkled his nose.

"Yes – he was the god of the eastern frontier. He was a hawk-god," Bill continued, in his element when discussing Egyptian myth. "But Sopdet was the important one. When she was visible over the horizon at dawn it was called the Heliacal Rising."

"Nothing much there, I suppose," Sirius said.

"What about Padfoot?" Harry asked. Sirius frowned at him. "Everyone knows, it's no good trying to keep it secret around here."

"Make a nice surname," Bill said. "I mean, it sounds Wizarding through and through. Not a boring Muggle name like Jones or Smith."

"Nigel," Tonks said suddenly.

"Nigel?" Sirius asked, horrified.

"Well, it means 'black'..."

"Nigel?"

"Have you got a better idea?"

"Anything's better than *Nigel*," Sirius said.

"Bit of a snob, isn't he?" Tonks asked Bill, who laughed.

"Upper crust through and through!" he answered.

Sirius fixed him with an icy glare.

"I am *not* a snob," he snarled, and stood so fast his chair almost fell over.

"She didn't mean anything by it," Bill protested.

"I am not!" Sirius insisted. Harry touched his arm and he jerked it away.

"Take that back. It's bad enough I'm here in this bloody house without you

insinuating that I'm right where I belong with all the rest of the stupid, horrible Blacks!"

"We don't think that, lad," Moody said. "Sit down and finish your breakfast. We know all about your family."

Sirius glanced at Harry, who gave him an encouraging smile. Slowly he sat again, stabbing a bite of waffle viciously with his fork.

"I left, you know," he said.

"We know, Sirius," Harry murmured.

"All of it. They disowned me. I would've starved if the Potters hadn't taken me in," Sirius added. "I gave all of it up."

"Of course you did," Tonks reassured him. "Like my mum did."

"Because I hate who they are," Sirius continued wrathfully. "I'm not like that."

"Were," Bill said quietly. Sirius glanced up at him. "Your mum's been dead ten years, Sirius. Your brother's been dead fifteen. You're the last of the Blacks, unless you count Tonks and her mum, or the Malfoy branch."

"Excuse me," Sirius said, and this time no one stopped him when he rose and left the room. Harry fought the urge to follow him, knowing what it was like to want a bit of private time to oneself, and instead concentrated on his suddenly tasteless breakfast.

The only noise for several minutes was the scrape of cutlery on plates, until Tonks finally said, "Well, I *like* the name Nigel."

## CHAPTER IV

Harry found Sirius in dog-form, curled up at the foot of Remus' bed, when he went looking for him after breakfast. Augustus Pye was taking Remus' pulse, looking rather askance at the large black dog glowering nearby.

"How is he?" Harry asked. The Healer sighed and sat in a nearby chair.

"There's no reason he shouldn't be awake soon," he said. "If he isn't by tonight, I'm going to administer some potions – I don't want to, I'm not an expert in werewolf physiology, but we can't just keep him here like this. He's going to get bedsores, for one."

Harry glanced at Sirius, who blinked his doggy eyes and nudged Remus' blanket-covered knee. There was a quiet knock at the door, and Tonks put her head in. Pye smiled up at her and stood, gesturing for her to take his chair.

"Thanks," she said, settling into it. "I thought he might like it if someone read to him..." she held up a book in a leather binding. "He likes Ellis Graveworthy. You can stay if you want," she added to Harry, who bit his lip and glanced at Sirius. The dog looked defiant.

"I don't know Ellis Graveworthy," Harry said, sitting next to Sirius at the foot of the bed. He wanted to reach out and scratch the dog right between the shoulder blades where he knew the fur grew crosswise and itched, but he didn't know how Sirius would take it so he settled for folding his hands in his lap.

"He's a Wizarding novelist," Tonks said, opening the book and propping it on one leg. "He wrote *Wizard Bird* and *Two Kneazles* and a few others. He died young."

There was a change of pressure beside him, and Sirius sat up, scooting to the edge of the bed. "*Shop Gods* was supposed to be coming out next year," he said.

"That's the one I brought," Tonks answered. "And then *Animagus Winter*, that's Remus' favourite, but I couldn't find a copy."

"What happened to him?" Sirius asked. Tonks looked down at the book.

"He joined the Order in the last days of the war, is what my mum said," she admitted. "Remus has the whole set signed to him somewhere, they knew each other. He was killed by Death Eaters."

Sirius eyed the book. "That one any good then?"

"It's all right. Remus said that Graveworthy used to say he didn't really learn to be a novelist until he wrote *Animagus Winter*," Tonks said. "I guess if Remus knew him you probably did, too."

"I'd've given anything to meet Ellis Graveworthy," Sirius said. "Go on then, let's hear it. Least it's one good thing I got out of coming here. I get to read *Shop Gods* a year early."

Tonks gave him a small smile and opened the book to the first page of text.

*"In Diagon Alley," she read, "above the cobblestones but below the shadow of Muggle England, just after the second Muggle war, stood a shop by the name of Wren's Rest which sold post-owls and small carven-wood toys for children..."*

\* \* \*

Remus was conscious of noise, of the memory of noise and the memory of an impact, something tearing through him like a Change gone horribly wrong. Something that took and took and took when he tried to breathe. He inhaled now and found the air was stale, but wherever he was he could at least breathe freely; he was hot, too hot, but it was so hard to move...

The noise that he had thought was a memory was a voice, now, and he recognised it: Tonks' clear young voice, not conversational but reading in some kind of cadence. He could lie here and listen to that; that would be fine. He liked Tonks' voice.

*"...said Wren; he had studied the boy's face for what seemed like ages. It was a good face, strong and broad, but it was glamoured and Wren wondered why. When Charles spoke again – "*

*"Hang on, he's moving."*

Another young voice, deeper than Ron's, and not Harry's accent at all; then Harry's voice, and a sound that wasn't a sound so much as a movement. He remembered that sound – he remembered that voice.

*"Remus?"*

He opened his eyes and light stabbed into his skull, making it ache; after a second the cool relief of a painkilling charm washed over him, and he focused on a face bent over his. Tonks; good. Familiar. It smelled like he was in a room in Grimmauld Place – the faint scent of Harry and the never-ending mustiness of the old house.

*"Tonks," he croaked. She smiled at him, and he coughed. "Water..."*

A cup was pressed to his lips and a hand held his head up off the pillow enough for him to drink without spilling or choking; when he'd swallowed a few mouthfuls of mercifully cold water, he tried moving again and found himself under two or three blankets in a bed that was not his own.

"Where's Harry?" he asked, bewildered, but aware that as James' last living friend he ought to be keeping tabs on the boy.

"He's safe, he's here," Tonks answered, her hand moving from the back of his head to his neck, between his shoulder blades, helping to push him up.

Two boys sat at the foot of his bed, watching him carefully; he blinked sleep-crusted eyes and raised a hand to rub his knuckles across his face. His eyesight was still a little fuzzy, but he made out a tousled head of black hair, two in fact, and for a moment he thought he might be dreaming or seeing double. There were dozens of times he'd woken in the hospital bed at school or the dilapidated four-posted in the Shack, and there would be James and Sirius smiling black-haired at him while Peter made tea...

He turned to look up at Tonks too quickly. She caught him around the shoulders, steadying him before he could fall off the bed.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Awful," he answered, leaning back again to look at the two boys. Green eyes; that wasn't James but Harry. He didn't think he knew the other black-haired boy, but—

"What's the last thing you remember?" Tonks asked softly, as Remus stared in shock at the spit and image of Sirius Black—Sirius when he'd been sixteen, without the gaunt cheeks or deep-lined face, without the hollows under his eyes from twelve years in prison.

"I was talking with Harry," Remus answered, without looking away. "We were discussing the map. I was showing him a bit of it that the twins never found...I spread it out on the floor because it started malfunctioning—"

He put out a hand, slowly, and noticed that his arm shook. From here he couldn't reach the black-haired boy at the foot of the bed, but the boy was moving forward, stretching out his own hand to touch him.

When their fingers touched, Remus felt his chest heave as though a string attached to his ribcage had been pulled, and he couldn't help the noise his sharp inhalation of breath made.

"You put yourself into the map," he said, eyes wide. "Sirius—how could you?"

"I didn't mean to," Sirius replied, looking frightened.

"Not—you didn't—"

"It was an accident!"

"And when I tried to find out what you were you came back..."

"Nearly killed you," Tonks said. "If you'd been human it would have."

"How did you do it?" Remus asked. "Was it just you? Is James in there too? Did you do it together?"

"Just me," Sirius answered. "I didn't even mean to—"

"Come here," Remus commanded, drawing his knees up so that Sirius could move closer on the bedspread. He came forward hesitantly and knelt when he was about even with Remus' knees. Remus cupped his face, smoothing the hair back off his forehead, and smiled brokenly.

"Look at you, Sirius," he said, still stroking his hair back. "Look at you, how old are you, sixteen? Our brilliant Padfoot..."

Sirius smiled back, a little warily. "Sixteen," he agreed quietly.

"Merlin, I must seem ancient to you," Remus continued, letting his hands fall away. "You've been told who—"

"You're Moony," Sirius said. "Harry told me."

"You've been asleep for a while," Harry added, over Sirius' shoulder. "We've told him everything."

"Asleep...?" Remus looked up at Tonks, who nodded in confirmation. "Does the Order know?"

"Don't worry too much about who knows what," she said, ruffling his greying hair with a smile. "Are you hungry?"

"But what about—"

"Remus," she interrupted, patiently. He paused.

"Yes, please, Tonks," he said. "So long as they can stay."

"What are you, five? Of course they can stay," she answered. "Don't let him move too much," she said to Harry, who nodded.

"Does the Order know?" Remus repeated, when Tonks was gone. The other two looked at each other.

"They know," Harry answered finally. "They've already begun making plans."

"Plans?" Remus asked, coughing again. Harry picked up the glass of water and held it out to him. "Thank you."

"Well, he can't stay here," Harry said.

"I'm going back to Hogwarts," Sirius said.

"Back to Hogwarts? What, nobody's going to notice Sirius bloody Black running around the school?" Remus asked, drinking quickly to stop another coughing fit. With Tonks gone from the room the temporary painkilling charm was slowly wearing off. He tried to breathe deeply.

"We're renaming him," Harry said, as though this solved all problems.

"They're hiring me as a special tutor," Sirius added. "And they're going to let me study for my NEWTs in the meantime. McGonagall got a bit wrinkly, didn't she?"

Remus smiled. "So have we all, in case you hadn't noticed," he said, running his fingers through his hair and separating out a lock of grey.

"Yeah," Sirius said, rather sadly.

"Here we are then," Tonks said, kicking the door open and almost tripping on the carpet. "Stew and bread and good wishes from downstairs. I've floo'd Augustus Pye and he'll be around in a little while to talk to you."

"Thank you," Remus said quietly, reaching up to take the bowl out of the air where it was floating behind Tonks. The plate of bread settled on the blanket nearby, and Sirius promptly took a piece and began buttering it.

"We were just talking about me going back to school," he said, breaking off half and passing it to Harry.

Remus, pushing chunks of beef around to try to collect them all at once, looked sceptical. "Are we sure this is a wise idea?"

"McGonagall seemed to think it was the only one worth considering," Tonks answered. "Don't you take any more of that bread, Sirius Black."

Sirius looked sullen and shoved the rest of his bread into his mouth. Remus chuckled.

"Hard to be taking orders from someone who used to come up to your knee, isn't it?" he asked amusedly.

"I'll eat more bread if I please," Sirius answered. "I just don't feel like any right now."

Remus gave him a sober nod and then winked at Harry. He felt unaccountably euphoric, which was probably equal parts light-headedness and having Sirius back, any form of Sirius. Sixteen or thirty-six, it didn't matter. In fact he probably, given the choice, would prefer sixteen, even with all the flaws that came with adolescence. Those were surface and could be polished.

That was the most comforting and the most dangerous thing about Sirius. At the core, he never really changed.

\* \* \*

Halfway through the meal, Augustus Pye came to take Remus' pulse and check his eyes and do a lot of other rather silly Healer things, which Sirius only bore as well as he did because he'd seen Madam Pomfrey do them lots of times before—and done them a few times himself, if it came to that. By the time Remus was sopping up the last of the stew broth with the bread, Tonks was ready to shoo Pye and Harry and Sirius out, but Remus put his hand on her arm and smiled. When Remus smiled, well. Even James wasn't able to say no to that ingratiating grin.

*Hadn't ever been.* James *hadn't ever been* able to say no . He couldn't be not-able to say no now, because he was dead and couldn't say anything.

Sirius ignored that, concentrating on being where he was and not everything he'd lost in the last two days, because if he did that he might run mad.

"I'd like to speak with Sirius alone for a little while, if that's all right," Remus said. "Nothing stressful, Tonks, I promise. Please," he added.

Tonks sighed. "All right. Come on, Harry."

Harry gave them a reassuring look and patted Sirius on the shoulder tentatively before he slid off the bed and followed Tonks and the Healer out, closing the door behind him. The room was terribly silent for a few minutes. Sirius studied the pattern of the top blanket and waited for Remus to speak.

"Here you are, Sirius," Remus said.

"Yeah. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I would have done it voluntarily if you'd given me warning."

"I don't think I knew how. I don't...remember being in the map. Just going to bed one night and waking up here, covered in ink. Your Harry very nearly hexed me stupid."

Remus sighed. "That does sound like Harry."

"He was worried about you."

"Apparently he had reason. How long, exactly, have I been unconscious?"

"Just about a day. Most of yesterday, and it's coming up on lunch-time today."

"Harry says they've told you everything," Remus said. "How much is everything?"

Sirius shrugged. "He showed me his photographs and told me what he knows, and about us joining the Order thing, and Wormtail and all."

"He told you Wormtail was the traitor?"

Sirius ducked his head. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"I forgave the man who actually did mistrust me, Padfoot, I think I can forgive you," Remus said. "I do need to ask though...have you told *them* everything?"

"Well, they know about Padfoot and about the map but they already knew that—I mean what else do you expect I ought to tell them?" Sirius asked.

"About yourself, I mean," Remus said. "Moody knows, and I know, but that's about it—oh, Tonks, probably," he added. Sirius stared at him.

"Myself?" Sirius asked, voice rising slightly. If Remus had picked up something from the map..."What's there to tell about me?"

"It's all right, Sirius, you told me ages ago," Remus said gently. "About you and, er, blokes."

"There's nothing to tell about me and blokes!" Sirius blurted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sirius, listen to me. I'm trying to tell you that people know. So that you'll know you can trust them," Remus continued. Sirius stared at him in horror. "Sirius, please. Don't look so terrified. It's just me," he added.

"Nobody knew about that!"

"Well, not when we were sixteen, certainly," Remus said sardonically. "But the truth rather came out when James and I caught you with Matthew Byrnbaum the night before graduation—"

"Byrnbaum should be so lucky!" Sirius said hotly, then flushed with embarrassment. "I mean—I don't fancy blokes!"

"You fancied me for a year and a half."

"I never did!"

"You told me so yourself," Remus said, with a small smile.

"Well you needn't be so amused over it," Sirius growled.

"I just thought you ought to be aware that I knew. And so do Moody and Tonks. It's all right, you know. I mean it's different than when we were boys—well, different than—" Remus sighed. "It's different now than it was twenty years ago. It's a bit more accepted. Not much, but..."

"Well, I'll thank you not to go blabbing it about," Sirius said sullenly.

"I don't intend to. I kept your secret for far longer than you managed to keep mine," Remus chided gently.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? I haven't told anyone about you, they all knew already!"

Remus gave him a searching look. "You hadn't finished sixth year yet, had you?"

"Why, who found out in sixth year?"

"It's not important. I'm tired, Sirius, I'd like to sleep some more. I just thought you ought to know."

"Wait—" Sirius started, but Remus had slid down under the blankets again and rolled over so that he faced the wall, away from the younger man. "All right, be that way," Sirius said. "But you might have the decency to tell me whether you fancied me back."

"If I had ever fancied blokes, Sirius, it would have been you," Remus said, around what was clearly a yawn. "Unfortunately, you were the odd one out in that respect."

"Oh."

"Good to have you back though."

Sirius nodded. "Mind if I stay? There's room for Padfoot."

Remus lifted a hand and gestured agreeably; Sirius closed his eyes, Changed, and curled up at the foot of the bed.

\* \* \*

Remus began to move around again by that evening, haltingly with his cane or Tonks' arm for support. His familiarity with the cane made Sirius angry, but there was little he could do. The calm, almost serene man who took weakness in stride was not precisely the shy and impulsive boy Sirius had known. While he wanted to speak to Remus, wanted the reassurance of his presence, he also didn't know how. It was not his Moony who listened with keen silence but spoke with authority when he had to, not his Moony who deftly deflected people away from each other when raised voices threatened. It was not his Moony with grey hair and an old face and a cane who depended on Tonks, who was not his Little Dora, to help him down the stairs.

That afternoon was spent mostly playing catch-up; Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, who treated Sirius with wary deference at first, had reports

to make and questions to ask about Harry's sojourn with the Dursleys, which incensed Sirius more every time he heard it. He felt no protective urge towards Harry, no godfatherly paternity, but no one should have endured such things. Sirius knew from experience what it was like to be reviled by one's family. He hated the Dursleys because they were like his own family, but worse – they were *low class*.

And Harry himself, who looked like Sirius' James, was as unlike James as he could possibly be. He was sober, grave and thoughtful – and so silent as well, where James would have filled the room with wisecracks and overlarge gestures. Nor was he swotty and studious like Evans, all competence and imperious bossiness.

Harry was like Moony more than anything. He was *adult*, and his friends were no less so, though they were more given to laughter than Harry was. Sirius felt quite a child among them. They spoke in low adult tones, about adult things like deaths and battles, things Sirius had dreamed about as adventures but never encountered – not as they had, not in earnest. Skirmishes with the Slytherins, with no permanent casualties on either side, were all he could put to his name. He wondered why he was allowed there at all. Perhaps they wouldn't have, except that he lived at Grimmauld Place now and would have been left alone if they hadn't.

Of course there was gossip to be had as well, and there were jokes and jests of a subdued sort. It was evening before they finished recounting their summers to date and Harry finally adjourned them all – Ron, Hermione, a tired-looking Moony and a solicitous Tonks – for dinner.

"Tomorrow," Harry said, "we start. If you're up to it," he added politely to Remus, who smiled and nodded.

"The war doesn't seem to wait for any man," Sirius said, as Harry took down a griddle and lit the stove underneath with a flick of his wand. Hermione set three knives to buttering bread, and Ron set another three sharper ones to chopping cheese. Tonks put a large saucepan on the stove next to the griddle and began pouring cans of tomato soup into it.

"It seems to have waited for me," Harry sighed. "I wish it hadn't. But I can be patient if they can; running in will only get us killed."

"Well, we're certainly going to have to spend at least some little thought on what Sirius means for the war," Remus replied. "Above and beyond any illicit activities he may get up to at school."

"What more is there to think about?" Harry asked.

"Oh...inheritance, livelihood, legality," Remus replied.

"Is that what you've been thinking about all afternoon when you're pretending to pay attention?" Tonks asked with a grin.

"No, then I was thinking about having a nap," he answered.

"Well, if you can find Kreacher..." Ron said darkly. "I haven't seen him since summer started, except lurking round the bottom of the stairs, leering at the portrait in the hallway."

"What do we want to find that sack of uselessness for?" Sirius asked, alarmed.

"You may very well own this house," Remus replied.

"Bloody hell, I don't want it!"

"Kreacher," Harry called. "Kreacher, come here."

"Where does he go the rest of the time, do you suppose?" Hermione asked.

"Who cares?" Ron replied. The soup began to bubble, and he started laying out sandwiches on the griddle to fry.

Kreacher appeared in the doorway, grumbling under his breath.

"One sure way to find out," Harry sighed. "Go on, give him an order."

Sirius looked down at the house-elf disdainfully. "Cut your head off," he said.

"Sirius!" Hermione said, horrified. Kreacher merely sneered and pointed a finger.

"He *sounds* like old mistress' son and *looks* like old mistress' son but he is not. He is a pureblood and ought to be master but no, Kreacher must serve the half-blood, oh what must mistress think—"

"That's enough, Kreacher," Harry replied, and Kreacher made a sort of obsequious snorting noise. "I don't need you right now."

"How could you tell him to do that?" Hermione demanded of Sirius as Kreacher vanished, but Sirius had lived in the same dormitory as Lily Evans for six years and had no fear of loud women.

"What do you care? He's not your house-elf," he retorted.

"He shouldn't be anyone's! House-elves ought to be free," she insisted.

"*That* house-elf ought to be poisoned," Sirius answered.

"He's a person!"

Sirius shrugged. "I know a lot of people who should be poisoned."

"What if all this had belonged to you and he really had done it?"

"Good riddance," Sirius said ruthlessly. "I hate this house and everything in it. If it were mine I'd blow it up. If you're not mad you'll do the same, one day," he said to Harry.

"Gentlemen," Moony said gently. Sirius lifted his chin and jutted it out.

"I don't care who knows it. What are you going to do, set me lines?" he demanded. There was a hiss from the stove as Ron began turning the sandwiches.

"Clearly Harry is still the owner, and thus the point is theoretical. You can blow up as many theoretical houses as you like, but you will have to tolerate this one's existence another thirty days," Remus said, still in that tolerant, gentle voice—the one with steel bands behind it.

"I wonder why," Tonks said. "I suppose once the title passes it can't pass back, or something."

"He's not really Sirius," Hermione said viciously. "He's just something a bit of parchment vomited up."

"Oh, that is *it*," Sirius said, reaching for his wand. "I'll show you how bloody real I can be—"

Harry was between them with a fluid, silent movement that startled Hermione so badly she knocked a sandwich to the floor.

"No fighting," he said. "Not between us. Hermione, apologise."

"Why should—"

"Hermione."

"Sorry," Hermione said sullenly.

"Sirius?" Harry said, gesturing at Hermione.

"What should I apologise for? She called me vomit!"

"Sirius," said Harry.

"Sorry," Sirius muttered. He noticed Moony was looking oddly at Harry.

"Sandwiches are ready," Ron said hesitantly, clearing his throat.

## CHAPTER V

Dinner that night was subdued, with nearly everyone lost in their own thoughts. Afterwards Ron and Hermione were sent back to the Burrow and tension eased somewhat, but Sirius kept close to the others in the big downstairs living room. He didn't care to roam much, as though his mother or father or one of his horrific cousins might be lurking around a corner, ready to pounce if he strayed into the more distant corners of the house.

Remus had picked up the Graveworthy book Tonks had been reading and was now engrossed in it, though Sirius secretly wished he would set it down so Sirius could pick it up. Tonks herself was idly shuffling a tarot deck she'd found in the kitchen, an old grimy pack that Sirius vaguely recalled their cook using while she waited for bread to bake. House-elves couldn't be trusted with cooking, at least that was the theory; Sirius had privately always thought that his parents were afraid the house-elves would poison them.

"Fancy a game, Harry?" she asked, holding up the cards. Harry settled on the floor on the other side of the coffee table. "Remus, Sirius?"

"Mmh?" Remus asked, looking up from the book. Sirius didn't like the way his eyes were sunken in or the pallor on his skin, but the gesture was so very *Moony* that he smiled in spite of himself. "Oh! All right."

"Game of what?" Sirius asked.

"Emperors," she answered. Sirius blinked.

"How do you know about Emperors?" he asked curiously.

"You taught me to play," she answered.

"I did?"

"Well, you will have. You came to stay with us—would have..." she sighed. "After your seventh year you came to visit a lot, and you and James taught me to play. I won eight sickles off you," she added with relish.

"She's never let anyone forget it, either," Remus added. "I'm in, but we'll have to play with small change."

Harry gave him an uncomfortable look and then glanced at Sirius, while Tonks looked sidelong at Harry and Remus looked at nobody at all. It was a complicated telegraph of emotions and conflict that Sirius couldn't unravel, but he made a mental note of it.

"I'll play," Sirius agreed, scooting forward to sit between Remus and Harry. He eyed *Shop Gods* covetously as Tonks shuffled and Harry cut. She dealt

one card up to each and then two cards down before setting the deck aside. Harry reached under the table and produced a jar of small, coppery discs that looked a little bit like knuts.

"Is that Muggle money?" Sirius asked interestedly. Harry dumped out a pile in front of him.

"Yep," Harry said. "Arthur Weasley let us have it. He's got jars full of coins he finds on the sidewalk and such. Not worth much—hardly worth the percentage they'd take to have it changed to sickles and galleons."

Sirius studied one of the coins, curiously. "Who's on the front?"

"That's the queen."

"Queen of what?"

"England."

"Rubbish! There isn't any wizarding royalty anymore."

"*Muggle* England," Harry said. Sirius picked up another coin.

"What's this one?" he asked. There was a lion on the coin, and the number ten. "It's got the Gryffindor seal on it."

"That's ten pence. Bit like a sickle," Harry explained. Sirius spun it on the table deftly, one-handed. Remus had gathered his coins into tidy piles and Tonks had made a large heap out of hers. Remus picked up a single coin and put it in the middle of the table for an ante, raising his hand to run his thumb over his lips in a familiar gesture of thought. Sirius, Harry, and Tonks anted as well.

Sirius studied the cards while Remus picked up a second coin and decided where to place it. Emperors was not a game of particular skill and bluffing didn't really work; if any of its inventors had been inclined naturally towards divination, they probably would have won continually.

Fortunately, two of its inventors were sitting in this room.

*Unfortunately*, a small voice reminded Sirius, *the other two are dead. Or as good as, anyway.*

He and James had by rights actually invented the game, but Remus (whose Muggleborn mother had taught him to play poker as a child) had refined it considerably. Peter had made a steady fourth for their experimentations. They'd played often enough that the betting was usually even, except for times when the three of them orchestrated a careful losing streak to Remus so that he'd have pocket money for Hogsmeade weekends.

Everyone knew that tarot wasn't really useful for divination, not unless you yourself had some kind of talent. The cards didn't know anything; they were

just cheap bits of pasteboard, although James had once owned a ripping set with naughty pictures on. It was all in how you read them and shuffled them and things, and of course if you hadn't any real gift – well, you could always trust in your subconscious, but for real, true Divs, what was the point? You might as well play games with them.

Emperors was pretty simple, as card games went. One card up and two down; bet on who looked like they were going to have the best fortune. Bets were made every time the cards were turned over, and if you'd bet on the "Emperor" in the end, you took the pot or divvied it up with the other winners. If nobody bet on the Emperor, the Emperor himself took the pot.

Harry won in the first round, Remus being the Emperor with The Hanged Man, the Seven of Swords, and the Magician, an odd combination but nevertheless positive by general acclaim. On Remus' deal, Harry won again with Tonks as Emperor but had to split with Sirius; Remus and Tonks had both bet on Harry (and with a strong opening like The Hermit, who wouldn't?).

Harry sorted out his coins while Sirius gathered up the cards to deal next, shuffling them and offering them to Remus to cut. Tonks rested her chin on her hands and sighed when he dealt out the cards.

"All trumps," she said. "It's so hard to choose when that happens."

Harry deliberated, twiddling a coin between his fingers before finally laying it down on Sirius, who'd been dealt the Wheel of Fortune. Tonks and Remus both bet on Harry (the Magician) and Sirius bet on Remus, the Chariot.

They turned over the second set of cards, and Remus frowned.

"I'm sequential," he said.

"Does it hurt?" Tonks asked flippantly.

"No, look...Chariot and Strength," he insisted. "That's seven and eight of the Major Arcana, in order. So are you," he added. "Emperor and Hierophant."

"I've got...Magician and Papess," Harry announced. They all looked at Sirius.

"I didn't do it," Sirius said, staring at the cards. His own were the Wheel of Fortune and Justice. Sequential.

"It must have been a bad shuffle," Tonks decided.

"But if they'd been in order to start with, surely it ought to skip," Remus said. "If I have four you ought to have three."

Without bothering to bet, they all turned over their final card. Harry had one, two three; Tonks four, five, six; Remus seven, eight, and nine. Sirius had ten, eleven, and twelve.

"Now...I know I wasn't raised magical," Harry said slowly, "But this isn't normal, yeah?"

Remus held out his hand for the deck, and Sirius passed it to him. He began turning over cards from the top and laying them across the table, face-up.

"Ace Coins...Nine Cups...Two Cups...the Moon...Four Staves..." Tonks said, as he turned up the cards. "Those aren't even close to sequential—it must have been a fluke."

"I think if it were less random I would be less worried, actually," Remus said. He set the deck down and rested his left palm over it, thoughtfully. Then he quickly gathered up the cards, including the ones Sirius had dealt, and shuffled them back into the deck. He studied it, held between his two hands, and finally offered it to Sirius.

"I can't feel any charms on it," he said. "It's hard to charm playing cards. They're old magic, like...well, like coins. Deal them again, Sirius."

Sirius moved closer to Harry, instinctively, and began to deal them out again. Two of Swords. Five of Swords. Eight of Swords. Page of Swords.

"Bugger," Tonks said, under her breath.

Second set; Three of Swords, Six of Swords, Nine of Swords, Knight of Swords. And the third—Four, Seven, Ten, Queen.

"That's not good," Tonks said. "Swords, I mean..."

Remus took the deck back and laid four more cards. Harry took the Fool; Tonks got the Queen of Cups; he dealt himself the Seven of Coins, and Sirius the Sun.

They all stared at the cards in silence for a while.

"I didn't do anything," Sirius repeated.

"I think you did," Remus answered. "Not intentionally, but somehow. Even a magical idiot can learn a little from the cards. But you're...displacing them. It's like...your shuffling somehow doesn't count."

He handed the deck back to Sirius. "Turn over four more."

Sirius laid out four in a line in front of him. King of Swords. Ace of Swords. Magician. Papess. The last two in the deck, the first two in the deck. He dropped the rest of the cards on the table as if they had burned him. There was a deep, dangerous silence in the room.

"I think perhaps Sirius had better not deal," Remus said quietly. "Harry, take up the cards and deal, please?"

"I don't think I want to play anymore," Sirius said, before Harry could take the deck. Remus nodded.

"Perhaps we had best go to bed. Harry will have a lot to do tomorrow, and I am tired," he said. "Tonks?"

"I'd better go home," she agreed. "I'm on duty tomorrow."

Harry cleared up the cards and scooped the coins back into the jar while Remus rose and walked with Tonks to the floo on the far side of the room. Sirius watched, not wanting to look too closely at the cards. Moony leaned on little Dora more than he should, but Sirius didn't think it was weakness, now. Particularly not when she said something in his ear, and he smiled and said something quiet in reply. She kissed him goodbye without any particular show and went on her way, vanishing into the green flame the floo powder created. Moony turned around after securing the floo again and caught Sirius' eye. An almost guilty look crossed his face.

"I'll be all right in my own bed tonight," he said, clearing his throat. Harry nodded. "Do you need anything? Sirius?"

Sirius shook his head and shrugged. Harry put the cards and the jar of coins away in a little drawer in the coffee table. Remus hesitated, then turned to the hallway and made his way slowly out of the room. When they heard his door close, both of them relaxed slightly.

"It's probably some charm or other," Harry said, standing up and shaking the wrinkles out of his trousers.

"Sure."

"I mean Remus couldn't possibly have checked really thoroughly."

Sirius shrugged. His eyes fell on the book that Remus had left, and he picked it up as he stood too.

"Might as well go up," Harry said. "Remus was right. There's a lot to do tomorrow. Hermione and Ron'll be here early, and—we're going to have a lot to talk about. A lot to do."

"Going to tell me, too? Or should I sit in the corner and study my lessons?" Sirius asked, more sharply than he meant to. Harry bit his lip.

"The more people know, the more dangerous it is," he said. "This isn't school gossip."

"And you think I can't keep my mouth shut?"

Harry studied his hands, fingers crooked in against the palms. "You hadn't finished your sixth year, had you?"

"What's that got to do with anything? Why do people keep asking that?"

"You told. About Remus."

Sirius stared at him. "I never would," he replied. "Never, ever would I."

"But you did. You told Snape," Harry said, spitting the name of the traitor who had killed Headmaster Dumbledore.

"Whoever told you that is a dirty liar," Sirius insisted. "That lying, snooping bastard –"

"You *told* him, Sirius," Harry snapped. "You told him if he wanted to know where you went on the full moons he should follow you, and he did. You and my dad both told him. And you would have let Remus kill him, except my dad got cold feet and saved his life. Much worth it is now."

Sirius met his glare without flinching, but it took every ounce of Black arrogance he had, to do it.

"I would never make Moony a murderer," he said clearly. "Ever."

"But you did. You tried to, anyway. So how do you know what you're capable of?"

"I know I can keep a stupid secret. And I know I can find out secrets others want kept. I know that if we did tell Snivellus, he was asking for it."

"And what happens when someone taunts you into telling my secrets, then?" Harry demanded. Sirius fell silent.

"You won't know unless you give me the chance, will you?" he asked finally. "Besides, I might not even exist," he added bitterly.

"I don't believe that," Harry said fiercely. "We can't have got you back only for you to disappear again."

"Yes, but I'm not *your* Sirius, am I?" he asked. "Not much use to you as I am. Can't even buy you a drink."

"You're still Sirius."

"You'd trust Sirius."

Harry ran his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture that made him look so much like James, for just a brief second, that Sirius felt this new world fold in on itself. Beyond it he could see his home, could see his Hogwarts, his James.

"I have to talk to Ron and Hermione, and Remus. It's not up to just me," Harry said. "I have other people to think about."

"But do you think I ought to know?" Sirius asked, gripping the book tightly in one hand. Harry met his eyes squarely.

"I think you should know."

Sirius nodded. They watched each other warily across a gap of twenty years, until finally Harry shrugged.

"Coming up?" he asked, turning to the staircase.

"Just going to fetch some candles from the kitchen," Sirius said. He heard Harry's footsteps on the stairs while he found the stock of taper candles in the pantry and shoved a few in his back pocket, careful not to snap them. Whatever had just happened and might happen tomorrow, tonight he had sole proprietorship of *Shop Gods* by Ellis Graveworthy, and he intended to make the most of the opportunity. A little thing like potential disincorporation was not going to stop Sirius Black from his pleasure reading.

The room he had been given had once been the bedchamber of his mother's maid, which was fine with him; he would rather a servant's room than his own. He set the candles in the bracket above the bed and tugged on the wicks to activate their self-lighting magic, careful not to singe his fingers.

The frontispiece was, like Tonks had said, inscribed by Graveworthy himself: *For Remus Lupin, friend and comrade in arms to whom I am most indebted. Yours humbly ever, Graveworthy.*

Sirius wondered idly what Remus had done to indebt the novelist to him, but he knew he shouldn't ask. It seemed the list of things he didn't want to discover about this new incarnation of his friend was growing by the hour.

He turned through the pages, looking for the place Tonks had stopped reading, and curled up against the headboard, knees bent, book propped on his thighs.

*When Charles spoke again, it was with more courtesy than he had previously shown. "What is this?" he asked, and Wren saw that he was indeed a well-bred young man, merely rude out of habit. When the scholarly urge overtook the boy, he reverted to an innate politeness which did some childhood nurse, far in his history, a great credit –*

A draft blowing across the bed put one of the candles out, and he turned and knelt to get enough height to re-light it from the others, then slid off the bed entirely to investigate the rogue wind.

One of the narrow windows set deep in the wall was cracked, and air crept through whenever wind blew past the eaves. He knew, because Harry had told him, that the house was unplottable, but that didn't mean he felt any better

about it. Down below he could see scraps of paper and rubbish caught up in little eddies of wind. It was that time between dusk and full night when one feels peculiarly as though one must be in the wrong place.

He took the book and the blanket off the bed, put one of the candles carefully in an old silver candleholder decorated with twined serpents, and left.

Harry was writing when Sirius knocked on the door to the sitting room. He didn't look too surprised to see him. He gestured with the end of his quill to the sofa, and Sirius lit the candles in the stands near it, settling down with his book and his blanket once more. This was better; the candles threw pools of warm light across the wood floor, still dappled with blue ink. The scratch of Harry's quill filled the silence nicely.

*"That is a pistol," Wren answered, leaving the till and circling to open the glass case that hung on the wall. He took down the heavy contraption, cradling it in his fingers carefully.*

*"What does it do?"*

*"It kills people. That is its sole purpose; it is created to do nothing but destroy."*

*Charles regarded it sceptically, and it was perhaps easy to see why. When Wren had first encountered a pistol, he had been fascinated by its sleek steel surfaces, by the intricate combination of levers and cylinders which moved with such grace...*

"Do you even have any pyjamas?" Harry asked, after a time. Sirius looked up from the book, surprised.

"No," he said, thoughtfully. "But I've been Padfoot, so it hasn't mattered much."

"Would you like some? You can have some of mine, but they won't fit properly. They aren't really mine, just second-hand from my cousin," Harry offered.

"But you have all sorts of money."

"And no time I could have used it. I can now. I should. But..." Harry shook his head. "There are more important things right now."

He stood and crossed into the bedroom, Sirius following after a moment. At the foot of the bed was the school trunk where he'd found his photo-book the day before. Harry bent and rummaged in it, finally producing what looked like a red-striped tent-and-hammock set. Sirius shrugged out of his Hogwarts uniform shirt and ignored the pyjama top, holding up the trousers for inspection.

"Bit baggy," Harry said apologetically, pulling his own shirt over his head. "I could shrink them if you want. Should do that to all of them, really."

"You could buy all new clothes at Diagon, couldn't you?" Sirius asked, folding the trousers carefully. "Because these would make a pretty ripping sail for a pirate ship."

"Well, I guess I could."

"You have all kinds of money," Sirius said, and a thought occurred to him. "Er...and all of mine."

"That's all right, though; you'll have money when you start Hogwarts again, and if you want the money from the inheritance back, I'll give it to you. I don't need it; Mum and Dad left me enough to live all right."

"I wish I'd left you some pyjamas that fit," Sirius sighed.

"Sorry."

A thought occurred to Sirius as Harry stood behind a door to decently change into his own pyjamas. "Or..."

"What?" Harry asked, leaning around the door.

"Would you...I mean, you can say no, if you like, but...well, we're both used to the dormitory, aren't we?" Sirius asked. "I mean, it wouldn't bother you if I slept in here, would it?"

Harry scratched the hollow of his collarbone, thoughtfully. "Not really, but there's just the one bed," he said.

"Oh—I could be Padfoot. That'd be all right, wouldn't it? That way I wouldn't have to worry about the pyjamas at all."

Harry grinned. "Sure. Padfoot doesn't kick or snore."

Sirius fetched his book from the other room and blew out the candles, carrying the last one into the bedroom with him. Harry had crawled into bed and was sitting cross-legged with the blankets over his lap, reading a book that looked considerably less interesting than Sirius'.

"What's that?" Sirius asked, settling himself facing Harry, leaning against one of the foot posts.

"Remus left it on the bookshelf for me. It's about Grindelwald. He thought it might help, I think, though a history of the Founders would be more favourite right now. Still, it could be useful," Harry allowed. "Did you know he split his soul in half?"

"Oh yeah—put it in a horcrux, didn't he?" Sirius asked absently, opening *Shop Gods* on one knee. It took him a moment to realise how tense the silence had grown. He glanced up.

"What do you know about horcruxes?" Harry asked.

"Oh, what anyone knows, I imagine," Sirius said. "Well, maybe not. Mum wanted one, but she gave up when she realised there wasn't any way 'round the kill-them-yourself clause. Mum doesn't—didn't," he amended, "...didn't do her own dirty work. Why? It's really Dark stuff, you know. And tedious. Nothing worse than being evil *and* boring," he said, bending to his book again.

"Sirius, *what do you know about them?*" Harry asked.

Sirius looked up, irritated now. "Listen, it's not like I'd ever try my hand at one myself. I'm a genius, but I'm not a stupid one."

He saw Harry pause to parse this, lips moving slightly.

"But you know how to make one?" Harry finally asked.

"Not really. I mean it's not the sort of thing you get out of books, is it? I know you use a deliberate act of murder to separate out a piece of your soul, which goes into a...thingy. A necklace or something. Anything really, like *whatshisname*." Sirius gestured in the air, something he did when he was trying to bring something to mind—a habit that had annoyed a lot of his fellow OWL-takers during the exams. "Meleager."

Harry had closed his book now, and was listening with rather flattering attention. "Who's Meleager?"

"Greek wizard, one of the old ones, you know. Killed a slave girl and made a horcrux from a bit of old wood; reckon he thought nobody'd know to destroy it," Sirius said. "He told his mum, though. That was a bit of a misstep."

"Why?"

"Destroyed it, didn't she? He went out on a boar-hunt and got in a row with his uncles over something, stabbed 'em both and took a mortal wound himself, only he had the horcrux, of course, so that was all right. Well, he thought so. His mum heard he'd been murdering her brothers and she set the bit of wood on fire. Did for him all right," Sirius said. "It's all in Ovid, and Phoenix tells it in Homer I think, but they get it wrong. Why?"

Harry had drawn his knees up against his chest and curled his arms around them; he looked younger than his years, and for the first time Sirius realised that Harry was a child too—or rather, Harry was a child who wasn't allowed to be a child.

Except here, in the privacy of his bedroom, listening to stories of the old magic as Sirius had heard them from his nursemaids.

"Does *he* have a horcrux?" Sirius asked, leaving no doubt as to who they were discussing now. Harry nodded. Sirius closed his book and crawled forward

on the bed, settling himself next to Harry. "Well, they're not that hard to wreck, at least."

Harry tilted his head against his knees, regarding Sirius with eyes that revealed very little. Sirius picked up Harry's book and put it with his own on the bedside table. He retreated down to the end of the bed and, when Harry didn't move to keep watching him, Changed into Padfoot.

Harry slid down under the blankets and curled up on one side. Padfoot, snuffing innocently, crept back towards the headboard and insinuated himself up against Harry's chest. He exhaled a satisfied sigh when Harry's fingers found and scratched the bit between his shoulder blades, where the fur grew crosswise and itched.

Soon enough both man and dog were asleep, Harry dreaming of an unending search through the halls of Hogwarts while Padfoot fled through a monochrome dream world full of predatory humans who wanted to take away his Map.

## CHAPTER VI

Remus was an early riser by inclination, as many bookish sorts are, and he prepared breakfast with halting slowness before climbing the stairs to wake Sirius and Harry.

He was used to a certain degree of physical infirmity, but this lingering exhaustion irritated him. His hands shook as he made breakfast and he had trouble lifting things; he had to stop for breath twice on the stairs. He fretted, especially since the moon was coming and there would be no Wolfsbane potion. He had survived without the potion and without companions before—indeed, most of his early youth and the twelve years between the fall of Voldemort and Remus' tenure as a Hogwarts professor had left their legacy of scars.

But it was hard, very hard to go back to solitary moons without the potion. The last three years had been a welcome respite, and he thanked his stars that Dumbledore had bullied or bribed or blackmailed Severus into continuing to make the potion for him. Except now Snape had fled back to his true master and no one else who could be trusted was talented enough to brew it.

And yet...he wondered. It would have been so easy for Severus to poison the drink, to slip something into it. It was still experimental; no one need even know it was poisoned. Just an adverse allergic reaction or an unexpected physiological quirk. It wouldn't look like murder. He supposed it would look like incompetence, and Severus would never brook the belief that he was incompetent. Perhaps rightly so; the man was a genius, that much was obvious. Though Remus knew what he had seen in Severus' hateful glares that one year he spent at Hogwarts was jealousy—jealousy and envy, because Remus had been a better teacher than he and had been popular with the students. Genius did not always translate well between people.

There had been only one moon since Dumbledore's death, and he had been tempted to seek out Fenrir's pack on the off chance that he might get lucky and kill one of them while he was Changed. Too much of a risk, however; he might just as easily kill a human—and he had heard stories about children fathered on werewolf females in heat. So he had locked himself in the cellar, which had been...painful, but effective.

He had no options. The cellar of the house had sturdy barrier charms on the doors, and if he was already weak, perhaps the wolf would not be so destructive as it had sometimes been in the past. Augustus Pye would be there,

even if Remus couldn't really afford the cost of a Healer. Tonks would be there too, though he had made her promise to wait until the sun was fully up before she would come find him.

He opened the door to Harry's sitting room and passed through it, noting the crumpled blanket on the couch and the pages of parchment lying on the roll top desk. Good; Harry was already making this place his own, and perhaps there would be redemption for the old house after all.

He knocked quietly on the inner door leading to the bedroom, then eased it open a few inches.

Harry laid on his side, younger in sleep, one palm resting against his cheek and blocking sunlight out of his eyes. The early-morning light filtered through the dusty windows and washed out the colours, turning Harry's skin a dull dun, his hair deep grey rather than its usual messy black.

Curled up in the crook of Harry's legs, head resting across his hip, Padfoot slept obliviously on. He'd never made much of a guard dog, though anyone who would try to attack someone sharing a bed with a creature of that size was clearly a fool to begin with. As a dog, he was still clumsy and gangling, not quite fully out of puppyhood. Remus remembered Padfoot at full growth and prime, before Azkaban. When he walked down the street, even at the heels of James or Remus or Peter, he drew stares from everyone.

Harry made a quiet noise and shifted slightly. Remus touched his elbow gently.

"Breakfast, Harry," he said.

"Mmhrh?"

"It's just me. Breakfast is ready. Ron and Hermione will be here in an hour or so."

Harry sat up and blinked in the light, reaching for his glasses on the side-table. "Right," he said muzzily. "I'm up."

His movements slid his legs out from under Padfoot's great furry head, and the dog blinked and yawned, stretching.

"All right, Padfoot," Remus said, rubbing him behind the ears affectionately before turning to the door. "Come down when you're ready."

It didn't occur to him to find Sirius and Harry sharing a bed at all strange; he couldn't count the number of times he'd slept with Padfoot on the bed, an enormous and reassuring warmth pressed up against the small of his back.

When he'd visited the Potters on holidays after Sirius moved in, they'd had no choice – they only had one guest bed and *someone* had to share it.

Back downstairs, there was owl post that had arrived in his absence – a letter from McGonagall updating him on the Hogwarts situation and the morning edition of the *Prophet*. There was a letter for Harry included in McGonagall's owl; Neville, writing from Ireland. Remus recalled, dimly, something about a summer apprenticeship at a magical arboretum there.

Harry and Sirius clattered down the stairs a few minutes later, looking freshly if not very thoroughly washed. Remus gestured at the covered platter where the eggs and toast were staying warm, and they helped themselves.

"Anything we should know about?" Harry asked, nodding at the *Prophet*. Remus folded it and shook his head, passing it across.

"The usual. Disturbances, thefts, attacks; no murders, thankfully," he said.

"Some things don't change," Sirius murmured. "Sounds just like most of the conversations we have – we had," he corrected himself.

"They had changed," Remus replied wistfully. "We had ten years of relative peace, once upon a time."

"Intermission," Harry said darkly, reading the front page.

"Temporary truce to reload," Remus answered.

"Naptime," Sirius said lightly. The other two smiled at him, but the laugh he had been angling for did not materialise. He took a few huge bites of toast to hide his dismay.

"I'm going to Diagon Alley this morning," Remus said, adjusting his shirt-cuffs unnecessarily. "I can get anything you need, if you give me a list."

"Are you sure you'll be all right alone?" Harry asked.

"I'm meeting the twins there."

"I'll repeat my question..."

"We should be fine. Nobody's going to pick a fight in broad daylight," Remus reassured him. "Bill's not far away; we're meeting him and Fleur for lunch. Besides, I haven't really any choice. I have to go to St. Mungo's anyway. Augustus Pye wants to check on me but he's on rotation, so I promised him I'd show up."

"We could go with you," Harry persisted.

"I think not, Harry. You and Ron and Hermione have a lot to discuss," Remus said.

"Some of which I have to tell you, too."

"Save that for this afternoon, then; I'll be back soon enough."

"I don't like it."

"Harry," Remus said, growing slightly annoyed. "While I appreciate your concern, I have managed to keep myself from being killed for the past thirty-seven years. Which is more than can be said for some of us at this table."

Harry's head snapped up and fury showed bright for a moment in his eyes. Remus realised that what he had intended as a joke was not, in fact, at all funny.

"Bollocks to your condescension, Remus," Harry said, and he would give the boy this; a year ago it would have been a shout, and now it was...well, almost calm. "You're not safe anywhere anymore, and you know it."

"It's very hard to kill a werewolf," Remus reminded him.

"Sirius could go with you."

"Certainly not. You heard McGonagall."

"I wouldn't mind –" Sirius started, but Harry interrupted.

"Bollocks to her too."

"Harry, you don't mean that," Remus said, while Sirius stared at Harry in horror.

"Why shouldn't I? You know what happened the last time someone tried to lock him up here."

"That was different."

"Excuse me," Sirius said loudly, and they both turned to look at him. "Moony's never needed a bodyguard yet. I want to stay here; I want to know what Harry has to tell the other two. Therefore Moony has to go on to Diagon, because I want a pound of Honeydukes chocolate, and Harry and I and everyone else have to stay here and talk about Voldemort so we can plot to kill the bastard."

Remus leaned forward slowly and rested his chin on one hand while Harry sullenly lapsed into resentful muttering.

"Nice to have you back, Sirius," he said with a smile.

\* \* \*

Harry didn't speak much through breakfast, and when Sirius found him after finishing his own rather more leisurely meal and seeing Remus off, he was in his sitting room, sorting books rather violently.

"What're you doing?" Sirius asked.

"Research," Harry said vengefully, thumping a book down so hard Sirius winced. He picked up the next one Harry reached for, bent on saving it from his wrath. "Which is apparently all I'm ever supposed to do. Talk and look things up—" he reached for another book, which Sirius took out of his hands. "Pretend like I'm still a child—stop taking books from me!"

"Then stop abusing them!" Sirius retorted, setting the pile he'd collected on the table, gingerly. "They never did anything to you."

Harry threw himself down into a chair, rolling his eyes.

"What's got into you? He's just going to Diagon. And he's right, you know, he is older than us."

"For six years they've been telling me I can't go here or there and that I'm not ready and finally Dumbledore says I am ready and then goes and gets himself killed..."

"I don't think Remus thinks that," Sirius said reasonably. "He's been treating you pretty much like a man, far as I can see. He only told you off when you stopped acting like one."

Harry glared up at him, but Sirius had undergone worse. He settled himself on the chair next to the desk, crossing his arms atop the books and resting his chin on them.

"We can't afford to lose anyone else," Harry said.

"You mean you're afraid that if you aren't there he's going to get killed."

"Well, is that so unreasonable?"

"Yes," Sirius said.

Harry let his head fall back, staring up at the ceiling.

"I don't mind it here," Sirius tried.

"Yes you do."

"Well, all right, but there are worse places one could be."

"Yeah, I know. I'm going to one."

Sirius tilted his head. "What?"

"After today. I'm leaving Grimmauld Place soon; Remus doesn't know yet. Do you know where Godric's Hollow is?"

"Course, that's where James' parents live..." Sirius hesitated. "Lived. I stayed there...I guess for quite a while, if what you say is true. Nice little place. Sort of suburban, though. I mean. Little white houses all-inna-row kind of a place. Flower gardens and gossipy neighbours." He grinned, reminiscently. "Made a big scandal when I showed up. Tongues a-wagging."

"Did you deserve the talk?" Harry asked.

"Reckon I did, considering what we got up to last August."

From downstairs came the *woomph* of the floo, and then Hermione's voice.

"Harry? It's us!"

Harry moved quickly to the door, leaning out. "Up here, Hermione! Sirius is too."

Hermione and Ron arrived in short order, dusting the soot and ashes from their clothing. Hermione gave Sirius a curt nod, behind which Ron offered an apologetic smile.

"Sirius," Harry said, hesitant now. "I need to talk to them."

Sirius echoed Harry's eye-roll from a few minutes before and stood up. "I'll just go stick my fingers in my ears," he said. "Mind if I use your bedroom?"

Harry shook his head and Sirius left, closing the door firmly behind him. Whether Harry believed him or not, he understood how Harry felt better than anyone would probably know. He couldn't use his wand, couldn't be told secrets, couldn't leave Grimmauld Place.

He flopped onto the bed, reaching out for the book. There were spy holes everywhere in the house, of course, and monitoring charms he didn't even think anyone had found yet. Most of them were *into* the bedrooms, however, rather than out from. Sirius recalled his Uncle Sabik, a rather disturbing middle-aged man who liked to invite guests to stay at Grimmauld Place, feed them a rich and aphrodisiac-laced dinner, and then spy on them in...well, in this bedroom, as a matter of fact.

He shivered. Between Uncle Sabik, Cissy and Bella (who knew when uncle had time to actually fuck Auntie enough to get three daughters out of the deal?), Sirius' senile and violent Gran Black and his vague, hard-drinking father, they almost made Mum's family look sane.

Almost. Except nobody could out-mad Mum, not even uncle Sabik, because Mum would watch at peepholes to make sure you *didn't* do anything enjoyable. He'd found that out the hard way, the first time he'd tried to have a private wank one summer holiday after learning about such things at school...

She never caught Bella and Cissy with Lucius Malfoy, though, because Lucius was a wealthy pureblood. So he could fuck both sisters at once and try for the third if he pleased, even if he was ten years older than either of them and Cissy was barely two years older than Sirius himself. Until he picked one of them, he had his run of the Black harem.

Andromeda knew better, though; she'd got herself knocked up by a pleasant, even-tempered Muggle-born and run off with him, and a sweeter little girl than Dora had never existed.

Sirius brooded, ignoring the book spread before him. Sweet little Dora, who had kissed his Moony goodnight last night. Moony himself had to be ten years older than her; he remembered Dora begging for a ride on the motorbike when he and Moony and James visited Andromeda last summer, and Moony laughing and plonking his borrowed helmet down on her head and saying perhaps when she was older.

It had always been understood by everyone at school that Moony was *his*. His to protect, his to study with, and no one was to mess with Moony on pain of a thrashing from Sirius and James. But...everything was different now. Harry clearly thought Moony belonged to him, and little Dora was making a decent bid as well, but Moony himself looked like he hadn't belonged to anyone in a long time. And that was Sirius Black's own fault for bollocksing everything up, five years away from whom he had been when the Map had been finished.

Harry opened the door, cautiously. Sirius looked up.

"Fate decided?" he asked.

"You'd better come in," Harry said. Sirius closed the book, sliding off the bed and joining the others in the sitting room.

"We've agreed," Harry continued, as Sirius sat down next to Ron on the sofa, "that you should know. You know some of it already—"

"But you mustn't tell anyone," Hermione interrupted. Sirius gave her a stony look.

"Yes, Hermione," Harry said. "He knows that. This goes no further than this room, for now—Remus may have to know, and Tonks, but what we talk about here stays here until I say otherwise. Dumbledore told me not to tell anyone but Ron and Hermione, and I wanted to abide by his wishes...but he's dead, and McGonagall was right, not that I'd admit it to her. I can't do this as if he were still alive. Things are changing. We have to keep up, and that means telling—probably Remus and Tonks. Definitely Sirius; he can help us."

Hermione was still watching Sirius suspiciously.

"You know what a horcrux is," Harry prompted.

Sirius nodded. "And Voldemort has one," he added.

"Six," Harry said. "Well, four now."

"Six?" Sirius asked, incredulous.

"We assume six," Hermione said. "There's no proof he actually managed to make them all."

"We can assume a few, though," Harry replied. "Dumbledore's destroyed one and so have I; we tried to find a third, but it was already gone, replaced by a fake. We don't know if it's been destroyed or not. Dumbledore thought the fourth was probably put into the snake he keeps – and the fifth is probably in an artefact he stole from a witch when he was still a young man. A cup owned by Helga Hufflepuff. We've no clue what the sixth is, or even where to start looking."

Sirius listened, bewildered. "Six?" he repeated, dumbly. "Is that even possible?"

"It must be," Hermione answered. "He did it."

"But that's...that's madness," Sirius stammered. "My mum was mad for wanting to have one, and even she realised how mad it was in the end. Look what happened to Meleager. It always ends that way."

"Meleager?" Ron asked Harry.

"Later," Harry said. "Listen, we *know* he's mad. The point is, we haven't a chance against him unless we can destroy the horcruxes."

"Should be horcruces," Hermione muttered. "Proper plural."

"Whatever the plural," Harry said, "The reason we're here now is because we need a plan. We can't just go randomly searching England; they might not even be in England. Hermione's been doing some work on it..."

Hermione reached down into a bag sitting near her feet and drew out a cheap notebook with a red cover and, incongruously, a large brass locking mechanism on one side. She took a key from a chain around her neck and unlocked it, flipping the catch back and passing it to Harry.

"Couldn't they just tear the cover off?" Sirius asked curiously. "Or is the lock a binding charm?"

"It'd take some pretty powerful magic to rip off the covers through the charm," Hermione answered, slightly less snootily.

"What'd you use?" Sirius asked, distracted. "Glomgour's binding or uh, pixie brass on the key?"

Hermione blinked at him. "Glomgour's binding, actually. I couldn't get any pixie brass."

"Meanwhile, *back in the war...*" Harry said, and they both turned their attention back to him. He opened the book and leafed through the first few

pages, which were covered in Hermione's small, tidy handwriting. "Citations and bibliography?" he asked, amused. Hermione flushed.

"If you're going to do a thing, do it properly and in correct grammatical fashion," she said. "I thought I'd sort them by...well, the destroyed ones first, then in order of how much we know about them—so that the ones we still can add information about are at the back."

Harry turned the page and smoothed it down; there was what Sirius recognised as a copyquill reproduction of a page out of some book or other. It showed a large picture of a ring, top and side, and then below that a coat of arms. The opposite page was again filled with Hermione's handwriting.

"That's one of them?" he asked.

"The one Dumbledore destroyed," Harry said.

Sirius craned his neck to look at it right-side-up, and bit his lip. "That's the Peverell coat of arms, isn't it? *Deo non fortuna hinc mihi salus*—yeah, must be. They were all religious nuts."

Harry looked up at him. "What does it mean?"

"Not through Luck but through God comes salvation to me," Hermione supplied, pointing to a line of text. "I translated it."

"But this one's been destroyed?" Sirius asked. "Looks a bit like my dad's ring—well, his is Black, of course."

"*Toujours pur*," Harry murmured, turning the page. Yellowing, flaking newspaper articles had been pasted in; one about the death of a Hogwarts student years before even Sirius' time, one about the abduction and subsequent rescue of one Ginevra Weasley.

"Your mum?" Sirius asked Ron.

"My sister," Ron said tightly, glancing at Harry with something like resentment. Harry's lips tightened into a thin line.

"I destroyed this one," he said, turning again until he reached another drawing, this of a large snake.

"I did what I could with what you told me, Harry," Hermione said. "I think I know...well, what breed it is, and that sort of thing."

Harry nodded. "Good work. We'll save her for last; there's no reason to tip our hand now."

"That's dangerous stuff," Sirius said. "Animals aren't reliable. Even for spells that aren't as complicated as this one. That's why the animagus transformation is so dangerous. You need to really understand animals."

"Voldemort understands snakes," Harry said briefly. The next page had a newspaper article and a drawing of a cup on it. The article seemed to be about the murder of an elderly woman by her house-elf, which just went to show you, Sirius thought, that having a human cook was a good idea after all.

"Helga Hufflepuff's cup," Harry explained to Sirius. "We think it was stolen out of the woman's house—that someone else killed her and set up her house-elf."

"They took a locket too," Hermione said, reaching out and turning the page. "Slytherin's locket."

Which is where it gets complicated," Harry sighed. "He took the locket and made a horcrux out of it, but when we went to retrieve it, someone else had beaten us to it."

Sirius studied the page of writing below the little drawing of the locket and the large bare space below it, which looked as if it were waiting expectantly for something. Harry took a smaller locket out of his pocket and flicked it open with his thumbnail.

"The fake," Harry said. Inside was a crumpled scrap of parchment that he unfolded and pressed into place in the notebook. It stuck, but Sirius wasn't paying attention to the adhesion spell. Instead he was staring in shock at the handwriting.

"That was inside the fake?" he asked, mouth dry.

"You all right?" Ron asked. "You've gone all over white."

"Regulus," Sirius said hoarsely.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"That note. It's from Regulus. You said—" Sirius turned to Harry. "You said he was a Death Eater. You said he was killed for trying to get out, that they hunted him down in a matter of days."

"That's what I'd been told," Harry answered. "R.A.B.—"

"Regulus Alphard Black," Sirius said.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"I think I know my own brother's handwriting, thanks," Sirius said. "For fuck's sake, Reg..."

"At least...at least we know who R.A.B. is," Hermione ventured. Harry touched Sirius' arm.

"What would he have done with it?" Harry asked.

"Fuck your locket, my brother's *dead*," Sirius answered, angrily.

"But you knew that," Hermione said reasonably. "Harry must have told you."

"It's all right, Hermione," Harry said. Sirius was still staring at the letter in his brother's handwriting. That was Reg, all right; stupidly romantic about everything, morbidly overdramatic, and he *always had to have the last bloody word*.

"That's all there is anyway," Hermione said, in a quieter voice. "I mean, I know what you told me, Harry, to start looking up artefacts that might have belonged to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, but I couldn't find much. I wrote down the names of some books that might help, but they're not the kind of book you can put on order with Flourish & Blotts."

"So..." Ron said uneasily. "Where does that leave us? Two down, a snake, a cup, a locket, and something we don't even know. How're we going to find this stuff?"

Sirius slid down to the ground next to Harry's chair, crossing his legs and resting his hands in his lap, back propped on one of the chair legs.

"Well, we could try to see if there's some way of detecting horcruxes," Hermione said. "You don't suppose Slughorn knows anything more about it?"

Harry shook his head. "Even if he did, it was hard enough getting anything out of him the first time, and I don't fancy having to get him drunk again. The woman who owned the cup said that it was rumoured to have all kinds of powers. Could you find out, Hermione?"

She nodded. "I've been looking. I don't think that'll help either, though."

A thought occurred to Sirius, rising up around the idea that James was as dead as Regulus, and that he was more or less alone in the world.

"If I was twenty-one when it all ended," he said slowly, "that means Regulus couldn't have been more than nineteen. Hardly out of school."

Harry glanced down at him. "We know when he died..." he said, rising up out of the chair. "The family tree has the dates."

"If he hadn't left school, he'd still be living here, wouldn't he? It's not like you'd notice Slytherin's locket in with all the other rot my parents kept," Sirius said. "What'd you do with it all?"

"The harmless stuff we mostly threw out," Harry said. "The really bad stuff—oh bloody hell, I wonder if Dung's nicked it?"

"No, he couldn't have—the stuff he stole was all stuff that was still out. He's not ambitious enough to actually go chasing after things," Ron said. "We

put most of it in a sack, didn't we? I remember cos Kreacher kept stealing things out of it and Sirius had to send him off."

"Bloody elf," Sirius muttered. "What'd you do with the sack?"

"The attic, wasn't it?" Hermione asked. "The family tree's up there too."

\* \* \*

*Regulus Black*, the tapestry read when Hermione unfurled it. Next to it was a small hole, blackened around the edges, where Sirius could just make out *Si* and *ack* in gold lettering on either side.

*Regulus Black*

1962 – 1980

Sirius followed the line up to his father, and then over to his uncle and down again, to the three girls. Narcissa's name was connected to Lucius—well, he could have figured that, Lucius liked them young, probably why uncle Sabik had hit it off with him. Down from their names was *Draco Malfoy*, the little second-generation Death Eater who hadn't even been born yet, in Sirius' world.

"It's got to be one of these two," Ron said, dragging a sack out into the dusty open space in the middle of the attic. Harry followed with another one. "Careful, some of this stuff bites."

"Let me," Sirius said.

Ron shrugged and untied the top of the sack, folding back the edges. Sirius carefully removed some of his family's most prized heirlooms, now dented and scraped and growing rust or mould. A good metaphor, he decided, and he threw them down on the floor as roughly as he could, trying to add a few good dents. Harry had opened the other one and was carefully picking out one object at a time.

There were necklaces and collars and bracelets, goblets, miniature portraits, brooches, snuffboxes, music boxes; as Sirius reached the bottom of the sack he saw a glint of gold and reached in to retrieve it, but he knew when he grasped it that it wasn't the locket.

He pulled it out and held it in his palm. It was his father's signet ring, the silver-inlaid band covered in a verdigris patina. The seal, however, looked as though it had been polished daily. It glittered in the dusty light of the attic.

This belonged to him now; his father was dead. Perhaps really it belonged to Harry – his other self had given everything in the house and vaults to Harry – but some things were stronger than wills and legality. Only a blood-heir of the house ought to wear this, and as much as Sirius hated the house of Black, he was the last in the direct line. That little shit of a Malfoy spawn be damned.

His father had only worn it on special occasions but he had never permitted Sirius or Regulus to try it on, even as inquisitive children who knew no better.

He slipped it over the index finger of his left hand. It fit snugly behind his second knuckle.

Only then did he realise that everyone else was silent; he looked up and saw Harry holding a thin golden chain. A crudely made locket hung on the end, engraved with an ornate, serpentine S.

*Note: "Deo non fortuna / hinc mihi salus" is a combination of two real-life mottoes, one for the Peverel family and one for the proper Peverells. In an interesting twist, I also located the Pettigrew family motto, which translates to "Nothing without the sun".*

## CHAPTER VII

When Remus arrived at Grimmauld Place just after noon, laden with three large bags, the four conspirators were sitting silently around the kitchen table.

"I've brought lunch," Remus volunteered, wondering if Harry was still angry with him. He set the sack of food down on the table as a peace offering. "Bill knows a bloke who runs an Egyptian place and he packaged up some food for you."

Harry looked up at him, then at the sack. "Thanks," he said dully. Remus set the other two bags down on the kitchen counter and sank gratefully into a chair that Sirius kicked out for him.

"What's happened?" he asked. He was exhausted, but Pye had given him a few invigorating potions and Bill had just forced at least two meals' worth of food down his throat, so he felt as though he was probably up to at least one more ordeal before he fled for the comfort of his bed.

The others exchanged looks; Remus saw that a sort of silent vote was being taken. Finally, Harry turned to him. "We've found something," he said hesitantly.

"Oh?" Remus asked. Sirius took hold of one of the take-away boxes and slid it across the table, opening it to reveal several lamb kebabs. "There's pitas too," Remus said to Sirius, who nodded and rummaged in another box. Ron was hesitantly poking the stewed beans in the third box.

Harry's hands had been folded in his lap; now he opened them and offered a heavy, metallic object to Remus.

He cradled it in his palm, letting the chain dangle through his fingers. It was heavy and not very well made; there was an intricately carved initial on one side, but other than that it was polished smooth more by time than by intention. There were little burrs on the hinge, and the clasp appeared to be sealed shut.

"Well, as finds go, this is interesting, but I'm not sure why it's important," he said hesitantly. "It feels...heavier than it should. And Dark—but then one expects that, in this house..."

"It's a horcrux," Harry said. Remus' head snapped up, sharply.

"Where did you learn that word?" he asked.

"Where did you?" Hermione inquired.

"That's almost all I do know. I've come across it a few times in the last ten years. Mostly in old books. They hardly say what it is—only that it's very, very Dark," Remus said. "Harry, what am I holding?"

"We need to talk," Harry said.

Remus wasn't quite sure, when he'd assured himself that he was able to tackle one more hurdle, that this was it.

\* \* \*

Sirius watched, rather wistfully, as Ron and Hermione did the washing-up after lunch with the help of a few cleaning spells. They said he didn't have to help, but he knew what it really was—nobody wanted to see him, unable to use his wand, having to hand-scrub the table or hand-dry the plates that Ron had fetched for the food while Harry explained to a stunned and startled Remus that they had, in their possession, one-seventh of the soul of Tom Riddle.

Remus had kept the locket in his hand, lying flat on top of his smooth pale palm, studying it while Harry spoke. He'd asked only one or two questions, weighing the gold object as if he thought he could calculate the weight of a soul's fraction. Wizards didn't have the dilemma of asking whether or not humanity had souls, but not much was known about them outside of raving madmen who had pushed the boundaries too far and ended up in the secure ward at St. Mungo's.

Finally, as Ron and Hermione were finishing, he closed his fingers around the locket, turned his hand over, and placed it cautiously on the table in front of Harry.

"It belongs to you," he said. "It's yours to dispose of as you see fit, Harry. I wouldn't wear it, if I were you, but it seems reasonably dormant for now. You saw what happened to Dumbledore when he broke a horcrux. I am asking you..." he hesitated, "...not as a teacher or a parent but as a friend, not to try to destroy it yet."

"I wouldn't know how," Harry said.

"Poisoned fang seemed to work a treat last time," Ron muttered.

"There are other reasons—I think some research is in order. Hermione," Remus said, turning to where she stood at the sink. "Can I send you back to Diagon with a list of a few volumes? Flourish will know where to find them."

She nodded, grinning.

"And there are two books in your room, Harry," Remus continued, reaching into his pocket. He drew out a handful of knuts and sickles, looking down at them regretfully. Another pocket produced a single galleon. He sighed.

"Well, buy what you can," he said, giving the money to Hermione.

"I'll buy them," Hermione said, giving it back. Remus glanced up at her, embarrassed, and then put the money back in his pocket. Sirius watched, slightly confused.

"Tonks has contacts in Knockturn—I can tell her what to ask about...if I can tell her, of course," Remus said, with a questioning look at Harry.

"I think you'll have to," Harry answered. "But it doesn't go beyond the six of us."

"Which reminds me, mate, we need to talk to you," Ron said to Harry, sitting down at the table again. "Privately. Unrelated matter."

Harry spread his hands and glanced at Sirius, who was sitting next to Ron, and Remus, who was still looking at the locket.

Hermione, who seemed to know what this was about, coughed politely. "Remus, could you write that list up? Ron and I can go a little later this afternoon."

"Of course," Remus said. "Sirius, you can help me get the books from Harry's room."

Sirius vaguely resented the secrecy, but he had already been taken into one confidence today, which he supposed was all you could ask of people you'd only met three days before. He followed Remus out of the room; before the door closed he heard Hermione say, "Harry, it's about Ginny..."

"I've been wanting to speak with you alone at any rate," Remus said, turning to give him a friendly smile over his shoulder as they climbed the stairs. "I—hmh..." He paused, and Sirius realised he was catching his breath. He stopped, and Remus looked grateful to stop as well. The older man drew a few deep breaths and then continued up. "I realised there are things you should know..."

Another pause at the top of the stairs, and then Remus spoke again. "Things you should know about what your...other, your older self did in his life."

"Harry told me about Snivellus," Sirius said. "I wouldn't do that, though."

Remus pushed open the door to Harry's sitting room and sank gratefully into a chair.

"Severus Snape and the trick you played on him, you mean?" he asked.

"I wouldn't do that to you," Sirius insisted.

"It is...complicated. I don't think—I never did think—that you meant to. I think it was a harmless taunt that he took too seriously. You did fix it—realised what you'd done, told James...I forgave you. Severus did not. Neither one of us, nor James."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me about?"

"In part. Harry's told you a great deal—your time in Azkaban, your death. And Sirius, never once should you think that you were not a good man," Remus said. "We all have our flaws."

"I hadn't thought much about it," Sirius lied. "But I won't be him."

"One hopes not. His life was difficult and miserable, in the end. A waste of a brilliant mind, for which I was in part responsible. I believed you had betrayed us. You are impulsive, Sirius, and not overly given to thinking through the consequences of your actions."

Sirius gestured to himself. "As the map is proof."

"Yes." Remus stood and went to the bookshelf, reaching up to the highest level to take down a thick, black-bound volume. He found a book on a lower shelf with a rather lurid green cover, and set both on the table. "These are the only ones we'll need, but...ah."

There was a set of four matched books on one of the higher shelves, bound in amber-coloured calfskin and stamped in gold. Remus took down two of them.

"I'd like my own copy of *Shop Gods* back, but you're welcome to read yours," he said, holding one up. "You had the complete set from Graveworthy's own hands...which, before you take these, is something else we have to discuss."

"Bloody hell, did I get him killed too?" Sirius asked tiredly. "More horrible revelations about me?"

Remus sat down again, holding the second of the two books in his hands and looking down at it.

"I don't know how much to tell you about who you were," he said, slowly. "Because as you've said, the man you were is not the man you're going to become. But you need to know his secrets. Do you understand?"

"What is it you don't want to tell me?"

Remus gave him wry look. "There's a lot I don't want to tell you, but in this case I think I'd better. You know Graveworthy joined the Order shortly after we did, in the last two years of the war."

"Yeah, Tonks told me about it."

"The reason these books are yours, Sirius – the reason Graveworthy even wrote *Animagus Winter* – is that you two became...close friends."

"Really? Me and Ellis Graveworthy?" Sirius said wistfully, then paused. "Wait, you mean he wrote *Animagus Winter* because of me?"

"Yes. He knew what you were."

"How?"

"None of us were precisely secretive about it, if you'll recall," Remus said, with a sidelong smile. "An observant man wouldn't have too much difficulty, and Graveworthy spent...oh, a lot of time observing you, after I introduced you to him."

"Why?"

"I suspect, at first, because you were young and loud and very handsome," Remus said. "And later because you appealed to his writer's sensibilities. You were – are – so much larger than life sometimes, Sirius, such a dominant personality. He often said he wished he had written a character so perfectly literary as you were."

Sirius bit his lip. He wasn't sure what Remus was trying to say, but he had a suspicion it wouldn't be easy to hear.

"He was in love with you, Sirius – you or the idea of you, we never could separate it out," Remus said. "In many ways it was not an easy love on either of you, but you both held up well. He died barely a week before James and Lily."

"We...?" Sirius asked, eyes wide.

Remus lifted the copy of *Animagus Winter* and read the dedication, there in black print on the white page. "*For my black dog, who has more loyalty than good sense, and has taught an old soul new tricks.*" He looked over the edge at Sirius. "And then there's the inscription, which I really think I oughtn't to read aloud in case you blush."

Sirius took the book from him and flicked back to the blank first page, which was nearly filled with elegant copperplate handwriting.

*My dearest Animus, my soul in the whole of the thing, this is yours and always was; forgive me for keeping a part of your own self from you for so long, but I needed it. I*

*give it back to you now and with it your liberty if you so wish, because youth has not yet left your heart and god forbid it ever should. But I beg this of you, that you remember Wren and do me the honour of tendering your freedom back again, as I promise I shan't take advantage of it.*

*You made me want to speak into the silences and there is no greater gift –*

"Me and Ellis Graveworthy?" he asked, looking up. "But we all...when we were in school he was my favourite writer –"

"Merlin knows why he chose you, since having more loyalty than good sense isn't hard when you haven't any good sense, but I must say he was good for you," Remus said. "Taught you a few things about the world. In return, I imagine you gave him what he needed to write again. He didn't think he would, after *Shop Gods*. He thought he'd said all he had to say. Then you came along."

Sirius turned the book over in his hands, thoughtfully. "He wrote a book for me?"

"He wrote a book around you, at any rate. I..." Remus looked embarrassed. "After he died and after you were sent to Azkaban...well. You may like what you find there; you may not."

Sirius closed the book and smoothed his hand over it, slowly. "What a miserable life," he said.

"Yes."

"And now I have to live it over again. Parts of it. There's still a war; there's still *him*," he said. "And now Moony teaches us our lessons and my best friend's son teaches us how to fight. Child soldiers. Just like in *Shop Gods*."

Remus was quiet.

"Can I come with you, on the next moon?" Sirius asked, suddenly. "Please let me come."

"Sirius –"

"Please, Moony."

Remus studied him, head tilted, eyes terribly closed off.

"If you want to take on that responsibility again, I won't say no," he said finally. "But I want you to consider it carefully."

"Why?"

Remus started to laugh, quietly. "All right then; don't consider it. But I am in my prime, so they tell me, and you're still not fully grown – not a match for the wolf. I'm still going to lock myself in the cellar."

Sirius' fingers clenched on the cover of the book. "Is that what it was for you, after I was gone? Cellars? Threadbare robes and fifteen sickles to your name?"

Remus shrugged. "What else was there? I'm still alive; that's what matters." He smiled at Sirius' stubborn look. "It's all right, Padfoot. I never blamed the other Sirius, and I would be a fool to blame you."

"I don't care about you *blaming* me," Sirius replied. "There's enough gold in the Black vaults to keep you and Harry both out of trouble for the rest of your lives."

"It was given to Harry."

"He doesn't need it."

"I don't want it."

Sirius shook his head. "I told you that your pride would choke you one day."

"Many times," Remus agreed. "I'll accept your help on the full moon, Sirius. More than that I don't want. And we," he added, pausing to pile up the books, "should take these downstairs. Will you fetch my *Shop Gods* for me?"

Sirius, frustrated, went to the other room to pick up the book; when he stopped at the doorway, book in hand, he peered through and saw Remus with his head bowed over the desk, breathing deeply, one fist pressed against the centre of his chest. As soon as he came into the room, however, the older man looked up and stood, so quickly that Sirius almost wondered if he'd imagined it.

"Thank you," he said, accepting the book. He did not meet Sirius' eyes.

\* \* \*

Harry was having no easier a time of it.

"It's just *stupid*, Harry," Hermione said, for what seemed like the thousandth time. "Didn't you learn anything from Tonks?"

"What's Tonks got to do with it?" Harry asked tiredly.

"*She* didn't care that it's dangerous," Hermione said. "And when you think about it, it's a lot less dangerous for Ginny than for Tonks. You're not a werewolf."

"Ginny's not an Auror. She's barely sixteen," Harry replied. "She doesn't understand how dangerous it is. None of us do."

"Yeah, but you don't turn into a slavering monster every twenty-eight days, mate," Ron said.

"Listen, did she put you up to this?" Harry asked.

"She didn't have to, Harry," Hermione sighed.

"The point is, Ginny's my sister and if you break her heart I'm going to kill you," Ron added. "So really it's more dangerous to keep up like this. And I know you don't like it and neither does she."

Harry rested his chin on his crossed arms, regarding the horcrux sitting on the table in front of him.

"I told Ginny that being with her was like a part of some other person's life," he said.

"Fat lot of good that does when you dump her two minutes later," Ron said angrily.

"But it was true," Harry answered, an odd calm settling over him. "It didn't feel like my life, Ron. It felt like something out of a story. It was nice, and it was nice to fool myself that I could have someone...but I don't have time for stories or schoolkid romance."

"I suppose that's what you think we are," Ron retorted, gesturing angrily at himself and Hermione. "Stupid schoolkids for thinking that it's possible to be in danger and in love at the same time."

Hermione looked up at Ron sharply, and Harry almost laughed. He didn't think they were schoolkids, but he did think he hadn't the luxury of acting like they did.

"In love?" Hermione asked in a very small voice. *Oh god, Harry thought, it really is like something out of a storybook.*

"Well what the hell did you think this was?" Ron asked her, rolling along now on a momentum of anger rather than good sense.

"Love?" Hermione asked, and then it hit Ron with comical abruptness.

"I think you have a few things to sort out before you come lecturing me," Harry said, grinning. Ron was staring at her, face bright red. "Go on, Ron. If Ginny wants your help, she'll ask."

And he stood, while Ron was still staring confusedly at Hermione, and left the room. Behind him, he heard Hermione say "Oh, Ron..."

He ran into Remus and Sirius as they were descending the stairs, books in hand; Remus looked exhausted. Harry guided them back into Remus' bedroom, rather than out into the front rooms. Lord knew what Ron and Hermione were about to get up to in the kitchen, and Harry didn't fancy being an inadvertent eavesdropper.

Remus, unlike Harry, had chosen a single large room with a bathroom next door. Its main advantage, aside from being ground-floor, was that it stood directly across the hall from the back of the staircase where there was a door down to the cellar. His bedroom had once been Jupiter Black's study and it was still dark and somewhat gloomy, but the presence of yet more bookshelves and an enormous red quilt on the bed had made it into a sort of warm, cosy gloom. Sirius seated himself on the bed without being invited; Remus gestured Harry into the wingchair and took the other chair, which sat in front of a rather more plain desk than Harry's upstairs.

"Ron giving you brotherly advice about Ginevra?" Remus asked Harry, who cursed him internally for being too perceptive for his own, or anyone else's, good.

"Unsolicited," Harry answered briefly. "Got that list for Hermione yet?"

"Not quite yet," Remus said, pulling a tattered half-sheet of parchment towards him and dipping a ragged quill into the inkbottle. He wrote as he talked, a skill Harry would dearly have liked to master. "I don't know how much any of this will help, but it can't hurt. I've no clue how to destroy something like this; I wonder if simply melting it down would do it."

"Dumbledore had to crack the stone on the ring to break that horcrux," Harry answered. "You saw what it did to him."

Remus nodded, opening one of the books and paging through it deftly. "This is an Aurors' procedure guide—I picked it up from Tonks, she has the whole thing memorized," he added, running his finger down one page and scribbling down a reference. "Unfortunately, most of the section on Dark objects boils down to *Don't let anyone touch it until you can get an expert in,*" he sighed.

"Well, so, where are the procedure guides for the experts?" Sirius asked.

"They're not written down," Remus said, closing the first book. He bowed his head over the papers and rolled his shoulders, resulting in an alarming series of cracks as his vertebrae realigned. "And in these times I'm not sure I'm comfortable taking something that Dark to anyone outside the Order."

"Or most people inside it," Harry agreed.

"But there are at least two more out there we're going to have to destroy as well, not counting the bloody snake," Remus continued, opening the second book. "It's illegal to even own this book, you know. Came with the house," he added, gesturing towards the ceiling in an arc that figuratively encompassed the

entire property. Sirius leaned forward and picked up the Aurors' guide, idly thumbing through it.

"I don't see how we're expected to do anything when nobody even knows anything," Harry said.

"You said Slughorn knew something?"

"Not more than we took from his memories."

"Well, Tom Riddle had to learn somewhere," Remus said. "He had to have heard about them before he left school, if what you say is true. And wherever he went after he left school, he learned more there. I don't think he just experimented randomly; he's a maniac, but he's not a fool. He had to know that every murder he committed put him in more danger of being caught."

"Didn't seem to stop him very often," Harry muttered. Remus glanced up, and Harry saw his brown eyes unusually expressive, filled with a mixture of remorse and sympathy.

"Well, to be honest I don't much see him picking up this kind of thing in Africa or out on the Pacific Rim; their idea of Dark isn't even the same as ours, most of the time," Remus said. "America's practically empty when it comes to wizardry at all, and besides, there were always rumours..." he made another note on the parchment, "that Tom Riddle was seen in eastern Europe during that time. The Carpathians, Romania, the Steppes...I wonder," he said suddenly.

"What?" Harry asked.

"How much do you know about Grigori Rasputin?" Remus asked.

\* \* \*

Sirius wasn't really listening to Harry and Remus talk; undoubtedly it was interesting, but he'd picked up the knack of half-paying-attention in Magical History, and he could listen for important keywords (Sirius, Padfoot, Dinner, Sex, Danger) with part of his brain while actually devoting his attentions to something completely different.

The manual was interesting in theory, but in reality sort of dry; all kinds of adventuresome headings like "Smuggling, Counterfeiting, and Conspiracy" ended up being long paragraphs about an Auror's legal responsibility in any given case. He nearly flipped past the section on Youth Outreach until he noticed a small grey "footnote box" in one corner.

*It is sometimes difficult to interpret the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery in such a way that children, particularly those who have just received a wand, will understand its importance. It is vital to impress on parents the necessity of enforcing the Decree in their own household. Children caught violating Paragraph C are to be handled with particular care and attention to detail. For a more thorough explication of the function of the Decree as it applies to Aurors and their ability to enforce, see section 8.2.2.*

Remus was going on about cyanide poisoning and some political coup; Sirius hastily flipped through to section 8.2.2.

He had always assumed that there was some sort of monitoring system; either their wands were enchanted with a Decree-specific hex or there was a central office that kept tabs on magical children. He'd envisioned a giant map of Great Britain, little blue-coloured dots indicating each child, turning red whenever the Decree was violated. Reg had once hexed a Muggle boy's ears off for making fun of his admittedly funny-looking pet owl, and Dad had been forced to pay a hefty fine to hush it up.

Now that he came to think logically about it, there had been dozens of times over a handful of summers when they'd been doing magic of a sort, if you considered the Animagus transformation to be a proper spell. And how could they possibly monitor every child in Great Britain? And even if they could, would he show up? Being dead ought to have at least one or two advantages...

*Section 8.2.2 – Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery – Explication – Function*

Sirius read the text with a growing sense of glee while Harry asked Remus questions about some Muggle assassination a hundred years ago. This...this was *ridiculously* simple to crack. He wondered why they hadn't bothered before, but he supposed the incident with Reg had put the fear of the infamous They who ran the government into his fourteen-year-old heart.

Magical usage in high-Muggle-traffic areas was monitored. Within private homes owned by wizards or witches, parents were expected to enforce the Decree personally. If someone under the age of seventeen were to be out with two adults in a Magical area, the odds of getting caught were nearly nil. And Sirius was sitting in a bedroom in the ground floor of a house owned by an adult, in the company of two wizards of full majority.

He wished like anything that he hadn't left his wand in the upstairs bedroom; he'd have given quite a lot to give Harry a hotfoot and see the look on their faces.

Then again...

It suddenly occurred to them that if Hermione was right (not that he would admit it) and he was just a...a part of himself, a walking charm attached to a map the real Sirius had helped to make, his wand might not even work. The idea was horrifying; he'd rather be dead than a squib.

"Sirius?" Harry asked, and Sirius glanced up, immediately casting his brain back a few seconds.

*...can't very well go to Russia to find out about it. What do you think, Sirius?*

"I think Russia's out of the question," Sirius said. "Why Russia, again?"

"Rasputin?" Harry prompted.

"Oh yes—bloke that blew smoke up the Tsar's arse," Sirius replied. "What's he got to do with anything?"

Remus smiled indulgently at Sirius' summation of the political life of Grigori Rasputin.

"I was saying," he said, scolding lightly, "that Rasputin was extremely difficult to kill. It took poison, three bullets, and a dunk in a freezing river to do it. It's quite possible he had a horcrux; if so, it's a starting place. I have contacts there—I don't think we'll need to go ourselves. If Tom Riddle learned how to go about it in Russia, we should find traces."

"Which still doesn't help lead us to the cup," Harry sighed.

"I thought you said you were a patient man?" Remus asked, smiling. "Baby steps first. We have to know what he knows, you're aware of that."

"Remus?"

Harry and Sirius glanced at each other with a smirk. Tonks' voice.

"In here," Remus called, a faint blush spreading across his cheeks. He stood as Tonks put her head in the doorway.

"I just walked in on Ron and Hermione—what on earth did you feed them for lunch?" she asked.

"My fault," Harry volunteered. "I egged Ron into saying something he shouldn't have."

"Well, whatever it was, Hermione certainly seems to have enjoyed it," Tonks answered. "What are we talking about?"

Harry and Sirius exchanged a glance, and Remus quietly allowed Tonks to rest a hand at the nape of his neck, rubbing gently.

"I'll tell her," he said.

"I'm sure you will," Harry answered with a grin.

"Out with you, whelp," Remus replied. "Go break up Ron and Hermione."

"I never signed on to be chaperone," Sirius said to Harry, sliding off the bed.

"Good; I think we're being bad ones," Harry replied, closing the door firmly behind them as they left. "I'd rather not go witness the face-sucking."

"That's okay," Sirius said, a wicked gleam coming into his eye. "I have an idea or two of my own."

## CHAPTER VIII

"Mmm, now, what is it you're supposed to tell me?" Tonks asked, as the door closed on Harry and Sirius in the hallway.

Remus turned, his arm fitting itself around her waist naturally but still a little awkwardly. He never allowed himself a moment of complacency about Nymphadora; he had learned better than that in the past fifteen years. She nuzzled his jaw affectionately.

"Harry's made some interesting discoveries," he said. Her hand pressed against his stomach, warm and reassuring.

"You look exhausted," she said, lips just barely brushing his throat.

"I am. It feels like I'm suffocating every time I climb stairs."

"What did Augustus say?"

He shrugged. He was unused to people inquiring after his personal health; it had been years since anyone other than Sirius had been allowed close enough. He didn't really know how to tell this kind of thing.

"He said I'm still sick. It may be a while before I'm...not," he answered. "I have potions for it. Sirius has said he'll spend the moon with me. That'll help."

She kissed his chin, grinning at him. "And this news of Harry's...can it wait?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't think I'd be worth much at the—*oh*—"

She had found a knot of tension at the base of his skull and her knuckles made one deft, expert motion that loosed it all at once.

"You don't always have to be useful," she said, fingers combing through the short hair at the back of his head.

"Really, what Harry found is rather important—"

"He doesn't seem to mind you putting it off."

He let out a breath and closed his eyes, leaning into her. It took effort. He was still unused to this. Back...sometime in the distant time after Sirius died it had been comfort and he had never meant it to be anything more—just sex, some kind of release. They hadn't touched except to get each others' clothes off as quickly as possible and hadn't talked except to work out the logistics of *bed or chair or wall?*

But then suddenly she had started *staying* and he had started making her breakfast and it had become a big mess of feelings. And now here they were. Just

standing in the middle of a room, fully clothed, touching. And he could not remember a time he had wanted any woman more.

Well, nearly fully clothed. She was managing to unbuckle his belt with one hand and unbutton his worn shirt with the other, which just went to show that Auror training could result in some particularly unusual skills.

"Harry and the others—" he began, but she slid the heel of her hand down from his belt buckle and he gasped.

"—it's been a long day," she said softly, "and I want you to myself before dinner."

Part of the reassuring thing about Nymphadora was that he was rarely even fractionally in control of anything about their relationship. He suspected Ted Tonks had gone the same way over Andromeda, in fact. She was an independent-minded woman like her mother and it was so easy just to trust in her, particularly when he was so tired. He sometimes, especially in the last two days, felt as though the world was moving a fraction of a second faster than he was. Tonks slowed it down to proper speed—or at least didn't expect him to fully keep up.

Her durable Aurors' robes fell to the floor with a soft whump and her bare shoulders were warm under his hands even as she let go of him to pull the hem of her sleeveless tunic over her head. He shrugged out of his shirt, resulting in another alarming series of pops in his joints. She grinned at him.

"Getting stiff, old man."

He groaned. "Tonks, that was really awful."

"See what I have to resort to in order to make you smile?" she asked, hips pressing against his. She traced a line down his chest with her knuckle, then hooked her fingers in his unbuckled belt and in one swift movement stripped trousers and pants down and away. He'd been barefoot to start with and he was at ease with the nakedness; too many moons waking up somewhere in the Forest that way as a younger man, being hustled back to the Shack by the others in the dawn hours.

"Where does it hurt?" she asked, and he wanted to laugh, but the thing was...she was quite serious. One of her hands was already back on his neck, kneading the sore muscles there, filling his body with warmth.

"I don't...know that..." he hesitated, and she pressed a kiss to the nearest available skin, which happened to be his shoulder.

"Remus, I'm not going to ask you to perform unusual and athletic sex," she said softly. "I just want to know where you hurt."

He laughed against her hair. "Well, that's a relief." He took her wrists gently and moved them so that her fingers touched his temples. "Here," he said quietly. And..." he moved one of her hands to his chest. "When I breathe."

She sucked in a worried breath.

"And..." he continued, moving her hand again so that it rested in the small of his back. "And...here." He pressed both of her palms to his belly, looking down. "Because I'm frightened."

She kissed him. "Of what?"

"What we know. What we have to do. What I've been told. What I think it means."

He released her wrists and she raised her hands to his shoulders, pushing him gently against the bed. He sat, watching quietly as she banished the rest of her clothing and slid her thighs over his, kissing him again.

"Forget," she said softly. He wrapped his arms around her, cupping his hands up against her shoulder blades.

"I can't. Nor can you."

"We can. Just for a few minutes."

He wanted to believe her and, well, he had been wrong before. Wrong in rejecting this, for a start, in rejecting the curve of her breast and the smooth skin of her belly and—

"Remus," she said seriously. He raised his head from the crook of her neck, meeting her eyes. They were green today. "Forget," she insisted, and her hips slid forward and he moaned at the overwhelming sensation of *touch—her—here—now—yes*.

\* \* \*

Sirius led the way up the stairs, waving Harry on to the other rooms as he ducked into the small bedroom, retrieving his wand and tucking it in his sleeve.

In the sitting room, Harry was studying the two books Remus had taken down—the calfskin-bound Graveworthys—and Sirius felt an odd and sudden proprietorship.

"Those are mine," he said.

"Sorry, I was only looking," Harry replied. "They were sitting on my desk."

Sirius picked them up and moved them to a chair by the door. "Well, they were put in here by mistake."

"So what's this idea you have, anyway?"

Sirius grinned and jerked his arm forward. His wand slid out of his sleeve in a quick, smooth motion (he'd spent months perfecting the toss and trying to find the right kind of shirt for this) and he caught it by the proper hand-end. He flicked it at himself. "*Maculatne.*"

He'd been wearing the same shirt he came through the map with, allowing Harry to clean it with a simple charm each morning, but now he rid himself of the blue ink stains even as Harry gaped at him. He hadn't known if it would even work, but of course it was better to rip the plaster off one's skin all at once, metaphorically speaking.

"Are you mad?" Harry demanded, reaching out to take the wand from him. He flicked it away, laughing. He still had his magic; the world was good.

"No, I'm well-researched," he replied, and then in a singsong, "*I know how the Decree works*—and I know they won't do anything if I've done magic in the house of a fully-grown wizard. *They can't tell!*"

"Bloody hell, that's no excuse!"

"You," Sirius said, pointing the wand at him, "are too grown up for your own good."

Harry tried to grasp the point of the wand, but Sirius flicked it out of his reach twice before lifting his arm and letting it fall back down into his sleeve.

"Besides, I might not even be noticed. I'm just a bit some map vomited up," he said.

"You might warn a person!" Harry exclaimed.

"Relax," Sirius said, flopping down onto the sofa. "So. I have magic and you have magic and it sounds like Ron and Hermione are ripe for having their lips permanently glued together. Want to have a try?"

"They're my best friends!"

"Well, yes," Sirius said, mystified by this apparently irrelevant statement. "What did they want to talk to you about, anyway? That Ginny kid?"

"She's not a kid, she's your age."

Sirius shrugged. "Some of us are born kids; some have kidhood thrust upon 'em. I was never young. I was always as you see me now. You and her...?"

"Yeah, we had...something, for a bit," Harry said, dropping onto the couch next to him. "I ended it. Ron's annoyed. She's his sister."

"You break her heart?"

Harry snorted. "It'd take a lot more than me dumping her to break Ginny Weasley's heart."

"Lots of Weasleys," Sirius mused.

"Seven, if you count Percy. Nobody does, mostly."

"Why not?"

"Won't speak to his family. Thinks they're all on the losing side or something. I think Percy has his head up his bum, personally, but then it's not as if he's any great loss. All he ever did was lecture about things."

"Bill Weasley grew up all right, didn't he?"

Harry gave him a quizzical look. "Yeah, I reckon so. He used to work in Egypt—works for Gringott's now. Well, he will, when he goes back. He's getting married to Fleur soon—the blonde girl who's surgically attached to his arm."

"Well, she'll have to be good-looking for both of them, I guess," Sirius grinned. Harry laughed.

"That's what she said..." he stopped, abruptly. "Well. When we found out about it."

"Harry..." Sirius said, turning to regard him. "Really, do you really think we can do all this?"

"All what?"

"Finding the other horcr...uxes," he said, deciding to ignore Hermione's *horcruxes* contention. "And destroying them and all. I mean even if you do, he's still...really powerful, you know."

"Yeah. I know," Harry said, rubbing his forehead with the side of his thumb. "I don't know...I don't know."

Sirius impulsively reached out and ruffled Harry's messy hair, so like James'. Harry grabbed his wrist, holding it in a vicelike grip. He did not laugh.

They watched each other warily. Finally, Harry lowered his hand, still holding Sirius' wrist. He turned it over, and Sirius opened his palm to show he hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Sorry," Harry said, letting go. "I'm not used to that."

"Obviously," Sirius said, leaving his palm outstretched. He tilted his hand so that it was bent towards Harry, stretching his wrist.

"Hey look," he said suddenly, pointing to his hand.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Look—right there," Sirius said, pointing to his palm. Harry bent over to examine it, and Sirius whacked Harry's nose with his fingers, bursting out laughing. Harry grinned sheepishly and rubbed his nose.

"I can't believe you fell for that! James would *never* have fallen for that. Even *Peter* knows better than to fall for that."

"Wait," Harry caught his hand before he could draw it back, holding his palm with warm, dry fingers.

"No you don't—"

"No, I'm serious," Harry said.

"No, I'm—"

"Oh, god, not that old joke," Harry groaned. "Honestly, look at your hand."

Sirius cautiously examined his palm.

"There's no life line," Harry said.

"Oh, for Loki's sake," Sirius sighed. "First the tarot, now this. I've told people Divs aren't worth anything, but will they believe me?"

Harry turned over his other palm. There was no life line there, either, but Sirius rather enjoyed the sensation of Harry's thumb rubbing across the spot where it ought to be.

"Maybe I never had one, *you* don't know," Sirius muttered. "Bloody inbred Blacks. Some kind of birth defect, probably. I don't care; let's come up with something fun to do."

Harry looked up at him over his outstretched palms, and let go of them, folding his arms across his thighs and slouching forward.

"We really should go talk to Ron and Hermione. We need a plan."

"Bollocks! We need a drink," Sirius replied. "But we can get that in the kitchen, too."

"I think we have some butterbeer," Harry said, standing up. Sirius stood too and followed him to the door.

"I'm pretty sure I saw some firewhiskey and I'm almost positive there was a bottle of mandrake vodka. You're seventeen, it's not like it's illegal."

Harry shrugged. "What's the point?"

"Why does there have to be a point? When was the last time you did something just because it feels good?"

"Well, I'm not going to go get drunk and shag someone, if that's what you mean."

Sirius rolled his eyes as they descended the stairs. "I see you got Evans' squeamishness."

"My mum was not squeamish!"

"She is so. No sense of fun at all, not what I'd call fun. Not bad fun herself though—confront her with a spider or a lizard or a dead fish—" Sirius smiled nostalgically. "We have great plans for this eel that James found...had great plans, anyway...she hates...*hated*, anything slimy," he finished awkwardly, realising he'd once again been speaking of someone long dead in the present tense.

"No wonder she never got on with Snape," Harry murmured. Sirius gaped at him before bursting out laughing.

"You're all right, you are," he said. Harry smiled at him over his shoulder.

"Ta," Harry said. "So're you."

Sirius shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to ignore the warm sensation in the pit of his stomach as Harry knocked on the kitchen door. There was a crash and a muffled curse.

"Come in!" Ron's voice called after a minute. When they entered, he and Hermione were sitting on opposite sides of the table. Hermione was paging through her notebook, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. The notebook was upside-down.

"Everything settled?" Sirius asked in a deeply amused voice.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione answered.

"Ron, your..." Harry gestured to his trousers. Ron looked down, horrified, and zipped his flies.

"Learn anything from Remus?" Hermione continued.

"A little. He's going to talk to some people he knows. He'll have some addition for your notebook pretty soon, I think," Harry said. "You'd better start a section on Tom Riddle, nineteen...forty-five to fifty-five. And..."

Hermione had obediently taken out a quill and flicked a few pages into the blank sheets, writing in large, even lettering TOM RIDDLE, 1945–55. Her quill remained poised in the air, and Sirius had to admire this, that Harry's friends were at least as devoted to him as James' had been.

"Start subheadings on Igor Karkaroff and Antonin Dolohov," Harry said. "I don't want you doing work on that, Hermione, I know what Dolohov did to you in the Department of Mysteries—we'll find someone in the Order who can do that research. But I want all the information to come to you. I'm going to owl

Charlie Weasley and see what he knows about Dementors, they're something in his line. And..."

He bit his lip. The others waited.

"Don't tell Lupin. Start something on Fenrir Greyback. In a separate notebook."

Hermione and Ron both looked at Harry, curiously.

"Who's that?" Sirius asked.

"He's a werewolf," Harry said. "He's the leader of the faction that's siding with Voldemort. He's the one who's responsible for Bill's face. And Remus."

Sirius went very still. "What?"

"He made Remus what he is. I don't think he ever knew while he was at school, but he told me so. Voldemort's promised Greyback prey in return for his help." Harry nodded to Hermione as she closed the notebook. "So keep that one separate. That's personal."

Hermione and Ron were both looking past him, in the direction of Lupin's room; Sirius felt his fists clench and forcibly relaxed them.

"We need to call an Order meeting and give out assignments," Harry said. "We can find out who knows anything about locating magical objects—Ron, your dad..."

"Right," Ron said. "I know his department has ways."

"Good. The Aurors can get started on Dolohov and Karkaroff. Remus has his own research to do."

"What about me?" Sirius asked.

"You're going to help me," Harry said. "I need to know more about the Map."

And just like that, Sirius was suddenly a grown-up.

\* \* \*

Remus was not sleeping, but he was certainly not entirely awake; drifting in warm lassitude, wrapped in the big scarlet quilt on the old and slightly sagging bed, his thoughts moved at three-quarters pace. He found he didn't mind.

There was a sudden loss of warmth, however, and he opened his eyes to see Tonks sliding out of the bed, reaching for her clothing with a grace that, he thought, she was still not accustomed to possessing.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, voice slurring slightly from the combination of tiredness and really quite enjoyable afterglow.

"No—just putting on a few clothes," she said, turning to smile at him. He felt stupid even thinking it, but she looked like some kind of Renaissance painting, half in shadow, breasts still bare and a healthy pink blush on her cheeks. But then perhaps she knew that; if a woman could make herself look like anyone, why shouldn't she choose a Botticelli or a Da Vinci?

Clearly he was getting soft in his old age.

She pulled her trousers up around her waist and leaned on the bed to shrug back into her tunic. He propped himself on one elbow and reached out to straighten the edge of her collar.

"We do need to talk about what Harry's told me," he said.

"You should sleep," she reminded him.

"Augustus gave me some potions," he said. "In the bag, near the door. He said they'd help."

She went to the bag and retrieved a handful of small vials. "Help you sleep?"

"No, help me keep from sleeping so bloody much. Just one. One of the blue-glass ones."

She offered him the vial. "Want some water?"

"No—it doesn't taste bad." He swallowed it quickly, because that was a complete lie, but he didn't want Tonks going anywhere. She climbed up on the bed and crossed her legs; he sat up to face her, settling the blanket around his lap. She brushed some hair out of his eyes for him, affectionately.

"Puts some colour in your skin," she observed, as the potion sped up his heartbeat. He waited until the sensation had passed and found that he did breathe easier.

"Glad something does," he answered.

She smiled. "Tell me what Harry's found."

In a few brief sentences, he sketched out the discovery of the horcruxes, both the ones yet to be found and those already destroyed; Sirius' information about Meleager and his own suspicions about Rasputin. She listened attentively, intelligently, and when he was finished she sighed.

"It's a lot of work...a lot of effort for not much return. We don't know much about them. I wouldn't have the first clue how to go about destroying one," she said. "Dumbledore must have, but he..."

"Yes." Remus leaned forward slightly, curling in on himself; Dumbledore's death had been a hard loss in two years of hard losses, almost as bad as losing Sirius and more harmful to the Order in the long run. He would not be a wizard if it were not for Albus Dumbledore. He would likely be one of those wretched creatures who knew little more than Fenrir Greyback's pack.

"I can ask around, but I have to be careful," Tonks said. "I'm already being watched."

He glanced up at her. She shrugged. "Scrimgeour was suspicious back before he was Minister. Now he has the power to waste on watching young Aurors who know more than they should. It's so absurd," she sighed. "Such a waste of time. They're frightened so they're doing stupid things to make up for it when they could actually be helping."

"Well, as you say, they're scared. Fear can be immobilizing."

"Funny how when people are scared of evil they don't do anything, but when people are scared of Muggles they commit murder," Tonks said. Remus sighed. "Harry told Scrimgeour off right enough, though. He still won't even comment on any imprisonments he's made since he became Minister, anymore."

"Yes...it makes me worry, rather."

"About what? You don't think he's going to try to lock up werewolves?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't know. I doubt it. If he did, it would be outright war between Fenrir's people and the wizarding world. Scrimgeour knows that, he won't risk having to set a curfew on the full moons. No...but if Harry makes enough trouble, Chosen One or not, he'll be in danger. Public sentiment swings wildly when it comes to Harry. And if it's known we've recovered Sirius—he's not the subtlest of boys. If he's found out, they may very well choose to send him to Azkaban too."

"But he hasn't done anything!" she said.

"Yes—and if they put him away he won't get the chance, will he?" Remus sighed. "Nobody's thinking logically about anything right now, certainly not about teenaged copies of someone plenty of people still believe was Voldemort's right hand."

She shook her head, somewhat dejectedly. "It's too big for us."

"Life generally is." He studied her carefully for a moment. "Come here."

"What?"

"Come here," he repeated, gesturing her forward. She slid around, moving back to rest her head against the hollow of his neck, shoulders against his chest. He settled his arms around her, nuzzling her pink hair.

"Now, listen to an old man," he said, and she laughed. "We are only responsible for —"

"—what we can do, I know," she chimed in. "You told me that when Sirius died. It didn't help then, either."

He gestured with one hand, soothingly. "Every generation faces its own Voldemort. Some are worse than others. But for every dark age there has been an enlightenment and for every Grindelwald there is a Dumbledore. Human history is nothing if not a series of cycles. Sometimes the upswing comes a little later, that's all, and at a little more cost."

"Have you tried telling Harry this?"

"Harry wouldn't understand; he'd think I meant he has to sacrifice himself," he said. He tried to keep the hesitancy out of his voice; if what he suspected was true, Harry would not be wrong. "Voldemort threatens only those who oppose him or who have what he wants. That's why people won't act against him. But if nobody does, soon he'll want what you have, or what I have, and then it won't matter. He'll kill us anyway. Better to fight now, while he hasn't as much power as he could."

"That's a terribly morbid reason for being optimistic," she said.

"Well, it works. I could say worse."

"Oh?"

He kissed the edge of her ear and sighed. "Either we win this war and come out the other side triumphant, in which case bring on the parades..."

"I like that part."

"Or we die trying, in which case the outcome won't matter to us anyway, presumably."

There was a moment of silence.

"I don't like that part as well," she said finally. "Besides, there's a fallacy in it."

He looked down at her. "What's that?"

"What if some of us die, and some of us don't?" she asked. "I don't see any up-side to surviving you."

He shook his head. "Believe me, you would go on. I did, when I lost James and Sirius and Lily — and Peter — all together. Sirius did too, after losing twelve

years of his own life. And he is now—imagine having lost your school, your friends, your family. Every point of reference which made your world real to you, all gone in an instant. But we survive, you know. Whatever else one may say about the human race, we are first-rate survivors.”

“I wouldn’t want to survive you,” she said.

“Nymphadora, you are much too intelligent to be saying things like that.”

“Well, I’m feeling petulant and disinclined to agree with you, especially when you call me Nymphadora,” she said, tilting her face up to his. “Blame it on my impetuous youth.”

He bowed his head over her shoulder, inhaling deeply. The potion was having some sort of euphoric effect, he decided.

That was what it was, surely.

“At any rate,” he said, after a minute, “we have work to do. Tomorrow I’ll have owls to send, which I should write tonight. You need to rest, you’ve worked all day. And someone ought to make sure Sirius and Harry haven’t set fire to the place.”

She laughed and slid off the bed, gathering up the rest of her clothes and passing his to him. “We’d have smelled smoke.”

“Small comfort.”

“We can make them cook dinner, that’ll be something to keep them busy,” she said, raking her hair into some semblance of order with her fingers. He held the door and gestured her through with a polite, only slightly mocking bow. She swept past, patting him on the head as she went.

When she had passed, he straightened and leaned on the door for a moment, gathering his strength and regaining his equilibrium. He reached into the bag and slipped two more blue vials into his pocket; Pye had said every four hours, but one never knew. Particularly now, when Sirius needed Moony, and Harry needed a guide to fill Dumbledore’s considerable place.

## CHAPTER IX

It was a foregone conclusion that Sirius would sleep on Harry's bed that night. Neither of them even bothered to discuss it.

Ron and Hermione had returned to the Burrow early after dinner; it was easier to get in touch with most of the Order from there through Arthur and the twins. Seeing that Sirius was content to read and Harry wanted a closer look at the Aurors' manual, the nominal adults of Grimmauld Place sprawled lazily nearby, drinking wine while Tonks finished paperwork from her last shift and Remus idly wrote letters to be sent the following day.

Sirius was making headway on *Shop Gods*, apparently; he looked to be nearly halfway through and ploughing onward at a prodigious rate. Harry had never been very interested in novels, but he supposed he ought to read it when Sirius was done so they'd at least have something in common to talk about. Sirius had confided over dinner that he was more interested in *Animagus Winter*, but he was determined to finish the other book first.

"You're going to wear through that shirt, soon," Remus observed out of nowhere, and Harry looked up to see him watching Sirius, who was rubbing at a threadbare spot on his shirt cuff. It looked as though it was an absentminded habit; the other cuff had a bare patch in the same place. "You'll need more when you go back to Hogwarts anyway. I'll speak with McGonagall about a stipend advance for uniform and books, if you like."

"I'll pay for it," Harry said. "It's his money anyway, really."

"Blood money," Sirius replied. Harry groaned inwardly. It was bad enough that Remus politely rejected every offer; he couldn't cope with two idiots in the same house.

"Fine, then I'll pay for it with my dad's money. Unless Potter money isn't good enough for you," he taunted. Sirius scowled, but shrugged.

"If you want to," he said. "Can we go to Diagon to get everything?"

"Best not," Remus said. "We'll get what you need. You won't have regular robes, I don't think; resident tutors get professors' robes."

Sirius grinned. "Me, influencing young minds. Moulding and shaping the leaders of tomorrow..."

"Terrifying, isn't it?"

Tonks, who had been sorting out scrolls of parchment, began to pack them into an old school bag.

"That's it for me, I think," she said, standing and straightening the strap over her shoulder. "I should go home – another early shift tomorrow. Day after's free, though. I can come with you to Diagon if you go then."

"If she's coming, I want to go," Sirius insisted. "She's an Auror, it'll be perfectly safe. You can't keep me locked up forever."

"Do we have to fight about it tonight?" Harry asked. Remus shot him an amused look that seemed to ask *and what were you fighting me about yesterday?* but Harry ignored it. "There will be lots of time to be tiresome tomorrow, and I think I'm for bed so that I'll be well-rested and ready for it."

It had the desired effect; Sirius grinned at him and Remus shrugged off the other man's objections, giving Tonks his usual subdued goodbye as he sent her off into the floo.

"Bed sounds good," he said, shoulders slumping a little. "You two all right, then?"

"We'll be fine," Harry promised. Sirius was already on the stairs.

"I'll need Hedwig tomorrow, Harry, if I can borrow her."

Harry waved a hand at the kitchen, where Hedwig was asleep on her perch. "I haven't got anyone to write to. Are you going to send her all the way to Russia?"

"No – I'm sending those by floo express. Which reminds me, since that won't be cheap..." He paused. Sirius hesitated too, three steps up. "I still have access to some of your vaults, Harry, from last year when I was doing the food shopping and such. Do you mind terribly...?"

"All Order expenses," Harry confirmed. "Don't ask me, and I don't want to know accounting."

Remus nodded, looking mildly relieved. "Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, Remus," Harry said, closing his book. He heard Sirius say "Night, Moony," as the older man passed.

Upstairs, Sirius drew the blinds in the sitting room while Harry changed into his pyjamas. When Harry opened the bedroom door again, Padfoot was sitting patiently in front of it, tongue lolling out slightly in a comical doggy grin. He trotted past Harry and jumped on the bed, trampling the blankets down cheerfully. Harry shoved him over as he climbed into bed, lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling, framed by the high bedposts.

Padfoot rested his head on Harry's stomach and Harry grinned, scratching between his furry shoulders.

Sirius had reached out to ruffle his hair today and he'd caught his wrist defensively; even Harry was aware that this was not a good thing. It wasn't as though the idea was alien. He and Ginny had...oh, done a lot of things, and Ron used to rough-house with him when they were younger. But lately, particularly after the realisation that Dumbledore had been the last barrier between him and harsh reality, he had been solitary even in crowds.

Still, Sirius trusted him enough to curl up against his hip as Padfoot and snooze while he enjoyed the benefits of being a very pettable dog; he owed Sirius at least that much back again.

He had always, since he'd known Sirius was innocent, liked his godfather. Admired him, even, for his courage and the way he never simply ran away from fights though he had every right to want to flee. Sirius had given him decent advice and written him a lot of letters. But there were twelve lost years and there had been James between them like a ghost.

James should stand between him and Sirius still, he supposed, but he didn't sense that from this incarnation. This Sirius was what he had hoped for—someone who was fun and cheerful and headstrong, teasing him when he got too grave, reassuring in the dark, shadowy times. And that wasn't really what godfathers did, precisely, but then Sirius wasn't his godfather, never would be now.

He wondered if Remus would hate him for preferring this Sirius to the other one. He wondered if Sirius himself would hate him, but he decided not. Sirius would say that sixteen was a lot more fun than thirty-six.

Padfoot huffed in his sleep and wriggled a little against Harry's side. Harry closed his eyes and let himself drift off, one hand still resting on the silky black fur between Padfoot's shoulders.

\* \* \*

Hermione didn't come to Grimmauld Place with Ron after breakfast the next day. He came alone, giving them her regards and saying that she had gone off with Bill to Gringott's to have a poke around their considerable library regarding curses, hexes, jinxes, charms, and methods of breaking all of the above.

"And it's just as well, really," Ron said, cramming a leftover piece of toast into his mouth, "because Dad says it's high time he was back at work and Mum didn't think Bill was ever going to go back, so it's got him off his arse at least. And Hermione likes him, so that's no problem."

"Don't her parents worry?" Remus asked, quill scritchng over the day's list of things to do.

Ron shrugged. "I don't think they really get it," he said. "I mean, they love her and all, but they've never really understood it all, I think. It's not their world, is it? I dunno how much she even tells them."

"Well, she has the Weasleys, at any rate," Remus answered. Ron grinned at him. "Anything from your father?"

"About finding things? Well, yeah," Ron said, frowning in concentration. "He said it depended on the thing, and what it was made of, and how much you know about it. He said he'd look into it on Monday. He doesn't really deal with that part, it's another department, but there's some bloke there he used to work with."

"Small steps," Remus murmured.

"Meeting on for tonight?" Harry asked Ron, who nodded.

"Everyone in London, anyway."

"We should have food for them," Remus murmured.

"Well, that's what the vaults are for," Harry answered comfortably. "If you're not up to it, I can go."

"How domestic of you," Remus said, amused. "No, I'm going directly to Gringott's, and from there straight to Hogsmeade. The bakery and butchers' shop are both on their way to the Floo Express office."

"You're going alone?" Harry asked, carefully.

"Yes. It's not as bad as Diagon. I'll be fine."

"Ron, go with him?" Harry asked. Ron grinned and nodded.

"I don't need a bodyguard."

"If you don't agree, I'll just follow you," Ron said.

Remus cast his eyes heavenwards in supplication. Sirius laughed.

"You can carry the food, in that case. Ready to leave?"

Ron dusted crumbs off his shirt and nodded, picking up Remus' satchel before he could.

"I don't like his colour," Sirius said, when they'd vanished in the living room fireplace.

"Neither do I," Harry said. "But I had a word with Tonks this morning before he was up. She says he's getting better."

"That's where you were when I woke up?"

"Yep. You'll never defeat the Dark Lord lying in bed all day," Harry scolded, in a decent imitation of Molly Weasley. "And we do have work to do. Got the map?"

Sirius took the folded and now-blank piece of parchment out of his back pocket. He opened it and spread it on the table, touching it with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he said, watching with his usual delight as the map sprawled across the page.

"All this is Moony," he said to Harry, hands enclosing the area surrounding the Ravenclaw tower. "He was seeing a girl in Ravenclaw. James did most of the first three floors with his cloak. All the handwriting's mine—we put a charm on that replicated their handwriting into mine, I mean. Well, sort of mine. The spell that found all the hidden stuff cleaned up my handwriting. And see? The animagus stuff doesn't cause a problem anymore, either."

He pointed to a pair of footprints moving towards the Headmaster's—the Headmistress's—office, labelled *McGonagall*.

"Whole thing used to freeze up when it detected an animagus. Took Remus six hours one night, figuring out why."

"What was it?" Harry asked.

"One of the nested detection spells didn't have a protocol for cats," Sirius shrugged. "We put in a general animal protocol, though I guess if it were something really exotic, it might freeze up again."

"Can you show me the journals?"

Sirius nodded and touched his wand to the map again. "I solemnly swear that I am Sirius Black."

"Would that work if it weren't you?" Harry asked. "If I said I was?"

"Yeah—I think so. It's just a password—there were four. James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew."

Harry watched as the map filled with four columns of text again. Harry turned it around enough that he could read the black ink, his father's writing. The last entry had no date, but was clearly sometime in seventh year.

*Moony, I won't make the Full tonight. Herself is getting suspicious and she specifically asked me to sneak her into Hogsmeade for a moonlit dinner. Sorry mate, know you'll understand.*

"Dad stood up Remus!"

"Well, he still had us," Sirius said reasonably. "Who's this Herself? Is that Evans?"

"Must be."

"Well, stands to reason then. Evans couldn't find out about Remus, could she?"

"She must have, sooner or later."

"Dunno. You could ask him when he gets back."

The very lowest entry on the page was in gold, the colour Remus had claimed as his own.

*Happy Graduation! We survived. I guess nobody's going to ever read this again, but that's all right. Padfoot, did you pick out someone to give it to yet?*

*Everyone meet in Hogsmeade tonight, I got Madam Rosmerta to let us use the back room so it'll be a proper party and Prongs and I won't have to write anyone up for anything, since it's off school grounds. I've asked Byrnbaum and Derrik and some of the Ravenclaws and Wormtail's going to invite his girlfriend in Hufflepuff and all the other Huffle sevenths girls. And Herself's bringing people, of course.*

*Graduation!*

"Do you know what all that stuff about picking people is?" Sirius asked. "It's after my time."

"No..." Harry shrugged. "Fred and George gave me the map. They stole it from Filch's office."

"That bastard," Sirius grunted.

"Maybe you gave the map to someone else? When you graduated, I mean. It's not very useful outside of Hogwarts."

Sirius rested his chin on one hand, studying the journals.

"Sirius..." Harry said, hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think maybe this journal is the reason you came back?"

Sirius turned to look at him. Harry shrugged.

"I mean...do you think maybe...if we could bring you back...maybe my dad..." Harry let the idea hang in the air between them. Sirius stared down at James' handwriting.

"I don't know how it works," Sirius admitted finally. "Or...if the writing stops here..."

He touched his own blue ink, thoughtfully.

*I have money to pay Rosmerta with. Tonight we dine on steaks and firewhiskey! Tomorrow we will have splendid hangovers for graduation and life begins.*

*How many NEWTs do you suppose Moony got? Think he collected the full set?*

"If it stops here, why didn't...I come from then?" he asked, though he had a sudden suspicion that he knew the answer. "I don't think it's the journals, I don't think it could be, but...well, Moony always had a suspicion the magic was a little darker than we thought."

Harry folded his arms on the table and leaned one cheek on them. "I didn't think so," he said, disappointed.

"I think maybe it's...there's a second journal," Sirius said reluctantly.

"A second journal?"

"I put a secret one in. Just for me. I was the keeper, so it seemed to make sense, right?" Sirius cleared the map with a quick "Mischief Managed!" and looked down at the blank parchment.

"The thing is," Harry said, after a moment, "If there's a way to put someone into a horcrux without killing anyone, and we can figure out what it is, we can break the horcruxes too."

"I don't think you should call it that," Sirius answered.

"Call it what?"

"The map. It's not really any kind of horcrux. It should be..." his lips moved silently for a moment, "an *orcelo*. A container in which I hide secrets."

"What does it matter?"

"It matters to me. I came from one."

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah, I guess it would."

Sirius touched his finger to an outer corner of the parchment and drew it inward in a spiral, moving in the opposite direction as Remus had when he drew Sirius out of the map in the first place. Harry watched ink seem to appear and gather around his fingertip, a little like the tail of a comet. When he reached the

centre, Sirius lifted his finger and touched the map with his wand. "*Libellus ater,*" he said, softly.

This time the entire parchment filled once more with row after row of script in blue ink, recognisable as Sirius' hand but hopelessly garbled.

"This was mine," Sirius said. "I didn't write in it much...just really important things."

*That it has proven the average of the truth interests the product of the rock. "Enormously, pattern of the old fashioned building" came to make sculptor.*

*Then you and I go, if the night were represented to satisfy the sky, because the ways.*

*In the east the proximities nevertheless are enthusiasm of these, these situations, in the ordered order to advance it to be strong. "The calm surface of the existence of the instruction to read, the ruptures and half of the face." Parallel of the word, of that the material of the hand; and the source writes the source, that one that looks like words.*

*The ways, that one that like painful argument to a question that it presses to execute itself...that covered with the mine and where and because he was forgotten.*

*In order to print ye of the mine and desperations of the work! It sees the end. Another one is remaining. If in the infinite ruins with the fallen tax discovered him for the other way around, extend itself in the distance. It has taken to the man and the ways in the thrown one. I meant the sonorous signal, in the ordered order to sing, everything yet. Sings it. I saw for this, this air that it had pushed in the hats, if the wind completely burned. The black colour of the water we were done when we delayed it in the spaces of the sea. The girls of the sea, of that one with the red and of the brown one of the colour they twisted it. The voices above for above did not wake up to us inside, in us, and we skirted them.*

"What were you drinking when you did write in it?" Harry asked.

"It's encoded. Babble-speak. That's not Remus or James, there; just their mapselves responding."

Harry looked cautious. "Tom Riddle's journal did that. Responded on its own."

"Well, that bit of the spell's not hard to fake. With enough practice, a simple mynah charm can be trained to sound like another person replying."

"Can you read that? Or is there another password?"

"This is mine," Sirius said. "I'm not teaching you how to read it."

"But if this is the —"

"Mine," Sirius repeated. "Nobody else reads this but me. If this is the reason I'm here today, I'll find it out on my own."

Harry cocked his head. "Can you tell me when the last entry was written? Do you remember writing it?"

Sirius cleared the map by simply running his palm across the blue ink.

"The last entry I made is the last entry *I made*," he said. "I remember watching it get babbled."

They regarded each other across the blank parchment, Sirius warily defiant, Harry perplexed. The older boy spoke first.

"It'll take Remus and Ron another two hours to get the post and shopping done at this time of day, and then there's lunch," he said. "If I know Hermione, she'll probably show up late to the meeting and still complaining there was one more book she wanted to see. I'm going to Godric's Hollow. Want to come?"

Sirius blinked owlishly at him. "What?"

"I told Ron to distract Remus. We have until one o'clock at least. I've found a floo point and I'm going. Want to come along?"

Sirius had to admit that Harry, however unlike his father in other respects, had James' audacity.

"Yes," he said simply, because that was what he'd always said to James.

\* \* \*

The village of Godric's Hollow had once been nearly entirely wizarding, although Muggles had always abounded as well. Like Hogsmeade, it boasted several High Street shops that catered to the magically inclined; unlike Hogsmeade, it had been slowly filling up with Muggles in the past sixteen years, and one by one the magical businesses had sold or folded or died out.

The owner of the Witch And Wardrobe Pub called it 'gentrification' with an ironic twist of the lip that showed her mild contempt for the magicless creatures that rarely ventured into her pub. The Muggles favoured the King's Arms and her business had flagged accordingly, but there were still just enough magical people to keep her afloat. And then there was the tourist trade of course.

Visitors to the Potter house had picked up ever since You Know Who's return, which was a nice little bonus for her.

The two boys who stumbled out of the floo at the back of the room were probably tourists, she decided; Hogwarts graduates doing the grand tour, flooring round England before taking off for the continent. The good-looking boy with the messy black hair was obviously wealthy, even if he still wore a shabby, untucked shirt with the Hogwarts crest on. The other boy, who had shock-charmed blond hair and sunglasses on, wore baggy Muggle clothing a few sizes too large.

"What'll you lads have?" she asked, leaning on the counter.

"We're in a hurry," the blond boy said as they passed.

"Floo hookup's not free, you know," she called after them. He turned and made a stone-skipping motion with his hand; she caught the whizzing gold disc neatly. A Galleon for floo service was overpaying, but the pair were already out the door.

"I remember her," Sirius said, as they emerged into welcome sunlight. He lifted his face to the sky, drinking it in; he'd missed the sun on his face. When he left Hogwarts it had been late winter, too early for much natural light. "We stole three bottles of apple brandy from her last summer and got drunk in James' dad's broom shed."

"I'll want to talk to her later," Harry said, examining the street-signpost on the corner. Blond hair didn't suit him, but neither did being recognised. "Can you show me where my grandparents lived?"

"Sure, it's not far," Sirius said, still enjoying just being out in the fresh air. Harry's walking pace was quicker than he liked, but then it was true they didn't have all the leisure time in the world. It was just one block down, a right turn, and two blocks over...

"There," he said, stopping Harry and turning to face a pretty little house with blue paint and green trim. They were across the street from it, but Sirius recognised it even with an unfamiliar Muggle automobile parked in front and strange furniture on the porch. "That's where Mr. and Mrs. Potter lived. Brilliant climbing trellis in the back."

Harry looked at it with an odd hunger on his face that Sirius couldn't quite fathom. It was only a house, and clearly Mr. and Mrs. Potter didn't live there anymore. Perhaps they'd died; they'd had James when both of them were already well on in years and it wasn't inconceivable. At any rate, they would

never own a car, let alone a hideous boxy thing like that. James' father's fortune had been made in broomsticks and broomsticks were all the Potters would ever use.

"You've been inside?" Harry asked.

"Sure. Your average house, really. Small kitchen, poky upstairs, nice garden."

Harry reluctantly turned away from the house and took a scrap of paper out of his pocket, consulting it.

"I got the address of the house from Hermione—looked it up in an old Prophet article."

"She's been a busy bee, hasn't she?" Sirius asked.

"Always was. Says they lived at Fourteen Back, Richard Court, Alley," Harry said.

"Well, Richard Court Alley runs parallel to Richard Court, off of Henry Street," Sirius said. "Which is..."

He leaned out into the road, checking the sign from a distance. "...this way. Come on, I know how to get into the alley."

"Fourteen Back, that means they were behind a proper house, right?" Harry asked.

"Yeah—lots of the bigger houses around here have guest houses. Cottages, I guess you'd call 'em," Sirius said. "Usually not that impressive, though. Some of 'em were nice enough. Here's Henry," he added, turning them to the left. "Why're we here, anyway?"

Harry shrugged, stowing the address away again. "Dumbledore spent most of last year showing me what Tom Riddle's past was like. What he knew of it. History is important."

"Some history is," Sirius allowed.

"That history was. I saw him when he was eleven, and when he was at school, and once or twice after he left school. Enough to think I sort of know him, a little."

"S'weird," Sirius mused as they walked. "At school we heard stories of course, and they were getting more and more frequent. We knew his name and all, but nobody ever thought of him as a person. And nobody knew Tom Riddle, not that I ever heard."

Harry nodded. "I don't know much about him between the time he left Knockturn Alley and the time he came back to try to get a job teaching at

Hogwarts, not really. That's what Hermione and Ron are going to work on. But...the story wasn't over when he died – or when everyone thought he died, anyway."

"How do you mean?"

"This," Harry gestured at the little houses lining the street, each with their tidy gardens and fresh paint, "This is where I would have grown up. My parents lived here, died here...but I don't know anything about it. I don't know anything about my grandparents, and my only living family are horrible people. I don't know what happened when my parents died; where they're buried, whether there were bodies left to be buried. I don't know if the cottage is still standing, if it was destroyed, if there's anything left."

They passed Richard Court, crossing the nearly empty street. A young woman was walking a dog in the distance, but otherwise they were alone.

"What if someone else is living there?" Sirius asked. "Look – here it is."

He pointed to a small stone arch emerging from a wall, fronted by a red wooden gate. Two rows of houses, one on either side, backed onto a narrow dirt lane beyond. Harry pushed on the gate and it opened without trouble on well-oiled hinges.

Most of the alley was simply a patchwork of different stone and brick garden walls, with the occasional board fence or cottage doorway. The cottages, numbers facing into the alley, started at twenty-two and descended. They reached fourteen before they would have had to cross another street, and Harry stood before it quietly. Sirius could see the tension in his shoulders, the clenched muscles of his back and neck.

"Still standing," Sirius said lightly. "Doesn't look like anyone's home, though."

It was a simple building, two floors, very narrow; the windows were dusty on the outside but had obviously been cleaned recently, and the drapes drawn across them on the inside looked fairly well kept. The step up to the house was covered in dust from the lane and bare of potted plants, but the trim looked as though it had been painted in the not-too-distant past. There was a lion's-head knocker on the door, shining in the morning sun. It was impossible to tell if anyone lived there or not.

"Hullo there, lads!" said a voice suddenly, startling both of them. A straw hat appeared at the top of the wall that ran into the house on either side, and was followed by a small, wizened face. "Be right with ye in just a minute."

There was a grunt and the sound of metal creaking, and then the man's shoulders and chest became visible as well as he stepped onto what was apparently an old step stool set there for the express purpose of talking to people over his wall. He took off his straw hat and rested his arms on the top of the wall. Harry was still staring.

"I'm Bowman," he said, cheerfully. "Come t'see t'house, did ye?" He didn't wait for reply before continuing. "Lucky. Lots of rush after lunchtime. Most folks come to t'front door, though."

"Yes; we've come to see the house," Sirius answered quickly. "This it, is it?"

"Aye, that's t'one. Number Fourteen Back. Tourists?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come around by t'passage and I'll let ye in."

His arm flailed in the direction of a narrow corridor between the wall of his garden and the garden of the house adjoining his; Sirius, without hesitation, shoved Harry into the passage.

"I know him," he said in Harry's ear.

"How?" Harry asked.

"I didn't realise it. We used to steal mangoes from his garden."

"Mangoes?"

Sirius didn't have time to answer; they'd reached another red-painted door which opened inward.

From the lane they had been able to see the cottage and the house to which it belonged, as well as everything in the garden above about six feet. Or rather, they thought they'd been able to see everything. Stepping into the garden, they were met with the humid smell of cut grass, multiplied a hundredfold. From the outside the garden had looked treeless and bare, but from the inside it was full of plant life.

"Always been proud of my garden," the mysterious Bowman said, beaming at Harry's surprise. "Charmed it 'specially to grow all sorts of things. Not easy, a good atmosphere charm."

Before them lay a broad stretch of bright green grass, broken here and there by carefully mulched beds of roses and neatly trimmed berry bushes. Apple and fig trees towered over the walls, covered in not-quite-ripe fruit; in the centre of the garden stood a ring of three mango trees. A pair of walnut trees flanked the cottage's back door.

"T'missus makes jams and things," Bowman said, waving his hand at the back porch of the actual house, where several mysterious vats were steaming under the supervision of an elderly woman who smiled at them. "Twelve sickles a jar and zucchini free for the taking. Give you my name? Bowman Jenkins."

He held out his hand and Harry took it automatically.

"I'm S—amuel Padfoot," Sirius said, hesitating barely a fraction of a second before plunging ahead. "This is Harold."

"Pleasure, pleasure," Bowman answered, shaking Sirius' hand too. "Now, t'way we does it is, it's one sickle t'see t'cottage and three sickles t'get a speech by me, as has lived here since afore the Potters took t'cottage. One extra and I gives ye a basket t'pick yer own mangoes with." He pointed to a little metal box which was standing nearby. "No cameras, no touching anything in t'cottage, and t'money is strickly for upkeep and the like."

"You give *tours* of their *house*?" Harry demanded, finally finding his voice in outrage.

"Innat what you came t'see?" Bowman asked, complacently. "We treats it with respect, an' it's an education for t'kiddies as come from school to see it."

"Don't you think that's a bit...unseemly?" Sirius said, elbowing Harry in the ribs to shut him up.

Bowman seemed to give it actual consideration. "Can't see that it is, myself. Historical landmark and all. We doesn't charge the schoolkids," he added. "Say it's a sight more seemly than some as has come around wantin' to rent it. Now, that's morbid, I call it. No; I tells 'em it's not for rent. The Potters paid for a ten-year lease and used up hardly a year anna half; but I says, tis young Harry Potter's right to the other eight anna half, and until he comes to either take back his money or take up living there, I'm not rentin' to nowt. Haven't got to; I owns the land and there's plenty of money in my vaults for my tobacco and t'missus' canning jars without we must be taking on renters again."

"So you knew them," Harry said, sounding a little less furious now. "James and Lily Potter."

"Oh aye," Bowman said. "A sweet young pair, if a leetle tempestuous now and agin. She had a fiery temper, she had, and he didn't half make mischief sometimes, but he was a good lad all in all. And never a man did dote on his boy more. That'd be young Harry Potter, what the papers say is the Chosen One. A handsome little lad he was, wandering round the garden in his nappies with his mum..."

Harry flushed red at this, but Bowman, off in some distant past, didn't notice. "She had him in this cottage with t' missus for a midwife —"

"— I'm surprised you didn't get made into preserves," Sirius whispered to Harry.

"— and a very good job too," Bowman continued. "Lily said she wanted her baby growing up in a nice garden, see, which is why they moved here, though for what they paid they could've had a nice city house somewhere." He sniffed. "Can't find mangoes like mine in the city."

"We'd like two of the deluxe tours, please," Sirius said, nudging Harry again. Harry produced six sickles and put them in the box, mechanically. "And er, does your wife make mango jam?"

"That she does, that she does," the man chuckled. "Tour first, jam after!"

"He's right, you know," Sirius said, as they followed him across the tidy green lawn towards the cottage that Lily and James Potter had died in. "You really can't get mangoes like this anywhere else..."

*Endnote: Lest anyone think I am wiser than I am, let it be known that the garbled entry in Sirius' journal is not of any deep meaning; it is merely a mildly modified multiple-language translation of: Ozymandias (Sirius), The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock (map-Remus), and What Lips My Lips Have Kissed (map-James).*

## CHAPTER X

Bowman's easygoing, incessant speech about the history of the cottage and of James and Lily Potter seemed to ease Harry's tension in an odd fashion. It was easier to enter the cottage as a stranger being given a tour, easier to pass through the small kitchen (still stocked with dishes in glass-fronted cupboards) as Harold, Samuel Padfoot's traveling companion.

The back door—the entry from the garden—led them into a sunny and spotless kitchen with a smallish but by no means tiny room attached to it, which Bowman referred to as *t'storeeroom*. Beyond the kitchen was a small living room with an enormous fireplace and dusty but well-kept furniture; the windows looked out onto the alley. On their right was a stairway leading up, and on their left was a door covered in wide strips of red tape. The tape had been slit along the seam where door fit frame. Bowman led them upstairs, though Harry kept glancing back at the door.

The entire second floor was composed of a large, spacious bedroom, an equally enormous bathroom, and a small windowed gable with bookshelves and a writing desk in it. There was another stairway as well, this one going down on the opposite side from the stairs they'd come up. Bowman led them there but Harry lingered, taking in the faded quilt on the bed, the books, the pleasant curtains. All in such order; it was hard to believe two people had been brutally murdered here.

"Are these their books?" he asked.

"Some of 'em," Bowman replied. "There was a young man as handled t'estate, he took one or two—keepsakes, he said. Name of Lupin, think it was."

"You've looked after the place," Sirius observed, in the hushed voice people use in empty, un-lived-in houses.

"Aye, so we have," Bowman said imperturbably. "Was in a shambles when we arrived, but looked worse than it was; nothing much broken cept for windows and mirrors. Furniture thrown about, that sort of thing. Fixed up all t'plaster and wainscoting, mostly, except one or two areas. Replaced the windows, mended the curtains. Paint it every two years. Keepin' it up for young Harry when he should come back."

"What if he never does?" Harry asked abruptly. "If no one ever told him this was here..."

"Didn't want to go pushing myself on him, did I?" Bowman said. "He's enough problems without strange old men writing to him as regards his parents' house. He'll come in time; I knows he will."

He vanished downstairs, followed by Sirius and Harry, both realising at once that they were descending into the room that had been closed off from the living room. In here things were less orderly; the wood floor was spotlessly clean, but holes pocked the plaster walls and there seemed to be...things missing.

"Tis where it happened," Bowman said sadly. "Ye can still see t'tape on t'door. Wasn't allowed to repair anything in here; Aurors said I oughtr't."

"This is where they died?" Sirius asked.

"Aye. Young Lily lying there..." Bowman indicated a crushed portion of wall under the front window. "Young James just inside the door. Came through my garden, t'villain did; monstrous. Killed all my rose bushes. They found young Harry here..."

He gestured to a bare portion of floor, entirely unremarkable.

"Used to be a lovely little nursery," Bowman continued. "Lily put a desk under t'window and did her work here. Wrote essays for magazines and that; smarter woman I never met. Crib was wrecked, 'course, and t'desk. Took my missus that long to scrub t'blood out, when t'Aurors were done."

Harry was still on the bottom step of the stairs, not yet having properly stepped into the room. Sirius turned to look at him.

"This is where they died," Harry said. It was not a question.

"Aye."

Harry stepped down into the room, hands buried in his pockets, head bowed. Sirius wasn't sure what to do; Harry looked...fragile, as though if one touched him he might fall to dust.

He ran a hand quickly through his hair and the blond colouring faded into black; he touched the sunglasses he still wore and they turned into his regular everyday glasses. Bowman narrowed his eyes suspiciously but Harry was moving past him to stand in the spot where, sixteen years before, he'd somehow survived the greatest dark wizard of his parents' – and his own – generation.

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins," he said, crouching to touch the floor. "I'd like to take my home back now."

The old man's jaw dropped and he looked from Sirius to Harry. "Little Harry?" he said softly.

"Give or take a few years," Harry said with a small smile. He straightened, dusting his hands unnecessarily. "Thank you for taking care of it for me."

Bowman's face split in a huge grin. "Didn't I say young Harry'd come back some day?" he asked, cheerfully. "Welcome ye are to yer cottage, Mr. Potter, and may ye get good use out of it."

"Thank you. I think I shall," Harry agreed. "Eight and a half years, you said? Is there anything owing?"

"Not a copper knut, bless ye," Bowman answered. "Yer father paid ten years in advance, said he wanted to be sure he was settled somewhere."

"That's good," Harry said.

"And this young man is a friend of yers?" Bowman asked.

"Yes; he'll be living with me until school starts," Harry said. Sirius gave him a startled look, but didn't object. "I'll need a spare key for him. And if you could have four or five more made, that would be excellent. I'll make everything right with the Aurors; in fact, I may send a few to install some new wards. I'll tell them not to disturb you."

"Disturb me?" Bowman laughed. "My missus'll fix 'em tea and we'll be glad for it. Ye'll come soon, then?"

"Oh yes; a week or two at the outside. I expect to have visitors; is the fireplace connected to the floo?"

"Not as such, no," Bowman allowed. "Expensive to keep up."

"That's fine. I'll arrange it." Harry offered Bowman his hand, and the man shook it cheerfully. "We have other errands to run today, Mr. Jenkins, but thank you for everything. I'm afraid you'll have to give up the tours, though," he added.

"Oh—I was getting too old for them anyway," Bowman said. "I'll take down t'box this afternoon and lock t'gate."

Harry nodded and they left the little room through the red-taped door, walking back out into Bowman's glorious garden. The old man offered to load them down with some of Mrs. Jenkins' preserves and zucchini, but Harry managed to get them away before he could. They were back on Henry Street again before Sirius spoke.

"Are you really going to move there?" he asked, excitedly.

"Yes—it's nicer than Grimmauld Place, and I...I think I need to," Harry said. "We'd better walk fast, it's almost quarter-till-one."

"And you want me to come too?"

"Of course. I'm not leaving you shut up in that mausoleum."

"What about Moony?"

Harry grinned. "Well, I saw another bedroom, didn't you? We'll partition off the upstairs and you can stay up there with me, and he'll have *t'storeeroom* to himself. It's much more practical. Once we have the floo installed there'll be no difference, really."

"And you won't feel...you know, weird?" Sirius asked. They were passing Mr. and Mrs. Potter's old house, but Harry hardly gave it a look; he seemed as though he was trying to decide between elation and grim determination. "Living there? Where your parents died?"

"Your parents probably died in Grimmauld Place," Harry said. "Besides, I was born at Fourteen Back. It's mine by birth as much as anyone else's by death."

They moved so quickly through the pub that the witch tending bar didn't even have time to call out in surprise; the Grimmauld Place floo recognised them both without issue and let them through.

Sirius was brushing some ash from his shirt, unconcerned, when Harry suddenly staggered and stumbled into him.

"Whoa there, mate," he said, catching him around the waist and helping him back upright. "Step wrong?"

Harry was white as a sheet, breathing heavily; Sirius recognised nerves when he saw it and walked him into the kitchen, dropping him into one of the seats at the table. Harry gripped the edge of it tightly, hands shaking.

A distant part of his mind told him that this, too, reminded him of Moony; push and push and *push* until there was time for collapse, and then a prompt and complete one. Moony had done it a few times at school—seemed perfectly normal all through OWLs, even cheerful, and then the day he went home, his mum owled to say he'd been throwing up for three hours and what had Sirius given him on the train? Sirius hadn't given him anything, of course. Moony had simply finally let himself break down.

"All right?" Sirius asked, resting a hand on the back of Harry's neck.

"Yeah..." Harry said, but his eyes were glassy. He rested his face in his hands. "Oh god..."

"Stay here," he commanded, running to the pantry. He was willing to bet that nobody had found his father's stash...

He hooked his hands on the top shelf and hauled himself up, using the lower ones as footholds. The seemingly solid stone ceiling gave way when he pushed, and he reached into the stone, groping around the little hidey-hole. His hand settled on a heavy glass bottle, and he came away with his father's "medicinal" brandy.

He hopped down, bottle in hand, and found a clean glass, pouring out a generous helping and offering it to Harry. It did seem to help; Harry began to breathe slower, though he gagged a little at the taste. His face coloured up, and his hands steadied.

"Thanks," he said. "Sorry, I just...I didn't expect to *see* it."

Sirius grinned. "You remember telling old Jenkins you're going to move in?"

Harry buried his face in his hands again.

"You seemed to have it all planned out, I'll give you that much," Sirius said, comfortingly.

Just then there was the unmistakable sound of the floo flaring up, and they heard Remus' voice. "Harry! Sirius! We're back..."

"In here," Sirius called, before he thought about it. Remus appeared empty-handed and Ron followed behind with a number of bundles in his arms and Remus' satchel still slung over his shoulder.

"We've had lunch, I hope you didn't—" Remus stopped. Sirius realised he still held the brandy bottle in his hand. Remus smiled. "A little early in the day for this, isn't it?" he asked.

"Harry..." Sirius gestured at Harry, who was looking guilty and trying to pretend there wasn't a glass half-full of alcohol in his hands.

"Are you all right?" Remus asked, dropping into the chair next to Harry and tilting his chin up to examine his eyes. "What happened? Why is it every time I come back here I have to ask that?" he said to Sirius, abruptly. Sirius grinned.

"I'm all right," Harry said, politely removing Remus' hand from his chin. "I just had a bad moment, that's all."

"Your scar?" Ron asked, abandoning the bundles.

"No...just...I tripped," Harry said, "and almost fell down the stairs. It startled me."

Remus glanced sceptically at Sirius, who shrugged. "I thought a nip would do him good. It's medicinal."

"Have you eaten?" Remus asked. Harry shook his head. "Small wonder. Well, you'd better get something into your stomach before you have any more brandy –"

"I'm okay," Harry insisted, and Remus paused in reaching for the glass to take it away from him. The expectant silence unwound slowly.

"All right," Remus said finally, withdrawing his hand. "Of course you are, Harry. I'm sorry; you're your own best judge."

In almost any other person, it would have sounded insincere and sarcastic, but Remus managed to make it seem as though he meant it. It was very likely he did.

"How was Hogsmeade?" Harry asked, shifting the subject quickly and pushing the glass away from himself. Sirius set the bottle down and went to inspect the packages, carefully unwrapping each one and storing it either in the pantry or the charmed-cold cupboard.

"Brilliant," Ron said. "I've never used floo express before. They take your letter, right, and they wrap it up in a little steel case –"

"– which is why it's so expensive, you have to *buy* the case." Remus put in. "Highway bloody robbery if you ask me."

"– and each desk has a little tiny fire, and they toss your letter in." Ron grinned.

"I've asked them to express me back care of the Hogsmeade office, so I'll have to check in or send someone else," Remus continued. "We've bought a roast for tonight – Sirius?"

"Got it," Sirius said, holding up an enormous hunk of meat wrapped in paper. "What should I do with it?"

"Cold cupboard – as soon as I've had a bit of a rest, we'll chop some vegetables and start the oven," Remus answered. Sirius uncovered an enormous bag of vegetables and put them aside to be washed and chopped up.

"Do you expect to hear back soon?" Harry asked Remus.

"Well, yes and no. My Russian friends, who shall for the moment remain nameless, are not the most prompt of letter-writers and..." Remus made a face. "Tomorrow night is the full moon, which will affect them as well."

"Ah. *Those* kinds of friends," Harry said.

"Yes. So I don't expect an answer before Monday. I'm sorry, Harry; these things move slowly sometimes."

"I know it," Harry answered with a sigh. "That's all right; I have plans for the next few days."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I saw some history books on those shelves you stocked for me. The sixth horcrux is probably something that Godric Gryffindor or Rowena Ravenclaw owned; I'm going to try to find out if there's any historical record. Keep me busy while the rest of you are owling Russia and wandering Gringott's and such," Harry smiled. Sirius unpacked a bag of Flavourite Crisps (*Vinegar or Cheddar, Flavourite Always Tastes Like What You Want! A Subsidiary of Bertie Bott Inc.*) and dumped the whole thing into a bowl, carrying it to the table.

"Nutritious," Remus remarked.

"First course," Sirius replied. He shoved the bowl across to Harry, who obediently began to eat.

"If I may make a respectful recommendation," Remus said, "I think you ought to rest this afternoon, Harry. Sleep if you can. It's likely to be a long meeting tonight, and you don't look your best right now."

Harry nodded, which just proved how tired he had to be. Sirius and Ron exchanged an anxious look across his slumped shoulders. Ron rose and went back to the remains of their shopping, locating some cheese and bread and uncapping a bottle of butterbeer. He glanced at Remus, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

Harry accepted it all with a weary grin. "Ta, Ron," he said. "I'll be all right. It wasn't much."

"Which reminds me..." Remus rose and poured himself a glass of water before taking a blue-glass vial out of his pocket and twisting off the wax-sealed topper. "Pye gave me enough to see me through the full moon, and I'm sure I'll need it."

"No you won't," Sirius said, as Remus swallowed the potion in a single gulp. "I'll be there."

"Very true," Remus said, drinking the water quickly. "Harry, finish that and go to bed. Ron and Sirius can help me fix the roast."

Harry was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow. Ron, who had gone up to make sure he got into bed all right, came back into the kitchen with a satisfied look.

"What exactly did I put in his drink?" he asked Remus, who was washing potatoes with his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows.

"Just a few drops of a simple sleeping potion; he'll be up and about by four or so. Normally I wouldn't presume, but he doesn't know his own limits yet. This...helps him learn," Remus said. Sirius accepted the potato from him and covertly peeled it with a quick spell. Ron stared at Sirius, who made a shushing gesture. "What really happened, Sirius?" Remus asked, scrubbing a potato vigorously.

Sirius gave him an innocent look. "What Harry said."

"Harry's seen far too much to be that shaken up after tripping on the stairs," Remus answered calmly. "Did someone try to get into Grimmauld Place?"

"No," Sirius said truthfully.

"And it wasn't his scar?"

"Not that I saw."

"He didn't pass out?"

"No."

"You weren't in danger?"

"Not that I saw. We were safe."

"Well, whatever the two of you got up to, try not to do it again," Remus sighed.

Sirius grinned. "Does it count as 'not doing it' if you don't find out?"

Remus laughed a little and moved on to washing to carrots. "You never change, Padfoot."

\* \* \*

The meeting was, as Remus had predicted, very long and in addition very contentious. People did not like being asked to do things without being told why, and a promise made to a dead man did not hold much weight, particularly with the younger members of the Order. Hermione and Ron helped Harry present a united front, and Tonks managed to reassure the Aurors that whatever Harry was up to was worth doing, but there were still grumblings when the meeting finally ended and the food was passed around for those that were staying.

Throughout the meeting, the twins had thrown in their lot with Sirius; it was clear that whatever he said they were willing to back it, which had helped a great deal. During dinner they sat on either side of him and pelted him mercilessly with questions about things that Harry only vaguely understood.

Some of it clearly concerned the making of the Marauder's Map, but the rest was almost incomprehensible.

Back when it had first been revealed to the pair that Remus was Moony of Marauder's Map fame, the twins had presented themselves to him as willing disciples, but Remus had deferred to his better judgement and fear of Molly's wrath and given them no information. Sirius was more forthcoming, and of course by now the Weasley parents had quite given up trying to rein in Fred and George. Sirius seemed to like the attention.

Ginny sat with Harry, eating quietly and neatly. If she was still upset about his decision, she made no sign; she seemed cheerful enough, but she was careful not to smile too warmly at him.

That night Harry and Sirius sat up reading until very late; Sirius managed three chapters of *Founders: What You Think You Know About The Four* before he gave up and went back to *Shop Gods*.

"It's all gossip anyway," he told Harry, who was nodding off over *Mystical Artefacts Of Great Britain*. "Says that Godric Gryffindor chased all the older girls at the school and incidentally, so did Helga Hufflepuff."

"Chase all the girls?" Harry asked.

"Yup. I think it's crap, a bit."

"Well, you never know. No reason she couldn't have," Harry said. Sirius blinked. That kind of fact wouldn't even have been found in books twenty years ago, and the mere idea would have been enough to touch off hours of debate in the dormitories.

He had been leaning up against the footboard, facing Harry; now he crawled forward and stretched out on his stomach, propping himself on his elbows over *Shop Gods*. Harry, absently, reached out and stroked his head. Sirius jerked it up in surprise, and Harry glanced at him.

"Oh! I thought you were Padfoot," he said, flushing a little. "Sorry. I didn't look first."

Sirius laughed. "I shed considerably less this way."

Harry grinned too and went back to reading, and Sirius pretended to. Now he rather wanted to be Padfoot; it would mean more pets from Harry, because as Sirius well knew, Padfoot's silky coat was *irresistible*. Better people than Harry had failed to resist Padfoot's slobbery charms. But that would rather give the game away, so he would have to wait until it was time to sleep.

From below, he heard a low laugh and a door close firmly.

"Sounds like Tonks is staying the night," Harry said, turning the page.  
"Lucky Moony," Sirius murmured.

\* \* \*

The next few days were spent in a frustrating pattern of research and talking and more research, with intermittent breaks for meals and the occasional trip out. Remus brought back tutor's robes and a selection of books, prepared by McGonagall ahead of time, for Sirius; with it came confirmation that the school would reopen on schedule, despite a sharp drop in enrolment.

"Any news on the new Defence professor?" Harry asked. Remus shook his head.

"I doubt anyone would take the job. You'd have to be a fool," he said. "Whether or not it's a hex on the job, it's been getting steadily worse lately. I got off lightly, it would seem."

"I wouldn't call it light," Harry answered. Remus, arranging books and writing implements so that he would be able to work from bed the following day, after the moon, folded a pair of trousers and draped it over the end of his bed.

"Well, I could have died," he said. "Or been locked in the safe ward at St. Mungo's. Or I could be an impostor—or a Ministry drone—or a murderer." His eyes hardened, and he clenched the inkbottle between his fingers so tightly that Harry thought he might break it. Finally he set it down with a sigh. "At least Hogwarts will reopen. That's important."

"Is it?" Harry asked, indifferently.

"Yes, Harry, of course it is," Remus said, looking surprised. "It's vital. Surely you've learned that by now. If we forget our children, if we teach them fear instead of curiosity, then we lose. Irrevocably."

"But it's only a school."

"It is fifty years of Albus Dumbledore's life; nearly forty of Minerva McGonagall's. Eight of mine. Six of yours. It is the single most long-standing institution in the entirety of wizarding Britain, Harry. Hogwarts has withstood wars both Muggle and Magical—rebellions, revolutions..."

"You sound like Hermione."

Remus smiled. "Thank you. But it's true, Harry. Hogwarts represents the world you and I are fighting for—children educated as equals regardless of their

bloodline or background. The idea of a fair society where learning is valued above power."

"It never seemed very fair to me. Our world isn't fair to you either."

"We often fall short of our ideals, Harry. That doesn't mean they aren't worth trying for," Remus said. "If we did not try, then Sirius would be a Slytherin today, Tonks would be in a laboratory somewhere, and you—whose mother was Muggle-born—would not have attended at all. And you would always know that there was a part of you that was irrevocably lost, forever."

He put the last book in place on the bedside table, and Harry realised that what he had just described had almost been Remus Lupin's reality.

"How close was it?" he asked. "How close did you come to not attending?"

"I got my official admission on August twenty-eighth," Remus said. "So you see, if I overvalue Hogwarts, I do perhaps have reason to do so."

"Moonrise in thirty minutes!" Sirius sang out from the hallway. "All hands report to the cellar for the most boring full moon I've ever spent!"

Remus gestured at the doorway. "I am summoned," he intoned, grinning. "You'll be all right, Harry?"

"I have been before," Harry said.

"Well, yes, but don't think I haven't noticed Padfoot sleeping with you. Tonks will be downstairs if you have a problem, and I'm sure Ron would be happy to stay."

"I'll be fine," Harry reassured him.

"The barrier charms will fall into place when I close the door and dissolve at dawn. You don't need to get up—Sirius will be there, and Tonks. It shouldn't be a hard moon."

"All right."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Harry. Whatever you do—"

"Don't open the door, I know."

\* \* \*

Sirius was used to the transformations, both into and back from the wolf, but it hurt him every time.

Padfoot was woken from a happy, furry nap by the shuddering of human muscle under wolf-skin. He backed into a corner, whining unhappily as Remus curled into a foetal ball and gasped with pain. As soon as it was done he

ventured closer again, snuffling the bare skin that was pocked with scars and still twitching a little.

He changed back when Remus' body stilled, the spasms ending. He quickly retrieved the blanket from the steps, wrapping the older man in it and helping him upright. He weighed not an ounce more than he had when he was sixteen, and it wasn't hard for Sirius to get him up the stairs and through the door where Tonks had been told to wait.

Together they helped him into his room and bed, piling up the blankets when he began to shake from the cold.

"Should I stay with him?" she asked Sirius, and Sirius looked at her confusedly. He was used to being the one who healed Moony's various cuts and scrapes, but to have a woman ten years older than him ask his advice was bewildering.

"He's all right. No scrapes—it was a pretty good moon," Sirius said. "I wouldn't get too close to him. Body heat's all right, but sometimes he tries to bite."

"What?"

"He doesn't mean to. He'll be all right after a sleep. He gets confused. Used to, anyway. Maybe not anymore," Sirius said. "But I wouldn't go cuddling up to him just yet."

"But..."

"Yeah," Sirius said. "I know."

He stood looking at Remus—grey-haired, scarred-up Remus, so different from his own impulsive, inquisitive Moony. Suddenly he didn't want to be in the room for another minute; he wanted to be home, at Hogwarts, where he could sit with James and Peter and share around hot pumpkin juice while they waited helplessly for Remus to fall asleep, for what little comfort sleep could offer. He wanted to share a blanket with James and nap on his shoulder and skip classes that day and be allowed to curl up with Moony as Padfoot and warm him.

"I'm going upstairs," he said. Tonks nodded, already preoccupied with settling the blankets properly around Moony's shoulders. Sirius all but ran from the room.

Harry woke when Padfoot leapt up onto the bed, but it was the half-waking of a very tired man who knows that whatever it is can wait.

"M'mus kay?" he mumbled. Padfoot insinuated himself up against Harry's chest and licked his cheek. "Good."

Harry smelled reassuring and real, like soap and unwashed socks, and Harry's fingers were even now scratching behind his ears. Padfoot leaned into the caress, comforted by it. Harry laughed sleepily and pressed his face against Padfoot's forehead, eyes closing again.

## CHAPTER XI

Time marched onwards for the Grimmauld Place residents into full August's dog-day heat, and slowly Hermione's notebooks began to fill. Karkaroff and Dolohov had both attended the Moscow Institute, one of the few Magical universities in the world, and they had attended at the same time. Rodolphus Lestrange had also attended during that time, and while Tom Riddle had not, all three of the others had been members of the same literary club—or at least what they claimed was a literary club. There had been two murders within the club before the school forcibly dissolved it. The Russian friends Remus had written to were afraid to inquire further.

An Englishman matching Tom Riddle's description had taught English Grammar at several schools in Russia between 1945 and 55; most of the superintendents were either dead or reluctant to discuss why he had, each time, been dismissed. His last known post was just outside of Moscow, and Harry became more and more convinced that there were answers to be had at the Moscow Institute. Riddle had gone to Russia in search of Rasputin; perhaps he had found what he was looking for, in one way or another.

Charlie owled back to Harry that few things other than a Patronus could drive back a Dementor, but if he had the help of at least one of the twins he could probably devise something. Fred volunteered to go and George moped for days, often coming to Grimmauld Place for dinner and talking pranks and potions with Sirius.

The small green notebook headed *Fenrir Greyback* on the first page also began to fill with information, most of it sketchy at best, some wheedled out of Remus in unguarded moments and the rest made up of speculation and old newspaper clippings. When Hermione wasn't using it, Harry kept it on his bedside table under his own research books and, usually, Sirius' copy of *Animagus Winter*. He was devouring it at the rate of a chapter a night, as though he was eager to read it but wanted to make Ellis Graveworthy's last book draw out as long as possible.

The page in the big notebook for the sixth horcrux remained blank, except for a short passage about Rowena Ravenclaw's experimentations with wands—apparently she had been attempting to create one from glass. Harry was adamant that Godric Gryffindor's sword could not be a horcrux, and Remus, having examined it, agreed with him.

When Harry announced his intentions to move into Fourteen Back he expected Remus to object, but he merely insisted that he come along, that a Fidelius be performed, and that he inspect the wards himself before Harry be allowed to set up residence there. He did point out that he didn't see much difference between Fourteen Back and Grimmauld Place, but Harry knew that when he saw it, when he remembered it as it must have been when James and Lily lived there, Remus would understand.

What Harry had not expected was the hurt and unhappiness the decision caused Ron. He didn't really understand it; Ron was perfectly content that Harry should live at Twelve Grimmauld Place with Remus and Sirius while he and Hermione both stayed at the Burrow. He was happy to floo over every morning and home every night, though he was of age and could have left home if he really had a mind to. He knew the Grangers would never stand for their daughter living in a strange house with only one chaperone and three boys.

And yet, when Harry indicated that he would be shifting their strange little family from Grimmauld Place to Fourteen Back, Ron was furious and hurt. Why, he asked, hadn't Harry invited him, or even Hermione, to move with him? Why was Harry taking only a middle-aged werewolf and a teenaged troublemaker with him? Ron was Harry's best friend, he ought to at least have had the offer.

When Harry pointed out to Ron that there was very little room and it wasn't any different, really, Ron told him off again and refused point-blank to listen to reason.

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked Hermione. Ron had just floo'd home in high dudgeon, and Hermione seemed to be the only one who really understood him these days anyway.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione sighed. "Isn't it obvious?"

"It bloody well is not," Harry replied. "If it were do you think I'd be asking?"

Hermione drew a letter out of her pocket and handed it to him.

"What's this?"

"Your Hogwarts letter."

Harry stared at her. "I told you—I told *McGonagall*—that I'm not going back."

"I know, but I asked her to register you anyway, just in case. Ron's came too, and mine. And we might be going back, mightn't we? We don't know that

you'll need us yet. Ron doesn't know what you want from him, but he's scared he might not go back – he's scared he won't have a place anywhere. Hogwarts is all we've known for six years, Harry. It's frightening to think about leaving it."

"What, he doesn't think I'm scared of leaving it?"

"If you are, you don't show it much," Hermione replied. "And he's your best friend, but instead of asking him to come room with you, you've asked Sirius."

"But Sirius hasn't anywhere to stay!"

"That doesn't *matter*, Harry. The point is, you asked him and not Ron. How do you suppose that makes Ron feel? You might be sending him away, you might not, you might be going out with Ginny, you might not, you might be his best friend or Sirius might have taken his place."

Harry gaped at her. The idea had never occurred to him. After all, he and Ron had faced death together. Death and giant spiders and flying cars and Divinations professors. Of course Ron was his best mate; and anyway hadn't Ron abandoned him for Hermione? Who, granted, was also his best mate, but he felt that it was a little unfair that he didn't get kissing privileges with *someone*.

But Ron had also done everything Harry asked and was willing to defy his parents and good sense and follow Harry away from Hogwarts. He had stood behind Harry without a single complaint until now, and even now it was not a complaint about their work. Perhaps there was some justification to it.

"I'll talk to him," he told Hermione.

By now it was nearly mid-August and students who were returning to Hogwarts were preparing to do so, most of them armed by their parents with extra hexes and amulets against this or that. Others were plotting their escapes – if their parents wouldn't let them go back, they would go without their parents' consent. Harry had heard, through Ron and Hermione, of at least six or seven who were going to have to apply for scholarships of one form or another. Hermione had been shamelessly facilitating it all by arranging for Bill to pick up their books and robes for them.

"Harry," she asked, hesitantly.

"Mmh?"

"Are we going back to Hogwarts?" She bit her lip. "It's just...I want to stay and help you, but I want to take my NEWTs, too, and if I'm seventeen I don't need permission to leave school grounds. So I could keep doing whatever research you needed and still take classes..."

Harry thought about what Remus had said, about fear and education.

"Plan to go back," he said, and Hermione beamed at him. "Besides, you're going to have to help the runaways get onto the train."

\* \* \*

By the time the new wards were put up at Fourteen Back and George had found a way to hook the fireplace into the floo network without anyone catching on, Harry had packaged up all the books he wanted to take and packed his school trunk. Remus, likewise, had fitted everything he owned into a significantly more battered school trunk and a suitcase. Sirius' trunk, shinningly new and filled with his tutor's robes and schoolbooks, seemed to scorn the other two where it sat next to them.

"You could have bought mine used," Sirius said, standing in the front hall of Grimmauld Place.

"Why bother? The money is there for it, and it's yours," Remus replied. In the background, they could hear Harry giving Kreacher instructions on keeping the house clean and fit for habitation with as few loopholes as possible. "I was too tired to go poking around second-hand shops to salve your pride."

"You're a fine one to talk about pride," Sirius retorted, as Harry walked up.

"All right?" Harry said brightly. "Come on then, through the floo we go."

Tonks, who had all but taken up residence with Remus, had a small valise of her own belongings; she picked up Remus' trunk, ignoring his attempts to take it from her, and led the way into the fire, drawing the trunk up against her and saying clearly, "Fourteen Back, Godric's Hollow, password *Deporto*."

One by one they stepped through the fireplace, Remus going last. On the other end, in Fourteen Back, Bowman Jenkins and his wife were waiting to welcome them with tea and several jars of pickled and preserved foodstuffs. Tea was had in the sunny little cottage kitchen looking out on Bowman's garden; afterwards, Bowman went to the pantry and returned with a wooden chest about the size of a hatbox.

"Now, Mr. Lupin will maybe remember this," Bowman said, nodding to Remus, "As he did tell me if I found anything valuable to hold it in safekeeping."

"I planned to come back for it...circumstances intervened," Remus said to Harry, in a low voice.

"But bits and bobs did turn up, and t'best thing, I thought, was to put them all together somewhere," Bowman continued, setting the chest in front of Harry. "Got some of it back from t'Auror blokes when they were done investigating. Open it up, there's a lad."

Harry opened the chest hesitantly, well aware of the sorts of things that could pop out of wizarding chests. Inside, however, was nothing more dangerous than a few flip-out racks containing what looked like costume jewellery. On the other hand, given Remus' sudden flinch, at least some of it was probably real silver.

"Yer parents'," Bowman said. "Lily, mostly. And yer father's cufflinks and pocket-watchdog and all."

Harry drew out a small silver object about the size of a pocket-watch, shaped like a sitting English bulldog. There were round caps set in either side of the dog's torso like clock-face covers.

"Pocket-watchdog?" he asked, amused. Bowman grinned. Harry put it carefully in his own pocket and lifted out a gold ring.

"They were buried with their wedding rings," Remus said quietly. "The graveyard isn't far from here. Bowman can show you where. They...used to fight over that one," he added, indicating the one Harry held in his hand. "Lily's boyfriend gave it to her a year before she started seeing James. He didn't like that she kept it, but they eventually came to a truce..."

He cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Sorry. Memory's a funny thing."

Tonks, sitting next to him, took his hand reassuringly. He smiled sidelong at her and squeezed it before letting go again.

Harry put the ring back and selected, instead, a pair of pearl earrings. "Dad's, right?" he asked, holding them up to his earlobes. Bowman laughed.

The rest of it was mostly earrings and bracelets that clearly had belonged to Lily, some of it more antique than others. From James there were only a few pairs of cufflinks and one or two tiepins.

"Whose was this?" Harry asked finally, drawing a long, thin rod out of the bottom of the box. It had to be the silver that was making Remus wince; Harry glanced at Remus, who narrowed his eyes.

"Must have been an award of some sort," Tonks suggested. "Is it all silver?"

"Feels like it," Remus said. "I don't remember it, but then Lily was always winning awards for things. Probably some kind of honorarium for scholarship."

Harry put it back and closed the lid, resting his palms on the top.

"I think we should probably get on with the Fidelius," Tonks suggested quietly. "If we're going to be ready for Ron and Hermione to come for dinner."

Harry nodded. There was a lot to do; they had to complete the Fidelius that Kingsley and Tonks had been installing in their spare time, appoint Remus as Secret-Keeper for this home as well (he'd protested, but it hadn't done any good, and since Sirius' arrival Remus hadn't had the energy to do much arguing), and fetch Ron and Hermione. Bowman and his wife left, with an invitation to "Come up to t'house tomorrow for lunch", and the rest of them got down to work.

By the time they had finished the wards, fetched the others, eaten dinner, drunk to Harry's new home in the small but cosy sitting room, and unpacked enough for it to actually feel like a new home, most of the residents of Fourteen Back were exhausted. Sirius, draped sideways over a wingchair, was watching the fire with sleepy eyes; Remus sat on the rug, back propped on the sofa, idly stroking Tonks' hair where her head rested on his lap. Harry sat on the sofa itself, studying the silver bulldog, flicking one of the little round caps up and down again. It covered what seemed to be a normal watch face, which, against all odds, was still giving the correct time.

"Magically powered," Remus said, tilting his head back to indicate the watchdog. "Never runs down."

"Expensive," Sirius remarked, without moving.

"James had the money; if he bought something, he bought the most useful and durable kind available," Remus said. "And of course the most stylish."

"I think it's sort of funny-looking," Tonks said. "What's the other lid on the other side for?"

"To get into the gears, probably," Harry said. "That one sticks."

"Oh—no, that's not it at all." Remus held his hand out for it. Harry hesitated.

"It's silver," Harry said.

"No—it's nickel," Remus answered with a smile. "Like sickles, it looks shinier than it is. James and Sirius never owned silver after they found out about me."

"Disloyal," Sirius murmured. Harry placed the little dog in Remus' hand, and Remus dug a fingernail under the catch of the second cap.

"That's why it's called a pocket watchdog," he explained, fiddling with it. "There's a watch on one side and a little...divinatory...device..." he finally got the cap to lift up, and showed it to Harry, "...called a Rector on the other. So that if you're pressed for time and you need to make a decision, you can consult your handy watchdog and it will never steer you wrong. Or so the adverts said. The company went bankrupt sometime in the eighties, so you can judge for yourself how useful it might or might not be."

He studied the little glass face under the cap and blushed suddenly, handing it quickly to Harry. Tonks, amused, sat up and leaned her chin on his shoulder.

"Say anything interesting?" she asked.

"It would bore you," he answered, but he did kiss her. Sirius made a vague gagging noise.

"What does it say when you hold it, Harry?" Tonks asked, turning to look at him queryingly.

Harry looked down at the watchdog, curiously. The Rector, like the watch, had a slightly convex glass lens covering it. There were no gears, however, nor was there a face; just a deep black background on which words were appearing like smoke.

"You will find what you seek," he read slowly, as the words appeared, "not in battle but in books."

"Well," Remus said. "That's rather fortune-cookie. Usually it's a little more direct."

Tonks held out her hand, impulsively, and Harry placed it on her palm.

"Suggest the—ooooh," Tonks said. Remus, looking over her shoulder, blushed again. She flipped the cap down and passed it to Harry, who offered it to Sirius.

"I don't think I want to know," Sirius said, nearly interrupted by a yawn. "Mmmh. Am I a wanker if I go to bed at this hour?"

Harry flipped the watch open. "No, I don't think so. I might too."

Remus leaned his head against the sofa. "We haven't put up the partition upstairs yet," he groaned.

Sirius shrugged, an interesting move while lying sideways on a chair. "Do we really need one? Padfoot sleeps on Harry's bed anyway."

"Up to you two," Remus said, hauling himself to his feet with the aid of the sofa. It was awkward to watch, and all three of them started forward when

he stumbled a little, catching his balance on the sofa's arm. "Too much wine," he murmured.

"One glass," Tonks reminded him. "Come on. It's been a long day; we're all tired."

Harry climbed the stairs to the upper bedroom, Sirius following behind; no one had yet even gone into the former nursery, and they had deliberately piled their trunks in front of the stairway leading from the second-floor bedroom down to it.

Harry stripped off his shirt, dropping it near the bathroom, while Sirius wandered over to the little windowed gable. From here one could see just a corner of the garden; most of the view was of the neighbouring garden next door. While splendid in the daylight, it had nothing on the tropical lushness of Bowman's and was clearly not owned by anyone of the wizarding persuasion. Sirius could see why James had wanted to live here; they had a lot of memories built up in this garden from last summer, when they stole mangoes and used the walnut trees as a quiet place to have a smoke behind.

Even here in Godric's Hollow, even with Harry as a constant reminder, Sirius found his thoughts focusing less on the past and more on the future—less on the world he'd left behind and more on what was to come. He was going to be a tutor, an exalted position at Hogwarts. He was going to be allowed to help the good fight, when he thought before it might have been years until he was deemed ready.

He found himself trying to extend friendship to Ron and Hermione, although Ron still visibly staked claims on Harry whenever he could and Hermione could be intolerably bossy. He tried to keep Harry's spirits up and help George devise new pranks, though without Fred they weren't always quite up to snuff. He watched Moony tirelessly, making sure that he never had to overexert himself, entering into a conspiracy with Tonks to prevent him from doing the same amount of lifting and carrying the others did.

He liked Tonks, had liked her as a kid. She was a lot like Andromeda, who had always favoured Sirius above all his other cousins. They got on well because they rarely spoke a word of good sense between them and because they were united in the common cause of loving Moony with a fierceness that, had he been actually aware of it, would have embarrassed him severely. But Sirius was aware that however much he loved Moony and had harboured...well, inappropriate

thoughts about Moony's twenty-years-ago counterpart, this man was not that boy.

And then there was Harry.

Harry who was brushing his teeth in the bathroom, shirtless, his trousers slung low on his hips. Harry, who gave Padfoot extremely good pets and whose smile of approval was something Sirius had begun to angle for. Harry, who looked so much like James and yet was so different. *Harry.*

Sirius picked up the little nickel-plated bulldog Harry had set on the bedside table, flicking open the Rector. He didn't expect anything to appear; he'd learned his lesson from the single aborted game of Emperors. Still, it never hurt to try.

*Ask him about his hand.*

Sirius blinked down at the white lettering that rose in little smoky wisps before his eyes. He glanced back at Harry. Hand? What the hell kind of advice was that?

He flicked the cap shut and set the dog back down again, picking up his book. Two days ago, Ron and Harry had swapped out the Grimmauld Place bed for the one that had been here; Sirius could understand Harry wouldn't want to sleep in his parents' bed, and the big old four-poster was nicer anyway. The whole thing was a bit morbid, if you asked Sirius, but then at least Harry wasn't sleeping downstairs in the former nursery.

He curled up against the footboard in his usual place, propping the book on his knees.

"This is better," Harry said, wandering in from the bathroom and pulling a pyjama shirt over his head. "Better than Grimmauld Place."

"Certainly smaller," Sirius answered. Harry grinned and flopped onto the bed, picking up *Shop Gods*.

"I like it smaller. I'm not used to having too much space," he said. "When I lived with the Dursleys I only had —"

He shut his mouth abruptly.

"This feels more like it ought to, anyhow," he said. "This is what people our age do; double up in little tiny cottages and share the kitchen and fight each other about the shower."

Sirius watched Harry's hands; he wore sleeves that fell across the flat of his palm, and Sirius realised he always had. He hadn't noticed Harry's hands

before. Now, watching the deft fingers open the book on his thigh, he could see why Harry had been a Seeker.

Harry absently scratched his left arm with his right hand, and then Sirius did see it; in fact he wasn't sure how he'd missed it before. The pale scars weren't vivid on the skin, but they were certainly visible. They looked almost like words.

And he had such fine, narrow knuckles, the skin stretched across them, the pads of the fingertips delightfully lickable if one could only —

Harry caught him staring, and Sirius flushed crimson. Wordlessly, Harry slid forward and held out his right hand, drawing the sleeve back.

"I was wondering when you'd notice," he said quietly.

*I must not tell lies.*

Sirius stared.

"Did you...do that...?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Not voluntarily," Harry said.

"Not...?"

"An odious woman once thought she could teach me a lesson in endurance when I was fifteen," Harry said distantly. "She set me to write lines. The quill she gave me made a cut for every line I made with the ink."

Sirius stared at him, horrified.

"I think the centaurs should have killed her," Harry continued. "But it's as good a reminder as anything. I've learned that lies get me nowhere; and who am I accountable to for any pain the truth causes? Only a handful of people matter to me, and some of those are only because I hate them. The ones I love would never turn on me for the truth, and I in turn will never do anything to them worth the lying over. That's the treaty I made with myself."

Sirius reached out hesitantly and touched the scars, feeling the slight variation in the texture of Harry's skin. Harry allowed him to unfold his curled fingers carefully, spreading the fingertips wide with one hand. Almost dizzily, Sirius raised Harry's hand, pressing the scars against his lips. Not a kiss; nothing so ridiculous. Just feeling the ridges and valleys of the knuckles, letting Harry feel his breath across his skin. Harry watched him with hard, wary eyes for a fraction of a second. Then they closed and his head dropped forward, chest giving a dangerous heave.

Sirius released him and leaned forward, worried he'd crossed some sort of line, but Harry merely covered his face with his hand. Now the scar stood out lividly, like the matching mark on his forehead.

"Harry..." he said helplessly. "You're...just tired, and...and it's only natural, you know –"

Harry's chest heaved again and Sirius began to get really concerned. Boys their age Did Not Cry, especially in front of other boys. Even when Peter broke his leg last year falling down a flight of stairs, Peter hadn't cried.

But still Sirius instinctively gathered him close, pulling Harry's head against his chest awkwardly and smoothing down his messy hair.

"Christ, Sirius," Harry gasped, shaking. The boy was an absolute wreck, Sirius thought. This is the great soldier who's supposed to defeat the Dark Lord? "I keep trying, I keep trying to know what I'm doing, but I don't know –"

"Nonsense," Sirius said reassuringly. "If you were doing it wrong, Moony would stop you. Or Ron or someone would."

"They don't know any more than I do."

"Who's going to blame you if you do it wrong, then?" Sirius asked. "If nobody knows any more than you, they should bloody well bless their stars you're willing to at least make a decision."

Harry laughed a little at that, which was the desired response. Sirius released him when Harry pulled away.

"You're right, I'm tired," Harry said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. His eyes were still dry, which was something. "Sorry."

Sirius made a vague gesture in the air. "S'okay."

"If you want to sleep downstairs –"

"No," Sirius said, as Harry turned back the blankets and pulled them up around his chest, rolling over onto his side. Hesitantly, Sirius crept up to the head of the bed, propping his back against the headboard. Harry took off his glasses and set them on the bedside table. It seemed like every movement of his right hand was now somehow significant to Sirius, but to Harry the scar was just a part of him – it could be used to wipe noses or wash dishes or turn book pages with.

Hesitantly, Sirius reached out with his left hand and continued to stroke Harry's hair, twisting it into little kinks and curls where it ran crossgrain to itself. James had always wanted his own hair to look windblown and tousled; apparently his son had inherited the urge subconsciously.

Harry's breathing slowed. Sirius tried slicking down a cowlick one way, then smoothed it over across the crown of his head instead.

"When I was little," Harry said, sleepily, "My aunt cut all my hair off because it wouldn't grow properly."

"Looks fine to me," Sirius said.

"It grew back when I went to bed that night. I was glad because I didn't want to go to school with no hair."

"One time I set fire to a potion in class for a lark and blew bits of my eyebrows off," Sirius offered. Harry laughed.

"She used to brush it down all the time, tried to get it to lie flat," Harry continued, as Sirius encountered a particularly stubborn curl. "She never once touched me except to try to cut off my hair or fit me into Dudley's clothing. Never touched me except to make me be someone I'm not. Nobody ever does. She wanted me to be normal; Dumbledore wanted me to be special. Ginny wants me to be in love with her. Remus wants me to be suddenly grown-up and wise. Sirius—"

"I don't want anything," Sirius said quickly.

"No...my Sirius, my godfather...wanted me to be more like my dad."

"But I don't," Sirius said. There was silence from the other boy.

"We should sleep," Harry said after a while. Sirius sighed and took his hand away, sitting up to Change. Padfoot flopped down as usual in the curve of Harry's legs, and Harry flicked one of the blankets backwards, the edge just covering Padfoot from tail to nose.

## CHAPTER XII

Harry woke late the next morning and even then not naturally, but rather to the sound of Padfoot barking. He threw off the covers and went to the window overlooking Bowman's garden, where the noise seemed to be coming from.

Down in the garden Padfoot was standing splay-footed, clearly ready to catch something, barking joyfully; a triangle of toast went whirling through the air even as he watched and Padfoot leapt to catch it, crunching it up in his huge jaws. Harry leaned forward, trying to see who was down below. Remus, hair askew from sleep, sat in a garden chair of some kind with a large plate of food on his lap. Mrs. Jenkins stood next to Remus, talking with Tonks, who looked likewise as sleep-rumpled as Remus. Two magpies swooped down and began fighting for the remains of the toast that fell sloppily from Padfoot's mouth. Harry slid the window up.

"Good morning!" he called. Remus turned his face up to look at Harry, and smiled.

"Good morning, Harry!" he replied. "Did we wake you?"

"You should have, ages ago! What time is it?" Harry asked, unaccountably cheerful.

"Coming on nine-thirty. Hermione and Ron floo'd to say they couldn't come over, so we thought we'd let you sleep," Tonks answered.

"I'm going to market today," Mrs. Jenkins added. "Would you like anything, young Harry?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Jenkins, I think we're fully stocked."

Remus flung another piece of toast across the garden, this one in a high arc, and Padfoot executed a near-backflip to get it. Tonks laughed and applauded.

"What a lovely creature," Mrs. Jenkins said appreciatively. "Only mind, don't let him go in Bowman's flower beds."

Remus winked at Harry behind her back. "He's fully trained."

Harry washed and dressed quickly, descending to the bottom floor and passing through the kitchen into the sunlit garden. It would be hot today, he could tell; that was fine. They could cast cooling charms and stay inside. He had a commission to make of George, who was meeting him down at the Witch And

Wardrobe, but that wasn't until late afternoon. It would be a nice walk. Perhaps Padfoot would tag along.

Remus offered Harry the remains of the toast and one sad fried egg. Harry took the toast and nibbled on it, content to lean in the doorway and watch Tonks wrestle Padfoot for possession of a prime fetching-stick.

"Nice morning," he said idly.

"Yes," Remus agreed, tilting his head back to rest it against the wall of the house. He glanced up at Harry. "Sleep well?"

"I did."

"Good. I wondered...this house..." Remus shook his head. "But you were right, Harry. It is a good place."

Harry smiled as Padfoot knocked Tonks over and proceeded to bolt, stick in mouth, while she shook her fist after him.

"She's being very tolerant," Harry observed.

"She loved her cousin. It must feel like a reprieve for her; she blamed herself too much for his death. To have him back seems like a reassurance of sorts. A second chance."

Harry glanced down at Remus, who was watching her with studied carelessness.

"I wonder what we did to deserve it," Remus said, after a time.

"Maybe it's not what we did. Maybe it's what he did," Harry pointed out. "This could be his reward, not ours."

"So it could. Mmh," Remus grunted, adjusting his shoulders slightly. "I'd forgotten what it was like to sit in the sun—seems like I spend all day buried in libraries or dim little shops."

"You must remember my parents living here," Harry said. He'd never prodded Remus about what he knew, though he'd often wanted to. It wasn't fair to make him secret keeper and in addition keeper of the memories of James and Lily—and Sirius.

"Vividly. James' mother turned up her nose at it; nothing was good enough for her son and his wife. But he liked it, and Lily loved it."

Padfoot came dashing back across the lawn, knocked Tonks over again, dropped the stick on her head, and rushed up to Remus and Harry. He skidded to a halt in front of Remus, tossing muddy paws up on his knees and panting in his face.

"You stink," Remus informed him. "And you have crumbs in your whiskers."

Padfoot's eyes rolled in a wild, bizarre imitation of a human eye roll. He jumped away from Remus and nudged Harry's knees, shoving him aside gently. Inside there was a sound like an exhalation of air, and Sirius' bare feet could be heard tracking mud into the downstairs bathroom.

"Can't sit around all day," Remus said, hoisting himself up out of the chair and stretching. "There are letters to write and books to read. I thought I'd go into town this afternoon; there might be a bookshop that needs a clerk or something similar."

"You're not seriously thinking of getting a job?" Tonks asked, following him inside. Harry backed out of the doorway to let them through, then pulled the door closed and went about procuring himself some cereal.

"Well, perpetual unemployment has its appeal, but it's bad for the digestion," he answered dryly.

"You're not well yet."

"I've never been well; it's never stopped me before." Remus seated himself complacently at the kitchen table and opened his quillcase, uncapping his inkbottle. He pulled a sheet of parchment out of the little compartment for scrolls, unrolled it, and began to write.

"Harry, tell him he doesn't have to get a job."

Harry shrugged. "He knows what I'm worth better than I do. He knows he doesn't have to get a job."

"Then tell him he shouldn't!" Tonks growled in frustration.

"Remus?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You shouldn't get a job."

Remus smiled at him. "Thank you for the advice, Harry. However, without one it is difficult to procure ink, quills, clothing, food, books, shiny baubles for Tonks—"

"Men!" Tonks crossed her arms.

"That's hardly fair. I'm sure there are plenty of men who would be happy to live on Harry's savings their whole lives," Remus said with a smile. "It's all right, you know. I doubt anywhere would hire me at any rate, so it's likely you shan't have to worry."

"What're we worrying about?" Sirius asked, emerging from the bathroom with a towel tied around his waist.

"Sirius, that's my towel!" Tonks cried.

"It's nice," Sirius said. "Very thick and woolly."

Harry glanced at Remus as Sirius and Tonks began to bicker about personal property rights and contagious skin diseases. Remus gave Harry a small smile, then bent back to his writing.

\* \* \*

It was agreed that the afternoon trip down to the centre of town could be successfully accomplished by Remus and Harry, with Sirius tagging along as Padfoot since he seemed to be in a doggy mood for the majority of the day. The proprietress of the Witch And Wardrobe could hardly be expected to ban Padfoot when she dealt with rats, cats, toads, owls, and spiders as her customers' familiars on a regular basis. The life of a magical pub owner is not an easy one.

The walk wasn't difficult, and Harry felt it rather did Remus good. They strolled in a leisurely way down the streets, Padfoot occasionally scouting ahead. Tonks had gone in to London to complete some paperwork and fill out some scheduling forms, still vaguely annoyed by Remus' insistence on looking for a job.

There were help-wanted signs in a few windows; Harry and Padfoot loitered on the sidewalk or browsed while Remus spoke with shop-owners and cashiers. His poverty had always been theoretical to Harry before now, but to see his clever and kind professor ask about shelf-stocking jobs annoyed him. It didn't help that he knew Remus was naturally inclined to shyness, and even the simple act of asking was difficult for him.

"I need to talk to George alone," he told Remus, as they stood outside the Witch And Wardrobe. "It shouldn't take long, though."

Remus indicated the newspaper under his arm. "I'll stay at the bar with Sirius until you call us."

Harry hesitated, torn, then dug in his pocket and pulled out a handful of galleons and sickles. "It's coming on dinner – can you get me something to eat? Doesn't matter what. And a bowl of something for Padfoot and stuff."

Remus examined him, head tilted a little, eyes a little more knowing than Harry was comfortable with. Finally, he held out his hand and accepted the money.

George was already sitting inside at a rear booth, a pint in front of him. Harry left Remus speaking with the witch at the bar and slid into the seat across from George, smiling a greeting.

Harry had a theory that, while most twins weren't necessarily identical or mystically connected or any of that rot, magical twins were different. Without Fred, George was listless and unhappy; Charlie had written again to say that Fred was just as miserable, but it was good motivation to find a solution, and they were making headway.

"What's up?" George asked, leaning forward. "You said super-secret, hush-hush?"

"Yeah. Well. That and I wanted to see if you wanted to come over for dinner tomorrow."

George gave him a small grin. "And here I was thinking you were sending me on a dangerous and exciting mission."

"Well...sort of."

"I'm all ears. And red hair."

Harry bit his lip.

"I've silenced the booth," George added. "Anyone eavesdropping really will be all ears. Have at it."

"What I'm planning for Voldemort isn't going to be easy," Harry said quietly. "We're going to have to get to him, and to that snake of his. I need his defences weakened. Hermione's already working on Fenrir Greyback, and you know what Fred's up to."

George nodded, looking more interested now.

"It's the humans I'm still worried about."

"Snape," George said, a full measure of loathing in his voice.

"Yes."

"If I find him first, do I get to kill him?"

Harry smiled. George did not.

"I don't think anyone's going to find him. But if anyone could, George..."

George nodded. "I know people. I can ask around. I've heard things already—I have to go into Knockturn to buy supplies sometimes. Tonks has, too. Word is, though, he's just vanished. He might be in Europe, but I think he'd stand out like a sore thumb there, especially if he has that little weasel Malfoy there with him."

"I need you to find him, George, or at least find out where he might be. He knows all our weaknesses—he taught most of us." Harry lowered his voice. "If you find them, you can have Malfoy. Snape belongs to me."

"That little tit," George said bitterly.

"Do what you can. I'm not expecting miracles from anyone. I just want to know where they are. Any other information you can round up would be welcome, too. Other Death Eaters—cutting them off, getting them thrown in Azkaban, anything we can do to make trouble."

George nodded. "Harry, I had this...idea."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We get a lot of regulars in the joke shop. Kids. They see stuff. They don't even always understand what they see. Could be useful, though. Some of them have parents who work in Knockturn."

"Any spies you can get, George. Keep track of what you pay out and I'll have Remus pay you back from the vaults." Harry leaned back. "Speaking of which, it looks like he has our food. Are we agreed, then?"

"Yeah," George said. "You're a bit scary, Harry, you know that?"

"Good," Harry answered grimly, turning around to wave at Remus. The older man nodded and picked up a plate and a bowl, carrying them over to the table while juggling two pint glasses as well. Padfoot followed, squirming under the table and flopping down on Harry's feet.

"I thought George might want some," he said, indicating the double helping of fish and chips on the plate. He set the bowl of stew in front of himself and one pint glass in front of Harry. "And I ducked into the owl office next door—brought the post."

Harry glanced down at the two letters, addressed to H.P. c/o Remus Lupin, Godric's Hollow, *Post Restante*. Remus had a letter too, and Sirius had no less than three addressed to Nigel Padfoot, which seemed to have stuck despite all his best efforts to insist on Samuel. One from Gringott's, probably confirming the addition of his name to the access list for Harry Potter's vaults; one from Hogwarts, no doubt to do with the tutoring position, and one from Kingsley Shacklebolt, thick and looking like it probably contained several fake identification papers. Possibly a dog licence.

"How are you faring, George?" Remus asked, as Harry opened his letters. A long one from Neville, still in Ireland; a slightly shorter one, stuffed with

newspaper clippings, from Luna. McGonagall must have sent them his new address.

"Pretty well," George answered with a shrug. "Working on some new stuff for when Fred gets back."

"Any news on that front?"

"Charlie says soon," Harry answered, stuffing his letters in his back pocket along with Sirius'. "We may be ready before we're actually ready, which would be a welcome change."

Remus nodded, opening his own letter.

"Fred's really good with explosives," George said, rather unnecessarily. "He thinks if you packed something harmful to them in with a lot of Muggle fireworks explosives, you could build these...rocket type things, maybe even modify Muggle firearms—"

He stopped, because Remus had just dropped the letter he'd opened into his stew as if it had burned him.

"Remus?" Harry said. Remus stared down at the letter that was slowly soaking into the gravy. "Remus, what is it?"

"Bollocks," Remus said, startling the others and reaching into the stew to pick up the letter, hastily cleaning it with a paper napkin. "Oh, bollocks—"

Padfoot lifted his head up into the space between Harry and Remus in the booth, inquiringly.

"Bad news?" George asked, craning his neck. "Hey, that's got the Hogwarts seal on it."

Harry looked too, even as Remus bent to cleaning the grease and beef juices off the parchment.

*It is the pleasure of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to offer Mr. Remus John Lupin the position of Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts for the coming school year –*

"Ooo-er," George said, eyes wide.

*And in view of his past services to the school, to offer in addition the position of Head of House for Gryffindor.*

Harry heard Remus swallow, convulsively.

"McGonagall's gone mad," he said, hoarsely. "Absolutely round the twist. If she thinks she has a chance of getting this past the Board of Governors—"

"No, look," Harry said, indicating a grease-marked spot.

*Understanding the health and safety concerns involved, the Board of Governors has approved the offer conditional upon the following. 1. That Mr. Lupin remove himself to a secure location for the two days surrounding the full moon –*

Remus peeled the first page off and set it aside. The second page, having got the worst of the stew, was nearly illegible. Harry saw McGonagall's signature at the bottom.

"I'd better be going," George said, cramming some chips into his mouth and sliding out of the booth. "Good to see you, Harry. Dinner tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yeah – I'll have someone come fetch you," Harry said.

"Cheers. See you, then."

The redheaded man vanished into the cabinet. Harry glanced at Remus, who was still reading the letter.

"What are the other conditions?" he asked. Remus looked up at him, vacantly.

"Um," he said. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Remus so completely at a loss.

"Other conditions of you being hired?" Harry prompted.

"Oh. Ah. Shack for the moons...can't live at the school...no individual tutoring without another professor present." Remus said, reading the list. "That's all. Nothing about Wolfsbane."

"That's not so bad, really. You can stay at Fourteen Back and floo in, and you never did much tutoring anyway," Harry said.

"No, you were the only one..." Remus shook his head, clearing it. "McGonagall shouldn't give me that kind of news in a letter. My nerves can't take it."

"But it's good news, right?" Harry asked. "I mean, no more looking for clerk jobs..."

Remus looked noncommittal. "Perhaps we should go," he said, after a pause. "I've paid for the drinks and such already."

He absently reached into his pocket and provided Harry with his change as they left the booth, Padfoot scurrying out ahead of them. Remus almost left the letter behind, but Harry gathered it up and muttered a cleaning charm to keep it from getting grease all over his pocket.

Outside, Padfoot romped joyfully around Remus for a second before running down an alley, emerging a few seconds later as Sirius. He laughed and punched Remus on the shoulder.

"Professor Lupin!" he said, grinning. "We'll get to see each other every day!"

Harry, who sensed there was something deeply upsetting in the letter, grabbed Sirius by the arm.

"Don't make a show," he said.

"Aw, Harry, come on—" Sirius caught his eye and stopped, then glanced back at Remus, who had continued to walk onwards. "What...?"

"Later," Harry said.

The walk to Fourteen Back was conducted in a tense silence, Sirius looking like nothing so much as a whipped puppy, Harry watchful, Remus abstracted and anxious. They could have gone in through the front door that faced the alley, but out of habit they went through the garden, waving at Bowman where he sat on the back porch.

"Harry, did you..." Remus asked, and Harry held up the letter. Remus accepted it and smoothed it open. "Thank you."

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

"Ah...she always did like putting me in the hot seat," Remus said.

"Who?" Sirius asked.

"McGonagall...made me Prefect because she thought I could control—well, you...wanted me to be more prominent in the Order..." he sat at the kitchen table. "She likes it when I'm between a rock and a hard place. Think it helps my character."

"I don't see what's so bloody rocky about it," Sirius burst out. "Nice soft teaching job—"

Remus laughed mirthlessly. "Soft, you call it? I did that job for a year, Sirius. I was lucky to get out with my skin. I was lucky Harry got out with *his* skin."

"Not the old curse," Sirius groaned, dropping into the seat opposite him. "I didn't believe in it then and I don't believe in it now."

"No—it really is," Harry started, but apparently this was an old argument that Remus was more than willing to pick up again.

"We had eight professor in seven years, Sirius. Belief isn't really an issue," Remus said.

"Eight?" Harry asked curiously.

"He had a heart attack and he'd only been teaching for two days, Blankenship doesn't count," Sirius argued.

"I don't want to fight an uphill battle. I'm too tired for that," Remus said. "The minute I show my face in the Great Hall, dozens of owls are going to go home about it."

"I dunno," Harry said. "Most of the parents who're easily scared have already pulled their kids, haven't they? And the students who are going back don't want to do anything to jeopardise that. And the rest think Hogwarts is safer than anywhere else anyway."

"Harry, you can't ask me to seriously consider this." Remus gave him an astounded look. "I'm hardly in condition to spend all day teaching, I haven't any lesson plans prepared and no time —"

"Hah! Already thinking about lesson plans!" Sirius said triumphantly.

"—and I wouldn't be able to teach for whole days together," Remus finished.

"You didn't before, either. Sirius can fill in for you," Harry said. "Why else have a tutor around?"

"Steady employment," Sirius said tantalisingly. "Having me around all the time..."

"Hardly a perk," Remus drawled. Sirius mocked hurt. "Let's put this aside for now. And for Merlin's sake, whatever you do, don't tell —"

"Tonks!" Sirius said brightly, leaning out the window. "Hiya! Here for dinner? We've eaten already..."

"I just heard," came a voice in reply. "Is Remus there?"

"Heard? From *who*?" Remus asked, alarmed.

"Whom," Harry murmured. Remus glared at him.

Tonks burst into the kitchen and Remus stood just in time to be knocked back against the wall by her overenthusiastic hug. He clutched his chest.

"Oh—Merlin—sorry," she said, while he gasped for breath.

"S...fine..." he managed. All three of them waited expectantly while he got his wind back. "I'm all right."

"Of course you are!" she said excitedly. "McGonagall owled to say she'd offered you the Dark Arts job again!"

"Bedamned woman—her, not you," he said quickly, when she scowled. "She must be desperate. I don't imagine anyone wants the job of the man who killed Albus Dumbledore."

"All the more reason you should take it," Harry said quietly. "They need someone who knows what they're doing now."

"You'll have Sirius with you on the full moons," Tonks added, touching Remus' arm hesitantly. When he didn't pull away, she rubbed it, comfortingly. "You won't have to lie about where you are."

"Head of House," Remus murmured to himself. "Tempting bait."

"Well, someone has to, now that she's Headmistress," Tonks said. "Can you imagine Trelawney trying to be Gryffindor Head?"

Remus covered his eyes with his hand. "All too clearly," he murmured. "Oh, Merlin..."

He began to laugh, dropping back into the chair at the kitchen table. Sirius and Harry exchanged a nervous look while Tonks *accio'd* a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water, offering it to him.

"I told you my nerves couldn't stand this," he said to Harry, taking a deep sip. "Merlin knows what I'll do the first time I have to give an order to the Prefects."

Tonks glanced sidelong at Harry and grinned. "Merlin knows," she agreed.

\* \* \*

Harry's life in the last weeks of August became a constant, if not unpleasant, series of letters and books and discussions. Two years, even a year ago, he would have rankled at the inaction, but now he didn't even see it as such. Each course of research, each correspondence, became a single thread which connected him—however indirectly—to Voldemort. Charlie's cheerful but uninformative letters, George's cryptic notes about information received, Hermione's over-detailed but necessary reports, Ron's shorter and much more entertaining ones, Tonks' forays into Knockturn, all these came to Harry's hands, occasionally intercrossing and sometimes even seeming to form patterns.

Fenrir Greyback and a small pack of werewolves loyal to him were living, even as humans, on Dartmoor near Exeter. Their options for travel were limited; none of them knew how to Apparate and none of them would voluntarily use broomsticks. Remus had told Hermione that Fenrir was essentially illiterate and had no magical knowledge other than a few wandless healing charms. Harry privately thought it was quite possible Fenrir's philosophy of ignorance stemmed from shame in his ignorance. Remus had been the first werewolf ever admitted to Hogwarts; Fenrir had never been given the chance to join wizarding

society, let alone understand it. He was determined to keep the rest of his pack as ignorant as he himself was.

Sirius finished *Animagus Winter* and Remus agreed to lend his copy to Harry, who had been interested enough by *Shop Gods* to wish to continue. Sirius', which had an inscription he would rather – for obvious reasons – not share, was packed in his trunk along with his robes and schoolbooks. The Fourteen Back floo was connected to the fireplace in Remus' office and he spent a very long, very tiring day with Tonks, blowing most of his first advance paycheque on new clothing and robes. It was amazing the change that occurred from this alone; he still looked slightly ill in unpatched clothing, with a proper haircut and shining shoes, but he no longer looked as though he were on death's door.

Perhaps the most entertaining thing they had all encountered in weeks was the Tutors' Code of Conduct that McGonagall had dug up and sent to Sirius. It had clearly not actually been revised in several hundred years. Additions had been made here and there and a few things had been visibly scratched out or rearranged, but the document – almost an inch thick – was a considerable testament to the long tradition of scandalous and scurrilous Tutors who had held the post since the Renaissance.

"All right, listen to this," Sirius said, grinning as he paged through it the evening before two of the three residents of Fourteen Back would be returning to Hogwarts. "On pages twelve, twenty-nine, sixty, and forty – which by the way comes *after* sixty – I am warned about the consequences of licentious fornication with the headmaster. I think maybe someone should be coming up with a code of conduct for the headmasters, don't you?"

"Admit it – you're planning licentious fornication with McGonagall," Harry accused, laughing over the top of his own book, a catalogue of 'harmless' magical artefacts on display in the British Museum.

"Oh sweet Merlin's toes!" Sirius looked horrified. "Do you suppose she's capable of it?"

"I shouldn't see why not. In fact I'm fairly certain she is," Remus replied. Everyone looked at him. "I'm not telling you any more than that," he added firmly. "I don't think she fancies you, Sirius."

"No chance of *modest* fornication, then," George suggested. Ron, sitting on the floor next to him, punched him in the arm and the two scuffled while Sirius calmly continued paging through.

"Ah, page ex ell vee eye eye as well," Sirius said. "Which comes between pages thirty-two and thirty-three, both of which contain advice about how to properly remove a fainting student's corset so as not to cause any intimation of impropriety."

"How do you do that?" Hermione asked. She was already elbow-deep in all her NEWTs subjects, her schoolbooks spouting sticky-notes like demented hedgehogs. To no-one's surprise, she had been declared Head Girl; equally unsurprisingly, Ron had not been declared Head Boy, though he had been made Quidditch Captain in Harry's absence. Ron and Hermione would be going back to Hogwarts on the train, like always, with Tonks as part of the train's security escort; Remus and Sirius would floo in just before the Sorting was to get underway, and Harry would be left—at least until Remus came back late in the evening—alone in the house for the first time since they'd moved in.

"Planning on removing someone's corset in the near future?" Sirius inquired. Hermione glared at him. "It's just an under-clothes banishment."

"Like this," George said, flicking his wand at Hermione, who shrieked.

"Send them back, George!" she insisted. "Ack, what a draft!"

"George," Remus said warningly.

"That's his Head of House voice," George stage-whispered to Harry.

"Send them back, George, before Ron pummels you again," Harry said. George rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers. Hermione got a very odd look on her face and fled for the bathroom.

"When you unbanish 'em, they generally return backwards," George said. Ron glared at him and got up to go see if Hermione was all right.

"This bit on catching cheaters is a riot," Sirius said, thumbing through a well-worn section. "There's eight different people writing in it and it's still at least twenty years out of date—well, which means really it's forty years out of date by now. Ooooh, we never tried that one though."

Sirius reached over the edge of his chair and languidly stole one of Hermione's sticky-notes, marking the page with it. Harry, sitting on the floor with his arms around his knees and his back propped by one of the chair's arms, grinned up at him.

Harry suddenly wished he knew how to work a pensieve; he wanted to take this memory and preserve it forever in a little glass jar, so that he could see it whenever he wanted. Hermione standing in the doorway, Ron's arm around her waist; Sirius sprawling above him and laughing; George feet-up on the sofa;

Tonks doing a wizarding crossword next to the hearth of the empty fireplace; Remus in his new clothes on the other wing-chair, checking over his lesson plans.

He turned his head, resting it against the chair, and his eyes fell on the door to the nursery. By common consent it was walled off, secured away and treated as if it were a missing part of the house, a dead limb.

And that was the reason the memory unwinding in front of him right now couldn't last. Always lurking in the background, casting a shadow over the cosy living room of Fourteen Back, was the room his parents had died in, the room in which Voldemort had met his first death.

Sirius slid down out of the chair, dropping to the floor next to Harry and offering him the book for perusal. "Look at this—I bet this is why they fired the last tutor."

In what was clearly McGonagall's angular copperplate script, Harry read a new addition to the Code of Conduct.

*The Tutor is considered a role model and mentor to young students, being generally a young person themselves. They are gifted with a great trust, the shaping and improvement of youthful minds by example. They are expected to comport themselves with dignity and sobriety at all times. The Tutor is forbidden from imbibing alcohol or mood-changing potions during school hours, while in the presence of other students, or while representing the school in any way.*

"Think he was a drunk?" Harry asked.

"No, keep reading," Sirius said in his ear. George was distracting Remus and Hermione by teaching them how to make Hermione's sticky notes flap up in the air like moths; Ron was distracted (as usual, of late) by Hermione, and Tonks was engrossed in her crossword. Sirius leaned against Harry, right hand pointing to a paragraph lower down.

*The Tutor is permitted to entertain approved non-Hogwarts visitors in their quarters between the hours of three and eight in the evening on week-days when not engaged in their duties. The Tutor is not permitted to entertain students of any gender in their quarters, nor are they permitted to escort individual students to Hogsmeade or any formal occasion at the school. The Tutor must bear in mind that they exert a certain power over students, and not engage in any romantic or sexual misconduct.*

"Spoil your fun, eh?" Harry asked lightly, though Sirius hadn't moved his hand, and the close proximity of his face was suddenly very confusing.

"Oh, I don't know. I was never much interested in anyone below our year, and most of the people in our year and above were pretty annoying too, come to

think of it," Sirius said casually. He reached further across the book to the far page, turning it over. Quite suddenly, the next page was an antiquated list of infractions and punishments the Tutor was allowed (indeed, required) to dispense. Above it, in McGonagall's hand again, was the annotation *Try any of these and you'll live to regret it.*

"Are you looking forward to it, Sirius?" Harry asked, while Sirius chuckled.

"Going back to school? Sure. Going to be let study on my own, have occupation, real occupation—be useful, you know." Sirius nodded. "Yes, I think so. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Still time for you to come along, Harry."

Harry cut his eyes away, shook his head. "No. I have other responsibilities."

"But you will come and visit?"

"Visit?" Harry asked. The idea had never occurred to him.

"Of course, you git. I'm allowed to entertain visitors from two to two-forty five on alternate Tuesdays, remember?" Sirius grinned.

"I'm not sure I should—"

"Do come. We'll comport ourselves without dignity or sobriety and make bad examples."

Sirius looked pleading, and Harry realised that aside from Ron and Hermione, who were not precisely Sirius' best friends, the other boy would know only Remus, and none of the other students.

"I'll come when I can," Harry promised. Sirius grinned at him.

"They're planning something," Remus said, and Harry glanced up. Remus was watching him and Sirius, not with any particular malice, simply taking them in. As he had watched Harry the day in town, when Harry had offered him the money for the pub.

"Mischief," Sirius said with a wink, and hoisted himself back up onto the chair. "That's all."

## CHAPTER XIII

At the end of the day Harry was almost glad to be rid of Remus and Sirius. The pair of them were both as jumpy as first-years; Remus didn't like that he wasn't going to be taking the train, but he had to admit the wisdom of letting the Aurors be the ones to patrol the corridors and defend against any comers. Harry realised now that the reason Remus had been on the train the first time round was almost entirely because of the Dementors. Surely it would have been easier on him to have floo'd in to Hogwarts, rather than suffer a daylong train ride fresh from the full moon.

Sirius was just excitable and enthusiastic, but an entire day of Sirius' excitability could be a little wearing on a person. When McGonagall's head finally appeared in their floo and the pair prepared to leave, Harry was relieved. He'd never really been alone at Fourteen Back before, anyway, and he wondered what it would feel like to be left to himself in his own home, the first real place that was *his*. Remus would be back, of course, but not for hours – there was the Sorting and the feast and then the faculty usually had a brew up and an informal sort of meeting. Tonks was staying the night in Hogsmeade with friends, so until Remus returned around midnight it would just be Harry, king of the cottage.

He stood in front of the hearth and watched Sirius disappear, spinning away towards Hogwarts. After a second, McGonagall's voice called out to say that they'd both arrived safely and she was closing down the floo point.

"All right, Professor," Harry replied. He half expected that she, like Sirius and later Remus, would offer him one last chance to return, but someone must have warned her that he was getting impatient with them; she merely said "Look after yourself, Harry" and closed the connection.

Harry stood there for a good five minutes, right hand rubbing his left arm thoughtfully, just listening to the sudden silence in the normally noisy house. He could hear one or two birds in Bowman's garden and people occasionally passed by in the alley on their way to other cottages, but the presence or absence of human voices made all the difference.

He padded barefoot into the kitchen, dim and dark in the post-twilight evening, lit as all magical houses were by rows of candles in stands on the walls. Only a few were actually burning, and he set the rest ablaze with a flick of his wand, only now feeling as though he was justified in using magic despite having been seventeen for a full month. Now it felt right; now he would have been back

at school, if he hadn't made this decision. But he didn't think he could have gone back to schoolbooks and Quidditch, not knowing what he knew. Things weren't normal. No use in pretending. And because he was not going back, nothing was changing for him, not really.

He didn't feel like cooking, so he made some tea and assembled a cheese sandwich, settling in at the kitchen table to continue poring over books of magical mythology and museum catalogues.

Slytherin's locket, still unopened and apparently indestructible, lay under heavy wards in one of the cupboards. It was the only thing in the cupboard; Sirius refused to keep food near it, and Remus said it wasn't at all a bad idea to keep it isolated.

It was like the sort of spell you read about before you knew that magic really existed. A ring, a book, a locket, a cup; Nagini, a living embodiment (a *sacrifice*, part of his mind insisted) and an object of mystery. Ring and book gone, locket safely in hand; they would deal with Nagini when they had to and not before, because it would tip their hand.

*Book, bell, and candle*—wasn't that an old ritual? He wasn't sure why or from where, but he was certain he'd heard of it somewhere. Objects had power. Just look to the Marauder's Map, now riding safely in the inner pocket of Sirius' robes, for proof. Certain things had power by dint of simply being what they were. Maps. Playing cards. Coins. Clocks. Rings. Books—yes, and bells. And some types of things—iron and glass.

Old magic, given up when wands and funny words proved easier—magic which was orderly and civilised, chipped slowly out of the old folk ways. Harry had the sudden wish that they had learned *that* in History of Magic instead of the dates of political rebellions; how magic had come to be from what it had been.

Tom Riddle would have studied the old magic, would have studied that history all on his own. He didn't simply want one horcrux made of any old thing; he wanted six, and he wanted them to be objects of power. What could it be then? A clock, like the old one ticking away at Grimmauld Place that fired crossbow bolts at bystanders? A bell?

Tom's first try had been the diary, which was cheap, flimsy, easily destroyed—its value was in its ability to communicate and manipulate. He'd obviously learned from making it, since the next one was a ring with a stone that must crack before the ghost was, as it were, given up. He'd used metal objects, hard to kill—and Harry had no illusions that *killing* them wasn't the proper term

for it. Nagini was more troubling; if it was true that Tom trusted no living soul, it seemed foolishness itself to use even a snake. Break its back or chop off its head and there you were, down one horcrux. But Harry himself had said that Voldemort understood snakes. Look at Arabella Figg, who might be a member of the magical world but was still a crazy cat lady. Look at Ron, if it came to that, who had been willing to break with Hermione for good over the supposed death-by-Crookshanks of Scabbers. Pets had power over people, even people who hated other people.

What a capricious creature Tom Riddle was.

Harry settled his chin on his hands and began to read again.

\* \* \*

"Professor," McGonagall said, by way of greeting.

"Headmistress," Remus answered. They smiled at each other as if over a private joke, while a handful of house-elves converged on Sirius and confiscated his trunk, disappearing with it.

"And Mr. Padfoot," McGonagall said, while Sirius gave her a sheepish grin. "Your tutor's robes suit you."

"Yes," Sirius agreed, straightening the high, banded collar of the deep red robes. "They do."

"Professor Lupin, you are welcome to go down to the feast; I'll be down in just a few moments to start the Sorting," she said. "Mr. Padfoot and I have things to discuss."

Remus smiled. "My cue to depart. I'll see you at the Sorting, S—" he stopped himself. "—Nigel."

Sirius rolled his eyes at Remus as he vanished down the spiral staircase leading out of the Headmaster's—Headmistress's—office. When he was gone, McGonagall crossed her arms and regarded the new Tutor with her merely-terrifying stare. He'd grown used to the merely-terrifying stare; it was worse than the stern stare but of course much better than the furious stare.

"You reviewed the Code of Conduct I sent you?" she said finally.

"Yes, Headmistress."

"Very well. You understand that you will be serving your tutorship under the name of Nigel Padfoot, and that you are expected to behave as though you are a graduate of an undisclosed school for Wizards, where you were accredited three years ago at the age of seventeen."

"I don't look twenty," Sirius said dubiously.

"To children, anyone they are forced to address with respect automatically looks forty, I assure you," she answered, somewhat wryly. "You will be entering into an independent course of study based on your OWLs and career intentions; you'll have a week to settle in before we begin to discuss precisely what your continuing education will be composed of. I located your file..."

Sirius eyed the thick, red-coloured file. He'd never seen his educational file before. Apparently they stored disciplinary records in them too because his academic record, while outstanding, was certainly not what was padding it out to the bursting point.

"In addition, I reviewed the on-file notes I made during your fifth year vocational consultation," McGonagall said. "They were...indirect at best. I seem to recall you being rather vague on the subject of your future prospects. Have you given any new thought to where your particular...aptitudes might lead you?"

"Well, teaching seems rather prime at the moment, doesn't it?" Sirius asked. McGonagall had time to look horrified before there was a sudden outraged exclamation from one of the portraits behind her.

"Who, pray tell, is *that*?" demanded the portrait. Sirius turned to look at it.

"Isn't it obvious, Phineas?" came another, rather more familiar voice. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore adjusted his glasses, leaning forward in his frame. "I hardly expected to see you in my—I beg your pardon, Minerva—*this* office again, Sirius Black."

"I must ask you to call him Nigel, Albus," McGonagall said politely. "He is...undercover."

"Oh! Quite. Welcome to Hogwarts, Nigel," Albus said with a smile. "You are taking up the position of Tutor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Splendid! Splendid. The last young gentleman, you know, was somewhat—"

"The less said about him, the better," McGonagall said firmly.

"Tutor? Here? What? Eh?"

Sirius turned in the opposite direction and was subject to the gimlet stare of Phineas Nigellus, who was looking put out. "Great-Great Grandfather," he said grudgingly.

"What on earth is the meaning of all this?" Nigellus demanded.

"If you deigned to visit Grimmauld Place, you would have known," Sirius answered shortly. "I see you were too busy haranguing the Headmistress."

"That is quite enough of your talk, youngster," Nigellus said severely.

"What are you going to do, strap me?" Sirius asked. "You're not really my ancestor, you're nothing but pigment and varnish and a few cheap charms—"

"Sirius!" McGonagall said, forgetting her own rule.

"Don't think I couldn't!" Nigellus retorted. "You young troublemaker, you've come to a bad end once already and however you've returned, you will again! It's all your drunkard father's blood—"

"I'll set his bloody portrait on fire," Sirius said, starting forward and drawing his wand. McGonagall stopped him with an arm around his chest.

"I should like to see you try, worthless Gryffindor! Cull!" Phineas taunted.

"Phineas, do shut up," Dumbledore admonished. Several of the other portraits cried "Hear Hear!" and a few murmured about bad form. Sirius visibly gathered himself.

"Sorry," he said to McGonagall.

"Remember you have an example to set now, Nigel," she scolded. "And you," she added, turning to Phineas, "If you don't keep your mouth shut I shall have you rolled up and put in storage."

Nigellus scowled, but fell silent nonetheless. McGonagall took a deep breath.

"I think perhaps we should go down to the Feast," she said. "No doubt the train—ah yes," she added, as the Hogwarts Express blew its whistle at the station down below, near Hogsmeade. She took down the Sorting Hat from its stand behind her desk and turned to face him. "Time to meet the new class. Shoulders straight please, Mr. Padfoot, and head back."

"Headmistress," Sirius said, as they left her office and began the walk down the many flights of stairs to the Great Hall. "May I ask you something?"

"I should hope so, Mr. Padfoot."

"Hiring Remus—"

"Professor Lupin."

"Hiring Professor Lupin...I mean...I've heard him and Harry talking. I know what went on. Even if most of the parents won't care, it can't have been an easy sell, can it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, he's still not in the running for most popular man in Wizarding Britain," Sirius said.

"Ah. Yes, but he does have a reputation, as a werewolf," she replied.

"He does?"

"All werewolves do. Strong, powerful, dangerous, volatile—"

"He isn't!"

"He is, by his very nature, abnormally strong and...one might call him durable," McGonagall replied. "The rest is taken as given by those who do not care to know him."

"But that's hardly in his favour, here."

"On the contrary; many parents have expressed their concern over the safety of their children from outside attackers. Hiring a known werewolf has settled many worried minds. So long as he isn't left alone with the students..."

"And yet that pervert Slughorn—"

"You will address your comments on professors in a respectful and courteous manner, Nigel, or not at all," McGonagall replied, sharply. "Professor Slughorn's behaviour amongst the students may not be all one could wish, but no accusation of misconduct has ever been brought against him."

"He has beady eyes," Sirius insisted. "And you know the way he stares at the girls' arses."

"So long as staring is all he does, we cannot afford to lose another teacher this term," McGonagall sighed. They reached the Great Hall at that point and heard the clattering of feet in the corridor. The first-years were arriving.

"This way," she said, leading him away from the firsties and through a side door into the hall before abandoning him. The rest of the students were already there, chattering away as if a war wasn't occurring outside their gates. Big Hagrid, the Groundskeeper who used to chase them out of his pumpkin patch, sat at the table; Remus had told him Hagrid taught Care of Magical Creatures now. Vector and Slughorn—both of whom had been Sirius' teachers twenty years ago—were also seated, Slughorn leaning forward slightly to talk across the table at the Weasley girl, who looked like she'd rather be elsewhere. The small, rather boring-looking man who would be replacing McGonagall as Transfiguration professor sat next to Hagrid on his far side.

Between Hagrid and Slughorn sat a dreamy-looking woman with a deck of tarot cards in one hand. Sirius gave her a wide berth as he passed; Remus had warned him about Professor Trelawney.

McGonagall's chair was flanked by Vector on one side and Professor Sprout, who'd been a very young, very new professor in Sirius' fourth year, on the other. Past her, an unknown witch who must be the Astronomy professor sat idly watching the students.

Then, on the end, three empty seats, one of them being scaled slowly by tiny Professor Flitwick.

Sirius realised that the seat on the very end was his own; he was to sit at the head table now. The other was for Moony, who was –

Down amongst the students, surrounded by a crowd of mixed Houses, mostly Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.

*Oh, Moony. The first rule of being a professor is that you never fraternise at dinner!* Even Sirius knew that. But of course Moony never did anything quite by the rules; he merely managed to make it look as if he were while subtly disobeying anything he didn't agree with.

The students who surrounded him were all from the upper years, and as Sirius dropped into his seat he grinned at their obvious idolatry of his Moony. Remus was smiling and talking and shaking hands, looking possibly the happiest Sirius had seen him since – since he came out of the map, really. Other students, still streaming into the Great Hall, skirted the area as if lycanthropy was catching, but Remus clearly couldn't even see that, over the assortment of students grouped about him.

"Have you met our Professor Lupin?" someone asked, and Sirius looked up into the slightly unfocused gaze of Professor Trelawney. He cursed to himself.

"Yes; we've known each other for some time," Sirius said. It was true, after all.

"Such a dear man, and so brave in the face of his mortality," Trelawney said airily. "When he came here four years ago I could see at once, of course, that he was a werewolf, but I held my tongue; discretion is a necessary part of the gift of the third eye."

"Where?" Sirius asked. She looked down at him.

"Where?" she repeated.

"Where's your third eye?" he said, unable to resist. "Is it under your hair?"

She looked at him, shocked and (hopefully) insulted. "Young man, have you never been educated in the divinatory arts?"

"Where I come from, they're considered a load of tosh," he said amiably. "I'm willing to keep an open mind, though," he added.

"I should hope so, for I can see..." she drifted off dreamily. "I can see that your life...indeed, your very future...depends upon it. Would you care to draw a card?" she asked, offering him the tarot deck.

"No, thank you," he said. "I think they're going to start the Sorting soon."

"Are you certain, young tutor?" she asked. "I really believe you ought to draw a card."

"You'll be sorry," he warned her, taking a card. He turned it up. "Magician."

"A master of all things," she said gravely. "Beware of arrogance, Mr..."

"Padfoot. Nigel Padfoot," he said, returning the card to the deck. "Hadn't you better sit down? There's the firsties now."

Trelawney floated away, looking vaguely offended. Slughorn slunk around McGonagall's chair and ended up in Remus' seat, even as Remus called for order and consulted the list McGonagall had given him.

"You must be Nigel," Slughorn said, quietly. "If you know what's good for your sanity you'll keep away from Trelawney. Nice woman, not a thought in her head."

"Abbot, Miriam! Hallo, are you Hannah's sister?" Remus paused to ask. The girl blushed pink and nodded. Remus set the hat on her head.

"Thank you for the advice," Sirius replied. "You must be Horace Slughorn; I've heard a lot about you."

*Gryffindor!*

Slughorn beamed. "Just a humble Potions Master, I'm sure," he said.

"Bagnold, Harold!"

"And Head of Slytherin House, I think?" Sirius asked.

"Yes—a finer group of students than this year's I've never seen, I'm sure," Slughorn said. "I wondered if I might ask—"

*Slytherin!*

"—if you were free tomorrow evening," Slughorn continued. "I'm having a small party in my office—just faculty and a few seventh-years."

"Bletchley, Aaron! Any relation to Miles?"

"Cousin, sir."

"Up you go then."

Sirius groped for a reason to tell Slughorn no. Oh god, not another round of Join The Slug Club. He'd had enough of that the first time as a third-year, and it had taken him threatening to form a club of his own to get Slughorn to back off.

"I'm afraid I'm busy," he said finally.

*Slytherin!*

"Well, not unexpected, off that way...Dawlish, Tricia!"

"Do you know, you quite remind me of someone," Slughorn said ruminatively. "I don't suppose you're any relation to the famed Black clan?"

*Hufflepuff!*

"Goshawk, Miranda—named for your gran?" Remus asked a young girl, who grinned and nodded.

*Hufflepuff!*

"I don't think so," Sirius said calmly. "Then again it's a wise man as knows his own father, don't you think so, Professor?"

Slughorn looked taken aback by this. "I suppose so!" he said jovially, after a minute. "Still, it's no insult to be compared to the Blacks—a handsomer young man than Regulus Black I'm sure I never knew, and you favour him remarkably."

Sirius suppressed the urge to punch the professor in his fat face.

"Mr. Padfoot, your assistance please," Remus said, saving Sirius from a summons on charges of assault. A young boy had burst into tears in the line. Remus jerked his head at the kid and Sirius nodded, descending to the level of the House tables and making his way along the line as Remus continued with the sorting.

"What's all this then?" he asked, gently shoving a couple of older Hufflepuffs out of the way. Before him stood a very small boy, his robes on slightly askew and badly done up, still wearing Muggle trainers. "Come now, you can't make a scene in the Great Hall, you know, it isn't done."

"I'm sorry," the boy stammered, sniffing and trying to wipe his tears away. "But I've forgot my shoes and someone's taken my wand and I'm afraid..."

He burst into a fresh stream of tears, and Sirius sighed. This had not been in the job description.

"What's your name?" he asked, crouching.

"Alexander," the boy said thickly.

"Your last name?"

"Worthington."

"Well, that's something, there's plenty of time before you go up. How'd you lose your wand?"

"I don't know..."

Sirius took out his own wand and bent to tap it against the trainers, hastily casting a quick glamour over them. To the casual observer, they looked like quite a nice pair of brown wing-tips. The boy stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Let me guess—Muggle-born," Sirius said. The boy nodded. Sirius indicated the front of the room. "See the man calling names?"

"They say he's a werewolf!" Alexander said urgently.

"Well, yes. But he's also half-Muggle himself. And see that big seventh-year girl over there?" he gestured to where Hermione was sitting. "She's a Muggle-born too, and she's Head Girl."

Alexander, tears all but forgotten in the sudden barrage of information, looked shyly at Sirius. "Can you help me find my wand?" he whispered.

"Of course. What's it made of?"

"Ash and dragon heartstring, ten inches," Alexander recited promptly.

"I'll be sure and have a house-elf find it. You just worry about getting Sorted, all right? It doesn't hurt at all, I promise," Sirius said. He turned to walk back up to the front when he heard a slight scuffle and one of the other boys say "Nancy boy! Sissy!"

He turned quick enough to see that it had been two others shoving Alexander and taunting; before he even thought of it, he'd fetched his hands up against their ears and knocked their heads together. They both cried out in surprise.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Padfoot?" McGonagall called.

"Not anymore, Headmistress," Sirius answered. Most of the Hall began to giggle. He crouched in front of the pair.

"I catch you *looking* wrong at anyone, it's a week's detention for the both of you," he said quietly. "And you think about the sound your heads made knocking together, the next time you get the urge to call someone a nancy-boy."

He felt rather like a hero, walking back to the high table. Remus gave him a sardonic look as he passed, but returned quickly to his roll call. Sirius managed to catch a house-elf watching in the doorway and asked him to have someone

look around for a ten-inch ash wand and return it to Alexander Worthington, who was a first-year –

*Gryffindor!* the hat called, and Alexander bolted for the Gryffindor table. He was the last but one to be called.

“Young, Andrea, last and most patient,” Remus said. The girl hopped eagerly onto the stool and was a *Ravenclaw!* almost before the Hat touched her head.

The Sorting having been settled, McGonagall stepped to the front of the platform where the high table stood, holding up her hands for silence. Slughorn having slithered back to his own seat, Remus took the chair next to Sirius.

“I am aware,” McGonagall said, voice carrying throughout the hall, “That it has been a long day, and that many of you are very hungry. I will attempt to keep my remarks brief. As you know, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore has left me with the difficult position of filling his considerable place at the school, but I can assure you that classes and exams will proceed on time and on schedule. Those of you who know me know that I do not brook chaos in my classes, and I do not intend to brook it as Headmistress, either.”

Sirius glanced at Hermione and winked. Ron looked annoyed.

“I would like to introduce you to the new members of our faculty – some of you may recall Professor Lupin, who is returning to take up his post as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. In addition, Professor Lupin will be replacing me as Head of Gryffindor House.”

There was uproarious applause from the Gryffindors as Remus stood and acknowledged the introduction.

“I would also like to introduce Professor Dextra, who will be replacing me as Transfigurations instructor,” she continued, as the boring-looking man bowed to a less enthusiastic round of applause.

“Our other new member comes to fill a position which for too long has been left vacant,” McGonagall continued. “The position of Tutor of the School is one of great responsibility; the Tutor makes himself available to assist you in your studies and compositions, and I advise you to make good use of him. This year we welcome Nigel Padfoot to the post.”

Sirius stood and imitated Remus, nodding his head slightly and trying to look self-deprecating.

“And now, as was Headmaster Dumbledore’s habit, I shall desist and allow you to enjoy your dinners in peace,” McGonagall concluded.

"What was Slughorn oiling up to you about?" Remus asked as the food appeared in front of their plates. Sirius suddenly realised he was ravenous.

"Oh, the usual. Wants to ask me to *a little get-together* tomorrow night," he answered, dumping nearly half a bowl of mashed potatoes on his plate.

"Hasn't asked me. No need to wonder why," Remus said with a smile. "No family, no prospects, and a werewolf to boot."

"I should bring you along just to see his face," Sirius said.

"You couldn't pay me."

"Asked if I was related to the Blacks, too."

Remus glanced at him. "What did you answer?"

"Told him I didn't think so, and intimated I was of *low birth*," Sirius drawled.

"And what happened to the boy who started crying in the line? What was his name, Worthington?"

"Yeah. Poor kid lost his wand and had the wrong shoes on. Terrorstruck."

"Horrors," Remus laughed. "Do you remember —"

"A scrawny, funny-haired kid I made fun of for having a weird name?" Sirius asked. "Yeah, he sticks in the mind for some reason."

"And James telling you off for picking on me — not because you shouldn't pick on people, but because it was a waste of time to pick on the weak," Remus said, transferring several steaming slices of roast chicken onto his plate. "Much more challenging to make fun of the cool kids."

"I never looked at Hogwarts from this side of the table before," Sirius reflected.

"Get used to it," Remus advised. "From now on, you're one of us."

"I don't like being a grown-up. The pay is good but the hours are awful," Sirius complained.

"Sorry, Mr. Padfoot. We all go that way sooner or later," Remus said. From down below, Alexander Worthington stared up at Sirius with a look of pure and unadulterated devotion.

Sirius had the sudden feeling that he was probably in way over his head.

On the other hand, most of the best things in life had happened to him while he was in over his head or running for his life, so that was just as well.

\* \* \*

Remus returned to Fourteen Back around one in the morning, sleepy from the late hours and slightly drunk from the redcurrant wine served in the faculty common room. He'd seen Sirius safely to his new quarters and made sure nothing was amiss, then gratefully stumbled into the floo and allowed it to carry him home.

"Harry?" he called softly, in case the boy had already gone to bed. "Are you up?"

No answer; there were candles burning still in the kitchen, and Remus walked carefully so as not to make the floorboards creak.

"Anyone here?" he asked, putting his head in the door.

Harry was sitting at the table, or rather slumped over it, one cheek resting on an open book, shoulders moving in the slow rhythm of sleeping breath. His right hand lay atop a sheet of parchment, the quill having fallen from tired fingers to the floor. The handwriting on the page became progressively less legible the further down it went.

Remus leaned over his shoulder and read a few words; it didn't look like anything that couldn't, at this point, wait until tomorrow. Harry, on the other hand...

He put his hand out and ruffled Harry's hair gently. He was a good lad, and didn't deserve any of this.

"Harry," he said softly, rocking Harry's shoulder. "You'll cramp if you sleep that way all night."

"Mmh?" Harry asked, sitting up slowly. "Wossit, om. You make bre'fas', I'm knackered."

"Not breakfast. Bedtime. Up you go," Remus said, lifting Harry out of the chair by his arm encouragingly. Harry yawned and wandered back into the living room, climbing the stairs slowly.

"Sortin' go okay?" he asked.

"More or less."

"Sirius?"

"Safely asleep, which is more than I can say for you."

"M' going," Harry answered, even as his head and shoulders disappeared, blocked from his view by the upper floor. "G'night."

"Goodnight, Harry," Remus said, drifting back into his own room. In short order he was in his pyjamas and under the blankets; if he heard Harry

pacing upstairs into the wee hours, it was only as an echo of footsteps in his dreams.

## CHAPTER XIV

The morning after school began, Bowman Jenkins came across the garden to bring Harry some fresh rosemary and leeks from his food-garden, which could not be called a vegetable patch by virtue of being neither small enough to be called a "patch" nor confined to vegetables. He found Harry sitting up one of the walnut trees which flanked the little cottage, eating an apple and reading a book.

"Good morning, young Harry!" he called up. "Brung ye some greens!"

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins!" Harry called down. "I'll be down in a second—"

"No need, I'll set 'em here," Bowman said, plonking the small basket down next to the tree. He and Mrs. Jenkins had not been let in on the Fidelius; they had accepted Harry's explanation of "it's for your own protection" with placid cheerfulness. It wasn't, of course; it was simply too easy for someone to cast an *imperio* on the pair.

"What's that yer reading, then?" Bowman asked, as he began to gather up the walnuts which Harry's morning climb had shaken out, into a bright red pail.

"It's all about cups," Harry said, holding it up. The cover was blazoned with *Chalices of the Isles* and a gaudy photograph of a twinkling, ruby-crueted cup. "Famous ones, mostly."

"Well, they'd hardly write a book about t'ordinary ones," Bowman agreed. "Mr. Lupin off to work all right?"

"Yes, thanks; he says your wife's apple butter is what gets him out of bed in the morning," Harry grinned.

"Aye, tis a prize-winner," Bowman said. "Ye wait until Christmas, she does up a cranberry sauce ye won't believe. She says it's good to see ye resting a bit, like. She heard from Miss Tonks that ye aren't much one to lay about."

"Not much, no," Harry said. "And I don't really like it now, but it doesn't seem to be avoidable. I'm...looking for something, and until I find it..."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

Harry swung his leg over the branch he was sitting on and dropped to the ground, lightly. Bowman smiled at him.

"If you were going to hide something," Harry said, leaning back against the tree's trunk, "Something really important, something your life depended on, where would you hide it?"

"Not in a bank?"

"No – if you didn't trust anyone, or locks and vaults."

Bowman looked thoughtful. "Maybe in a jar of jam in t'cellar – lots of jam jars down there..."

"If you wanted to keep it far away from you though, in a place nobody could find. Or would want to find."

"Somewhere nobody goes, then," Bowman mused. "Like deep inna forest?" he shuddered. "I do hate a forest. Not enough light for t'little plants as want to grow."

He glanced at his rosebushes as he said it, and Harry nodded. Bowman was one of nature's gardeners.

"All dark and creepy," Bowman continued. "No thank ye. Couldn't get me within a mile of t'forest. Or a sheep farm."

"A sheep farm?"

"Aye. I don't like sheep; crazy bastards and smell something awful," Bowman pronounced.

Harry grinned. Funny how people had little fears; Ron and his spiders, Bowman and sheep farms. Harry certainly wasn't terribly fond of closets or, if it came to that, evil monomaniacs.

"Or a cave. Can't abide caves," Bowman said. "Dark, drippy places."

"Yes, that's where –" Harry said, then stopped himself.

"Now, burying in t'garden's no good for hidin' things, as the ground will tell," Bowman continued, oblivious to Harry's sudden amazement. "The number of times I've dropped a sickle only to turn it up two years later while furrowing a carrot-bed would make ye laugh. And for magical things it's right out of t'question, magical things always want to breathe, they'll work themselves up to t'surface – are ye all right then, young Harry?" he asked.

"Yes – thank you, Mr. Jenkins," Harry said. "I...I appreciate your help."

"Any time ye like," Bowman answered. "Got to go check on t'pumpkins – have a bumper crop this year if t'flies don't kill them all."

He hefted the pail half-full of walnuts and ambled off across the garden.

*We hide things where we think people won't go, and we think people won't go where we're afraid to go ourselves.*

Harry battled the urge to bolt off for the floo; instead he very carefully picked up the basket of rosemary and leeks, carrying it inside along with his book. He worried the thought like a loose tooth as he set the book on the kitchen table and ran water through the basket, washing its contents.

*Tom Riddle doesn't like people, he doesn't trust anyone, he reveres history, he worships his ancestors –*

*And he's afraid of death.*

Graveyards. Would he bury the cup with his father – no, that'd be the first place an enemy would look, and Bowman had said magic things liked to seek out the open air.

A mausoleum? Too easily robbed. Harry had seen mausoleums with locks on the doors to keep vandals and homeless people out.

Wild ideas circles in his head. Madam Tussaud's, in London. There were death masks there and a chamber of horrors; Helga Hufflepuff's cup would be just one more prop for the wax figures. Churches had stones engraved with the names of their dead patrons, under one of those would work well – but no, Tom Riddle would never honour a dead Muggle in that fashion. Likewise his orphanage, that was absolutely out of the question, and Harry was suddenly certain he was on the right track with this idea.

Were there...museums of death? Places famous wizards had died? Where had Grindelwald met his end? For that matter, where had Helga Hufflepuff? Or Salazar Slytherin?

*Why hadn't he paid attention in History of Magic?*

He could look it up, but he knew who would know already and even better, she'd have ideas too, probably smarter ones.

Now he did move quickly, running to the floo in the living room and tossing a handful of powder on the fire before crouching and sticking his head in.

"The Burrow!" he cried. The world tip-tilted for a minute, but when it ended he could see the tidy, shabby kitchen of The Burrow with Molly Weasley standing over a large cake of some sort.

"Harry! What a lovely surprise," she said, leaning over the fire. "How are you, dear?"

"Fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said hurriedly. "Is Hermione around? I really need to talk to her."

"Hermione? Of course not, dear."

"Well, will she be back soon? Where is she? Can I come through to find her?"

"Of course you can't, don't be silly," Molly said, surprising him.

"Why not? It's really important. Or you could send Ginny –"

"Harry, dear, what are you forgetting?" Molly asked, patiently.

"Forgetting? What—oh." Harry slapped his forehead. "Of course. She's at school, with the others."

He must have looked as dismayed as he felt; Molly gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm sure if it's urgent you could floo the school—"

"No, no. It's not urgent, really, I was just...excited about something and I wanted to tell her about it," Harry said, disappointed.

"Well, you could tell me, dear," Molly offered.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Weasley...it's not really that exciting, when I come to think of it. Hermione would like it, that's all."

"All right. Stand back a bit, Harry, I'm sending something through."

Harry leaned away from the fireplace and waited; after a second, a pan of fudge clattered onto the hearth. Harry picked it up, feeling rather gratified.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," he said, leaning forward again. "Sorry to interrupt your cooking."

"It's my pleasure, dear. Is Remus looking after you?"

"Yes," Harry said, because it was easier than fighting about whether or not he needed looking after.

"Good. Floo us anytime," Molly continued. Harry sat back on his heels as the floo connection was closed.

At school. Of course.

Everyone was; Ron and Hermione, Remus, Sirius—Seamus, Dean, the Creeveys, probably even Crabbe and Goyle. And Harry was not.

The magnitude of the step he'd taken had only begun to sink in, really.

He ate a bite of fudge, thoughtfully. Well, that was that, then; Molly's practical, sensible approach had effectively sobered him up. He'd just have to ask Remus to pass the message on to Hermione tomorrow. Remus would be excited about it, he was sure. What would Hermione have done, anyway? She might have even said it was a stupid idea. It probably was, in reality.

Harry carried the fudge back into the kitchen and sat down. But if she *didn't* say it was stupid...

She'd make a *list*.

Harry promptly pulled a sheet of parchment towards him and picked up his quill—well, really, Remus' quill. Remus tended to leave his books and writing supplies on the table, stacked and messily spread out everywhere. The comfortable communism of dormitory life had taught Harry and Sirius that his

writing supplies were, therefore, public property; Remus occasionally got his revenge on the pair of looters by eating their ice cream.

He dipped the quill in the inkwell and drew a long, straight line down the sheet, dividing it in half. At the top of one half he wrote WHERE and on top of the other half he wrote WHY. And then, nibbling the quill, he added (NOT?) under WHY.

He sat back. This looked very official and Hermionesque, even though his handwriting was somewhat blotchier.

Under WHERE, he began to make a list. *Graveyard, Mausoleum, Wax Museum, Church...*

\* \* \*

Sirius had been given a schedule at breakfast, as if he were indeed a student; McGonagall instructed him to sit in on the classes, assist the Professors as necessary, take notes so that he would know what to teach the other students, and in general not act like a hooligan. Taking notes was a novel experience for Sirius, who normally simply drank in the lecture and cribbed (from Moony or Peter) anything he missed while lobbing bugs into the inkwells of the girls across the aisle.

He was, apparently, going for maximum coverage this time round; he had class with everyone from first-year Slytherins through seventh-year Gryffindors. Remus, having arrived early, was devouring an enormous breakfast next to him. The older man tapped the schedule with his fork.

"Watch out. Those Hufflepuff firsts are little monsters," he said. "Loyal and true they might be but well-mannered they are *not*. You get just one of them acting up and the rest'll protect him to the death."

"Thanks. Look, after lunch I have you and the sixth-year Ravenclaws."

"They were second-years when I taught. Good students. I hope they still are," Remus said. "Listen, Padfoot, we ought to talk about my class. About my teaching in general."

"What about it?"

"Well..." Remus looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Remember our fourth year, when you punched Angelo Smith for stealing my books?"

"Yeah, I think so. Nobody ever stole your books again, did they?"

"No, and I was grateful enough for that, but...well, things are different now. Everyone knows what I am."

"You're not a *what*, you're a *who*," Sirius scowled.

"Let's not argue semantics. Everyone knows, and not everyone is happy about it. There are going to be things said and no doubt pranks pulled. I want you to let me deal with them in my own fashion, all right? You can't go around punching children, you're supposed to be respectable now."

"I'm not going to hear words against you and not do anything," Sirius protested.

"Fine. Take House points—you're allowed to do that. But nothing more, all right? I know you. I know you have a temper, Padfoot. All I'm asking is that you try to keep it in check."

"Fine, fine. But when Slytherin end up in the negative points range by the end of the day, don't say I didn't warn you."

"So long as no-one ends up in the hospital wing." Remus lifted his head as a mass exodus slowly began. "We'd better finish—I'll see you after lunch."

Sirius nodded and crammed the last slice of toast into his mouth as he stood, shouldering his bag and following Remus out into the corridor. He had to face Slughorn and the Hufflepuff first-years now, and he squared his shoulders for the fray.

It was true that the Hufflepuff firsts were bad; the class-clown was protected by his comrades, but Sirius would give Slughorn this—the man picked out the troublemaker and deftly made friends, preventing too much carnage from going on. The class was easy, but Sirius learned one or two things he'd forgotten about over the summer, simple stuff which he would have known how to look up but wouldn't have known off from memory. Slughorn tried to smarm up to him after class; Sirius pleaded Divination with the Slytherins and bolted.

He had yet to meet Firenze, the centaur who taught half the Divs classes; this time around he had Trelawney, who had been hired after he—well, the other Sirius—would have graduated. He joined a crowd of noisy third-year Slytherins at the bottom of the ladder that led into the classroom and cuffed the heads of a few boys who were lingering and trying to look up the robes of the girls climbing upwards.

"Ah...yes. Welcome, welcome," Trelawney greeted them, dreamily. To her credit, she didn't smell like cooking sherry. Yet. "Mr. Padfoot, what a pleasure it is to see you again."

"Professor," Sirius said, unaccountably unnerved by this foggy little room full of footstools. "How's that third eye?"

"You jest now, but soon you will understand...yes..." she replied. "I am glad you have come to sit at the foot of knowledge, Mr. Padfoot."

"Which?" Sirius asked. She just made it *so easy*...

"I beg your pardon?"

"Which one's the foot of knowledge?"

She summoned all her severity for a single look. Minerva McGonagall had more in her little finger.

"You will not mock the divinatory arts when you have seen them for yourself," she said, sweeping away to attend to the Slytherins, who were poking about in her tea things. Sirius rolled his eyes and settled himself at a table in the back where he could watch the little buggers and hex anyone who got out of line.

Unlike Potions, where Slughorn had ignored Sirius in favour of actually teaching the class, Trelawney kept calling him up to the front to participate in her little fortune-telling games. He drew three tarot cards (two, three, four of staves, after which she gave up) and drank a cup of somewhat rank tea. When his tea leaves drained out of the cup completely as he poured out the last of the liquid, she demanded that he try bibliomancy. She gave a brief lecture on the usage of various books, which sounded reasonably accurate, while Sirius selected one of many identical, blank-covered books and opened it.

*"And have you gone mad yet?" inquired the boy in his way, without first saying hello.*

*"No I have not," Polaris replied over the hiss and crackle of the eggs in the pan. The boy knocked the deepwoods snow from his boots and held out his gloved hands; Polaris scooped a potato from the boiling pan with a spoon and laid it in the open cup of the boy's fingers.*

*"That is known as entropy," I said to the boy, "the gradual cooling of the universe. Out of cold nothing we became and into cold nothing we go."*

*"Shan't we continue to do it, then?" the boy asked, and Polaris' laughter filled the room.*

*"Why have you come here today, boy?" he inquired.*

*"I've brought you a present," the boy answered, gnawing carefully on the hot potato.*

Sirius stared down at the page, startled. He turned to the frontispiece; there it was. *Animagus Winter, by Ellis Graveworthy.*

"Nigel," Trelanwey said, and Sirius realised she was talking to him. "Close the book and reopen it."

Sirius slammed the book shut perhaps harder than he meant to, and opened it once more.

"The first sentence at the top of the page."

Sirius looked down.

*Polaris refused to stay; he pled the coming storm, but I knew he had not wanted to hear these words: "There can be no transformation without love, Pol; even Ovid knew that."*

"Clearly you must make Divination your passion if you are to succeed in anything," Trelanwey said. Sirius gave her a skeptical look that made the third-years snicker to themselves.

After lunch he had three more classes—Defence Against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy, and History of Magic. It was bizarre to see Moony standing in front of a classroom, teaching with a sort of gentle humour that he was just beginning to develop as a sixteen-year-old. Sirius saw only echoes of *his* Moony in the grey-haired man at the chalkboard, but he saw enough for it to be a truly surreal experience. One of the Ravenclaws made a smart remark about Dark Creatures which set Sirius' teeth on edge and would have sent Remus into a withdrawn misery as a boy; now Remus simply shot back a quick, witty retort that left the girl blushing furiously and the rest of the class giggling at her.

He was...well, a *good teacher*. He made things interesting and didn't condescend. Students lingered after class to talk to him. No wonder McGonagall had called him back in spite of everything.

By the end of the day, between keeping order, taking notes, having his non-fortune told thrice over, and remembering to answer to the name of Nigel, Sirius was ready to fall asleep over his dinner. Remus had gone home to Fourteen Back for his own; he told Sirius he didn't want Harry to be eating alone, which was fine and good except that then *Sirius* was eating alone, or worse—

"Padfoot old fellow! You can't eat down here all alone," Slughorn said, appearing at his elbow just as he was helping himself to some dinner rolls.

"Alone?" Sirius asked, eyeing the high table. Most of the professors, save Remus and Trelanwey, were present. "No, it's quite crowded in here, really."

"I meant down at this end of the table—abandoned by Lupin and all," Slughorn continued. "Come on, we're having dinner in my office. I've asked the house-elves to cater it particularly."

"I really do have to plead duty," Sirius said calmly. "Who knows what might happen if I show up late from your dinner this evening? Perhaps some other time."

And, to cement his refusal, he took an enormous bite of buttered dinner roll. Slughorn, looking confused, retreated. Sirius licked butter from his lips and felt a little more satisfied with the world. Down below, he could see empty places where Granger and Weasley were missing; probably the "few Seventh-Years" Slughorn had mentioned the day before.

He played a matching game, picking out students he'd met that day and seeing how many he could put names to. He did pretty well, too, but then he had a good head for names and faces. Little Worthington looked like he'd found some comrades in Gryffindor. All to the good. No picking on the littlest ones; the kids who really needed picking on were the confident, cool ones.

When the coffee appeared after dinner, he drank the whole cup hurriedly; his day was far from over, after all. From now until nine, he was supposed to be in his office next to the library, available in case he was needed by any of the students. He rather hoped nobody would need him, this being the first day of classes.

The office was a nice one, if a bit dusty; furnished with a bookshelf, desk, three chairs and a couple of lamps, it seemed bare, but he could easily fill it. He had his stipend, and some money from Harry's vaults. There were doubtlessly bookshops in Hogsmeade.

Someone, probably a house-elf, had left a kettle, pot, and a couple of elderly teacups on a strange cabinet next to the bookshelf. Sirius opened it to discover a tin of tea, a jar of sugar, a box of chocolate biscuits, and a small basket of fruit. He moved the fruit to the table and set his bag down next to it, unpacking the school books he'd been told to buy and putting them on the bare bookshelf. They looked lonely.

He heard giggling out in the hallway, followed by echoes of "You ask!" "No, *you* ask!" "Dare you to ask!" and then louder giggles and gasps as footsteps approached.

A small face appeared, about four feet off the ground, around the edge of his open doorway.

"Worthington," Sirius said with a grin. "Don't stand there in the doorway, someone'll mistake you for a knob and grab you."

The boy grinned shyly and came just inside, looking around him in awe.

"The house-elves found my wand," he blurted, and Sirius could see him clutching it tightly in one hand. "Thank you, Mr. Padfoot."

"I didn't really do anything," Sirius shrugged. "Have a seat, I thought I'd put some tea on."

"Yes, sir," the boy said politely, seating himself in front of Sirius' desk. "Are you new here too?"

Sirius laughed as he filled the kettle with water and tapped it to heat it. "I guess that's one way of putting it. This is my first year here as a tutor, anyway. Did you need help with something?"

"Well, it's my shoes, sir," he said, taking what looked like a pair of brown wing-tips out of his bag. "I was wondering if you'd change them back?"

"Oh! Right you are, on the desk they go, and—*finite incantatem!*" Sirius said. The brown melted away to reveal a nice, sturdy pair of well-worn trainers. "That's a useful little charm. Help yourself to the fruit."

Alexander took a pear, nibbling it, eyes wide and round as saucers.

"How was your first day? Learn anything interesting?"

"*Everything's* interesting," Alexander replied.

"Well, yes, that's true. What was that commotion in the hall, by the way?"

The boy sniffed. "Some of the big girls were fighting about something. I think they wanted to come ask you a question."

"Ask me a question, huh," Sirius asked, snickering. Alexander grinned at him. "Did you have a question for me?"

"Well..." Alexander looked uncertain. "I'm taking Transfiguration and I don't really understand it. Do you know stuff about Transfiguration?"

Sirius laughed and poured the tea. "Do I ever..."

\* \* \*

Harry was waiting impatiently for Remus to return that evening, and the older man was barely through the floo before Harry bounded up to him anxiously.

"Hi, Harry—is something wrong?" Remus asked, setting his briefcase down next to the hearth.

"No! I have a list," Harry blurted. Remus paused.

"A list?" he asked. "A...grocery list? Or...a list of...victims?"

Harry grinned. "Come see."

Remus, still wary, followed Harry into the kitchen (where, he tried not to notice, there was absolutely no evidence of any form of dinner being cooked).

"I have this idea," Harry said, "that Voldemort may be hiding his horcruxes somewhere he himself doesn't like to go—he hid one of them in the Gaunt house, and the locket was in a cave full of inferi. He's afraid of graveyards and places like that, that's why he uses them, because he assumes everyone else is, too."

Remus accepted the list Harry gave him. It began rather scratchily but, as it went further, the handwriting evened out and quotes from books started to appear. He glanced at the kitchen table, which appeared to contain as many of Harry's books as it did his own.

"This is..." he paused, groping for the proper word to express his pride and pleasure at Harry's efforts. He glanced at Harry, who looked already crestfallen. "Really quite outstanding work, Harry! How on earth did you think of it?"

Harry's sudden, radiant smile was good to see. Remus settled in at the kitchen table, dinner forgotten, while Harry began opening books and explaining his theory in more detail. The list was a long one, but it significantly narrowed their search from Everything (Everywhere) to Certain Places (Probably in Britain). Harry had even documented starting points—the locations where the four Founders were said to be interred and the site where Grindelwald was killed.

"Nobody says where he was buried," Harry said, when Remus reached that point.

"I don't..." Remus hesitated. "I don't think there was enough left of him to be buried, Harry. Albus was nothing if not thorough, you know."

"How did he do it?" Harry asked. "Nowhere seems to be able to say. None of the books, I mean."

"He never said. At the time—and recall, this was well before you or I were born or even thought of by our infant parents—people asked him, but he refused to tell. It was rather a big deal, at the time, that he wouldn't reveal what he'd done. But..." Remus spread his hands. "...that was fifty years ago, and people forget—it never occurs to all but the most scholarly to ask. It's enough to know that he did it, I suppose."

"Did he ever tell you?"

"No!" Remus laughed. "Why on earth would he tell me?"

"You seem to know this kind of thing, that's all."

"I was fond of history at school. And still am, really. I wonder..."

Harry looked at him inquiringly.

"I wonder if he could have stopped Tom Riddle—if he would have, if he hadn't been busy with Grindelwald. And I wonder if he himself thought about that, either. Sometimes I think that's why he stayed at Hogwarts."

"I don't understand."

"Well, as penance for failing with Voldemort. Or in order to ensure it never happened again. He was offered high posts in the Ministry, not to mention the Minister of Magic position. He was offered professorships at the most prestigious magical schools in the world. Instead, he stayed at Hogwarts—which has its own prestige, but it doesn't hold a candle to Chair of Wizardry at the Moscow Institute, just for example. But it's as well he stayed, I think. He seemed happy there."

Harry rested his chin in his hands, looking down at the list. "Will I live as long as Dumbledore did?"

"Well, if you're lucky and keep out of the way of lorries, I should think so," Remus said. "Most wizards do."

"My parents and grandparents too?"

"Your father's parents, certainly. They were older when they had James—they died about a year before he did, which I think is one reason he wanted to start a family sooner rather than later. Dumbledore, now, probably...well. There's no point in speculation. But yes, you have another hundred and fifty years ahead of you, Harry, give or take."

"And you?" Harry asked, as Remus brushed a lock of grey hair out of his eyes.

"Werewolves don't die natural deaths," Remus answered. "I looked it up once. Supposedly I ought to live to a ripe old age—but that's if I don't kill anyone, or get shot by some overzealous bigot, or fatally harm myself. Or kill myself—that's a popular one." He looked amused at Harry's reaction. "Don't worry, I'm not planning on it. It's interesting, you know, that you haven't asked these questions until now."

"I never thought of them until now."

"And this is better work than you ever did for any of my Dark Arts essays, I notice," Remus said with a gently teasing grin. "Keep at it—we'll call an Order meeting this weekend and start sending out search parties. We might be able to use the locket, too—if the pieces of the soul are drawn to each other, it may help."

There was a crash from the living room, and the pair of them exchanged knowing looks.

"Hi, Tonks," Harry called.

"Wotcha! Don't worry about me, just knocked over the poker," she called from the living room. She emerged into the kitchen a minute later, dusting her robes off. "Did I miss dinner?" she asked, looking disappointed.

"Oh—dinner," Harry said. "I forgot about it—Bowman brought over some...smelly cooking things and everything. There's some fudge Molly sent..."

"Curry," Tonks said succinctly. "Or some roast chicken from the pub. Come on, you two bookworms, let's go."

"Bossy, isn't she?" Remus asked Harry, who grinned. "Bring your list, Harry, and we'll see what the Auror thinks of it."

Harry, still smiling, rolled the list up and tucked it in his back pocket, following Tonks and Remus out into the alley. He felt one step closer to triumph, and combined with the pleasant glow of the setting sun and the way Remus had spoken to him—not like a child but like a colleague—Harry could ask for little more.

Except, some part of him pointed out, a gawky, half-grown black newfoundland dog romping ahead of them on the way to the pub.

## CHAPTER XV

The week passed as quickly for Harry as it did for Sirius, which was unexpected; suddenly given purpose, Harry devoured maps of the countryside and books about graveyards and English burial customs, spitting back information in admittedly disorderly but nevertheless interesting ways. There were frequent owls to and from Ron and Hermione, and Sirius often sent notes back with Remus, which were shorter but usually more entertaining. Remus himself seemed alive again for really the first time since third year—his eyes moved more quickly, he smiled more readily, and late into the evenings he sat and talked with Harry about anything that caught their fancy. On the nights Tonks joined in, she often had to give Remus a shove to get him into bed at a decent hour. It helped Harry, anyway, who still didn't sleep as well without Padfoot's reassuring warmth somewhere on the bed.

Sirius flourished in his new role as Tutor. Every day he had a different schedule and new students to meet, and he began to realise how confining his own House-snobbishness had been. Last year—well, twenty years ago, but only last year for him—he hadn't been interested in the other Houses and had been downright hostile to the Slytherins. Now he was required to treat all houses equally and he did so with a scrupulousness that told of some distant wrong done to him by a prejudiced professor.

He never had to do any reading he didn't want to and was never required to hand anything in. He learned more by sitting at a lesson with a Ravenclaw seventh year until she mastered a difficult extraction process for Potions than he would have in weeks' worth of class time. On Harry's orders he devoured the Hogwarts Library's section on famous wizarding burial rites and wrote them up in probably more organised fashion than Harry himself would have. He was in his element; Hogwarts was where he belonged, and the freedom of his position allowed him to pursue his education unhampered by professors. If he spent his first few nights curled up as Padfoot in a nest of quilts, that was only to be expected as part of his readjustment.

Thursday was supposed to be his evening off and he had been looking forward to it; this teaching thing was fun, but on a regular basis it became rather wearing. It was disheartening, then, to have run up to his office to fetch a book and then to hear a knock on his door.

"It's my evening—oh, Moony!" he said, cheerfully. Remus stood in front of his office door, briefcase in one hand, smiling. "Want to come in? Didn't expect you by here."

"Well, you weren't in your rooms, so I thought I'd check," Remus answered. "I know it's supposed to be your night off, Padfoot, but I was wondering if you wanted to go down to Hogsmeade with me. I've got papers to mark, and if I go home I'll get distracted. Besides, if you help me I'll buy you a firewhiskey."

Sirius noticed that he was done up in the new, thick woolen cloak Tonks had talked him into buying; it was early for true chill to be setting in, but the night-time did have a bit of a bite to it already and Moony still moved slowly and achingly sometimes, though teaching seemed to help him immensely.

"Sure," he said, eager for a night away from school. "Let me get my cloak."

In short order the pair could be seen strolling across the grounds towards the path into Hogsmeade, Remus tall and slouch-shouldered in his brown cloak, Sirius a little shorter and more confident in his bright scarlet one. They didn't talk much as they walked, but then they often hadn't. Sirius was just happy to be out with Moony again, and Remus seemed to be distracted by the beauty of the grounds and the distant, just-beginning twilight. They made for the Three Broomsticks, where Sirius mentally catalogued the changes (Rosmerta was almost exactly the same, which he found oddly unsurprising) while Remus ordered a flagon of firewhiskey and a platter of chips.

"Now," Remus said, uncapping a bottle of red ink as they settled into a corner table, "the trick is to drink just enough firewhiskey that the awful spelling and horrifying grammatical errors sort of wash over you while remaining sober enough to follow the convoluted and torturous reasoning to its arguably logical conclusion."

"What are we marking?" Sirius asked, accepting a pile of rolled-up parchment scrolls and a quill.

"Fourth-year compositions on the three forms of Unforgivable curse. You want to look for a brief discussion of each and then a few paragraphs about magical ethics and why any one, their choice, is considered unforgivable while other hexes are not."

"Sounds easy enough," Sirius said, with all the innocence of untried youth on his brow. Remus thanked Rosmerta as she set down their food and poured out a healthy measure of firewhiskey from the flagon for each of them.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," he remarked, as he began unrolling scrolls and flattening them into a single pile.

"Well, it's nice not to have to write compositions myself," Sirius said.

"Are you enjoying teaching?"

"Reckon so. I like the first and second years. They try harder."

"They have further to go," Remus agreed. "You certainly seem popular with a particular subset of the school population."

"The sixth-years," Sirius groaned. "Every evening a gaggle of them congregate in the hallway and get in everyone's way while they dare each other to come flash their cleavage at me on the barest excuse."

"Shame you don't like cleavage. When I was sixteen I'd have done your job for free," Remus murmured. Sirius tensed slightly; the subject of sex hadn't come up since that first day after Remus awoke, and he was still unused to the idea that anyone would know. He was slowly acclimating to the fact that people discussed this sort of thing now, but that didn't mean he felt any more comfortable about it.

"Even...if I did," he managed, trying to seem as relaxed about the whole thing as Remus was, "They're just...annoying. The fifth and seventh years don't, you know. It's just the sixths."

"The fifths are all too shy and the sevenths are all studying for NEWTs already," Remus answered. "Besides, isn't Colin Creevey hanging around too?"

"But that's my point, isn't it? One more annoying...sixth...year..." Sirius paused. "You don't think he's..."

"I couldn't say. I know he doesn't seem very interested in the girls in his year. Or any other year. And he used to idolize Harry, so you're his type."

Sirius tried to recall Colin Creevey and came up with the mental image of a tall, shaggy-haired boy perpetually carrying a camera case as well as his Hogwarts bag. A bit on the uncouth side, but then so had Remus been, once upon a time.

Remus sipped his firewhiskey and dipped his quill in the inkpot, already bending to write notes in the margins of the first composition. Sirius firmly put aside his speculation on the older Creevey brother and watched Remus mark for a while, until he was confident he understood how it was done.

They worked in silence for the most part, steadily reducing both the level of the firewhiskey in the flagon and the height of the parchment stacked in front of them. Occasionally Remus shared a particularly awful turn of phrase and Sirius replied in kind, but for the most part it was like it had been at school: the comfortable silence of friends working to complete a not entirely enjoyable task.

When they left the pub, every paper marked and secured in Remus' briefcase, full night had fallen and the wind was definitely chilly. People hurried through the streets without spending much time looking at one another, and now Sirius realised that Remus had another reason for wanting a companion along with him. When others did look long enough to see who was walking down the road, they gave him a wide berth; some muttered epithets that Sirius was glad he couldn't fully hear. Remus didn't even bother to shrug. Perhaps he didn't hear them fully either, though he could hardly miss their intent.

But nobody was going to accost the pair of them together, and Sirius strutted just a little. Remus might not be his, not anymore, but he could still help protect him.

As they passed out of town Remus lit a small ball of green flame in the palm of his hand; they proceeded down the track to the main gate in silence again, warm and cheerful from the firewhiskey. They had completed a chore, spent a nice evening at the pub, and Sirius was with his Moony. Nothing else seemed to matter at the moment.

Until Moony stopped suddenly, grasping Sirius' cloak to stop him as well.

"Don't go any further," he said, taking his wand out of his pocket. "*Lumos maximus!*"

Immediately the flat, rather scrubby wilderness around them was lit by pale white light; Sirius scanned but didn't see anything. He glanced at Remus, whose nostrils twitched and flared as he inhaled.

"Fenrir," he said quietly. "He's been here."

"You can smell him?"

Remus nodded. Sirius followed his stare; there was a stone nearby with a large, wet stain on it. "He made sure I would," Remus said. Sirius felt a chilly pit open in his stomach. "He's not here now, though..."

"Is it a trap?"

"I don't know. Forward at half-time, Pads," Remus said softly. They moved towards the gate slowly, eyes darting across the landscape, entirely sober now. Sirius almost breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the gate itself;

Hagrid's hut wasn't far beyond, and at this range the groundskeeper would hear them if they shouted.

Then he saw the gate itself.

The two stone boars that flanked the big wrought-iron gate were spattered with blood; wedged into one of the gaps in the gate itself was a knife with a note impaled on the tip.

"Is it human?" Sirius asked in a hushed whisper as Remus crouched to examine the spatters.

"No—I'd smell if it was. Don't know what it is...probably big, to get this much out in a single go," Remus said. "Fenrir's supper, I think. Don't touch it."

"No fear," Sirius said. "Let's get the bloody hell out of this place, Moony."

Remus turned to the knife. "It's holding the gate shut. Might be a trap, but that's not Fenrir's style."

"Doesn't feel like it, either," Sirius said, passing his wand over it a few times.

"No, but it—bastard," Remus swore. He'd put his hand out to grab the knife and it clattered to the ground; Remus pressed his fingers to his mouth, then shook his hand as if he'd burned himself. "Silver inlay on the handle. Sirius, please..."

"Right," Sirius said, picking up the dagger and plucking the note off its tip. The gates, no longer wedged shut, swung open eerily. They glanced at each other before passing through, closing the gates firmly behind them and making with all speed for the entrance to the school.

Once inside, they stopped under the first lit candelabra they came to and Remus held up his hand for examination. It was blistering already, red bands curving across the palm and fingers where he'd grasped the knife. Sirius lifted the knife itself to the light.

"Steel blade, stone handle," Remus said, noting the *Sheffield* stamp in one side of the blade. "It's had silver melted into cracks and chips in the stone—clever lad. He might not be well educated but Fenrir is no fool. He wanted to nip me."

"He'll get more than a nip in return, that I promise you," Sirius said, carefully tucking the knife into a pocket of his bag.

"Where's the note?"

"Here..." Sirius smoothed it flat on his palm. "Look, it's not addressed to you."

"McGonagall," Remus read. "See the handwriting, how uneven it is. He's written it himself."

"Should we open it?" Sirius asked.

"No – we're meant to deliver it," Remus replied. "McGonagall's likely to be in her office still; I won't blame you if you don't come along, Pads."

"Catch me leaving now!" Sirius said heatedly. "When I find him I'll nail his bollocks to his –"

"All right, let's stay calm," Remus chided gently.

They floo-called the headmistress from Remus' office and had an immediate reply; she asked them to come through, and in a matter of moments they were standing in the round office of the Headmistress as she turned the letter over in her fingers.

"It doesn't seem to have any traps built into it," she said finally. "May I see the dagger, Mr. Padfoot?"

Sirius offered up the knife reluctantly. He had privately promised himself he was going to use it to castrate Fenrir Greyback with. McGonagall examined it, then laid it next to the note on the desk. Cautiously, with wand drawn, she picked up a letter opener and unfolded the note.

For a second – just long enough to see that the inner page was blank – nothing happened. Then a rasping, horrible voice filled the room.

*"Send the pack-traitor away from the school before the next moon,"* the voice growled, sending unpleasant chills down Sirius' spine like the screech of glass on glass, *"or we find a child to replace him."*

The blank sheet of parchment burst into flames and was quickly doused with a flick of McGonagall's wand. Sirius raised his head to look at Remus, who was white as a sheet. The scars on his face, not normally that noticeable, stood out lividly.

"What does it mean?" Sirius asked.

"If I don't quit – if I'm not sacked – Fenrir's going to take a child," Remus answered.

"Well," McGonagall said briskly. "I must say that this was not an angle I considered when I was preparing my defence of your hire, Remus."

\* \* \*

On Friday morning the owls went out and the word began to circulate; Order Meeting, Saturday afternoon, Grimmauld Place. Ron and Hermione were

floo'ing from Hogsmeade; Remus would escort them. Sirius demanded to be a part of it, and a really awe-inspiring row began to brew until Harry stepped in and said that he had other things to speak to Sirius about, and would Remus please bring him along. Remus, unusually quiet and subdued, agreed without question.

Harry wasn't told about Fenrir's note; no one but Tonks was. Remus had agreed not to make a move until the meeting, at which point it could be discussed. So instead of fretting about Remus, Harry spent Friday fretting about how he was going to convince the Order to go scouring graveyards for an old metal cup. His promise to Dumbledore seemed to serve no purpose other than paranoia, but he meant to keep it as well he could, and paranoia couldn't hurt. One never knew when there was another Peter Pettigrew in their midst. Harry was coming to understand that Tonks was cleverer than she liked to let on and a little more ruthless; Sirius, he had deduced, was a sort of coal-miner's canary. If word broke about Sirius Black's return from the dead, they would know they had at best a dupe and at worst a spy within the Order.

Harry was waiting at Grimmauld Place to meet with everyone who knew about the horcruxes—Remus, Tonks, Ron, Hermione, and Sirius—to discuss his strategy for finding the cup.

Tonks was already at Grimmauld Place, it being her day off; Ron and Hermione appeared first, followed by Remus, with Sirius holding onto his arm. Hermione greeted Harry with a hug and Ron punched him in the shoulder by way of greeting. Sirius bounded up to say hello and uninhibitedly knocked Harry to the floor, wrestling with him until Harry cried peanuts.

"Whenever you're ready, Harry," Remus drawled. Sirius climbed off and offered Harry a hand up.

"Right...horcruxes," Harry said, as he and Sirius joined the others at the kitchen table. "I have a list and a plan."

Each one of them would take a single site: a tomb or monument to one of the Founders, the open field where Grindelwald had been destroyed, and the old family crypt of the Gaunts, which hadn't been used for nearly two hundred years. If the rest of the Order agreed, they would each take a companion with them for protection; if the others balked, they would have to double-up and go much more slowly. It would be slipped in, it was decided, at the end of Order Business, which Remus had said he had quite enough of to divert attention away from the quest.

Even as he said it, other Order members began to arrive; McGonagall and Kingsley first, then most of the Weasleys in a ginger-haired mass, then others in twos and threes. When a decent number of people were assembled (ten minutes past the appointed starting time) McGonagall stood and held up her hands for attention. Silence was rather slow in falling, and she had time to summon Remus to the front of the room as well before everyone was fully paying attention.

"We have," she said, "something of a grave problem, and an action which I feel requires our immediate reaction." She glanced at Remus. "Lupin, would you prefer...?"

He nodded, fidgeting somewhat uncomfortably. "On Thursday night, I encountered some...evidence of vandalism outside of Hogwarts. The boars at the gate had been smeared with—what was it, Hagrid?"

"Sheep's blood," Hagrid supplied. "Aberforth tol' me 'e's missin' two lambs."

"It is almost certainly the doing of Fenrir Greyback and members of his pack. Along with the blood we found a knife with a silver-inlaid handle and this," he said, as McGonagall produced the charred remains of the parchment. "On opening it, we were informed that if I did not leave Hogwarts—rather, if I was not sacked—Fenrir would..." he ducked his head. "Choose a child and turn them. Intentionally and as a direct consequence of my defiance."

"Did you know about this?" Harry asked Sirius, who nodded.

"I was with him when he found it. He asked me not to tell."

"The Headmistress has convinced me not to resign before this meeting, in the rather unrealistic hope that another solution could be put forward," Remus continued. He wouldn't meet anyone's eyes.

"We know where he is," Kingsley said, slowly. "But we can't prove anything he's done, even if we could catch him. He knows the moors better than we, and he has better senses. He could track us. We couldn't track him."

"Remus could," Harry pointed out.

"It doesn't matter, if we can't do anything once we find him," Tonks said, frustration evident in her tone.

Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron, who were speaking to each other quietly. Finally, Ron put his hand up. Remus smiled a little at that.

"Yes, Ron?" he asked.

"Uhm..." Ron stood up, glancing around. "Hermione and I think we could do something about him."

"You do?" Remus asked, surprised.

"Yeah, well...not...legally," Ron added, giving Kingsley a nervous look. "I mean, we can't...tell you about it."

"You're not going to try hunting him down yourself, I hope," Molly said severely. "Don't be foolish, Ron."

"No...not exactly," Ron answered, flushing red. "But we—Hermione and me—we know a bit about surviving werewolves, don't we? Sorry, professor," he added. Remus waved off the apology. "It's just, you have to trust us. And not ask any questions."

"There's no point in putting you needlessly in danger," Remus replied.

"Got to be stopped sooner or later," Moody said.

"I can help," Bill said. Fleur clutched his arm tightly. "I can track almost as well as Remus can, and I don't Change."

"I'd be willing to go along," Harry added. "I make good bait."

"I think it would be wiser if I simply resigned," Remus said.

"You don't want to, do you?" Harry asked.

"No! Of course not. But unless you kill him, you won't stop him, and I won't have people dying over a job I've left before and could leave again."

"I won't accept your resignation," McGonagall said firmly.

"If I leave, you won't have a choice."

"Yes I will. I'll dock your pay and won't hire another professor."

"Sirius can—"

"No. The children will go to class and amuse themselves without a professor, if you refuse to show."

"Tis cowardly to run, lad," Moody agreed. "You know it."

"Doesn't..." Harry hesitated, then plunged onward. "Doesn't Fenrir do it anyway? I mean, if you leave he might not this moon—but he will the next. And with you gone from the school, it's that much easier for him to get in. There'd be no point, except to teach him that bullying works."

"If the Prophet found out—"

"I think I could keep it out," said a young man named Schoebel, a new recruit to the Order. He was an under-editor at the Prophet and hated his job with a passion. "He'd have to go through me to get an interview—I'm supposed to sort out the nutcases from the real news. I could hold him off for a month or two, unless he tried something drastic."

"I don't think he'd even think of it," Hermione said.

"Ron, Hermione," McGonagall said, "How certain are you that you can stop him?"

Ron glanced at Hermione, who stood. "We have an even chance," she said. "I don't think it's that dangerous. With Bill and Harry along, even if we..." she clearly struggled even saying the word, "...fail, we'll be able to get out safely. He can't Apparate."

"He knows a lot about werewolves from being one," Ron said, "But he doesn't know anything he hasn't seen personally. That's a lot, really."

"How do you —" Remus began, but Ron continued without stopping.

"If we can find him now, we can watch where he goes and what he does. We'll know where he's likely to try and attack."

"Not much trouble," Moody grunted. "Standard surveillance detail. Don't even have to use the Order."

"How much time do we have?" Hermione asked Remus. He sighed.

"The full is on the sixteenth. Ten days."

"Loads of time," she said.

"And we don't technically need your permission," Ron said. "You can't actually stop us."

"Dangerous words, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall warned. Molly glared at her as if it was Molly's right alone to chastise her child.

"He's right, though," Harry said. "If they don't come with me, Bill and I could always go alone."

Remus had stopped even trying to interject; it was clear this argument had gone far beyond his control.

"Stay until the full moon. If we haven't solved the problem, we'll take the blame," Hermione said.

"It's not that simple," Remus answered.

"Make it that simple. Trust us and stay. Anyway, we have other stuff to talk about too," Hermione said, turning to Harry. "If you want to look after us, we need chaperones for research trips. Nobody's supposed to travel alone and we can cut our time in half if we don't double up with each other. We need volunteers."

"Six," Harry said. "One chaperone each for Ron, Hermione, Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and me. Never more than two or three hours at a time."

"I don't think we can spare that many Aurors without someone noticing," Kingsley said. "Scrimgeour keeps a close watch on where we go and what we do."

"I can go," Moody said. "Wouldn't be left behind, matter of fact."

"If yeh need me..." Hagrid said, and Harry nodded.

"Ees eet intrigue?" Fleur asked.

"Uh...no," Harry said.

"Ees alright. I will go. Bill too, oui?"

"Long as Ron doesn't draw Fleur," Bill said, winking at his brother. "George is game, aren't you, George?"

"Sure," George answered. "And that's five."

"I'll make six," Augustus Pye said.

"That's settled then," Harry said. "Anyone else have anything they need to bring up?"

There didn't appear to be anything immediately forthcoming, so they formally dissolved the meeting and left everyone to wander off and find their own tea, it being just barely four o'clock. McGonagall returned speedily to Hogwarts, where she had marking to do; Tonks took a rather stunned Remus back to the cottage and Bill sent Fleur ahead with Molly and Arthur, lingering to confer with Ron and Hermione about Fenrir. Sirius remained also, foraging in the kitchen pantry for snack food.

"Do you actually know what you're going to do?" Harry asked Ron, who grinned.

"Not yet," Ron said. "But you're not the only one who can come up with plans. Did you think I did when you stood up with us?"

"No," Harry replied. "Never stopped me backing you yet."

"I have some ideas," Hermione said.

"Like what?" Ron asked.

"Well..." Hermione shrugged. "If it's self-defence it isn't murder."

Harry, Ron, Sirius, and Bill all stared at her, surprised.

"Remus is giving a few of the Ravenclaws and me some special NEWT tutoring," Hermione said calmly. "Do you know how rare it is to have a Dark Arts professor who knows what he's doing? I'm not going to risk that because some barbarian thinks all werewolves should be as illiterate as he is."

"Better you than me, mate," Bill whispered to Ron. Hermione glared at them.

"I'll need a few days to make plans," she continued, "but we'll be in touch, Bill. Can you talk to Moody about setting a watch on Greyback?"

"Sure thing. Reckon I'll go make sure Mum and Fleur aren't shouting again," Bill said, rising and ducking into the floo. "The Burrow!"

"Now," Hermione said, all business, "Are we actually ready to go looking for horcruxes?"

"The Great Horcrux Hunt," Ron said glumly.

"Well, I am," Harry said. "Ron, I really do think it might be best if you didn't take Fleur."

"Nobody said I was going to!" Ron said defensively. Hermione huffed. "I never asked for her! I never said a word!"

"I think we'd better send her with Tonks," Harry said.

"There's a Laurel and Hardy film in the making," Hermione muttered.

"Remus can go with Moody, he knows how to handle him," Harry continued. "I might as well take Hagrid; he's huge, and half the charms we know don't work on him."

"I'll go with the Pye chap," Sirius volunteered. Harry glanced at him, narrowed his eyes, nodded, and turned to Ron.

"That leaves you two with Bill and George."

"If you give me George I shall kill him," Hermione said.

"Sorry, Ron," Harry said.

"S'fine," Ron said resignedly. "I just need to remember not to eat anything he offers me."

"Do we even know what we're looking for?" Sirius said, tipping his chair back on two legs.

"I dunno. I think we'll know when we see it. Places you could hide a cup, I suppose. Anything that looks out of place. Ask people if they've noticed...weird things."

"Right," Ron said with a sigh. "We ought to get back—I have plays to work on before tomorrow's tryouts."

"Captaining duties?" Harry asked.

"It's a dog's life," Ron answered.

"Weasley is our king," Harry grinned. "Good to see you two."

"Hogwarts isn't the same without you, Harry," Hermione said, kissing him on the cheek. "Come on, Sirius."

"Nah—I'm staying at Fourteen Back tonight," Sirius said. "You go on. I'll be there if anyone needs me."

Ron and Hermione held hands as they stepped into the floo. Harry was torn between smiling and gagging.

"Are you really staying tonight?" Harry asked, tidying up the scattered maps and papers he'd been consulting.

"If it's all right. Sorry I didn't ask, but if I had Hermione might have got stroppey and ratted me to McGonagall," Sirius said.

"Course it is. Why wouldn't it be? Just didn't think you'd want to bunk out with us when you've your own place at Hogwarts."

"Well..." Sirius picked up a sheet of parchment and rolled it tight, absently. "It's a bit...I mean, I like Hogwarts and all, but..."

"It's a lot quieter without you around," Harry said in unspoken agreement. "Bed seems a lot bigger."

"Yeah, well, I make a lot of noise and hog the quilts," Sirius answered lightly. "Ready to go, then?"

When they emerged into the living room of Fourteen Back, Harry set his bag down on the couch and stretched. Flooing always gave him a shoulder cramp; probably the tension of keeping his elbows tucked tightly against his body after his first abortive trip landed him in Knockturn by mistake. They could hear Remus and Tonks talking in the kitchen and the apparent sound of dinner being prepared. Outside, Bowman was swearing at a newly discovered colony of garden gnomes. The chair sent up a puff of dust when Harry flopped into it.

Sirius stood on the hideous braided rag-rug in front of the hearth and inhaled deeply the smell of dust, rosemary, onions in a pan in the kitchen, and Harry's overly fragrant trainers.

"Home," he sighed blissfully.

## CHAPTER XVI

It was amazing how quickly one got used to animagery, really. In a matter of a year, or even a little under, Sirius had become so comfortable with his other, mute, colour-blind self that it was hard to remember that once he hadn't been able to shift effortlessly from man to beast. Hadn't it always been so? He felt it had, as though he'd known secretly that Padfoot was always a part of his destiny. The various uses of the dog-form were not lost on him, and neither was the sensory shift; he paid for it in eyesight when the world became a mess of greys and whites, but the *smells*...

To say that Remus was a cloud of *inkpaperclothanimal* was accurate, but it failed to bring the full force of scent to bear—it would be like saying Remus in man-sight was brown, pink, and grey instead of being a brown-eyed man with pale skin and greying hair. The scent was such a given that it defied definition. Remus was *RemusRemusRemus*, that was all. The scents that made up people were just one small part of the world of a dog.

And the dreams. Dreams were so simple as a dog. People very rarely even got involved, except as the occasional dispensers of treats.

Sirius was having a splendid dog-dream. For days he had fallen asleep in a new bed that smelled only of dust and his own skin, which was gratifying to the ego but somewhat dull after a while. In this bed, on the other hand, the smell of Harry was an all-encompassing experience.

It was a lovely dream about Harry and the sunlit garden and having the ridge of his spine scratched just above his tail, which was sheer bliss.

And suddenly he realised it was in colour.

Sirius woke to the dark and actually rather cold bedroom with a slight start, fingers of his left hand twitching where they hung in the air. Harry's bedroom in Fourteen Back, the rafters rising up above them with a high, airy openness that Harry had, in a sleepy moment, confessed to loving because *they aren't the cupboard*. Sirius wasn't sure which cupboard, but he hadn't been brave enough to ask.

Harry was sleeping on his right side, legs curled slightly like always; Sirius found himself slumped sideways over Harry's hip and using it like a pillow. His left elbow was propped on Harry's thigh, left cheek resting on the blanket and right palm spread across Harry's skin just where his ribcage ended. His knees were pulled up almost against his chest and pressed into Harry's back

between his shoulder blades. Sometime in the night, probably recently, he'd pushed himself out of Padfoot and back into his proper body, and it was terrifically awkward.

The blankets only came up as far as the point where Sirius' cheek rested on Harry's body; his right hand lay on warm, smooth flesh below the hiked-up hem of Harry's shirt, and it was hardly a movement at all to tilt his head and inhale. That was the scent, fading as his brain adjusted to being human again. *HarryHarryHarry.*

He was, however, not only going to give himself a chill but also a cramp if he stayed in this position. He tried to move slowly; the last thing in the world he wanted was to wake Harry. If he could get enough distance to Change again, all would be well, but in order to move he had to bring his left arm down across Harry's body and —

Harry shifted without warning, rolling onto his back, and Sirius found himself propped over Harry's chest, left thigh against Harry's right hip, looking down at the sharp curve of Harry's jaw, so like James'.

Harry's eyes opened and Sirius felt his pulse thud in his ears, along with a not-entirely-unpleasant throb in his groin even as his sleep-addled brain said *oh bugger*. Harry's eyes didn't precisely focus, but they did find Sirius' flushed face.

"Mmh," Harry mumbled sleepily. "Awright Sir'us?"

Sirius opened his mouth to answer, to give an apology, but Harry's eyes had closed again already. Harry gave a soft groan and stretched a little, back arching, head tilting back and oh, this was *bad*.

"Sirius," Harry sighed, lapsing back into deeper, more even breaths. Sirius counted to fifty before trying to move; he leaned away slowly, eventually ending up on his back about a foot from Harry. The cold air was not unwelcome, now; in fact it was distinctly helping matters.

Sodding teenage urges. Sodding unnatural tastes. He couldn't be some normal little Black clone, vaguely inbred and looking for a tolerant pureblood wife who would pop out heirs while ignoring his piece on the side. He had to be a Gryffindor and like to read books and like boys.

*It's different now*, Remus had told him, and Harry's easy acceptance of Helga Hufflepuff's implied deviance told Sirius just how different it was. No matter how casual it had been, however, Sirius was fairly sure that Harry would clock him in disgust if he tried anything.

He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, rubbing gently.

Oh, sod, this was bad. He'd come to spend the night because he had missed Harry fiercely, especially after they found Fenrir's note and Remus went all weird and quiet. He'd just wanted to curl up with a warm body—with Harry's warm body—and spend the night safely surrounded by a familiar scent.

And he was *freezing* bloody *hell* this loft was cold.

He really had two options: he could change over to Padfoot and stay here, or he could steal the quilt and go downstairs to sleep on the sofa. The idea did not appeal.

Padfoot, as sullenly as it was possible for a dog to do, curled up to sleep on top of the blankets with his back pointedly turned to Harry.

Even if it was also pressed up against Harry's shoulders.

\* \* \*

Tonks had shared a bed with Remus since long before the end of the last school year—indeed, they'd begun not long after Sirius died. At first she'd cherished no illusions at all that what they were doing was anything more than comfort because Remus had lost his best friend *again* and Tonks had blamed herself for the loss of a man who'd once been a surrogate brother to her.

But Remus had been decent to her and was a kind man and one could do far worse, and from that to love was a short step. A short step Remus had fought her on, every inch of the way, though in the end youth and determination had triumphed over his born-in stubborn pride.

She'd had time to get used to his sleeping patterns, and in truth they'd probably done her good. He rose early, which got her out of bed and in to work on time anyway.

He also tended not to insomnia but to a peculiar sort of night-time restlessness. Sometimes she would wake up because a light somewhere had gone on, only to find him sitting next to her in bed, the barest flicker of cold fire dancing across the top of his book so that he could read without lighting candles (or, in her more modern flat, turning on a lamp). It was never for more than ten or fifteen minutes, and then she would feel him slide down in the bed and sometimes curl his arm around her waist again. He told her he simply woke up in the night and sometimes needed to read for a while in order to get back to sleep. She accepted it as a natural human quirk.

It was, technically, light when she woke; the sun was just barely inching through the northern windows of the little room, slanting across the bed. Remus

was sitting up, a shirt hanging off his shoulders, book propped open on the blanket covering his thighs.

"Good morning," he said, when she stretched and yawned. "Did I wake you?"

"Dun thin' so," she answered. "Wha time issit?"

"About half-past six."

She rolled over and placed her head in his lap, looking up at him, hair blocking the book. He smiled, brushed her hair off her face, then flattened it and pretended to go on reading.

"Do you want breakfast?" she asked, crooking her neck to block his book again. He rested his bookmark across the bridge of her nose.

"It's Sunday – we should have a lie-in," he said.

"Okay," she agreed, rolling over and pushing herself up until she sat nose-to-nose with him. She took the book out of his hands and set it on the side-table, kissing him.

"Stop thinking about Fenrir," she said. "Stop thinking about the horcruxes. Stop thinking about Harry and come have a lie-in with me."

Once you had him trained, he was really surprisingly docile, she decided. Perhaps it was simply too many years of having been lonely, or an inherent desire to make people happy. She had found it nearly impossible to work her way past his defences, but once they had reached their understanding...

Well, even impossibly polite, impossibly English, impossibly stubborn Remus was passionate and affectionate and not afraid of her, and those were rare things in her life. It wasn't like for him, where people crossed the street to avoid him, but in some ways it was worse. People liked Tonks and were happy to have a butterbeer with her at the pub or crack jokes with her in the canteen at Auror headquarters, but when it came to relationships, well. Either you got the perverts who wanted you to look like someone else or you got the nice people who didn't...quite...trust you that far.

Remus understood, and he was so starved for this himself that when he did give in, it was complete. There was no hesitation as he followed her down into the nest of blankets and twined his fingers in her pink hair, kissing a line down her neck.

Perhaps he was more desperate than usual, his hands rougher and his movements more forceful, but then she knew the feeling of looking for something to cling to in uncertainty. And the moon was coming, after all. She

hated the full moon and with good reason, but she had to admit the handful of days leading up to it were often quite...pleasurable. She could see why other (lesser, to her mind) women would have kept their distance, but they clearly didn't know what they were missing.

Didn't matter. She had him all to herself and she wasn't planning that anyone else should ever find out. Not when he made such delightful noises and did such delightful things and always, afterwards, he always stayed and touched her. Hands on shoulder or neck or breast, reassuring and real.

"Is that the boys?" he asked, lazily stroking her hair where her head rested on his shoulder. She listened; yes, there was the dull thud of Harry's feet on the living-room floor where he always jumped the last two steps of the staircase. Voices, too; bickering, by the sound of it. Probably about what to eat for breakfast.

"Shh," she said. "We're having a lie-in."

There was a crash as several cast-iron pots and pans fell out of the cupboard next to the stove.

"They're going to set the place on fire, you realise this."

"Not our problem! Lie-in!"

Remus shook his head and pushed himself to his elbows, eyes scanning the room, probably to figure out where she'd thrown his pyjama trousers. She groaned as he climbed out of bed and went questing for proper clothing. In the morning half-light his skin was pale, almost as pale as hers but more weathered, pocked with scars. By far the worst was the sharp crescent on his thigh where Fenrir had nearly torn his leg off when he was a child. That one never faded.

He bent to kiss her even as he was buckling the belt on his trousers, and she wished he'd put on a shirt so she could have grabbed him by it.

"He's a man now. You said it yourself," she said, against his mouth.

"He's still young. A *young* man."

"And he needs you?" Tonks asked, shrewdly. Remus looked away.

"They both do. I'm no kind of father, but they need *someone*," he said quietly.

"You're every kind of father," she answered. "Go on. I'll be out in a bit."

She lay in bed for a while, listening to their voices through the half-open door. Harry and Sirius were arguing about Quidditch good-naturedly, pouring milk, heating water for tea, breaking eggs, rummaging around for the bacon,

chopping something up to go into what were apparently going to be *the best scrambled eggs ever* according to Sirius.

By the time she gathered enough energy to wash and dress, they were sitting around the table, Sirius frowning over a sheet of parchment, Harry and Remus discussing their plans for the Great Horcrux Hunt. She poured some tea and uncovered a charm-warmed plate of eggs and bacon, joining them.

"I'd rather go to the Gaunt crypt myself," Harry was saying, devouring a bowl of cereal in addition to the evidence of ravaged scrambled eggs on a nearby plate. "They were parselmouths...I'm the only one going who speaks parseltongue."

"That's fine, but be careful. I don't think they were above booby traps," Remus answered.

"Sure. Which do you want? Hermione wants to go see the Grindelwald site."

"Gryffindor's mine," Sirius said, not looking up from his parchment.

"Oh, I'll take Hufflepuff," Tonks said. "Unless you want it," she added to Remus.

"No, that's fine. I'd rather see Ravenclaw's grave, in that case, it's interesting anyway. Slytherin's monument is up the top of an enormous and tediously steep hill," Remus said.

"Have you been there?" Harry asked, curiously.

"I've seen photographs. Never felt the urge to actually go and see it," Remus said. Sirius looked down at his parchment in frustration, screwed it up into a ball, and threw it at the garbage bin nearby. Remus noticed there were several similar paper balls lying in and around it.

"What's got you all knotted up?" Tonks asked. "Can't you just whisk stuff away?"

"I like throwing them," Sirius said, unrolling another sheet and tearing off a portion. "It's cathartic."

"He's writing to Pye to set up a time to go see Gryffindor's Stones," Harry said. Tonks turned a laugh into a cough.

"It's not funny," Sirius said.

"No, not that – Gryffindor's Stones," she said.

"Coming from a woman called Tonks..."

"All right, point taken, but still it is a bit funny. Didn't you think it was funny in school? The lecture about the mighty stones of Gryffindor. And then

you see the pictures..." she snickered. "Two big oblong stones and that mound of dirt between them where our dear departed Gryffindor is supposedly interr'd..."

"I'm sure Godric Gryffindor wouldn't like you thinking that," Remus said with mock-seriousness.

"I think Godric Gryffindor was the sort to enjoy fart jokes and probably would think it was hugely funny," Tonks answered. "Anyway, what's so difficult about a letter?"

"Sirius wants to impress him, I think," Harry teased.

"I just don't want to sound like an idiot," Sirius answered.

"Too late."

"Oi, you!" Sirius flicked ink off the quill's nib at Harry. "Don't make me come over there!"

"Gentlemen," Remus murmured, remonstratively. Harry dabbed the ink off his cheeks.

"So are you going to spend all day writing letters and boring things like that?" Tonks asked, sipping her tea.

"Well, we were going to listen to a match on the Floo Broadcast," Harry said. "And I though I'd do a good bit of laying about uselessly. I think I've been more than useful in the past few days. I feel I'm rather entitled. Sirius definitely is."

Sirius, still bent over his letter, grunted in agreement. Remus raised his eyebrows at Tonks, amused, as he sipped his tea.

\* \* \*

*Nigel Padfoot  
c/o Hogwarts School*

*Healer Pye,*

*I am writing to you Incognito in case this letter falls into the wrong hands. I hope you do not mind.*

*I have spoken with Harry and he has asked me to do a study of the area around Godric's Stones east of Hogsmeade to determine if there are any inscriptions or engravings which might be of use to us in defeating You Know Who.*

*I think it would be wise to investigate as soon as possible and would like to know when your work allows you to accompany me. As you know I am Tutor at Hogwarts, so I am free mostly in the late afternoons and on Thursday evenings.*

*I also have some business with you of a more private nature if you have the time and inclination, which I will discuss with you when we meet if you are agreeable.*

*Yrs.*

*Nigel Padfoot*

Sirius looked down at the letter, thoughtfully. As the result of several hours' work it wasn't very impressive, but it was eager without being childish. That last paragraph made it seem like he had an embarrassing skin condition, but that simply couldn't be helped.

It needed one more thing, however...

The others were already in the living room, listening to the Quidditch pre-game announcements; he had the time and he was alone at the moment. He wasn't ashamed of this, exactly, but he didn't care to have anyone asking him questions about it.

There was sealing wax on the desk in Remus' room, and Sirius lit it with the tip of his wand, dribbling several blobs of the scarlet wax below his name on the parchment before reaching into his pocket.

He put the ring on the forefinger of his left hand and pressed it deeply into the wax. The residual heat bled through the metal and warmed his knuckle. When he pulled the ring away it came cleanly, leaving a perfect signature-seal below his false name.



He rolled the parchment, addressed it, sealed it with a plain glob of wax and took it to Hedwig, who was preening on her perch in the corner sleepily.

"Now lovely," he said wheedlingly, "Take this for me?"

Hedwig clicked her beak at him and held out one clawed foot for the letter. Sirius gave it to her with relief, carried her into Bowman's garden and watched her fly away, then went to join the others in the living room.

\* \* \*

Unlike the past week, on Monday there was no schedule of classes sitting next to Sirius' plate at breakfast. Instead there was a letter from Pye, stating that Thursday would be fine, and a note from McGonagall.

*Now that you are familiar with the various classes and years, you may exercise your own discretion in choosing what you are to attend. Please see me during your final class of the day for a discussion of your continuing education. M. McGonagall, Headmistress.*

There was also a note from Harry, passed to him by Remus as breakfast ended: *Fancy entertaining a guest Friday afternoon?*

Sirius grinned and scribbled back *I'll nick some finger sandwiches from the kitchens* before returning it to Remus, who raised his eyebrows but tucked it into his pocket without reading it.

Slughorn was working on a tedious three-day project with the NEWTs students which made the whole dungeon smell, so Sirius avoided the lower levels. He went instead to Divinations, the class Firenze the centaur taught, because he still hadn't met him—he didn't dine with the other professors and was rarely to be found, so Sirius was told, outside of his classroom. Colin Creevey was one of the Gryffindor sixths who'd drawn Firenze this year, and Sirius walked with him to class, ambling along after a large hot breakfast.

"What's he like?" he asked Colin, as they walked. "I met a centaur once, but we didn't really spend much time talking."

"He's great," Colin said enthusiastically. "I mean, you don't feel like you learn much, really, cos he says only people with a real talent can do much, but you sort of learn...how to think about stuff. He beats Trelawney, I had her two years ago."

He made a face. Sirius grinned.

"So what does he teach, then, if he says only really talented people can learn anything?"

"Oh, we learn how to do it anyway, we just never succeed," Colin said philosophically. "He almost never assigns outside work, which is something."

They entered the classroom then and Sirius looked around in amazement at the false forest inside. It was a perfect replica of the Forbidden Forest—he almost thought he knew the location it had been lifted from. There were trees and grass, boulders, sunlight dappling through the leaves, and a clearing which most of the students were expectantly facing, finding seats on the mossy turf.

In the middle of the clearing stood Firenze the centaur, a pale palomino with likewise white-blond hair and startling blue eyes. Sirius had encountered a centaur once before, on a midnight jaunt in the Forest during a full moon, but it hadn't been Firenze—even Padfoot would have noticed colouration that light. That centaur had been darker and less solidly built; they'd been running at full bay after a rabbit, or at least he and Moony had, and for several minutes the other centaur had gracefully run alongside Prongs, who was crashing with more difficulty through the undergrowth. Sirius couldn't be sure, but he'd had the idea at the time that possibly there were foals in a nearby clearing, and the centaur was not so much joining in as ensuring they kept out.

When Firenze saw him, one front hoof pawed at the grass, almost thoughtfully.

"You are the Tutor," he said.

"Yes—Nigel Padfoot," Sirius said, coming forward. He wasn't sure if he ought to offer his hand, so instead he bowed. Firenze bowed back with a slight smile on his face.

"Yes...*Nigel Padfoot*," the centaur drawled.

"Ah...I was thinking of sitting in, today," Sirius continued, unnerved slightly by the centaur's knowing look. Firenze's tail slapped against his flank.

"I have been awaiting you," he said. "As have others."

Sirius looked around. The rest of the class was watching him, but there were still people coming through the doorway, so he wasn't late...

"Mars grows ever brighter—but look to the southeast and you will see a new star," Firenze said gravely. "The Nile Star's twin is ascendant."

Sirius waited for an explanation, but Firenze was continuing.

"I am surprised to see you in red robes," he said gravely. "I had presumed they would be green. It is of no matter; you are young yet. Please, be seated."

Sirius, thus confused and dismissed, found an empty patch near the back and sat down. Green? If he knew Sirius' name, as he seemed to, perhaps he assumed that, like all Blacks, Sirius was Slytherin material...

But it wasn't as though Slytherin students wore green robes, and Tutors wore red regardless.

He continued to prod at Firenze's words all through the lesson and well into the next, which was History of Magic with the first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins.

At least Alexander seemed to be settling in; Sirius was so distracted that he almost didn't catch the boy setting hotfeet to a couple of his Slytherin classmates across the aisle.

\* \* \*

By the end of the day Sirius had given up on the centaur's cryptic observations and concentrated instead on what he was going to say in his meeting with McGonagall. He remembered intentionally misdirecting her last year, and from the sound of it so did she, though it was far further in her past. He doubted she'd let him get away with it again.

The whole point of it had been so that she would leave him alone and let him take the classes he pleased – the classes that James was taking, primarily, but also the classes that were just...well, interesting. Sirius wasn't interested in Divs or History of Magic, easy as the former might be. He didn't care for Slughorn but he didn't mind Potions; he liked Care of Magical Creatures and Charms and of course Transfiguration. He was good at Arithmancy.

And he had a plan of his own that nobody needed to know about. If he failed, nobody would make fun of him; if he made it in, nobody would dare.

"Now then, Mr...Padfoot," McGonagall said, seated behind the big desk in her office with Sirius, plucking nervously at his robes, on the other side. "You seem to be settling into your new post nicely."

"I am, thanks," Sirius replied. "I met Firenze today."

"And what did he make of you?"

Sirius grinned. "He said something about ascendant stars and red robes."

"That sounds like Firenze, I'm afraid. I don't suppose he was kind enough to provide you any insights into your future career?"

Sirius shrugged. "Do I really need to set one yet? I don't know if I'll survive the war. I didn't last time."

"I would hope you would at least find the goal of taking your NEWTs worthwhile," she replied sharply.

"Did I?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The other Sirius – did I take my NEWTs?"

She sighed. "Yes. I have no idea, to this day, why you did, but yes – you did take your NEWTs. You did very well on them, actually."

"Really? What'd I take?" he asked, leaning forward to reach for his file, sitting near her elbow. She rested a hand on it possessively.

"I think it would be...unwise to determine your future based on the past of a man who spent twelve years in prison and died rather tragically and unnecessarily at the hands of a piece of architecture," she said quietly. Sirius ducked his head, chastised.

"But he was me," he said, after a silent moment. "At least tell me what I did with my life."

"From what I could tell, as little as possible," she answered. "You may wish to ask Professor Lupin—he knew you rather better than I did. You spent much of your time working for the Order, in the later days of the war. You may recall that you had some little inheritance on graduation."

"Uncle Alphard."

"Indeed."

"Good old bastard," Sirius said with a grin. McGonagall looked reproving.

"As I said, it is not wise to base current decisions on past history," she repeated. "What is it you wish to do with your life, Sirius? Surely there must be something worthwhile. As much as it pains me to admit it, you would be utterly wasted if you did not at least attempt your NEWTs."

"When would I have to register for them?"

"Within the next three weeks, to sit this year's."

Sirius gave her an indecisive look. "Can I have a few more days?"

"Do you imagine your wishes and desires will change within a few days?"

"I think they might, yeah," he answered. "I mean, I think maybe I'll have some."

She regarded him gravely across the desk.

"I have made many exceptions for you already, young man," she said. "I understand your abilities, believe it or not, possibly better than you yourself do. You have done great things, and great things will be expected of you."

He glanced at her sharply.

"Now that your potential is fully understood, you will be weighed against that and not against your fellow students," she continued. "A young man who can complete the Animagus transformation at the age of fifteen does not belong in a sixth-year Transfigurations class, as I think you well know."

"Reckon I wouldn't need to swot that much for Transfigs," he said with a cocky grin.

"You have two weeks in which to make your decisions, Mr. Padfoot," she said firmly. "I cannot give you more time than that. I would suggest you consult those who know you best—Professor Lupin, and perhaps, though I dread to say it, Mr. Potter." She shuffled some papers on her desk and set them aside. "Off you go to dinner, then."

"Thank you, Headmistress," he said, rising to leave. "I'll give it every consideration."

"Two weeks, no more!" she called after him as the door closed behind him.

## CHAPTER XVII

Sirius was quiet after his meeting with McGonagall, so unusually quiet that Remus remarked on it at dinner – Tonks was in London on Auror business and Harry had said he was just going to do a fry-up, so Remus decided to stay at Hogwarts for the evening meal.

“Are you all right, Padfoot?” he asked, spooning potatoes onto his plate. Sirius shrugged, then looked at him thoughtfully.

“Had my career session with McGonagall today,” he said.

“Oh yes? Picked your NEWTs, have you? Hope you’re taking Transfiguration – be a shame if you didn’t,” Remus said with a smile.

“Dunno...I asked for a few days to think it over.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“She wouldn’t tell me what I took last time. She said she didn’t even know what I did after Hogwarts.”

Remus carefully separated his potatoes from his roast beef, fussily. “I’d venture to guess she told you that you didn’t do much of anything.”

“That’s it exactly!”

“Yes, well, you didn’t *appear* to,” Remus allowed. “You did quite a lot, though, to be honest. It’s just that none of it was really...well, it was not what you would call employment.”

“What would I call it then? Charity?”

Remus grinned over his food. “Well, if I recall you were going to be an Auror, but your training was rather spotty. You worked in some shops in Diagon for a while, but you never really needed the money, so when you got annoyed you generally quit. You did lots of other things, though.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you worked for the Order – you were really quite indispensable whenever someone wanted anything dangerous done. There were the full moons of course, you...looked after me after the moons, which is quite a full time job, you know.”

Sirius winced.

“After Harry came along, you were babysitter number one – wouldn’t let anyone else do it. You were working on your motorbike a lot. And you were Ellis’ muse which, trust me, was another full-time job,” Remus smiled nostalgically.

"It doesn't sound very well-planned," Sirius said finally.

"Yes, well, the only thing you ever put any real planning into were pranks, if you recall," Remus chided gently. "I think it was rather hard for you. You had no real reason to have to do anything, so you simply did what came along. One did get the sense that you were...waiting, perhaps. For the war to end. It did seem like there were things you wanted, but...well, you never said what they were, if you even knew."

"And then came Azkaban—"

"Yes," Remus bit the word out sharply, cutting him off. Sirius fell silent, sopping up some gravy with a bit of potato. Finally, Remus continued.

"So, Padfoot," he said, without looking at him, "If you have a heart's desire, you certainly never told me. But I would advise you to follow it; ignoring it didn't seem to work very well last time."

"All right, Moony," Sirius answered. "Maybe I will."

\* \* \*

On Thursday afternoon, Augustus Pye appeared on the rather unseasonably drizzly main street of Hogsmeade, making for the warmth and pleasant yellow light of the Three Broomsticks. As he picked his way across the shallow mud, a large black dog trotted out of the alley and sidled up to him like a second shadow.

"Hullo, stray," he said, stopping on the threshold. "Come in for a drink first?"

Padfoot licked his lips and let his tongue loll out. The young Healer smiled and led the way inside, ordering a butterbeer and democratically pouring half into a saucer for the dog, who lapped it up lazily. When he was finished, Augustus tipped his hat to the barmaid and left a handful of sickles on the table, venturing back outside into the post-drizzle dampness.

They walked together, Padfoot leading the way up the branch of road which split off from the path to Hogwarts. They skirted around the side of the Forbidden Forest until they reached an open, grassy plain down the hill from the town. Once they were in amongst the high grass, Sirius changed back without breaking stride and they continued in silence for a while.

"Have you ever been here before?" Pye asked, finally.

"Around—we never went down to the site, but I know where it is. Harry gave me maps," Sirius added. "It's another ten minutes' walk that way. Thanks for coming along."

"It's my pleasure. I rarely get to leave St. Mungo's—patching up hexes and curing comatose werewolves aside, I don't really do much for the Order," Pye admitted. "This is an adventure, for me."

"Pretty poor adventuring," Sirius said, shoving his hands in the pockets of his scarlet robes. His boots, caked with mud, crunched on the harder soil in the field.

"Well, it'll be interesting to see the gravesite. Do you expect to find anything specific there?"

"I don't know. I mean I sort of know. I'll know it when I see it, anyway," Sirius said. "I might have to do a few charms."

"I hope I can be of help." Pye cleared his throat. "On that count, you did say in your letter..."

"Personal business," Sirius grunted.

"If it's some sort of magical malady, I am sworn to confidentiality—"

"No! No, it's not that," Sirius said, as a flock of birds rose from nearby and fluttered up into the air. "It's...well, I'd still appreciate that confidentiality."

"Have you got a girl in trouble?" Pye asked.

"Of course not!"

"Only asking. Better men than you have, and you've got the look about you."

"What look is that?" Sirius demanded.

"Nothing! Nothing. Rakish, that's what it is. You look like it wouldn't be hard for you to get...into the sort of position that results in getting girls in trouble. Sorry, that's terrible, isn't it? I'm told I haven't got the greatest bedside manner sometimes," Pye said.

"Well, it isn't a girl, either. I just...had some questions. Hypothetical."

"Aha," Pye said, kicking a stone out of his way. "Hypothetical. Right."

"How many NEWTs did you take?"

Pye blinked at him, then laughed. "Well, not that I can see why it matters, but I sat nine and got seven with Exceeds or higher. I shouldn't even have registered to sit History, looking back, but I thought it might be a feather in my cap."

"What did you sit?"

"Oh...History, of course, and Care of Magical Creatures, those are the two I didn't pass. Ignominious, I know, but we had a particularly rigorous examiner and I wasn't as interested in animals as I was in humans. Herbology and Potions of course, those are core, Charms, Transfiguration, Defence Against the Dark Arts – that one surprised me – Arithmancy and Ancient Runes."

"Defence? Really?"

"Well, yes. I mean you have to know all sorts of countercharms and antidotes to various hexes, if you want to be a really top-notch Healer. You can't get into an apprentice Healer program without five Exceeds Expectations NEWTs, and the three you *have* to get are Herbology, Potions, and Defence."

"Popular job? I mean, people are a bit impressed, right? It's not like working in a shop somewhere."

"Well, I'm not exactly the life of the party, but there's a certain cachet in – why, you aren't thinking of being a Healer, are you?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Sirius asked defensively.

"I'm sorry..." Pye hesitated. "It's just, I met the other Sirius, once or twice."

"Was he really such a bastard?"

"I don't think he was naturally an angry man, but he wasn't precisely the sort I'd peg as Healer material. He was more of the insane vengeful Auror sort. Tell me, do you ever read Muggle comic books...like, uh, *Batman*?"

Sirius looked at him blankly. "Is it about an animagus?"

Pye sighed. "Not exactly. Anyway, is that what you wanted to ask me about? Being a Healer?"

"I was just thinking about it," Sirius said with a shrug. "I'm pretty good at healing charms, I have a lot of practice."

"How are you at Potions? That's about half of what we do."

"Decent. Could be better *if I applied myself*," Sirius said, slipping into a high-voiced Scots accent reminiscent of McGonagall. Pye snorted. "Reckon I'd have a chance?"

"I don't know anything about you, really," Pye said. "I couldn't say in the least. I can bring you some pamphlets, though, if you like. Confidentially."

"Ta," Sirius said. "I'd appreciate that. Look – there they are," he added, pointing to two large, slightly oblong stones rising up out of the landscape.

"Godric's Stones," Pye said with a snicker. As they drew closer, the long, narrow mound which covered Godric Gryffindor's final resting place became

visible, jutting out from between the two stones. It really did look as though some final dirty joke old Gryffindor had played on the landscape. Sirius knocked his knuckles against one of the stones, noticing the weathered creases here and there. Finally he turned to Pye.

"Dare you to climb it," he said.

"That's Godric Gryffindor's grave marker!" Pye said, shocked.

"Fine, I will," Sirius said, getting a foothold and a decent handhold. "Bet I could beat you up anyway."

Augustus Pye was a Healer, but he was after all a very *young* Healer. "Could not!"

"Prove it!"

The stones weren't too terribly large and they both reached the top without trouble; from this vantage point they could see the field sloping down to the Forest, and Hogwarts rising out again from behind it. Sirius leaned back on the slightly clammy surface of the stone and breathed deeply.

"Smell that?" he said. "That's autumn. No wonder Gryffindor wanted to be buried here. I would too."

\* \* \*

Sirius didn't bother owling Harry with his findings before Friday; he hadn't uncovered anything that couldn't wait the few hours between when an owl would have reached him and when he would arrive to visit. Sirius took the last two afternoon classes off and, as promised, nicked sandwiches and other foodstuffs from the kitchen.

Harry arrived through the floo in Remus' office, sneaking out while Remus was engaged in teaching. Sirius met him in the hallway nearby, just a short walk from his rooms. On the way there he told him about finding and exploring the gravesite, including what he thought was a very concise and professional summation of all the charms he'd tried.

"So you didn't find anything?" Harry asked, as Sirius let him into his rooms. Room, really; he had a private bath as well as the password to the Prefects' bathroom, but other than that the Tutor's quarters were really just a large open room with a bed at one end and a little grouping of sitting-room furniture around a rug at the other.

"Not a thing. I even did some pretty tricky charms to see if I could detect metal down in the grave, but I came up pretty empty-handed."

Harry sighed. "Hermione didn't turn up anything at the Grindelwald site, either, and Tonks said Hufflepuff's tomb was a big waste of time, especially since Fleur kept complaining about mud on her shoes."

"I can imagine," Sirius said with a laugh. "Here, there's food and tea, and..."

He reached into a cupboard and pulled out the prize loot from his kitchen trip, a bottle of Ogden's Old Peculiar.

"Sirius, it's half-three in the afternoon!"

"Well, I'm not doing any more teaching today, are you? I hung a sign on my office door and everything saying I was out sick. I didn't get my proper afternoon off yesterday, you know."

"So you're going to make up for it by drinking today?"

Sirius spread his hands. Harry dropped into one of the chairs at the little table in one corner, shaking his head in amusement while Sirius set out food and poured two cups of tea, spiking it with the whiskey.

"I have heard stories about your teetotal ways," he said. "It must be remedied, young Harry."

"I'm older than you are," Harry protested.

"Not when I am Nigel Padfoot!" Sirius answered cheerfully. "Drink your tea and eat your sandwich and tell me about the doings of the Order's inner circle."

"Well, I'm going off to the Gaunt family crypt this week-end, since Hagrid's had classes all week. Same with Remus—I think he and Moody are going on Sunday. Apparently Hermione had a lot of fun at the Grindelwald site, she brought a guidebook along."

"Bill must have been bored out of his redheaded skull," Sirius observed.

"Probably so. Ron and George are having a hard time finding out when they can go because George doesn't trust anyone else to mind the shop, but I think maybe they'll go on Sunday too, and I'll mind it for them."

"Great! Can I come help?"

"Depends. George might get Ginny to do it, if he can sneak her out of the castle. As for Tonks and Fleur...well, neither of them said much, just that they didn't find anything. I don't think they get on well."

"Does anyone get on well with Fleur?"

Harry shrugged. "She's part veela. When she wants people to get on with her...they do."

"Reckon Ron and George will find something?"

Harry sipped his tea, apparently forgetting the whiskey in it. "I don't know," he said, turning the cup around and around on the table. "I was so sure it had something to do with death. I mean I have a gut feeling about it."

"But there are a thousand million graveyards in Britain alone?"

"Something like that."

Sirius topped off Harry's tea with the whiskey. "Got any other ideas yet?"

"Not yet. And there's still a few places, so I haven't given up."

"What have you been doing in the meantime?"

Harry shrugged. "Reading. Going down to the pub when I get bored. Helping Bowman in the garden a bit."

"Really? Pumpkins coming along?"

"Yeah, they'll be huge by Hallowe'en. Anyway...that takes up some time, and Tonks has me studying a bit for the Aurors' entry exam even without my NEWTs—she says it's good practice. Keeps me busy."

Sirius studied Harry, who was slumped slightly and staring at the mug on the table, still turning it around in place, making little wet circles where it sloshed slightly. He looked lonely and tired, Sirius realised. Like a seventeen-year-old boy who spent all his time preparing for a war he wasn't sure how to fight.

Well, there was only one solution for that, which Sirius had learned in the Care And Handling of Moony Lupin course he'd assigned himself and James in their fourth year. There was a cure for depressive ennui, and Sirius Black knew precisely what it was.

"Drink your tea," he said, and led the conversation on into other topics, including but not limited to Firenze and his cryptic remarks, the impending first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, and the relative merits of chocolate frogs versus Honeydukes bars.

"I have an idea," Sirius said, when he and Harry had managed to consume about a third of the bottle between them. Harry looked significantly less worried and slightly red-cheeked. "It's a grand idea."

"It's going to get us into trouble, isn't it?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Nonsense, you're not even a student anymore and they can't sack me," Sirius replied. "Besides, we have the Map, and with the Map we are invincible."

"No, that's the cloak," Harry corrected.

"Invincible, not invisible."

"Right, invisible. Got that in my pocket."

"You brought the cloak?"

"Yeah—I bring it everywhere. It folds up really small," Harry said, removing a rather tightly-folded wad of fabric from the inner pocket of the jacket hanging on the back of his chair. Sirius' eyes gleamed.

"This is perfect," he said.

"What're we going to do?" Harry asked, leaning forward.

"Dinner's going to be over in a few minutes," Sirius said, glancing at the clock. "At which point a...a *gaggle* of girls will congregate in my hallway and get in the way of everyone who actually wants to come to tutoring. I think it's time I exacted my revenge."

\* \* \*

Harry had forgotten, in the months since he'd left school, how small the Invisibility Cloak was growing. It wasn't actually shrinking, of course, but it had only ever been intended for one fully grown person to wear. That wasn't a problem when you were thirteen and somewhat underfed for your age; at that point, three people fit just fine.

Now, however, Harry had grown quite a bit, and Sirius wasn't tiny himself, which made it difficult to fit both of them under the cloak. Walking side-by-side was impossible; instead, Harry followed Sirius closely, hands on his shoulders, trying to move his feet in sync with Sirius' strides. Sirius held the map in one hand and carefully avoided Filch, a wandering Trelawney, and a couple of fifth-year Prefects as he guided them along.

"Here," Sirius whispered, drawing them up to a halt next to a statue that stood opposite his office door and provided the perfect cover. Sirius crouched slightly and peered around the pedestal; Harry leaned in and over his shoulder, looking also. He heard Sirius folding the map and tucking it away somewhere even as there was a clatter of feet on the stairs.

"You follow my lead," Sirius whispered, tense with excitement. Harry, still trying to get a decent view, leaned forward more. Sirius had slipped just the tip of his wand under a corner of the cloak and Harry gave up and knelt behind him, sliding his wand-arm around Sirius' hip and under the cloak as well. The other boy's breath hitched slightly, probably from excitement.

Harry became aware, as they lay in wait for their victims, that he was closer to Sirius physically than he'd ever been while they were both human.

Sirius smelled differently as a human than he did as a dog; it made sense, anyway, since dogs didn't wear aftershave. They didn't *shave*.

Harry drew a giddy breath and blamed the whiskey. He didn't care if it was Sirius or Padfoot; it was a relief to touch someone, such a relief that he told himself he wouldn't have cared if Sirius were some random person in a shop somewhere. Sirius shifted his weight slightly and Harry rested his chin on Sirius' shoulder to get the best view. For a moment, however, he forgot their prey or the reason they were even here in the skin-prickling sensation of closeness, the feel-smell-heat of Sirius' body.

"Ready?" Sirius asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Ready," Harry answered, pulling himself together. This was Sirius, for god's sake, not Ginny or some other girl he fancied, and he should definitely not be thinking that Sirius smelled better than them anyway.

He was so wrapped up in chastising himself that he almost didn't notice Sirius flick his wand and mutter a charm; the girls, who were clustered around the door reading the notice, definitely didn't notice.

At least until one of them squeaked and clutched her bum, turning around to see who was there.

"Bum-pinching hex," Sirius said to Harry, turning his head slightly. "*Pugachellus*. Popular with the Italians. Try it."

Harry took aim at the girl next to Sirius' victim and whispered, "*Pugachellus!*"

This girl shrieked, causing all the others to shriek also. Both offended parties grabbed their bottoms. Harry fought down a snicker. Sirius cast another two and Harry one more before Sirius shushed him again and prepared the killing blow, now that the girls were all in a state of chaotic confusion, casting anti-ghost charms left and right.

"*Adlevoga Aeolus!*"

Most of the girls weren't wearing robes, just their under-uniforms with skirts that were hiked rather higher than McGonagall would have approved of. When Sirius cast the hex, every skirt in the hallway blew up around the girls' shoulders, giving Sirius and Harry a quick but efficient survey of who'd had their laundry done recently and who preferred to go *au naturel*. Harry gaped in amazement as they fled, pulling their skirts down so fast that some of them had to pull the waistbands back up again. The few boys who'd accompanied them had to stagger out clutching their waistbands after their belt-buckles failed.

Sirius cracked up laughing as their victims disappeared around a corner. Harry pressed his face between Sirius' shoulder blades as he laughed and laughed until he was exhausted.

"Let's go back," he said, and they fled back to Sirius' rooms without bothering to fully conceal themselves, collapsing into fits of laughter again after they had shut the door.

"Merlin," Sirius said, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes. "Oh, Merlin, that was perfect."

"It was great," Harry agreed, dropping onto the sofa next to Sirius and leaning back. "I can't remember when I've had that much fun."

"Yeah, I know," Sirius answered. "Oh, the looks on their faces..."

"Did you see the girl in the red – you know?"

"UP GRYFFINDOR!" Sirius cried, and Harry collapsed into laughter again. Sirius flopped backwards, turning to grin at Harry.

"You need to have more fun, Harry Potter," he said, as Harry continued to make a noise that was suspiciously close to a giggle. Harry turned his head too, and suddenly found himself nose-to-nose with Sirius, who *still smelled really good*.

"Well, that's why I have you," he heard himself say. For just a moment the world froze; Sirius darted his tongue along his lower lip, smooth and pink, as if he were about to speak. Harry became very aware of the fact that if Sirius inclined his head about an inch, he could dart his tongue along *Harry's* lower lip.

"Yep," Sirius said instead, straightening quickly and leaping to his feet. "You'd better go, though – Remus said he was going to come get you after dinner."

Harry frowned, confused. "Are you going to come back with us? It's Friday, you don't have to be around again until Monday."

"No – you have work to do," Sirius said. "I mean I'd like to, but I don't want to be in the way."

Harry, secretly slightly relieved, nodded. "Right. But I'll come next week? On Thursday next time?"

"Sure – and I'll see you on Tuesday probably, that's the full moon."

"Sure. Right then," Harry said.

"Right. Oh – have a Predica Mint," Sirius said, offering Harry a small tin. "Makes you act – and uh, smell – sober for half an hour. So that Remus doesn't shout at me," he added with a wink.

Harry took the mint and chewed it up, feeling immediately more sober and slightly shocked at what he'd been thinking.

"See you," he said, gathering up his cloak and going to the door. "I'll send a note with Remus on Monday, let you know what we find."

He probably imagined Sirius' sigh of relief as he closed the door.

\* \* \*

Harry did send a note on Monday, which was delivered at lunch by the somewhat gaunt-faced Remus, but it was fairly brief and Sirius wondered if he'd accidentally pushed matters too far.

*Padfoot,*

*Can't come before the full moon – Hermione needs me & Ron for a project, wish she didn't. Remus is not well, know you'll look after him. DO NOT LISTEN TO HIM he is not well, Tonks says so and if anyone would know she would.*

*No news from the Slytherin or Ravenclaw sites. Didn't get to Gaunt yet. Hermione again. More after the moon. Would tell you but – can't.*

*Harry*

Sirius, disappointed, folded the note and put it in his pocket.

"Want to write back?" Remus asked. Sirius examined him; his skin was dull and pale, eyes glassy, and the bones of his knuckles looked like they were pressing against his skin. Sirius knew the signs of a bad moon impending.

"Yeah – I'll bring you a reply at dinner?" Sirius said. Remus nodded and returned to picking at his lunch unenthusiastically. Sirius bit his lip. It wasn't his place to say anything, not really, not anymore, and what would he say? Everything you could possibly say to Moony about his disease was either pointless or had already been said.

After lunch he stopped McGonagall in the hallway.

"I'll have my NEWTs choices for you this evening," he said. "I don't think you'll disapprove."

"How many?" she asked.

"Eight. Maybe nine. Seven at the least," he answered. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not say why just yet."

She gave him a sceptical look. "You seem very certain, all of a sudden."

"I am," Sirius answered. He left her there in the hallway, staring after him, until she had to hurry so as not to be late to one of her own classes.

That evening he gave Remus a note for Harry, written in an afternoon class, which said that he understood and wondered if Harry wanted to come to tea on Thursday this week. He also passed a list of classes to McGonagall, who promptly began making notes about appropriate compositions to set him and books to make him read.

*NIGEL PADFOOT – NEWTS REGISTRATION*

*Herbology*

*Potions*

*Charms*

*Transfiguration*

*Defence Against the Dark Arts*

*Ancient Runes*

*Astronomy*

"What is that boy up to?" she asked herself, glancing down the table to where Sirius was badgering Professor Lupin into finishing his carrots. Then she had to remind herself that sometimes curiosity was lethal to cats, and she tucked the list away until she could fill out the proper paperwork. Some things in life, she had found, were better left as mysteries.

## CHAPTER XVIII

McGonagall, watching Remus fumble with his spoon at breakfast on Tuesday morning, made an impartial decision having nothing to do with her fondness for her former pupil and sent him off to get some rest before the evening's Change. Sirius helped him down the passageway and into a freshly made bed in the Shack before dashing back to take over his first class.

Remus had been at Hogwarts often that weekend, composing lesson plans for him and explaining what and what not to do. Sirius grasped the basic gist fairly quickly, and it would have been ridiculous after two weeks of Tutoring to be afraid of standing up and lecturing. Absolutely ridiculous. Surely.

He wiped his palms on the inside sleeves of his robe again and leaned back against Remus' desk. The second-year Slytherin-Hufflepuff class was slowly sorting itself out into factions and cliques just like always, seating themselves and slamming books around.

Slytherins and Hufflepuffs. Great. And he had them double, which meant *all morning long*.

"All right, settle down," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Everyone in seats, books and parchment out, come on, you know the drill. For those of you who've been living under a rock, I'm Mr. Padfoot."

"We know who you are!" a young Hufflepuff by the name of Brianna piped up.

"Good, I'm glad to know my fame is spreading," Sirius answered with a smirk. The class finally fell into full silence, and he almost stuttered. The immense *focus* of everyone in the room on him was almost frightening. He'd been the centre of attention before—he liked being the centre of attention—but always because he'd done something worth it. He'd never simply been stared at for being the Teacher.

"Now, I'll be teaching for Professor Lupin today, and probably tomorrow and the next day. So it behooves you not to annoy me or otherwise cause Grudges to be Held. I see that, Dentworth," he added, before he could stop himself. One of the Hufflepuffs was slipping a note to his next-door neighbour. Both boys suddenly looked terrified. "If I see it again, I'm reading it aloud. Remember my mercy this time around."

*Oh Merlin, he thought, I'm turning into McGonagall.*

"Now, let me see...since I'm the teacher today, that means one of you has to be Tutor..." He tapped his finger against his lips, pacing back and forth and finally pointing to a particularly uppity Slytherin girl. "Maddie, you're just the sort I think this class needs, don't you?"

She looked startled as Sirius undid his scarlet robes and swirled them around her shoulders. He did up the knot-and-loop clasp around her neck, settled the sleeves neatly, and grinned at her. She looked as though she were sitting in a large, gilt-edged red tent. Everyone else laughed.

"You laugh now, but with the red robes comes the *power*," he said. "So you had better watch out for Maddie. And Maddie had better do a good job, or else she's fired, just like me. But if she's suitably helpful, I'll pay her ten points to Slytherin at the end of class."

He held out his hand to the small girl, and she shook it firmly.

"Now then!" Sirius said, returning to the front of the class and rolling up the sleeves of his white Hogwarts shirt, "Professor Lupin left you with the categories of defensive magic, I think. Anyone want to take a stab at naming all eight?"

\* \* \*

It was just as well that Remus was indisposed in the Shack all day and had been gone most of the weekend, since as a Professor he probably would have warned Ron and Hermione away from leaving the school grounds. McGonagall politely looked the other way since they'd told her it was Order business, and besides, she still had a school to run.

The pair of them had spent most of their weekend at Grimmauld Place with Harry, stewing wolfsbane—the herb, not the potion—in a cauldron on the stove and studying maps of areas that Fenrir was likely to try. Bill had commissioned Fleur to find the silver they would need and through family connections she managed quite a bit, in ingots, for a very low price. It was now in the hands of a professional: George, who had enough experience with volatile chemicals that molten silver was no problem.

Hermione had also set up a series of large, square boxes in the garden of Grimmauld Place and produced two items that made Harry and Ron both extremely excited and extremely nervous.

"It's scary how much you know about this," Ron told Hermione, as they took a well-deserved break on Sunday afternoon. London was sunnier than

Hogwarts, and they were enjoying the brief warmth in the back garden over lemonade and biscuits.

"I read," Hermione had said.

"I know," Ron had answered sourly, but she leaned over from where she sat next to him on the steps and kissed him, which seemed to cheer his mood considerably.

"Do you really think we'll have to use all this?" Harry had asked.

"We might. I don't care if we kill Fenrir Greyback, but I know bloody well that he's not going to kill us," Hermione had answered. "You've got a pretty good eye, Harry."

Harry had waggled his fingers. "Seeker, remember? Used to finding small things."

Now, as he waited at the edge of Hogsmeade for Ron and Hermione to appear on Tuesday evening, he wondered if they weren't being ridiculously arrogant. George had delivered the requisite weaponry that morning after Remus left for Hogwarts, and the silver-plated dagger had already absorbed the heat of Harry's body, becoming a warm weight in his pocket. He felt guilty carrying it, but the dagger was the least of his worries. The crude bracelets and necklace worried him far more. If they were detected because the werewolves could sense silver...

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" someone roared in his ear. Harry turned, instinctively raising his hands. Bill leapt backwards, laughing.

"Sorry, Harry, I couldn't resist," he said.

"Bill, don't do that," he scolded.

"I am sorry. You should pay more attention to your surroundings! Phew, that stuff is awful," Bill added, indicating the silver on Harry's wrists. Harry let his sleeves fall back over the silver circlets, and Bill looked more at ease.

"What's it like?" Harry asked curiously.

"Dunno about real werewolves," Bill answered. "But for me it's like...this buzzing noise, and the closer you get the louder it is, only it gets inside your head. Like a headache. And Charlie says if it touches real werewolves, it burns them."

"Yuck," Harry said.

"It's not great," Bill agreed.

"You think it'll hurt our chances of finding Fenrir?"

"No, I don't think so—smell carries a lot further than silver. That's what Remus told me, anyway. You have to get really close to make an impact with silver."

"Good," Harry said, just as Ron and Hermione Apparated with a crack.

"Wotcha," Ron said, coming forward. "All ready?"

Harry nudged the nearby sack with his boot. "Everything's in there. Are we sure this is a smart idea?"

"It's what has to be done," Hermione said. "Look at it this way...Remus hasn't left the school. So Fenrir's going to turn—possibly kill—a child. We're defending a child from death."

"How long until moonrise?" Bill asked.

"Almost an hour. Think it's enough?"

"It has to be," Harry replied. "Any sooner and he might not even be out—all we'd be doing is spreading our scent."

"Which reminds me..." Hermione offered him a fragile-looking glass vial. "If he gets out of control, crush it—it's the distilled wolfsbane we made. Ought to keep him off you for long enough to call for help. Sorry, Bill—haven't got much to offer you."

"S'all right," Bill said. "I brought something I had Dad find for me."

He unshouldered an oblong bag he'd been carrying and opened it. Harry and Hermione's eyes widened.

"It's a raffle," Bill said proudly. "Dad showed me how to use it. George loaded it up with silver bullets for me."

"Rifle," Harry corrected, staring at the sleek, shining hunting rifle. "Bill, those are really dangerous!"

"Yeah, I know. Figures Dad would have one, doesn't it?" Bill held the rifle up and sighted down the barrel. Harry stepped back quickly. "He says Muggles hunt ducks with it."

"And *other Muggles*," Hermione said. "Put it away, Bill, before someone loses a limb."

Bill shrugged and zipped it back up into the case. Harry picked up the sack next to his leg and shouldered it, looking expectantly at Hermione and Ron.

"All right," Hermione said. "Bill, can you take Harry and follow us?"

"No problem," Bill said with a grin. "Whenever you're ready."

Harry took hold of Bill's arm and, as soon as Hermione and Ron vanished, felt that horrible sensation of being squeezed through a tube, breathless, heart about to explode in his chest –

And then they were standing in the open air once more, far damper than Scotland's had been, with a breeze that smelled of the coast – wet gravel, seaweed and fish. They were next to a road that led northwards, but on either side of the road there was nothing but grassy turf, broken by rocks and the occasional small pond.

"He likes the coasts – fewer distractions than forests," Hermione said. In the distance, water crashed on the beach, a dull background roar. "He likes to have somewhere he feels safe, somewhere protected but wild."

"Why here?" Bill asked, studying the darkening sky above them. "I'd think he'd strike Hogsmeade. It's closest."

"Because this is Remus' home," Hermione answered quietly. "He told me once. It's closer to his heart than Hogsmeade. And it has *that*," she added.

They followed her gaze across the stretch of rocky, uneven ground before them, to where a dim shadow jutted up towards the sky. From here he could barely make out the jagged shapes of a ruined building, freestanding walls and scattered stone.

"Whitby Abby," Ron said.

"It looks creepier in person," Harry observed.

"I think he'll start there." Hermione sighed. "You know how children are. There are bound to be a few who want to go adventuring in the Abbey on a full moon night."

"And if there aren't...town isn't far away," Harry said. "Just down the cliff."

"From here..." Hermione said, "...from here, I guess it's all Bill, really. Harry, do you want to unpack?"

"I think we'd better," Harry agreed. He lowered the pack from his shoulder and crouched over it, undoing the drawstring at the top. Bill grunted and stepped back as Harry drew out a handful of George's best work – long, thin shafts of wood with sharp silver tips. They were followed quickly by three wicked-looking wooden contraptions, stamped on the side with *Infensus Arms Co, Est. 1102*.

"Crossbows?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, well, wands, not much good against a werewolf, really," Ron said, accepting one of them. He was still a little clumsy loading it, but they weren't planning on having to reload in a hurry. "Besides, you brought a *raffle*."

"Rifle," Harry and Hermione corrected in unison.

"True," Bill conceded. "Do you know how to work them, even?"

"We've been practicing," Hermione said.

"For a whole weekend," Ron added, rolling his eyes.

"Well, the plan isn't to hunt him," Hermione said. "Just to reason with him, and if reasoning doesn't work, to shoot him at close range. Besides, they're charmed for easy use."

"This isn't," Bill said, indicating the rifle. "This is for if he tries to eat my little brother. Or my little brother's girlfriend and best friend."

"Can you tell if he's here?" Hermione asked. Bill lifted his head and for a moment Harry saw the part of Ron's brother which was not entirely human; the tilt of his chin, the flare of nostrils and the sudden tense stillness were all things one would expect of a hunting dog—or a large jungle cat. He'd never seen such things in Remus, but then Remus had spent a lifetime learning to hide them.

"Not yet," Bill said. "But the wind is coming off the ocean—if you stay behind me as we go, I'll smell him a long time before he smells any of us. As long as he's not coming up behind us," he added. "We should try to keep as invisible as possible—maybe a Disillusionment?"

Even as he said it, Harry felt a cold trickle over his skin, and realised that Hermione had anticipated Bill's suggestion. He glanced at Ron, standing next to him, and saw Ron's head and arms begin to blend in with the landscape. Another second and Ron had nearly vanished; only the occasional warp or discolouration showed where he was.

"I'll keep an eye on our back," Hermione said. "We should hold hands."

Harry felt Bill's hand grope along the side of his arm and settle on his shoulder; Ron's hand gripped his wrist tightly. They moved along the north-running road slowly, cutting across it to make a more direct line for the Abbey. Harry kept his eyes fixed on it, straining for the slightest sign of movement. Not so much as a flicker of a shadow.

Bill's fingers tightened on his shoulder suddenly.

"Don't talk," he said in the barest of whispers. "Fenrir. Follow me."

Harry shifted place, reminded of his adventure with Sirius under the invisibility cloak, and gripped Bill's sleeve with his right hand, left cradling the

crossbow. The wind still blew against them, masking their scent and clearly carrying Fenrir's to Bill on the air.

There was a soft noise, a thud of footsteps, and Harry realised Hermione had gone ahead. She must have seen Fenrir – and in a second, he did also. A dark shape lounging among the fallen stones of the ruined Whitby Abbey, seated on a large chunk of wall and, incongruously, smoking a cigarette. He was facing west, in profile, away from the water and towards the outskirts of Whitby itself.

Harry heard Ron break away and head in the opposite direction from Hermione; he wondered if they'd developed telepathy since they'd begun snogging each other.

He saw Hermione step out of the Disillusionment upwind from Fenrir at the same time he felt a warm rush of air across his skin. Ron appeared far off to his left, Hermione across the ruins and closer to Fenrir than either one of them.

The werewolf tensed and leapt to his feet, but he didn't run. He must have smelled Hermione a second before she appeared.

They all stared at each other for a minute; Fenrir surrounded by a triangle of humans, the others watching to see what he would do. Finally he straightened from the fighting stance he'd been in.

He was still filthy and he reeked of animal waste and cigarettes; slowly he produced another from his pocket, took the one he was smoking out of his mouth, and lit the new one with the butt of the old. He dropped the old one to the ground, where it smouldered and smoked. He didn't bother putting it out. He was barefoot.

"Children," he said, showing his teeth. "What brings four such tasty morsels to the door of the Big Bad Wolf?"

"I'm surprised you read well enough to know the story," Hermione said.

"Oh yes, I know that story, Riding Hood. I *like* that story," Fenrir answered.

"Doesn't end well for the wolf."

"Maybe not in the one you've...*read*," Fenrir said. "In the old stories they pass down in the packs, the wolf picks his teeth with the woodchopper's bones."

"Greyback," Harry said, not wanting to waste time on comparative mythology. The sun was setting. "Out without your pack?"

Fenrir snorted. "If you were wise, little boy, you would understand. If your pet pack-traitor had bothered to learn anything I had to teach him, he could have told you. You know nothing about us."

"I do," Bill rumbled. Fenrir grinned at him.

"How's your face, Ginger? Wish I could have got you on a moon."

"If one bites, they all want to bite...but only the Alpha gets to pass on his bloodline, isn't that right?" Bill asked.

"Clever, Ginger. How did you learn? You haven't been running with a pack now, have you?"

"No," Bill said. "My brother Charlie *reads* too. He told me all about it. Really, it must be embarrassing to you."

"What's that?" Fenrir asked. Harry could almost see his ears prick – if Bill looked a little like a hunting dog at times, Fenrir practically *was*.

"Failure," Bill said. "Impotence. I mean look at me – still human. Can't be very powerful, can you?"

Fenrir started to snarl, then turned it into a laugh and extended a claw-nailed finger. "Nice try."

"That's why you came alone?" Hermione asked. "So that you had first taste?"

Fenrir licked his lips.

"Well, that was cocky and stupid," she said.

Harry wanted to laugh; she wasn't being smug, she was being so...Hermione. She sounded as though she were scolding Ron for making a dangerous dive in Quidditch.

"I could start with you, Riding Hood," he snarled. "Or with the other boy – the one who smells like your sex."

Harry glanced at Ron, startled.

"We were nervous," Ron said, apologetically. Harry heard Bill snort behind him.

"Or with the Chosen One, the little boy – oh, wouldn't his Lordship love to see you turned," Fenrir said, taking a step towards Harry. Harry reached one hand into the pack that hung off his shoulder, removing the last item in it, wrapped in thick burlap. He tossed it at Fenrir's feet.

Bill and Fenrir both winced; lying on the ground was a brightly glinting set of delicate silver shackles and a silver collar, supplied by Moody from the Aurors' armoury.

"Never," Fenrir growled.

"It's this or we kill you," Hermione said.

"You? Kill me?" Fenrir asked. He managed another bark of laughter, but it looked like an effort.

"We won't kill you in cold blood," Harry heard himself say. "But if you go near a child tonight rest assured we will kill you."

"How alike we are," Fenrir said. "You ask, I disobey, you act; I do no different for the pet. One must teach errant cubs obedience. They learn to be headstrong from humans."

"Put on the chains, Fenrir," Hermione said.

"Fenrir now, is it, Riding Hood? And if I refuse?" he asked, curling his hands into hooked, clawed talons.

Hermione held up the crossbow and sighted along the length of the bolt. Fenrir's laugh was more sincere this time.

"Do you even know how to use that?" he asked, grinning wickedly.

"Isn't it this little button?" she said, finger tightening on the trigger. "I think so. And I never can remember to put the safety on..."

"It can end here," Harry said. "All you have to do is let us tie you up."

"Bind and castrate me like a dog, is that all? Like Lupin, that *lapdog*?" Fenrir spat on the ground. "You'll have to kill me first."

"If you insist," Hermione retorted, tracking his every move.

"The moon will be out soon. Put the chains on," Harry continued. "You have a count of five to start."

"And if I don't?" Fenrir asked.

"One," Harry said. "Two."

"You won't shoot without provocation. I know your kind. Useless, weak—"

"Three. Four."

"She's just a girl, she hasn't the—"

"Five."

*Thunk.*

There was a solid, dull noise as the crossbow bolt slammed into Fenrir's thigh, and a sickening squeak when it collided with bone. Fenrir screamed and lunged for Hermione—

*Thunk.*

Ron's crossbow fired, catching him in the shoulder. He gasped and gripped it with the hand that wasn't already snapping the wood on the bolt in his thigh. The end of his cigarette lay still smoking on the ground.

"Put the chains on," Harry said, as Fenrir screeched in pain and clawed the silver tip out of his shoulder. "If you don't put the chains on, we'll leave you here like this, and when you change if you come within ten feet of a human being we'll shoot you."

Harry heard a soft *snick* behind him. Bill Weasley had chambered a silver bullet in the rifle.

"I don't hold with killing *animals* that hurt children," Bill said. "Most of the time it's on account of children not using their own common sense. I'm bang alongside killing *people* who hurt children, though."

"And here's what will happen, Fenrir," Harry said. "Even if you get away tonight we will find you and we will chain you down and if you get free, if you harm a single human being, rest assured we will hunt you down and make you pay."

Fenrir, hunched over on the ground, lifted his right hand and let the bloody silver bolt-tip from his thigh fall to the ground. Hermione had already reloaded.

"Do you really have it in you, Chosen One?" Fenrir asked Harry. "Do you really think you could?"

"Funny thing," Harry said, as Ron and Hermione edged closer to him. He could see Bill on the edge of his vision, the rifle lifted and aimed, though he was trying to keep his head as far away from the silver bullet as possible. "I keep being told that love is the weapon I need to win this war."

"Fool's game," Fenrir snarled.

"No," Harry said simply. "See, I remembered that, when you love someone, it's not just dying you'll do to protect them. Funny how your pack's all afraid of you but Lupin's pack loves him, isn't it?"

Harry looked along the line of the crossbow bolt. From here he could send it straight through the side of Fenrir's head. It wouldn't go all the way through, but it would go far enough.

"Put the chains on, Fenrir."

\* \* \*

The singular condition of his stays with Remus in the shack was that Sirius not allow the Changed werewolf out into the Forest or the fields outside Hogsmeade. He had been tempted to break this rule, but he was seeing what Remus could not, and what nobody else would suspect—the wolf was as tired as

the man was. It still wanted to stalk and hunt and kill, that much was clear, but Padfoot led the wolf a merry chase around the inside of the Shack instead, destroying what was left of its paltry furnishings in the process and generally exhausting them both.

Eventually the wolf had caught the big black dog and tumbled him over, pinning him on his back. Padfoot, no fool, whined and bared his throat; the wolf seemed satisfied with this, and together they dragged their carcasses upstairs and into the little bedroom with its now-shredded blankets and dilapidated old bed. New sheets would have to be in the offing, Sirius thought, but the shreds and scraps did make a lovely warm nest to curl up in.

He woke at dawn with Remus shuddering and shivering next to him; in an instant he was human again, pushing himself up to grab the tattered blankets and pull them over the other man's shoulders. Remus twitched and huddled closer.

"Padfoot," he said hoarsely.

"It's fine, Moony, I'm here."

"How...was it?"

"Fine, we stayed here," Sirius said, remembering that this had always been the first question, after they had begun going out of the Shack. *How was it...did I kill anyone?*

"Good. Unh..." he grunted and arched his back. Sirius murmured a quiet spell to relax the muscles, and Remus settled in a boneless heap in the blankets. "Sore."

"I know," Sirius said. "But you're not bleeding."

"Small mercies."

"Would you like Padfoot?"

"Don't I...have him?" Remus asked, with the barest smile.

"I mean, I could be Padfoot."

"No, I need..." he closed his eyes and sighed. "Any news?"

"News? About what?"

"Fenrir."

"It's barely dawn—even if there were I wouldn't have it yet. Go to sleep. I'll wake you when I hear anything."

"Promise."

"I promise, Moony," Sirius said. "Sleep."

"Yes," Remus agreed. "Promise you're sure?"

"I promise," Sirius said, changing back into Padfoot. He flopped over next to Remus, curling up against his belly to keep him warm. Remus shifted slightly and curled one hand in Padfoot's thick fur, clinging tightly. Padfoot huffed happily. He was Being Useful to Moony.

*One day, he said to himself. One day they're going to name a cure for Lycanthropy after me.*

He didn't precisely sleep again, but he did doze, eyes closed, listening to Remus' heartbeat where his head was pressed to the man's chest. Remus slept very still, only his fingers flexing occasionally in Padfoot's fur. Sirius missed Wormtail's habit of gnawing reassuringly on Padfoot's ears, and the presence of James who, not being of the precisely cuddly animal persuasion, tended to change back and be the one to potter – HA! – around and fix tea.

There was a noise from downstairs and Sirius' head jerked up; Remus didn't even register it.

Padfoot slipped to the floor as quietly as he could and slunk out the door, teeth already bared. He hadn't arranged for anyone to show up this morning, and it was hours yet before he'd have to be back at Hogwarts for classes. It wasn't likely that it was trouble but, if it was, they were going to have to go through him to get to Moony.

He huffed with relief when he saw that it was Tonks running up the stairs. He galloped to meet her, throwing his paws up on her shoulders in greeting and licking her face. She hugged him, her pink hair tickling his ears.

"Oh, Sirius," she said, stepping back. "Where is he?"

Sirius changed back and took her sleeve, gesturing for her to be quiet. They moved quickly along the landing and into the bedroom where Remus still hadn't moved.

"He said to wake him if there was news – about, about Fenrir," Sirius said. "...is there?"

She bit her lip and nodded, then sat on the bed and touched his arm gingerly. "Remus...wake up."

"Mmh," Remus mumbled.

"Remus, it's important," she continued, as Sirius circled to the other side of the bed, hovering.

"Promised I'd wake you, mate," Sirius added, and his deeper voice seemed to reach Remus more clearly through his exhausted sleep.

"Oh..." he said, eyes opening, eyebrows pulling together in confusion. "It's you..."

Tonks smiled and stroked a lock of hair out of his eyes. "Yeah. Hi."

"Hi," Remus said, and Sirius felt suddenly as though he were intruding on something private, far more intimate than if he'd walked in on them having sex. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, unwilling to leave, wanting to hear the news Tonks plainly had to tell.

"Harry sent me," she said softly. "I have news about Fenrir."

"Oh god..." Remus moaned and covered his face with one hand.

"No, shh, it's okay—it's all right," she said, grasping his wrist and pulling his hand away. "He didn't hurt anyone. Harry—I don't know the details, they didn't *tell* me they were planning this. Probably thought I'd tell you, and they'd have been right...they found Fenrir in Whitby. I don't know how they did it...Remus, Fenrir's been captured. He's in chains at Auror headquarters in London."

Remus stared at her, his eyes wide and not completely focused. "Chains...?"

"I don't know much—they haven't let anyone in to see him and they haven't even told the Prophet yet. Two of the Weasley brothers Apparated in with him early this morning—apparently they'd spent all night keeping watch, with Harry and Hermione and Ron. He tried to bite Charlie, and Bill's filed charges for attempted murder."

"But—"

"It's all right," she said, soothingly. "He's been caught. You're safe."

Remus' chest gave a dangerous heave, almost a spasm, and then he was weeping—silently, exhaustedly, tears rolling down the sides of his face in streaks. He tried to turn away out of shame, but he didn't have the energy; Sirius watched as Tonks pulled him into her lap and he pressed his face against her robes, his shoulders jerking helplessly.

Tonks looked up at Sirius, confusion plain on her face. She didn't know what to do or how to fix it, and Sirius could see that she was looking to him for help. He leaned across the bed and touched Remus' head, whispering softly. As he did so, the erratic movement of Remus' shoulders ceased. The tension drained out of his body, and finally he drew a deep, even breath.

"Sleeping charm," Sirius said quietly.

"Thank Merlin," Tonks said, her hand rising to cover the back of Remus' head protectively.

"Is it true?" Sirius asked. "This werewolf—they brought him in chains? And he's to be imprisoned?"

Tonks nodded. "I think he's been waiting to hear that since he was eight years old. He was so afraid some other little boy was going to go through what he had to."

She wiped her own nose on the sleeve of her free arm and gestured for Sirius to come closer. He changed into Padfoot as he crawled up on the bed, nuzzling her shoulder. She let her head rest on top of his, sighing.

"I wish I could say it was over," she said, "but I think it's really only starting..."

## CHAPTER XIX

Harry arrived while Remus was sleeping and Sirius reluctantly left to go teach class on the few hours of sleep he'd managed between moonrise and dawn. Ron and Hermione were in his second class of the day, so he set everyone else to duelling practice while he heard the full story from their own mouths.

Around the same time, in the Shack, Tonks and a drowsy, aching Remus were listening to Harry's account of it, which was rather slower going. Harry would begin to speak and eventually Remus would nod off; they'd stop and wait for him to wake restlessly, a few minutes later, before continuing. By the time Harry reached the point where he and Bill had summoned Charlie to help Bill bring the exhausted and defeated Fenrir to London, Remus' eyes were hugely dilated, almost eerily so, and his hands clenched and unclenched on the blanket.

"They don't know how to keep him," he said, as soon as Harry was finished. "He'll trick them —"

"It's all right," Tonks soothed. "Bill and Charlie are both keeping watch."

"And Moody," Harry added, and Remus relaxed a little at this.

"Moody won't trust him," he said. "Moody's all right."

Tonks grinned at him. "You're funny when you're loopy."

"Looney, loopy Lupin," Remus mumbled.

"Lovely Lupin," Tonks answered, kissing his temple. "And I'm going to go down to the Three Broomsticks and floo over to look in on everything. I'll bring back news, all right?"

He nodded, plucking at the tattered blankets.

"He'll get no peace unless he knows Fenrir won't escape," she said to Harry quietly. "I'll be back in an hour. Can you stay?"

"Sure," Harry said. "I was going to. Does he...need anything?"

"He shouldn't. Give him water if he asks. I'll bring food back with me, but I don't think he'll want it."

She patted him on the shoulder and left, clattering down the stairs. From below there was the sharp crack of Disapparation, and Harry closed the bedroom door. When he turned back, Remus had shoved himself upright and drawn his legs up, crossing them under the blankets. He had picked up one shredded corner and was knotting it to another, re-joining the edges of a long tear in the fabric. The under-blankets had been fixed with a *reparo* sometime before Harry

arrived, but the top one was still in tatters. Harry watched as his fingers found another pair of corners, smoothing them slowly and then tying them together.

"How are you really?" Harry asked finally. Remus looked up from his knots, slowly.

"As ever, Harry, I survive," he said.

"It's not the same now, is it?"

"The same as...?"

"As before. You haven't really been well since Sirius came, have you?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm healing. It just takes time."

"Does Tonks know?"

"She could hardly avoid knowing. She...plays along." He tied another knot, then looked back up. "You should have told her. She could have helped you."

"She would have told you. Tonks is great, Remus, but she's not very discreet."

Remus smiled. "You don't know Nymphadora Tonks as well as you think, Harry." He shifted a little, ducking his head. "It was a very brave thing the lot of you did. Possibly quite stupid, but as I am the beneficiary I am not in a position to judge."

"It wouldn't have been your fault, you know," Harry blurted. "If he had got hold of some kid—he does it anyway. He threatened to eat Ron and he tried to bite Charlie already."

"I still pity him, sometimes," Remus said quietly.

"You oughtn't."

"It's not entirely *his* fault either. When he was made—what we are—it was a long time ago, and things were very different." Remus breathed deeply, as if just speaking had winded him. "And I am afraid of what will happen when this becomes public."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"His pack may not retaliate...the big talkers are most of them cowards and some not terribly bright...but there are the Death Eaters. And a werewolf in chains in public...it may stir up dangerous sentiments."

Harry stared at him.

"Sirius went to prison without a trial, Harry, and the times then were no darker than they are now," Remus continued. "They're all alike...kill them all

and no trials necessary. You don't try a dog for murder. Vicious animals...ought to be put down."

"Fenrir ought to be," Harry said vehemently.

"Perhaps. But he ought to stand trial like any other *person* first. His actions make him a monster, not the fact that he's a werewolf. People won't see that." Remus tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "I'm so tired of people and their unending stupidity."

Harry smiled. "Me too."

"I know, Harry."

"Do you want to sleep some more?"

"Yes...I think so. Tonks can wake me when she comes back," Remus answered, slouching down in the bed a little.

"Not like she'll have a choice," Harry grinned. Remus laughed hoarsely.

"She is nothing like I expected I would ever want, you know," he said, trailing off into sleepy mumbles. "Love appears to take us very much by surprise."

Harry absently flicked his wand at a three-legged chair in the corner, waiting until the fourth leg had grown out (it was a slightly lighter colour than the others, but it wasn't like it would matter in the Shack, after all) before sitting down.

He had the sudden urge to wake Remus up and ask him what he meant; Remus' last remark had hit slightly too close to home for comfort, and he wondered if Remus could see things he couldn't. Even a week later, he was still turning over in his mind that moment when he'd watch Sirius lick his lips and a bolt of confused desire had shot through him. Even *three* weeks later, he still missed Padfoot on his bed at night and his dreams were becoming disquietingly...vivid.

Sometimes, when Sirius passed close, Harry felt heat rush to his face when he smelled him.

He didn't know what it meant. He didn't think it meant what it might mean, because that was ridiculous—Harry fancied girls. He always had. Hadn't he fancied Cho while Ron and Hermione were busy bickering about Viktor, and hadn't he been viciously jealous of Dean Thomas for seeing Ginny while Ron was off sucking Lavender's face and Hermione was off sulking about it? That was normal. He and Ron fancied girls and Hermione fancied boys and since the other two were always being idiots about love, he'd pretty much done the same.

But Cho had been an epic disaster, he recalled, and Ginny had...it really had felt like he was living someone else's life, like he was doing something he ought to instead of something natural. It wasn't at all a bad thing, he'd quite enjoyed some of the things he and Ginny had got up to, but there had been a constant question in the back of his mind of *is this it?*

And with Sirius, instead, he wanted to ask *can I have more?*

He sighed and pulled his legs up against his chest, resting the heels of his shoes on the edge of the chair. Ron and Hermione were in class now, and he wasn't; Sirius was teaching, and he wasn't. Tonks was getting news, and he wasn't. He was taking action against Voldemort—if anything, last night's adventure had proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But that was...destiny and war and such. That was History, and History didn't often tell you anything about peoples' actual lives.

Harry wanted his life, even the little scraps of it which were all he could gather up, but suddenly his life wasn't what he had expected it to be at all.

\* \* \*

Fenrir's capture couldn't be kept a secret forever, especially since his pack was looking for him. When the Prophet broke the story in that day's afternoon edition, there were retributions. Primarily against the Ministry, who were taking full credit for the capture, but also against Bill and Charlie, whose photographs had appeared in the paper. Bill, catching scent of his stalkers in time, was able to elude them; he and Fleur took a brief holiday and went across to Paris for a few days.

Fred and Charlie had come from Romania, arriving on the day of the full moon and laying low at the Burrow; there were two attempts to break into the Burrow, but Arthur and Molly soundly thrashed them with the help of Charlie, Fred, several territorial garden gnomes, and most of Molly's cast-iron cookware. After the second successful rebuff resulted in a dented skillet, the invaders did not try for a third.

Fred's return was the cause of much jubilation in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Molly was thrilled to have her entire family back in England and nominally under her eye; after sending Ron a loud but vague Howler and shouting at Bill and Charlie for two solid hours about the stupidity of hunting werewolves without proper training, she threw an enormous dinner at the first opportunity. Ron and Hermione ditched a Friday evening study session to

attend and Sirius arrived as soon as he could escape tutoring duties, still wearing his Tutors' robes. Tonks and Remus arrived with rather more wine than was quite proper, even for such a large gathering, and Fred and George exuberantly shared around their various new inventions, slipping Harry a tin of their experimental Orgaz Mints on the sly (*by the makers of Predica and Ail Mints!*). Harry forebode to try one in a house full of Weasleys.

"And how is Ginny, dear? I imagine you talk to her more than I do, though she does send letters with far more regularity than any of my other children manage," Molly said to Harry. Ron rolled his eyes and grinned at Charlie, who was looking guilty.

"She's uh, fine, as far as I know," Harry answered awkwardly.

"Well, she's a good girl and I have no doubt she's getting on, she always does."

"Going to finish out like Bill did, all NEWTs," Arthur said proudly. "It just goes to show you. Six sons and a daughter and all of them doing quite well for themselves, thank you, while *some* people I could name, with only one child and more pride than good sense, however wealthy they are—"

Molly coughed, and Arthur lapsed into silence.

"They're certainly a credit to the both of you," Remus murmured. He was still looking pale but he'd managed to take over classes again from Sirius, who was glad enough to give them up. He had remarked on how obedient his Friday classes were, which is what happens when the school Tutor threatens to kneecap anyone who gives the Dark Arts Professor any trouble.

"Harry," Fred said, leaning across Sirius seated between them as the others began to clear away their plates. "Can I have a word with you, outside?"

"Sure," Harry said. "Is this about...?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to bring it up before dinner..."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Going to let me in on the secret?"

"Soon," Harry promised, following Fred to the door. As they left they heard Arthur speaking to Remus.

"Molly didn't want me to bring it up, but I wondered about the...Greyback situation?"

"Oh," Remus replied. "It should be in the Prophet tomorrow—he'll have a full trial. I suppose it's a good thing. Bill's going to have to testify—I will too, probably..."

The door closed at that point, and Harry turned his attention to Fred, who was loitering on the front step. They began to amble wandringly down the lane to the main road, kicking stones out of their way as they went.

"Is everything done, then?" Harry asked. "I assumed so, but the last few days have been busy."

"Yeah—I wanted to come up and say hello too, but I really had to take care of some of the stuff for the shop, George let it slip a bit." Fred dug in his pocket and produced a small leather sack.

"Is that it?" Harry asked, impressed. Fred laughed.

"Bless his ickle heart. No, Harry. That's the problem. This..." he poured out a small helping of silvery powder into his hand, "...is just the ammunition. There's no quick kill on a Dementor, you know that. It's in their nature to be tenacious."

Harry nodded, sifting a pinch of the powder between thumb and forefinger. "What does it do?"

"It's complicated," Fred said, emptying most of the powder back into the sack. He kept walking. "Dementors feed through their presence. Charlie actually caught one, it was pretty wicked, and we had to keep it in a cave a mile outside of town. Even when we wired its jaw shut—"

"How the hell did you manage that?"

"Trade secret," Fred answered wickedly. "And two very powerful patronii. Anyway, if you wire its jaw shut it can't give you the Kiss, but that doesn't mean it can't feed. It takes it in through its skin. The skin's pretty sensitive, that's why you don't see much of it."

"And don't want to," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, I've seen a lot more Dementor than I ever thought I would, that's the truth," Fred agreed. "It was interesting, though."

Harry had a sudden mental image of Charlie holding a Dementor at bay with a patronus while Fred wired its jaw shut—no pity or mercy on their faces, just the intent look of two men doing the job they came to do. Fred was, after all, a scientist in his own way.

He shivered. Even Dementors, perhaps, deserved a better fate than that. If they were this cruel they were really no better than the enemy—

But then he remembered the horrible cold chill of their presence, and what they'd done to Sirius—and that they were the enemy. *Like Fenrir*, he thought. *Monsters who chose to join with Voldemort.*

*I will destroy anyone who hurts the people I love.*

"Harry, are you listening?" Fred asked.

"Sorry, Fred...I was just thinking about something," Harry said. They had arrived at the fence that bounded the Weasleys' yard in the front. Fred leaned back against it, looking speculatively up at the sky.

"Dementors can feed through their pores, but they don't have very many," he said. "That powder clogs their pores, gets into their skin. Nice side effect is that it self-multiplies, so you only have to hit one part of the Dementor and it'll cover 'em in a matter of a few minutes. When they're covered they can't feed, so they can't hurt anyone. Not so nice side effect is that the ones that don't die from the shock of being cut off starve to death."

"How long does that take?"

"Two or three days. They start howling towards the end..." even Fred looked disturbed by this, still gazing distantly at the sky. "Most of the ones we tried it on died pretty quickly. I have a theory about it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah...there's a lot of misery in the world, so it's kind of free-floating, right? So there's always something they can pick up on, even if you don't feel them doing it. It's like when you're near the ocean and you can always hear the noise of the waves. If this hits them fast enough, it's like suddenly going deaf—only about a million times worse. They just drop from the shock of it."

"How many Dementors did you try this on?" Harry asked.

"The one we caught first—killed him instantly. And we caught one more and that one starved." Fred looked at Harry, whose remaining pity must have showed on his face. "Harry, listen, nobody knows better than the two of us what a Dementor's capable of. They're not human."

"That's what some people say about Remus."

"No, they're not even animals. They're like...a disease. The only thing they do is breed and feed. You might as well worry about killing the little things that the Healers say cause Kneazlepox. They're just bigger, that's all."

"Do you know where they come from?"

"Boggarts, actually. You feed a Boggart enough and poof...baby Dementor."

"And we do kill Boggarts," Harry said, more to himself than to Fred. "So we have to cover the Dementors with the powder—how do you do that?"

"Explosives. No, really," Fred said, when Harry laughed. "Something that gets a lot of it up into the air at once. And...well, this is just me personally, but the powder's hard to come by, so I think you'd want to get as many of them as possible in a small space at the same time."

"Remind me not to volunteer for that duty."

"You can count Charlie and me out, we've done our time," Fred said. "If we exterminate them completely it can't be too soon."

Harry nodded. "Can you get more powder? How's it made?"

"Well, between you and me..." Fred leaned close. "Not all of it is legal. I mean, the active ingredient is but only because they don't know it exists—I think we've actually invented it."

"Is it hard to get the ingredients?"

"That's the thing. The illegal stuff is no problem. It's the thing that actually makes it all work that's difficult to come by."

"Let me guess...trade secret?"

"Something like that. It'll be easier now that I'm home. I'd like to have as much as possible before we let anyone know we've got it," Fred said. "Sound all right?"

"How long do you need?"

"Another few weeks would be good, at least."

Harry nodded. "I think we can give you that. But I want to hit them fast, before the werewolves have time to really regroup."

"Look at Generallissimo Harry," Fred said with a grin. "You got it, boss."

"Fred..."

"Yeah?"

"How's it made?" Harry asked. "It doesn't hurt anyone to make it? I mean it's not ground-up puffskeins or anything?"

Fred smiled. "Pretty much the opposite. That's why it'll be easier at the joke shop. It's powdered laughter. You know how sometimes you start laughing and you just laugh so hard that you can't breathe, and your face is all red? That kind. You'd be surprised how hard it is to laugh on command—they do say comedy is hard," he added. "But we get a fair bit at the joke shop. You should come by sometime—you don't look like you laugh enough, Harry."

Harry thought of last Friday, sitting on the sofa in Sirius' rooms and laughing giddily.

"I suppose I don't," he answered. "And your mum looks like she's about to start yelling for us –"

"FRED! HARRY!"

"–so we'd better go in," Fred finished for him. "Sure thing. You were right when you gave us the Triwizard winnings, by the way – now's the time when we need all the laughter we can get."

\* \* \*

Harry didn't want to ask if Sirius was coming to Fourteen Back for the weekend, in case he seemed too...eager, or pathetic, or something. So he just didn't say anything, really, and when it was time to leave, he waved in the general direction of where Sirius was talking with the twins and floo'd through.

"Leave me behind, why don't you," Sirius complained, arriving barely a step behind Harry. Remus came through after him and promptly dropped into one of the chairs.

"I like the Weasleys, but they are *exhausting*," he moaned.

"Sorry," Harry said to Sirius. "I was trying to escape before Molly loaded me down with any more left-overs."

"Well, I would have helped you. The more food the better, I think," he said as he took some of the bags and tidy cartons out of Harry's hands and led the way into the kitchen. "Less cooking for us."

Harry passed him the remaining packages when he held out his hands. Sirius stowed them neatly in the chill-cupboard and then turned to Harry with a grin.

"Want to see a magic trick?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. Sirius held up his hands, wiggled his fingers, and pressed his palms together, one on top of the other, producing from between them a bottle filled with amber-coloured liquid.

"Again?" Harry asked.

"I'm starting a tradition!" Sirius protested. "Remus, do you want some Knotgrass rum?"

"In large amounts," Remus called from the kitchen. "*Accio* tumblers!"

Three glass tumblers flung themselves off the shelf nearby and zoomed past Harry and Sirius into the living room. Sirius followed in short order, trailed by a skeptical Harry.

With a bow, Sirius presented Remus with the bottle, and the older man deftly uncorked it with a tap of his wand, pouring the thick, almost syrupy liquid into the tumblers. When he saw Harry's skeptical look at the size of the servings, he smiled.

"Knotgrass rum isn't true rum," he explained.

"S'right, it's more like ice cream topping," Sirius said. "Tastes like lemony caramel."

"Lemony caramel?" Harry wrinkled his nose.

"No, but it's good. Try it."

"What I meant was," Remus said, glancing at Sirius, "that it's not very alcoholic. More than a butterbeer, less than a firewhiskey."

Harry cautiously put the tumbler to his lips and sipped; the amber liquid did taste a little like caramel syrup, with a sharp afterbite of lemons. Remus leaned back in his chair, waiting expectantly.

"It's all right," Harry admitted. Sirius flung himself into the other armchair and tossed his legs up on the coffee table. "It's sort of sweet."

"Better than sour!" Sirius said cheerfully. "Can't have too much, though. Going off to the Gaunt crypt tomorrow."

"Well, I am," Harry said.

"And me!" Sirius added.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I talked to Hagrid. I'm going to be here, I might as well go with you instead," Sirius said with a shrug. He held out his glass again, and Remus waved a hand at the bottle, which promptly refilled the tumbler.

"Thanks for asking!" Harry said, feeling as though he ought to be outraged but only managing mild shock.

"Well, if you'd rather I didn't come—"

"I didn't say that," Harry said. "You've got to, now, don't you? Cos Hagrid isn't..."

The fight was interrupted by a laugh from Remus, who had covered his face with one hand.

"Merlin, I miss being seventeen like I'd miss having a hole in my head," he said, amused. "I'm sure I was just as awkward and clueless as the pair of you are. I'm going to bed," he added, standing and finishing his drink. "Don't wake me in the morning unless you're bringing me a large breakfast as you do so."

"Are you going to stay here tomorrow?" Harry asked after him. Remus paused in the doorway to the kitchen, suddenly quite grave.

"No – I'm going to London," he replied. "There are a few details about the Greyback case that need to be sorted. I'll be back by dinner – shall I bring it home with me?"

"Indian!" Sirius said. "Let's have curry."

"Curry it will be," Remus said. "Goodnight, you two. Don't stay up too late."

Sirius offered the bottle to Harry and, when he declined, corked it and set it aside.

"See? It's a nice tradition," he said, finishing the last of his second helping.

"I guess so," Harry said. "I'm going up – are you coming?"

Sirius looked indecisive. "I could sleep on the sofa," he offered.

"If you don't want to be Padfoot –"

"I was just saying," Sirius shrugged. "It's warm enough down here."

"Fine then," Harry replied, oddly angry about this sudden change of plans. "Stay down here if you please."

He went up the stairs rather more quickly than usual and tossed away his shirt. He had taken off his trousers and pulled on a pair of pyjamas before he heard the quiet thumping on the far side of the bed; when he turned around, Padfoot's head was resting on the bed, watching him warily.

He walked resolutely to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. When he emerged he saw that the thumping noise was Padfoot's tail, wagging hopefully against the floor. Padfoot tilted his head slightly to watch him.

Harry sighed.

"All right, up you go on the bed, then," he said, gesturing to the blankets. Padfoot lolled his tongue out and leapt onto the bed in a single, graceful move, flopping down happily at the foot. Harry slid under the blankets and flipped the top one up so that it covered Padfoot instead of himself before throwing his arm across the dog's broad back.

He'd never thought it was particularly weird that he shared a bed with Sirius, because it was Padfoot, and that was what you did with dogs. Now he was quite conscious that it might be a furry black body under the blanket, but it was still Sirius.

"Sirius, this isn't weird, is it?" he asked softly. Padfoot shook his head, ears flapping. "Because if you think it's weird you don't have to."

Padfoot's smooth pink tongue licked his cheek, and Harry laughed and wiped his face.

"I'm glad you're coming along tomorrow. I just wish you'd told me before you told Hagrid, that's all," he said. The Knotgrass rum was making him sleepy, and his thoughts weren't coming as clearly as they had been. "Reckon I should have told you about Fenrir, anyway. S'pose we're even, then."

Padfoot let out a happy little huff of air and his tail wagged against Harry's thigh.

"Rather go with you anyway," Harry said, slipping down into sleep.

\* \* \*

Downstairs, Remus heard Harry and Sirius settle themselves on the bed even as he himself climbed between the sheets. Tonks was in London this evening, more was the pity; he felt cold and still sore, mostly from the stress of all the overwhelming Weasleys.

Sooner or later, something was going to have to be done about Harry and Sirius. It was clear that Sirius, poor Sirius who barely had an idea of his own desires, let alone anyone else's, was falling for Harry. It looked to be at least a healthier thing than the covert and terrified sneaking around Sirius had done at school, but if Harry didn't return the sentiments Sirius would have his heart broken. Part and parcel of growing up, of course, but it was nice to avoid the gratuitous occurrence of such things. Sirius did seem to have a knack for falling in love with extraordinary men; the greatest wizarding novelist of their lifetime and the Boy Who Lived among them...

And did Harry return those sentiments? He'd seen clearly enough that something had gone on between Harry and Ginny. He wasn't privy to Harry's personal life, really. As far as his experience went, what Harry enjoyed most in the world was Quidditch. Still, surely he had to have noticed sex in some form by now. Perhaps he ought to have a word with Harry about it. Perhaps that would only make it worse. Whatever 'it' was, really.

It wasn't any of his business, except that he had very little else to fill his time with and it took his mind away from what he had to do tomorrow. He would take that in segments: get up, wash, eat breakfast, walk to the floo, floo to London, walk to the Ministry, meet with Moody, do...what he came to do...find Tonks and have lunch with her, floo home.

Home. More than Grimmauld Place or any of the series of flats he'd had in years, some a good deal less cramped than Fourteen Back. This little cottage was home. Home, shared with two teenage boys and occasionally Tonks. Family. *Pack*. And a good leader, a good man, took care of his family.

He turned over, bones cracking and popping in protest, and tried to find a comfortable position for sleeping in.

Segments. Get up; wash; eat; and face the day. Time enough to decide what to do when he faced the new day with a clean face and a full stomach, which were more than he had sometimes gotten in the past.

He hoped Harry and Padfoot were sleeping better than he was.

## CHAPTER XX

The next morning Moody met a grave, pale-faced Remus Lupin at the Leaky Cauldron. The werewolf was standing at the bar, hunched over a glass of pale alcohol, the only occupant of the pub other than Tom the bartender.

"Bit early to be drinkin', lad," he said, by way of greeting. Remus glanced up at him with a weak smile.

"Liquid courage, Alastor," he answered, picking up the glass and swirling the drink. "You're early."

"So are you. We're ready now, if you'd like to come along."

Remus set his half-finished drink down, left a pair of sickles in payment, and followed the Auror out into Muggle London once more. It was a short walk to the red telephone box which was the admission point through to the Ministry, but to Remus' surprise they passed it completely and made for a nearby bookshop instead.

"Mornin', Manny," Moody said as they entered.

"Good morning, Alastor," said the bearded, balding man at the till, cheerfully but without looking up from the book he was studying. They passed through a curtain dividing the shop from what appeared to be an equally messy kitchen, then turned left and descended a dim staircase.

"I thought you said we were going to the Ministry," Remus said.

"Back-entrance. No fussing about with visitors' badges," Alastor replied. His wooden leg clacked on the smooth stone steps. They descended through a series of staircases and landings, many of which had doors or what were clearly one-way windows looking in on various parts of the Ministry. Remus counted: one, two, three, four levels and they passed the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, with which he was all too familiar. Five, six, seven—Magical Games and Sports, bedecked with pennants for the various British Quidditch teams. Eight, the atrium they would normally have entered; nine, the —

"All right, lad?" Moody asked, as Remus stumbled on a landing. The Department of Mysteries, where Arthur had been attacked and Sirius had died. There was no window on this level, but he could feel the malevolence through the walls.

"Fine," he said, and they continued on. There was a door marked 10, but they passed it without hesitation. Another flight of stairs and their way

terminated in a small landing with a door in each of three walls. One was marked 12; one was unmarked, but chained and boarded shut.

"Level thirteen," Moody said, indicating the unmarked door. "We don't go there anymore."

"Ever?" Remus managed to ask.

"No," Moody answered, in a voice that said he was not going to give any further details. Remus turned to the third door, straight ahead. Moody put out a hand and opened the door to level eleven. Remus had the feeling that if he himself had tried, he might not have a hand anymore.

Inside it was surprisingly light and airy; there was a bare white room with a young uniformed Auror at one end, sitting behind a desk. He didn't acknowledge Moody as they passed, and Moody didn't speak to him. Another door, a hallway full of charmed windows like all the Ministry's floors had. As they passed a candle bracket in one wall, Moody reached out and touched it; the wall faded to glass, and Remus saw rows of cells beyond it.

"Holding cells for prisoners goin' to trial on ten," Moody said. Most of the cells were empty. One looked as though a hurricane had hit it—there were dents in the bars and the bedding had been torn to shreds. The door was open.

They stopped in front of yet another door, and Moody turned to him.

"There's no one as would require this of you," he said quietly. "Not me nor anyone else thinks you're anything like a coward, Lupin."

Remus watched him expectantly. He didn't trust himself to speak. His heart hammered in his chest and he could feel the cold prickle of fear on the back of his neck. Moody watched him a moment longer, then opened the door.

The room beyond was stone; a high, vaulted ceiling echoed their footsteps back to them and the charmed windows were full of rain and wind. Glass—well, something clear and probably strong, which might as well be called glass—divided the room in half.

On the other side of the glass stood Fenrir Greyback. They had clearly manhandled him into a uniform at one point, but most of it had been torn away and he was naked to the waist, white scars crisscrossing his chest and arms. Remus felt the cold burn along the scars he himself had in very similar patterns.

An Auror sat off to their left on Remus' side of the glass. Moody whistled shrill and jerked his head; the man rose silently and disappeared into the corridor. Fenrir hadn't moved, and Remus couldn't take his eyes away.

He heard the door close; Moody had gone too.

"Fenrir," Remus heard himself say. The other man narrowed his eyes.

"Lupin," he said finally. There were charms on the room; his voice was crystal clear, not muffled at all by the solid glass. "Come to gawk?"

"I came to talk to you."

"Yes; you do talk."

Remus swallowed.

"I can smell the sweat on you," Fenrir said. "I remember that. The fear. They've left you alone with the monster, haven't they?"

"They have."

"They said I wasn't to have any visitors."

"I'm here...unofficially."

"That human bribed my guards. And you think they're any better than us?"

"Yes. I do think they're better than *you*."

There was an uneasy, tense silence between them until Fenrir laughed.

"You're a headstrong bastard, Lupin, like your father. And me, too," he said proudly. "You were the best day's work I ever did."

"I don't doubt it, considering your usual standard of conduct," Remus answered.

"But you wanted to talk, and I seem to be doing the bulk of the talking. Ironic, considering how they have me chained and bound." Fenrir glanced down. Remus followed his gaze. There were shackles on his ankles—silver, wrapped in leather to keep it from burning him. "Your keepers do a good job looking after you, grooming your fur, picking up your shit—"

"They are my family."

"Don't you mean your pack?" Fenrir asked nastily. "Can they hunt? Can they run alongside and keep up with you? Don't you starve for their flesh on the full moons? I remember how yours tasted. Fresh."

Remus closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

"I need to speak with you."

"So you keep saying, and then you start to cry—"

"I am *not* crying," Remus snarled. Fenrir smiled lazily.

"Like I said. Your father's son."

"*Listen to me!*"

"Then talk. Pack-traitor."

Remus licked his lips. "You've seen what they're capable of, Fenrir. I know they shot you." A muscle in Fenrir's shoulder twitched. There was a dark scar there, puckered and angry still. Silver wounds didn't heal quickly. "They're mine and they did it because you threatened me."

"You're proud of that."

"No. I hate it. But they did it. There are people who won't stop at defending me. There are people who would do it to any werewolf for no good reason at all."

"And you'd rather —"

"*Shut up,*" Remus said, and to his shock, the other man obeyed. "Your pack is in danger. They've already been hurt because they attacked others. Soon it won't end in injury. It'll be death. Do you think yours will be safe? Do you think they'll thank you for that?"

"My pack is strong."

"Your pack has no leader. Your pack is scared. Every werewolf in Britain is scared."

"Good!" Fenrir growled. "*Good!* Fear breeds strength! You're afraid of me and look at you! Good that they're scared, good to strike *first!*"

"Who cares, if they end up dead anyway? They're your pack, Fenrir. Do you think for a moment about them instead of your own wretched hateful pride, your *sick* taste for children?"

"I think of nothing *but* my pack, cub, of which you are a member whether you like it or not," Fenrir answered sharply. "If you cared for our pack, you would free me and join us, tainted or not."

"If by tainted you mean *literate* —"

"What do we need with books?"

"Perhaps if you took the time to find out, you wouldn't be living in the wilderness and picking raw meat from your teeth! For fuck's sake, Fenrir, there are better ways to live. This isn't some glorified ancient tradition, it's just a disease. You're letting it kill you."

"Me?" Fenrir asked, his voice dangerously low. "It's killing *me*, is it? Do you see the muscles on my arms? Do you see the way the guards look at me? You're a woman. Pale and fine, not even any marks on your hands. Your teeth are dull from eating overcooked food."

"None of this matters," Remus said, frustrated. "Fenrir, please."

"And you beg."

"All I'm asking is that you think of us. They tell me you're going to stand trial, and believe me, I had to fight for you to get that. Please, don't make our lives any harder."

"Let them kill me."

"They might anyway, you know."

Fenrir growled deep in his throat.

"All I ask is that when you stand public trial, you remember us. The less you talk about biting children, the less you snarl and parade around your ignorance like it was some sort of badge of pride, the less we'll suffer. You owe me this, Fenrir. You owe me for thirty years of this curse."

"And what am I owed for sixty of my own?" Fenrir asked. "Who owes me? What do I collect?"

Remus bowed his head. He knew that Fenrir was owed as much as he was, even more; but Fenrir had collected in the lives of children.

"I think any debt you were owed was taken off the books when you took your pound of flesh," he said, viciously. "Didn't you kill your own daughter, Fenrir? Trying to make her like you? You owed her, too. And you owe her more now."

Fenrir leapt for the glass, snarling. His fingers scraped against it, nails breaking, tips leaving bloody streaks. Remus waited until he was finished.

"I can't offer you anything. Whether you fight it or not, things will move on. If they leave you behind, you have only yourself to blame."

He didn't want to turn his back, but he did it anyway; turned his back and walked to the door. There was no handle on the inside, so he knocked gently.

"You're just a cub, you know," Fenrir grated. "You belong to *me*. I'll own you yet."

"I doubt you'll ever own anyone again, Fenrir," Remus said, without turning. "You chose to live as a beast; you oughtn't be surprised when men put you in a cage."

"You choose to live like a man—how have the men treated you?"

"None of them ever infected me with an incurable disease, so they're one up on you."

The door opened then, admitting the guard from earlier; Remus brushed past him in his hurry to leave. Fenrir's scream of rage was cut off when the door closed behind him.

Moody's good eye was staring at him but the large, magical false eye looked over his shoulder, through the door.

"You watched?" Remus asked, tense.

"Aye. Had to. Security reasons."

Remus nodded.

"Looks like you had the better of him. Say anything interesting?"

Remus shook his head, combing his hair back with his fingers nervously, resting the palm of his left hand on the back of his neck.

"Do I need to sign something? Can I leave?" he asked, suddenly conscious even despite the windows of how deep underground they were. He felt shut in, as caged as Fenrir had been.

"This way," Moody said, leading him back the way they'd come and up to the atrium level. The door on the landing led them into a fireplace as if they were entering through the floo network. They hurried to the lift and it shot upwards, emptying them into the red phone box across the street from the bookshop through which they'd entered. Remus drew a deep breath of fresh air, shakily. His knees felt weak, now that it was over, and he sat on the kerb before he could fall down.

"Do what you came for?" Moody asked, standing over him, eye swivelling around to take in the street.

"I said what I had to. I don't know if he'll listen," Remus said, scrubbing at his face with his hands. "But now I know...I *know* that he's there, that he can't get out."

They remained there in silence for a while, Remus breathing deeply, Moody scanning the street and muttering to himself if anyone passed too close. Finally, Remus pushed himself upright and turned to face the older man.

"Thank you," he said. "He said you bribed the guards—"

"—they owed me."

"You don't need paying back?"

Moody shook his head.

"Thank you anyway. It's appreciated."

He offered his hand and Moody shook it; without another word, the Auror crossed the street again and re-entered the bookshop. Remus waited until a couple had passed, clearly on their way to lunch somewhere and in no hurry to get there, before he began to walk in the opposite direction. Tonks was probably already waiting for him in Diagon.

\* \* \*

While Remus was descending into the deepest corners of the Ministry with Alastor Moody, Sirius and Harry were arming themselves with sandwiches, a charmed thermos full of soup, and two books—the notebook Hermione had been keeping on the horcruxes and a book of Great Wizarding Graves, which had a rough map to the Gaunt Crypt. They worked quietly and rather more efficiently than usual, and neither would quite meet the other's eye.

It was understood that they were, in fact, sharing a bed; it was just different when Sirius was Padfoot. The fact that one of them couldn't talk and didn't have...well, hands, which could roam in unwelcome ways in sleep...was a reassurance against the hint of anything more than platonic. Sirius had been reluctant to try it again after realising that he could, in fact, flip out of his Animagus form while sleeping, but he'd never done it before and perhaps it had been a fluke.

If it was a fluke, it could fuck right the hell off as far as he was concerned, because it had happened again and this time Harry had woken up before he had.

When Harry moved, Sirius woke too, and then quickly bolted across the bed; he'd been curled around the other boy, face pressed to the nape of Harry's neck, arm thrown carelessly over over his hip. His hand had been dangling perilously close to Harry's thighs.

Now, washed and fed and tooth-brushed, dressed, prepared to go, he stopped when Harry thrust the bag of food at him without looking at him.

"It was an accident," he said. "That's all." Harry glanced at him. Sirius shrugged. "Bound to happen sooner or later. Doesn't mean anything."

"That's not what it looked like when you just about fell out of bed to get away," Harry said.

"Well, you startled me," Sirius answered.

"I wasn't trying to!"

"All right, all right," Sirius said, annoyed. "If you're so particular about it, Padfoot can sleep somewhere else."

"I didn't mean *that*," Harry sulked. He stepped into the floo and announced "The Spring, Glastonbury" without saying anything further, and Sirius followed hurriedly.

"Well, then what did you mean?" Sirius asked doggedly, catching up to Harry who was already halfway out the door of the little wizarding pub.

"Just that you didn't have to look so horrified about it. *I* know it was an accident," Harry continued. "If you don't like it you needn't keep doing it just because you think I need someone."

"I'm sure you don't need anyone," Sirius answered, just as sullen now as Harry. "That's not why I ever did it anyway, so you can just stop thinking the world revolves around you, Harry Potter."

"You're one to talk—" Harry replied hotly, but Sirius cut him off.

"I didn't ask to be brought here! I know the world doesn't revolve around me, I know it's gone on without me," he replied. "Where the bloody hell are we going?"

"Glastonbury Abbey," Harry answered, tight-lipped. Sirius grabbed his arm and pulled him around.

"This is a stupid fight," he said. "It's really *stupid*. It was an accident! I didn't mean to do any of it!"

"Stop shouting!" Harry shouted.

"I'm not shouting!" Sirius shouted back.

Harry set his jaw resolutely. He looked so much like Evans that Sirius had to swallow to keep from saying it.

"Let's go," Harry said, shrugging out of Sirius' grip and walking past him. Sirius, furious, Changed and ran past Harry, faster on four legs than Harry was on two. He hadn't looked to see if anyone was watching and didn't care if they did.

Fortunately, doggy senses didn't impair his ability to read and the signs for the Abbey were quite large; even after Harry started running to try to keep up, Padfoot beat him there. He sat smugly at the entrance to the Abbey, but Harry passed him without a word and walked into the car park next to it. Sirius trailed him, pretending that he was in no hurry. Harry pushed the gate from the car park to the Abbey grounds open, and Sirius ran to get through before it closed again.

It was a Saturday, but at ten in the morning in the off-season the place was hardly crowded. Harry made for a nearby building with a signpost reading *The Lady Chapel*, consulting a small map in his hand. It was a rather squat, squarish building, and Sirius could see that the entrance led only a few feet inside the roofless building before it was fenced off. Down below was an empty, stone-lined crypt.

The entryway had a doorway recessed inside another doorway, and Harry stopped in the arch of the outer one, consulting his map again. Carefully, he tapped a series of stone blocks in specific order as Padfoot came up beside him.

There was a subtle shift in the air as a door appeared in the inner doorway, heavy wood and banded with black iron. Harry put out his hand and shoved it.

Inside there was no longer a fenced-off stone porch looking down into an empty crypt; the door revealed a beam-braced wood floor, solid to Harry's footsteps, and a central stairway at the front of the chapel.

Sirius remembered, dimly, reading about the dangerous magic in Glastonbury and the surrounding areas. Things doubled up here; there was a Muggle world layered directly over an old magical world, and sometimes you could walk through the same door twice and find yourself in different places. Wizards had got lost walking the spiral road up to Glastonbury Tor before, because the road they went up wasn't the same one they went down.

Overawed by the second chapel that lay before them, he followed Harry rather more docilely to the staircase. At the head of the stairs was a sign.

*Here lies the family crypt of the  
Ancient and Venerated House of Gaunt  
Now Deceased  
The use of which was discontinued when  
It was purchased from Elias Gaunt in 1877  
By the Ministry for the Preservation of Magical Landmarks.*

In smaller letters that were harder for his doggy eyes to read, it continued:

*With the decease of the Gaunt family in the early twentieth century came the terminus of many other proud families, including the Peverell line whose last descendant married into the Gaunts in the sixteenth century, and purportedly the last remaining bloodline of Salazar Slytherin, one of the Founders of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

*The crypt was once highly dangerous and contained many pitfalls and secret magical traps, but has since been thoroughly inspected and cleansed of any potentially*

*terminal hexes. Please proceed with care, however, and report any unusual activity at once.*

*The Magical Trust, formerly the Ministry for the Preservation of Magical Landmarks, owns and maintains the crypt. We thank you for not littering.*

He trotted down the slippery steps after Harry, who had taken far less time to read the sign. Here was the stone floor and here were the stone walls, but the space was lit by brackets of candles set low on the walls and the rest of the stone was...different. Twisted. Sculpted bodies writhed out of it at points and faces emerged, leering, from others. There were strange indentations and irregular outcrops. There were gargoyles.

At the far end of the crypt there was a large throne, on which sat a skeleton in a crown. It took him a minute, with his flickering vision, to realise the skeleton was a metal sculpture, probably bronze.



It smelled dusty and empty; Harry's scent was the only living smell here, the only smell at all other than the warm hints of candle wax.

"You might make yourself useful and help look around," Harry said, his voice weirdly dampened by the crypt. Sirius snorted and began snuffling in corners, but there weren't even any spiders. He inspected everything below hip-level of a man and left Harry to the higher-up things. The doors showed no signs of being recently disturbed; the candles held the scent of someone, probably a caretaker, only at the bases and in the same place for each one, where he'd picked up the candle and put it in the bracket.

Harry was studying the mostly-Latin inscriptions, working his way down towards the skeleton at one end. Padfoot kept one eye on him; just because he was furious with Harry didn't mean he wanted him to get killed.

When they finally reached the skeleton, who was wearing not only a crown but a cape settled around his shoulders and a ring on one upraised hand, they both hesitated. Sirius snuffed suspiciously at the bony feet and then put one paw hesitantly up on a fold of cape to inspect the beringed hand; the ring was a crude copy of a coat of arms, probably the Gaunts'.

Harry, such a copycat, put one of his own feet up on the other side and took hold of the upraised hand for support, clambering up the slippery bronze figure to peer into the crown.

"Nothing," he muttered, inspecting the narrow space behind the sculpture. He began to climb down, much more difficult to do without slipping, especially in his cheap trainers. He stretched one leg and let go of the skeleton's arm, reaching instead for the curve of the ribcage and hooking his fingers around the edge.

Instead, somehow, his hand slipped and he tumbled down, barely catching himself. Sirius darted forward, ready to help, but Harry dusted his shirt off and glared at him, shaking his left hand as if he'd hurt it. With a determined look he stepped on the skeleton's foot and leaned over his splayed knees, resting one hand on its arm again and reaching the other out slowly.

Sirius watched as Harry pressed his hand flat against what should have been empty space where the skeleton's mortal stomach would have been located. After a moment, his fingers seemed to hook in something invisible, and he pulled.

There was an ominous creak and something appeared; a wooden box, fitted to the insides of the skeleton's ribcage. Sirius barely had time to be surprised before there was a second ominous creak, and the hand Harry was holding *moved*.

Harry yelped in pain as the beringed skeletal hand gripped his wrist and the skeleton's head turned to look straight into his eyes. He jerked backwards, scuttling off the statue, but the hand held on and when he pulled further away, the elbow-joint flexed and snapped.

The skeleton looked down at where its missing forearm should have been, then opened its jaw in a silent scream and lunged forward. Harry stumbled backwards just as Padfoot, with a low growl, leapt ahead of him to meet the skeleton in mid-lunge. His teeth closed painfully around solid metal, but he got a good grip on the ribcage and shook his head for all he was worth. The skeleton's other hand emerged from below the cape and batted at his shoulders, but now Harry was beating it off with the bronze limb still stuck to his wrist and Sirius had time to wrench the ribcage off the pelvis, sending it and the skull flying with a crash into one of the other tombs.

The skeleton's left hand, ripped from its socket, clattered uselessly to the ground with the cape, and the legs began to kick. He took two glancing blows to the chest before Harry shouted a freezing hex, which froze the hips and knees in place and left the remains of the skeleton flexing its toes uselessly. Padfoot leapt away and went for the arm still digging its bones into Harry's wrist, ripping off everything above the metacarpals. The finger bones, without anything to bind them together, fell away and Harry rubbed his hand, which had been starting to turn purple.

The skull and ribcage lay still and quiet in the corner and Harry went forward before Sirius could stop him, giving it a sound and vicious kick with his shoe. Vertebrae went flying, but even as Harry reached down to retrieve the box, the skull itself leapt up and only Padfoot's violent tug on the hem of Harry's shirt saved him from losing a few fingers. He fell backwards over Padfoot, who changed back just in time for Sirius to catch him, one of Harry's arms wrapping around his shoulders, Harry's back against his stomach. Sirius propped himself up on his elbow and stared at the skull, fascinated and horrified, as it lay on its side with its jaws snapping. Harry, gripping Sirius' neck tightly, let out a breath of air and tipped his head back, relaxing against Sirius' body in relief.

After a few seconds he pushed himself to his feet and picked up the skull by the top of its head. Its jaws snapped and jerked, and Harry carefully pried the joints apart, separating jawbone from skull. He tossed the skull aside, and the metal cracked loudly on the stone.

Sirius reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and realised that there was blood in it; further exploration revealed, with a sudden sting of pain, a long gash just above his left ear. There was blood filling his mouth, too; he spat, and with the blood came a couple of chips of bone – broken teeth.

“Harry,” he said, and Harry turned, shoving the jawbone in his pocket. His eyes widened.

“Sirius –”

“I’m okay, just...” Sirius felt the sharp edge of a broken tooth cut his tongue. When he moved, it felt like there was a bone broken somewhere in his left shoulder. Tears of pain streamed down his face. “Get the box and take me home.”

Harry yanked the oddly shaped box out of the bronze ribcage and ran back to Sirius, helping him up.

“Reckon we should let the Magical Trust know about this,” Sirius mumbled, pain rippling across his shoulders. Harry wrapped one arm around his hip and got him standing; at least his legs seemed to work, though he could feel the bruises forming on them. He could see the ones already raised on Harry’s wrist.

“Can’t Apparate,” he mumbled hazily. “Got a broomstick?”

Harry’s grip on his hip tightened. “Can you walk all right?”

Sirius eyed the stairs rearing up before him, wondering just how much it would hurt whatever was broken when he walked up them. Harry followed his gaze.

“I think I can carry Padfoot,” he said quietly. “If you can change back.”

Sirius closed his eyes and, with great effort, willed himself into dog-form. It took longer than usual and it hurt like all fuck, but he managed. He felt Harry lift him, cursing at the weight, and he tried to help without clawing anything. Eventually they managed, Padfoot with head and shoulders over Harry’s right shoulder, Harry’s arms holding the rest of him tightly against his chest and stomach.

“You couldn’t have been a poodle?” Harry asked as he staggered up the stairs. Sirius tried to keep still and think light, inhaling Harry’s reassuring scent.

The rest of the journey was a blur of light and movement, the smell of grass again and then of exhaust and hot brakes, until he was laid on warm pavement. Harry’s voice echoed loudly in his ear, suddenly. “Sirius, change back. I’m taking you to St. Mungo’s.”

Sirius moaned—it came out more like a yelp—and this time the change seemed to take forever. When he was done he found himself lying on the pavement near the car park. Harry was standing over him, holding his wand out firmly.

There was an enormously loud bang, and Sirius opened bleary eyes. The Knight Bus; oh, clever Harry.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the—Merlin, what happened to him?”

Harry helped Sirius to his feet and shoved him into the arms of the man standing in the bus doorway. “We need to go to St. Mungo’s. *Now.*”

The man looked at Sirius uncertainly. “Express is ten sickles extra—”

“Does he look like he’s willing to wait? *NOW, ALRIGHT?*” Harry shouted. Sirius winced and let them manhandle him into a lounge chair near the door. There was a terrible roar and a burst of light behind his eyelids, and then he was being helped down again, walked across a seemingly endless expanse of pavement. There was a blurry figure in green in the distance.

“Harry?” called the figure. “I didn’t expect—oh, Merlin, what has he done to himself?”

“We did it together,” Harry said, and the figure caught Sirius as he fell forward. “He got attacked by a statue—well, he attacked it first—he’s broken some teeth and he’s got blood everywhere...”

“Yes, I see that. Come on, Nigel,” the figure said. “It’s Augustus. You’re at St. Mungo’s. In you come...SOMEBODY FIND ME A BED PLEASE, ARTEFACT ACCIDENT COMING THROUGH...no, that young man’s with me, keep up Harry or they’ll send you back to the waiting room...”

Sirius, suddenly began to giggle. *McGonagall was wrong; I’m going to end up being killed by architecture again...*

Then there were cool hands on his face and chest, and a soft voice murmuring words that sent him down into darkness, still laughing.

*End Note: The Lady Chapel at Glastonbury Abbey does exist and my description of its exterior is accurate as far as my knowledge goes. The interior layout of the magical “twin” of the chapel is not accurate to the chapel and crypt as it is now or has ever been. While researching crypt architecture for this chapter, I stumbled across the Kaisergruft in Vienna, which is where the inspiration for the Crypt King came from.*

## CHAPTER XXI

It was ages before Augustus would come and talk to him and longer still before he would let Harry run down Diagon to fetch George and ask him to find Remus and Tonks. First Augustus insisted on having someone look Harry over and heal his bruises. He took down the whole story in his notes personally, insisting that Harry leave the wooden box in his small but lockable office before he distractedly left it lying somewhere. By the time Remus arrived, Harry had already annoyed the front-desk witch, the canteen staff, and several apprentice Healers with his nervous pacing and constant questions.

"Harry, what on earth is going on? George was at Fourteen Back and you weren't—he said you're in hospital and Sirius is hurt—"

Harry ran up to Remus and didn't stop to say hello before throwing himself into the other man, wrapping his arms around Remus' chest and burying his face in his shirt. Remus cast a startled glance at Tonks, then patted Harry gently on the back of his head before disentangling himself. He kept his hands on Harry's shoulders, looking down into his eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Harry nodded, biting his lip.

"Is Sirius all right?"

"They won't tell me!" Harry burst out, frustrated. "Augustus says he will be, but how does he know? There was so much blood..."

There was a cough from behind him, and they both looked up to see Augustus Pye standing by the front desk, gesturing them over.

"I've just come from checking on Sirius. He's fine," he said, and Harry's shoulders sagged with relief. "He's not quite all there—nasty knock on the head or three he had, and I'm sure you're aware of how scalp wounds bleed—but he knows who he is and where he is, which is almost more than we can say for Harry here, hm?"

"Can we see him?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but you mustn't upset him. He's quite upset enough already," Augustus added. "This way, I've put him in a private room."

"Are you going to tell me what in bloody hell happened?" Remus asked, as they walked. "George said you were a wreck and wouldn't tell him anything. Why didn't you floo the Aurors? They'd have called Tonks."

"Didn't think of it," Harry said miserably. Tonks hugged his shoulders as they walked.

"It's all right," she said. "Who attacked you?"

"Nobody – well –" Harry broke off as they stopped in front of a door and Augustus peered inside it. "I'll tell you later."

Augustus held his finger to his lips as a reminder and opened the door. Sirius was sitting up in bed, a large patch of hair missing from his scalp where a deep cut was already almost completely healed. In addition, he had a strange metal device stuck to the outside of his face, little silvery arms spanning from cheekbone to jaw.

"We had to extract four teeth and we're re-growing them now," Augustus said. "It's better if he doesn't talk while it happens. He's had a potion for the concussion so another half-hour at most and he'll be good as new and ready to go home and have a few days of bed rest."

Sirius gave Harry an imploring look and made an odd gesture with his hands. Harry sat down in the chair next to him as Augustus left.

"I don't understand," he said. "What?"

"It looks like a box," Remus said, as Sirius formed a three-dimensional square with his hands, wincing every time his left arm moved.

"Oh – oh! It's in Pye's office," Harry said. "Locked up. It's safe."

Sirius rolled his eyes in relief and covered his forehead with one hand.

"Yeah, you don't look so hot," Harry agreed.

"You're re-growing *teeth*? Did you two get into some kind of fistfight with someone?" Tonks asked.

"*Something*," Harry said darkly. Sirius growled. "But I think we may have got the cup – we've got something, anyway."

Sirius mimed a beautiful right hook, and Remus pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you two go alone," he said with a sigh. "The Gaunt Crypt is supposed to be safe – it's a tourist spot..."

"Yeah, well, apparently it's *not* safe, since it tried to kill us," Harry answered defensively.

"Did you provoke it?" Tonks asked, crossing her arms.

"We might have done," Harry admitted. Sirius looked sheepish. The metal thing on his cheek beeped, and he tore it off with relief.

"I hate that thing," he announced, setting it on the bedside table. He rotated his jaw slowly, then opened his mouth. "Loo ohay?" he asked Harry, who inspected his canines.

"They seem all right."

"It was bloody brilliant, you should have been there," Sirius continued, addressing Remus and Tonks equally. "It went CRASH and then I jumped all over it and Harry beat it off me with part of the arm and it tried to bite – did you bring the jaw? Show us the jaw," Sirius insisted. Harry put a hand on his chest and pushed him back against the pillows gently.

"You're not quite all there yet," he said.

"I am so –"

"Well, your hair isn't."

"What?" Sirius asked, reaching up to touch his scalp. When he encountered bare skin, he moaned.

"Jaw?" Remus asked, slightly horrified. Harry dug in his pocket and produced the bronze jawbone of the skeleton. Remus and Tonks exchanged a dark look.

"You dismantled one of the monuments in the crypt?" Tonks asked.

"It tried to dismantle us first!" Harry said. "If it hadn't been for Padfoot, it would have pulled my hand off!"

"Everyone stop talking," Remus said. "This can wait until we get home. Sirius, do you feel all right?"

"I'm going bald!"

"Well, he looks all right, anyway," Remus sighed. "I'll see about getting him released. Has someone informed the authorities that they should probably go have a look at the crypt?"

"Augustus said he'd see that someone got told," Harry said. "He said it's some kind of incident and he had to be the one to report it since Sirius – well, Nigel, he's Nigel on the paperwork – came here."

"All right. I'll be back soon. You – stay put," Remus said to Sirius, who was still feeling out the bald spot on his head.

"Oh, for pity's sake, it could be worse," Tonks said, as Remus left the room. She took out her wand and flicked it at his head. "*Adumbro capillusque!*"

Hair sprouted from the bald spot, growing so fast it looked alive. Harry had to admit that it did cover the bald spot and until Sirius looked in a mirror,

he'd never notice that it was pink and yellow striped. Tonks looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Thank you," Sirius said gravely.

\* \* \*

They took Sirius home as soon as Augustus would release him, with orders that he spend at least the next full day and preferably the next two in bed. He was given a case full of potions—blood restoratives, energy enhancers, painkillers—and Apparated home by Remus, who left Tonks to Apparate with Harry.

"You're old enough to get your licence now," she said, as he took her arm. "I really think you should have a bit more practice and then apply. If you'd been able to Apparate this afternoon, you could have taken Sirius directly to St. Mungo's."

Sirius was not at all loathe to be helped upstairs by Harry while the others re-heated the curry they'd left on the kitchen counter and brought it up. They had a picnic on Harry's bed, with Sirius propped against the headboard while Harry sat cross-legged next to him and Remus and Tonks pulled chairs up. Sirius was all for opening the box Harry had retrieved from Augustus' office immediately, but the others insisted he eat first. Remus wasn't at all sure they should even try to open it without studying it extensively, but once the food had been cleared away, Harry fetched it from the bookshelf where he'd stashed it and set it on the bed.

It was an odd shape, flat on one side and rising to a narrow peaked dome in order to fit the curve of the bronze skeleton's ribcage on the other. It was absolutely smooth without a trace of joinery anywhere, as if it had been carved from a single block of wood. There was a ring made of green stone and set into a recess in the flat side, attached by a gold hinge; Harry had carried the box by the ring while he was helping Sirius to St. Mungo's.

"It might not be anything," Harry said offhandedly. "It might be something the Gaunts wanted stored there. It might be someone's...remains."

Remus ran his hands over the ring, tilting it up so that Harry saw it in full light. He realised that it was actually a snake eating its own tail, the head and tail a part of the hinge that attached it to the box.

"Considering what you went through just to get the box," he said, "I'm inclined to give it to Tonks and have her give it the full Auror shakedown before anyone else touches it."

"I can have our alchemists look it over, they're pretty clever about this kind of thing," Tonks offered.

"I don't like to let it out of our hands," Harry said reluctantly. "Can't you do it here?"

"Well...I can do part of it here," Tonks said, accepting the box from Remus. She held it up with one finger through the ring and studied it contemplatively. "I'll get started on it tomorrow, all right?"

Harry was about to open his mouth and agree, when she tried to spin it so that her finger was hooked around the outside instead of supporting the inside of the ring. It bumped against her arm and she let out a painful yelp; even as she did so, the ring turned sideways with a snapping noise. The domed portion of the box slid off as she lifted her hand to rub her elbow.

Everyone flinched, Sirius a half-second later than the others.

"Ooooh buggery," Tonks said, dropping the lid as if it had burned her. The dome lay like an oblong bowl on the blankets, something small and hard spinning around inside it.

"Nobody touch it," she ordered, picking up the lid and setting it aside slowly. They all leaned forward.

Inside the smooth, concave surface of the box were two objects: a twist of crumpled parchment and a small stone which had clearly been wrapped in the parchment until recently. The stone was shaped like an ordinary egg but much too small, more like a quail's egg.

Tonks touched the rim of the box with her wand; when nothing happened, she flicked the wad of parchment out onto the blanket. She picked it up and unfolded it with the same wary caution, smoothing it against her leg.

When she read it, her face closed itself off and she pressed her lips together. She handed it to Sirius, wordlessly.

*"To the Dark Lord,"* Sirius read, voice trembling. *"I had thought to be dead long before now but I have had time to realise the scope of your deviance and locate your second Horcrux. They will both be destroyed at my first opportunity though I have left you a present in their place. You should know—oh, Reg,"* he said, drawing his knees up against his chest and pressing his face against his legs tiredly.

Harry took the paper from his fingers and finished reading.

*"You should know better than to think a son of the House of Black would ever be any man's servant,"* he read. *"I would rather face death, as I am sure I will soon. R.A.B."*

Tonks hesitantly reached into the box and took out the little stone, studying it. Remus' hands clenched on the blanket, his dark eyes watching Sirius carefully.

"It would seem," he said softly, "your brother must have led the Dark Lord on quite a merry chase before he died. Your scholarship was sound, Harry; it's not your fault."

"If he'd left the bloody things be, we'd have another horcrux right now," Sirius said.

"It's not impossible to trace where he went before he died—we may be able to pick up the trail again," Tonks said. "I'll see if we have a file on him. And I want to have this stone looked at," she added, almost as if she were asking Sirius for permission. Sirius glanced at Remus, who nodded.

"I think we're all tired," he said. "And we didn't need this on top of everything else. I have work to do—Greyback's trial might do us a world of good in the long run, but while it's going on someone needs to write letters to the papers about the difference between a freak of nature and a werewolf. They all know I'm one anyway; might as well be me," he sighed.

"I'll come down with you," Tonks said. "Nobody's going to be at headquarters right now anyway; I'll bring all this in first thing tomorrow. Harry?"

Harry glanced at Sirius, who looked positively grey from exhaustion and pain.

"I need to change," he said, touching the bloody sleeve of his shirt. Sirius' shirt had been a lost cause; he was still wearing the hospital-issue pyjama shirt. "Don't wait on my account."

Remus nodded and descended the staircase; Tonks made it to the top step before she turned and came back, giving Sirius a ginger but heartfelt hug.

"I'm glad you're okay," she said, then bolted down the stairs after Remus. Sirius ducked his head and grinned just a little. Harry slid off the bed and walked to the wardrobe.

"We could have some books sent up from Hogwarts, if you're going to be here for a few days," he said, stripping off his blood-crusting shirt and tossing it into a far corner. He wasn't sure he wanted to wash it; he might burn it instead.

"There are books here," Sirius said, easing himself down in the bed until he lay on his right side, eyes barely slits. He had yet to notice his patch of technicolour hair, but Harry wasn't going to tell him. He unbuckled his belt under the loose tails of his shirt and shucked his grimy trousers.

"Dog hair all over my new clothes," he said with a grin. Sirius grunted. "Do you want some water or anything?"

"Nuh," Sirius said, face almost buried in the pillow. "Might sleep a bit."

"Probably good for you. You're lucky. When Muggles get a concussion, they don't have potions for it—they have to keep awake for ages."

"Why?" Sirius asked around a yawn.

"No clue. Anyway..." Harry selected a new belt and pair of trousers, "I didn't get to say thank-you yet. You didn't have to go and break your teeth on account of me, you know."

Sirius made a noncommittal noise, so he kept talking.

"I mean, if we'd been smart we'd have got out of there when it started to move. Some Auror I'd make, huh? I bet you Tonks would say it was amazing I could keep my head at all, but I'm starting to think that knowing when to run away is pretty much half of being an Auror to begin with. I still could, if I studied. Bet you'd help me. What NEWTs are you going to—"

He turned around when Sirius made an alarming moan, but it turned out to be just a snore. Harry hadn't really ever encountered Sirius sleeping as a human before. He wasn't aware that he snored.

Harry crossed to the bed, still holding his trousers in one hand.

"Sirius," he said quietly.

"Mmh."

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

Sirius shifted slightly. "Mmhm. Wan' Pa'foo?"

"No—stay there," Harry said. He abandoned the trousers in favour of the pyjamas he'd tossed on the chair that morning and an extra blanket from the top of the wardrobe.

Sirius was used to a smaller bed than this at Hogwarts, and he took up really very little of it; Harry circled the bed and crawled across to where Sirius lay, curling up in his own blanket on top of the others, his back pressed to Sirius'. It felt awkward, though, and after a minute he rolled over, pressing against the other warm body in the bed just as if it were Padfoot.

"You asleep?" he asked.

"Jus' bout," Sirius answered.

"You all right, Sirius? You don't mind it?" Harry asked. "It's just us, anyway. We always share the bed."

"Don' mind what?" Sirius asked sleepily. He wriggled his shoulders a little, winced, and settled down with Harry's arm curled over his hip, Harry's hand pressed against his chest to keep him still.

"I didn't mean any of it anyway," he said, well aware that Sirius was either asleep or so close to it that he probably wouldn't recall this when he woke. "I don't sleep as well without Padfoot and I don't want you to sleep on the sofa downstairs."

"Mmkay," Sirius answered. "Won't."

"Good."

\* \* \*

Downstairs, Remus made tea while Tonks settled into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and placed the egg atop a leather-bound book. She picked up one of his quills and a spare scrap of parchment and began making notes.

"There are a couple of things I can do at Headquarters, I just need a few tools," she said, as she wrote. "And if Harry agrees, I'll run it past the alchemists and some other specialists. It has to have some kind of significance."

"I don't know. It seems rather light, for its size."

"It does. Durable, though. It might be hollow—a puzzle-box within a puzzle-box."

"Well, I hope this one doesn't fall open, I think its surprise might be rather nastier than the other box's," he said, carrying two cups of tea to the table. The sugar bowl followed him, floating along in the air and settling between them on a bare patch of table.

"I agree with you. Do you remember Regulus at all?"

Remus shook his head. "Only as an annoyance a few years below us. He and Sirius didn't mix much at school. I didn't visit them during the summers—the house was warded against werewolves, and they were never fond of his scruffy half-blood friend even before he ran off. You?"

"Mum didn't talk to them at all after she married Dad. I only knew Sirius, and I was just a kid when he went to Azkaban."

"Your mum would remember him, though."

"She doesn't talk about that half of the family at all, though. It wasn't easy, you know? She was like Sirius, she hated them all anyway, and then they disowned her, and then Sirius went to Azkaban..."

"Have you told her about Sirius?"

"I keep wondering if I should, but the fewer people who know, the better. And she's...she made peace with him a long time ago. She had to. Why stir it up?"

Remus studied his tea. "I'm beginning to think I should have paid more attention to Regulus. Sirius was—is—such a terribly precocious, brilliant man. I don't know why I thought Regulus would be anything less."

"Do you think he destroyed the cup?"

"No. If he hadn't time to destroy the locket...he must have stolen it and hidden it, then gone back for the cup and hidden that somewhere too, but Harry would have found it when he went looking for the locket, if it were at Grimmauld Place. I wonder how Regulus knew."

"We'll know soon, if I have anything to say about it," she said with a grin. "I like mysteries."

"And here I thought you joined up with the Aurors for the shiny uniform," Remus said with a smile.

"You sound tired," she said.

"I am tired."

"Maybe I should go—let you boys get some sleep."

"No," he said quickly, and she laughed. "No, what I mean is...please stay. Tonight."

"Sure, if you want. Your bed's nicer than mine." She studied his face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes—I'm sorry, I don't like to say these things..." he looked down at the table. "I mean I don't like to ask because I...need. That can't be...proper, really."

She smiled at him across the table. "It's been a long day. I'm not surprised you're a little under the weather. Sirius could have gone for Harry and dragged him away, instead of breaking his teeth on bronze bones."

"No, it's not—well, it is. Of course. But it's not only Sirius and Harry."

She waited while he gathered himself, mentally; the tips of his fingers flexed, a sure sign he was thinking hard. She'd seen him do this before, this assembly of his own thoughts into a tight little package, and it worried her just a little.

"The reason I was in London today..." he started, then stopped.

"Dealing with preliminaries for Greyback's trial, right?"

"No. I went to speak to him."

She stared at him. "You *what?*"

"Moody arranged it. I asked him to. I had to. I had to see him, Tonks."

"You *talked to him?*" she said, mouth agape. "Are you *daft?*"

"I asked him not to make a spectacle of himself in the trial. People are going to judge all of us on how he behaves —"

"You can't reason with him! He eats children, Remus. He *eats* them."

"Don't you think I know that?" he asked, sharply. "I *was* one of those children."

She watched him warily. "So you went to talk to him today. Alone."

"Moody was there."

"While you talked?"

"He was watching through the door to make sure nothing went wrong."

"But you were alone."

"Yes."

"And you didn't think I really merited telling this."

He looked away.

"Apparently nobody wants to tell me anything. I'm not an idiot, Remus."

"Tonks, I know that —"

"Then don't treat me like one."

The kitchen was silent, and he was reminded for a split second of the silence between himself and Fenrir in the Ministry jail.

"It was something I had to do, and I didn't want to have to defend myself about doing it beforehand," he said. "I don't intend to make a habit of lying to you, but thirty years of avoiding drawing attention to myself — it's hard to break. I'm trying. I'm telling you now."

"After the fact."

"Tonks, *please*. Nymphadora. I warned you I'm not perfect."

She stared at him. "So I'm supposed to just accept that you lied to me?"

"No! But — do you know how long it's been since I had to answer to someone else for my actions? The last time I was in love you weren't old enough to Apparate legally. Yes, by all means, you have the right to be angry, but please stay here tonight."

Her face was cold and grave, like it had been for the unending months of fighting between them over what they even were to each other.

"I need you," he said quietly, looking away. "I know I'm not supposed to, I know it's a terrible way to be in love, to need someone, but I need you and I can't help that."

"You can't do this only when it's convenient to you," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"You can't lie to me and then expect me to pick up the pieces when you're hurt because you lied."

The tips of his ear, all she could really see of him, was red.

"What did you think? That I'd forbid you to go?" she asked.

"No," he whispered. "I thought you'd—I didn't want to fight with you over it. I hate rows."

"Well, I'm not sure what you'd call this..." she sighed. "If you'd just told me I would have gone with you."

He looked up again, surprised.

"I wouldn't have liked it. I would have been furious at the idea and I would have told you it was daft, but if you'd said you had to, I wouldn't have made you go alone," she said. "But you didn't let me prove that, did you?"

He brushed his hair out of his eyes, one hand clutching at the back of his head. "I've never—nobody but—do you realise how naked I am in front of you, Tonks?"

"What?"

"You know *everything*. I've been with women who knew I was poor or who knew I was a wizard when they weren't or who knew I loved them and one or two who knew I was a werewolf but I've never been with anyone who knew everything all at once. I don't know how you go about all day *knowing* everything and still come back to me at the end of it. Bloody hell, the last person who did that was Sirius, and that was twenty years ago when he was too stupid to know any better. Merlin," he said, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. "I sound like an absolute madman. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "We're all tired. At least you told me. Come on..." she took one of his hands away from his face, grasping his wrist lightly and pulling him up out of the chair. He watched her cautiously, and she wondered what had happened to make him so wary of a little fighting. "Dare you to get

naked in front of me for real," she said with a small smile, and he smiled back. "This doesn't mean I'm not angry with you. Don't do that sort of thing again."

"I can't make promises, Tonks – I can try, but old habits die hard," he said, cupping his hands around her face, fingers threading through her pink hair just behind her ears. "Can I ask you something rude?"

"If you say please I might say yes," she replied, and he blushed.

"No, I just...Tonks, what do you even...what do you get out of...this? I know it's not that easy, this isn't a business transaction, but...sex, someone to sleep next to, someone who can talk to you about books...I'm not the only man who can do any of that, and plenty could do it better."

"You want me to forgive you *and* stroke your ego?" she asked sardonically. He stammered and she put her hand over his mouth. "Don't answer that."

Sometimes he watched her so intently that she wondered if the wolf didn't bleed over into the man when he wasn't careful.

"What I get out of you," she said, slowly, "Is the teenage boy who didn't think his best friend's klutzy little cousin was too uncool to hang out with. Someone who knows what it's like to be looked at...differently, not because of anything you did but just because other people don't see you the way you actually are. Someone who knows about books and history, someone who likes his women intelligent..."

Remus smiled behind her hand.

"Someone who doesn't want me to look like someone else, even in fun, someone who thinks he's not quite good enough for me instead of the other way around."

Her thumb rubbed his cheek gently, and he closed his eyes, breathing hard against her palm.

"When I was nine I thought you and Sirius hung the moon and James Potter lit it," she said. "I don't mind you being human, Remus. But I wouldn't say no if you wanted to be perfect, either," she added, taking her hand away and kissing him. "We both need sleep."

"Yes," he agreed, pulling her almost hesitantly towards the bedroom. "You'll stay?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll stay."

\* \* \*

The Sunday after they went to the Gaunt crypt, Sirius woke with a pounding headache and a stiff neck. A few seconds' contemplation allowed him to deduce that the headache was likely the result of being clobbered by statuary the day before; the stiff neck was probably from sleeping in one position all night.

He could feel Harry curled against his back, Harry's hand clutching his pyjama shirt and Harry's breath on his neck. It was nice, of course, but it also wasn't helping what he understood to be most teenage boys' natural reactions to waking up in the morning. He slid his hand up and untangled Harry's fingers from his shirt gently, regretfully sliding out of the bed and standing unsteadily. Harry mumbled something sleepily and pulled in on himself, pressing his messy-haired head deeper into the pillow.

A hot bath would help the headache, and anyway they only had a clawfoot bathtub in the upstairs room, no shower. He gingerly eased his pyjama shirt over his head and left it on the floor, removing the trousers he'd fallen asleep in.

Something had been shoved in the back pocket, next to the Marauder's Map; Sirius didn't feel comfortable if he didn't have the Map somewhere about him. He pulled them out together and then placed the Map in a cubbyhole in Harry's writing desk before unfolding the thick, expensive parchment.

SO YOU WANT TO BE A HEALER, the top read. The rest of it was filled with smaller print, interspersed with pictures of Healers patching up various gory injuries and holding buckets for vomiting patients. A note was stuck to it.

*Nigel, just some literature to get you started. If you manage to keep out of hospital as a patient in the future, anyway. Augustus.*

Sirius grinned and shoved the pamphlet in with the Map, then tossed his trousers and pants next to his shirt and wandered into the bathroom. A hot bath and a few minutes of privacy, that was what was needed. He ran the bath and climbed in, his left shoulder still protesting any strenuous use until he slid down and submerged his whole body up to his chin in the steaming water. He could *feel* the muscles in his left shoulder stretching, the knots slowly unwinding. He let his mind wander as he soaked, right hand resting on his belly, left dangling over the edge of the tub.

If one had to get into shouting matches with Harry Potter, ending the day by saving his life and being honourably injured was a pretty good way to win

the fight. He, Sirius Black, was an out and out hero. He was *definitely* a Good Dog.

When he'd realised, somewhere around the age of fourteen, that he was never going to be like other boys, he'd also realised that it would be absolutely fatal to allow himself anywhere near the idea of sex with James Potter. It was hard enough imagining the awkwardness of sex with another boy without it being his best friend, for all intents and purposes the brother he'd wanted instead of the brother he'd actually got. Remus was safe; Remus never let anyone too close, even his friends, and Remus was handsome too in a scholarly sort of way. He'd entertained fantasies of getting Remus alone in the Prefect's bathroom and explaining precisely what a bad young man he had been. It always ended with the mental vision of Remus' thighs tightening around his jerking hips and had naturally led, because variety was the spice of life, to the idea of other Prefects doing the same—Matthew Byrnbaum (who was a bit of a wanker, especially for a Hufflepuff) among them.

But never James.

The thing was that Harry, for all he looked like James, *wasn't* James, and Sirius had realised that he liked dark hair and sharp jawlines, he liked green eyes. He slid his hand a little lower, meditating on this, until his knuckles brushed his erection under the water.

He and Harry were Adventurers. Perhaps the crypt could have gone differently; without the broken teeth and broken bones, Sirius would have been there with Harry leaning up against him and collapsing in relief across his body. Harry could have looked down and said "Thanks" in that way he had, and Sirius could have—his hand twitched and rubbed, gently—just leaned up and kissed him and said "you're welcome" which would just barely have gotten his tongue past Harry's lips.

It took even less effort in fantasy than it would have in reality to have rolled Harry over and straddled his hips. He could have kissed Harry there on the floor of the Gaunt family crypt and given the skeletons a show, brought life back into the cold stone cavern.

Some little voice in the back of his mind told him this was just a bit too creepy and wouldn't a nice, warm hospital bed be more comfortable anyway?

His breath came a little faster now, inhaling the steam of the bath as he pinned Harry underneath him on the hospital bed in the *very* private room and

kissed his shoulders and spine. Harry writhed delightfully up against his cock and *begged* Sirius *please* just like that.

Sirius tilted his head back on the rim of the bathtub and tried not to moan. The warm air sent pleasant tingles across his skin and he pulled himself up out of the bath until he was sitting on the edge, his left hand clenching it for support while his right hand moved faster, and Harry's mouth was slickly warm and he moaned and —

Harry woke briefly when a warm, damp body curled up against him again, but whoever it was smelled like comforting things, soap and clean laundry and Sirius, and he merely adjusted to accommodate this new presence and slept on.

## CHAPTER XXII

Harry woke on Sunday morning to an agonised howl from the general area of the bathroom; Sirius, having been too sleepy during his bath to notice his reflection, was standing in front of the mirror over the sink and staring at his hair in horror.

"What did she do to it?" he wailed. Remus came pelting up the stairs as if shot from a cannon, Tonks on his heels, and Harry had to reassure them that nobody was being murdered—although homicide was clearly in the offing. Sirius turned on Tonks and pointed at her.

"You! You gave me a...stripe!" he said accusingly. "My hair is *pink!*"

Remus, who looked like he'd been about to have a heart attack, sank down onto the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands, laughing.

"It's not funny!" Sirius insisted. "Do you mean to tell me I've been wandering around since yesterday with this...this stuff on my head?"

"You weren't really wandering much," Tonks said. "A walk down a hospital corridor and another walk up the stairs to the bedroom isn't wandering. It's hardly even strolling."

Sirius angrily picked up his wand and aimed it at his own head, squinting carefully in the mirror. The hair began to turn grey.

"What did you do to it? It won't go back right!"

"I just grew you some hair. Keep trying, you're the brilliant animagus, you'll figure it out," she said. "Could be worse."

"How?" Sirius demanded. Tonks screwed up her face, wincing, and a moment later Sirius stared at a carbon copy of himself standing next to the bed—wearing her bathrobe and pyjamas, of course, and with a full head of lusciously pink-and-gold striped hair.

"Camera," Remus gasped, still laughing. "Oh, get a camera..."

Sirius retreated into the bathroom and slammed the door shut. Tonks shook her head, settling her face back into its usual features. She kept the striped hair, though.

"There's breakfast coming up," Remus said to Harry, even as he and Tonks were descending again. Harry slid out of bed and dressed, knocking on the bathroom door.

"Get it fixed yet? I need the toilet," he said.

Sirius opened the door reluctantly. He'd managed to fade the worst of it into black, but there was still a long grey streak where it had proved stubborn.

"Well, it doesn't look silly," Harry allowed. Sirius snorted. "Come on, get out, I want a piss and a shave."

"Height of elegance, you are," Sirius said.

"And go back to bed! Augustus said bed rest!" Harry called. Sirius threw him a two-fingered salute as the door closed, but when he emerged Sirius was back under the blankets. His obedience might have had something to do with Remus, who was sitting next to it and sharing a large plate of toast that sat on a tray on the bed. Or it might have had something to do with the slightly dazed look in his eyes.

"He tried to go downstairs," Remus said. "That didn't work too well."

"I got dizzy, that's all," Sirius said.

"That's why you're supposed to stay in bed," Remus said. "Harry, there's breakfast downstairs if you'd rather not bask in the glow of the most sullen man on earth."

"That's all right," Harry said, taking a slice of toast from the plate. "Someone's got to keep him entertained. Are you staying here today?"

Remus nodded. "Tonks has gone off home already – she's having a look at that present Regulus left for Voldemort, and I think she's going to try to sneak into the files room and see what there is to be seen."

Sirius rested his elbows on his knees, one hand cupping a bowl of oatmeal while he stirred jam into it absently.

"Do you know how he died?" he asked. Remus gave him a searching look. "I just...I don't know how any of them died, really. My family I mean. Other than, he was murdered."

"Sirius – uh, my – I mean, the other Sirius," Harry said awkwardly, "He just said he was killed for wanting to get out. He didn't talk about his – your parents."

They both looked at Remus, who cleared his throat.

"Your father, ah...we had this second-hand, but I'm told it was a bad fall down the stairs – he wasn't young," Remus said slowly. "The rumour was that he'd been drinking, and – well, it stops the blood from clotting easily..."

"It's all right," Sirius said. "I'm not going to start crying or anything. I hated the bastard, and besides it's been two months. I just want to know *how*."

Remus gave him an uncertain look. "Your mum had an apoplectic fit when she heard about Regulus. It put too much strain on her heart—she died in St. Mungo's a week or two later. I don't actually know—no one does—who murdered Regulus. They found his body outside the Leaky Cauldron." Remus sighed. "I'd rather not say anything more about it, if you don't mind."

The second note from Regulus had ended up in neat folds on Harry's bedside table; Sirius unfolded it, studying it carefully. "I thought he was a bit of an idiot, but we got on all right."

"If I recall correctly, Sirius, you got on mainly because you never had to speak to each other."

"Yeah, well, that's still more than you can say of Mum," Sirius answered. "And at least Reg did something worthwhile before they got to him. As much of a pain in the arse as it might be now. He tried. I wish I knew how he found out about them."

"Well, brooding will get us nowhere," Remus said, gathering up the breakfast dishes. "Would you like to sleep?"

"No. Isn't there anything useful I can do?" Sirius asked.

"I think you earned a day off after yesterday," Remus replied. "Make Harry bring you a book or play some chess. I have marking to do."

"I could help you mark—"

"Not with your head half bashed in, you can't," Remus said. "Merlin alone knows how it would come out. And stop fretting," he added, as Sirius gave him a defiant look. "Harry, find some way to distract him, please? I'll be downstairs."

If he saw Harry's flushed face as he went down the stairs again, he paid it no mind; Sirius was busy carefully refolding the note Regulus had left. He leaned over the edge opposite Harry's bedside table and rummaged in the bag he'd left there, extracting *Animagus Winter* from the crushed and crumpled clothes and creased parchment.

"Didn't you finish that?" Harry asked.

"I'm re-reading," Sirius said. "Unless you really want to play chess."

"Nah. I guess I should write some letters," Harry said. "Let Ron and Hermione know what happened and all."

"Sure," Sirius said, removing a photograph he'd been using as a bookmark. Harry turned his head and craned his neck to see it properly. In the picture, Sirius was sitting with Remus at the professors' table, his red robes vivid

next to the other man's deep brown and against the grey stone behind them. He was tearing off bits of a roll and eating them as Remus told him some story, waving the fork in his hand for dramatic effect.

"That's a good photograph," Harry said.

"It's all right," Sirius agreed. "Creevey took it. Nice enough bloke. Bit mad for cameras."

"Oh," Harry said, a slight note of chill in his voice. "Yeah, Colin's that way. Well, I should answer my post."

"All right," Sirius agreed, propping the book open on his lap. He watched Harry, however, as he sat at the desk below the high window, sunlight streaming in and picking out motes of dust dancing around Harry's head and shoulders.

He turned his eyes back to the book, tucking the photograph between two later pages so that it wasn't lying there on the bed, a peculiar bone of contention between them.

*"Cerastes," Polaris said, his fingers pale and crooked around the edge of the plate, "Do you have a past?"*

*"Of course, Pol," I laughed. "I may even go so far as to say I have history. Why? I don't suppose you wonder what it's like; I know you have history as well."*

*"How do you know?"*

*"Because you are unique. Men don't become like you are without having a history."*

*"I'd like to tell you, sometime."*

*He looked tired as he wrapped his hands around the cup and held it to his lips. I had seen him laughing and boyish, had seen him studious and serious, but I had never seen him exhausted or afraid. I had assumed that he was not the sort to show such things in public. I didn't dream that I knew him well enough to be offered this.*

*"I should like to hear it," I replied. "When will you tell me?"*

*"Someday soon," he said, with a flash of sharp white teeth, a half-grin over the rim of the cup. He was about to say something more when the boy, who had been loitering in the corner of the little cafe with some young friends, upset a display of wineglasses in the window and a pyramid of glass came crashing down in all directions. He ran up to us with a bit of glass embedded in his palm, piteously begging for comfort, and Polaris deftly plucked the shard from his hand without a second thought. The boy's whimpers subsided and he hid behind Polaris, in the chair between him and the wall, as the proprietor stormed through the room to see what the fuss was about.*

\* \* \*

Sirius went back to school on Monday evening, much to the delight and relief of the Hogwarts students who had already come to be amusingly fond of their Tutor. He and Harry didn't discuss Saturday or the fact that Padfoot actually crawled under the blankets to sleep that much closer to Harry on Sunday night. It wasn't the awkward silence that had been a prelude to their fight on Saturday, but rather a mutual agreement that the particular situation they were in fell outside the normal rules of behaviour.

Fenrir Greyback's trial began on the twenty-eighth, a full week after Remus met him in the underground cells at the Ministry. It was very public. Even the Quibbler sent a reporter to cover it, though admittedly their angle was not the trial of a werewolf so much as support for the claim that Greyback was part of a Ministry conspiracy.

Fenrir could not be tried for many of the crimes he had committed; among those was the infection of Remus Lupin, since Remus himself had not seen the wolf that did it and his father, the other witness, was dead. Remus' testimony was merely hearsay—Fenrir's boasting passed along to him through another person who could not be located. Many of Fenrir's other victims were already his allies, and still more were scared of retribution—not only if they testified against Fenrir, but if they revealed to the world that they were werewolves.

The primary charge against him and the keystone of the prosecution was the attempted murder of Bill Weasley. In the last two days before the trial started, two young men also came forward to assert that they had seen Fenrir as a wolf and could identify him as the one who had infected them as children. The day the trial started and this became public, both were sacked from their jobs and two of Fenrir's pack broke into the younger man's thankfully empty flat, destroying most of his furniture before the Aurors arrived.

Fenrir himself seemed to walk a fine line; Remus wasn't sure if it was his own influence or simply capriciousness, but Fenrir danced along the edge of impropriety without ever falling off, pulling himself back when he was about to start a rant about human inferiority or brag about the taste of flesh in his mouth. Perhaps he really was thinking of his pack. Remus didn't know, and wasn't about to ask. He didn't attend the trial, but he did listen to it on the Floo Broadcasting Network between classes.

Anti-werewolf sentiment at Hogwarts was on the rise with every new Prophet article, but when it finally came to a head, it was Sirius who bore the brunt of it.

He had taken to holding reviews in a classroom on Wednesdays, since that was the day he always had a lot of students, Thursdays being his day off. He appropriated the Dark Arts classroom from the end of dinner until lights-out and took questions from first-year through seventh-year, or at any rate managed to direct people to where they could find the answers if he didn't know. It was only the second time he'd done it when one of the second-years, a Slytherin named Beatrice, raised her hand and insolently asked him how one killed a werewolf. Sirius stared at her in shock for a minute before a wicked look crossed his face.

"Why don't we ask someone who's actually studying werewolves?" he asked, turning to a brace of fifth-year Hufflepuffs sitting near the back. "Is Taylor back there?"

"Here, Mr. Padfoot," William Taylor raised his hand.

"You're studying werewolves, aren't you?" Sirius asked.

"Not directly," William said, embarrassed. "That is to say, *I am*—it's for my Potions OWL."

"Can you tell me how to tell a werewolf from a true wolf?"

"Yessir. Snout, eyes, and tail are all physical signs; the howl sounds more full-throated and less natural; and uh..." William looked stricken. A fourth-year Ravenclaw raised her hand.

"Yes, Polly?"

"There's no under-fur on the pelt," she said. "They don't need it—they're only wolves one night a month."

"Very good," Sirius said, tossing her a ButterBite from Honeydukes. He threw one to William, too. "These are the five standard ways to identify a werewolf, Scamander tells us," he said. "How many of them are applicable more than once every twenty eight days?"

"None, sir," William said.

"Do you know any which are, William?"

"No, sir."

"Why is that?"

"Because there aren't any, sir."

"Not hairy knuckles? Eyebrows across the nose?" Sirius asked. Polly stifled a laugh.

"That's just an old myth, sir," she said.

"Checked Professor Lupin's knuckles, did you?" he asked. Polly had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Sir," Beatrice said, interrupting brashly, "I didn't ask how to identify a werewolf."

"Really? So you knew?"

"No, sir."

"Interesting. Why do you suppose you're here, Beatrice?"

The girl looked at him blankly.

"Why do you suppose we're teaching you all this?" Sirius asked, feeling slightly frustrated. "Why don't we just give you a handout and send you off?"

She shook her head. "Sir, I didn't ask—"

"No, you didn't ask, Beatrice. You thought you'd be a smartarse and ask a werewolf's friend how to kill him instead."

She blushed bright scarlet.

"You are here because it's not enough to know things. You have to *understand* them, you little idiot," he continued wrathfully. "Do you know why you can't tell a werewolf from an ordinary person outside of a full moon? Because there *isn't a difference*. So unless a werewolf is running at you with jaws open during a full moon, you'll never have to worry, will you? Granted, you'll be in a pickle if you know then, but let's calculate the odds. Who here knows the population of Great Britain?"

There was silence until a first-year raised his hand hesitantly.

"All right, Olly, do you know?" Sirius inquired.

"About sixty million, sir," Oliver said.

"Muggle Studies students may want to make a note of that," Sirius said in passing, as he placed a Jawsticking Sucker in Oliver's pocket. "Let's see who knows what the population of Wizarding Great Britain is."

This time a crop of hands went up. Sirius flung a Fizzing Whizbee at Colin Creevey, who grinned at him as he caught it.

"About ten thousand, three thousand of which aren't actually magical themselves," he said. "Spouses, squibs, and some family."

"Now, for the big prize," Sirius said, holding up a pot of much coveted disappearing ink as a reward. "Who can tell me what the werewolf population of Wizarding Britain is?"

"Who cares?" someone in the back asked.

"I do," Sirius answered. "And I'm sure Beatrice will. After all, she's very concerned about killing them."

This time the silence was absolute, and Sirius shoved his hands in his pockets, setting the ink down on Remus' desk.

"Well, I know," Sirius said. "I made it my business to know. And I'll bet that even if Professor Lupin weren't a werewolf, he'd know, because he's a conscientious teacher. Now, it's difficult to pin this number down because people are secretive about it—scared of Beatrice, you know—but conservative estimates put it at somewhere between three and five hundred."

There was a mass intake of breath. Five hundred werewolves in a population of ten thousand was significant.

"So what are your odds of meeting a werewolf in Diagon Alley? Pretty bloody likely. You've already met one at Hogwarts. There are probably eight or nine in Hogsmeade. Probably eighty or ninety in London. On the other hand—who's good with arithmancy? Is Granger here?"

"Off snogging Weasley," a wag called. Sirius grinned.

"Padma Patil?"

Padma sat up straight in her chair, quill at the ready.

"Can you tell me the odds of an individual meeting a given werewolf, one of a minority of five hundred in a population of sixty million? On a single night that only occurs thirteen times a year?"

"It depends on population concentration, sir," Padma answered, making notes nevertheless. "How big is the area?"

"Anyone know the size of our fair isle?" Sirius asked. Silence. "Oh bollocks, me either."

They laughed at that, which broke the tension nicely.

"I think my point's been made, however," Sirius said. "I'll tell you what, Beatrice. You answer me the question I just asked Padma, and then you tell me who put you up to this on the foolish assumption that I wouldn't stoop to crushing a second-year's ego, and I'll tell you the eight ways to kill a werewolf."

"I did," said Blaise Zabini, swaggering forward from the back. Sirius narrowed his eyes.

"Surely you're capable of doing your own research, Zabini?" he asked. "I presume you know how to read. I know using the library might be a fresh experience for you, but it's good to try new things and keep an open mind."

Zabini snorted. "When the werewolves try to kill you all after they put Greyback down, you'll wish you knew," he said, taking in the students in the classroom. "I don't intend to be eaten on the full moon by a savage."

He swept out before Sirius could throw him out, slamming the classroom door behind him. Sirius leaned back on the desk, bowing his head. Beatrice had sunk down in her seat so far that she was barely visible, and the girls sitting near her were leaning as far away as possible. Maddie, the second-year Slytherin he'd chosen to be his replacement Tutor when he'd taught Dark Arts two weeks before, looked disgusted.

"Some of you, particularly the younger ones, may not understand some of the politics going on outside these walls," he said slowly. "I hardly understand all of them myself. But I do know that you have nothing—*nothing*—to fear from Professor Lupin. What you as students need to be afraid of is the dangerous idea that there's nothing more you need to learn. I'm still learning, just like you are, just like Professor Lupin and Headmistress McGonagall. When you start to think that you can't be proven wrong, then you're the one to fear and repudiate." He sighed. "Thus concludes the lecture. All right, it's only seven o'clock, who has more questions? Slughorn gave out some stiff orders this week, didn't he?"

\* \* \*

While Sirius was returning to his duties and Remus was fretting himself into exhaustion over the Greyback trial, Harry was discovering that solving mysteries the Auror way involved a lot of boring paperwork and speculation.

Tonks had sweet-talked the archivist in the Auror records office into giving her free run of the files there and she brought home three boxes of reports—reports about Regulus, reports about the Death Eaters during the time Regulus was with them, Muggle police report copies from the weeks around Regulus' death. There was one box she didn't bring back with her; it had Regulus' clothes and the contents of his pockets when he was found. She brought the inventory list along, however, and Harry returned to it over and over again as he and Tonks began to build a timeline. Remus often helped in the evenings, though he was mostly quiet and merely did as they asked. Harry sometimes saw Remus watching him and wondered what the other man was thinking.

Regulus had died less than a year before the end of the war, and investigations at the time were not particularly thorough—a lot of people were dying at the time. There had been special interest in the case because he had been

a Death Eater, but the details were still sketchy. For a week beforehand, nobody had seen the young man except his mother, who hadn't been paying much attention; he came home to Grimmauld Place to eat dinner and sleep, and that was all.

"They didn't know the right questions to ask," Harry said to Tonks as he read through the interview with Sirius' mother. It was peculiar to see her words down in black and white, sounding saner—a little—than the lunatic ravings of her portrait.

"They didn't know he'd gone and found a horcrux," Tonks answered. "Two."

"He can't have found them much ahead of when he died..." Harry went back to the chart they'd made. "He must have been a hell of a liar to keep so calm. If I had a bit of Voldemort's soul and I knew he was after me for whatever reason, I'd have been a lot less cool about it than he was."

"He was fond of acting," Remus said from the table, where he was bent over a bowl of spaghetti. They both looked at him. "Some of the Slytherins had formed an amateur dramatics troupe. Regulus was their star player."

"So he didn't come home the night before they found him dead...but he left that morning without appearing to have anything wrong with him," Tonks said, consulting another report. "Left the house around nine, disappeared into London, never came home. They killed him—cut him up afterwards, pretty unusual even for Death Eaters—and dumped his body in front of the Leaky Cauldron..."

"Effective warning against traitors," Remus murmured.

"...but he hadn't been dead an hour when he was found, so they must have caught up with him in the early morning."

"Or kept him captive," Harry said.

"But if he didn't hide the cup with the locket, he must have only had the cup that day," Tonks pointed out.

"You're sure Dung didn't sell it?" Remus asked.

"No, we tracked down everything he sold." She offered him the inventory sheet of Dung's iniquitous activities, but he waved it off.

"He must have hidden it *somewhere*," Harry said, frustrated. "Somewhere other than Grimmauld Place, but—"

"—but he didn't have anywhere else," Tonks sighed. "He could have pawned it or shoved it in a trash can, he could have done anything with it."

"He wanted to destroy it," Remus said. "He would have put it somewhere he could go back for it later."

"Besides, it doesn't even look like they knew what he was doing, or they would have cleared away the notes he left behind." Harry put his head in his hands, threading his fingers through his hair. Tonks patted the back of his head.

"Welcome to the Aurors," she sighed.

"I keep going back to his pockets, thinking there must be something there that can tell us. But if they took what it was, then I won't even know that they took it, because it's not there," he moaned.

"Intuition is not a bad thing, Harry," Remus said. "Follow it. You were right about Draco Malfoy." Harry looked up at him, and he smiled. "Ron told me about it."

"What more is there to follow? It's just a list," Harry said, resting his fingers on the tidy sheet of parchment.

*Wand – left rear pocket. 9", oak and unicorn hair. Snapped. Unable to recover last spell performed.*

*Bamboo Quill – left rear pocket. High-end Flourish & Blotts product: self-inking, non-smearing. Nib chipped. R.A.B. monogrammed.*

*Coin Bag – left front pocket. Leather, gold chain drawstring. S.A.B. to R.A.B. – Happy Christmas embossed. Contents: 2G 4S 1k.*

*Receipt – left front pocket. 3S kebab and chips special, Roc's Nest food stand, undated.*

*Ring – left index finger. Band, a silver snake; initials RAB on head, set with two emeralds.*

*Ring – right front pocket. Band, gold; inscribed with foreign lettering (note – poss. House Elf script). Corresponds to tan line on right ring finger.*

*Leather Necklace – neck. Leather thong, tied at nape of neck. Pendant, opaque green stone, silver mounting.*

*White Necklace – left front pocket. Plastic beads (white), nylon string. Plastic pendant (white). Broken.*

*Bracelet – left wrist. Three plain leather thongs, bound together with green thread.*

"Ask yourself what you don't know about these things," Tonks said. "That's a start. If you want to look at them, I can probably sneak you in—still got your cloak?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah."

Remus held out his hand. "May I see the list?" he asked. Harry passed it over and Remus studied it. His lips quirked upwards.

"He kept the coin bag Sirius gave him when we were fourth-years," he said. "Sirius was sure Reg burned everything that ever reminded the family of him." His eyes moved further down. "I remember that ring, too. It was a gift from their parents when he did well on his OWLs. They gave Sirius one after his OWLs, but he sold it after he ran off." He handed it back to Harry. "I can't help you, unless you're curious about those things. The Roc's Nest is still open, it's down in Knockturn past the raptor shop. It's the sort of place where you don't want to ask what kind of meat their 'meat kabob' uses."

"You both look like you could use a holiday," Tonks said, as Harry sat back in his chair and rolled his shoulders. "You know, they taught us at the academy that obsession is unhealthy..."

"I'm having dinner with Sirius tomorrow," Harry said.

"Well, that'll be nice—"

"Maybe he can help, if I'm tactful about it."

Tonks threw up her hands in despair and walked into the bedroom, muttering to herself. Remus winked at Harry.

"She's right. Sirius will tell you, too, Harry. We still have the advantage of knowing what Voldemort doesn't know."

"I just wish we knew what Regulus *did* know," Harry answered, with a sigh.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Harry had given up even pretending to be shocked or dismayed by the burgeoning tradition of drinks with Sirius on Thursday evenings. This time round, unlike the others, he'd been asked to a proper dinner with Sirius and Ron and Hermione instead of spiked tea when Sirius should be working or a late-evening snack on Sirius' day off.

He entered through the floo in Remus' office just as Remus was returning from his last class of the day; he looked cheerful and happy, despite the dark smudges under his eyes. It was two weeks until the full moon, which meant that he was in the middle of a lull—body recovered from the last change and not yet preparing for the next. Sirius and Ron were waiting behind Remus in the doorway, and Hermione ran up even as Harry greeted them.

"Come on then," Sirius said. "See you tomorrow, Moony. Don't let Slughorn sit next to you at dinner."

"I'm not the one he wants to sit next to," Remus replied with a smile. Sirius shuddered dramatically and dragged the other three off to the kitchens. It took a while to extricate Dobby from his beloved Harry Potter once they'd collected the basket of food the elves had prepared for them, but they finally escaped and fled to Sirius' quarters.

It was an early winter, or rather would be soon; rain fell steadily against the windowpanes. The hearth fire, which had been annoying in the late August heat, was now a welcome warmth. Ron and Hermione accepted the mulled rum Sirius poured without hesitation, so Harry didn't hesitate either; it felt very grown-up and more than a little strange to be drinking mulled rum and eating a roasted chicken dinner in the quarters of the Hogwarts School Tutor, with Ron and Hermione tangled up in each other on the sofa and all four of them talking politics and making plans. They'd exhausted the Greyback trial, some recent Death Eater attacks that had been in the Prophet, and the new horcrux mystery before the conversation turned to the enigma that Regulus Black had left behind him.

"Don't they know anything yet?" Sirius asked from his wing chair, legs stretched out in front of him indolently. "It's been nearly two weeks."

"Well, Tonks is only looking at it in her spare time," Harry said. "Which...between her job and Remus, I don't guess she has a lot of."

"He keeps her busy," Hermione said with a laugh. Ron quietly emptied the rest of her goblet into his, making a hushing sign at Harry.

"She's only just taken it to the alchemists – I still don't like it, but at least we might get some answers," Harry said.

"It might just be a rock, you know," Sirius suggested, rather more cheerfully than he otherwise might have. The grey streak in his hair hadn't gone away, but he'd brushed the rest of his hair down over it, which almost worked. "That'd be like Reg. *'Here, have a gift! It's an enigma! It's a mystery! Oh wait, it's just a rock.'*"

Ron snorted into his goblet. Sirius refilled his own from the jug on the end-table just as there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," Harry said. "I think I'm the most sober."

"But Harry, you're not supposed –" Sirius broke off as Harry opened the door.

"Harry!" Padma Patil said, startled.

"Hiya, Padma," Harry said, right before it hit him what Sirius had been about to say. *But Harry, you're not supposed to know who Nigel Padfoot is...*

"Sorry, I was looking for Mr. Padfoot," Padma said, hesitantly. "Is uh...is he here?"

"Hi Padma!" Hermione called, waving. Ron anchored her firmly to the couch to keep her from standing up and joining them at the door.

"Hi...Hermione..." Padma said, now thoroughly confused. "I didn't know you knew Mr. Padfoot, Harry."

"Yeah, sorry, we – have mutual friends," Harry said, as Sirius came to stand behind him in the doorway.

"Clearly," Padma murmured, a trace of Ravenclaw wit shining bravely through. "Mr. Padfoot, I wanted to...uh, Harry, can we...?"

"Oh, it's all right," Harry said, standing his ground. Padma Patil, of all people to come round trying to make up to Sirius!

"I just...I know I didn't have to, but it was sort of a challenge," Padma said. "About the math problem you gave me, I mean. I worked it out – I had to make some assumptions but it wasn't really all that hard, when you got down to it..."

She offered Sirius a sheet of parchment, folded in half. Sirius opened it and examined the calculations carefully. "It's just a matter of space and how many people are in the space, and what percentage of those people are

werewolves...you have to account for rural areas...and I, um. I took into account werewolves who don't run loose, like Professor Lupin."

"Yes, I see," Sirius said, finger following the line of the calculation. "This is good work. I'll make sure Professor Vector gets a look at this. Thanks, Patil," he finished. Padma batted her eyes. Harry wanted to kick her shins even as Sirius held the paper out to her, pointing to a circled number at the bottom. "So that's it?"

"Eight point eighteen times ten to the negative fourteenth power," she said. "The odds are...pretty miniscule."

"Hmm, yes. Beatrice will be underwhelmed, I'm afraid, but I appreciate the work," he said with a smile. Padma smiled back. Harry felt action was called for.

"Good seeing you, Padma," he interrupted. She took the hint.

"You too, Harry. See you later, Mr. Padfoot," she added, even as Harry was closing the door. Behind them, Hermione giggled.

"She fancies you. That was an excuse to come by your rooms on your day off," she said to Sirius. "What was all that about werewolves about, anyway?"

"Just a little theoretical exercise," Sirius said, downing a large gulp of his rum as he returned to his chair. "Apparently the odds of a given human encountering a changed werewolf on the full moon are uh...small. And you could have been nicer to her, Harry."

"It's your day off, she's supposed to leave you *alone*," Harry retorted, although he realised that Sirius was probably right. Sirius folded the parchment again and tossed it the short distance between his chair and his nearby desk. "Why were you setting Patil to do sums about werewolves?"

"Some of the Slytherins were showing an unhealthy interest in the Greyback trial, that's all," Sirius answered. He stretched and sighed. "Ugh...I have to be up at some ungodly hour tomorrow to help Sprout chaperone a bunch of Slytherins on a toadstool hunt. *More powerful if gathered by dawn* my arse."

"We should go too," Hermione said. "It'll be bedtime soon enough."

"Hermione, you're Head Girl and I'm a Prefect," Ron complained. "I think it's all right if we're out a few minutes past curfew!"

"It's a bad example," Hermione insisted, pulling him up off the sofa.

"No worse than showing up tipsy in the Gryffindor common room," Sirius observed with a grin. He offered her a Predica Mint and she kissed him on

the cheek before popping it into her mouth. Ron scowled, so she kissed him on the mouth and laughed.

"I gave you my mint," she said. "Sirius, give us another."

Sirius rolled his eyes and handed her another mint while Harry made gagging noises. Hermione called back a thank-you as they left, and after the door slammed Harry pushed himself up out of his chair.

"I should go too, I guess," he said. "I can sneak back into Remus' office..."

"There's no rush," Sirius said. "You don't have a curfew."

"Yeah, but you have toadstools at dawn," Harry said with a grin.

"Well, you know what the solution to that is," Sirius replied gravely.

"What's that?"

"Stay up all night."

Harry laughed and sat on the sofa, reaching for his half-empty glass. "You're not seri – oh, bollocks..."

"Yes I am," Sirius said, just as gravely. Then he burst out laughing too.

"What do you say, Harry? Going to help me push through until dawn?"

"Remus would worry. He'd probably come looking for me," Harry said.

"Good, he can help."

Harry shook his head even as Sirius dropped to the floor and sat with his back against the sofa's arm, refilling Harry's cup. Harry held it up to the light.

"I wonder what Helga Hufflepuff would have thought of it," he said.

"Of what?"

"Well, it must have been one of her favourite things, her cup. And here some overblown descendant of old Sally Slytherin is using it to stash his soul in."

"Dunno, don't Muggles venerate that kind of thing?" Sirius said. "Like the Holy Grail. Only not..."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. See the knucklebone of Saint Whosis the Patron of nose blowing; kiss the skull of the great martyr Soandso who died by the hedgehog," Sirius said, drinking directly from the jug.

"Reliquaries," Harry said. "I don't think they're quite the same thing."

"I've read my history. If you see a thing that's holy, you're more holy by association."

"Yeah, but it's not a bit of soul."

"No. Box with a mouldering old bit of bone or flesh in it. Much less hygienic than souls, really."

Something sparked across the back of Harry's brain, but he didn't quite catch it in time. Sirius was talking, anyway, his voice a pleasant low hum.

"Maybe that's the sixth horcrux, you know. Tom Riddle was raised Muggle, wasn't he? He'd know about requisitionaries."

"Reliquaries."

"Sure. Wouldn't he think it splendid to use one?"

"It'd have to be some sort of special one, though. Besides, we've got to figure out how to destroy the ones we already have," Harry said. Sirius rested an arm across Harry's knees, tipping his head back so that he could see Harry upside-down.

"You're so grown-up sometimes," Sirius said.

"You're the one with the paying job," Harry answered.

"Yeah, but you never stop thinking. I wish you would take a break, it makes my brain hurt."

"You never do either."

"Sure I do. I'm not thinking at all," Sirius said. "Not a blessed thought in my empty mind. Hey, why is the rum gone?" he added, looking mournfully into the bottom of the jug.

"Well, that might be true," Harry allowed. "But I'm not thinking all the time. It's just...important. When the war's over, I'll have time to do what I want."

"What if you're over before the war is?" Sirius asked, hoisting himself up using one of Harry's thighs as leverage. Harry sucked in a breath at the warm weight of his fingers.

"What do you mean?" he asked. *You're just bloody lonely, that's all it is...*

"Well, I mean, what if you die first? Or die in the final attempt? Dumbledore didn't live to see the end, did he?"

Harry considered this. "It's still more important. Maybe even more important, if I think I'm not going to survive. I have to do all I can."

"Sounds like a half-life to me. Like mine was. The other me," Sirius said, putting the jug carefully on the table. He began unbuttoning his Hogwarts shirt without a hint of self-consciousness, shrugging it off his broad shoulders. Harry watched the flex of muscle across the shoulder blades as he tossed it to one side and rummaged for a pyjama shirt.

"Sirius knew there were things worth dying for," Harry said. "He said so. He had a row with the Weasleys over it once."

"So? If I'm going to die for a cause, I'm going to drink and eat and fuck first," Sirius said, then paused. "Er. That didn't quite come out the way I intended. I may have had just a bit too much rum."

"Well, then you've satisfied one out of the three requirements," Harry said sardonically. Sirius grinned at him over his shoulder. "Anyway, I need to go." He stood and picked up the cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders. "I'll see you this weekend?"

"Saturday morning," Sirius answered. "Take a mint on your way out!"

\* \* \*

Harry returned to Fourteen Back in good spirits, but he kept turning the conversation with Sirius over in his mind. It was confusing for any number of reasons. Something in what Sirius had said about horcruxes—cruces—whatever—something had been important, but he didn't know what. It kept getting pushed to one side by Sirius' remark about the war. Was it a boast, or...just a statement, or was it an invitation?

*If I'm going to die for a cause, I'm going to drink and eat and fuck first.*

Was that to say he already had? He wasn't allowed to sleep with students, but if the people in Hogsmeade thought he was older—Sirius wouldn't. Would he? He knew his father and Sirius had been the wild ones at school, but—no. Surely not. Sirius would have told him. They were friends.

So then was it simply something Sirius wanted, or was it something Sirius wanted from *him*?

Ridiculous. Harry told himself that it was just that he was seventeen and he'd dumped his girlfriend and he hardly even wanked anymore because when he did either he started thinking about the war, which was just *upsetting*, or he'd think about Sirius, which was hardly better. Or worse—some other boy, Ron or even Colin and he didn't even *like* Colin.

Harry Potter was not about to tell anyone he fancied a boy, let alone boys as a species. He could see how that conversation would go with any number of people. Ron would stammer and stutter and flee, the Twins would send him naughty pictures, and Molly would say it was just a phase (which would be a comforting thought, but Harry didn't much like the idea of telling Molly at any rate). Hermione didn't even bear thinking about. Remus would probably give him tips or something, a thought too horrifying to contemplate. Tonks would

tease him. Augustus Pye would lecture him about diseases. Sirius was utterly out of the question. Ginny would stab him with something dull and rusty.

He lay on his bed in Fourteen Back, staring up at the rafters. He half-wished for a journal like the one in the map, one which could talk back to him in a not-creepy-horcrux sort of way. He could use a little reassurance right now.

His eyes fell on the little silvery bulldog on his bedside table. He picked it up, compact and heavy in his hand. His father's pocketwatchdog, and possibly the secret of his father's success with his mother.

He flicked open one side. Half past midnight. The time when witches were abroad. Or, more likely, the time when any sensible witch was tucked up in bed after a big dinner. He caught his thumbnail on the other side and lifted, staring up at the black circle contemplatively. White words rose wispily into view.

*Read the inscription.*

"Inscription on what?" Harry asked, annoyed. The pocketwatchdog didn't answer him, and he set it down again with a groan, closing his eyes and trying to sleep. After a while the tension in his shoulders eased along with the tightness in his jaw. The darkness and stillness of this room were nearly perfect; there was not even a single noisy bird in Bowman's garden.

He wriggled into a more comfortable position and encountered Padfoot's warm bulk, his breathing a slow and comforting rhythm. Padfoot woke when Harry's hips rudely invaded his space, but he merely scrambled up and scooted over to make room before dropping back down, head on Harry's thighs. Harry smiled and scratched Padfoot's ears without looking. Padfoot adjusted his head for maximum scratches and his muzzle bumped against Harry's thigh where Sirius' hand had rested earlier that day; Harry squirmed and Padfoot growled, nudging him again. Harry tightened his fingers in Padfoot's fur to stop him and suddenly it was Sirius' hair, and Sirius grinning at him, propped on his hands over Harry's hips.

"Told you," Sirius said, spreading one long-fingered hand over Harry's stomach. Harry pushed himself up on his elbows as Sirius bent and kissed the skin visible between his fingers, then took his hand away, sliding it down over Harry's hip-bone and stroking the growing erection through his pyjama trousers.

"Told me?" Harry asked, breathless. Sirius dipped his head and nuzzled the line of Harry's ribcage. Harry realised, rather calmly, that there was a cup in his belly, just the gold rim visible above his skin, a cup full of water. Sirius

lapped at it like a dog, every small sip making Harry's pulse beat louder in his ears. As it emptied it became obvious that the cup was shallow, in fact not a cup at all but a wide gold ring lined with pale white pearls.

"Read the inscription," Sirius said, his fingers tightening almost painfully. Harry cried out and the ring blew away like dust, tickling the sensitive skin of his stomach and leaving behind the pearls, which rolled down into the hollow place between hip and thigh.

Harry woke suddenly and completely to a sunlit bedroom, not as quiet as the dream had been but still quiet enough that he heard his own voice echo back to him for a split second, the hoarse cry that had woken him. His skin felt *alive* and it was hard to catch his breath; his pyjamas were constricting him rather uncomfortably, and he kicked them off, shoving them away with his feet. Throwing the covers back he curled his legs up and stroked quickly with one hand, one two *three* and at least it hadn't taken very long.

"Harry?" Remus called from downstairs. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, Remus," Harry called, realising his cry must have been audible from below. "Stubbed my toe."

"Oh! Sorry. Right, I'm off – I'll see you this evening if you're around."

Harry sighed and crawled out of bed, stretching. Just a dream; a nice dream in some ways, to be sure, but just a dream and anyway wizards didn't go in for all that psychological stuff.

He touched the sensitive skin of his abdomen for reassurance; he could almost still feel Sirius' tongue, catching on the skin as he lapped up the water in the cup – ring – whatever it had been.

*Read the inscription.*

"Life couldn't possibly give me a break now and then," Harry muttered, wandering into the bathroom for a wash.

\* \* \*

Between the usual mess Remus always made of his own papers and the piles of things Tonks had brought back from Auror headquarters with her, the kitchen was becoming a disaster area. Harry, while never the tidiest of people, decided that it had reached near-critical mass, and devoted most of his morning to cleaning up the piles of papers. He found no less than four pots of black ink and two of red, along with innumerable bits of ribbon used to tie parchment scrolls shut with. The Auror files went into a series of heaps on the kitchen

counter, which at least cleared off the table for the most part. He put anything from Hogwarts on Remus' bed, noticing how quickly Remus had put his own stamp on the place—at Grimmauld Place Remus' rooms had always seemed rather sterile and temporary, but now there were clothes strewn around, more papers, and even things hung on the walls. There were photographs in cheap frames, and books *everywhere*. Granted, the shirt in the corner reading *Aurors Do It Vigilantly* was probably Tonks', and the skirt nearby had *better* be, but Remus had merely stayed at Grimmauld Place—he *lived* at Fourteen Back.

Outside in Godric's Hollow it was overcast and chilly, but from the kitchen windows Harry could see the sun shining warmly down on the garden. The mango harvest was in full swing and Bowman was standing on the upper rungs of a ladder holding an enormous basket. Every so often he would give the ladder an order and it would shuffle around to a better position; sometimes it overshot and he swore at it. Harry grinned as he straightened the last pile of parchment and moved it out of the way. Underneath, Sirius' copy of that Graveworthy book was sitting out; Harry put it in the living room where he'd see it when he arrived tomorrow evening.

He had made one rather uneven heap on the table—parchments he wanted to look through again, the inventory list of Regulus Black's pockets on top. A wand, a self-inking quill, two rings, a coin bag; the belongings of a wealthy young wizard.

His eye caught the second ring, and he paused. *Ring – right front pocket. Band, gold; inscribed with foreign lettering...*

*Read the inscription.*

Harry hesitated. He would not bolt for the floo again, like he had last time; he would stop and think. Why would Regulus Black own a ring inscribed with something in another language? Why wouldn't he be wearing it? Was it some sort of Death Eater symbol? Like the coins that they'd used to gather the Dark Arts class in fifth year...

There was a crash in the living room, and Harry ran through the kitchen door, wand out. It was Tonks; she stumbled forward as she dusted ash from her clothing.

"Harry!" she said excitedly. "They've figured it out!"

"I have too!" Harry blurted.

There was a pause.

"What?" they asked in unison. Tonks shook her head. "Me first."

"Okay, what?" Harry asked, impatiently.

"I took the little rock thing to one of Kingsley's contacts – not really legal, you know, he runs a pawn – right," she said, as he gestured for her to get on with it. "He had one look at it and gave me this book – the rock *is* an egg," she finished.

"It is?" Harry demanded, holding out his hand. She set the egg in his palm, holding out a book as well.

"It's a phoenix egg," she said. "He's never seen anything like it, but he's read about them. If you snatch a phoenix egg from the fire before it really gets going, you get a phoenix egg. They're hard as anything, impossible to crack, and the book says," she took a deep breath, "that you can hatch it if you put it *back* in a fire. It's a survival mechanism."

Harry held the egg up to eye level and stared at it, fascinated. "Why would Regulus leave a phoenix egg for Voldemort? That'd only be helping him. They're really useful."

"I dunno, but sometimes they lay two eggs, and if the second egg is black – I mean I know that one isn't – but if it is, it's supposed to hatch out something awful. They don't even know what," she said. "Now you, what did you find out?"

"Oh – right, I need to go to headquarters," he said breathlessly. "I think I – well, it's just a hunch..."

"You need to see his things?" she asked, knowingly.

"Yeah – the ring he *wasn't* wearing. I don't know if it'll lead us to the horcrux, but I need to see it anyway," he said. "Can we go now?"

"Oooh – I think so." She checked the grandfather clock in the corner. "He should be back from lunch by now."

"He?" Harry asked, tucking the egg into a pocket and shoving the book into his old schoolbag, sitting near the hearth.

"Yeah – we'll need special permission, but I have contacts... need anything else?" she asked. Harry ran upstairs and grabbed the pocketwatchdog, shoving it in with the phoenix egg. She offered him the bowl of floo powder as he settled the bag across his shoulder.

"Auror Administration Office," she told him. He tossed the powder in, stepped inside, and called out the name; the world spun for a moment before he tumbled out onto the hearth of a small but rich-looking waiting room. A wizard

behind a desk looked up in surprise, then smiled as Tonks emerged behind Harry.

"Hi, Asa," she said, walking forward briskly. "Is Knightley in?"

"He's meeting with some section heads about pay rises," the man called Asa answered. "Is it urgent? I'd rather not disturb him. Fifteen minutes at most."

Tonks glanced at Harry. "I think we can wait fifteen minutes."

"Great. Have a seat."

Harry followed Tonks to a low leather-covered bench. "Where are we?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"Office of the head of the Aurors – what Scrimgeour used to do before he was Minister."

"Who does it now?"

"Julian Knightley. He was my professor in History at the Academy. His family and the Blacks are pretty close, Mum used to baby-sit him."

Harry grinned. She grinned back.

"Anyway, he likes me. He'll help us out. Regulus' personal things are in a secure archive because they're valuable and possibly Dark, which is why I couldn't take them out in the first place..."

Just then a door opened and a small group of Aurors, most of whom made Moody look like a fashion model, came out. They paid no attention to Harry and Tonks as they grumbled their way through a door at the far end of the waiting room. Asa leaned in through the open door, then beckoned Tonks and Harry inside, closing it behind them.

The office was, like the waiting room, small but well-appointed; bookshelves adorned with odd curios and ancient-looking works of art lined the walls, and there was apparently a game in progress on a small chess table off to the left of the large desk in the middle of the room. The man sitting behind it looked older than he was, Harry thought; he wore deep blue robes and his hair was just beginning to go straight from dark black to white without any intermediate stages. He set his quill down and stood as they entered, gesturing them into two comfortable chairs in front of the desk.

"Nymphadora," he said with a smile. "This is an unexpected surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Uncle Jacky," she answered, shaking his offered hand before seating herself. "I didn't mean to barge in, but I need you to push some paperwork through for me. Oh – this is Harry Potter. Harry, Julian Knightley."

Knightley grinned at him. "My pleasure, Mr. Potter. I've wanted to meet you for a long time, particularly after Scrimgeour's fits over your unwillingness to cooperate with his public-relations scheme."

Harry, taken aback by his frankness, found himself at a loss for words. "Thanks," he said.

"Paperwork, you said?" Knightley continued.

"Yeah—we need access to the restricted archives. Just one box, but the sooner the better," Tonks answered.

The man looked from her to Harry and back again, and Harry saw a sharp keenness in his eyes, belied by his friendly expression. "I assume there's at least a tenuous link to Auror business involved?" he asked carefully.

"Well, yes—I'm doing some unofficial investigation into an unsolved case."

Knightley reached into a drawer for a slip of parchment with official-looking print already on it. "Do you need to remove anything?"

"No—I don't think so," she said, glancing at Harry, who shook his head.

"How long do you need access for?" he asked, filling in several blank spaces.

"Just an afternoon," Harry answered. Knightley looked up at him.

"Unofficially, can I ask what this is all about?" he said quietly. Tonks and Harry exchanged an uneasy look.

"Sir, with all due respect, it's probably better if you don't know," she said slowly.

"You do understand you'll be thoroughly searched before you enter and after you leave?"

"Yes, sir," Tonks said. He signed the slip of parchment and passed it across the desk to her.

"Don't get me in trouble, Tonks," he warned.

"We'll try not to, sir," she said.

"Very well. If that's all, I wish I could stay and chat, but—"

"Right you are," she grinned.

"Give my love to your mum. And, Mr. Potter..." he added, as they walked to the door. Harry stopped and turned back.

"Things filter up to me through channels," Knightley said. "I know now's not the time to extend the invitation, but in a year or two, if things work out well

and you sit your NEWTs, there's a place for you at the Aurors' Academy. Guaranteed."

Harry blinked. "Thank you, sir."

"Anyone with the guts to stand up to Scrimgeour and tick him off deserves it," Knightley said. "Off you go now, and have fun in the archives. Mind the dust."

## CHAPTER XXIV

Harry didn't fully understand what Knightley meant by "mind the dust" until they were inside the restricted archives.

They'd presented the slip of parchment to a witch who scrutinized it carefully and ran two separate anti-forgery spells on it before taking out a complicated series of keys and unlocking the barred iron door that stood across from the much more unassuming wooden one which gave access to the regular archives. On the other side of the iron door was a small anteroom where they left everything but their clothing in a small locked safe; they were then searched more thoroughly than Harry had ever been in his life. When she was satisfied that neither of them were smuggling anything in, she gave them a small glass box containing a single quill, a vial rather than a pot of ink, and several sheets of parchment.

The inner door was shut firmly behind them and Harry found himself staring at what seemed to be a warehouse full of racks, each piled high with boxes and folders. The floor at first looked to be wood, but as Tonks moved forward he realised that it was stone covered in dust, dust at least an inch thick on the ground and only disturbed here and there by footprints. Most of the boxes had at least two inches of dust on their tops. He sneezed and a cloud of it enveloped him instantly.

"Watch out, Harry!" Tonks called from somewhere beyond the cloud. She cast a spell he didn't recognise and instantly the dust settled—all over him. He shook his head and brushed at his arms. "Sorry, forgot you didn't know to do that."

"Guess they don't open this place very often," Harry said.

"Nope. Lots of the stuff in here is dangerous, or really dark," she answered, leading him down the aisles. "Normally it takes four weeks to get permission to even come in here."

"Lucky you know Knightley, then."

"Yeah," she said, turning right. "I didn't think it was worth the trouble when we had the inventory list, but sometimes you do just have to..." a left turn, "...see things in the flesh."

Harry glanced at the shelves. There was a large skull, much too big to be human, on one shelf. On another, an enormous eel twisted and circled endlessly in an aquarium. There was a whole rack of spears down an aisle they passed by

on their way to a large, dirty sign reading "BLA – BLE". At the end of every shelf was a large table with a small indentation, apparently for the glass box to rest in.

"Here," Tonks said, ducking down an aisle. "Black, Black, Black...there's a lot of Black in here...Black, Black, Black, Black...Regulus."

She took down a pathetically small wooden box with a non-locking clasp and handed it to Harry. He carried it out to the table and set it down while she set down the glass box and opened it. Harry paused, taking a deep breath before flipping the clasp up and opening the lid. Dust puffed up as it slid off the top.

Inside were several labelled glass jars, each holding a single item. He almost laughed; it looked like the sort of jam sampler that Mrs. Jenkins would sell. They unpacked them all, then took the two fragmented pieces of wand out of the bottom of the box. Harry picked up the jar with the gold ring in it, unscrewing the lid. Tonks watched, cautiously.

"Don't put it on," she said. "You never know what's been cursed around here."

"I don't need to wear it," Harry answered, taking the quill out of the box and setting a piece of parchment in front of him. "I just need to know what it says."

He held it up with one hand while he copied out the shapes with the other, until he reached about the fourth character. Then he stopped and set down the quill, slowly.

"What idiot," he asked slowly, "wrote up the inventory report?"

"Why, what is it?" she asked, holding out her hand for the ring. He groaned and set it in her palm, and she examined it minutely.

"Are these what they look like?" she asked.

"Horoscope signs?" Harry asked angrily. "Yes. They are. Stupid – *idiot*. It's a *novelty* ring."

She weighed the ring in her palm. "It doesn't look cheap, though. I mean, no, it's probably not of any great significance, but...*finite incantatem*," she said, aiming her wand at the ring. Nothing happened. "They're in order...it's not even a code, I don't think." She looked at Harry. "What made you think of it?"

"A stupid hunch, that's all," Harry said sourly. He reached for the other jars and began repacking them. "I'm sorry I wasted your time, Tonks."

"It's not a waste of time. We're following leads. Lots of them die out," she said, helping him pack.

"Yeah, well—hold on," he said, as she reached for the jar labelled *Necklace – Broken – Pocket (L.F.)*. White beads rattled against the glass and he unscrewed the lid, emptying them into his hand. Most of them were still knotted onto the white nylon string, and they formed two strands which came together in a single line of beads, ending with a white plastic pendant, just like the inventory sheet had said.

Except it wasn't a necklace.

"Tonks, do you know what this is?" he asked, holding up the pendant. A tiny figure was moulded onto it, arms splayed on the crossbar, body writhing on the upright.

"It looks familiar," she said uncertainly. "Isn't it a...Muggle thing?"

"It's a rosary," Harry said, turning the crucifix over. On the back was a little stamp. *St. Dismas Ministry. Made in China*. "What the hell was Regulus Black doing with a broken rosary in his pocket?"

"It's not something he'd carry, is it?" she asked. "Is it a good-luck charm?"

"Not really...I don't think he'd have one unless...it was given to him," Harry said, brow furrowing. He copied down the name, *St. Dismas*. "He might have thought it was like a good-luck charm, though. It'd look like that to someone who didn't know much."

"Do you think he might have got it the night he died?"

"Or not long before," Harry agreed. "I need to...I think I need to look at a telephone directory."

\* \* \*

Remus came home that evening to find Tonks and Harry bent over a large map of London with a number of flimsy sheets of paper scattered around them. The map had been drawn on extensively in red ink, mostly with small circles and odd names. There was, however, a not-untalented doodle in one corner of what he took to be Tonks hexing the hell out of some poor sod, hopefully not himself.

"Productive day?" he asked from the kitchen doorway. Dinner was, once more, nowhere in evidence.

"Yes," Harry said. "We nicked your ink."

"I see that," he answered. "Why?"

"Harry thinks he knows where Regulus might have gone before he died," Tonks said. "Do you know anything about churches in London?"

"Not really. Churches? Like the one above the Gaunt Crypt?"

"The necklace on the inventory sheet wasn't a necklace," Harry said. "It was a rosary. It's really cheap, the sort they give out for free."

"We're going church-stalking tomorrow," Tonks announced. "Starting at Grimmauld Place and working our way out. Want to come?"

Remus smiled a little at their enthusiasm. "I'll put some dinner on," he said.

\* \* \*

Sirius was all for church-stalking in London when he arrived for breakfast the following day. He wasn't keen on going through Grimmauld Place to get to London, but once they were out in the dingy street outside the house, he ran on ahead with Harry while Remus and Tonks walked more sedately – and at a far better pace, if they were going to be on their feet all day.

"What are you going to ask?" Remus had inquired over dinner the night before. "It's not likely they'll remember one boy, twenty years ago."

"We can try," Harry said. "And maybe he left...a message or something. And we can ask about St. Dismas, whoever he was."

Remus had looked sceptical, but at least it was *doing* something. He knew how Harry fretted that things weren't moving fast enough, weren't working out as quickly as he'd like.

Now Harry and Sirius were standing on the corner, bent over the map, studying which way to turn. Sirius pointed left, and they disappeared from sight momentarily in the direction of a church spire down the block.

"How many churches do you think we ought to let them invade before they realise what hard work this is?" Remus asked. Tonks grinned.

"They'll wear themselves out soon enough."

"How many Catholic churches can there be in London?"

"Lots," she sighed.

They caught up to Harry and Sirius just as the boys were standing outside the front entrance of the church, debating about how to proceed. Sirius was all for opening the door and barging in; Harry thought they ought to knock, maybe. Remus solved the problem by tugging on the locked door.

"Well, there's probably a back entrance," Tonks said reasonably.

They learned a lot about back entrances in the next few hours. They walked parts of the distance and took the Tube for others when they could. At nearly every church they visited there was someone who tried to help them;

usually it meant them asking someone else, who would ask yet someone else, until finally someone would appear who could tell them that no, they had no record of anyone coming here, and they didn't give out rosaries. They were, by and large, very kind people, but they were not very helpful in the long run.

"I don't suppose they'd feed us lunch?" Sirius said, as they trooped up the steps of a rather shabby-looking church with a sign pointing the way to a soup kitchen nearby. "I'm famished."

"You're rich," Harry pointed out.

"So're you."

"Well, we'll give them a donation then," Sirius said grandly, knocking at a little door labelled *Office*. It opened and a white-haired man in a collar and a black shirt peered out.

"Hi," Sirius said. "Sorry to be a bother, but I'm—"

"Dead," the man blurted.

This was definitely not the expected response.

"Uh...no I'm not," he said uneasily. The priest covered his face with one hand.

"Of course not, I'm so sorry," he said. "You just—reminded me of someone I—well, how may I help you?"

"No—who?" Sirius asked. The man shook his head.

"We're looking for someone," Harry interrupted. "Or...something."

"Come in," the man said, standing aside. They filed into the small office, almost filling it. Harry nudged Sirius' ribs; behind the priest's desk was a cardboard carton with a white rosary hanging off the edge.

"We're looking for information on someone who died twenty years ago," Harry said awkwardly. "He left behind a white plastic rosary, we think it was given to him not long before he was killed. It was stamped with *St. Dismas Ministries* on the back..."

The priest raised his eyes to a poster on the wall. It was elderly and crumbling, a rather bad drawing of three crosses on a hill, a light shining from one of them. *St. Dismas Guide Us* was written in fancy font underneath.

"I think perhaps you are looking for your father?" he asked Sirius. "The resemblance is striking."

"My..." Sirius trailed off.

"Let me see, twenty years ago, yes...I remember him."

"How?" Sirius asked.

"Well, that is a story," the man said warily. "Please...let me show you our sanctuary. This office is rather small for five people."

He unlocked a door behind him and led them through, into a corridor and through a doorway which led to the front of the church.

"We minister to a great many of the needy, as I'm sure you saw," he said as they walked. "We once had a small ministry called the St. Dismas Ministry, which worked with prisoners who had either lost faith or...found it again. St. Dismas, you know, was a thief himself, the patron of the penitent criminal."

"So we've been told," Remus said.

"A folk saint, but nevertheless a symbol of great compassion for those who yearn for forgiveness."

"Regulus," Sirius murmured.

"I was not surprised the young man was drawn here. He clearly regretted his theft quite deeply."

"Theft?" Remus asked, inspecting the pews idly.

"Yes...he came to me, you see, rather late one night, terribly afraid that the wrath of some supernatural beast was going to descend upon him. He had stolen something of great value..." the man's voice trailed off. "I remember him quite clearly because I told him not to fear demons and the practitioners of evil if he walked with God, and I gave him, as you say, the rosary..."

He sat in one of the pews. Sirius hovered around him, nervously fidgeting.

"...and then he walked out into the street, and I—he was killed by a—it was not earthly doing, and I only barely recall."

"*Avada kedavra*," Harry said. The man stared at him.

"How do you—"

"Please," Tonks urged. "You saw him killed?"

"I saw it—four men, and a flash of green light. But then he and they vanished, and the police don't like to listen to the ravings of an hysterical priest," he said. "With nearly no evidence to back it up, and strange things do happen amongst the dispossessed...but..." he hesitated. "You know the young man's name and clearly you are...aware of his circumstances, so perhaps..."

He stood again and walked to the front of the sanctuary, opening a small door off to the left. They followed him into a tiny, dimly-lit room.

"He told me that this object he had stolen was the container in which a man's soul might be held," he said. "My research has turned up very little on the

subject of this grail, but it was so clearly an object of some age and merit...possibly a reliquary..."

He removed a bright red cover from a small glass case, and Harry sucked in a breath. He could *feel* the darkness on the object.

"To be frank, I've never been at ease with it," the priest said. "But as no one has ever claimed it, not even the museums..."

The little cup sat on a painted wooden stand under cloudy, cheap Plexiglas. It was not the glorious gold of the Hufflepuff cup – it looked as though it had been carved from wood – but it was identical in every detail.

"He left a letter..." the man opened a small drawer in the stand and took out a faded, dusty piece of folded parchment, sealed with wax. Sirius held his hand up to the seal, pressing the Black sealing ring to the wax. It was a perfect fit.

"I suppose that gives you the right to read it," the priest said, handing it to him. Sirius lifted the seal carefully. The parchment, aged as it was, tore along the crease when he unfolded it.

*"To the finder of this letter I entrust the destruction of the Hufflepuff cup because it is a horcrux and I have given my life to secure it," he read. "I am being chased by the Death Eaters and they will find me before long. I hope to leave the cup in a safe place but if you find it and you can't understand this letter please deliver it to Sirius Black care of James Potter at the address below since he will know what to do and will reward you for returning the cup to him. I ask you in Merlin's name destroy this cup before its creator destroys us all. Yrs sincerely R.A.B."*

"Do you understand it all?" the priest asked.

"Yes," Sirius answered. *"There's more...Dear Sirius, Please destroy this cup or ask Dumbledore what a horcrux is, he will know and help you. I do not know how many more there are but at least one, a locket I have hidden at Grimmauld Place. I hope I have finally been of some use and you were right. Love your brother Reg."*

"He wants it destroyed?" the priest said, horrified. "Such a beautiful work of art?"

Sirius put the letter carefully in his pocket.

"I'm afraid we need to take the cup from you," Remus said. "I'm sorry about this."

"But you can't possibly believe –"

"*Obliviate*," Sirius said quietly, and the priest's face went slack. Remus took him by the elbow and led him out the door.

The case wasn't even locked; Harry simply pulled on the little handle and lifted the cup from its stand. The hairs on the back of his neck raised as he touched it and he passed it to Tonks as soon as he could.

"I'm taking it back directly—I'll see you at the house," she said, Disapparating with a crack. Sirius, who was flexing his fingers compulsively, still stared at the empty case. Harry dragged him out and shut the door hastily behind them.

"Thank you again," Remus was saying. "I'm sure it's been very well looked after, but the British Museum will be able to care for it much more thoroughly, don't you agree? I'll be in touch if we have any questions."

"Yes, yes," the priest said vaguely. "Well done, so glad to see it properly cared for."

When they were back out on the street, Harry turned to Remus. "Tonks took it straight back—did you feel it?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Let's not linger. Sirius, are you all right?"

"I want to go home," Sirius said simply.

\* \* \*

Tonks had cleared off the kitchen table and placed the cup there by the time they returned through the Grimmauld Place floo. She was thumbing through a book of concealment spells stolen from Remus' room.

"He was a clever bugger, your brother," she said to Sirius. "It's the real cup, all right, but he glamourised it pretty thoroughly."

"Not too clever to get killed," Sirius said, going to the cabinet and taking down a wine glass. He was reaching for a bottle of wine when Harry grasped his wrist lightly and shook his head. Sirius looked from Harry to the bottle and nodded, putting the glass back. He took down a tumbler in its place and filled it with water.

"At least he died for a reason," Remus said gently. "You—your counterpart—died thinking that your brother was a traitor and a fool. Now you know he was...a hero of sorts. Perhaps not the best hero there ever was, but now Regulus has a second chance, as well. To be known as something more than a failure."

"Speaking of success, I forgot in all the madness," Tonks said. "Harry, I didn't tell either of them about the egg, did you?"

"Oh—no!" Harry said, looking guilty. He took the little egg out of his pocket, offering it up for inspection. "Tonks found out what the rock is that Regulus left behind. She thinks it's a phoenix egg."

"Really?" Remus asked, fascinated. He took the egg out of Harry's hand and examined it. "Unhatched? How do you suppose he got hold of it?"

"Dunno," Harry said, as Remus passed the egg to Sirius. "We don't even know why he left it. I mean...it's not exactly the most useless thing to give someone, is it? You'd think he wouldn't want to *help* Voldemort."

"It's a taunt," Sirius said suddenly. They all looked at him. He held the egg up between thumb and forefinger. "Phoenixes are immortal; when they die they're reborn."

"And Voldemort isn't—or wasn't—or wouldn't be anymore, once the horcrux was destroyed," Tonks said. "Oh, he thinks like a Black, he does."

Sirius smiled wanly at that. "Such a simple, natural little thing, doing what the Dark Lord couldn't." He closed his hand around the egg and placed it in Harry's palm again. "I like him a lot better now than I ever did when he was alive."

"Kingsley sent me to someone who figured out what it was. He's interested in seeing it again—he thinks he can hatch it," Tonks said. "And uh..." she looked uneasy.

"What is it?" Remus asked.

"Well, he's sort of an expert in magical ephemera. Cursed books, ancient scrolls, early Wizarding photography, that sort of thing. And charmed maps..." she said. "I thought maybe he might...understand how...Sirius happened. Or know how to find out."

Sirius touched his back pocket protectively; he could feel the map, solid and tightly folded.

"I don't want some stranger mucking about with my map," he said firmly.

"I didn't tell him about it," Tonks said defensively. "But I thought if you wanted to bring it with you if we go back, you could, and let him have a look at it."

"I'll come with," Sirius said, "but I'm not giving him the map."

"You let Harry use the map," Remus put in.

"I trust Harry. Besides, he understands it already."

"Well, we can sort that out later," Tonks said. "Really, to him the important thing is the egg. Would you mind him trying to hatch it, Harry?"

Harry chewed his lip thoughtfully. "What if he hatches it and it's that horrible thing you talked about? The thing that isn't a phoenix?"

"It's not a black egg," Tonks said reasonably. "It ought to be just a normal phoenix. Anyway, he's not open on Sundays so if we want to bring Sirius along, it'll have to be next week. Or Thursday night," she suggested. "If you can get away before dinner, we could eat in Diagon and then go down to see him. He's in Mardjinn, just where it connects to Knockturn."

"Better make it Saturday," Remus said. "My seventh-years have an assignment due Wednesday and I'm going to try to get them all marked before the weekend."

"Full moon, Friday after next," Sirius said.

"That's right, which means you'll be teaching most of that week. It looks like they'll return a verdict on Greyback sometime this coming week, too," Remus said. "Which means the next moon could be very...tense. For all of us. I'm going to suggest to Minerva that guards be posted at Hogwarts."

"They wouldn't try anything with Fenrir gone, would they?" Tonks asked.

"I don't know. I don't know who's leading his pack now. I'd be tempted to go back, but at this point my cover is rather shot to hell," Remus said with a small smile. "I suspect, if it's going to be someone else who wants to make trouble, we'll find out soon enough."

"Well, I'm knackered," Harry said. "And tired of talking. I say jolly well done for us finding the cup, and I'm going to go beg scones and jam off Mrs. Jenkins. Want to come?" he said, turning to Sirius, but Padfoot already stood before him, tongue lolling out. "Guess that's a yes. We'll bring you back some mango preserves," he said to Remus and Tonks, pushing open the kitchen door. It shut behind them with a slam, and Remus leaned back in his chair, stretching.

"He's right, you know," she said. "Well done us."

"Yes...I think we deserve a reward, don't you?" he asked. She ruffled his hair.

"Have anything in mind?"

"One or two ideas," he replied. "If you're willing to lock up the cup for a bit and come help me try them out."

"Do elaborate, Professor."

He picked up the cup and carried it to the shelf where the locket lay, placing it next to the other horcrux. He paused, fingers resting on the shelf, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders from behind.

"Strange how objects can seem so evil," he said quietly. "There's a terrible symmetry in these; two destroyed, two in our possession, two still free out in the world."

She contemplated the horcruxes, her chin resting on his shoulder. "Remus..."

"Mm?"

"Do you know what the sixth horcrux is?"

He nodded. "I have suspicions."

"Is there a reason you haven't told Harry yet?"

"I don't want to be right." He shrugged out of her embrace and turned, pulling her close. "Let's not think about it anymore today."

She kissed him, almost startled at how intently he returned the kiss. It felt like it had been after Sirius' death—desperation to remember that they were real people, that Sirius was dead but they were still alive. She didn't even realise that they'd been moving towards the bedroom until he shut the door to the kitchen behind them.

As much as she loved having her privacy and a place to go that was all her own, she was beginning to prefer his poky little bedroom in Fourteen Back to her own flat. She spent so much of her time in shadows, peering around corners and running through cold dark streets—digging through archives full of Dark objects and writing reports late into the night—that the brightly-lit, wood-paneled room was comforting even without Remus in it. Safe refuge from the world.

"It's the middle of the afternoon," she said, even as she began to unbutton his shirt.

"Well, there aren't any Quidditch games on the Floo network," he answered, and she laughed. "I had to find some way to keep you entertained."

"Is that what this is?" she asked. He let her push his sleeves down to his wrists before he shed the shirt entirely and pulled hers over her head.

"You'll have to tell me if I'm boring you," he said, wrapping one arm around her waist and kissing her neck.

"Definitely not boring," she replied.

“So noted,” he said, and she laughed again and pulled him towards the bed.

## CHAPTER XXV

The next week passed fairly quickly; Harry threw himself into books on magic that were advanced beyond anything he'd encountered, trying to discover how to destroy the horcruxes locked in the kitchen cabinet. Remus had subtly hinted to McGonagall that there might be something in Dumbledore's papers which could be of service to the Order, but she'd been forced to admit that Dumbledore had left no personal papers of any kind. There were several books of his writings, but they were nothing secret and indeed, many of the older ones had become redundant over the years. Whether he had even kept any notes—which didn't seem like him, Remus had to admit—or whether they'd destroyed themselves upon his death, Dumbledore would be no help now.

Which was typical, really. When had the Headmaster ever given anyone an answer on a silver platter if he knew that sooner or later they'd work it out for themselves? It was what was so bloody frustrating. Remus knew, as a teacher, that it was the right attitude to take, but it was annoying to be still treated like a student. Adults *told* each other things. Particularly when it came to defending the Wizarding World from a sociopathic maniac.

So, Harry was left with a mountain of books he only barely comprehended, Tonks was left hinting around to her old Defence Professor at the Academy about ways to destroy powerful Dark objects, and Remus was left browsing the Restricted Section in his off-time. Sirius was a help but Sirius was at work on his own projects as well, and rightly so. McGonagall was demanding weekly updates on his studies to prevent him slacking on them, and Sirius was stubborn enough to want to prove to her that he could do *more* than she expected of him. He was already combining classes to get more use out of a single project—Herbology was an aspect of his Potions work, and in Charms he was devising new translation spells for Ancient Runes. He could justify time spent in the Restricted Section with Remus as DADA, and he wasn't even bothering to mess around with Transfiguration. He decided if she asked him about that, he'd just turn into Padfoot for a while and give her a good doggy stare.

And he had gone back to Firenze's Divination class, many times. He was trying to work up the courage to ask the imposing centaur if he would give him astronomy lessons; it wasn't that Sinistra wasn't a good astronomer, but she wasn't very imaginative, better at drilling locations and calculations into young heads than the more...artistic interpretation Firenze put on things.

"Mr. Padfoot," Firenze said to him, as he lingered after the last class on Tuesday. "Still in your red robes, I see."

"Yeah," Sirius said, examining his cuffs. "Well, it's a living."

"Is it?" Firenze asked, looking as if he didn't really expect an answer.

"I was wondering if I could..." Sirius hesitated. "You know who I am, don't you?"

"I know what the stars tell me. The rest can be deduced," Firenze said. "Walk with me?"

"I'm planning to sit NEWTs at the end of the year," Sirius said, walking alongside the centaur as they moved through the false forest that grew in Firenze's classroom. Firenze remained impassive. "I'm taking Astronomy as one of my exams."

"Exams...these are the times when young children are required to demonstrate a year's worth of knowledge in the space of an hour?" Firenze asked drily.

"Or seven years' worth," Sirius answered. "That's the idea."

"I see."

"And I like Sinistra at all, she's a good teacher, but..."

"But you are ambitious," Firenze said, "and you do not wish to settle for second-best."

"It's not that so much as..." Sirius trailed off. Firenze waited. "Well, maybe it is that a little, but why learn less when I could learn more?"

"Do you suppose you will learn more, with me?" the centaur asked.

"You know more."

"Indeed, but that does not necessarily mean you will learn more," Firenze replied.

"Why not?"

Firenze's tail swished, and Sirius had the impression that he was amused.

"Centaurians understand the movements of the stars far more intuitively than humans ever have or, perhaps, ever will. Humans have other concerns in which they surpass us, though it would be death to admit such within the herd."

Sirius waited. Firenze ducked under a low branch before continuing.

"Learning is not a matter of selecting a goal and immediately arriving at it. You would not put a first-year student in a seventh-year class, though that may be the eventual result of seven years' time. There may be an insurmountable

gap between what you know now and where your education with a centaur would begin."

The centaur wheeled his body to face Sirius. "To understand if you are prepared to study with me may alone take months. You have a bare year in which to learn how to fool an examiner. Which will it be?"

"I don't understand."

"Choose learning," Firenze said patiently, "Or choose the ability to pass your exam. At times, the two become mutually exclusive."

"Learning," Sirius said immediately. Firenze nodded.

"Then we shall, at the least, gauge your worth," he replied. "Two days from now, meet me here and we will see what you are capable of."

Sirius almost opened his mouth to protest that Thursday was his night off and Harry always came to see him, but he saw Firenze's expression and realised that it would almost certainly end his lessons immediately if he said that.

Well, he'd chosen learning. Now he was stuck with it.

He apologized to Harry in a note sent with Lupin, and Harry wrote back that it didn't matter, they'd see each other on the weekend anyway. Sirius was mildly put out by this; the least Harry could do was complain a little.

Firenze was waiting for him in the hallway outside his Divinations classroom that Thursday, unshod hooves ringing hollow on the stone. He nodded at Sirius and led the way out of the castle without a word, through a side door that opened directly onto the dirt paths and turf.

"We dare not venture too close to the forest," he said as they crossed the grounds at an oblique angle to the tree line, apparently heading for the lake. "My brothers and sisters in the herd would be displeased to see me, let alone with a human walking at my side."

"Displeasing my family – that would've been enough reason for me to do it, once," Sirius answered.

"Once?"

"I've grown up a bit."

"As do we all, when we are separated from our rightful place. We must find new places to inhabit."

Sirius wasn't sure what to say to that, so he was silent. When they reached the lake's edge, at the furthest point from the trees, Firenze waved a hand at the utterly still water. The moon, a bare week from being full, illuminated it brightly.

"What is the difference between the lake and the sky?" he asked.

Sirius was ready to retort with a quip about them both being in trouble if Firenze didn't know that, but he paused.

The sky was the sky and the lake was the lake; that was all. But...that wasn't really saying anything, was it? And he was fairly sure that a person who lived in a forest by preference was not asking him about the chemical properties of air and water.

So he looked at the lake, and he looked at the stars, and he looked at the reflection of the stars in the lake, and the reverse-image of the moon-hare that was just beginning to emerge as the moon waxed towards fullness. His father had always said that the man-in-the-moon was for Muggles, and Sirius had never been able to see it anyway – it was a hare, *ad aeternitas*, world without end.

"The stars in the lake are backwards," he said.

"What does this mean?"

Sirius looked down at the lake and pictured the stars wheeling above them, held on their axis by Polaris, the North Star, the constant. If the movements of the stars showed the fates of men –

"The split isn't definite; not positive-negative, not like a scrying mirror might work," he said slowly, trying to work it out in words. "The stars are the stars. All it means is that you have to remember, if you're looking at a mirror of the stars, to think backwards."

Firenze was regarding him with solemn eyes. Sirius blinked.

"Which means that if the stars *reflect* the events on earth – in big terms, anyway – sometimes a presence can mean an absence," he said. "Just because there's a sign of peace in the sky...doesn't mean it's *good* peace. You can't put value on an event. It's just an event."

"Be seated, Nigel Padfoot."

Sirius sat cross-legged on a rock outcrop, his eyes still almost level with Firenze's, and turned his attention from the lake.

"Show me the constellations and the planets," Firenze said. "Until they are as familiar a face to you as a lover's, you cannot possibly hope to apply what you have just learned."

"But they change," Sirius said. "I mean, I can pick them out, no problem, but they're not always in the same place."

"And does a man's face become unfamiliar because he smiles instead of frowns?"

"Oh." Sirius rested his left hand on his knee and then, after a second, hesitated. "But if I'm sitting I can't see the whole sky at once."

Firenze said nothing. Finally, Sirius lay back on the rock, drawing his legs up so that his knees were crooked at the stars.

"There," he said, pointing. "Polaris, the north star. Everything wheels around it. And there's Sirius, the dog star. And—" he hesitated. "It's known as the Nile Star too, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze answered.

"But—" Sirius pushed himself up onto his elbows, staring at the bright south-eastern star. "There are two of them. Do you see that? Clustered close together?"

"Indeed."

"That's not right—or wasn't, twenty years ago."

"It is neither right nor wrong; it is simply what is," Firenze replied. "It is the twin of the Nile Star, and it is dying—some would call it dead already."

"But it's so bright!"

"The heart of the mystery," Firenze answered. "Why should a dead star shine so visibly as it ascends? Perhaps it has made way for a second star to shine through in its place; perhaps it is inexplicable. But nevertheless, the second Sirius is rising."

Sirius looked at him sharply. "But you teach that the stars don't guide the fates of individual men. It's all about clans and wars and countries."

"Sometimes a single man so shapes the world that his fortune cannot be avoided in the heavens."

Sirius gazed upwards. Finally, he breathed deeply.

"Should I continue?" he asked.

"Yes. The visible planets first this time, please, then where and at what degree the invisible ones will rise."

\* \* \*

When Tonks had said that her contact was in Mardjinn Alley where it connected to Knockturn, she hadn't been exaggerating. Caligula Curios may have been one small shop crammed with odds and ends in a long line of small shops crammed with odds and ends, but it had the dubious honour of standing at the corner of Mardjinn and Knockturn, with doors opening into both streets.

The proprietor was a small man called Mr. Nigenae, who almost looked as if he himself were made of paper; his face was creased sharply with age and his white hair had a dry, crisp look to it. When they visited him on Saturday he was quite ready to explain his deductions to Remus, who seemed to follow the series of sources and references better than the others; when Harry produced the egg once more, Nigenae fixed a jeweller's glass in his eye and examined it minutely.

"I have calculated the rate of exothermic output in a phoenix flame to precision using...mm, research of others who have come before and some brief experiments of my own. Of course, the variety from start to finish of the burn is, oh, very great, but I believe with a simple formula we might endeavour to, hm, hatch the little beast," he said, with a conspiratorial grin at Harry. "As I understand it, you lose nothing by trying."

"Is there any way to tell where it came from?" Remus asked. "What its lineage might be?"

"Oh, you want, well, hah, you want an avian expert for that; perhaps, perhaps. To judge from the thickness and hardness of the shell, mmhm, you have likely stumbled upon what is known as a *fresh* egg, which is to say, the second laying of a phoenix. In essence this is a new bird, never having hatched before, and therefore it does indeed have, ah, a parent. Most phoenix birds, perhaps you are not aware, die not from old age but rather from, aha, youth as it were."

As he spoke, Nigenae bustled around the back room of the shop, gathering up several items: a small bowl, several wads of thick, yellowish paper, a few herbs, and a handful of downy feathers.

"Parrot," he said as he took out the feathers. Apparently he thought this explained things. "As I was saying, phoenix birds, when they do expire, often do so because their shells have grown too thin through repeated rebirths, and thus they are not, aha, allowed to age to a point where self-immolation to once again renew themselves is an option. Tragic, tragic, but such is the way of things."

He set the bowl on the tabletop and began to layer herbs and feathers inside it, building it up with what looked like sticks of cinnamon. When this was done he surrounded the small pyre with wads of paper and picked up the egg.

"Shall we attempt it?" he asked. Remus looked at Harry and Sirius; Sirius gave Harry a nod, and Harry turned to Nigenae.

"Go ahead," he said. Nigenae carefully placed the egg in the centre of the bowl and piled more cinnamon sticks up around it until they formed a sort of

cone over the top. He held up his wand and a tiny flicker of flame burst from the tip.

Harry held his breath as the flame was touched to the apex of the tinder. As aware of it as he was, however, he wasn't prepared for what happened next.

He had assumed it would burn slowly but instead it exploded into flames at least a foot high, filling the air with acrid smoke. A second later the smell of burning feathers wafted up, accompanied by a strong odour of cinnamon, not entirely pleasant. It was over as quickly as any phoenix immolation, at least by Harry's limited experience. The ashes gave off little wisps but the smoke was dissipating rapidly even as Nigenae leaned forward.

"Behold," he said in a hushed voice. There was a soft chirruping noise, and a beak poked its way out of the ashes. The shopkeeper picked up a small brush and cleared away the grey dust, revealing a small orange head and two beady black eyes.

Tonks squeaked and Remus glanced at her, startled. She looked sheepish.

"Girl moment. It's over now," she added. Harry put out a finger and stroked the little head, hesitantly.

"It's warm."

"It's a phoenix," Nigenae reminded him.

"What do they eat?" Harry asked. Nigenae held up a book, *Onne the Care and Feedyng of Fenexes*.

"Eight sickles," he said. "A man has to make a living, you know."

Harry gave him a Galleon and cupped his hand down in the bowl, lifting the little bird out. It shook itself, sending ash everywhere, and coughed piteously.

"Hedwig'll be furious, you know that, right?" Sirius said.

"Maybe you should take—it?" Harry said. "How do you tell what sex a phoenix is?"

Sirius picked up *Onne The Care and Feedyng of Fenexes* and thumbed through it.

"Um. Maybe they don't have a gender," he said. He glanced up to find that Remus and Tonks were deep in conference with Nigenae, standing out of earshot. Nigenae glanced at Sirius, eyes wide, and then quickly looked away.

"Don't have a gender?"

"Well, they don't have sex, do they?"

The little bird ruffled its feathers again and bit Harry's thumb. "Ow!"

"Nigel, would you mind stepping over here for a moment?" Remus called. Sirius obeyed, scowling. "We've been discussing the map with Mr. Nigenae."

"You can't have it," Sirius said firmly.

"Padfoot," Remus warned.

"May I, at least, examine it?" Nigenae asked. "The idea of imprinting an item such as a map with, ah, an actual personality is unusual to say the least."

Sirius took the map out of his pocket, but when Nigenae reached for it, he pulled away.

"I'll do it," he said, spreading it out on an antique desk that happened to be handy. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he said, under his breath so that Nigenae wouldn't hear the passphrase. The lines of the map began to appear on the surface. Nigenae looked delighted.

"What wonderful craftsmanship! What ingenuity! What detail!" he cried.

"What a load of rubbish," Sirius muttered.

"And you say you were actually able to reproduce a significant portion of yourself within it?" Nigenae asked. Sirius nodded. "Strictly through the cartography?"

"Er...well, no," Sirius said. "We—I—kept a journal in it too."

"I see, I see. May I—no, of course not," Nigenae said hastily, when Sirius glared at him.

"What we're wondering is how it could occur inadvertently and whether it is damaging to the individual," Remus said. "The reproduction was not intentional, although it took a great deal of power to complete the charm."

"H'm, well," Nigenae said, examining the map with his jeweller's glass, poring over a section of the Gryffindor tower. "There are myths, of course, and certain, hah, figures in history. Let me see, let me see..." he tapped one finger against his lips. "Are you aware of the belief held in the early part of the century by certain witches and wizards averse to, ah, photography?"

"That they thought the camera would steal a part of them?" Tonks asked.

"Yes yes, the very one, this was when cameras were quite new to our world, of course—funny, isn't it, that a camera functions quite well and yet a ball-point pen breaks down in areas of high magical charge..." Nigenae trailed off for a second and then seemed to relocate his thread. "Mysticism aside, consider that it is possible to place one's own self within a work of, if I may call it such, considerable art as this item."

He tapped the map with his finger, gently.

"It is not precisely division as we understand it but replication, as with offspring, resembling a phoenix in nature if it comes to that. To replicate a complete person would be a labour of considerable effort, yes, and also would require terribly complete honesty. But were such a person to be replicated...well, who can say what power they would have? They might themselves possess the ability to touch the heart, the very soul of another."

Sirius felt gooseflesh rise on his skin. He didn't like being talked about as if he were a theory, but there was something...right about Nigenae's last suggestion.

"You are quite certain you refuse to leave it with me? Temporarily?" Nigenae asked, hand caressing the map. Sirius shook his head and began to gather it up, clearing it with a quick "*Mischief Managed!*" and placing it in his pocket once more. At that moment there was the sound of a bell from the front of the shop, and Nigenae bustled out to serve his customer.

"I'm not sure we learned anything we didn't already know," Remus said regretfully.

"I don't care," Sirius retorted. "it doesn't matter anyway—I'm here now, aren't I?"

"It's all right, Padfoot. I'm not scolding you," Remus answered. Sirius turned away, ashamed, his eyes lighting on Harry at the other end of the room. Harry had picked up the book on "Fenexes" with one hand, still holding the little creature in the other.

"Come on, Harry," Remus said. "I think we're finished here."

"Find anything interesting?" Harry asked. Sirius shook his head, accepting the book from Harry as the other boy tucked the bird carefully into a pocket in his shirt. It squealed and settled down as a lump in the bottom of the pocket. There was the faint odour of burning fabric.

"It never hurts to ask," Tonks reminded them as they passed out into the shop proper. Even as Harry stepped through the doorway, Remus moved in front of him quickly.

"Remus, what—"

"Shut up," Remus ordered, and Harry lapsed into surprised silence. Remus moved back, forcing Harry and Sirius into the rear office once more. Tonks followed him, her sleeve grasped in his fingers.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Death Eaters. Be quiet."

Sirius craned his head around Remus' shoulders, warily. Two men in black cloaks stood in the shop, facing the windows, backs to the doorway.

"Is there another way to leave?" Remus asked. Tonks glanced over her shoulder.

"There's a door," she said, testing it as silently as she could. It opened into a dim, cold space between two buildings, not wide enough to be called a proper alley. As soon as she opened it, a gust of wind blew through and the two men in cloaks turned to the source of the sudden chill.

"*Snape,*" Harry whispered, hatefully. He charged forward but Sirius grabbed his wrist and pulled him off his feet in the other direction, through the doorway. He stumbled down the steps even as Remus pulled the door shut between the office and the shop, locking it with a hasty charm before he followed them.

"THERE!" someone shouted, and three more black-cloaked figures bolted down the passageway after them. Sirius was still hauling him along even as hexes flew past; Tonks and Remus were shouting and turning to return the attack with vigour. Sirius pulled him to the right, headed for the dubious safety of Mardjinn Alley...

Except on this side, the passageway narrowed to nothing as two buildings converged. It wasn't even a wall; they could have gone over a wall. It was just an ending, rising three stories above them.

Tonks shoved over a pile of empty packing crates for cover, but it wouldn't last long; Harry could see the hooded figures looming before them, wands outstretched, could hear Remus curse softly and felt Sirius grip his arm tightly –

And then, inexplicably, the three Death Eaters stopped.

And *then*, even *more* inexplicably, they fell over.

In their place stood an un-hooded Severus Snape, wand outstretched. Harry moved forward again, but Sirius was still holding onto his arm and there was only so far he could go.

"Don't be a fool, Potter – don't even *try* it," he snapped at Tonks, who had been about to raise her wand. "There are more on the way. Go now. *Go,*" he urged, when they hesitated. "*Idiots!*"

Remus laid a hand on Harry's arm and before Harry could protest they were Apparating; he felt a sharp tug on his hair that overrode the usual pain of a

side-along. They emerged from nothingness into the sunny garden of Fourteen Back, Sirius and Tonks appearing a split second later, and Harry discovered the source of his pain.

"Malfoy," he growled, even as the pale boy released the back of his head and scrambled away. Remus had to lunge forward and grab Harry by the shoulders to keep him from getting his hands around Malfoy's throat; Sirius joined in, and Tonks put herself between them, wand on Draco but eyes on Harry. "I'll fucking *kill you*, Malfoy!" Harry shouted, struggling against Sirius and Remus' grips. In his pocket, the phoenix was crying piteously.

"Give me a reason," Tonks said to Malfoy as he moved to stand. He stilled, staring at her.

"There's a letter," he stammered.

"Let me go!" Harry cried.

"It's in my pocket—take it yourself if you don't believe me," Malfoy continued. Tonks edged forward and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a piece of folded parchment.

"The password is *oddmint*," Malfoy said, and before she could move, he had Disapparated with a crack. Her hex was a second too late, and it killed one of Bowman's rosebushes instead of hitting Malfoy in the chest.

Remus let Harry go. Sirius relaxed his grip as well, much more slowly.

"Why didn't you let me kill him?" Harry asked.

"We're not murderers," Remus answered.

"WE SHOULD BE!" Harry shouted, turning on him. "They don't *deserve* any better!"

"Ooooh, Remus, you need to read this," Tonks said, staring down at the letter. "Oh, you need to read this right now."

"Who's it from?" Sirius asked. He wiped blood away from his lips, and Harry belatedly realised he must have elbowed Sirius in the mouth in the struggle.

"Albus Dumbledore," she answered.

## CHAPTER XXVI

Albus Dumbledore

May 1, 1997

Hogwarts School

My dear Harry,

If you are reading this letter then things have grown dire indeed. I am almost certainly deceased and you have every reason to believe that Severus Snape is my murderer; perhaps you were even witness to the event, considering your aptitude for being in places one least expects of you and seeing things that a man of your few years had much better live without seeing.

I digress from the point, however, which is to put your mind at least partially at ease. If you will consult Healer Abigail Francisco, head of the Spell Damage unit at St. Mungo's, she will be able to confirm that my death warrant has, in fact, been signed and sealed for some time. I am afraid that the reason I cannot instruct you as to the obliteration of the remaining horcruxes (which, I am sure, you will have no trouble locating) is that I have unfortunately given my life in order to destroy the Ring of the House of Peverell. I will persevere as far as I can, but I doubt I shall finish out the school year. Such a shame; I do love the end-of-year feast.

Do not despair, however! For, as you are reading this letter, you will discover you possess allies in unexpected places. No doubt you believe Severus to be a traitor; Abigail will also be able to confirm (as she was our Bonded) that he was sworn by Unbreakable Vow to assist me to a less painful grave than otherwise. If I am dead at his hand, it is by my own request and through no misdeed of his own. You must believe him to be an ally, Harry, no matter what; as I have trusted him implicitly in life, so do I in death, and wish that you will do the same. Consider it an inheritance, if you will. You will find far richer inheritances in the future, if you hold fast to these convictions now.

Abigail herself has been sworn to secrecy with a similar vow, the exception being if you, Harry, ask her to reveal what she knows of my death. She will assist you in contacting Professor Snape if he has fled to the Death Eaters, which is highly likely if he has managed to deliver to you this letter. He is, if he has escaped your wrath thus far, engaged in discovering what I could not. I have

asked him to make himself useful to you; I doubt he will do so without a struggle, but then you are familiar with his ways and will expect this.

Is it not strange, Harry, that your father's generation should produce so many brilliant minds and yet lose or cripple so many, so young? I muse on it often. Your generation, no less brilliant but far less innocent, will face more challenges, I fear. Learn from those who have survived Voldemort's wrath once: believe strongly, love fully, fight with bravery as well as wit, and be steadfast to your comrades.

You will not fail. In this I have faith.

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*

\* \* \*

Fourteen Back was unusually subdued that Saturday evening.

Most of the afternoon was spent patching wounds and making plans; Tonks departed with the letter to speak to Moody and, if possible, track down Abigail Francisco. While Tonks was gone they cooked a half-hearted dinner and then sat around the kitchen table, talking. Sirius was feeding the little phoenix hatchling on dry tinder and mashed up mangoes, which it seemed to appreciate. They danced around the topic of Severus Snape entirely, until Sirius cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Well..." he said. "Snivellus got beaky, didn't he? And old."

"No older than I am," Remus said tiredly.

"No, but he looks older."

Remus snorted.

"He does. You can tell you're still not very old, I can tell I mean, when I look at you," Sirius said. "Everything about *him* is old and dried up."

"Do you really suppose he's still an ally?" Harry asked, watching the hatchling as it gnawed on a mango rind held in Sirius' fingers.

"We can't know for sure," Remus said.

"He killed Dumbledore."

"On Dumbledore's request, if the letter is to be believed," Remus reminded him.

"The whole time on the tower he never once begged for his life from Malfoy...but when Snape showed up, he told him *please*..."

"He always was a bastard," Sirius muttered.

"The important thing is that we survived due in no small part to his timely action," Remus said. "And if the letter is valid, we should consider the idea that we now have a deeply trusted agent in the Death Eaters. Dumbledore is right—Snape will be able to find out from Voldemort how to destroy the horcruxes. If anyone knows, the Dark Lord will."

"Or all he'll do is tip him off," Harry said quietly.

"We must run the risk sooner or later, Harry. We have—or know of—all but one; that's something, anyway. And..." Remus bowed his head. "We'll know soon enough—we ought to know after this moon—if imprisoning Fenrir has disbanded his pack sufficiently."

"Perhaps there'll be a verdict on Monday," Sirius said comfortingly. Dumbledore's death was significant, yes, but in the here-and-now Remus and his worries were more important. Half of the people in Sirius' life had been suddenly dead when he arrived from the map, and he wanted to care more for the living.

"I doubt it. And if there is, they may hold it until after the moon. Scrimgeour's no fool. This close to the moon there *will* be riots, no matter what."

"Can they do that?" Sirius asked. "Hold the verdict?"

"I have learned," Remus said slowly, "that when it comes to werewolves, Sirius, 'they' can do just about anything they bloody well please."

Sirius scowled and stood up, walking to the kitchen counter. He took down a smallish soup bowl as he spoke, holding the phoenix in his other hand. "Perhaps the Ministry should do its own dirty work from now on," he declared. "Perhaps a riot or two might make them see reason."

"Not if innocent people are hurt, Sirius. I wouldn't wish this curse on anyone else for anything the Ministry could give me."

Sirius put the phoenix down on the counter and took out one of Remus' old shirts, which had gone for dusters when he bought new ones. He began shredding it into tiny strips, arranging them in the bowl. The phoenix, intrigued, ambled over to see what the fuss was about. When the bowl was about halfway full, it hooked its beak over the rim of the bowl and climbed in, fluffing its feathers contentedly as it settled into the makeshift nest.

"Look, it's a night-light," Sirius declared, as it began to glow softly.

"Remus," Harry said.

"Yes?"

"What are we going to do? Really, I mean."

Remus ran his hands through his hair, leaning back disconsolately.

"We'll wait until Tonks can confirm that letter is from Dumbledore. Then we'll talk to Abigail Francisco. Then...I don't know. I think we had best leave Snape, like the Fenrir verdict, until after the full moon. In the meantime...we carry on as we have done."

"I don't trust him."

"Neither do I. Not yet. This...game, I remember this from last time; covert meetings, assurances disbelieved, accusations made. I know he has done horrible things," he said, holding up a hand to forestall Harry's arguments, "But they may have been necessary things, even beneficial things in the end. And now," he added, "I think we ought to sleep."

Sirius picked up the bowl-bed he'd made for the little phoenix and followed Harry upstairs with it, setting it carefully on the desk under the windows while Harry changed into his pyjamas. Normally he might leap up onto the bed as Padfoot before Harry could get in, starting a shoving war which would end with Harry laughing and Padfoot the happy recipient of many, many pets. Tonight, however, he waited until Harry was situated and then climbed up quietly, taking his customary place in the crook of Harry's legs.

"I think you should have the phoenix," Harry said, one hand idly rubbing Padfoot's ears. "You haven't got an owl. You should name it something interesting too. And at least pick a gender and stick to it, because you can't call a living thing 'it' for the rest of its life."

Padfoot nuzzled up against Harry's hand, licking his palm.  
*Harryharryharry.*

"Maybe you should name him Gaunt," Harry said, rubbing the fuzzy spot between Padfoot's eyebrows. "Or Regulus—no, maybe not," he corrected himself. "Would Dismas be sacrilegious? Not that anyone would know..."

He was silent for so long that it seemed as if he'd fallen asleep. Finally, he spoke again.

"Or you could name him Glastonbury. That's a nice noble name for a phoenix."

\* \* \*

"Harry, wake up!"

Harry was tugged up out of amorphous dreams by Sirius' urgent voice, calling him. He sat up and rubbed his eyes blearily, finally locating his glasses near the desk on the windowsill.

"Glastonbury's gone!" Sirius said worriedly, showing him the bowl that they'd placed the little phoenix in the night before. "I can't find him upstairs anywhere."

"Ummmh," Harry said. "Padfoot."

"No—"

"No, find him with Padfoot," Harry said. "Scent?"

"Oh!" Sirius said. "Right!"

A second later both Padfoot and Harry came crashing down the stairs after the scent of the phoenix, only to find Tonks standing in the doorway to the kitchen, her finger held to her lips.

"Where's Glastonbury?" Sirius asked, not missing a beat in the change between dog and man.

"...Somerset?" Tonks said, confused. "Shut up, come look."

Harry and Sirius crowded around her through the doorway, curiously. In the kitchen, Remus was sitting at the table with a cup of tea in front of him, another one indicating where Tonks had just been; Hedwig was on her usual perch, the towel rack next to the sink where she could peer out the window any time she liked.

"Look at Hedwig," Remus said softly.

Harry became aware of a soft cheeping noise in the too-silent kitchen, and after a second Hedwig's downy belly appeared to move. Slowly, a small orange-red head poked out from underneath the white fluff.

"I guess she likes Glastonbury after all," Sirius said, grinning. He came forward to pick up the little phoenix, but Hedwig spread her wings and hissed warningly.

"Easy, Hedwig," Harry said, reaching out to stroke her head. She allowed it warily, and even folded her wings as Sirius moved closer and cautiously reached underneath her, picking up the rather ugly, scraggly-feathered chick she'd been protecting. Glastonbury nibbled on his thumbnail.

"I thought Sirius was going to have a heart attack," Harry said amusedly, allowing Hedwig to crawl up his wrist and perch on his arm. "Do you suppose she came up in the night and got him, or he flew down?"

"Didn't smell her in our room," Sirius said, taking down some sausage with his free hand and dropping it into an instantly hot pan. Tonks raised an eyebrow and glanced at Remus, mouthing 'our?' at him. Harry squinted, not quite catching on; Remus dismissed whatever it was with a shake of his head, and Harry went to help Sirius tend to breakfast-making.

"I have news about the letter," Tonks said, shrugging it off. "From what I can tell, the signature is real. There are no glamours and no forgery charms; there's a second magical signature that emerges when you try to test the real one, but it's Dumbledore's too. The Healer he mentioned," she added, consulting a sheet of parchment, "is unfortunately away on holiday, but she'll be back next Monday and when I spoke to her through the floo she said she thought she knew what this was all about. And I've put in a request for the Headmaster's medical records, so I should have those by Tuesday or so."

"Do you think I should talk to her sooner?" Harry asked, as Hedwig decided that hot sausage grease was not a pleasant morning experience and flapped back to her perch.

"Well..." she glanced at Remus, who leaned forward.

"If he is acting on Dumbledore's orders—if he's loyal to our side—then he'll keep on as he has done until we need him or until he can't take it any longer. Severus has a great tolerance for distasteful jobs; I can't see him quitting when he's finally managed to get a message through to us. If he has betrayed the Order..." Remus spread his hands. "There's no need to rush into his arms and put our own necks further in the noose."

"I set George to find him," Harry murmured. "So that we could kill him."

The others took this with an almost eerie equanimity.

"Then it's a rather good thing he didn't, don't you think?" Remus asked.

\* \* \*

There were moments of brightness in the week that followed, but on the whole the days passed with a sort of expectant silence. Sirius marked his hours by feeding times for Glastonbury (morning and evening with regular Hogwarts meals and a few segments of mango around two in the afternoon) and by how quickly the little phoenix grew. Harry moved through Fourteen Back in a ghostly fashion, spending most of his time buried in books Hermione had asked him to read because, despite her drive to actually read every printed word by the age of nineteen, there were still only twenty-four hours in a day and you had to sleep

for at least a few of them. Tonks continued to study Dumbledore's letter and search for ways it might have been forged in her off-hours.

For Remus, the time passed in a series of physical inconveniences which grew slowly but steadily worse as the moon worked its way towards the evening of the full. He taught until the last class on Wednesday, when he simply collapsed in his office afterwards and hadn't the strength to go down to dinner. Sirius brought him up a plate of food when he didn't show and took away his class notes so that he could start teaching the following day.

On Thursday evening, Firenze made Sirius recite the myths associated with every constellation, star, and planet that was in the sky above the school. Sirius got about two thirds of them, and the displeasure on Firenze's face sent him scrambling for his magical mythology books to look up the other third later that evening, when he should have been getting enough sleep to be coherent for class the following day.

Tonks showed up at Fourteen Back right around sundown and insisted on making tarts with the bumper crop of strawberries Bowman had given Harry earlier in the week. Harry wasn't sure why she was making tarts, but he was subjected to an extended lecture on the proper way to bake Muggle-fashion (unnecessary), her father's habit of cooking food while under stress (vaguely informative), and some varied rantings about fate in general and love in specific being very unfair (entertaining). Harry had to admit that chopping up strawberries did at least provide something to do with the hands while he fretted about Remus, who by now must be fully Changed, and Padfoot, who was locked up with a werewolf.

And besides, hot strawberry tarts eaten at the kitchen table with warm apple cider did a lot to soothe frazzled nerves.

"Harry," Tonks said, round about the third tart, "can I ask you something?"

"Course," Harry replied, licking his fingers. "What?"

"You and Sirius...you're pretty good friends?"

"He's Sirius," Harry answered.

"Yeah, but what does that mean, really?"

Harry pondered it. "Well, it's destiny, isn't it?"

Tonks burst out laughing. "What?"

"I mean, all right, he left me once for Azkaban and then came back, and then left to go into hiding and then came back, and then he—just...left..." Harry

shook his head. "But he came back again. Don't tell me that's not...fate, somehow."

"Three times," Tonks agreed. "But does that mean it's fate for him to stay with you...or fate for him to keep leaving?"

Harry scowled. "He's not leaving again. I won't let him. I'm not fifteen anymore."

"But that's what I'm asking. I know he used to be your godfather, Harry, I just wonder...what he is now."

"He's my mate, isn't he? Like Ron and Hermione. Except he sort of...needs me more. You know what Remus said, Remus said he's a second chance."

Tonks studied him for a while, chin resting on her hand. "Remus is very perceptive about these things."

"Are you going to marry him?" Harry asked. She grinned and picked at the last of her tart.

"You're such a girl, Harry," she said, ruffling his hair as she stood. "I'm going to get some rest. Are you coming to the Shack tomorrow morning?"

"I'll come a little later – bring breakfast and all."

"That sounds good. And don't forget Sirius' book, he keeps leaving it here and Remus said a few days ago that he was looking for it."

"Right, it's in the living room," Harry said. "Night, Tonks."

"Night, Harry," Tonks said, as she closed the door to Remus' bedroom behind her. Harry reached for *Animagus Winter* on the side-table only to find two copies; Remus must have decided to re-read his copy as well. He picked up the one closest to him and opened it, looking for a bookplate. There was no plate, but the blank front page was inscribed with a lengthy letter. He'd borrowed Remus' copy and he was pretty sure this had to belong to Sirius, but he scanned it just to be sure.

*My dearest Animus, my soul in the whole of the thing, this is yours and always was; forgive me for keeping a part of your own self from you for so long, but I needed it. I give it back to you now and with it your liberty if you so wish, because youth has not yet left your heart and god forbid it ever should. But I beg this of you, that you remember Wren and do me the honour of tendering your freedom back again, as I promise I shan't take advantage of it.*

*You made me want to speak into the silences and there is no greater gift to a writer than to be given a reason to use his voice. Your passion and grace, perhaps yet a little untempered, shine out so brightly that sometimes you blind me, beloved. If I am jealous, ungentlemanly, rude, and shy, it is because I am learning how to love your spirit, which is strange to me. But you know better than many that blind men often may be prophets, and that there is a divinity in it. If you are willing to tolerate these intemperances of mine and give me some little affection, please allow me to love you; I will lay whole worlds at your feet and tell you stories in the evenings while the clocks chime the hours.*

*For as long as there is breath in me, some part of all my stories will be your dominion and your word will be law; you will know how all stories end.*

*Your own,*

*El.*

Harry stared down at the inscription, cheeks flushing as hot as if he had walked in on Sirius having sex with someone. Ellis Graveworthy, the novelist who died in the last war, and Sirius...?

He had never thought of the other Sirius, his godfather, having sex with anyone, being in love with anyone. He could have—had, once—imagined that Tonks might love him, but he had never thought of Sirius loving her back. Sirius must have loved someone once, though. Clearly Ellis Graveworthy had loved Sirius, but there was no mistaking the intimacy of that inscription even to Harry's untrained, seventeen-year-old eye. This was not a letter one wrote to a stranger or a friend. This was a letter from a man to his lover. Ellis Graveworthy had loved Sirius and—

The plot of *Animagus Winter* suddenly became blindingly, painfully clear to Harry. He had assumed it was simply the story of a friendship between a man and his mentor, but for Sirius it would be a chronicle of how Ellis Graveworthy had fallen in love with him. And Ellis Graveworthy had died even before Sirius went to Azkaban, which meant that if Sirius had loved him too then Sirius had lost more than James and Lily and his freedom in the war.

Harry sat on the stairs up to his room with a thump, stunned and bewildered. Remus had known them during the first war; Remus must know. Remus must know that Sirius Black was gay, or at any rate fancied men at least as much as women.

He turned it over in his head. His godfather had fancied men. And he had never, ever discussed it with Harry or anyone else. Had he fancied someone in the Order, before...before he died? Had he fancied *Remus*? It wasn't beyond the pale. Harry himself would have picked Bill Weasley, but—

He hadn't felt a pang of grief for Sirius this powerful in months, nearly a year. Sirius would have understood this confusion, this feeling that what was right for everyone else was somehow wrong for him. Sirius had been *like him*. Harry could have asked him about it and Sirius would have understood and explained things.

But his godfather was dead. In his place was this young, fearless Sirius who was the axis of all of Harry's confusion.

Oh, god. Sirius. Sirius fancied men, this Sirius in this place and time. This Sirius. Confusing, handsome, comforting Sirius who *slept on his bed*, who had saved him from the Crypt King, who had promised that he didn't want Harry to be something he wasn't.

Harry left the book on the steps and walked upstairs with the thoughts turning over and over in his head in a dull sort of rhythm. He didn't recall changing into his pyjamas or crawling into bed; once there, however, he lay perfectly still long into the night, staring through the window at the full moon until he finally drifted off, exhausted by his own confusion. He did not dream.

\* \* \*

Harry was shaken awake after only a few hours' sleep by an insistent hand on his shoulder.

"Harry, wake up. Harry, please wake up." Tonks' voice. Harry yawned and opened his eyes, focusing on Tonks' heart-shaped face, now a mask of worry.

"Wossit?" he asked.

"It's Sirius," she said. "He's been hurt."

Harry sat up so fast he nearly collided with Tonks. For about two seconds he had no idea where he was or what was going on, but if Sirius was hurt, he had to help him. Why hurt? Why such worry, unless it was a bad injury, or—

-- oh, the full moon. Padfoot and the wolf, locked up in the Shack together. Harry tumbled out of bed and hastily pulled a pair of trousers on over his pyjamas. Tonks handed him his coat to wear over his pyjama shirt, and he stepped into his shoes without any socks on.

"It's his arm. I don't know what it is; I just went to get help from Madam Pomfrey and then came here to get you."

"Wolf bite?" Harry asked, terrified.

"I don't know," Tonks said in frustration as they descended the stairs. "He's lost some blood, but not too much, I think. When I arrived, Remus was trying to get onto the bed; he's had a bad knock on the head, I guess he was on the bed and fell off during the change. Padfoot was bleeding all over the blankets."

Harry passed the book on the stairwell, where he'd left it last night, and a whole new set of memories nearly sent him reeling down the rest of the steps. He half-suspected the entire thing had been a dream and he had the presence of mind to grab the book and shove it in his coat pocket even as he followed Tonks into the floo, crying "Lupin's Office, Hogwarts!"

They ran out into the hallway and nearly bowled over Madam Pomfrey, who was carrying a large metal basin piled with medical supplies.

"Ah! You're in good time. I was just taking this down to Mr. Padfoot," she said with a broad wink.

"Is he all right?" Harry asked.

"Harry! Hello, what a pleasure. Yes, he's quite all right; he's resting in his room. He told me the whole story as I was helping him back – while I was there I checked up on Remus too, dear," she added to Tonks, "and he's fine, though very fretful."

"Harry, I'd better go –"

"Go on," Harry said. "Can I come with you?" he asked Madam Pomfrey, as Tonks bolted.

"Of course. It's not serious at all; merely a scrape. I'll have to be quick, however. I have a ward full of magical flu victims waiting for breakfast and their morning potions..."

"I can do it," Harry said. She gave him a sceptical look. "Please? Between him and me, we're sure to get everything healed quickly. And you can get back to the hospital wing."

She considered it for a minute, then placed the basin in his outstretched hands.

"Thanks, Madam Pomfrey," he said, running down the corridor to the Tutor's rooms. He stopped outside the door with the ridiculous urge to try and

flatten his hair before he entered, and transferred the basin to his left hand so that he could knock with his right.

"Sirius?" he called, worried. Surely if it were a werewolf bite, Madam Pomfrey would not have trusted him; then again, people had a bad habit of trusting Harry Potter when they shouldn't, and mistrusting him when he was just trying to do what was right. "Sirius? Are you there?"

"Come in," a voice said, barely audible. Harry entered to find Sirius lying on his side on the bed, shirtless, his broad back to the door. Torn strips of fabric were badly knotted around his right arm from shoulder to elbow.

"Sirius?" Harry said softly, passing the sofa and wing-chairs, then the worktable. He brought the chair from the worktable with him, setting it on the braided rug next to the bed at the far end of the room. Sirius stirred. "I've brought proper bandages from Madam Pomfrey."

Sirius rolled over slowly until he was staring up at the ceiling, sleepily. "Remus. He all right?"

"I think so." Harry set the shallow basin on the bedside table. "Do you need help?" he asked cautiously.

"No," Sirius said, drawing his left arm back to push himself up with. The movement obviously hurt his arm, but at least it seemed to wake him up. He drew his legs up against his chest, leaning on them for support. Harry hesitated.

"Can I take the bandages off?" he asked. Sirius nodded. "Do you want—" he reached into the basin for a vial of clear amber liquid. "For the pain?"

"I'd rather not. That stuff makes me sick," Sirius said. Harry began to untie the crude knots as carefully as he could. He peeled back each strip carefully while Sirius concentrated on his blanketed knees and sucked in the occasional breath against the sting of air on the wounds.

"I think it looks worse than it is," Harry said, taking in the mass of dried blood and torn flesh that was Sirius' upper arm. "He...didn't mean to do it, did he?"

"He didn't do it at all," Sirius said tightly, as Harry took the proper bandages out of the basin and filled it with water. He dipped one of the cleaner strips of cloth in it and began washing off the skin. He had to stop occasionally to pick out slivers of wood. "Moony would never hurt me."

"These look like claw marks."

"Caught myself on an exposed board," Sirius said, through gritted teeth. "He loves Padfoot. We're all — sffft!"

"Sorry," Harry said, dropping a particularly large sliver on the nightstand.

"We're all his pack, but Padfoot—*looks* like a wolf," Sirius said. "Deep down he knows it isn't proper for a wolf to go running about with a great bloody stag and a rat...oooh Merlin," he sighed, as Harry dabbed another bit of cloth into a small jar and rubbed the blue goop in the jar onto the wounds. "That feels better."

Harry unrolled the gauze Madam Pomfrey had given him. It was self-sticking; all he had to do was wrap Sirius' arm in it. "Hold out your hand."

Sirius obeyed and Harry started at the shoulder, working his way down to the elbow.

"He was nervous," Sirius said. "About what Fenrir's old pack would do. Any news?"

"I don't know," Harry said, tearing off the end of the gauze and smoothing it over. It stuck firmly. "I haven't had time to look at a newspaper. All right, I think you're patched up," he said, gathering up the splinters and dropping them, along with the bloody strips of cloth, into the basin.

Sirius turned his head as he leaned forward. "Thank you," he said.

"Nice to feel useful," Harry answered. He didn't lean back, and Sirius didn't turn away. Harry was afraid to breathe.

"You look worried," Sirius said in a low voice.

"I was, a bit," Harry agreed. "You're hurt again."

"You worry about me."

"Sometimes."

Sirius dropped his gaze, cutting his eyes away. Harry, desperate that he not turn away, leaned forward and kissed him before he'd even thought about it.

*Oh bloody hell you are in for it now* his brain said even as the rest of his body was saying *this is nothing like kissing Ginny*.

His pulse jumped when Sirius made an urgent little noise in the back of his throat and he could feel Sirius' tongue slide along his lower lip, just like he'd imagined. He opened his mouth in surprise and Sirius took advantage, tracing his tongue across Harry's and tilting his head for better leverage. Harry, off-balance, gripped the bed with his right hand and Sirius' arm with his left, strong enough that Sirius winced.

"Oh—shit, I'm sorry—" Harry said, as Sirius pulled back. The other boy simply stared at him, eyes huge, his left hand rubbing his arm where Harry had grasped it. "Are you all right?"

Sirius was breathing heavily and Harry noticed that he was too, and that the steady thrum of *yes this is right more please* in his body was making for an uncomfortable tightness in his trousers.

"I—did you mean to—" Sirius stammered, licking his lips. He really was going to have to stop doing that before he did permanent damage to Harry's brain somehow.

"If, did I—did you—was that all right?" Harry asked. "I mean I didn't expect you to...lick...that's all."

"No, it was." Sirius took a deep breath. "Good. You are good."

"Do you want to, um, try it again?" Harry hesitated. "With less of me grabbing your arm this time maybe?"

"Do *you* want to?" Sirius asked incredulously.

They stared at each other for a moment, both at a loss. Finally Sirius moved, sliding closer to Harry, reaching out hesitantly with his injured arm to touch the side of Harry's throat just below his ear, thumb exploring the line of his jaw curiously.

"I thought you fancied girls," he said as Harry's eyes closed. He slid his thumb over Harry's chin and up across his lower lip.

"I thought I did too," Harry replied.

"I'm not a girl, Harry."

Harry laughed against his thumb, which was resting on his lower lip. "No."

Sirius closed the few inches between them and kissed him again, a little less intensely this time, moving his hand up to ruffle his fingers in Harry's messy black hair. "You don't seem to mind," he said against Harry's lips. In reply, Harry opened his mouth and deepened the kiss—awkwardly, perhaps, but Sirius seemed to be perfectly happy with what he'd got. Harry carefully touched his chest, wanting to be sure Sirius was quite real. The skin was smooth and warm under his fingers.

There was a knock on Sirius' door, and Sirius jerked back. Harry had a bare second to pretend he'd been mucking with something in the basin before Hermione burst in.

"Harry, I was visiting Ron in the flu ward and Madam Pomfrey told me Sirius was hurt—" she looked at the boys worriedly. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine, Hermione," Harry said, because Sirius was nervously silent. "Just an accident, that's all."

"Well, does he need to go to the—"

"—no, I'm all right, really," Sirius answered. "Honest, Hermione, Harry did me right up—"

He stopped, horrified, and Harry had the singular experience of seeing Sirius Black blush from hairline to navel. Hermione didn't appear to notice; she was fussily cleaning up some of the bandages Harry had missed.

"I'd better go tell Remus you're all right and it's not his fault," Harry said, half-regretfully. Sirius nodded and looked away, and Harry realised that Sirius was, in an exhausted and injured state, badly misreading things.

"Hermione, can I have a word with Sirius alone?" he said, as Hermione butted in between them.

"Oh...sure, Harry," she said, slightly confused.

"Tell Ron hello, and I hope he feels better," he added. She smiled, warmly.

"Of course," she said. "I'll take this back to Madam Pomfrey," she called over her shoulder as she left. When the door had closed behind her, Harry spoke again.

"Sirius," he said, then more forcefully, "*Sirius.*"

Sirius turned to look at him, regretfully.

"I'm coming back," Harry said. He almost thought better of it, but decided that if he was going to make a fool of himself it had better be a thorough job. He leaned forward and kissed Sirius for the third time, quick and rough enough to send fire licking along his nerves. "I'm coming back," he repeated, then ran from the room, twitching the invisibility cloak around his shoulders as he went.

He ran all the way to the Shack, trying to leave the nervous energy from that kiss—those kisses—behind him; when he finally reached the top of the stairs he stopped for breath, clearing his head before he went to find Remus and be the reassuring, competent, mature adult that he didn't feel at all like he actually was.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Remus had been fretful and anxious when Harry arrived, oddly childish in his worry; he asked Harry to swear to him that it hadn't been the wolf that hurt Sirius, and Harry began to understand why his father and godfather and former Professor—and his enemy—had been so close in their childhood. Every other hour of every other day, Remus was a quiet, self-sufficient, closed-off man. Here in the Shack, however—after the change—he quite clearly needed caring-for that three teenaged boys must have been ill-equipped to provide. Harry felt a stab of pride that his father had been one to comfort the bewildered werewolf.

"There were splinters in the wound," he said, sitting next to the bed where Remus lay on his side, curled under mountains of blankets. Harry was wrapped in one himself, since the non-scorching fire Tonks had kindled on the floor didn't give off as much heat as a real hearth fire would have. "I picked out a ton of them. I'll go find the place he did it, if you want, there's bound to be blood."

Remus tilted his head at the floor, and Harry looked down. A small reddish pool, already almost completely dry, stained the wood floor. It led away in a trail of droplets and splatters, out the door.

"It's not as bad as that makes it look, honest," Harry said. "Madam Pomfrey let me take care of him, I saw it. Once I cleaned it off they weren't even that deep."

"If I hurt him...I'd never forgive myself," Remus murmured sleepily. "Is he angry?"

Harry grinned. "Hardly. When I asked if it was you he almost threw me out. He told me that the wolf knows that Padfoot is pack, and that he loves Padfoot and would never hurt him."

"So I do," Remus answered. "Pack, mmh...any news about Fenrir's?"

Tonks had been straightening the room, cleaning up any debris, and now she came to sit on the bed. She stroked his hair, reassuringly.

"No news yet," she said. "I came straight here, and Harry went straight to Sirius."

"I saw Hermione for a minute. She didn't say anything," Harry offered.

"I can go get some news if you want," Tonks said. "The Prophet should be out by now. It's not far to Hogsmeade."

Remus didn't reply; his eyes were closed and his shoulders moved with a slow, exhausted regularity. She studied him for a minute, then slid slowly off the bed.

"Harry, can you stay here?" she asked. "I know we were going to have Sirius do it, but —"

"I can stay," Harry said, though he was itching to get back to Hogwarts. He didn't want Sirius to think he had abandoned him. Tonks kissed his cheek and ran off, and Harry leaned back in the chair a little. He was prodded in the ribs by *Animagus Winter* in his pocket, which was a slim but not a small book; he took it out and opened it again, resting it on one knee.

He didn't re-read the inscription; he wasn't certain he could. Ellis Graveworthy must have loved Sirius very much. There was a certain...yearning in the words, a deep affection tempered by uncertainty. Instead he turned to the first page and began to read, picturing Graveworthy as the dry, wise Cerastes, Sirius as the impetuous and shy Polaris.

*...he was in the crowd but not a part of it, an intentional darkness on the good cheer at the bar. They didn't notice, because he smiled and stood his round and because he was handsome, and the handsome are forgiven many things. Already he had an animal air about him, though, and he was wary in this bustling mass of humanity...*

"James?"

Harry looked up from the book. Remus' eyes were barely slits, but he must have woken when Harry turned the page.

"No," Harry said, embarrassed. "It's Harry."

"Of course it is," Remus mumbled. "Sorry."

"It's all right."

"Did Tonks..."

"She left," Harry said. "To go get a newspaper. She'll probably bring back breakfast," he added. "You can sleep some more."

Remus nodded, but his eyes opened a fraction wider. "I should. If I rest...I could teach again on Monday."

"Sirius can teach for you."

"I don't like to put too much on him."

"He doesn't mind." Harry hesitated, then plunged ahead. "Remus..."

"Mmhm?" Remus asked, pushing himself up to a sitting position. Harry took his arm to help him, settling the blankets across his lap. Sirius was right; even in this state, Harry could see something vital in Remus that Snape somehow lacked. He still fought to believe in something. Harry wondered how much of that fight had been rekindled by Tonks.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Remus nodded, shivering a little. Harry helped him pull a blanket up around his shoulders, wrapping it across his chest.

"Did you know Sirius fancied blokes?"

Remus turned his head slowly, studying Harry. He opened his mouth and the corner of his lip began to bleed where it was chapped. He wiped it away with the back of one hand.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No," Harry said. He turned the book around and showed it, inscription-up, to Remus. The older man nodded.

"You found it," he said. "Yes. I knew."

"Sirius told you?"

"Oh, Christ, no," Remus gave a dry laugh. "Sirius never told a soul unless they were in danger of finding out. Even with—" he coughed, "Even with Ellis, he was always...circumspect. Closeted," he added. "It was not a time when such things were deemed acceptable. It still isn't, not really."

Harry closed the book and drew his leg up onto the chair, hooking the heel of his shoe on the edge and wrapping his arms around it.

"He thought he ought to tell you—our Sirius, the other Sirius," Remus continued, haltingly. "He was afraid you'd see him differently. He thought if you knew, you wouldn't want to see him anymore—"

"That's not true!" Harry burst out.

"I told him so," Remus said. "He said when you were older, perhaps."

"It's not fair—"

"I know that," Remus replied. They were silent for a moment. "After he died, I didn't think it mattered."

"No, I guess not." Harry closed the book and set it on the bed, studying his hands.

"Harry..." Remus swallowed and picked up a goblet of water from the table, drinking it slowly. "When we discovered it, Sirius was terrified. I've never

seen him so afraid, and he was a year older than Sirius is now." He sipped again. "If you tell him you know, please be kind. Please don't hurt him."

"I kissed him," Harry blurted. Remus blinked.

"When?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Oh." He paused. "Did you mean it?"

"What do you mean?"

Remus set the goblet down, slowly. "Harry, you're older than he is and ages more mature. You're both too old for your age, but...this is not a game you can play with Sirius. It's a part of him that frightens him and upsets him. It was hard enough, seeing him afraid to love Ellis..."

"But Graveworthy loved him!"

"Yes. But it took this book to prove it to Sirius." Remus fixed him with almost fever-bright eyes. "Don't hurt him, Harry. Please."

"You don't think it's possible I might feel the same way he does?" Harry asked, angrily. Remus flinched.

"I think I have seen you with girls in the past, and that it is very difficult for a man of your age to be comfortable with anything other than what is...acceptable," he said, his voice hoarse. He took another sip of water and rubbed his forehead.

"How's your head?" Tonks asked, reappearing in the doorway. She carried a Prophet under one arm and a greasy paper bag in the other.

"It's all right," Remus said quietly. Tonks set the bag of food in Harry's lap and sat on the bed, curling up against him with the newspaper. Harry watched, warily, but Remus didn't say anything more on the subject. He let Tonks open the paper and show it to him as she read, closing his eyes and leaning back while she scanned for news of any new werewolf activity.

"Fred and George's shop was attacked late last night," she said. "Apparently they didn't get away with anything and the Aurors are now in search of two individuals with bright blue skin, pointy ears, and *Moron* written on their foreheads."

Remus laughed a little. Harry grinned.

"Probably not werewolves," Remus murmured.

"Probably not. Cannons got trounced again—uh oh."

"What?" Harry asked, leaning forward. Tonks glanced at Remus, worried, but read the headline aloud.

"Fenrir Greyback To Azkaban," she read. *"Ministry officials announced at an early press conference this morning that a verdict has been returned on Fenrir Greyback, a known werewolf and alleged intentional disease-spreader. Greyback has been on trial for several weeks for assault, infection, and attempted murder. It is now confirmed that he has been declared guilty on all counts and has already been relocated to Azkaban prison where he will be serving a life sentence with no possibility of parole. Special holding arrangements have been made..."* she trailed off. Remus didn't appear to have reacted — unlike the last moon, when he had wept helplessly against her.

"Tried as a human," he said, finally. "With the same rights and the same punishments. It's a step. Smart of them; even the ones who run wild during the moon couldn't possibly muster enough power to do anything about it this morning. I'm glad...they didn't kill him."

"Why?" Harry asked. Remus opened his eyes and leaned his head on Tonks' hair, looking at him.

"Because we only kill dogs when they attack people." He breathed deeply. "And because now he'll suffer the way I have."

Harry hadn't expected the brief flash of vindictive bitterness in Remus' eyes, and for a moment he understood how exhausting it must have been to fight for the rights of someone who had taken so much from him. Tonks curled closer and rubbed his stomach through his pyjamas.

"Do you want to eat?" she asked softly. "I brought egg and sausage and some toast. Or there's juice and some bananas."

"Thank you. In a little while," Remus said. "Harry, take what you'd like and go along — Sirius is probably waiting for you."

"I'll have Dobby bring us up something," Harry said. "Sure you're all right?"

"We'll be fine," Tonks answered as he put the food on the bed.

"Yes. We will be," Remus agreed gravely.

\* \* \*

Harry very carefully did not run back to Hogwarts. He walked, turning over Remus' words in his mind, trying to decide what he could possibly say to Sirius. "Hi" seemed somehow lacking, but "can we do that again" was rather abrupt. He didn't want to do anything just to prove to Remus that he meant it, but he didn't want to scare Sirius off.

Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—he wasn't faced with the decision immediately. As he walked down the hallway to Sirius' rooms someone called his name. He turned to find Colin Creevey running to catch up, long legs covering the distance easily.

"Harry! Hi, how are you?" Colin asked breathlessly. "I'd heard you've been around recently."

"Hi, Colin," Harry said, with a small smile. "I'm all right—just visiting...Nigel."

"Right—I was just dropping in myself to pick up some papers for the kids up in the hospital wing. Bit unfair to give them homework, but then again all they do otherwise is sit in bed and cough and throw things at each other. It's a mess," he said frankly. Harry wondered to himself when Colin had grown up—but then other people than himself had been affected by the war and Colin had more to fear, being a Muggle-born.

"I don't think you'd better," Harry said. "He had an accident last night, he's not feeling very well."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Colin asked. Harry was about to make a joke when he remembered that Sirius was Nigel.

"No, nothing too bad—bit of a tumble on some rocks down near the lake," he lied. "I can bring them up, though, when I'm done checking on him."

"Oh, that'd be great. And tell him feel better for me, yeah? I'd better hop it—Professor Slughorn's letting me use his classroom for some new photographic potions I'm working on. Come say hi if you get the chance!" Colin said, already running off. Harry watched him go in bemusement, then moved on to knock on Sirius' door.

"Come in," Sirius called, and Harry pushed the door open. Glastonbury chirped cheerfully from a perch on the back of a chair, where he was holding a dried apple slice in his claws and mangling it gleefully with his beak. Phoenixes grew quickly and Glastonbury was almost fully grown, his plumage deep crimson and spreading beautifully when he ruffled his feathers. Harry moved forward to stroke the fledgling and found Sirius standing at the window, looking out at the chilly, sullen landscape of the grounds.

He still had no shirt on, but he'd wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and it hung down over his pyjama trousers, the dark blanket contrasting with the bright white flannel. His hair fell carelessly in his eyes, cutting a line across his

cheek, and his fingers held the corners of the blanket firmly. He turned to look at Harry and smiled a shy, secret grin that made Harry's pulse jump.

"Hi," he said. Harry swallowed.

"Hi," he answered.

"How's Moony?"

"Feeling pretty awful. Tonks is staying with him, she has food and stuff," Harry said, moving forward slowly. He craned his neck a little to see what Sirius had been looking at. "Fenrir's been sentenced."

"Yeah?"

"Life imprisonment."

"Good," Sirius said quietly.

"How's your arm?"

"It doesn't hurt much."

"Good."

They stood in silence at the window, looking out. Hogwarts was wreathed in mist with the promise of snow on the wind, and Harry suddenly missed it with all his heart.

"Do we talk now?" Sirius asked softly, not looking at him.

"Dunno. Never done this before."

"Not with Ginny Weasley?"

"Not with a bloke," Harry answered, and Sirius winced a little. "Well, have you?" he asked.

"Not with someone who mattered," Sirius said. "You matter. Not just to me."

The tacit admission of Harry's place in the war that was going on outside of Hogwarts was not lost on him. He turned to look at Sirius, who continued to stare out the window.

"I told Remus," he said quietly. "He told me not to hurt you."

"I'm all right," Sirius replied. "I'm better than he thinks I am."

Harry reached out and touched Sirius' chin, turning him gently so that they faced each other. He slid his hand around to the back of Sirius' neck and pulled him forward, resting their foreheads together.

"Can it just be—whatever it is? For a little while?" he asked. Sirius tilted his head a little, kissing him, warm pressure on his lips.

"The war comes first, is that it?" he said, into the kiss.

"I might die. So might you," Harry said. Sirius kissed him again, parting his lips a little. Harry heard the blanket fall to the floor and felt Sirius' hands slide around his waist, pulling him up against the other man. He was still gripping Sirius by the back of the neck with one hand; he lifted the other to Sirius' injured shoulder cautiously.

"An arrangement," Sirius suggested, kissing the corner of his mouth. "We are this to each other. What we need to be."

"But the war—"

"Yes," Sirius agreed, his left hand sliding up the small of Harry's back. Harry couldn't recall the last time someone had been so close. The feeling was almost overwhelming. "No promises made. Just us," a kiss on the mouth, "this," a gentle suction on his bottom lip, "each other. And we don't tell," he added, leaning back to meet Harry's eyes.

"I've already told Remus—"

"Moony understands. But not Ron or Hermione, not anyone else. If we end it, we end it privately. There's less hurt that way."

"You've done this before."

"Not in so many words," Sirius said, ducking his head. "But I do what I have to, to protect myself. To protect you," he added. "You're famous. There'd be scandal. And for all everyone else knows, I'm Nigel Padfoot, three years older than you are."

"I'm of age. I'm not a student."

"I doubt they'd care," Sirius said. "The last Tutor was sacked for being involved with a student."

"That was decades ago."

"Nobody else, Harry," Sirius said. "Or it ends right now."

Harry bit his lip, watching Sirius carefully. Sirius leaned in and kissed him again with a mouth that was full of promise. It was the most physical, visceral sensation Harry had ever felt, and it was too much to deny.

"All right," he said, when it was done. "Nobody else. For now. I won't promise never."

"Now is what I want," Sirius said. His voice was low and rough, almost hoarse, but he didn't kiss Harry again. "I can have some breakfast brought up, if you want some," he said, passing Harry with a slow, lingering movement. Harry swallowed.

"Breakfast might be good," he said. "And Colin Creevey asked me to pick up some papers he said you had."

"Yeah, the homework for the sick kids. Nasty flu," Sirius said. "It's by the door. I can run it up myself, after breakfast. Dobby," he called, apparently to the thin air, and the house-elf appeared with a pop.

"Is Mister Padfoot wanting something?" Dobby asked, then his face broke into a ridiculous grin of delight. "Harry Potter, sir!" he cried.

"Hiya, Dobby," Harry said, exchanging a grin with Sirius. "How're you?"

"Dobby is *very* well sir, very well," Dobby replied. "He is sometimes being put in charge of pastry, sir, a great honour for a house-elf."

"Grand, good to hear it," Harry said.

"Dobby, can you bring us some breakfast?" Sirius asked. "Lots of breakfast, I'm *ravenous*. Aren't you ravenous, Harry?"

He looked downright wicked, and Harry felt as if every nerve in his body was attuned to his voice.

"I could eat," he said hoarsely.

"Lots of food, Dobby – oatmeal and buttery toast – no, French toast with honey and sugar, and sausages and bacon, and some poached eggs," Sirius said. "And hot tea with milk and sugar. And some straw for Glastonbury."

Dobby bowed, gave Harry another broad grin, and vanished.

"Don't you sound like Enid Blyton," Harry said, grinning.

"Who's that?" Sirius asked.

"Nobody, never mind."

"Are you mocking me, Harry Potter?"

"*I'm ravenous, Harry! Aren't you ravenous?*" Harry mimicked. Sirius laughed and sat down at the little table where he ate, kicking out the other chair for Harry. Glastonbury took wing and flapped over gracefully, settling on Sirius' bare shoulder and peering around for scraps.

"Well," Sirius said, with what Harry could only categorize as a *leer*, "I've had a busy morning. So," he added, as Dobby appeared with an enormous tray of food and began to unload it onto the table, "Tell me about Remus. How did he take the news about Greyback?"

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, and Dobby saluted and vanished. "Well, he took it all right. He's glad they aren't killing him."

"Moony's a forgiving idiot."

"Well, it means a lot to him that a werewolf's getting punished like a human would."

"I don't care from werewolves, I just think Greyback ought to get what's coming to him," Sirius said, dumping honey on his toast. He licked his thumb and continued. "At least he'll be locked up. But Moony's doing all right, otherwise?"

"Hmm?" Harry asked. He'd been distracted by the sight of Sirius licking his thumb. Sirius grinned at him.

"Moony. He's all right?"

"He seemed tired, but we talked a bit," Harry shrugged, pouring brown sugar on his oatmeal and adding milk to his tea. Glastonbury had scooped up a beakful of dry hay and was swallowing it whole with apparent satisfaction. "Are you coming to Fourteen Back this weekend? I think Tonks'll move Remus there as soon as he's feeling better."

"Sure," Sirius said. They exchanged an almost conspiratorial look over their breakfast, and though Harry worried a little about whether or not he was in over his head, he was enjoying this far too much to care.

\* \* \*

Sitting in bed for days on end provided ample time for a person to ruminate on problems, and Remus was an expert. He thought of problems like strange objects, abstract three-dimensional shapes that would fit into the proper parts of his head if only he turned them around enough. He had been trying to find a fit for the letter from Dumbledore since before the moon, and he'd just about got it. It was more devious than was generally expected of Remus J. Lupin, Professor and former Prefect, but that was just as well.

The problem was that Severus Snape was an accomplished Legilimens, so it couldn't be Remus who executed the plan—and they couldn't know it was a plan. Tonks would either be furious she hadn't been made a part of the plan or furious she had been manipulated without been told; Harry might get rebellious, and sending Sirius to deal with Severus Snape didn't bear thinking about.

There were still a few rough spots that didn't quite fit, but he was polishing them all the time—while he lay in his bed at Fourteen Back, while he sat on the sofa and read as Harry and Sirius played Exploding Snap on the floor, while he drank tea in the warm kitchen with Tonks and listened to her too-casual chatter. She was too new to his disease to understand how little effort he really

expected of her; Sirius already knew, from the nearly-two-years he'd spent as Padfoot and the three years before that he'd spent sneaking out every morning-after with James and Peter to come see Remus. At first they had tried to bring games and toys and things to entertain him, but after a while they had simply come and climbed into bed, all four of them, and lain there in a great heap, overwhelming Remus with their sheer presence, a tangible reminder that he was not alone, not anymore. It was the exception to the rules of being boys; in this one time and place, it was all right to care and to be kind.

Tonks was already learning that what he craved was that presence, the presence he'd lacked for twelve years when his friends had died or gone mad or gone over to the other side. Simply to not be alone, to have her there to touch and feel.

In the meantime, he continued to work out a plan to test the loyalty of a man Dumbledore had trusted implicitly, because Albus Dumbledore had made mistakes in the past. He didn't like thinking this way; it was alien to him, and it was also rather frightening how good at it he was.

*Hm...quite Ravenclaw material, aren't you? Do you like to read?*

*Oh, yes, Hat. I do.*

*Yes, you're a rather clever child. Very good at thinking circles around others. But we have a secret, don't we?*

*Does that mean I can't be a wizard?*

*No, dear child. But I think you had better be with those who feel before they think...people in GRYFFINDOR!*

He smiled to himself as he sat in his bed on Sunday afternoon with three other Gryffindors. Those who felt before they thought – that was clear enough.

Tonks was doing paperwork, legs crossed and various reports resting precariously on her knees as she sat at the foot of the bed. Harry was sitting at the desk with Sirius, poring over research books and ostensibly making notes, although Remus doubted the legitimate scholarship of whatever they were writing together on the notepad. They were sitting...very close.

Nothing much had changed, whatever truce Harry and Sirius had come to regarding sex and what had probably been a very surprising kiss for both of them. At least, nothing that Remus could see. Padfoot still slept on Harry's bed, as far as Remus could tell; he refused to actively check, but he noticed that Sirius had come down from the loft that morning as Padfoot.

It wasn't his business. It was not his business. Harry was a grown man, he'd made that very clear, and Sirius would be seventeen – well, sort of – in less than two months. Neither of them were babes-in-arms. Additionally, he was in no way their father, godfather, or guardian. Officially, he wasn't even their teacher.

Sitting at the desk with his head close to Harry's, Sirius laughed low and warm, the way he used to laugh with Ellis and before Ellis with Eric (the infamous Muggle disaster, they'd dubbed that one), and before Eric with Matt Byrnbaum. Not for a moment had he been serious about Byrnbaum and they both knew it, and Eric had just been a four-week mess of epic proportions which eventually involved an obliviation when Eric flipped out about the whole "I'm also a wizard, *and* a dog" thing. But Ellis...

It had been a terrible war and nobody had felt much like laughing, but Sirius had laughed. And Ellis had too, shyly, the way the man always did everything. For a brilliant mind, a Slytherin, and a man who had a knack for coaxing confessions out of people, Ellis was so quiet and shy, always on the edge of any crowd. Watching. Listening. Not maliciously, just...patiently. As if he were waiting for someone.

Perhaps he had been waiting for Sirius. Remus had rejoiced that Ellis never lived to see Sirius sent to prison.

They were so young, Harry and Sirius. So young and so conscious of their own mortality, and who was Remus to deny them anything? They might not live to see eighteen.

He looked away in time to see Tonks watching him, and gave her a tired smile. She set her reports aside and crept up the bed to sit with him, brushing stray hair out of his eyes.

"You should think less," she said quietly. "You'll wear yourself out."

"Thought is easy," he answered. "Action is hard. It's only going to get harder."

"Maybe," she said. "Are you thinking of teaching tomorrow?"

"I think so," he said. "We can do something quiet. In-class essays."

"They had a good time playing Guess The Curse on Friday," Sirius said.

"Guess...the curse?" Remus asked faintly.

"Yeah, I show them the slides you left and they guess what caused it," Sirius explained. Remus looked horrified. "What? They learn, either way, and your lecture was boring. Not your best stuff – I'm disappointed really."

"If I could stand without falling over I would come over there and strangle you," Remus said. "Harry, do your old professor a favour and hurt him. Greviously."

"What for?" Sirius demanded.

"You're not supposed to go rewriting my lectures, they'll all start liking you better," Remus answered. Sirius left his place at the desk and jumped onto the bed, draping himself across Tonks' reports and making a mess. Harry came over too, landing almost on top of Sirius and kicking Remus accidentally in the shin. Tonks laughed and shoved them both, and Harry shoved back. In a moment all three of them were laughing – and it was real laughter, real joy.

He looked down at his hands while the others settled themselves in to discuss without his input whether or not he ought to be allowed to teach. They were still his family, regardless of blood, and if they were to succeed he would have to lie to them, even if it was only temporary.

The last war had been full of lies, tests which were never admitted to be tests, broken promises, dishonesty. He did not want this war to be fought the same way, but he had no choice.

That evening, after Tonks had gone back to her own flat and Sirius had gone back to Hogwarts with Glastonbury (and Harry had sulked that Sirius was gone and fled upstairs) he settled down at his desk and began to compose a letter to Kingsley Shacklebolt, and another to Augustus Pye.

*Kingsley, I need your assistance in removing a memory for me; the subject must not be warned or aware that they have been obliterated by a member of the Order...*

*Augustus, I'd like to meet with you to discuss some work for the Order that you may be particularly equipped for. I'll come by the hospital this week while you're on shift, probably Tuesday...*

## CHAPTER XXVIII

That Tuesday, four days after the full moon, Harry's room was dark blue in the morning light; Bowman was having a rainstorm in his garden for the benefit of the grass and roses. In the outside world snow was falling, piling up in heaps against the never-used front door of Fourteen Back and making the corridor down to the garden gate almost impossible to navigate. Harry, however, was rolled up on the bed in a blanket that smelled pleasantly if pungently of Padfoot and he could care less about the weather outside. He had his quill and ink and Hermione's notebook, the one full of information on the seven horcruxes (-cruces?) of Lord Voldemort open to a fresh, blank page in front of him.

He was composing a timeline of their creation, because he had suddenly realised when they recovered the cup that he was uncertain how much Voldemort could possibly know about his own soul. Clearly he didn't know that they knew about them, but he might know that the items themselves had gone missing. If he had known about either the ring or the locket last week he surely would have gone looking for the cup, wouldn't he? But since then, had Voldemort gone looking for the Peverell ring? Had he tried to find his locket or recover his cup? Dumbledore had told Harry that Voldemort had hidden the items and very rarely went back to find them, but then how would Dumbledore know that? Dumbledore's letter hadn't made it clear whether Snape knew about the horcruxes or not, and this was the sole fact that kept Harry from disbelieving Snape's loyalty completely—even if he had turned traitor, he hadn't told Voldemort that they knew about them. Unless, of course, that was another ruse...

Harry's head hurt, thinking about Snape, so he decided to ignore the Snape factor entirely for now and concentrate on the horcruxes.

He had given the diary back to Lucius Malfoy, which meant Voldemort must have known that the diary had been destroyed by the time he made Nagini into a horcrux. Assuming Nagini *was* one. It was a fair if not an infallible assumption. Lucius Malfoy couldn't have lied about such a monumental destruction, and he had a full year between Voldemort's resurrection and his own imprisonment—surely Voldemort would have asked him, at some point, *Hey Malfoy, still got that diary? Huh? Manage not to lose it? Oh. Dear me.*

But Nagini couldn't have been a replacement, because Malfoy wasn't aware of Voldemort's resurrection when Nagini was made.

All the deductions and causalities and predictions had begun to hurt his head, so he'd decided it behooved him to put it on paper where he could look at it without having to remember all of it at once. Like a map.

*1944: **Riddle Diary** ~~made~~ **completed**. 1 hc complete.*

*1942 – 1945: **Peeverell Ring** **made**. 2 hc complete.*

*1945: TR graduates. He goes to work for Borgin&Burke's.*

Here he paused. There was another deduction to be made, but he wasn't sure of its validity. If Tom Riddle had stolen the cup and locket and gone to Moscow, he wouldn't return until he needed another artefact, would he? So he must have needed one more. Probably two, if Dumbledore was to be believed. For the transformation between Tom Riddle and the returning Lord Voldemort to take place, Harry knew that at least one horcrux had been made abroad—so why not two?

*1946 – 1955: TR travels. **Slytherin Locket** **made**. **Hufflepuff Cup** **made**.*

*Assumed. 4 hc complete. TR assumes the name V. openly.*

*1955(?): V. returns to Britain. Denied Professorship at Hogwarts school.*

He could check with Remus about the specific dates Remus had gotten from his 'sources'. But now...he had to depend on Dumbledore's "calculations", whatever they had been, that Voldemort had not achieved six horcruxes before that fateful Hallowe'en in 1981. Harry rather thought that if he hadn't completed things before his...first death, Voldemort would save the final horcrux, the sixth, for the death of someone more important to him than an old caretaker, but perhaps he was desperate.

*1955 – 1981: **One more hc** **made**. 5 hc complete. (assumed)*

*1980: Regulus Black steals the locket & cup.*

*1981: Oct. V. "vanquished" in the attempt to make the 6th hc.*

*1993: June. **Riddle Diary Destroyed**. 4 hc now complete. V informed eventually?*

Was it likely that Lucius Malfoy had at some point told Voldemort of the diary's destruction? Not if he wanted to keep his head. But if Voldemort had

asked...well, he couldn't have had time to ask until he was resurrected, and Lucius Malfoy was in Azkaban a year later.

1994: *Summer Nagini made*. 5 hc now complete. V. assumes 6 hc now complete.

1996: *Before Sept. Peverell Ring Destroyed*. 4 hc now complete.

1997: *Aug/Sept. Locket&Cup recovered. Assuming destruction*, 2 hc remaining.

Assuming destruction. Harry chewed on his thumbnail. They were no closer to understanding how Dumbledore had destroyed that portion of the Peverell ring than they were to finding the crucial sixth horcrux. Harry dropped his head in disgust and let it rest on the blanket.

How, for God's sake, had Tom Riddle even learned what a horcrux *was*? It wasn't in any of the books anywhere. Had he simply *guessed* that such a thing must exist and then gone in search of it? Hermione had been ripping through books on wizarding spirituality (what little there was of it) in search of a discussion of the soul, for lack of a better idea.

Sometimes it was so *easy* for wizards. You could prove the existence of the soul—it was what went into a horcrux, and a horcrux could be made. You could see through someone else's eyes—with a pensieve. You could even talk to the dead—in paintings.

Hadn't Harry had Sirius here in this bed two nights before, Sirius who had died two years ago?

He smiled to himself, the same secret smile that Sirius had greeted him with on Saturday morning after the full moon. Everything was normal and yet nothing was—every time he looked at Sirius now a frisson of excitement went up his spine, as if he were waiting for a package in the post. He kept feeling as though he were anticipating something, and he'd stop and ask himself what he was looking forward to—and the answer was Sirius.

All day Saturday they'd been very well-behaved and hadn't done anything that would upset Remus, but when Harry had gone up to bed and Sirius had followed there had been a single hour...

Harry didn't know much about how blokes had sex, and Sirius didn't seem to care about it—they had just stood there in the middle of the floor and kissed each other and Sirius had hitched his hips up against Harry and it was the most amazing thing. Less even than he'd done with Ginny, what they'd done, but the smooth slide of Sirius' biceps under his fingers and the rougher, stubbled

skin on his jaw...Harry could still taste him on his lips, Sirius' skin, taut and expectant.

And still, after they'd finally stopped to catch their breath, it had been Padfoot who'd curled up next to Harry, not Sirius—Padfoot who had lapped at Harry's hand and fallen asleep while Harry scratched behind his ears. Harry wondered if Ellis Graveworthy had ever tried to understand the divide between Sirius and Padfoot—if the brilliant young author had felt as confused over it as Harry did. He supposed it was because dogs were practically built to love people and be loyal. Considering where Sirius had come from, the dark and dusty house on Grimmauld Place, perhaps Sirius imagined he was only allowed to care for another person when he was a dog. Perhaps that was why Graveworthy had written *Animagus Winter*. Sirius made a man want to study him.

Harry shook his head slightly and returned to the problem at hand. The war came first. That was the agreement.

At least other things were ticking along nicely. Fred and George had managed to make enough explosive powdered-laughter to kill as many Dementors as Voldemort could throw at them, and Remus had gotten an absolutely devilish look in his eye when Harry finally informed him what the twins are up to.

*"Don't worry,"* he'd told Harry, *"Just let me play a trick or two."*

Harry, who had never seen Remus look so much like Sirius—Sirius on the scent of trouble—grinned a little. Yes, things were ticking over very nicely indeed.

If only he could find the sixth horcrux.

He picked up the pocket watchdog, now his constant if rarely-consulted companion, and shook it. He wasn't sure why he shook it, since it didn't really *do* anything to help the charm along, but years of playing with Dudley's second-hand Magic Eight Ball had conditioned him. He flicked open the divination side and examined it.

*Bring sweets.*

Oh, thanks a *lot*.

\* \* \*

They ended up meeting for dinner, two hot bowls of soup in the St. Mungo's canteen. Remus looked pale, Augustus exhausted; he'd just come off a long and frustrating shift.

"I'm surprised you wanted to meet in public," Augustus said, over their soup. "It can't be too daunting if you're willing to talk about it where anyone could overhear."

"I'm carrying wards," Remus answered. "Kingsley Shacklebolt lent them to me. We can't be overheard."

"Never say never. There are always open ears in a hospital."

"I'll take my chances—for all anyone else knows, I'm here for a medical consultation, and I'd like it to stay that way."

Augustus nodded. "You look ruddy awful, Lupin."

"I know. It'll pass. I need you to do some communications work for the Order, and it has to be you—you're our only contact inside of St. Mungo's."

Augustus stirred his soup, thoughtfully. "What do you need?"

"A letter has surfaced, recently. From Albus Dumbledore," Remus said. "It says that Severus Snape is acting as our agent, deep inside the Death Eaters."

"But didn't he...wasn't he the one who...?"

Remus nodded.

"Do you trust this source?"

"I do, for reasons I don't need to go into here. I've always trusted Dumbledore—he's never given me a reason to doubt. I know the letter is genuine. I suspect Draco Malfoy may be working with Severus. He delivered it."

Augustus gave a low whistle. "This is too deep for me, Lupin. What can I do?"

"Dumbledore named a neutral point of contact as a way to get in touch with Snape. I can't talk to her—it would arouse too much suspicion. And she definitely can't come to me. But you can—she works here."

"Who?"

"Abigail Francisco. Dumbledore says she's Head of the—"

"—Spell Damage unit, sure," Augustus agreed. "I know her to speak to, nothing more."

"Well, you need to speak to her and arrange a meeting with Severus. She can't discuss this openly, so all you need to do is tell her a time and place that you and Severus can meet in her office. I want you to conduct the meeting, and all you have to do is give him a code phrase."

Augustus looked grave. "Are you sure you want *me* to do this?"

"Quite sure. Are you willing to do it?"

"Of course. Anything I can do. What's the code phrase?"

"Tell him, *Remus Lupin wants to know what you know about Dumbledore's hand.*"

"And what is he going to say?"

Remus frowned. "I'm not sure. If he says he doesn't know anything, tell him we need to meet with him and arrange a time; if he says he has information for me, tell him to leave it with Nigenae."

"And he'll know what that means?"

"He should."

"How utterly cloak and dagger it all is," Augustus said amusedly, sitting back and placing his spoon in his now-empty soup bowl.

"You have no idea," Remus answered. "And I ought to go. Remember – as soon as you can. *Remus Lupin wants to know what you know about Dumbledore's hand.*"

Augustus nodded agreeably and shook hands with Remus as he stood; after the other man had gone he finished his drink and made his way to the atrium of the big hospital, stepping out into Muggle London and heading towards home. He lived in a little flat not far from the hospital; most of the younger Healers had rooms in the cheap side of Diagon, but Augustus felt that it did him good to mingle with Muggles, given that he was studying their own brand of medicine.

He let himself into his flat, thinking that a nice warm bath would do him the world of good, locking the door behind him. He never even saw the knockout coming.

Kingsley Shacklebolt caught Augustus effortlessly as he collapsed, and Remus took his legs to help shift him onto the sofa.

"Ta, Shacklebolt," Remus said, as they settled him comfortably. "I'm not used to doing this sort of thing at all, let alone single-handedly."

"Mmh," Shacklebolt replied, regarding Augustus critically. "It's not going to be easy. Can I have my wards back, by the by, before we forget?"

"Of course." Remus reached into his pocket and took out two gold studs. Shacklebolt fitted them into one ear before he continued.

"This is going to take some time. The most important is the actual revelation of Black's existence, because that's going to stand out in his memory, but his knowledge will taint every single memory he has which is related to the Order, to Potter, or to Black. Each memory will have to have portions removed seamlessly. Sirius Black and Nigel Padfoot will cease to exist, for him."

"You're certain it won't leave a trace?"

"That I can assure you of. I did a stint with the Obliviation squad when I was a trainee. You will inform him, of course, when the mission is over?"

"Of course," Remus agreed. "If there were any other way..."

"Snape's a legilimens. It's only wise to protect an asset like Black." Kingsley carelessly straddled Augustus' unconscious form, kneeling over his chest, and put one hand on his forehead. He pointed his wand with his other hand and looked up at Lupin, who was watching with concerned eyes. "It won't hurt him."

"I know," Remus said. "It's just..."

"Every step forward is one step closer to being the enemy yourself?" Kingsley asked, one eyebrow raised. "Sometimes we walk along the edge, Lupin. Nobody knows that better than I do, or I wouldn't be here today."

"I worry that every step forward is one step deeper," Remus said. "That we're already in the shadow."

Kingsley looked down at Augustus. "I should get started. You may leave, if you please."

"No. I'll stay."

"Suit yourself."

\* \* \*

It wasn't really fair, Sirius thought, that his one night off a week he should be forced to spend sitting out in the arse-freezing cold with a centaur looking at stars. He could be curled up in his own room with (Harry) a nice book and something hot to drink, but Firenze was relentless and Sirius knew better than to argue with a centaur. He was learning, after all, and it meant he didn't have to spend his midnights with Sinistra's classes anymore.

He'd cleared a ledge overlooking the lake, blowing the snow off with a blast from his wand, and now he sat looking upwards at his namesake star and its weirdly bright twin while he waited for Firenze to speak. Finally he spoke instead.

"Do you ever use telescopes?" he asked. "Or do you do it all by sight?"

He heard one hoof scrape the earth, idly.

"My people invented the telescope," Firenze said finally. "When we were a single tribe."

"When was that?"

"Before the time of human dominion. Centaurs were the pre-eminent glassworkers and metalsmiths of the world; humans learned these arts from imitating us, and sometimes from centaur teachers."

"They don't teach us that in the history books," Sirius replied.

"There are many things humans do not teach one another," Firenze rumbled.

"That's the truth."

"Of course it is."

"So centaurs and humans must have got on better once, if centaurs taught humans." Sirius looked at Firenze, daringly, but the centaur merely bowed his head.

"In other days, it was said that it was once an honour to be the student of a centaur, and once it was an honour to teach humans. When I teach you, I represent all my people, even those who have ignored and banished me. Only the greatest and wisest teachers were sent to the humans, so that it would be understood what a great and wise race we are. Only the greatest and cleverest humans were sent to the centaurs, so that it would be understood what good students you wished to be." He paused. "It is not now an honour to mingle with humans."

Sirius looked up at the Nile star and its twin again.

"All that hunting mythology," he said, studying *Lepus* and *Orion* nearby, the hare and the hunter. "*Canis major* and *Canis minor* baying at *Orion's* heels. If you look just below the horizon you get—" he laughed. "A centaur, guarding a cross."

"*Centaurus* and *Crux*," Firenze said. "Indeed. Come, Nigel Padfoot; there will be no lesson tonight."

Sirius looked at him. "What?"

"It is an inauspicious night to read the stars."

Sirius stood and dusted his trousers off, angrily. "You couldn't have told me any sooner?"

"Sometimes it does not begin inauspiciously," Firenze said. "The stars have patiently awaited us; we can but be patient with them in return."

Sirius bit down on a sharp retort. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, Nigel. You said something right."

"What, then?"

"You will know, in time," Firenze said. "I advise you to purchase a telescope. When you have procured such a device, we will continue."

Sirius gaped after him, but didn't bother to run and catch up; Firenze was already trotting along at a fair clip and he had no desire to argue with a centaur as he ran. Instead he stopped and twisted his body around, looking back at his namesake star cautiously before he, too, made his way back to the warm safety of Hogwarts. There was still time to stop by the kitchens and get himself that warm drink, plus a small cup of melted tallow for Glastonbury.

\* \* \*

Severus Snape removed his black hood, unbuckled the cape that hung wet and dark around his shoulders, and laid the offending garment over the back of a chair.

"Good day," he said warily. Behind him, Draco pulled his hood back but did not remove his cape. They both wore severe black robes, Draco's too loose across the shoulders – he was wearing Snape's hand-me-downs.

"Severus," Remus answered. "Hello, Draco."

"Lupin," his former student muttered in greeting.

"Please, sit down," Remus said. Snape settled himself in the chair next to the one that his cape was now making damp. Draco came to stand behind him. "Thank you for coming."

Snape took in the empty office of Abigail Francisco: photographs of family on the desk, several deeply upholstered chairs, portraits of famous witches – exclusively witches – on the walls. He sniffed.

"I think we may dispense with the niceties, Lupin," he said snidely. "Surely you have more *important* matters to attend to on a Friday evening. Pye made it clear that you need to know what I know; very well. Ask."

Remus glanced at Draco.

"I think you need to know what I know, more," he said slowly. "Let me tell you what's happened since your...abrupt departure."

Draco snorted at the turn of phrase.

"Perhaps the less I know, the better all round," Snape said.

"No...I do not think that is so," Remus replied. "I'd like to outline a few things for you. You can be of great help to us, with a little more information. Redirecting raids, protecting our weak points, confusing Voldemort. It won't take long; it's nothing that needs writing down."

"Do tell," Snape drawled, under his breath.

"We've removed ourselves and any potentially dangerous artefacts from Grimmauld Place. If a raid is proposed, you could send them there. Harry is living with old family friends in a secure location—guarded in shifts. He goes nowhere alone."

"He does travel?"

"Occasionally, but always under heavy guard and in disguise. I'm more worried that you divert attention from other members of the Order, less well-protected ones. Alastor Moody—" Remus bit his lip, suddenly.

"What is it?"

"His madness has turned into a certain degree of senility. The Order protects him because he's a menace to our secrecy, but he's no longer able to protect himself." Remus sighed. "Kingsley Shackbolt has begun to act independently, in addition, and he is at high risk for attack."

"I see."

"And I would like to ask that you do your utmost to protect Nymphadora Tonks from harm. Consider it a personal favour," Remus said quietly. "She's pregnant."

Snape coughed. "I beg your pardon?"

"Was I unclear, Severus?"

Draco smirked. Remus continued. "The rest of the Order is reasonably well-protected. Except..."

Snape waited expectantly; Draco was pale and keen behind him.

"The children at Hogwarts," Remus said finally. "We have Ron and Hermione poised to lead a large number of them against Voldemort's forces, but they've not finished their training yet and without Dumbledore, Hogwarts is vulnerable. I don't need to tell you that if—if the Dark Lord turned his eyes to Hogwarts now, we would be in great danger indeed. I've had assurances that the Death Eaters couldn't possibly penetrate the Forbidden Forest...but we're not only talking about Death Eaters, are we? If a first wave of Dementors were sent in through the forest to establish a stronghold, it would be over in a matter of hours. Hogwarts can easily fall. I need you to prevent that."

"I can promise no more than a warning," Snape said.

"Warning would be more than we'd have now. What signal should I look for?"

Snape crossed his legs and settled his robes, almost fussily. "I am," he said, "raised high in the estimation of the Dark Lord. I murdered Albus Dumbledore."

He paused to gauge Remus' reaction; to hear it put so bluntly was certainly difficult, but Remus tried to remain composed.

"I am his lieutenant, one might almost say his advisor. In any such invasion I would no doubt be expected to supervise and command. Set a watch on Hogsmeade village; if there is to be an attack, I will kindle a signal fire on the roof of the Hog's Head."

"*This rooftop, the palace of the sons of Atreus,*" Remus murmured to himself. "Very well. That's all the information I have; now I need yours." He glanced at Draco. "Alone."

"He stays where I am," Snape said firmly.

"This is business, not a lesson," Remus replied. "It's not a time to indulge petulant children."

"You would know something about that," Snape said.

"Do you see Harry Potter here?" Remus asked. "Think he's hiding behind a painting? Send the boy away, Severus. It's not his concern."

Severus looked up over his shoulder at the pale, fox-like face. He gave Draco a curt nod and took a small object out of his pocket. It looked like a thick piece of wood, short and cylindrical, with a carved ivory ball delicately attached to one end – as if it were the head of a walking-stick. He held it carefully by the wooden part and offered it to Draco, who gripped the ivory ball with his whole palm. Immediately, both Draco and the portkey disappeared.

"Thank you," Remus said.

"Business, Lupin," Snape reminded him. Remus spread his hands.

"I need to know what you do about how Dumbledore injured his hand. I have...information that tells me it may be important."

"From Potter?"

Remus regarded him impassively.

"Has he informed you of the importance of Dumbledore's ring?" Snape asked.

"Allusions have been made."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Let's put all this cryptic nonsense aside. Do you, or do you not, know what a horcrux is?"

"I do," Remus allowed.

"As do I, and I am aware that there is more than one. As for what information I possess, you may tell Mr. Potter that, as usual, someone else is doing his home-work for him," Snape said.

"You've discovered something?"

Snape looked put out. "Not yet. I will send a message when I have. It isn't a matter of twenty questions, you know. He guards them closely and if he were to discover that one is missing—"

"Four," Remus said quietly.

"What?"

"Four. The ring has been destroyed. The diary which almost killed Ginny Weasley was one. Regulus Black stole two others before he died. We have recovered them. There are six total. The snake..."

"I see." Snape digested this information quickly, and Remus could see the addition going on in his head. "What is the sixth?"

"I don't know," Remus lied.

"You're lying."

Remus sighed. "I have suspicions, nothing more. Nothing substantiated by fact. And more importantly, Severus, nothing I'm willing to share with you."

Snape's fingers clenched on the arms of the chair, and then he stood and picked up his cloak. The last of the dampness steamed itself out as he settled it around his shoulders and pulled the hood up.

"I'll report back," he said.

"Severus," Remus said quietly.

"What?"

"Why did you do it?"

Snape looked at him, tilting his head to one side slightly.

"I made a promise. I keep my promises," he replied and, with a crack, he had Disappeared. Remus felt his hands clench into fists. He took two deep breaths, and then walked to the door.

Outside, Fred and George were sitting on hospital chairs, engaged in a furious thumb war. When the door open they leapt to their feet and stood at attention.

"Reporting for duty," they said in unison. Remus gave them a grin.

"Fred, set off the owls to Kingsley and Tonks, and tell Moody to set the traps on his home. George, take the bombs to the Forest. Make sure you set them up on the Hogsmeade side—I doubt they'll pass through Hogsmeade itself, that

would give too much away. I'm off to the school. Fred, when you're done, join George."

"Will it be tonight?" George asked excitedly.

"I don't know. Got your camping gear?"

Fred held up a backpack from which dangled a sleeping bag on one side and a frying pan on the other.

"Good lads. Don't venture too far in and remember to watch in shifts. Tonks will send you reinforcements as soon as she has your owl."

Fred and George grinned at each other. George pressed a small cardboard carton into his hands and they both ran off down the hallway. Remus, perplexed, walked back into the office. He left a note of thanks on Francisco's desk, unsigned, and then tossed a handful of floo powder into the fireplace. He emerged into his office at Hogwarts even as the sun was setting; there was precious little time to waste. It would take at least some time for Snape to rally the Dementors, if he was a traitor.

Remus was betting that he was. He had no mercy for Severus Snape, not anymore. He tried to find it in himself to understand that a good man might have done murder because he had no choice, but he would be damned if he'd give that bastard the benefit of the doubt. Sirius was right; Snape's eyes were dead. Remus felt no guilt for lying to him, not for a single second.

Not even about Tonks.

He regretted, more, telling him the truth about the horcruxes, but then clearly Snape knew about them and knew that Harry knew about them already, so there was little he could do there. Perhaps the knowledge would make Voldemort desperate and stupid. One could hope.

In the little time to spare, he stopped at his desk and set the box down, flipping the lid off quickly. Fred and George's voices emerged.

*We've decided we rather like you, Lupin.*

*Yes, we think you're a decent bloke.*

*And one of our heroes, of course.*

*You really don't know how much we owe you.*

*So we thought we'd give you a little present.*

*Don't worry, we tried it out ourselves first.*

*Enjoy...*

Remus lifted the small black object out of the box, cautiously. It looked for all the world like a pocket-knife—the vicious, long-bladed folding sort that hunters carried. The blade was hidden inside the black handle; cautiously, keeping it as far away from himself as he could, he grasped the bare half-inch of steel visible at the tip and unfolded it.

A white glow lit up his hands and he let go of the blade, passing the handle from his left to his right. The blade seemed to be made of opaque white light, as if it were illuminated pearl.

He looked into the box and found a scrap of paper on the bottom, which read:

*Weasley's Wizarding Weapons (Arms for the Discerning Prankster)*  
*Prototype: "Lupin" Model – Patronus-Blade Dagger*  
*Suitable for slaying evil and opening tinned dinners.*

Remus touched the sharp side of the knife to his palm. The metal was warm.

He folded it with an efficient snap and shoved it in his pocket, then left his office and made with all due haste for the office of the Headmistress, to inform her that the Forbidden Forest was being declared a battle zone even as night fell.

## CHAPTER XXIX

"I didn't like this plan when you proposed it to me three days ago, Remus, and I don't like it now," Minerva McGonagall said. "I don't like endangering the students. Putting trained Aurors at risk is one thing, but this is quite another."

Remus, who had to admit that he was having trouble keeping up with her rather than the other way around, pulled his cloak closer around his throat. Their breath froze in the air, boots crunching the frost of the Hogsmeade road underfoot.

"Would you like the clever answer or the honest answer?" Remus asked. She sighed and gave him a tolerant look.

"Clever answer first, then," she said.

"It's not that it's untrue," he continued, looking ahead to where the end of the Forest heralded the outskirts of Hogsmeade. "Sooner or later the Dark Lord would have come for Hogwarts. We both know it. He loves it, and he wants to possess it. Better to fight him on our own terms than wait for him to move first." He sighed. "And the honest answer is that the Forest is the only trap I could think to lay, aside from the Aurors and the Death Eaters won't send a Dementor after someone like Tonks."

"I see."

"I don't like who I'm turning into, Headmistress. These are the sorts of games Dumbledore played, and I never liked them. But now I begin to understand them."

"Albus Dumbledore was a good man. You could do worse."

"He was still a man."

"*Take him in his all, I shall not look upon his like again,*" she finished, and he smiled.

"Sometimes I feel closer to *Now could I drink hot blood and do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on,*" he answered. "Although I hope to come to a rather better end than young Hamlet."

"He left you alone, didn't he?" she asked, suddenly. "In the ways it mattered, I mean. Nearly no guidance, no information..."

"Yes," he said softly. "How did you notice?"

"What do you think he did to me?"

They continued on to the end of the forest in silence, and then Remus put his hand on her arm to stop her.

"It would be better if, from here, you could...be Tabby," he said quietly. She nodded and he looked politely away while she changed. She leapt easily into his arms and crawled up until she perched on his shoulder, tail wrapping firmly around his neck.

He slipped and skidded his way down the incline that the raised road was on, ending in a small gully which, under the ivy and moss and years of leaf mould, was paved with old cobblestones and even ancient cement. Some of the cement blocks had the seals of a Roman emperor pressed into their surface.

Fred and George knew more about the dark magic of the forest than was proper for two men not yet in their twenties, and Remus had mapped it out with the others when he was sixteen. Between the three of them, they understood the outer edges of the forest as if it were in fact a Roman wall – which it had once been, if the cobblestones were any indication. They knew where the weaknesses were and where it was safe for men to go. With four or five well-placed bombs, they could defend the entire forest from Dementor attack. Particularly since Fred and George had brought with them the secret weapon to draw the Dementors in.

There was a squeak and an inquisitive bark from nearby. Remus stopped.

"You'd better change back now," he said. McGonagall leapt off his shoulder and spiralled up from the ground quickly. Remus led her forward to the small encampment.

"It's Lupin," he called quietly. "It's all right."

George Weasley, who had been standing with his wand out and his other hand on the switch of a strange orange box, dropped his wand arm.

"How goes it?" Remus asked.

"All right – Fred's gone off to #2, and Tonks showed up for her shift on #3. We're staggering shifts so nobody changes over all at once."

"Regular military operation you've got here," Remus said. George grinned. "And I see Secret Weapon is getting along fine," he added, as a small white puppy took firm hold of his trouser leg and began to tug.

"That's your secret weapon?" McGonagall asked. "A Jack Russell?"

"Well, they're very good-spirited little things and they do attract Dementors like anything," George answered. "Fred tested several breeds. Golden Retrievers and Jack Russells worked the best, but Retrievers are a bit hard to handle. Puppies are choice."

"For attracting Dementors."

"Yeah! Because they're...you know. Cheerful and stuff."

"The headmistress wanted to see a little of the operation itself," Remus said, while McGonagall stared in disbelief at the little dog. "I doubt we'll see any action tonight."

"Oh, that's fine; Fred and I're used to waiting days for a prank to go off," George said. "We'll start trading off shifts after tonight so that the other can mind the shop. During the day we can set up the wards so that a Dementor anywhere along the line trips an alarm. Two men, a hundred acres..." he spread his arms, cheerfully. "Boom."

They both looked at McGonagall, Remus lifting up Secret Weapon to pat him.

"I think, some day, you two will end either in prison or with a magical engineering college named after you," she said with a small smile. "I'll send some seventh-years to assist you. Any requests?"

"Ron and Hermione," George said immediately. After some consideration, "Not together, though. And a couple of Hufflepuffs as backup. And if you can send the good tutor down...and Harry would be a help."

"I wanted this in place first...I'm hesitant to put Harry out there alone," Remus said.

"His patronus—"

"—isn't what I'm worried about," Remus said. "I'll put him out with a partner. If I survive telling him and Padfoot."

George nodded. "If it's any consolation, this is the best prank ever."

"I'm beginning to think war is just a series of very vicious pranks," Remus agreed. "The only difference is, now they're fatal."

\* \* \*

The Dementors didn't come that evening, but then he hadn't expected they would. They didn't come the next evening either, or the evening after. Fortunately, Fred and George were as faithful and patient as George had bragged they would be. They seemed to want nothing more than to spend twelve hours at a time sitting at the edge of the forest with the Secret Weapons, watching and waiting.

Harry, surprisingly, didn't even shout when he was told. He sat quietly, thoughtfully, and then turned to Remus.

"Good work," he said. "Do they have enough ammunition?"

Remus, taken aback, nodded. "I think so. They'd like you to take a shift if you can."

"Yeah, I can do that."

"But I don't want you going out alone. You'll serve your shifts with Hermione or Ron, or Bill."

Harry considered this. "I don't need a babysitter."

"You're too valuable, Harry."

"Which is why Dumbledore let me go up against Quirrell and Voldemort alone when I was eleven?" Harry asked.

"I'm not Dumbledore," Remus said. *Yet*, his mind added. As the days passed, he began to feel more and more as if it were true, and not in a good way. If Snape truly was faithful to the cause...

The weekend brought Sirius to Fourteen Back and took Harry from it for some amount of time, but they were both pulling shifts in the forest and neither of them seemed to begrudge the lack of time together. Then again, perhaps Remus wasn't seeing all of it; Sirius knew how to keep secrets.

If Remus could have seen them on Sunday afternoon, while he and Tonks were both on shift in the forest, he might have re-evaluated his opinion of both of them.

The fire was burning merrily in the hearth and both boys were seated on the floor, backs against the old sofa, curled up next to each other; Harry was copying a passage about Rowena Ravenclaw into Hermione's book, and Sirius was seated with his hip up against Harry's, pretending to read. In actuality, he was slowly inching closer to Harry's neck. Just a little closer...

"Mmh," Harry said, when Sirius brushed his lips against the skin just below his jaw. His quill stopped moving.

Sirius closed his book and slid his right hand across Harry's bent leg, bringing it to rest in a decent but tantalising place just above his thigh. Harry's fingers gripped the notebook tightly.

"Give it up, Potter," Sirius said, wickedly. Harry swallowed. Sirius went back to kissing his throat, biting occasionally. He turned for better leverage and his hand slid down an inch or two.

"That tickles," Harry said, caught between a moan and a laugh. Sirius bit his earlobe.

"Oh, you want to see tickling?" he asked. He turned fully to face Harry and ran his hand up Harry's ribcage instead. Harry burst out laughing and

batted his hands away, but Sirius was relentless. The battle turned into a tussle that sent the notebook sliding away and the two men rolling on the carpet.

"Give up!" Sirius crowed, grabbing Harry's wrists. Harry struggled to get free and *oh* – that felt good.

"Never!" Harry cried, taking advantage of Sirius' stunned jolt of pleasure to flip him over onto his back. There was a brief scuffle for dominance that threatened to steal Sirius' breath entirely before Harry straddled him and pinned his hands to the floor, leaning over him. Sirius, in a last-bid attempt for freedom, jerked his head up off the floor and kissed Harry soundly.

Harry's thighs tightened around his hips, which was counter to what Sirius had been aiming for but was, in many ways, much better. He let his head drop back to the floor and Harry followed, taking the invitation very much to heart when Sirius opened his mouth.

Harry's hips jerked against his, their positioning not quite right but still very good indeed, and Sirius moaned, trying to buck up against him. Harry's eyes flew open and he gasped. "Ah – hah –"

But instead of sliding down just six inches and a little to the right, as Sirius would have liked very much for him to do, Harry leaned back and rolled off him, collapsing on his back next to Sirius, who wasn't sure he could muster the energy to do anything more than turn his head.

"All right?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah..." Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. "That just...went a little fast for me."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You didn't..."

"No, uh, no," Harry said. His eyes were still closed. "I'm thinking of Professor Trelawney naked."

"Ew!"

"Sorry, I just..." Harry pushed himself up to a sitting position, trying to catch his breath. "Umm, sorry."

Sirius frowned. "Didn't it...feel all right?"

"Oh! Yes, um." Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose. "I just wasn't...it's all a little weird, you know? I mean...that was...not something I thought I was going to ever...with another..."

"Ah," Sirius said. "Right."

"Sirius, don't look like that," Harry said, and Sirius schooled his features into something a little less scowly. He hoped. "How long have you known you fancied men?"

"Three years, I guess. Why?"

"I've known for three *weeks*. Not even."

Sirius pushed himself up on his elbows. Certain parts of his body were throbbing and demanding attention rather urgently, despite all mention of Trelawney.

He tried to even remember a point at which he'd only known for three weeks. It wasn't like that for him. It had just been a gradual sensation, a growing knowledge that he was foreign somehow. The other boys were looking at girls and whispering about things, and it wasn't that he didn't think about...things, but when he did, he looked at other boys. But he'd *always* looked at other boys, because most girls were boring or annoying. So it had taken a while for it to sink in that he wasn't maturing late, just...differently.

And after that, frankly, he'd take what he could get and be happy for it, because a bloke got awfully tired of a Quidditch All Stars calendar and his own hand.

But on the other, ahahaha, *hand*, that was all he'd had for a good year, so it wasn't unreasonable to expect that Harry might be a little less enthusiastic about it.

Actually, Harry appeared to still be quite enthusiastic about it, in some ways, but Sirius understood the sentiment.

"Sirius, please say something," Harry said, looking down at him. Sirius sat up, slowly, and turned his head to catch Harry's lips with a quick kiss.

"This is what it is, remember? Doesn't have to be anything more," he said. "Besides, anyone who floo'd in would have had a rude surprise."

Harry laughed. Sirius subtly tried to shift so that his trousers were a little less...constricting.

"I don't want to be miserable later, though," he said, leaning close to Harry. "So I'm going to go lock myself in the toilet for a few minutes. You might want to take that time to go upstairs. Doesn't look like Trelawney worked as much as it should have," he said. Harry blushed crimson.

Sirius leaned forward and bent his mouth to Harry's ear. "Enjoy yourself," he said. He stood before Harry could reply and crossed the living room, tossing Harry a grin over his shoulder as he shut the door.

\* \* \*

The days dragged on, and there was still no response from the Death Eaters. A full week passed; Moody did not relax an inch and neither did Kingsley, but Tonks began to chafe a little at not being able to return to her booby-trapped flat. The outposts in the forest got a little sloppy and the twins were forced to play a few surprise pranks in order to keep people on their toes. Remus lived on nerves, expectant, and looked to Saturday as the deadline—if they weren't attacked by then, they would pack in the majority of their defences and leave only two bombs in the forest with automatic tripcharms on them.

Saturday.

Hallowe'en.

There was no better time, really, and it wasn't as though Voldemort hadn't made Hallowe'en a special kind of excruciating holiday for all concerned in the past. Harry had lost his parents, Remus his friends, Sirius his freedom, James and Lily their lives. Harry didn't seem to connect the two events, but then Harry had grown up without his parents from nearly the start. In Remus Lupin's personal lexicon, Hallowe'en was the day his world ended and he still went on living.

Well. One builds new worlds, and time moves onward.

Others than him must have caught onto the significance of the date; Fred and George couldn't be there, as they were hosting the first ever Weasley's Wizard Wheezes Halloween Smash For Charity, but most of the rest of the Order had volunteered for evening duty. Remus and Harry were at station one, Sirius and Tonks at station two, Pye at three and Moody at four with a portkey to five. Arthur Weasley was coming to relieve Pye at midnight and Ron and Hermione would replace Moody after the Hallowe'en feast. Bill and Fleur were on undercover point patrol in Hogsmeade and Molly Weasley was, rather ridiculously to her own mind, watching for the signal fire on the roof of the Hog's Head.

"If you want to sleep, I'll take first shift," Remus said to Harry. "Or you can."

"I'll go first," Harry said. "You can't be ready to sleep already. It's not even dark out."

"Not just yet," Remus agreed. They had a small, green-flame smokeless fire going to keep them warm while they sat on the ground, Remus propped

against a large tree, Harry with his arms around his knees. Remus stretched out his feet to get them closer to the fire.

"Harry, not to pry...but I was wondering," he said slowly. "About you and Sirius."

Harry looked at him suspiciously. "What about us?"

"Just...how that is," Remus said weakly. "Are you two getting along all right?"

Harry's tension eased slightly. "Reckon so."

"He's not, er." Remus looked uncomfortable. "Well, it's just, I know Sirius, Harry, and he can be somewhat overwhelming at times—he was *always* convincing me to do things I knew better than to do...not, not *those* sorts of things," he added hastily. "Not that they're bad, just...all right. I'm sorry. I'm pants at this kind of talk."

Harry grinned at him. "We're all right, Remus. Really."

"Good."

"You might want to have a word with Ron, though. Hermione knows plenty of protective spells but he *is* a Weasley," Harry continued. Remus put his face in his hands.

"There are some days I'm thankful I'll never be a father," he said through his fingers.

"You don't know that," Harry answered slyly. Remus removed his hands and gave Harry an odd half-smile, then pulled his legs under him and stood, stretching. They lapsed into silence, listening to the hoots and occasional howls in the forest behind them. Remus felt the solid weight of the Patronus dagger in his pocket, heavy and secure.

When the light had finally faded enough that they were forced to shield their fire in case someone saw it, Remus bid Harry good-night and curled up in his coat and a blanket to try and get a little sleep before midnight, when Harry would wake him. He almost thought he could hear the sounds of the Hallowe'en feast up at Hogwarts, though it was certainly too far away for that.

In another few hours it would be morning; James and Lily had been dead sixteen years, and here he was with their grown son, waiting for the Dementors to come. Harry would be a credit to them both, he thought, as he drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

Harry did not attach the same significance to Hallowe'en that Remus did, but nevertheless he was thinking of his parents even as Remus fell asleep. Specifically of his father.

He watched the grassy rise that separated the forest from Hogsmeade, idly, but he felt sure that he would know ahead of time if the Dementors were coming. He could keep watch and bury himself in his own thoughts at the same time.

The little pocket-watchdog that was his inheritance from James rested faithfully on one knee, its metallic eyes gazing up at him soulfully. The clock face said nearly-ten; the divinatory face had been stuck on "bring sweets" for a week and Harry was beginning to suspect it might be broken. He'd been carrying a package of chocolate-covered Muggle toffees with him all week, but he hadn't exactly understood why.

Remus was asleep nearby and Secret Weapon was gnawing half-heartedly on the toe of his shoe. The shielded fire crackled and gave off heat as the darkness fell slowly. Harry wondered if his father had ever sat sentry like this. Hadn't Mad-Eye Moody told them stories about guarding people who had annoyed Voldemort? The Aurors wouldn't do it without evidence so the Order used to camp out on their doorsteps...

With the werewolves in disarray and the Dementors destroyed, they would have a fighting chance. Only the giants and the Death Eaters would be left, and Giants were useless except for wholesale destruction. Harry didn't intend to enter into a battle with Voldemort after tonight; he intended to destroy what he could of the horcruxes and lure Voldemort out some other way.

Ten-thirty. Eleven. Eleven thirty.

There was a crackle in the distance and Harry leapt up, wand out; Ron appeared from the trees, holding up his hands.

"Moody's gone home," Ron said quietly, joining Harry by the fire. "Dad's just come to replace Augustus Pye, they're having a bit of a brew-up. Thought I'd let you know."

"Thanks," Harry said, relieved. "Have you talked to Tonks and Sirius?"

"Yeah — she's just put him on-shift."

"Good. I was about to wake Remus up."

Ron nodded agreeably.

"How was the feast?" Harry asked, a little wistfully. Ron shrugged.

"It was all right, I guess. Things...change," Ron said quietly. "Did you know Hermione's not talking to her parents?"

"What?"

"They had a row. They don't want her to..." he blushed a little. "They like me, you know, it's just...well, Mum wouldn't like it if I decided to go off and be a Muggle, would she? They think I'm stealing her."

"You don't think that, do you?"

"Hermione'd have my guts for garters if I did. But there's that, and she feels guilty about being a witch, I guess. And we knew we were coming out here, and all the older students go around looking scared most of the time."

"What about the kids?"

"The Muggleborns haven't a clue. Sometimes that's good, sometimes it gets 'em in trouble. They don't know who not to pick fights with. But...Harry," Ron said, lowering his voice a little more. "Does it occur to you that it's not natural, what we've been doing? I mean, we made out all right for ourselves, but when you're eleven you're supposed to be going to classes and playing Exploding Snap, not fighting evil wizards."

"It's not like we were offered a choice, Ron."

"Well, that's just it. Hermione and I...we sort of were."

Harry glanced at Ron, who was staring off at the edge of Hogsmeade in the distance.

"I dunno, Harry. I dunno what's going to happen. Do you know?"

"Not really."

"I don't want to die yet. I'm doing really well in classes, I really could be an Auror."

Harry didn't know what to say; he opened his mouth to try and find some kind of reassurance that nobody was going to die (which was a ridiculous lie, but a comforting one) when Secret Weapon lifted his fuzzy head and whined suddenly.

"Ron," Harry said, turning around slowly, "Where's the moon going?"

They both looked up at where the moon had been, a few minutes before; now there was only a growing shadow that was slowly eclipsing it, ragged and uneven around the edges.

"Oh blimey, it's them," Ron said.

"Go—tell everyone," Harry ordered, bending over to shake Remus awake. "Remus—they're coming."

Mist crept out from around the edges of Hogsmeade even as Harry realised the enormity, the magnitude of the army they were now facing. Dementors, thousands of them, blotting out the sky, soaring over the rooftops and slowly dipping lower and lower, heading for the forest.

"Oh my god," Remus said, staring where Harry pointed. Two shadowy figures came running hell-bent out of the village; Fleur's pale hair gleamed in what little moonlight was left.

"GET READY!" Bill bellowed. Remus fumbled for the ripcord on the bomb and shoved Harry back into the trees, following shortly after.

"I'll take the cord—go tell the others," Harry said, and Remus Disapparated with a bang.

\* \* \*

They had never planned on so many; they'd known the Dementors were breeding but it was impossible to have foreseen that they had bred so quickly and so energetically.

Remus flicked through the forest almost without stopping; from two to three to four, warning the watchers to be ready to set off the bombs when the Dementors were within distance. The explosives were set to send rockets into the air, spreading the dust over the entire forest, but Remus had one more station to get to, just in case, and it looked now as if they would need it.

The Dementors began pouring over the forest even as Remus took the broomstick from its hiding place outside the fifth station and got aloft; looking down it was as if a shadow had been cast for miles around. A solid mass of them, moving like a school of fish or a flock of birds, heading for the Forest and after the Forest for Hogwarts.

*Severus, I should have eaten you twenty years ago when I had the chance.*

Only the Weasley twins and McGonagall knew about the sixth station in the middle of the forest, the one with the rockets that were aimed outwards instead of upwards, designed to catch every last inch of the oncoming front. He flew low over the treetops, trying to find his way in the dark, and eventually nipped upwards for better light. He turned to check their progress and was just in time to catch the fireworks.

Two of the stations went off simultaneously—Harry and Hermione, he thought. The rockets whistled shrilly as they went, bursting just above the tree line. An enormous cloud of silver seemed to envelope the shadow, swirling

through and around it, almost beautiful in the patterns it created. High-pitched, almost supersonic screams filled the air.

The second wave, seeing what had happened to the first, kept on at a higher altitude, and the other three bombs exploded right on cue. Again the silver swirled against the darkness, and again Remus found himself simply watching, stunned as scores of Dementors screamed and fell. Even the smallest wisps of silver were enough to knock them out of the sky.

There were still more coming, however, and the thought was enough to send him onward, towards the very heart of the forest and the bright white flag that had been tied there —

Only to find someone else had beaten him to it.

His hand found the Patronus blade almost instinctively and he flicked it out as he descended. He was going to see that bastard's eyes when he slit his throat.

"SNAPE!" he shouted, and the dark-haired man kneeling on the tree-platform looked up. Two more seconds and he would be in range —

Snape threw himself sideways, almost off the little platform, and Remus skewed the broom around, leaping off it.

"There's no time for this, Lupin," Snape growled, even as Remus slashed at him with the glowing white knife. "Stop that, you idiot! McGonagall sent me!"

"No more games!" Remus shouted back. "This ends *now!*"

"What an idiot Gryffindor you are, you're telegraphing everything you're about to do," Snape snarled, catching his wrist with one thin, fallow hand. "*Help me set the bomb off.*"

This actually registered in time for Remus to prevent himself from punching Snape in the stomach with his other hand. He froze.

"What?"

"Merlin preserve me from morons," Snape shouted. "Set off the bloody bomb!"

Remus whirled to check on the progress of the Dementors, which could have been a fatal move, but Snape didn't even shift his weight; they were still too far off.

"Not yet," he said through gritted teeth. "What in the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"What do you think? The Headmistress is down in your precious forest, and she sent me to make sure the sixth bomb went off."

"You sold us to Voldemort!"

"Do you think, you ignorant fool, that I couldn't see through your stupid little trap? Do you really underestimate me so badly?" Snape answered. Remus realised that Snape's face was bleeding, though he didn't think it was his doing. "They sent me away on a mission. I've only just returned."

"Draco," Remus said, realisation hitting him like a sledgehammer.

"I murdered a man to save his soul and he sold it for a handful of knuts," Snape muttered, hard fire burning deep in his eyes. "He sold Hogwarts for Lucius Malfoy's freedom."

"He heard everything..."

"There wasn't time to warn you. I barely made it to the school. I thought you might have given up by now. They're coming, Lupin—when do we set this infernal device to go?"

Remus watched the thinning shadow move over the forest. "Now."

Snape handed him the ripcord and he stepped aside as he pulled. There was an ear-shattering roar and the last of their weapons against the Dementors exploded in a blinding flash of rockets.

The result, a solid wall of silver, was stunning enough that even Severus Snape could not contain himself.

"Merlin," he breathed. Remus turned to glance at him.

"You're bleeding," he said.

"There isn't time. I must return—they don't yet know. There's always another game, Lupin—now we start to play in earnest."

He vanished, leaving Remus alone on the platform. Remus turned back to the edge of the forest and strained to see any remaining Dementors; there were lumos charms going up all along the front line, where the rest of the bombs had been detonated. In the flashes of light, he thought he saw a movement—yes.

A handful of survivors were circling a point far off to his left—the first station, where he had left Harry alone.

He forgot the broomstick, his responsibility to the Order, Snape, and the bombs; he Apparated straight to the first station because James' boy was in trouble.

He found himself in the middle of a swirling mass of shadows and light—Dementors, closing in even as a silver stag charged at them. Harry was shouting himself hoarse, curses and calls for help.

"I'm here, Harry!" he shouted back, turning even as he felt a cold chill creep into his bones. He slashed wildly, the knife still in his hand, and there was a horrifying *thunk* as an actual Dementor's actual head actually rolled to the ground.

Thank god Fred and George were on their side.

Padfoot came charging out of the trees in full bay, Tonks not a step behind him; the remaining Dementors, who were not exactly tacticians, were all converging on one spot.

*Cut them down*, he thought, turning to stab one even as the stag passed *through* him to drive another back. A screaming, hissing banshee flew out of the trees, fur on end, and promptly changed into Minerva McGonagall.

"Come to me!" Harry shouted, and Remus bolted after the Stag to where Harry was standing. Padfoot, howling fit to deafen, was snapping and snarling at the Dementors that dared come near Harry; Tonks had her wand out and was bellowing orders at—

*So that's what I look like*, Remus thought dazedly. It was thinner than he'd imagined, somehow, but there could be no doubt that the snarling silver beast which rushed past him was a changed werewolf.

A screaming bloody great falcon was ripping its claws into the Dementors from above—that'd be Minerva's, he thought with great satisfaction, even as he turned to slice open a Dementor heading for Harry from behind.

Harry's stag was fading, however, and the Dementors were still coming. Padfoot was abruptly silenced as Sirius appeared, catching Harry when he almost fell backwards avoiding a Dementor that came too close. Remus saw Sirius grip the other man around the chest and whisper something in his ear even as the stag vanished entirely, so suddenly that Remus had to leap sideways to thrust the knife upwards and protect the suddenly-defenceless McGonagall, whose falcon was on the other side of the fight.

"Where the hell did you get that?" the Headmistress asked.

"Weasleys!" he shouted back. He turned to see if Harry was all right, just in time to witness Harry raise his wand, Sirius' fingers wrapped around his wrist. There was a *pulse* so deep Remus felt it in his spine, and suddenly the entire world was black-and-white, the stark trees throwing shadows against each other. Tonks was knocked into him and they both sprawled on the ground; McGonagall staggered against a tree a few feet away. The falcon and wolf

abruptly vanished in the wash of white that burned even through his eyelids when he closed them.

When it was over he saw flashes of colour in the darkness, and the first thing he heard was Sirius' voice, sounding very young and frightened.

"That wasn't my fault!"

## CHAPTER XXX

*"No, Moony, you're still thinking like a Ravenclaw."*

*"I don't think I am, I think it's entirely possible."*

*"Well of course it's possible, he did it."*

*"Padfoot, get your mind off how chuffed you are with Harry and listen to me. I'm not saying he did it. I'm saying you did it together. I don't really care whether you believe me or not, I think it's fascinating."*

*"But I've never done a Patronus."*

*"Well, clearly that's a gap in your education, you ought to spend more time in my class."*

*"You are such a Prefect."*

*"Of course I am, Sirius. I'm a professor."*

*"Don't remind me."*

*"Do you think we could re-create it?"*

*"Dunno. We could give it a go. I've never seen anything like it."*

*"Nor I. I've never thought you could make the world look so..."*

*"Stark."*

*"Yes."*

Harry was conscious that he had heard the words for some time, but he was only beginning to understand sense in them. Stark conjured a memory; the black trees and white sky and a deep, solid thrust that seemed to come straight from his core outwards. The world had turned oddly flat, and after that he had no memory until the voices – Remus. Remus and Sirius.

There was a strange sweet taste in his mouth, and his lips were sticky and dry. He opened his eyes without moving, because his eyes were just about all he could manage at the moment. The view that greeted him was depressingly familiar: the ceiling of the Hogwarts hospital wing.

He closed his eyes again and listened, because listening seemed to hurt his head less. There was a rustling noise and a squawk, and then the sound of paper.

*"It's from Bill. He says there was a reserve force—three giants and a dozen Death Eaters."*

*"Bloody hell."*

*"They took care of the giants..."* a pause. *"Three Death Eaters were captured. I need to go, Padfoot."*

*"Sure. I'll keep an eye on Harry."*

"I've no doubt," Remus said, and Harry was conscious of a certain dry humour in his tone. "I'll return shortly."

Harry heard footsteps and then in the following silence the soft chirrup of a bird – Glastonbury, he decided. There was a sudden heat near his cheek and he opened his eyes to find the phoenix in full plumage, perched on the bedstead and gazing down at him curiously. When he saw Harry was awake he fluffed himself up importantly and whistled.

The next minute the world spun and shook as something enormous landed on the bed; it turned out to be Sirius, who draped himself across Harry and folded his hands on Harry's chest, resting his chin on them. Harry could just about see his eyes.

"Ullo," Sirius said. "Guess what! You're on the front page of the Prophet. And my hand and a bit of my leg, too. It's very interesting, being half a celebrity."

Harry licked his lips. "Water. Please."

"Sure thing!" Sirius rolled off him and sat on the edge of the bed, filling a goblet with water from a pitcher on the table and offering it to Harry, who shoved himself upright and took it with both hands. He had to cradle the goblet in his palms for a moment before his arms felt as though they might actually lift it to his lips.

The water washed away the sweet taste in his mouth, and he could feel it cool his stomach. He licked his lips again and finally identified the taste – chocolate and toffee.

"What happened?" he asked. Sirius pulled his legs up and turned around on the bed, crossing them so that he took up as little space as possible.

"Well, you blew up half the forest and then we all had a nice chocolate snack," he said. "Feeling all right?"

"M'head hurts a bit."

"Reckon it would. What do you remember?"

"The Dementors – lots of them. Remus and Professor McGonagall and you and Tonks, and then I got so tired...and you grabbed me. To keep me from falling. Then I thought I'd give it one last go and everything went funny."

"S'right it went funny," Sirius said soberly. "You, mate, set off the biggest, fattest, angriest, loudest, most ball-contracting patronus I or anyone else has ever seen."

"Is that what it was?"

"Must've been, I heard you cast it. Remus and Tonks fell over and the Headmistress nearly did. Knocked you flat on your back with me under you. I don't think you breathed for a minute, then Remus went a bit bonkers and shoved a couple of your chocolates down your throat—lucky you had those or you might've been done but good."

Glastonbury cackled angrily.

"Right, I'm getting to that," Sirius said to the bird. "Anyhow, there we were with a bloody great crater in the ground where you stood and dead Dementors dropping out of the trees, what hadn't been vaporised I guess. We'd no clue what to do until Glastonbury showed up and Apparated you and me back to the hospital wing. Did you know he could do that?"

Harry smiled weakly. "I saw Fawkes do it once."

"Scared the life out of me, I can tell you," Sirius said, nevertheless stroking the bird's bright plumage affectionately. "Remus and Tonks came up on the double and the Headmistress showed up a bit later. She says there isn't a Dementor left anywhere—a bunch of animals came out of the forest and started dragging off the bodies."

"Animals?"

"Yeah," Sirius said, sounding very impressed. "Couple of unicorns, an acromantula or three, whole herd of bowtruckles. She says they're getting their own back for what the Dementors did when they came to Hogwarts a few years ago."

"Third year," Harry muttered.

"Anyway, I don't think there's a Dementor left in Britain after that thing. You scared the bloody living hell out of Aberforth Dumbledore, he was just locking up for the night and this big white thing came rushing at him..."

Harry grinned a bit at this. Sirius dug in the pocket of his robes and produced an enormous chocolate bar.

"Which reminds me, Madam Pomfrey said I was to stuff you full of chocolate when you woke up," he said, breaking it democratically in two. Harry took one half and nibbled on it while Sirius produced, from the voluminous sleeve of the Tutor's robes, a folded up copy of the Daily Prophet.

"How long was I asleep?" Harry asked.

"It's about nine. Colin Creevey brought the Prophet up a few hours ago. Apparently he was part of the reinforcements McGonagall summoned—took the photo himself right after it happened. I think it's a rather good one," he added.

"Colin's a born war photographer, someone says come help us fight and the first thing he does is grab a camera," Harry grumbled. "I think he sleeps with it."

He unfolded the newspaper and smoothed it out on his lap. The headline was typical: POTTER POTS PERPETRATORS. Underneath it was the photograph Colin had taken, and Harry was forced to admit that if anyone could get someone's good side while they were unconscious, it was Colin Creevey. It was quite a dramatic photograph.

The ground was, as Sirius had said, bare and almost craterlike, with grass ringing it in the distance, all of which had been blown quite flat. Harry lay on the ground, his head in the lap of someone just slightly off-camera; Sirius, to judge from his earlier remarks. Every so often a hand would emerge from the edge of the frame and push a bit of chocolate into Harry's mouth; he must have been at least half-conscious, because he could see himself chewing. Remus stood over them both, the tip of his wand glowing and a dazed expression on his face, one arm around Tonks. She was scanning the invisible horizon and looking as if she'd just come through a catfight and wouldn't mind another if the other guy wasn't satisfied with the whupping he'd taken the first time around.

Auror N. Tonks and Hogwarts Professor Remus Lupin look on as Harry Potter is tended to at the site of the battle, the caption read. It is estimated that as many as three thousand Dementors, almost the entire population of Great Britain, were destroyed in the skirmish.

"Skirmish," Harry snorted. The chocolate was indeed helping; he felt warmth flowing through his veins, and took a larger bite.

"Don't bother with the article," Sirius said, taking the paper away from him and tossing it on the floor next to the bed. "Eat up; do you want mine too?"

"That's all right," Harry said.

"No really—there's plenty. The Prophet said you were in hospital at Hogwarts and a thousand million girls sent you chocolates." Sirius leaned over the edge of the bed and pulled out a large bowl that was full to the brim with gaily wrapped sweets. He settled it between them and began picking it over for the good stuff.

"I wouldn't eat any of that—the last time Ron ate some of my food some girl had put a love potion in it."

"Madam Pomfrey cleared 'em all," Sirius said around a mouthful of Robe D'Or Truffle, the finest buttercream chocolates in the magical world. "Course I'll

taste-test if you like, and you know if I've gone funny over a girl it's definitely the chocolate." He said the last with great daring, as if it were an act of willpower to joke about it; Harry recalled Remus' remarks about how terrifying even admitting it to his best mates had been for Sirius, and he grinned reassuringly. Sirius grinned back. "Packages've been arriving for Moony all morning too. And a bunch of owls found Tonks, which made Moony furiously jealous because they were almost all from admirers," Sirius continued.

Harry laughed. "I wouldn't peg him as being the jealous type."

"Well, he tried to hide it, very badly, so she sent him up here to keep watch with me. I think it's also that she got a big long letter from her mum cos apparently she hadn't told her yet that Remus was the one she'd been seeing. Besides, she's been down in town helping clean up."

"Was anyone hurt?" Harry asked.

"Not that I've been told. I think they'd have brought them up here, wouldn't you? I mean, none of us were top of our game after nearly getting our arses kicked by a bunch of Dementors, but a bit of chocolate and some breakfast and we were all fine. Fred and George are thrilled it worked."

"Shame they didn't get to see it."

"They made the front of the society page, their big charity smash," Sirius said. "Brilliant idea, really. All the best parties end with broken furniture anyway, so you might as well invite people to a party with the express purpose of blowing things up."

"Wizards seem to like explosions," Harry mused.

"I know I do. Could have done with a few less last night, though," Sirius said, and for the first time Harry saw how tired and pale he looked, and how deep-sunk his eyes were with worry. Impulsively, Harry leaned forward and kissed him, tasting chocolate and butterscotch on his tongue.

"You do know how to set the world on fire, Harry Potter," Sirius said in a low voice, when Harry finally released him.

"Well, people tend to give me a lot of kindling," Harry answered. "It's Saturday, isn't it?"

"Yes. Happy Hallowe'en, by the way. We did get a pretty great stash of sweets," Sirius observed ruefully.

"Can I go home soon?"

"Dunno. Want me to sneak you out? I bet Glastonbury would take us there if we asked him nicely," Sirius said. Glastonbury had hopped down onto

the bed and was chasing a chocolate frog he'd freed from its carton across the counterpane. He looked up inquiringly at Sirius, then darted forward and caught the frog, carrying it proudly to Sirius and laying it on his lap like a small, greasy sacrifice. "Who's a good bird then?" Sirius murmured, tucking the melting frog back in its case.

"Better wait," Harry said. "If we're both gone when Remus gets back, he'll probably have a heart attack."

"Been rather a long day for him already," Sirius agreed. "I don't know about you but I think taking the rest of the week-end off sounds like a good idea."

"I'd planned on it," Harry said.

"Besides, this doesn't happen every day. I think we should celebrate," Sirius said.

"You always think we should celebrate," Harry teased. "Let me guess—firewhiskey and Indian take-away."

"Better! Fish and chips and a gallon of puffapod wine from McGonagall's secret stash," Sirius answered. "Dobby's already nicked it for me and it's just waiting to be given a good home."

"You two look as though you're plotting something," said a voice from the doorway, and Madam Pomfrey entered carrying a pile of neatly-folded clothing. "I'm afraid your clothes were dirty and had to be banished off you, Mr. Potter," she said with a kind smile. "I've brought you some Hogwarts clothes; they look like they'll fit long enough for you to get home."

She set them on the bed, then sighed rather nostalgically as she looked down at the Hogwarts crest on the shirt. "Inasmuch as you seem unable to keep away from Hogwarts, Harry, we do miss you here. I've never had a nicer patient."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, embarrassed. "That's nice of you to say."

She gave him a rather misty smile, then seemed to smarten up and recall that she was a school Healer, not a schoolgirl. "Well, now then, no need to dwell on unpleasantness. Your colour is good and you seem to be feeling all right; any lingering pain?"

"Bit of a headache, that's all."

"No tingling in the extremities or disorientation?"

"Not more than Hogwarts always gives me," he said. Sirius snorted.

"All right, in that case if you can stand up and manage to dress yourself, I think we may send you home. By the way, I don't suppose you'd like to, but there's a reporter from the Daily Prophet camped out at the front door of the school, insisting on an interview. Actually there are quite a few."

"I don't want to talk to anyone," Harry said tiredly. Sirius slid off the bed and offered Harry his arm for support as he threw back the blankets and made a precarious attempt at standing. He felt surprisingly solid on his feet, not dizzy at all, but he still let Sirius help him. Madam Pomfrey, seeing that he was in no immediate danger, left the room to give him some privacy while he undressed.

He could have done it himself, but there was no need to; without being asked, Sirius unbuttoned the hospital pyjama shirt he wore and eased it off his shoulders, setting it aside. He picked up the Hogwarts shirt and shook out the creases, then took Harry's left hand and slid it into the sleeve, repeating the process with his right. He leaned close to settle it around Harry's shoulders and began to do up the smaller, closer-together buttons on the school uniform shirt. Harry inhaled; Sirius smelled like leaves and dirt.

Sirius hitched up the tails of Harry's shirt, undoing the drawstring on the pyjamas and hooking his thumbs in the waistband; Harry put his hands on Sirius' and they both hesitated for a moment. Then Harry nodded, and Sirius grinned and just barely pushed. They slid off Harry's slim hips almost too easily and Sirius leaned back just before his lips would have brushed Harry's shoulder. He unfolded the trousers and circled around behind Harry, holding them in front of the other man. Harry stepped into them carefully, let Sirius slide them up his thighs and over his hips. Sirius pressed his face against Harry's neck as he did up the zip, fingers lingering a little longer than strictly necessary, and buckled the belt that was already threaded through the loops. Harry could feel the press of Sirius' chest against his shoulder blades, warm breath on the nape of his neck.

"It's been almost half a year since I wore one of these," Harry said, touching the collar of the shirt with one hand, Sirius' hands at his belt with the other.

"I wondered what you'd look like," Sirius said against his neck. Harry sighed.

"Like James," he said. "I know."

"No...I thought so for a little while," Sirius said. "But really, you look like you."

Harry twisted to catch his gaze, surprised. "You remember."

"I told you then. The rest of the world may want you to be whatever they decide, but I just want you to be you," Sirius breathed.

There was a discreet cough, and Sirius jerked away from Harry, so suddenly that Harry almost did lose his balance; it was only Remus, however, and he was looking politely out the window by the time Harry turned to see him.

"I've been told to get out of the bloody way and go do some good by chaperoning you two home," he said, turning to regard them both with eyes at once concerned and amused. "Madam Pomfrey says if you're feeling well, she sees no reason you can't, and I'm quoting here, spend the rest of the weekend in your own bed instead of one of ours."

"I feel all right," Harry said.

"Clearly," Remus drawled with a grin. "Considering Glastonbury's developing talents, you're welcome to Apparate down to Fourteen Back if you think he can manage it. It'll be safer than floo'ing, I suspect."

Sirius crooked his arm, holding his left forearm up and level, and Glastonbury fluttered across to him, landing as lightly as any owl.

"What do you say, Glas?" Sirius asked. "You remember how to get there? It's where Hedwig is. Do you remember Hedwig?"

Glastonbury looked as if his intelligence had been insulted, then made a low hooting noise that was so like Hedwig's that Remus and Harry both smiled.

"It sounds like he's ready. I'd like to go on ahead though, just in case—I'm going to run down and floo home from my office. Give it five minutes and then have him bring you home," Remus said. "I'll let Madam Pomfrey know."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Are you sure we can't help somehow?"

"Oh—the Ministry's shown up, believe me, there's no help for anyone right now," Remus said with a sigh. "Best we just stay out from underfoot. Five minutes!" he called, as he left.

"Gives us just enough time," Sirius said, and Harry got a rather hopeful feeling in his chest, but Sirius was walking to the bed. "Dobby!" he called. "Dobby, where's that basket?"

Dobby appeared at once, a basket almost as large as he was slung over one arm.

"Hello, Harry Potter!" he said happily. "The house-elves wish to say that they hope Harry Potter is feeling better and that he has come back to school!"

"Sorry, Dobby, not quite yet," Harry said. Dobby's ears wilted a little, but he kept smiling.

"It is good to see Harry Potter took no harm?"

"Almost none, thanks though," Harry said. Sirius had taken the basket from his arm and was loading it up with all the chocolates from the bowl on the bed. "Tell them all I said hi, and thank you."

Dobby saluted. "Does Nigel Padfoot require anything else?" he asked.

"Thanks, Dobby, no," Sirius said. "I'll be gone until Sunday night—can you make sure that when they clean my room they don't upset the papers? They're sorted very carefully."

"Dobby will personally clean it himself!" Dobby squeaked.

"Ta," Sirius said, and Dobby saluted once more before disappearing.

"Uh, Sirius, just one question," Harry said, as Sirius returned to his side, basket in his right hand. "What happened to my shoes?"

"You were blown out of 'em," Sirius said.

"What?"

"S'right. Blew you right out of your shoes and set your socks on fire for a minute. The shoes hadn't any toes left to them. It was pretty much the greatest thing I've ever seen," Sirius said with a grin. "Ready to go?" he asked, and before Harry could answer he'd held Glastonbury up to his face again. "Can you take us both to Fourteen Back?" he asked. "Where Hedwig is?"

Glastonbury rustled his wings excitedly and hopped a little on Sirius' arm. Sirius carried him to where Harry stood and Glastonbury reached out with one foot and sunk his talons into Harry's shirt.

"If he Apparates you and my shirt without me in it, I'm not going to be best pleased," Harry warned him, but the end of his sentence was swallowed up in the Apparation itself.

Phoenix Apparation was nothing like the clumsy human version; for one thing, when you were on the receiving end it felt a lot slower. The hospital wing seemed to melt, the colours blurring and bleeding into each other until the room was completely unfocused; then, slowly, the edges began to sharpen and colours fall into their proper places again, only this time they re-formed in the shape of Fourteen Back's kitchen. The actual process hadn't taken more than a second, Harry knew, but it felt like it had taken much longer.

"Welcome home," Remus said, sitting at the kitchen table. "You're well-timed, I just put a kettle on."

"That was great," Harry said. Glastonbury peeped self-contentedly and let go of his shirt, flapping over to the kitchen window where Hedwig was perched. The owl scooted aside to give him room to land and politely regurgitated half a mouse for him. Glastonbury couldn't have been more pleased if she'd brought him a whole bushel of dry tinder.

Sirius set the basket on the table and began unloading it; he gave Harry an unsubtle shove in the direction of the kitchen table, so Harry took the hint and sat down. His head did still hurt a bit.

"Madam Pomfrey said to make you some tea, and after that we're to send you to bed for the rest of the day and place ourselves at your beck and call," Remus said with a grin. "I suspect you won't lack for company. You certainly won't lack for chocolate."

"Sirius says you got a bunch too."

"Not as much as the hero of the day," Remus answered. "Or Tonks," he added, looking rather aggrieved. "I'm sure I don't know what these young men were thinking, sending my – and you can stop laughing, Sirius Black!"

"I didn't laugh! I didn't hardly snigger," Sirius replied from the stove, where he had placed a pan and was assembling piles of food nearby. "If I were you, fools sending my girlfriend chocolate would not be what I'd be worried the most about."

Remus rubbed his forehead. "Don't remind me. I've lived with you two long enough that I think I may actually have forgotten proper table manners completely."

"Andromeda's invited you to dinner then, has she?" Sirius asked with a wicked grin as he cracked two eggs into the pan. "I can't believe you didn't make Tonks tell her when the whole thing started – goes against your image as the chivalrous knight of Gryffindor..."

"I thought she had! Wouldn't you assume? I just thought maybe they didn't approve so we never talked about it."

"Do they?" Harry asked. "Approve, I mean?"

"Of a schoolteacher ten years her senior, who happens to turn into a monster every month, being appropriate material for their daughter? I hardly think they would, Harry," Remus said dryly.

"Nonsense, they both like you," Sirius protested.

"They liked me when I was sixteen, Sirius. Which, I may remind you, was when Nymphadora herself was six."

"Do you really need their approval?" Harry asked curiously.

"No, but I'd rather not be on bad terms with the parents of the woman I'm—" he stopped abruptly, and then continued in a more subdued tone, "—I'm rather openly living in sin with."

"Living in sin!" Sirius hooted. "Living in sin! You read too much Mallory as a child."

"The point is neither here nor there but resides in the fact that I'm dining with the Tonkses tomorrow night," Remus said. "We who are about to die salute you, Caesar."

Sirius returned to the table, carrying three mugs of tea in one hand and a plate in the other. Harry, who was starting to feel a bit chilly, wrapped his hands around his mug gratefully.

"And even more to the point, it's not really any of your business to begin with," Remus continued. "Harry, when you're feeling a bit better, I need to ask you some questions about what happened."

"All right," Harry said, sipping the tea. All he had in his stomach was a lot of chocolate; Sirius pushed the plate he'd brought over at him and Harry eyed it warily.

"Scrambled eggs with...stuff in," Sirius said. "Sorry, I was trying to make an omelette."

Harry took an experimental bite and, when it tasted actually rather good, began to devour the whole plate.

"No loss of appetite," Remus said to Sirius, who grinned. "You know, there are rumours that there's not a Dementor left on the island. He must have sent every single one he had up against the forest. It might have worked if we hadn't been ready for him. He's not a very good tactician, you know, not on a grand scale."

"Strange, really," Harry said. "He's not stupid and he's good at fooling people."

"Well, a confidence man doesn't always make a good general," Remus said with a shrug.

"Is that what he's like?" Sirius asked, and the gap between Remus' experience, Harry's knowledge, and Sirius' historical education yawned wide in front of them for a moment. "A tricky bloke but not much more?"

"He's very intelligent, very powerful," Remus said. "Don't underestimate him because he made one or two tactical errors. He learns from his mistakes."

"He does that," Harry murmured. "He plays games. He likes games for the sake of them. He doesn't always have to do things the way he does them, but if he does them that way then he controls them."

"Sometimes I wonder," Remus said, "why he ever wanted to be immortal in the first place."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I suppose in some circumstances I would, but there's a great difference between me and Tom Riddle," Remus said. Sirius laughed. "What I mean is...well, I don't know about the two of you, but I think it's generally accepted that we become immortal when our name is remembered—humanity has a strong urge to pass on the memory of itself to the next generation. So we have children, or we try to accomplish things that will make us well-known. But Tom Riddle..."

He shook his head.

"He clearly isn't concerned with how people see him as a man; if he were he wouldn't have accepted his physical changes as a payable price for immortality. He likes to be admired and feared, but he doesn't—not anymore, perhaps not ever—connect with people on any kind of level that makes them a reality to him. I think if complete anonymity were the price of immortality, he'd take it, which goes against every natural human urge to perpetuate. It's a very strange form of ambition. Some Slytherins might say it's the purest, because his ambition is wholly independent of the actions of other human beings."

"Why does he want it, then?" Sirius asked. Harry understood now why Sirius and Remus had been friends at school; Sirius was hanging on the other man's words, fascinated and enthralled. Harry wondered if Remus was even aware of it. It occurred to him that Sirius himself was not someone who could tell stories; Sirius was grounded in the present, in the earthy realities of life. Ellis Graveworthy had spent most of his time in other worlds and laid them at Sirius' feet; Remus sometimes did the same, perhaps without even realising it.

"I'm not sure. He doesn't seem to indulge in the usual things—sex, food, drink, music—natural human things. He has no interest in human affairs except as how they relate to his own desperate pursuit of eternity. I think...I think it's an irrational fear of death."

"I don't think fearing death is so irrational," Harry said. "I think it's pretty rational, actually. I'm afraid of death."

"Are you really?" Remus asked, and Harry saw that he really was curious. "You throw yourself into danger without hesitating; granted you don't throw yourself in front of cars, but it seems to me that what you fear, Harry, is the half-lived life. You're not afraid of dying, are you? Just of not being able to enjoy life anymore."

Harry considered. "Oh."

"I think that's why he frightens people so—he wants to be immortal not out of fascination but out of fear. He doesn't really take true pleasure in anything, so he can't regret that. He's just terrified to die. He wants his consciousness to be present in some form, eternally." Remus looked down at his tea. "It must be horrifying—such a tormented existence. Sacrificing everything out of fear is no way to live."

Harry gave him a significant look, and he grinned. "All right, so sometimes even we mere mortals do it as well. But the key is, isn't it, that I'm not afraid anymore."

"Except of Andromeda," Sirius put in.

"No man in his right mind wouldn't be," Remus answered. "And I know that Ted used to own a shotgun, which could definitely end my enjoyment of this world. At any rate, Harry, if you're done eating..."

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling much better with a stomach full of real food and some warm tea in him. "I'm going, I'm going."

"If you need anything, just shout; I'm going to be down here for a while. Hermione has some interesting notes for me on the nature of the mortal soul," Remus said. "Sirius?"

"Padfoot's place is with the ill," Sirius said gravely. Harry snickered as Sirius transformed and dashed out of the room, barking all the way up the stairs and thumping around in the upstairs bedroom. Harry followed, but he stopped in the kitchen doorway and looked back.

"Remus," he said.

"Yes?" Remus asked, looking up from the table.

"Don't think anyone in the Order isn't aware of who outflanked Voldemort yesterday. You make a pretty bloody good general yourself."

Remus smiled. "I'd rather be a diplomat."

"That's probably why."

"Get to bed, Harry; you need your rest. And I have some distinctly unmilitary books to look through."

Harry gave him a nod and turned, crossing the living room. As he went up the stairs rather less noisily than Padfoot, he thought he heard Remus breathe a sigh – whether of relief or anxiety, he couldn't tell.

## CHAPTER XXXI

Sirius had changed back into himself before Harry finished climbing the stairs, feeling oddly dizzy as he did so – probably an after-effect of whatever had happened to him in the Forest. When he tried to think about it, his eyes hurt and there was a buzzing in his ears, so he stopped trying. Sirius turned down the bed while Harry fiddled with the buttons on his shirt, feeling a bit strange to be back in a Hogwarts uniform.

“I don’t feel that tired,” he offered.

“Well, I’m knackered,” Sirius said. “And you’ve got to at least pretend you’re resting, so you might as well be thorough about it. I’ll go change in the other room if you like.”

“No, that’s all right...” Harry said. Sirius had seen him next-to-naked once that day already; what did it matter?

He took off his shoes and socks, arranging them neatly next to the bed while Sirius pulled his shirt off over his head and rummaged in a pile of mostly-clean clothing for a t-shirt and some boxers to serve as pyjamas. He tossed a pair of actual pyjama trousers to Harry, who set them on the bed and began to undress. Sirius politely turned away, but that did Harry little good; Sirius was unbuckling his belt, and Harry watched the movements of his shoulder blades in fascination. There was a slight twist to his spine, his right hand drawn back further than his left hand.

Sirius shoved his trousers down and stepped out of them carelessly. Harry looked away and undressed quickly, trousers-first so that by the time Sirius turned around he had already pulled the pyjamas over his hips.

“Do you mind if I’m human for a bit?” Sirius asked. “I don’t mind being Padfoot, but I feel like I really want to stretch out.”

“No, s’fine,” Harry said. Sirius slid between the bedsheets easily, turning his back to Harry and sighing a very Padfoot-like sigh of satisfaction. Harry hesitantly got into the bed also, curling up and wondering if he ought to turn away too, instead of facing Sirius.

He had almost decided to turn when Sirius rolled over and lay on his back, stretching his arms above his head. He wriggled happily and glanced at Harry before Harry could look away.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” he asked. “We don’t have to think for a full day and a half. No responsibilities until Monday...we can do just as we please.”

"Do you think all the Dementors are really gone?" Harry asked. Sirius sighed.

"Does it matter, right here, right now?" he asked.

"It matters to me. I can't stop thinking about things. I wish I could, but just because we say we deserve a few days off doesn't mean we get them. I gave up Hogwarts for this—I feel like I'm wasting time if I'm not doing something."

"Voldemort is licking his wounds somewhere, you're a hero twice over, we've hit a brick wall with the horcruxes for the moment—for the *moment*," Sirius insisted, when Harry opened his mouth to protest. "Remus is working on it, Tonks is making sure nobody else is going to get hurt, and everyone at Hogwarts is more than safe."

"I can't explain it, Sirius," Harry said, the weight and frustration growing more crushing with every reason Sirius gave for him to relax. "It's just so much."

Sirius hadn't turned his head away, his eyes still scanning Harry's face with what Harry realised was true worry. He reached across his own body with his left hand and took Harry's right, pulling the arm out straight and pressing Harry's hand over his chest, covering it with his own.

"We're still alive, Harry," he said softly. "Feel my heart beating? Feel my chest move?"

Harry did feel the steady, calm beat—calmer than his own, to be sure.

"You don't have to be the leader or the great wizard here. Not here. All you have to be is Harry," Sirius said. Harry closed his eyes, trying to match the rhythm of Sirius' breathing, slow and even. He could feel the other man's thumb stroking the back of his hand soothingly.

"If I stop being the other one I don't know if I could start again," Harry whispered. Sirius was silent, but Harry felt him shift slightly; he was still holding tight to Harry's hand, and now he began to move it—over the soft cotton t-shirt, the flaking remains of whatever logo had once been printed on it, up past the collar and over Sirius' throat. Sirius pressed his fingers over his pulse.

"It's all right, Harry," he said. His voicebox vibrated against Harry's palm. He slid his hand further, curving Harry's fingers around his jaw and up across his stubble-rough cheek. Of his own accord, Harry tangled his fingers in Sirius' hair.

Sirius pushed himself up on one elbow and then sat up, turning to face him; Harry curled his hand around the back of Sirius' head and used his body as

a prop to lever himself up. Sirius had released his hand and instead run his fingers down Harry's arm, gripping him just below the elbow.

"What did we do?" Harry asked, even as Sirius' other hand raised and he stroked the pad of his thumb across Harry's lips.

"My theory is," Sirius said, "that you overloaded a patronus spell. I think it backlashed," he continued, tilting his head. He kissed the inside of Harry's arm, just below where his hand held Harry's elbow. "I caught you...I said I had you and you shouldn't worry. Then the whole world went white."

Harry was beginning to be glad he hadn't worn a shirt.

"You need to sleep, Harry. I do too. If you're going to fret yourself awake, drastic measures will have to be taken," Sirius said. He smiled in a way that made Harry anxious, but he trusted Sirius—probably more than he trusted anyone in the world, even Ron and Hermione.

Sirius pushed him down onto his back, releasing his hold on Harry's arm and instead running his hand over Harry's hip, tugging on the waistband of the pyjamas. He bent over Harry and kissed him, almost chastely—except that as he did it he was also doing his level best to undress Harry.

"As a Healer's technique this is a little unorthodox," Sirius continued, kissing him tantalisingly every few words, just hinting at what was to come with quick strokes of his tongue against Harry's lips. "On the other hand, it should do nicely."

He had already pushed the pyjamas down to Harry's thighs and now his hand moved lightly over the tight, hard erection that made Harry's cheeks flush bright red. Even Ginny hadn't—well, no-one had *ever* touched him there—

"I like you, Harry," Sirius said, fingers tightening slightly as he stroked. He bent his mouth to Harry's ear and nibbled on his earlobe before he continued. "I like your body—I want to make you feel good."

Harry had only meant to breathe deeply, but it came out more like a moan, and Sirius laughed a little.

"You need to sleep," he continued, releasing Harry and pushing his pyjamas down until Harry could kick them away. Harry pushed himself up to his elbows, wondering how he must look to Sirius—naked, clearly aroused and not a little lost, unsure what he ought to do next. Sirius gazed down at him, a small smile on his face.

"All right?" he asked. Harry nodded. Sirius wriggled out of his own clothes with remarkable efficiency and pushed Harry down again, sliding

forward under the blankets until he was lying almost-on-top, but not quite, and then he moved a little and Harry moaned so loud that he became suddenly very worried that Remus could hear them down the stairs and through a wall.

"Fuck," Sirius said, and Harry felt his hips jerk once. "Merlin, I—*celosecus*—"

"What—" Harry managed, before Sirius' hips jerked again and he grunted with the effort of keeping quiet.

"S'all right," Sirius gasped, bending to kiss him more fiercely now than he had. Harry drew one leg up against Sirius' thigh and rocked his hips, which made Sirius gasp again. "Silencing spell—for this kind of thing—"

"Right," Harry replied, head spinning. It felt as though Sirius was touching every inch of his body and he still didn't have enough touch, enough—hot fast slide of bodies, sweat-slick, Sirius' tongue in his mouth, Sirius arching against him. Their cocks rubbing together, a point-counterpoint rhythm created when Sirius bucked and touched just there which made Harry rock his hips again. It was difficult, almost jarring—just when he thought he'd die if Sirius touched him again, Sirius touched him again and it got better.

"Harry," Sirius moaned, pressing his face to Harry's neck. "Feels—fuck—good. Want you, want you to—"

"Yeah," Harry answered, breathlessly. Sirius was using his arms for an extra bit of leverage, so Harry curled his own arms around Sirius' sides and up over his back, gripping his shoulders. Sirius, feeling his fingers dig in, bit Harry's neck and jerked again and Harry felt his whole body arch as he came, crying out.

Sirius licked at the bite he'd inflicted and said "Yes," in a deep, rough voice even before Harry had settled back in the bed. Harry hoped like all fuck that it meant Sirius had come too, because he wasn't sure he could breathe, let alone move. It seemed like it; Sirius had collapsed on top of him, kissing and nuzzling Harry's throat. Harry slid one hand up through Sirius' damp hair, stroking it gently.

"Hells, Harry," Sirius said against his skin, and Harry laughed a little. "If I'd known you were that good a fuck I'd have pinned you down and fucked you senseless a month ago."

"You haven't lost the chance," Harry pointed out.

"Mm. Warm Harry," Sirius said, shifting his weight a little to get, if it were possible, closer still. "Sleepy now?"

"Sticky," Harry said.

"I did my part keeping Remus from coming up to investigate," Sirius said. Harry rolled his eyes and cleaned them off with a *scourgify*, which he quickly discovered was a rather ticklish spell to use on one's nether regions. "Ta, you're a mate," Sirius said, nipping the skin on his throat more gently than he had. He murmured a charm and Harry felt the sting of the bite mark fade.

"I didn't think it would be..." Harry swallowed. "Like that."

Sirius tilted his head to look up at him. "You didn't hate it, did you?"

"No! No, the other way," Harry said quickly. "Um. That was a lot better than. Well, anything really."

"Better than Ginny Weasley?" Sirius asked with a wicked grin.

"We never got that far," Harry answered, enjoying the way Sirius' breath puffed against his skin when he talked. He stifled a yawn, badly.

"Well, you may now consider yourself debauched by a man of extremely easy virtue," Sirius said. "Feeling a bit less tense?"

"A bit," Harry admitted, not bothering to hide the yawn this time. He closed his eyes, grateful now for the bed, the blankets and soft pillows that really were quite comfortable.

"Just think," Sirius mumbled sleepily, settling down against Harry with one arm flung over his chest. "When you wake up we can do it all over again."

\* \* \*

Harry did not, in fact, wake up to sex. This would have been nice, but it was really all right that it was postponed. Instead he woke to Sirius, face smashed against his ribcage, fingers curled around his side, his body a reassuring heavy weight on Harry's hips like an anchor. Clearly, while Sirius had missed the buzz that came with being literally thrown out of one's own shoes, he'd missed the several hours of involuntary sleep as well. Harry wondered if Sirius had slept at all between the battle in the Forest and the point at which they'd returned to Fourteen Back.

He also wondered what time it was, since the grey light in the loft didn't seem to indicate day or night. For all he knew they could have slept through most of Saturday and it could already be Sunday. He turned his head and squinted at the clock on the wall—half-seven. Well, that was no help at all.

Harry gently removed Sirius' hand from his waist and slid out from under him, trying not to wake him. Sirius let out a doglike whine at the loss of heat and touch, but he curled up against a twist in the blanket and slept on while Harry

located enough clothing to make himself respectable and descended to the living room. It was empty, but he heard voices in the kitchen; it sounded like Remus and Tonks, and it smelled vaguely like dinner.

He put his head through the doorway and was confronted with the sight of Tonks, her back pressed up against the kitchen wall, one leg hooked over Remus' hip and both hands on his shoulders while he kissed her in ways Harry had been perfectly happy not knowing his former professor was even aware of. Oh god, he had his *hand* up her *shirt*—

"Christ! Harry!" Tonks said, shoving Remus away so suddenly that he stumbled. "Don't you knock?"

"What would I knock on?" Harry asked, blinking. She straightened her clothes and glared at him; Remus smoothed his hair back (which only resulted in it standing even more on end than it had been) and coughed.

"Sorry, Harry," he said awkwardly. "We thought you were still asleep."

"You might have made more noise on the stairs," Tonks said sulkily.

"Believe me, I would have if I'd known," Harry answered.

"Ah, well, at any rate..." Remus said, clearing his throat, "...you're awake now, and clearly feeling better, yes? Sirius up as well?"

"He's still asleep," Harry answered. "I wasn't sure how long we'd been out."

"It's just about time for dinner—I was going to wake you when it was ready," Remus said, gesturing vaguely at the oven. "Did you sleep well?"

Harry smiled to himself. "Yeah, I did. How are things in Hogsmeade?" he asked Tonks, who was still looking annoyed at being interrupted.

"Safe as houses, I suppose," she said, sitting down at the kitchen table. Remus went to the oven to check on whatever it was that smelled so good. "We think they were going to send in the Dementors first, then follow after—not through the forest, but down the Hogsmeade road. Most of them scattered when they saw what was happening, I think. We got four," she said with satisfaction. "Can't prove they were involved, of course, but we're bound to find something that'll give them a few months in Azkaban, anyway."

"No-one important?" Harry asked.

"Afraid not. Still, it was a good day's work. Humans are a lot less durable and annoying than Dementors," she said. "And we've probably earned ourselves a week's grace while they regroup. We can press that advantage—sweeps in Knockturn, raids, that kind of thing."

"She's forgetting important news," Remus said, leaning against the counter next to the oven and beaming. "Go on, Tonks, tell him."

She laughed. "It's nothing, really."

"It's not nothing! It's a lot," he insisted.

"I've been promoted," she told Harry. "But! It doesn't mean anything! I'll still be out in the field."

"But that's great! What to?" Harry asked.

"Supervisory field agent for special missions," she said. "It just means that they think I should be able to give orders when we're doing this kind of thing."

"It's huge, Tonks," Remus said. "It means they know that you're competent and you keep your head in a crisis *and* that they see what good work you're doing. It's good for the Order, too—word will get round that Order-trained Aurors make promotion faster."

"And it pays more," Tonks said. "Which'll make Dad happy, he's always griping about them underpaying me."

She did look happy; her hair was bright, electric pink and she was smiling even as she denied it was anything special. Harry glanced at Remus, who looked as if he was about to burst with pride.

"A Head of House and a Supervisory Field Agent," Harry said. "The school drop-out had better start keeping up soon or you'll be embarrassed to be seen in public with me."

"Oh! Never, Harry," Tonks said, suddenly concerned. "You don't think that, do you?"

"You oughtn't," Remus said. "You're doing a brilliant job, Harry. We just destroyed nearly half of Voldemort's army—with the werewolves still sorting themselves out, the only nonhumans he has left are the giants, and he can't use those for close-fighting. Once we destroy the horcruxes, the way is clear."

"Any news about that?" Harry asked. "Hermione's notes help?"

"Some," Remus said thoughtfully. "I can see now we *have* been going about it wrong. There's just nothing about horcruxes anywhere so that won't help. We have to discover how the spell works, how the soul works, then go back from there. We're making progress on that. It's too bad you destroyed the diary—that would have been really useful."

"I don't think Tom would have been very cooperative," Harry murmured.

"No, probably not," Remus agreed. "But it's the only horcrux where we know that the fragment of soul could interact with people as an autonomous

being. We don't know if that's an enchantment he put on the diary or if it's just a byproduct of a diary full of memories being made into a horcrux. You have to destroy them, at least in part—you stabbed the diary, didn't you?"

Harry nodded. "It bled ink."

"Weird!" Tonks said, looking interested.

"And Dumbledore's ring—the stone itself was cracked," Remus said. "There's no obvious way with the cup, but perhaps if we could open the locket, that would be enough. We're reaching a stage where we may have to start experimenting—"

"No," Harry said flatly.

"Harry, we might not have a choice."

"No," Harry repeated. "Dumbledore died breaking the stone—he might as well have, I mean," he said. "Nobody else is going to die for some stupid *trinket*. Definitely not you or Hermione."

Remus glanced at the cupboard where the horcruxes lay under lock and key. "There's no reward without risk, Harry."

"This isn't a risk I'm willing to take. Too many people have died because of them—Sirius' brother, Dumbledore, everyone who had to die to make one or because they had a...a *thing* he wanted," Harry said. "They stink like death and nobody touches them until we know how to destroy them."

Tonks looked surprised, but not defiant; Remus bent his head and sighed.

"I can't say I agree with that stance, Harry, but it's not my place to order you to do anything. We still have a few avenues of exploration," he said resignedly.

"Sorry, Remus," Harry said. Remus shook his head.

"I can understand, believe me." And to cover for whatever else he might have said, he bent and checked the oven. "It looks like being done—should we wake Sirius?"

"I'll do it," Harry said as Remus removed an entire roasted chicken from the oven and began spooning the vegetables around it into a dish.

Sirius was still asleep upstairs, leg kicking once in a while; he slept like a dog, Harry decided, restless and reactive. He shook Sirius' shoulder, enjoying the smooth feel of his skin—Sirius hadn't dressed before falling asleep and only a fold of the blankets was really preserving his dignity.

"Huz?" Sirius asked, eyes opening. "Whuz?"

"It's dinner," Harry said. Sirius rubbed his eyes and blinked at him as he sat up. "Food's ready, if you want to come down. You can sleep through if you like, we'll save you something."

"But...what?"

"Dinner," Harry repeated, amused. Sirius shook his head to clear it. "Dinner's ready."

"Oh! Fine," Sirius said, and then something seemed to occur to him. "Did we shag last night?"

"Not last night," Harry said. "This morning."

"But we did?"

Harry nodded. Sirius grinned and kissed him, which was unexpected but not unwelcome.

"Good," he said against Harry's lips. "That's very good. And now there's food?"

Harry laughed. "Get dressed and come down. Tonks has news."

Sirius slid out of bed and reached blindly for clothing while Harry cleaned out the pockets of the cleaned and folded clothing he'd been wearing yesterday before the explosion (they had a note from Dobby, expressing his great pleasure at being allowed to mend several holes in Harry Potter's trousers). He transferred his wand and a handful of coins from one pocket, throwing out some carefully-folded up toffee wrappers from another. In the left-front he found his pocket-watchdog, one leg badly dented—well, that explained the strangely-shaped bruise on his left leg. He rubbed his thumb in the dent, thoughtfully, then flicked open the watch-side. Miraculously, it looked like it was still keeping time.

*Bring sweets* made perfect sense now, actually; if he hadn't had those chocolate toffees in his pocket, he might have died there in the forest. He regarded the little pewter bulldog with renewed affection. He flicked the watch-cover shut and turned it over, shaking it and opening the divination side.

"Telling your fortune?" Sirius asked, not bothering with a real shave but pointing his wand at his chin and muttering.

"Just glad it's still working," Harry replied, showing him the dent. Wispy pale words were appearing against the black.

*Trust not in trinkets but in men;*

*Trust not in heat but in flame.*

"That's about the most cryptic I've ever heard it," Sirius said when Harry read it aloud.

"Well, it hasn't *exactly* been wrong yet," Harry replied.

"Yeah, but it hasn't been helpful, has it?"

"It's pretty clear. Voldemort doesn't trust people...*trust not in trinkets but in men*. I just called the horcruxes trinkets when I was talking with Remus."

"Yeah? What's he say about 'em?"

"He wants to start experimenting on them. I told him no."

"Yours to dispose of as you please, eh?" Sirius asked.

"What's that mean?" Harry demanded.

"Well, they don't belong to you."

"They don't belong to Voldemort, either!"

"Quite right—my brother stole them. *And* entrusted them to my care," Sirius pointed out. Harry scowled, and Sirius grinned and kissed him before walking away to fetch his red robes off the chair, settling them around his shoulders.

"I'm only teasing, Potter. I don't want the blasted things. Now, if it turns out number six was some artefact of the Blacks, then I'll claim it after we purge it—hey, there's a thought. Do you suppose Regulus found out about them because Voldemort asked him for something the family owned?"

"Most of it's accounted for," Harry replied. "Tonks even tracked down the stuff Dung sold off. We went through the rest of it."

"Might've asked him to procure something, still. Clearly Reg was holding out on me, I never knew he was such a good thief," Sirius said, looking down at the seal-ring on his finger. "Wish he was still around to ask."

Harry wasn't sure what to reply. Other than Sirius himself, he'd never lost someone he remembered with any clarity—except Dumbledore, and that wound was too raw still. He wasn't sure he'd be comfortable telling the man who'd shared his bed last night that he missed the man who'd been his godfather—not when they were one and the same person.

Fortunately, he was interrupted by a soft warble and the rustling of feathers; he turned and found Glastonbury perched on the banister-railing behind him, cocking his bright red head curiously. Sirius whistled and held up his arm. Glastonbury flapped across the room, landing on his forearm and disarranging his hair with his beak.

"Ooer, stop it!" Sirius laughed. Glastonbury looked contented and rubbed his head against Sirius' cheek. "Maybe it's about Glas," he said to Harry. "Not heat but flame, right?"

"Maybe," Harry said, grinning. Glastonbury flapped his wings, tugging Sirius' sleeve towards the stairs, and both boys took the hint. By the time they had descended the table was set and Remus and Tonks were already divvying up the chicken. Sirius took his seat at Harry's right; Harry felt Sirius' left hand under the table, sliding quickly over his thigh before releasing it.

He shot a sidelong grin at Sirius and turned his attention to dinner. After all, he was supposed to be in bed from now until Sunday night, and he could foresee that this might end up taking a great deal of energy to accomplish.

After dinner, however, he found himself exhausted by the effort of eating and listening to conversation—apparently he wasn't as well as he thought, and he was grateful to let Sirius prop him up on his shoulder and help him upstairs as much for the support of his body as for the warm fingers that rubbed his hip reassuringly. Sirius wouldn't even let him speak; before he could make his excuses, Padfoot had leapt up on the bed and was burrowing under the blankets, rolling them back. Harry grinned and took off his trousers, too tired to do more than climb into bed and let Padfoot curl up against him.

"Morning, maybe?" he asked, and Padfoot panted cheerfully before nuzzling close and closing his eyes.

\* \* \*

"Aren't you glad you bought new clothes now?" Tonks asked, straightening the edges of Remus' best robe. It was deep red and brown, and he was quite fond of it in the way people are fond of art: he liked to see it hanging in his wardrobe and was terrified of wearing it. It had been years since he'd worn something so nice, something about which he would be truly upset if it were torn or stained.

"This isn't what I had in mind when I picked it out," Remus said. "Are my cuffs straight? They aren't, are they. I should have had it tailored."

She examined his sleeves critically. "Well, Dad won't care if they are or not, and Mum's going to find fault with you no matter what your cuffs look like, so I wouldn't worry."

"You're not reassuring me, Tonks."

"I thought you liked it when I pretended to be a realist," she said, kissing him. Sirius and Harry made gagging noises from the couch near the hearth where Remus stood stalling for time, hoping that if he didn't acknowledge that it

was five-forty on Sunday, it would never be five forty-five and time for them to leave.

"Well, I don't mind that," he said, wrapping one arm very carefully (wrinkles! the sleeves would wrinkle!) around her waist and kissing her again, just to annoy the boys.

"Get a room!" Sirius hooted.

"Ignore him. He's only being obnoxious because he's glad *he* doesn't have to pass muster with Mum," she said.

"Still not reassuring," Remus said with a sigh.

"Come on, you know her, you've met her loads of times."

"Loads of times twenty years ago, when incidentally she was completely unaware that I was a werewolf. And when she was just Padfoot's interesting older cousin," he protested.

"Yes, back when I was just his gawky cousin once removed," she said.

"Don't remind me, I'm sure your Mum already thinks I'm some kind of—"

"—if you say cradle robber I shall shriek and send you through *all alone*," Tonks threatened. Remus sighed. "Don't worry so much. If it's any consolation, Dad'll go easy on you to make up for Mum. Besides, you're a Gryffindor. Up house and all."

"But your Mum's a Slytherin!"

"She'll love you," Tonks said, taking his hand. "I promise. She'll show you her library and you'll be *you* and she'll think you're a delightful gentleman."

"She's going to see through me. She'll see that I'm just an old—"

"—distinguished—"

"—dangerous—"

"—exciting—"

"—impoverished—"

"—Head of House!"

"Werewolf," he finished. She grinned at him, then looked past him at Harry and Sirius.

"Don't get into trouble, boys," she said.

"We're just going to sit here and play chess," Sirius said innocently.

"My eye you are," she replied, tossing a handful of floo powder into the fireplace and stepping inside. She pulled Remus after her and wrapped her arms around him. "Serpentshead, London!" she called, and they vanished from view.

There was a moment of silence as the fire died down, and then Sirius glanced at Harry.

“Chess,” Harry said distantly.

“Mmh.”

“That was a euphemism for the two of us desecrating this couch beyond reasonable repair?”

“Oh, yes,” Sirius said, grinning evilly. “And possibly at least one of the wing chairs.”

## CHAPTER XXXII

Remus had never been to the manor known as Serpentshead, located in the London suburbs; the last time he had visited the Tonkses at their home he'd been nineteen, and back then they were living in a small wizarding community in northern England. It had been some kind of experimental thing – the Ministry had funded it in an attempt to rebuild the idea of wizarding towns like Hogsmeade. It'd been a great place to visit – lots of kids around to admire the older boys and very permissive parents who never treated the four of them as if they were anything less than adults. But after the war had ended the settlement sort of broke up and drifted away, and when Ted got his big promotion in the Ministry they'd moved to Serpentshead, which Tonks told him had lovely big grounds and a beautiful old house.

They emerged from the hearth into a little floo-receiving room and were still dusting each other off when Andromeda's voice echoed through the doorway.

"Nymphadora, dear? Is that you?"

"It's us, Mum!" Tonks called. "Be out in just a minute!"

"I'm going back," Remus said, but she caught his arm and tugged him along, out into the high-ceilinged parlour beyond the floo chamber.

"There you are, dear," Andromeda Tonks said, straightening from where she'd been bending over to arrange some flowers in a vase on a low table surrounded by comfortable-looking leather couches. "And Remus, of course. Welcome to Serpentshead." She came forward to hug her daughter and then clasp his hands; he was a little surprised, but he smiled and thanked her. "It's good to see you again – how long has it been?" she asked.

"About fifteen years, I think," he said. "Er...just after..."

"Oh yes; of course," she said quietly. "I'm sorry about that; we should have kept better track of each other. I know Ted was quite fond of all of you boys, and of course I think we're both aware that Nymphadora continues to be."

"Mum!" Tonks said, horrified.

"Darling, if you didn't want me to make jokes at your expense you should have told me about him ages ago," Andromeda said kindly. "I assume, Remus, that you didn't coerce her into keeping you a secret?"

"I thought perhaps she'd mentioned it..."

"She had *not*. He's going to think you're ashamed of him, my dear. You don't make him call you Tonks, do you?"

"I don't—" Remus began, but Andromeda was already moving onward.

"It's silly—Nymphadora might be rather *long* but it's a very beautiful, traditional wizarding name. Can you imagine your children?"

"What?" Remus asked, really alarmed now.

"Well, what would your children think if they hear their father calling their mother Tonks? Would you like a drink?" she asked Remus.

"Very much," he said firmly.

"Something that won't spoil your palate for dinner, we've laid on a Carvell '44 for the occasion. Whiskey and soda?"

"That'll do nicely."

"I mean I assume you have given some thought to children. I floo'ed up Kingsley Shacklebolt after I saw that photograph in the newspaper—it was quite beautiful, excellent composition, I hope they offer that young man a job—and he said to the best of his knowledge you'd been seeing each other for over a year. Not to rush you of course," she said to Tonks, who was still looking slightly horrified. "You have your career to think about."

"Mum—" Tonks said desperately, as Andromeda handed Remus his drink. He fought the urge to down it in a single swallow. "You only just met him, please don't name the—"

"Ichabod!"

"What?" Remus asked again.

"I've always liked the name Ichabod. Or Pulcherrima, if it's a girl."

"Mum thinks it's amusing to try and come up with names for my future children with my boyfriends' surnames," Tonks said, hand over her eyes.

"Ichabod Lupin has a nice rhythm to it," Andromeda said. "And it works well with Tonks, too."

"Er..." Remus cleared his throat. "I'm ah. Andromeda, I'm sorry, but it's not...that is to say, there are certain Ministry restrictions with regards to werewolves and children. I'd have to get a permit."

"To have a baby?" Andromeda asked, outraged. "One gets a permit to go fishing, Remus, one does not get a permit to procreate!"

"If I were to marry or knowingly father a child without one, I could be prosecuted."

"Well, that will have to have a stop put to it. I'll have Ted look into it, he must be able to do something about it."

"Mum, Remus and I are not going to have children for a long time, if ever," Tonks said, recovering a little bit of ground. "I suspect after tonight he's never going to want to *see* me again..."

"May I remind you, young lady, that he was my friend long before he was your suitor," Andromeda replied. "Which is as it should be. All this shilly-shallying about with boys your own age when you know perfectly well they're all fools. Remus is not a fool. He never was. Besides, you're not going to run off simply because of me, are you? That would show a distinct lack of character, Remus. Ah, there's Ted," she said, as Remus was fumbling for an appropriate reply.

When Remus thought of Ted Tonks, the first word that came to mind was always "tidy"; as messy as he might be in private life, in appearance he was a *tidy* man, well-groomed and well-dressed, his pale hair always combed down against his head and his movements neat and quick. He looked the picture of a mid-level bureaucrat, and on first meeting him at the age of fifteen Sirius had whispered to Remus that he looked like he had no personality in the slightest, and he was sure Andromeda had only married him to escape from the family.

Remus, however, had been sceptical about this and was eventually proven right; underneath his bland exterior, Ted was a quick-witted man with an incisive intellect and a scathingly dry sense of humour. He had survived in the Ministry and thrived by never, ever appearing to be unorthodox while he, as Andromeda put it, gaily subverted the entire system from the inside. The fact that Tonks was not only cheerful but also well-adjusted and non-conformist while at the same time working in law-enforcement was really much less shocking, after you met her parents.

"Hello, Remus," Ted said, shaking hands with rather firmer a grip than Remus had been expecting. "It's been too long since we've seen you. Hi, darling," he added to Andromeda, kissing her on the cheek. "Nymphadora, you're looking guilty and ashamed, good for you."

"Hi, Dad," she said with a grin and a hug. "I'm not guilty or ashamed, but Mum's been naming my children again."

"Oh? Is it Ichabod or Tamlin this time?"

"Tamlin's an ill-fated name to give a child," Remus observed.

"Ichabod's not much better," Ted replied. "Is dinner ready? I'm famished."

Andromeda gestured through a wide arched doorway where a table had been laid. "Ellen's just finishing, I believe."

"Splendid!" Ted said, leading the way. Tonks took Remus' offered arm as they followed, grinning at him.

"Told you," she said. "She only names the imaginary children of boyfriends she really likes."

\* \* \*

It was true that Harry's learning curve was fairly steep when it came to sex, but then again Harry was a quick study and he'd been a Quidditch player, so he was well aware of his own body.

What he was learning, actually, was not necessarily Sirius' body but the physics of his own body when matched with another one shaped like his. Granted there were no curves – no breasts – but Sirius was young and strong and Harry liked the angles of his body, the barely-rounded edges. He liked the hard edge of Sirius' jaw against his skin as Sirius kissed his throat, the flat press of Sirius' chest against his, Sirius' broad shoulders under his hands.

Sirius, who had been content simply to pin Harry down on the sofa and kiss him for minutes on end, had finally grown restless – probably because Harry couldn't help arching his hips up against such delightful pressure, the real weight of another human body touching his. He had moved on to Harry's throat and was now nuzzling at the collar of the Hogwarts shirt he wore, one hand on Harry's hip and the other rising to unbutton the shirt.

"This may not be precisely what Augustus meant by bed rest," Harry gasped. Sirius slid up to kiss him again and thrust his hips against Harry's.

"Well, you can make me do most of the work," Sirius said. Harry raised a hand to stroke Sirius' short hair, ruffling it in the back. Sirius bent again, kissing a line down Harry's chest as he unbuttoned his shirt. "I mean, we *could* play chess if you wanted..."

"I like this game better," Harry answered. Sirius kissed him just above his navel and set about unbuckling his belt, although it probably would have gone faster if he hadn't kept stopping to slide his hand down and stroke the definite bulge in Harry's trousers. Harry gripped the edge of the sofa with one hand. Sirius, being a fairly direct man, was not one to linger, thank god, and Harry

lifted his hips to help get his trousers and pants off. Then he pulled Sirius up for another kiss, managing to get his shirt mostly off in the process.

"Rest," Sirius said, his own trousers rubbing against Harry's bare skin delightfully. "You just stay there..."

"What—" Harry asked, but Sirius was kissing the line of his hipbone, resting his cheek in the place between hip and thigh.

"Trust me?" Sirius asked, looking up at him. His hand rested on Harry's other thigh, thumb rubbing small circles.

"Yeah," Harry said, running his fingers over Sirius' hair. "But—oh—" Sirius had slid his hand up and was stroking him, a gentle light touch that was more tease than caress.

"More," Harry managed, and Sirius laughed. "No fear," he replied, and Harry tilted his head back, writhing under and against Sirius until *oh god that was Sirius' mouth...*

Sirius stopped and lifted his head anxiously when Harry cried out. "Is that—did I do it wrong?" he asked, breathing heavily. Harry shook his head. "I've never actually, I mean—"

"No, it was fine," Harry said breathlessly. "Please." Sirius hesitantly kissed the head of his cock, then ran his lips over it and moved his tongue, and Harry tried not to buck up into his mouth and choke him. The faint vibration he felt must have been Sirius laughing; he put both hands on Harry's hips and held him down while he licked and sucked and Harry moaned, gripping the cushions so tightly he thought he might rip them.

"Stop—stop," he said suddenly. "What?" Sirius asked, sounding concerned. Harry took a moment to catch his breath.

"Didn't want to—" he managed. "Er, I mean..." "Oh!" Sirius looked taken aback for a split second, then he grinned and lifted one hand from Harry's hips, tracing just the barest fingertip-touch up the underside of his cock, which was all it took—Harry almost choked on his own breath as he came, hips jerking, a moan caught in his throat.

Sirius nuzzled up next to him, his hand warm on Harry's thigh. Harry released his death grip on the furniture and breathed deeply.

"Told you I'd do all the work," Sirius said.

"Well, technically I'm not actually in a bed," Harry replied, as Sirius murmured a cleaning spell under his breath. "So if you wanted to, ah...help me to the bed upstairs?"

"...I'd be pleased," Sirius said, shifting a little so that his erection rubbed against Harry's hip through his trousers. "I mean, I'm willing to bet I could keep you fully entertained even if you are stuck in bed..."

He helped Harry pull his trousers up above his hips and supported him up the stairs, though this was not strictly necessary; they stopped at the top to kiss, and then Sirius released Harry and flopped back on the bed, sighing happily.

"I'm glad you enjoyed that, really," he said, as Harry knelt on the bed and straddled him. "Sorry it was a bit clumsy..."

"I wouldn't say that," Harry replied, kissing him.

"Never done it before," Sirius admitted against his mouth. "Only ever heard about it..."

"Have you...I mean, a lot of other boys, or...?"

"Balls! No," Sirius said, pulling Harry's hips forward slightly and humming happily. "Couple of quick wanks in the locker room—you know, not anything *they'd* tell their girlfriends about...and I had it off with a Ravenclaw bloke once, you know, sort of...properly."

"Properly?" Harry asked, not quite ready for a repeat of the night before, but fast realising he would be soon.

"Well, he'd found a book about it and all. He said we ought to try it, and I said I was game if he was, so—well, he was older so he went first, and then after a bit I did. Brilliant, I thought. He said he preferred—mmm. This," Sirius said.

"Are you talking about bugging someone?" Harry asked curiously. He reached for his wand and banished their clothes with a wicked grin.

"Yeah, well, I guess so," Sirius said, suddenly hesitant. "I mean, we needn't if you'd rather not. Not yet, of course, even if you...*would* rather."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'd...I mean, trying it would be all right, if you know how it's done," Harry said, leaning back a little. Sirius grunted and moved faster, and Harry felt warm arousal begin to uncoil again.

"Harry," Sirius said, staring up at him with half-lidded eyes. "*Harry—*"

Harry bent over and thrust against Sirius' body, nibbling on his earlobe. "Why not?" he asked, reasonably. "You could teach me—you are a tutor, after all..."

Sirius laughed breathlessly and slid his fingers up Harry's back. Harry growled and kissed him, and let the rhythm of their bodies distract him until Sirius tensed and whined and came. Harry brushed his hair off his forehead and kissed him, laughing.

"At this rate we're never going to manage it together," he said, dragging his half-erect cock across Sirius' belly.

"Think of England," Sirius advised with a laugh. "Or Professor Trelawney –"

"Don't say it!" Harry said, but the mental image was already rising in his head, and definitely enough to stop the rise of other things. "Sod you, Sirius Black!"

"You'll need that energy for later," Sirius grunted. Harry rolled onto his side and curled up against Sirius' naked skin, pressing one hand to his chest over his heart to feel for the steady beat of it. Sirius smiled and stroked Harry's hair, just behind his ear.

"Well, we know you'll sleep soundly tonight, anyway," he said.

\* \* \*

"So I understand," Andromeda said, as Ted poured the wine, "that you're Head of Gryffindor now, Remus."

"Yes—provisionally, I suppose," he replied. Soup bubbled up from seeming nowhere into their bowls. "I expect, when everything has settled down, that someone more experienced will replace me. I think it was bait."

"To get you to take the job?" Ted asked.

"Yes—I'm sure you're aware of the reputation of my position at Hogwarts."

"Are you enjoying it?" Andromeda asked.

"Very much," Remus said with a smile. "I like teaching, I always have. I feel as though I'm being useful. Rather a new sensation for me."

"You're always useful," Tonks answered.

"I approve of teachers, but I don't think I could be one," Andromeda said, sipping her wine. "I haven't the patience."

"It does require a lot of mental counting-to-ten," Remus agreed. "Fortunately, I have a lot of practice."

"And I imagine it needs quick reflexes as well," Ted said. "It's such a dangerous course. I don't think they ought to let the littler ones take it. Not that our Nymphadora didn't take to it from the start."

"Well, I suppose there's merit in not teaching eleven-year-olds how hexes and jinxes work, but they'd find out on their own at any rate," Remus said. "You should see some of the things they pick up from the older students in the dormitories. It's a nightmare."

The soup bowls vanished from in front of them with a soft pop, and the plates below the bowls filled with food. Remus was unused to multi-course meals but he was more than willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, particularly when the second course was grilled sea bass with wild mushrooms.

"Now, Remus, I believe the traditional question has to be asked," Ted said, with enough gravity that Remus knew he was having him on. "Just what precisely *are* your intentions towards my daughter?"

Remus set his fork and knife down and glanced at Tonks, clearing his throat. "Well, I thought I'd start with ravishment, move on to kidnapping, and finish with a shady half-legal wedding performed by a Muggle priest at knifepoint."

"Mmh. You're aware the traditional rope won't work on Nymphadora?"

"Oh, I've been practicing my petrification spells."

"You are the most ill-behaved man I have ever married," Andromeda said to Ted. Tonks was bright red. "You're only encouraging him."

"That's the general idea," Ted replied. "I want grandchildren, Andi."

"DAD!"

"Sorry, sweetheart. In your own time, of course," Ted patted her hand. "But if you're not planning on it until later in life, I wish you'd let me know and I'll get a puppy in the meantime."

Tonks buried her face in her hands.

"It's all right, Nymphadora, we promise not to tease you any more," Ted said. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, really I am. And I really do want an answer to that question, Remus," he added, turning to Remus and fixing him with an amiable smile and a steely, all-seeing gaze. "I can understand why she wouldn't want to tell us about you; she's a grown woman and it's none of our business—and I must admit that most parents' first choice would not be a werewolf a decade older than she."

"Ted," Andromeda said, slightly reprovably.

"Well, it's the truth, my dear," he replied. "He must be aware of the difficult road ahead; he's been walking it—how long?" he asked Remus.

"Since I was a child," Remus answered. "Yes. I do understand."

"He tried to stop me, Mum," Tonks said, looking directly at Remus. "For almost six months."

"We know he's a *determined* man, at any rate," Andromeda said to Ted.

"I felt—as you do—that there are better men—" Remus began, but Andromeda stopped him.

"Better situations, perhaps," she said. "I won't offend you with weights and measures, Remus—it's cheap and ill-mannered to balance the good and the bad that way. A better situation does not make a better man, however. I presume that you are aware of the immense prestige bestowed upon you by my daughter's choice."

He smiled a little. "Yes."

"It isn't like that, Mum," Tonks protested.

"Of course not, dear," Andromeda replied. Remus tried not to snicker at her tone. "But as Ted was saying...given that you appear to get on well enough to stand each others' company for months on end, naturally a parent grows curious."

Remus frowned a little to himself. "As far as more...permanent arrangements go, I don't think we've made any plans...it is, uh, not a time which allows for very firm plans to be made on any front."

"That's right; you're fighting a war as well," Ted said. "Better to wait than rush in out of fear, eh?"

"As I've said..." Remus spread his hands. "I'm used to being patient."

Andromeda was looking at the pair of them so sadly that he realised what it must sound like—two people afraid to believe what they had might actually be real, because any day one of them might die.

"Well, I suppose that's all we can ask," Ted said. "But if you do break my baby daughter's heart—"

"Dad..."

"I'd sooner die," Remus said, without thinking. Tonks looked at him sharply. "I would. I'd forgotten it was possible to be so happy."

"Well," Andromeda said, looking at her husband, "That sounds like an acceptable sort of answer to me."

"Hmm. Yes, I think so. He's held up much better than most of the boys she's brought home," Ted agreed.

"Do you mean that?" Tonks asked him. Remus nodded.

"I think that calls for dessert," Ted announced, and the remains of their dinner vanished. Remus grinned at Tonks as an enormous trifle and a bottle of dessert wine appeared, and she smiled back – a secret, affectionate smile that, he thought wryly, probably had Andromeda naming his second child already.

\* \* \*

They returned rather late but cheerful for the most part; after dinner Andromeda had indeed shown him the library and he'd been suitably impressed. She had not only a fine collection of old wizarding books but also a fair assortment of antique and rare Muggle volumes as well. He could see definite traces of her mother in Tonks – the imperious lift of the chin, the inability to give up pursuit of something she wanted, and a typical, slightly-mad sense of humour he recognised as a deeply-bred Black trait.

"Well, I had fun," he said, as they stepped out of the fireplace at Fourteen Back.

"They were really in top form tonight," she sighed.

"Our parents always embarrass us; it might as well be intentional," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and kissing the side of her neck. "I like them."

"I do too," she said, tilting her head so that he could do a better job of it. "They're not too bad as parents go."

"I wish you could have met my father – he'd have liked you immensely," Remus said. She lifted a hand to cup his head against hers, fingers rubbing his cheek.

"I wish too," she said. "Don't you have any family I could be subjected to? You must have an aunt or something who could terrify me suitably."

"A few second cousins on my mother's side, but they're all Muggle..." he turned her in his arms, pulling her close again. "You'll have to be content with me, I'm afraid."

"And Harry, and Sirius..." she smiled at him. "Ron and Hermione and all your students..."

"Don't remind me...I don't want to go back to school."

"Speaking of which, do you suppose Harry and Sirius have gone to bed for the night? You'll have to wake Sirius tomorrow so that he can get back to school in time."

"Harry? Sirius?" Remus called. There was a sleepy grunt from upstairs. "I think we're safe," he said to her. "Granted, I'm an old man, but I think I might manage to live up to the prestige of being Nymphadora Tonks' escort..."

"Oh god! I can't believe she said that..."

"Well, she is a Black, and so are you in part," he reminded her, as they moved slowly towards the bedroom. "Very old wizarding family —"

"— you are being *evil!*"

"— with many fine generations of wizarding intellectuals and politicians," he said. "I am fully conscious of the honour bestowed upon me, a lowly Lupin."

She smiled and kissed him and began to unbutton his robes. "I'm sure the Lupins are every bit as prestigious as the Blacks and probably significantly less inbred."

"That's true; we'll marry just about *anyone* — no discrimination of taste —"

They broke down into laughter at that point, and Remus shut the door to the bedroom quietly.

"I meant every word of what I said tonight," he reminded her, cupping her face in his hands. She smiled up at him.

"Did you?"

"Yes," he said seriously.

"Even the bit about the ravishment and kidnapping?"

"*Especially* the bit about the ravishment and kidnapping."

\* \* \*

Sometime during the night, Sirius had realised he might be woken in the morning, and sensibly crawled on top of the covers and Changed into Padfoot; Harry, whose dignity was preserved only by the rumped blankets, barely moved as Remus climbed the stairs the next morning and leaned on the banister.

"There'll be breakfast downstairs soon, but class is in half an hour — better hop-to, Padfoot," he heard Remus say through a haze of sleep. He barked in answer and Remus took this as confirmation, giving him a nod before descending again.

He leapt back onto the bed, changing as he did so, and kissed Harry's mouth hot and fast, ruffling his hair and running to the bathroom to wash. When

he was done he called goodbye, but Harry barely moved as he pulled his robes around his shoulders and ran down the stairs. Remus offered him a plate of toast and he shoved a slice in his mouth as Remus stepped through the floor. He followed with the other slice still in his hand and devoured it as they were walking down the hallway towards the Dark Arts classroom.

"Coming along today?" Remus asked, straightening his cuffs and shuffling the papers he'd picked up off his desk.

"Mmhf," Sirius said, nodding. He swallowed and cleared his throat. "How did dinner go? Can't have been too awful, we didn't even hear you come home last night."

"Oh, it went all right," Remus said with a smile. "I'd forgotten what a pair Andromeda and Ted are."

"I should meet them sometime," Sirius said wistfully. "They were always nice to me and I'd only just got to know them."

"Yes, I remember...you didn't even meet Nymphadora until she was five, did you?"

"Family wouldn't have it. Had to run off myself first."

"Well, they've aged gracefully," Remus said. "Lovely house they have, very nice library. Ted's done well for himself at the Ministry and they seem happy. Did you and Harry have fun...playing chess?"

Sirius chuckled. "Yeah. It was a hell of a game."

Remus looked at him sidelong, then smiled too. "Well, play carefully, Padfoot. There's more at stake than winning."

"I know that. Everyone assumes I don't know that," Sirius complained.

"Don't forget, I've seen you *play chess* before. Stop—" Remus turned to face him and straightened his collar, pulling his robe forward and settling it more fully on his shoulders. "All right, you look presentable now. In you go."

Sirius sat Defence for the first teaching period and ran across the castle cheerfully to spend the rest of the morning in the greenhouses, helping second-years re-pot mandrakes. Everyone wanted to hear the story of Friday's battle in the forest; Remus was probably trying to quell his fourth-years from asking even as he'd had to quell his first-years while Sirius was there. Everyone suddenly wanted to learn the Patronus spell, and those sixth- and seventh-years who could do it were much in demand to produce them. The number of silvery, ghostly creatures cavorting up the aisles in the Great Hall at lunch finally drove Sirius and Remus, after a brief exchange, to the silence and refuge of Remus' office.

"I don't know how they manage to make so much noise," Remus said as they walked. "It makes my ears ring sometimes."

"I rather like it," Sirius said. "But I suppose it gets to be a little overwhelming sometimes. I don't—what?" he asked, as Remus put a hand on his arm. Remus frowned.

"Stop," he said quietly, pulling Sirius across the hall and ducking behind a convenient suit of armour. "There's something—something wrong," he said. "Can you...?"

Sirius nodded, glanced around for stray students, and Changed. As a dog, things were immediately clear.

The hall was jam-packed with scent trails and reeked of sweat and cheap childish perfume and cologne. What stood out like a neon sign, however, was an animal smell, almost out of place—but not quite.

The cloud of scent that hung around Remus was similar. He was smelling something like a werewolf—no. He was smelling a werewolf, just one that was not Remus.

He huffed at the dust where he smelled the scent and stirred it up enough to follow it. He could hear Remus following behind; he didn't even realise he was leading them directly to Remus' office until Remus caught the scruff of his neck at the door. He Changed back, looking at Remus with wide eyes.

"There's a werewolf in your office," he said in a whisper. "And it isn't you."

Remus drew his wand and Sirius followed suit; he opened the door quickly, both men aiming their wands inside.

Someone was seated quietly in a chair next to Remus' desk, hands folded in their lap, a cloak around their shoulders with its hood raised. When the door opened, the figure turned and looked at them.

"Show yourself," Remus said, in a voice that Sirius had never heard him use before. The figure in the chair reached up slowly, showing their empty hands clearly, and pulled back their hood.

The woman's face was unfamiliar to Sirius, and he glanced at Remus for just long enough to ascertain that Remus didn't recognise her either; she was youngish—probably older than Sirius—with unkempt dark-blond hair and a narrow, clever face smeared here and there with smudges of dirt. Her eyes were light green, and they gleamed a little in the dim light of the office. She looked at them uncertainly, then fixed her gaze on Remus.

"Lupin, I've come unarmed," she said. "I was sent by the black-haired man with the..." she gestured to indicate, unmistakably, Severus Snape's overlarge nose.

"Are you a messenger?" Remus asked. He lowered his wand only slightly.

"No; I've come to speak to you about terms," she said, half-hesitantly. "Treaties? My name is Arcadia. You know what I am."

"I'm aware, yes," Remus said warily.

"I have...been selected by the Dark Lord to replace Fenrir Greyback," she said. "And that is why I am here."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

"Padfoot, send Glastonbury to get Tonks," Remus said, not looking away from the young woman sitting in his office. "Now."

"No—wait," she said, and Sirius hesitated. "Please. I don't want to hurt you—I mean!" she said, as Sirius raised his wand again. "I don't—I'm sorry, I don't mean to hurt anyone here. I don't intend to," she corrected herself.

"My door was locked," Remus said. He twisted the knob on the open door; it made an ominous crunching noise.

"I didn't like to wait in the hall," she explained. "I have a letter..."

She raised a hand and slowly reached for a pocket on the inside of her cloak, withdrawing a folded piece of parchment. Sirius moved forward, careful not to step between her and Remus, and took it. He slipped a thumbnail under the plain wax seal and flipped it up.

"It's blank," he said, unfolding the letter.

"Charmed," she said. "Severus Snape told me."

Remus held out his hand for the letter and moved forward, closing the door behind him. Sirius covered the woman—Arcadia—while Remus examined the parchment. Glastonbury appeared with a pop and landed on Sirius' shoulder, watching the girl curiously. She watched back.

"Is that a fire bird?" she asked, awestruck.

"Yes," Sirius said. "A phoenix."

"Your pack marker," she said knowingly. "The Order."

"Can you read it?" Sirius asked Remus.

"Yes—all it says is that she is who she says she is, and that he's been speaking with her. I'm sorry, I've spent time with Fenrir's circle...I don't recognise you," Remus said to her.

"No; I kept hidden," she said. "I came to hear you speak sometimes."

"Oh yes?"

She nodded.

"You said you've come to discuss a treaty," Remus said, folding the letter and putting it in his pocket. He reached out and grasped Sirius' wrist, lowering his wand. "Voldemort doesn't deal in treaties."

"No..." she looked as if she were struggling to find the right words. "I'm not here to speak for him. And not a treaty, really. I've come to make a bargain between packs."

"Packs?" Remus asked, taken aback.

"Yes. Against the Dark Lord. Your pack and mine. I've come a long way, please listen to me," she said anxiously. Remus circled to sit behind his desk and she turned as he moved, tracking him with her eyes. Sirius had the distinct impression that she knew where both of them were—and would even with her eyes closed.

"Miss..."

"Just Arcadia."

"Arcadia, I don't know what you think of me, but I don't have a pack," he said.

"Yes you do—the Order. I'm sorry, I don't deal with humans very often," she said. "Will you hear me out?"

Remus spread his hands, indicating she should continue. Sirius checked the clock.

"When Fenrir was sent away, we were left without a leader. Some of the older ones said we should wait until the moon and let that sort us out, but the last moon..." she shivered. "Most of the older ones tried to *kill* each other—it was just a long, bloody night. Nothing was settled."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"So we—that is to say, some of us—sent to ask the Dark Lord what should be done. I'm very popular with the younger ones...he appointed me."

"How old are you?" Remus asked.

"I don't know."

"Do you know how old you were when...?"

"Oh—just a very small child," she said. "Fenrir says—said—that my parents abandoned me."

"Do you think that's true?"

"Not anymore," she said. "He told us that humans abandoned werewolves and even left babies to die, but that isn't so, is it? Your parents didn't abandon you."

"No."

"And you had school, and good things..." she eyed his robes appreciatively. "He sent me to listen to you when you spoke, so that he'd know what you were saying. Fenrir...liked me."

Remus' eyes narrowed. She swallowed and continued.

"But I like the idea of living in houses instead of little huts in a bog...I don't see why we shouldn't. I'm not afraid of humans. I don't want prey," she added. "That's all the Dark Lord promises – that we'll have prey. I want shoes and cooked food – I want to learn to read. I think we shouldn't trust him. A lot of my pack feel the same way. We've heard about..." she bowed her head. "He told us you slaughtered the Dementors."

"They attacked us first," Remus said gently.

"That was...that sort of power is frightening, but we kill to defend our dens, too," she said. "He was very, very angry – I was there when the news came."

"You've spent some time in his presence?" Remus asked.

"He doesn't notice me. He doesn't think I'm worth his time – he tried to be inside my head once, but I showed him things I remember – hunts and fights. He thinks I'm an animal, like Fenrir was."

"I see," Remus said softly. "You're a natural occlumens. Interesting."

"I don't know what that is," she said. "But...I saw, watching him..."

"Go on. It's all right."

"He wasn't angry about the Dementors dying," she said. "He wasn't upset that they were no more. He was only upset because he lost. And...Fenrir really thought he cared about us, werewolves, but he hasn't rescued Fenrir, he hasn't even tried – my people have tried, some of them, and he wouldn't rescue them, either. You told one of my friends that he doesn't care about us, and I didn't really even believe you, but I can see now – he only cares about winning. I don't want him to send my pack out to die and complain that he doesn't win."

"No; he doesn't care about you," Remus said. She frowned. "It's not comforting, Arcadia, but did you think I would tell you anything different?"

"But you care about us. You risked Fenrir to come tell us." She fixed him with a shrewd look. "Or is it that you think your humans can't defend themselves against us?"

"Arcadia, do you think if we could kill Dementors we can't kill you as well, if we have to in order to defend ourselves?" Remus asked quietly. "Fighting werewolves led by Voldemort would be more difficult, but if I didn't care that you were making a mistake, I would have left you to your folly."

"What would happen if he won?" she asked.

"You know that already, I think," he replied. There was silence while he waited for her to speak again. Sirius watched a complex set of emotions cross her face – fear, betrayal, anger, resolution.

"Will you deal with us, then?" she asked. "If I brought the werewolves to bear against the Dark Lord? What can you offer to my people?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," he said. "A place with us...education for your children, maybe, but not without another fight."

"Enemies on all sides," she murmured. "Cursed if we side with him; tormented if we side with you."

"But if you do side with us, you also have hope," he said.

"I can't feed my children on hope."

"Humans are fearful of things they don't understand. But the number of werewolves you could bring to our side...the accomplishments you could make in defence of this world...that might tip the balance."

"Might."

"I can't promise you anything, Arcadia," he said.

"The Dark Lord makes us promises."

"The Dark Lord doesn't think promises are very valuable. I don't break promises I make; thus I make very few," he answered. "I won't bid against a maniac for your soul. I can promise you that if you do die fighting, there will be people to mourn you. Which, I may say, is more than you have now."

She bit her lip. Sirius held his breath. Moony had learned to be highly persuasive in the last twenty years; he'd never seen someone bargain so well with so little.

"How many in the pack feel this way?" Remus asked finally.

"Perhaps fifty. If they come, most of the others will. There are nine...well, troublemakers? Bullies? But without them, we're very strong," she said.

Remus looked at her speculatively. "It won't be easy, Arcadia."

"What choice do we have?" she asked. "What can we do?"

"You'll side with us?"

"Yes," she said, almost defiantly. He nodded.

"For now, stay where you are. Try to convince everyone you can of what you've told me today. Don't bother with the troublemakers – if you can, push them to the fringes of the pack. Can you keep control?"

"I've been appointed," she said. "They'll have to challenge me directly – and I can beat them, I think."

"All right. If he asks you to—no..." Remus looked thoughtful. "If he sends you to attack a single person, a small fight, can you manage to keep them safe and still look like you tried?"

"I think I understand."

"Good. If he sends all of you to attack somewhere—if he's preparing for battle—bring everyone you can here, to the school. We can protect you from here."

Sirius sucked in a breath, imagining what would happen if fifty werewolves showed up on the doorstep of Hogwarts.

"What else?" she asked.

"Any news you think we ought to hear...anything you can tell us. Send someone different each time, so that nobody gets too suspicious."

"We could...we could kill some of his people," she offered hesitantly. He shook his head.

"We don't kill except in self-defence," he said. She looked relieved. "You should go now, before you're missed. Wait..."

He stopped her as she stood up. Slowly and carefully he came around his desk to stand in front of her, taking his wand out of his pocket. He touched it to the edge of her ragged burlap cloak, whispering in Latin. Her cheeks flushed.

"It's warm," she said. Her fingers plucked up one corner and she held it between her hands, curious. "Is this what you learned at the school?"

He nodded. "There's just one more thing...before you go."

She looked at him expectantly.

"How did you get into the school?"

She frowned. "I came through the forest, of course. Is that all?"

"Can you get out the same way?"

"Yes—you should let me go alone."

He nodded and stepped back, gesturing at the door. She left silently, bare feet hardly making any sound on the stone. Remus watched her walk down the corridor, turn a corner to the stairwell, and descend.

"How old do you imagine she was?" he asked.

"Maybe twenty," Sirius said.

"Twenty-five at the most."

"Voldemort thought he had an easy puppet?" Sirius suggested.

"Perhaps. I'm not inclined to believe in this much luck."

"You think she's a spy?"

"No...but she might be a pawn."

"You'd better go talk to McGonagall," Sirius said. "She's not going to be very happy if she suddenly finds a small village camped out at the front gates."

"Yes...I imagine I should," Remus said. "Can you teach my first class until I get there? The notes are in the drawer."

Sirius nodded. "Should I still send Glastonbury for Tonks?"

"No – I'll tell her tonight."

"Better leave out how pretty the girl was," Sirius said.

"Was she?" Remus asked. Sirius snorted.

\* \* \*

*Dear Sirius,*

*I'm sorry I wasn't awake when you and Remus left this morning. I wanted to say goodbye, since I won't see you again until the next weekend unless you're going to be free Thursday. You might cancel on Firenze just this once, you know. We could go to Hogsmeade with Ron and Hermione for dinner.*

*There isn't much to do here, really, just more research. I got so bored today I went out and helped Bowman in his garden. I don't remember the last time I did anything so mindless – probably detention sometime. It's different, though, now. I don't mind it. It's a relief, in fact. Isn't that strange?*

*Harry*

\* \* \*

It had been strange, at first, having Tonks around. Remus was so used to living inside his own head that for a long time she'd had to prompt him to share what he was thinking. He'd trained himself over the years to trust only his own judgement, to be wholly responsible for himself alone, and to act without requiring reassurance. He'd had to. There hadn't been anyone for a long, long time.

And to be fair to Tonks, he'd struggled against telling her anything for a long time. He didn't want to weigh her down with his worries as well as her own, he didn't want to seem weak in her eyes. In a sense, he'd had to learn how to talk again.

At the moment she was sitting at his desk, brushing and fluffing and re-colouring her hair, using her reflection in the window as a mirror. He lay on his side in the wide, comfortable bed in his room at Fourteen Back, watching her.

"If I could look like anyone, who do you think I should look like?" she asked, gathering up her suddenly-long, suddenly-brown hair and piling it on top of her head.

"That's a double-edged sword," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you didn't look like you, I'd feel as though I were having an affair."

She laughed.

"And," he continued, "If I told you I wanted you to look like someone, or even just look a certain way, the implication would be that I don't like the way you look now."

"You don't like the pink much," she said. "Admit it."

"Well, it wouldn't be my first choice personally, but it suits you," he said with a smile.

"All right, but really – I mean, everyone has fantasies. There must be some famous person you've wished you could romance."

"Yes, but I wouldn't want you with her face."

She left the chair and came to the bed, her hair still long and chestnut-coloured as she flopped down next to him. "Sometimes – for a while, not anymore – I thought maybe you only wanted me because I was the only chance you had."

He looked at her quietly. "That's not true."

"I know that now." She rolled over and propped herself up on her elbows, looking sideways at him. "Really, there's nobody you'd want me to look like?"

"It's not my decision."

"That's not an answer, not really."

"Your face is not the reason for any of this," he said. "And never was. I understand appearances, Tonks. I understand how they change. I've watched my own face change – even if you weren't able to change yours on a whim, you haven't lived long enough to see yourself age, to really grasp how unimportant the outer layer is in comparison to what lies underneath. I won't say –" he bit his lip.

"What?"

"I won't say that I don't find you desirable, Tonks," he said, feeling as if that kind of phrase was something no right-thinking English man ought to say. "Your appearance is a part of that. But I've always—the few times I've been really in love, you know, I've always loved the mind first, and the body on account of it."

"Well, I think your grey hair is hot," she said, and he laughed. "I do!"

"You're a twisted woman, no doubt," he replied. She rolled over and curled up against him, pulling his right hand over so that he held her tightly.

"You've been gnawing at something all evening," she said. "I've been watching you tumble it around in your head. Is it something you can tell me about?"

He pressed his face against her hair, closing his eyes. "It's the letter from Snape."

"The one you told Harry and me about at dinner? Delivered by the girl?"

"Yes. It was more than just a letter of introduction. I didn't want to tell Harry...he gets so wrought up about things, and it wasn't written to him, anyway."

"Does he have news?"

"He didn't say—he just wants to meet with me again. He's given me a date—this Saturday. I hope he wants to talk to me about the werewolves. They seem to trust him, which is...unbelievably odd, actually."

"You hope, but...?"

"But I wonder if he hasn't managed to find out more about the horcruxes, or if he knows when Voldemort will attack again. I doubt it will be good news."

"Someday," she said, "after this is over, I'm going to take you somewhere sunny, some beach—and *not* some dreary seaside, I mean a real beach somewhere tropical—and the deepest worry we will have all day is what flavour of daiquiri to order."

It took him a while to answer. "I never think about the future. I learned a long time ago that wishing for *after* is dangerous."

"Remus, there will be After, some day," she said. "And I have to at least plan that both of us will be there, or they start to win before the fight even commences. That's why Mum and Dad talked about grandchildren..." She twisted and rolled over, facing him, propping herself on one elbow. "If we're afraid of the future then they win, but if we believe in it, they can't. Voldemort can't stop me naming the children we're going to have After. He can't stop me

thinking about how old Pulcherrima has to be before I can teach her how to dye her hair."

Remus groaned. "No child of mine is going to be named Pulcherrima, Tonks."

She smiled. "See? It's so easy to think about After." A bright smile crossed her face. "That's a good name! After! It has all kinds of good meaning, and—" she burst out laughing. "This is my son, After Lupin—yes, we named him after his father..."

"At least we know your mum would approve," he sighed. "Honestly, Tonks—"

"Good name for child #2! We can alternate surnames..."

"Tonks!"

"Sorry," she said with a grin. "It's hard to make you laugh. I have to take the opportunity where I find it. Really...do you ever think about kids?"

"I'm a teacher. I think about little else."

"No, I mean...your kids. Potentially. Do you want kids?"

"I don't know. It's been years since I had a reasonable belief that I might one day have the opportunity. When I was younger I did, but...it's a dangerous time. And I have a lot of kids, so if none of them are ever my blood..." he shrugged.

"Typical Remus Lupin answer. Doesn't actually answer the question and makes it impossible to press the point." She kissed his nose.

"As I was saying," he said sternly, "I still need to meet with Severus. If it goes well, I'll probably tell Harry about it. If it goes badly...I'm going to need you. As an Auror. Your advice. I need to know that I can trust you to tell me honestly what you think."

She nodded, soberly. "Always."

"Good."

He leaned over to blow out the candles on the nightstand. He was almost asleep when he heard her chuckle a little.

"I do think grey hair is sexy," she whispered.

"I like the pink," he replied muzzily, "but purple looks awful on you."

Her laughter was the last thing he heard before he slept.

\* \* \*

Harry,  
Firenze might cancel anyway if it's overcast, so I'll work on some atmospheric charms. If he does, I'll send Glastonbury to get you and we'll sneak out. It's only another day until the weekend, anyway.

You need to get out more.

Or stay in more.

"Nigel."

\* \* \*

By two o'clock on Thursday afternoon Harry was ready to leave at a moment's notice, and by five he was pacing. Remus, arriving by floo after having eaten dinner at Hogwarts, grinned as he stepped out onto the hearth. Glastonbury was perched on his shoulder.

"I don't suppose it's of any use to warn you that going out right now is dangerous," Remus said, as Harry held up his arm for Glastonbury to fly to. "Sirius says Firenze has told him the auguries are inauspicious, which he thinks is Centaur-speak for *cloudy night, eh?*"

"It'll be four of us," Harry reminded him. "We won't leave Hogsmeade. It's been a lot safer since the Dementors attacked."

"That's true, but don't let your guard down."

"You're starting to sound like Moody."

"Yes, well. Moody's still alive, much to his credit, and I'd like you to remain that way as well. Just keep an eye cocked for trouble, that's all I'm asking."

Harry nodded. "I promise, Remus. Ready, Glas?"

Glastonbury whistled excitedly.

"All right...take me to Sirius."

The world melted away again, colours blurring and running together until they re-formed, darkly, into a row of trees and a shadowed snow bank. Definitely not Hogwarts, but before he could get his bearings, someone grabbed him from behind. His immediate instinct was to struggle, but the scent that enveloped him was familiar: dust and soap, scorched wood (the hazard of phoenix ownership) and classroom chalk.

"Sirius!" he said, scoldingly.

"Yes?" Sirius purred against his neck.

"Oh..." All thought of shouting at him for being a bloody fool and leaping on someone with as many enemies as Harry had went straight out of his head. Sirius bit his neck. "Mmm..."

"I agree," Sirius said, letting him go. "Told you I'd send Glas for you."

"I didn't think he'd take me here," Harry answered, paying enough attention to recognise the looming shadow of the Shrieking Shack in the distance. "As meeting places go, Padfoot..."

"Believe me, you'll be grateful," Sirius said, grabbing his arm and leading him down the road into Hogsmeade. "You won't believe what Ron and Hermione did."

"Oh god..."

"I only just managed to wrangle five minutes to warn you," he continued. "I told Hermione that she and Ron could come have dinner tonight in Hogsmeade and that you were coming, and Ron had the bloody stupid idea that they ought to find you a date—"

Harry stopped, staring at him in horror. "What?"

"And then they thought they ought to find *me* a date, because they didn't want me to be the fifth wheel..."

"You can't date students!" Harry said hotly, jealousy blinding him momentarily. "What did they *do*?"

"That's why I came to warn you! Ron had Ginny come along—"

"Oh, no."

"And Hermione dug up some bird named Bell for me," Sirius finished. "She graduated last year, I guess."

"Katie Bell? Has Hermione utterly lost her *mind*?" Harry asked.

"Hermione said she's a reserve player on the Harpies," Sirius said. "She seems nice enough."

"Katie Bell!"

"All right, all right, hang on," Sirius said, moving to stand in front of Harry, blocking his way. He put up his hands. "Just listen a minute, all right? I've got more experience at this than you."

"What do you mean, *this*?" Harry asked. "My best friend set you up with a moving target for bad luck and me with my ex-girlfriend!"

"Well, Ron did that—not the point, not the point," Sirius said. "More experience with being set up with girls you're not interested in, is what I meant."

"More experience...not telling," Harry said.

"You promised, Harry," Sirius reminded him. "You promised this was between us."

"Nobody cares, Sirius."

"Everybody cares, and if you think otherwise you're an idiot," Sirius retorted. "Just listen, all right?"

Harry crossed his arms. "Fine."

"People've been doing this to me for almost four years," Sirius said. "It doesn't mean anything. It's just like having Hermione along. It's not a big deal. We still get to have dinner together, right?" he stepped closer and gave Harry a dangerous smile. "I'll make it up to you this weekend. I couldn't talk Hermione out of it without her asking why, and once Hermione starts asking why she doesn't stop until she gets an answer or a broken nose."

"I don't think a broken nose would stop Hermione," Harry said doubtfully.

"My point exactly." Sirius was close enough now that Harry could feel his body heat. "This way she doesn't even ask. And you and I," he kissed Harry, "get to sit next to each other," another kiss, "and imagine what we'd be doing if we were alone. Now," he added, drawing back, "Come on. They'll be waiting for us."

Harry walked quietly with Sirius down to the village, following him past the Hog's Head and down a side-street to a little eatery next to a book-shop where the others were waiting. Harry greeted Ginny with a guilty hug and said hello to Katie, while Ron clapped him on the shoulder and Hermione beamed at him and Ginny. Sirius, Harry had to admit, knew how to cover himself; he didn't think very highly of Sirius' deception, but he did admire the skill with which he executed it. He was all things charming to Katie, asking her about playing for the Harpies and gallantly ordering wine for the table, pouring it with an expertise that made him seem as if he really were the twenty-something tutor, Nigel Padfoot, instead of a nearly-seventeen-year-old boy who was desperately hiding a very large, very frightening secret.

Ron and Hermione hadn't seen much of Harry after the attack in the forest, and until they had reassured themselves of his health they paid rather more attention to him than made Harry comfortable. Ginny squeezed his hand carefully and seemed content just to have been smuggled out of school and be sitting with him, peppering Katie with questions whenever Sirius fell silent. It was...well, surprisingly enough, it was a good meal. These were his friends, no

matter what, and they were full of news of the school that Harry missed, being gone from it. He wondered if leaving had even been worth it – he didn't feel very useful to anyone at the moment, and at least if he were doing lessons he'd be making something out of all this time he suddenly had on his hands.

And through it all, there sat Sirius, looking at him hungrily whenever the others were distracted, licking the corner of his lip to catch a stray drop of wine, grinning at his jokes. Every nerve in his body was *aware* that Sirius was close enough to touch, sitting just *there* with Glas perched on his shoulder.

Ginny had to be snuck back into school before bedtime and Ron and Hermione wouldn't have been able to linger much past that at any rate; Katie had early practice and was a little too reluctant to go, but Sirius gently and apparently regretfully cajoled her into leaving. He told Hermione that he'd be along to the castle as soon as he'd walked Harry out of town; she didn't like him going alone, but he promised to use Glas to get back.

It was bitterly cold and the wind was blowing fiercely as they left the pub, but instead of steering him back up the road to the Shack, Sirius pulled him aside and into the lee of an enormous old oak tree. Just past it, Harry knew, was the path that led into the hills where the other Sirius, the first Sirius, had lived in the caves.

It was hard to think of that Sirius and this Sirius, especially when this Sirius was pressing him against the rough bark, all eager hands and mouth tasting of wine.

"Told you I'd make it up to you," he said, as warmth from a particularly well-timed charm washed over Harry. His skin tingled and he felt as if sparks would leap from his fingertips if he moved them; it wasn't actually a warming charm at all, but some kind of, of...

Harry tilted his head back as another surge spread across his skin, licking deliciously over the insides of his wrists, the hollows of his collarbones, the edges of his jaw. Sirius moaned and thrust against him almost desperately, as if he were proving something – to himself or to Harry, Harry wasn't quite sure, but all he could do was gasp and try to keep up. It was too fast, much too fast, so fast he couldn't get his breath. It was over before he'd even properly registered what was going on, that they were having it off fully dressed up against a tree in the snow in November.

Glastonbury, who apparently knew the definition of 'discretion' rather better than Sirius sometimes did, had betaken himself off somewhere and now

returned, fluttering down to land on Harry's shoulder even as Harry kissed Sirius goodbye. He could almost still feel Sirius' lips on his right up to the moment when he arrived again at Fourteen Back, fortunately upstairs. He staggered against the dresser and leaned on it, breathlessly. Glastonbury nipped his ear and vanished.

He murmured a cleaning spell but then bundled up his clothes and threw them in a pile of laundry to be washed anyway. Tomorrow was Friday, and he would have time to wash his things and come up with one or two imaginative ideas of his own before Sirius arrived with Remus to stay the week-end. It would be a bit more difficult to come up with reasons for sneaking off without the convenient excuse of necessary bed rest, but considering the show that Remus and Tonks had given Harry not too long ago, he rather thought they'd be understanding.

He came downstairs in his pyjamas to get a glass of water and found Remus at the kitchen table, working on a bit of parchment.

"Dinner go well?" Remus asked, smiling at him.

"Yeah," Harry said reservedly. "It was good to see Ron and Hermione for a bit. And Ginny too," he added. Remus didn't comment, for which Harry was immensely grateful. "Working on anything interesting?"

"Nothing for the Order—not directly, anyway," Remus replied. "Just some thoughts...you know how it is when you can't sleep."

Harry nodded. "Remus..."

"Mm?"

"What do we do if we can't figure out how to destroy the horcruxes?"

Remus considered him, the hollows under his eyes making his eyes themselves glitter in the dim kitchen.

"I don't know. We'll just have to find a way."

"If we don't find a way by January...maybe I could go back to Hogwarts. Just until I'm needed," Harry said slowly. "I miss it."

"We'll have to see come January," Remus replied.

"All right. Goodnight, Remus."

"Sleep well, Harry. Try not to worry too much."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

Remus was well-used to the less savoury parts of London. He and Sirius had gone adventuring there when they were younger—sometimes he and Ellis had worked there too—and although he had not spent his entire exile during the time after James and Lily's death in England, he had gotten to know London pretty well when he had.

He sat in the greasy little dark-windowed cafe, the address Snape had given him on the letter sent with Arcadia. The food was too terrifying to consider, but the tea was nearly drinkable. Despite its lack of quality the cafe was crowded, even for the lunch hour. He'd had to fend off two people already who wanted to take the other chair at the table.

"Is this seat taken?"

He looked up at the man standing over him—not Snape but a slightly younger man, with pale brown hair and green eyes.

"I'm sorry; I'm waiting for someone," he said politely. The man smiled and sat. Remus knew the smile; he would have to, by now. Snape's sardonic little smirk.

"Polyjuice," Remus said quietly.

"I find it helpful," Snape agreed. "I stole the hair from a passing Muggle; believe me, it would not be my first choice of disguises."

"How do I know you're the man who was sent to meet me?"

"Don't be a fool."

"It's not foolish," Remus answered. "I have no way of knowing that my contact's communications weren't intercepted. For all I know, you could be the Dark Lord himself. I won't transact with someone whose face I can't recognise."

"I have no way of proving it."

"Where were you in the forest?"

A brown eyebrow quirked. "On the platform with the last of the explosives. And I sent the letter with Arcadia, an intelligent if somewhat barbaric young woman."

"High praise from you," Remus answered.

"Perhaps so. We cannot meet too often," Snape continued in a low voice. "I have the Dark Lord's trust, but I think we may both agree that he is notoriously...fickle in such things."

"I think *paranoid* and *sociopathic* are the words you're looking for," Remus said.

"Irrelevant," Snape countered. "I haven't much news, but I have enough. It pertains to the horcruxes."

"Oh? Have you found the sixth?" Remus asked, barely containing his eagerness.

"No...but then again, neither has he," Snape said. He sipped his tea, thoughtfully. "Draco has been a useful tool. It becomes bewildering, recalling who knows what...but he and the Dark Lord both believe my loyalty is complete. Likewise, the Dark Lord looks on him as a favoured son."

"I'm sure he enjoys that very much," Remus murmured.

"He is a child, Lupin."

"Yes; so was Harry, once."

A bare flicker of something crossed Snape's face. Anger – possibly regret.

"And again we stray from the point," Snape said, the implication more than clear: Lupin couldn't keep *on* the point. "The Dark Lord has...confided certain things in me. Perhaps I should say he has made indications. One of these is that while the majority of his...particular belongings are safe, or rather he believes them to be so, there is one which is not. He does not know where it is and he has very little idea of how to reacquire it. It...distresses him."

He waited for Remus to react; clearly he expected surprise or amazement.

"I know," Remus said quietly.

"What?"

"I know where it is, and why he can't reach it."

"Do you really," Snape drawled.

"Yes."

"What is to be done? Is it in your possession?"

"No," Remus answered. "But it's secure."

"Well, where is it?"

Remus shook his head. "Some things are better left unsaid for now. Can you warn me if he decides to go after the others?"

"If I discover such a thing, yes."

"Listen..." Remus shook his head. "You're playing a dangerous game. You could come back with me today and find safe haven. No one would think less of you."

"Are you absolutely out of what passes for your mind?" Snape asked. "If we left the running of the Order to you we'd all be dead inside of a week. You honestly want the best agent you have to come hide like a child?"

"We're winning already."

"Yes, thanks to me!"

Remus covered his eyes with one hand. "All right. It was only a suggestion. You're useful where you are."

"Yes. I am." Snape steepled his fingers. "There's other news. He's been concerned with the werewolves, but he believes that to be sorted; now he's turning his attention fully to the Order. He wasn't pleased when the Dementors were destroyed."

"I imagine not," Remus said with a small smile.

"It's no laughing matter."

"I am not laughing. What do you mean by *turning his attention to the Order*?"

"He knows, more or less, who the members are. Those at Hogwarts should be safe—you, the children, the Headmistress. He's sending...groups to deal with the rest."

Remus tensed. "Groups?"

"Yes—it's a waste of time and resources, but he sees no other way. He will chase down member after member, one at a time—he is nothing if not painstaking," Snape added.

"I need to warn Moody—"

"He's not going to start at ten in the morning on a Saturday," Snape said, grasping his arm when he started to rise. "Sit down, idiot."

Remus sank back into his chair. "When? And who, do you know?"

"I can make educated guesses. I would imagine the easily accessible—the Weasleys in Diagon, Pye at the hospital. Yes, he knows about Pye," Snape said, when Remus scowled. "And the Aurors, I should think."

"The Aurors?"

"Easy to trap and ambush."

Remus nodded, feeling suddenly very still; when he moved, if he moved, he would have to leave. He would not sit and play games with Severus Snape if Tonks was in danger.

*Or the twins*, a voice chimed in guiltily. *Or the twins and Pye.*

"Is there anything else?" he asked. "Do you need anything?"

"Many things, none of which you can provide," Snape answered. He stood, resting his hands on the table. "Watch your step."

Remus carefully and slowly counted to a hundred after Snape left, vanishing into the crowd of people. He left enough money on the table to pay both the bills and returned to the street, moving cautiously. He did not start to run until he was a block away from the cafe, and then he bolted with unseemly haste for the Leaky Cauldron and a safe place to Apparate. He went straight to Bowman's garden; Bowman himself was spreading manure on his flowerbeds and waved at him as he ran past.

"Tonks?" he called, ducking through the kitchen door hastily. "Sirius? Harry?"

There was no verbal reply, but a thud and a scuffling noise from the living room; he drew his wand and looked around the doorframe cautiously.

Harry was on the floor, sitting up and apparently trying to buckle his belt; Sirius was straightening his hair furiously.

"Bollocks, I thought he'd take longer," Harry hissed to Sirius, and Remus had a moment of relief.

"Where's Tonks?" he asked, and Harry and Sirius both turned.

"Er — she's ah —" Sirius stammered.

"Here or somewhere else?" Remus said, making it easy on them. He would torment them for getting caught with their pants down later.

"Her flat," Harry said hastily.

"Right. Sirius, take Glastonbury and go to the Weasleys' joke shop in Diagon. Tell them to set every trap they have and keep a close eye out. Then you find out where Kingsley is and warn him that the Death Eaters are going to be targeting Aurors," Remus said. "Harry, go with Sirius. And you'd better get Augustus Pye and bring him to Bowman's house. I'll be back to get him into the cottage. Sirius, you'll have to re-introduce yourself to him."

"What?" Sirius called after him, but Remus was already running back out into the garden. He took the risk and Apparated directly into Tonks' hallway; luck was with him and there were no Muggles in the corridor.

She answered looking flushed and half-dressed, and Remus realised he must have been pounding rather harder than necessary on her door.

"What's happened?" she asked sleepily. "You look frantic. Come inside."

She barely had the door shut before he moved instinctively forward and wrapped his arms around her tightly, relief flooding him.

"What's all this then?" she asked. "Have I done something brilliant without knowing it? What time is it? I was asleep..."

"What on earth were you doing asleep at this hour?" he asked, not letting go.

"I was up with Harry and Sirius after you went to bed," she answered, hugging him back and then gently shoving him away. "We played Muggle cards for ages, I thought I shouldn't wake you so I came back to the flat. What is it, what's wrong? Oooh, bloody hell," she said. "It's Snape, isn't it?"

"Voldemort's going after Aurors," he said. "Specifically. He's sending...I don't know, squadrons, groups—"

"Remus, calm down a bit," she said, resting one hand on his chest. "I'm all right, really. Have you told Kingsley or Moody?"

"I sent Sirius," he said. "He's gone to tell the Weasley boys and Pye, too."

"Snape gave you a list, did he?"

"As good as."

"Well, we're natural targets, aren't we?" Tonks said.

"Not reassuring, Tonks."

"Sorry."

"Aurors aren't immortal, you know. We lost Frank and Alice—"

"I know, Remus," she interrupted. "Believe me. Nobody knows better than I do. Merlin, you're going to have a heart attack."

She pulled him into the kitchen and handed him a kettle from the stove. He looked down at it, curiously.

"Make tea," she said. "It'll help your nerves. Something to do."

Obediently if confusedly, he filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to heat, Muggle-fashion.

"I didn't mean to barge in," he said, as she put some bread in the toaster. "Sorry."

"It's all right," she answered. "Can you stay?"

"Not for long—Sirius is bringing Augustus Pye back with him. I trust the twins to take care of themselves, but Pye's a bit of an innocent."

"I wouldn't cast too many stones about that, if I were you," she replied, leaning against the counter next to him. "Remus, you *have* realised that battling Dark wizards is a good portion of my job? I mean, essentially it's what I do."

"Well, yes, I knew that, but..."

"Bit abstract, was it?" she asked gently.

"Sort of," he muttered. The teakettle whistled and he whisked it off the stove, pouring it into the teapot even as he dropped a pair of tea-bags into it. "It's not a job, for me I mean. It's just life, dangerous things happening...I forget you're trained for it."

He filled the mugs he found hanging on hooks under the cabinet and offered her one. She smiled.

"See? Told you it would help," she said, adding sugar to hers. "Drink up or you'll keep Pye waiting in Bowman's garden—though he'd probably be interested in Mrs. Jenkins' ginger jam."

"Guaranteed to cure what ails you and a few things that weren't."

"Also cleans silverware and windows," she grinned. "Go on."

"Come with, Tonks."

"Like this? Let a girl get a wash and put her face on before you drag her off," she said.

"Your face *grows* on you," he said. "Listen, just for my peace of mind, all right?"

"Remus, this is my job."

"It's not your job to be set on in your own home by a mob of Death Eaters," he said gravely. She frowned.

"Let me pack a bag, all right?" she asked. "And I've got to send an owl to Moody. Won't be a mo—you can take my bag and I'll come to the cottage when I'm done at the office."

"Tea-making, bag-carrying—tell me the truth, Tonks," he said. "You're keeping me around for the chores, aren't you?"

She kissed his cheek. "I'll go pack. You look after the toast."

\* \* \*

They Apparated back to Bowman's garden to find Pye engaged in deep conversation with Mrs. Jenkins, holding a jar of ginger jam up to the light. Nearby, Harry and Sirius were eating crusty bread with marmalade.

"Hullo, Remus!" Pye said. "Have you been rummaging in my brain?"

"I'll explain inside," Remus said. "Sorry, Mrs. Jenkins, we have to take away your disciple."

"Honestly, Remus," Pye asked him as they walked across the grass, "What've you done to me? This boy says he's Sirius Black and that I've known him for ages."

"Bit of a memory modification," Remus said sheepishly. "Nothing major. We had to—you had to deal with Snape, Snape's a legilimens, and I didn't want him knowing about Sirius until I knew he was on our side."

"Did I say it was all right?"

"Yes," Remus lied. "But you don't remember."

"All right then," Pye said agreeably. Tonks fixed Remus with a narrow look.

"Stop here," Remus said. To them, Fourteen Back was perfectly visible, but Pye needed letting in on the secret. Remus glanced around as if expecting Lord Voldemort himself to drop out of a walnut tree.

"Fourteen Back, Richard Court Alley, Godric's Hollow," he said in a low voice. Pye started backwards as the cottage appeared to him for the first time. "Come inside and I promise I'll explain everything."

Tonks went into Remus' room, abandoning her bag on the bed. Sirius and Harry dropped into chairs at the kitchen table, kicking one out for Pye.

"I've had...information that the Dark Lord is making targets of certain people in the Order. He knows you're one of them," he said to Pye. "Sirius, did you talk to the twins?"

"Only briefly," Sirius said. "They blew something up and I had to get out or be turned into a whelk. I don't even know what a whelk is," he added. "They got the message, though, and they said they'd tell Kingsley."

"Is there a reason I was abducted from the hospital in the middle of shift while the Weasley boys get left to their explosions?" the Healer asked.

"They're a bit...er..." Remus pursed his lips. "Well, more violent than you."

"What with that oath I made to do no harm and all," Augustus said agreeably.

"Sorry, Pye."

"Quite all right, Lupin; I've never been a fugitive before. It's interesting."

"We brought him straight here," Harry said, then turned to Augustus. "You can stay if you like, we can transfigure the sofa. Do you suppose we could get an Auror to keep an eye on him if he goes back to St. Mungo's?" he asked Tonks.

"Don't see why not; it's a pretty credible threat," she answered.

"How utterly fascinating. He's not aware that I'm only marginally useful, then?" Augustus asked cheerfully.

"You're our Healer. You're extremely useful," Remus replied. "Particularly considering the amount of trouble that these two get into," he added, jerking his head at Sirius and Harry.

"Well, that's true. I don't exactly mind staying here, but I'd rather not sleep on a transfigured sofa for more than a few nights. Then again, you're right, the hospital isn't very safe."

"We could put him up with Fred and George," Harry suggested. "Or send him up to the school."

Remus looked thoughtful. "I'd like you to stay here until Monday, if you've no objection. If you want to keep working, we'll have an Auror assigned to you and you can stay with the twins; if you're up for a bit of a holiday, there's Hogwarts. You could probably justify it—Sprout has a world-class greenhouse."

"Well, I have a day to decide," Augustus said with a grin. "And I want to go back and talk to Mrs. Jenkins some more—she's past mistress of the art of medicinal jams."

"I wasn't aware there was such a thing," Tonks laughed.

"I think she invented it," Augustus agreed gravely. "Is it all right, do you suppose? To go talk to her, I mean."

"Stay within shouting distance," Remus warned, and Augustus nodded and left. Remus turned to Tonks. "If they're tracking people down—Draco had no clue where we were when he Apparated with us, did he?" he asked. She shook her head.

"He might be able to get back here, but I doubt he'd try—still, we might want to make the garden Inapparable. If the Death Eaters get hold of the Jenkinsees, it'll be no good turn we've done them," she said. "I'll get on it."

"Thanks, Tonks. We'll have to call a meeting, I think; Grimmauld Place," Remus said. "Bill and Fleur are likely targets as well. It'll be hard to get everyone together on short notice, but we ought to manage it by Thursday. You'll have to cancel with Firenze, Sirius."

Sirius nodded.

"Until then, nobody goes anywhere alone. Especially you, Harry."

"That's hardly fair—I'm stuck here all day while you're at school and Tonks is at work," Harry protested.

"Take Bowman with you, he can at least run for help, or floo straight to the twins' shop and ask one of them to come with you where you need to go. I mean it, Harry," Remus said sternly.

"Fine, whatever," Harry grumbled.

"Well, I'm going to go fix the garden, then I'll see about finding Moody and Kingsley and talking strategy," Tonks said brightly.

"I have owls to send – lots and lots of owls," Remus groaned. "I should be done packaging them all up by the time you're back from the garden – I'll go with you and we can stop off at the owl post office in London."

"Harry and I will stay out from underfoot," Sirius announced, as Tonks patted Remus' shoulder and followed Augustus out into the garden.

"Is that what the young people are calling it these days," Remus drawled. Harry turned pink. "I have to sit on that sofa, you know."

"Sorry," Harry muttered. Remus shoo'ed them off.

\* \* \*

Remus had apparently misjudged his timing, or perhaps his dates were off; Thursday was the day before the full moon. Then again, by the time he was well enough again after the full moon, it might have been too late. Living with Remus, seeing him on a daily basis each morning and night as something other than a professor, Harry was beginning to understand just what it really meant to be a werewolf. It meant measuring time in three-week segments because that all-important fourth week was a blank space. It meant doing as much as possible at the weakest possible moment just before, so that in the days after, things went smoothly.

Life became a series of before and after, and Remus was having a bad *before*.

The meeting was held at 12 Grimmauld Place, which smelled now of un-lived-in rooms and dust. Not the same sort of dust it had collected when Harry had first come there; Molly's thorough cleaning had taken care of the vermin. It was sterile, now, and it smelled that way.

The voices of the Order members echoed off the ceiling of the kitchen, raised a little now that the meeting was over. It had gone rather well, at least Harry thought so. No one had panicked. Arrangements had been made for Order members who lived alone to find others to stay with. Rosters had been drawn up for off-duty Aurors to check on members and on each other. St. Mungo's wasn't far from the Ministry, so Augustus Pye – who had wisely chosen a week-long holiday at Hogwarts over sleeping on the sofa at Fourteen Back – was to move in with Kingsley Shacklebolt, who could see him safely to the hospital before

handing him off to whoever was supposed to look after him. Harry was not displeased with the results of the meeting, except for the way it had affected Remus.

"Job well done, Harry," Arthur said, as Harry made his way towards the kitchen door. The older man clapped him on the back and gave him an encouraging smile. "You'll be running the Order single-handedly soon, eh?"

"Something like that," Harry murmured.

"Well, I think you did a fine job leading the meeting and keeping everyone in line. You know you can yell anytime if you need our help."

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley," Harry said. Arthur moved on in the opposite direction and Harry continued to press forward, aiming for the stairwell up to the living room. Behind him, he heard Sirius talking to the Weasley twins.

Upstairs, in the living room, Remus was sitting on the sofa with his coat off, his sleeves rolled up and his shirt open at the throat. His face was an unhealthy shade of grey and he was staring, eyes half-lidded, at a goblet of water held in his hands.

"Feeling better?" Harry asked quietly. Remus looked up and gave him a tired smile.

"Feeling awful, Harry. That was my job; I should have known better than to schedule the meeting today. Nobody's been hurt so far. It could have waited."

"Maybe, but then again maybe someone would have been," Harry pointed out.

"Perhaps I should have let Tonks do the talking."

"She did her fair share. It went well."

"Sorry about that, anyway," Remus said. "It's just all that noise...threw me."

"How's your head now?"

"It hurts less. So the meeting went all right, with you leading it?"

"Sure," Harry said. "I mean, it's not like I did all the talking."

"I appreciate it."

"Harry? Is Remus still up there?"

Harry twisted around to look down the stairs. Tonks stood halfway up, with Sirius just behind her.

"I'm here, Tonks," Remus said. He stood, only a little unsteadily, and crossed to the doorway, leaning around to look down at her. Harry braced him before he could stumble.

"Take him home," Harry said as Tonks hurried up the stairs. She grinned at Harry and slung her shoulder easily under Remus' arm.

"Come on, invalid," she said, tossing floo powder into the fireplace. In a moment they were gone, and Harry looked down the stairs at Sirius.

"It's clearing out a bit – people going on their way," Sirius said. "Ron and Hermione want to say goodbye and talk about the weekend."

Harry followed him down into the thinning crowd; the Weasley twins, Ron and Hermione, and Augustus Pye were the only ones left.

"Fred and George taking you back with them?" Harry asked Augustus. "Where's Kingsley gone?"

"He went on ahead. I'm going back to my flat for a few more things, then I'll floo straight to his. Don't worry, the twins are coming along," Augustus said, even as Harry opened his mouth.

"Harry, can we have a word?" Ron asked. Harry let himself be led away from the Healer, who turned to Sirius and asked him a question that Harry didn't hear.

"What's up?" Harry inquired. Ron grinned at him.

"You weren't so bad tonight, were you?" he said.

"Don't listen to him, Harry, you were great," Hermione added. "Dumbledore would've been really proud of you."

"Thanks," Harry said, sheepishly.

"We just wanted you to know that there's a lot of interest in the Order at Hogwarts," Ron continued. "There's loads of Gryffindors who want to join up. We've decided to open up Dumbledore's Army again as a sort of...I dunno, student division. If you're all right with that, of course," he added hastily.

"Sure, yeah, I guess," Harry replied. "With you two leading?"

"Well...Hermione leading," Ron said. Hermione looked pleased. "Being Head Girl and all."

"It just makes it easier to get around the curfews and that kind of thing," she said. "I started a list, if you want to see...all Gryffindors, so far, except for a few Ravenclaw friends of Ginny's."

Harry accepted the list, scanning it.

"And there's..." Hermione glanced at Ron. "Well, there's one or two Slytherins –"

"No," Harry said.

"It's not anyone in our year, it's just the ones in the year below."

"No Slytherins."

"Come on, Harry," Ron said. "I'm the first to say you can't trust a Slytherin—"

"Good," Harry retorted.

"—but they do seem like they're in earnest and they're good at Defence."

"They would be, wouldn't they?" Harry said.

"You can't go round excluding people because of their House, Harry, that's just as bad as what they do. What if we got Remus to vouch for them?" Hermione asked. "He teaches them, he knows them really well. Besides, the old rule still stands, no-one in the Order until they turn seventeen. They'd have another whole year in Dumbledore's Army before they'd even have a chance to join. It's not like we go back to the school and blab all the Order secrets anywhere."

Harry looked from Hermione's keen, pink-cheeked face to Ron's solemn freckled one.

"If Remus is willing to vouch for them and they're willing to sign a charmed promise not to reveal anything they learn at DA meetings, you can let them in," he said finally. "But you'd better tell them that if I find out one of them is a traitor, they'll all be out. So they can bloody well keep an eye on each other."

Neither of the others looked happy about it, but Ron shrugged and Hermione shook her head resignedly. They followed Augustus Pye into the kitchen cook-fire, shouting "Hogwarts School!" as they went. Sirius leaned back against one of the kitchen walls and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank Merlin they're all gone," he said. "Why are the good guys always the really noisy ones?"

Harry laughed. "Noisy and messy," he agreed, shoving a few bottles of butterbeer into a barrel that served as a trash bin. "What did Pye want with you?"

"Nothing much," Sirius replied. Harry turned and leaned closer to him, bracing one hand on the wall next to Sirius' shoulder. "Why?" Sirius asked, amused. "Jealous?"

"Not jealous, exactly," Harry said, angling his head so that their lips almost touched. "I'd say more...possessive."

Sirius smiled into the kiss, nuzzling Harry's cheek a little when it finally ended. "I don't mind being possessed," he said in a low voice. Harry felt one of

Sirius' hands grasp his shirt and pull him closer, then slide around his hip to anchor their bodies firmly together.

"You want to go back to the cottage?" Harry asked against his mouth.

"In a bit," Sirius said, pressing his hips up against Harry's. "I like kissing you here."

"Yeah?" Harry tangled his fingers in Sirius' short black hair.

"Well, there's you," Sirius said, biting Harry's lower lip. "And also it's one in the eye for my family."

Harry laughed. "What, kissing a boy in the family kitchen?"

"This is life," Sirius said, breath warm on Harry's cheek. "The house is dead. They liked it that way. Dead house, dead family, already crumbling and in ruins...life and passion is fire and light, like a slap in the face."

"Like Glastonbury in the dark," Harry answered, turning his head slightly to catch Sirius' mouth with his own again. Neither bothered to notice the spinning figures that were slowly coalescing in the flames of the kitchen fireplace until it was much too late.

## CHAPTER XXXV

"Harry, I almost forgot, I have a book for you and I need that roll sheet back, we burn them now –"

Harry's head jerked up as Hermione reappeared in the kitchen fireplace, followed by Ron. She stopped just beyond the flame, fingers over her mouth, looking shocked. Behind her, Ron's eyes bulged.

"What the bloody hell's all this, then?" Ron demanded.

"So sorry, Harry, Sirius –" Hermione said, backing into Ron. He caught her by the shoulders but didn't budge an inch.

Sirius had frozen. There hadn't even been time to pull apart, and Harry could feel the terrified speed of Sirius' pulse through his body. Very slowly, he grasped Sirius' arms and pushed him gently away. Sirius' face was a mask of fear and worry.

"I didn't want you to find out like this –" Harry started.

"I should hope not!" Ron shouted.

"Ron, stop shouting," Hermione said.

"My best friend's having it off with a bloke and you want me to stop shouting?" Ron demanded. He was still shouting. "He's your own godfather, Harry!"

Harry glanced at Sirius, who was blushing furiously.

"Well, technically not. I mean, I'm older than he is, Ron," Harry continued, trying to stay calm. "I was going to tell you –"

"When? This is sort of important news, Harry!"

"When I was ready!" Harry shouted back. "Do you think it's bloody well easy? Hi Ron, can I have a word, I'm sorry I dumped your sister but I'm gay and –"

"WHAT?"

"Don't say what you're thinking, Ron," Harry said, dangerously. "Whatever you're thinking, do not say it."

Ron's face was bright red and he was holding Hermione's shoulders so tightly that she winced and finally shrugged him off, pulling away and crossing the kitchen floor.

"It's all right, Sirius," she said, surprising all three men in the room. Sirius stared at her, dumbly. "Ron's an idiot, he doesn't mean it. He shouts when he's surprised, that's all."

She took another step closer. "Really, it's all right. I don't care. Harry's been my best friend for years."

Sirius bit his lip, looked to Harry, looked back.

"It's different for Sirius," Hermione said, turning to Harry. "You know that. It was twenty years ago. Nobody told, twenty years ago. There were *laws* against it, for god's sake." Suddenly she snickered. "Oh Merlin, and I set you up with Katie Bell...poor Katie..."

Ron was staring at Hermione as if she'd lost her mind, but some of the red was slowly draining from his face. She turned back to Sirius, reaching out to touch his shoulder gently. He didn't flinch away.

"If you make Harry happy, that's all right, then," she said. "Of course, if you hurt him, I'll kill you slowly," she added with a smile.

"Hermione—" Ron started, and she turned to him.

"Ron, is shouting really going to do us any good? I know it's a shock, but you can do better than a really stunning display of ignorance," she said. "You're smarter than that."

"What am I supposed to say, then?" he demanded.

"How about *Congratulations*," she suggested. "There's little enough to celebrate these days, especially for Harry."

"You want me to—for them—they're both blokes!"

Hermione sighed. It was a very familiar sigh to Harry and Ron. It meant that someone, somewhere, was being an idiot. Idiocy depressed Hermione.

"Perfect marks for basic anatomy," she said. "Ron, you're not really going to be a big wet blanket over this, are you? It's Harry. Who cares who he—uh—spends his time with? He's still Harry."

Ron threw himself down in one of the seats left over from the Order meeting. "He might have told us," he muttered.

"I was going to, Ron, really," Harry said. "I just hadn't quite decided how yet, and Sirius..."

"It's my fault," Sirius said suddenly. "I made him promise."

"You see?" Ron demanded, waving a hand at Sirius.

"See what, Ron? He was frightened. I would be, if I suddenly started having it off with Parvati or something," Hermione said. Harry tried not to giggle hysterically. "It isn't easy, you know."

"Oh, you're such an expert all of a sudden?" Ron asked testily.

"Course I am. My uncle's—well, he likes both. It took him ten years to even tell my dad," Hermione said calmly. "And if you put a few facts together, it's pretty obvious that Professor McGonagall..."

Ron stared at her. "How could you possibly—"

"Professor Grubbly-Plank?" Harry asked abruptly. Hermione nodded and grinned.

"And I thought Professor Lupin was, for a while," she said. "Ginny and I had a bet on. Tonks lost me two Galleons," she said, aggrieved.

Ron growled. "You're talking about Galleons while they're standing there—"

"Standing there doing what? Being gay? It's not something they're doing on purpose to annoy you, I'm sure," she retorted.

"Ron, I am sorry," Harry said. "For not telling you, I mean."

Ron did not look pacified, but he didn't immediately reply; finally, he crossed his arms and muttered, "You might at least have considered me before someone you haven't known six months."

Hermione began to laugh. "Ron! Really!"

"He did," Sirius said, stopping Hermione's laughter abruptly. Ron glared at him. "No, really, he did—didn't you, Harry?"

"I didn't know I—it's only been a few weeks, you can't go saying things like that," Harry said miserably. "I don't even—what I mean is, I don't know if it's that it's Sirius or I just never thought about it, or..."

"No, but you did. Unconsciously or whatnot," Sirius said. "You snogged his sister for ages. She looks just like him."

Ron gaped. "Are you saying he was going out with Ginny because he—ew!"

"Well, you can't have it both ways," Harry said crossly.

"Tell my uncle that," Hermione murmured.

"Either you're all right with it and jealous, or you think it's disgusting, but if you don't like the idea you've no right to be jealous of Sirius," Harry continued. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but Sirius did make me promise, and if I'd known you were going to be like this about it, I would have been a lot less reluctant about promising, I can tell you that."

"Ron?" came a voice from the fire. "Hermione, are you there?"

Molly's head appeared in the flames. "I thought you were only going back to get your scarf, Hermione. Have you found it yet?"

"No, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "I think someone must have taken it with them. It's all right – we're coming back now."

"All right," Molly said. "Dinner's ready and you know you have to be back at Hogwarts by eight...Harry, Sirius, are you still there? Not still cleaning up, I hope."

"No, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. "Just going now."

"Why don't you come to dinner with us? There's plenty of food..."

"Most awkward meal *ever*," Sirius murmured. Harry glanced at Ron, trying to come up with a good excuse.

"Ron," Hermione said, with quiet urgency. "You don't get a second chance at these things."

"Well, it's not like they can never come to dinner again," Molly said, confused.

"You might as well come, then," Ron said slowly. The frown didn't leave his face, but he managed to look at Sirius, which was more than he'd been able to do before. "Besides, I don't think Sirius and I are done talking."

"Uh oh," Sirius muttered, as Molly's head disappeared from the fire and Ron stepped into it. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and gave it a quick squeeze before following.

"I'll go first, in case Ron's armed himself with the poker," Harry said. Sirius caught his arm as he moved to go, turned him around, and kissed him. Harry smoothed his hair down, affectionately.

"Could have been worse," he said.

"Don't tell me that," Sirius answered. He followed close on Harry's heels, emerging into the bright, warm comfort of Molly's kitchen.

\* \* \*

Remus was tired, but he wasn't quite ready to sleep yet; it was important, above all, to maintain a normal schedule around the moon, or else it would put his internal clock out of joint for days. Besides, he was perfectly happy to sit on the living room sofa with Tonks curled up against him and a book on his lap, though he was paying more attention to Tonks than the book. She was a comforting weight against his shoulder and hip, and her bright pink hair was a blot of cheerful colour against the dark blanket that she'd brought for him.

Glastonbury had brought a note from Sirius saying they were going to have dinner with the Weasleys; now he was chattering cheerfully to himself,

perched on the grandfather clock in the corner. He stopped abruptly enough that Remus glanced over at him and a second later Harry appeared in the fireplace, followed by Sirius.

"Good evening," Remus said. "Got your note, Sirius. How was dinner?"

Glastonbury swooped off the clock and fluttered down on Sirius' outstretched arm.

"Incredibly awkward," Sirius said, stroking Glastonbury's plumage affectionately.

"It wasn't so bad," Harry replied. "Ron and Hermione...um...sort of found out."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "About...?"

Sirius nodded.

"And?"

"Ron didn't take it well," Harry said.

"Found out about what?" Tonks asked sleepily, opening her eyes. Harry glanced at Sirius, who made a gesture of defeat and slumped into a chair.

"Sirius and me," Harry said carefully.

"Oh, is that all?" she asked. Harry stared at her.

"Did you tell her?" Sirius asked Remus.

"No..." Remus glanced down at Tonks, who grinned at him.

"Come on, do you think I'm blind? I practically live here and Harry's not very good at hiding this kind of thing. You could cut the hormones in the room with a knife," she added, burrowing back into Remus' shoulder. Sirius covered his face with his hands.

"Ron didn't take it well," Harry said, deciding to ignore Tonks for the moment. "He was...well, I guess he had good reasons."

"My fault," Sirius repeated. "I'm the one who made you swear not to tell anyone."

"I don't think he'll have any problem with blaming you, either," Harry sighed. Remus watched him as he sat in the other chair, long legs sprawling, slouching in the exact way James had done in a similar chair in this room, eighteen years ago. "Hermione took it a bit better."

"Always the level-headed one, Hermione," Remus agreed. "Is Ron all right with it now?"

"Well, he didn't talk much at dinner," Harry said. "But Hermione says he'll come round."

"It's a bit of a shock, that much is true," Remus said. "It takes a day or two sometimes. James and I walked in on Sirius with Matthew Byrnbaum and we did need drinks afterwards..."

"Who's Matthew Byrnbaum?" Harry asked sharply, looking at Sirius. Remus hid a grin and Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Nobody. He's – was – a Hufflepuff. Apparently I was desperate enough by seventh year to think he was interesting," Sirius said. "I think Moony made it up to embarrass me."

"I never did," Remus answered, amused. "Byrnbaum lives in New York now, owns his own apothecary's shop. I'm afraid I can't think of a way to ask him about all this that wouldn't be rude, however."

"Don't bother," Sirius groaned. "I'm going upstairs."

"Tonks," Harry said, "You won't tell anyone, will you? I don't mind, but Sirius..."

"Mmm-m," Tonks said, shaking her head. "I won't tell."

"I'd better go talk to him," Harry said, nodding in the direction Sirius had gone.

"That might be good," Remus answered quietly. "Believe it or not, Harry, there are worse things that can happen than a little shouting."

"I know it," Harry said.

"Would you remind Sirius that he's teaching for me tomorrow?" Remus asked. "The notes are on my desk like always."

Harry nodded. "Where are you going for the full moon?"

"The Shack, as usual. Sirius has said he'll come down after he eats dinner."

"We'll come keep you company on Saturday, too," Harry promised.

"Thank you," Remus said, watching Harry and thinking still of his father, twenty years before.

\* \* \*

The night of the full moon, Augustus Pye and Fleur Delacour were both attacked.

Or rather, the attempt was made to attack them. Augustus came out the worst, unfortunately; a Death Eater posing as a patient nearly made short work of him but Augustus proved surprisingly deft in combat, probably the result of a thorough knowledge of anatomy. It was true that he ended up bleeding in a

dozen places and nursing two broken ribs, but his opponent was curled on the floor and screaming in agony by the time the Auror assigned to keep watch on the Healer burst into the room.

"Kidneys are very sensitive, you know," was all the Healer said in reply to the Auror's respectfully questioning look.

It was rather a blow to Augustus' pride that they only sent one man after him, when it turned out later in the evening that they'd sent four after Fleur. Fortunately, Fleur was quite adept at using mirrors to bounce charms in unexpected directions; when they tried to take her while she was trying on a dress in one of Diagon's fashion boutiques, she simply used the mirrors in front of her to send one hex three ways, then turned and kicked the fourth Death Eater in the groin. This would have been more effective if her target had been male, but a swift jab between the legs is still a swift jab between the legs.

The rest of the Order got wind of the two attacks in time to get inside and stay inside, and the Aurors nipped from floo portal to floo portal, arranging patrols and warding shut any unnecessary windows and doors. It was a good distraction for Tonks, anyway, who as Moody put it would otherwise just have sat in a bar in Hogsmeade and brooded while her boyfriend howled and licked himself.

Sirius came down to the Shack for the change, of course, and kept Remus company. It was amazing the changes wrought by the full moon—not just physical, but in personality as well. Remus had always been a serious, studious sort of man, even when he was almost too young to be called a man at all, but the wolf was puppy-like, ready to chase anything that moved fast and wrestle with his companions. Perhaps the wolf was allowed to be the child Remus never quite was.

At any rate, though Remus had been exhausted and ill in the hours before the Change, the wolf was eager to play and Sirius was not at all loathe to abandon rational thought for an evening. Besides, playing with Moony was always fun, always had been fun. In unguarded moments he saw enough of *his* Moony, gawky and uncertain and sixteen years old, to know that Harry's Remus—confident, kind, teacherly and calm—was merely another layer, like a new cloak. Moony still belonged to him, somewhere deep inside, and it came out on the full moons.

Just after dawn, after Remus had become Remus again and fallen into an exhausted sleep with Padfoot curled up against his stomach to keep him warm,

there was a noise on the stairs. A second later he could smell Tonks and Harry, and he carefully lifted his head without waking Remus, perking his ears forward as they entered.

"Hiya, Sirius," Tonks said softly, coming to sit on the bed and rub him behind the ears. "How is he?"

Sirius licked her hand and did his best doggy smile. She smiled back.

"Not hurt anywhere?"

A headshake.

"He looks all right."

"I'll stand first watch, if you want to sleep," Harry said. Sirius noticed, even with his limited vision, that they both seemed tired but Tonks looked ready to drop. She nodded her thanks at Harry and lifted the blankets, sliding in next to Remus. He shifted only slightly and made no noise as she curled up against his back, draping one arm over his hip to continue patting behind Padfoot's ears. Harry went to the boarded-over window and peered out through a crack in one board, the only crack that hadn't been sealed with bits of rag or plaster.

"There were two attacks last night," Harry said quietly, so as not to wake Remus—or Tonks, whose eyes were already drifting shut. "Augustus and Fleur. They're both fine—Augustus will be, anyway, once the bones knit. Tonks spent all night making sure everyone else was secure. Remus was right. Voldemort's going to start picking us off any way he can."

Sirius turned to look at him, laid back his ears and showed his teeth.

"Well, I think so too, but we have to be careful. We don't have enough Aurors to put a guard on everyone and nobody can stay indoors or in public places forever. I may ask the twins to have someone else mind their shop so that they can help—they're the best fighters we have, after the Aurors. It makes me angry, you know."

Sirius cocked his head.

*"The best lack all convictions, while the worst are full of passionate intensity,"* said a voice behind him hoarsely. Remus was watching Harry through half-lidded eyes.

"That's it exactly," Harry said, not bothering to scold him for being awake.

"Yeats," Remus answered. He closed his eyes, but he didn't stop talking. *"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last..."*

His voice faded and Harry looked out the window again, assuming he'd gone back to sleep. It was almost startling when he spoke again.

"Harry, you must not allow yourself to be drowned. A way will come," Remus said.

"A way...?" Harry asked, mystified. "I'm not in the habit of drowning, Remus."

Remus smiled. "No, of course not."

"You'd better sleep some more. You're not making much sense," Harry said. Remus nodded slightly. "I'm keeping watch, don't worry."

Padfoot burrowed deeper against Remus' chest, reassuringly. Remus made a half-hearted noise and, apparently, slipped back into sleep.

Since it was Saturday, Ron and Hermione came down to the Shack to see Remus late in the day and meet with Tonks about the attacks. No more had been made so far, but even Hogwarts was not going to be immune forever, and they wanted to see about making the castle more secure.

Harry was still there when they arrived; Hermione smiled hesitantly at him and Ron gave him a sort of rough greeting that indicated he was still turning things over in his mind. That was all right; Harry was used to Ron taking a little extra time to get things sorted. At least he wasn't ignoring him completely. There had been times in the past...

But then that was in the past, before the war that no-one had any illusions was not already upon them. There was this to be said for it—it gave you a proper perspective on the rest of your life. When you didn't know how much time you had, you made it count.

"I've had a letter from Charlie," Ron said, after they had finished discussing new ideas for protecting Hogwarts. "It's weird, actually...he's being a bit roundabout. Particularly for Charlie."

He offered the letter to Remus, who held out his hand and took it, unfolding it carefully.

"Tell Remus that I've met a pal of his who brought me a lovely samovar and we've been listening to music together," he read, brow furrowed. "In fact, he's going to take my place here for a little while so I can come home and see the family. I'll probably be home by the middle of November." He looked up at Ron. "Very roundabout. I suppose one of my Russian friends is visiting him, but I can't think why he would. Unless he had some message to give someone in the Order, and it

couldn't be sent by owl—but then why would Charlie try to send me an Owl about it?"

"Maybe he's not," Tonks said, leaning over his shoulder. "Maybe he's bringing it—he does say he'll be coming this way soon."

"Unless he's traveling Muggle-fashion he'd have beaten the owl here, I'd think," Remus said. "Odd. You will let us know when he arrives, won't you?"

"I'll have Dad owl you—I haven't told Mum he's coming yet," Ron said. "She'll just fret until he shows up."

"All right," Remus said, handing back the note. "I wish he'd said something about how he's going. We could have sent someone to meet him."

"Charlie's always been independent," Ron said with a shrug. "He handles dragons for a living, so a few Death Eaters probably won't be a problem."

"Let's hope," Remus said reservedly. "Now, you and Hermione had better get back to school, and Harry and Tonks look dead on their feet."

"Well, you can't stay here tonight," Tonks said sceptically. "It isn't far to the floo and we can go directly to Fourteen Back from here."

Ron and Hermione politely turned to look in other directions as Remus began to climb stiffly out of bed; Sirius took his arm and helped him upright, then allowed Tonks to take over.

"We'll come in a bit," Sirius said as they made slow, painful progress towards the door. When they were gone, the four teenagers stood in awkward silence for a while before Hermione cleared her throat.

"We should go back, I guess," she said. "You could, uh, walk with us part of the way."

"Oh, well—we should floo back from downstairs, but we could walk you as far as Hogsmeade," Harry agreed. Hermione glanced at Ron; when he didn't move, she gave him a gentle shove in Harry's direction.

"Sirius, would you like to walk with me?" she asked, taking his arm and dragging him towards the door. He looked back over his shoulder as they went, but he didn't overtly resist.

"So," Harry said. "Everything all right? At Hogwarts, I mean."

"Yeah, Hogwarts...s'all right, I guess," Ron said. "Lot of work, and all."

"Yeah."

"Listen, Harry..."

"No, it's fine," Harry said, waving one hand vaguely.

"It's just weird, you know?"

"Yeah, it is weird. I mean, for me too."

Another awkward silence.

"So you're really, um..."

"I dunno. Still sort of figuring it out. It doesn't matter though, it doesn't change anything," Harry said. "Not any more than, you know, you and Hermione."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess not."

"So it's not really different. I'm not. And there's all this other...stuff going on, that's a lot more important. Um, so I'm going to sort it out when I—if I live through all this."

"That sounds like a good plan. Not sorting it out just yet," Ron agreed. "I could do that too, I guess."

"All right."

"All right. So...sorry?" Ron said, holding out his hand. Harry shook it solemnly. "No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings," Harry repeated. "Want to go down to Hogwarts now? Only, we told Remus and Tonks we wouldn't be too long."

Ron nodded and fell into step with Harry, and soon they'd caught up with Sirius and Hermione, who were waiting for them in the snow at the boundary of the Shack's fence. It felt strange to walk down to Hogsmeade next to Sirius and know that Ron and Hermione knew all about it, to know that he didn't need to hide it from them anymore. He wasn't quite sure he liked it, yet, but he had the feeling that it would grow on him.

They left Ron and Hermione at the edge of town and made their way back to the Shack, through the floo and home again, in silence. The house was quiet too, except for Tonks speaking to Remus in his room. Harry barely bothered to kick off his shoes and shrug out of his coat before he flopped down on his bed upstairs, but Sirius hesitated in the middle of the floor, looking at him.

"Things okay between you and Ron?" he asked.

"Yeah. He's sort of sorry."

Sirius nodded. "If you want to finish it...I mean, who am I, right? But you've got a reputation and friends who care about that kind of thing..."

"They're your friends too," Harry said.

"Not really. My friends are all dead. Or old," Sirius added, with a faint trace of a smile. "It's all right—one day I might belong here, but I don't yet...*here* I do," he corrected himself, seeing Harry's look. "At Fourteen Back, because

you're here and Moony is here. But this world, this time, it isn't mine yet. I was never supposed to be here."

"But you *are* here," Harry said. "That's not going to change."

Sirius shrugged. "Everything changes. I just want to know if we should stop. If you want to."

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't want to. I don't see the point of stopping just because you're not supposed to be here. I'm not supposed to be here either—I was supposed to die sixteen years ago. Bollocks to what's supposed to happen."

The other man grinned, looking relieved. "Right. Bollocks to that."

Harry sat up on the bed and pulled his shirt off, tossing it carelessly on a nearby chair. "Anyway, I think we got interrupted in the kitchen two days ago, didn't we? I haven't even seen much of you since then..."

Sirius moved forward, still hesitant until one outstretched hand touched Harry's bare shoulder.

"Granted, it's not one in the eye for your family anymore, but I imagine we could still make it interesting," Harry said, before Sirius stole his breath with a kiss, and the words became vastly unimportant anyway.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

The Wednesday night that Charlie Weasley nearly died started out on such a positive note.

Remus was up and about again, looking nearly as healthy as he ever looked and back from his first full day of teaching since Thursday. He'd tried to teach the whole day on Tuesday, but at lunch he'd had to admit defeat and let Sirius handle his afternoon classes. McGonagall dropped by and said that Sirius had a knack for teaching, suggesting in her own subtle way that perhaps after NEWTs he'd like to stay on as tutor and work his way up to professor when one of the faculty eventually retired, lost one too many limbs, or turned out to be evil. All three were about equally common at Hogwarts.

At any rate, Remus was feeling accomplished and having fun playing fetch with Padfoot in the garden, throwing the various sticks, rocks, and unripe fruit that Padfoot laid worshipfully at his feet. Tonks and Harry were up a tree with Bowman, helping to prune it. It was warm in the little walled garden, however the wind might howl outside, and the sun was low enough in the sky to turn the light a peculiar colour somewhere between dusk and true night.

Harry dropped down from the tree with leaves in his hair and a big smudge of dirt across his cheek just as Padfoot grew tired of fetch and threw himself down in front of the kitchen door, sides heaving. Remus bent to scratch his ears and then stepped over him, passing inside just as Tonks fell out of the tree with a *whump*.

"I'm fine," she called, as Harry and Padfoot both looked up. "Didn't fall far! Nothing to worry about!"

Bowman eased his way down the ladder he'd used to get into the tree with in the first place. "Well, that's t'quickest route between A and B," he chuckled. "Want some salve? My Missus makes a good bruise salve."

"No, thank you Bowman, I'm all right," Tonks assured him. Harry sat on the grass near Padfoot, pulling the debris of the tree-trimming out of his hair. "Where's Remus gone?"

"Right here," Remus said, emerging from the cottage. He held a book in one hand and a bowl of ice cream in the other. The book was offered to Harry; the ice cream was held well out of reach of Tonks. "I thought you might be interested in this, Harry; I seem to recall talking nonsense to you on Saturday, and I wasn't sure if you knew where it came from."

"This is just your copy of *Two Kneazles*," Harry said, examining the book.

"I'm pretty sure what I was looking for is in there – flip through the pages a bit," Remus said around a bite of ice cream. "You're looking for a loose piece of paper."

Harry gave him a sardonic look. At least five pieces of paper stuck out of the book at odd angles, makeshift bookmarks.

"The one you want is in green ink and it's somewhere near the back," Remus specified. Harry pulled out what looked, for all the world, like a restaurant napkin that had been mauled by a small child. "That's the one."

"What is it?" Harry asked, mystified.

"Well, it's a bit of a story, actually. I think what I was saying to you were lines from an old poem called *The Second Coming*, which should be on one side of that poor napkin," Remus said. Harry flipped it over and nodded. "Recognise any of it?"

"Oh – yeah, here it is," Harry said. "*The best lack all convention –*"

"– conviction –"

"*While the worst are full of passionate intensity.*"

"Yeats," Remus said, as Harry read the rest. "It was...oh, it must have been seventy-nine, because Ellis was there but Lily wasn't pregnant yet...we were having a drink at a pub in Edinburgh and it was rather...rather dismal, really. The war wasn't going well and everyone was speaking rather gloomily of our prospects. I quoted Yeats – I've always liked Irish poets – and Ellis got rather angry with me."

He grinned as he spoke, the ice cream bowl balancing forgotten on one knee while Padfoot nosed at it delightedly.

"He said that people had been talking about the end of the world nearly since it began and he was more interested in what people would be doing when the world ended rather than how they were preparing for it. He sat down right there and wrote a reply to Yeats. I was – still am – excessively proud of it, because he wrote it for me."

Harry turned the page over, examining the spiky handwriting on the other side.

*And why should some poor tethered bird  
Once-hooded, hear his master's call  
When now he has again been sent to wing?*

*Things fall apart; thus ever is the way  
That we move upwards. Anarchy  
Does this at least: new things arise.  
I see no tides but that the moon pulls in  
A necessary ceremony, and most innocent.  
The best lack no conviction, but are young  
And we deride their passionate beliefs.*

"Did he know about you?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Ellis had a way of drawing secrets out of people—I don't think he even intended it, but something about him made you want to tell him things. Sirius!" he said suddenly. Padfoot looked up at him, muzzle covered in ice cream. Remus sighed and set the bowl on the ground. "Cur."

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Perhaps your second coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Vanity makes  
You certain of your own great destiny  
That some most fearsome god selected you  
To be our final prophet of the end.  
A shape with lion body and the head of an ass  
A gaze blank and hopeless without light  
You move your slow lips while all about  
Reel your disciples, shadows ignorant.*

"Tough competition," Harry muttered. Remus looked amused.

"Apples and oranges, Harry. You and Ellis could not be more different. Besides, he was a Slytherin."

"He was?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yes. Very ambitious in his own way, and it paid off—by the time he was twenty-six he was a best-selling author. Not that a Gryffindor couldn't do it, but I imagine a Gryffindor would write adventure novels," Remus said.

*The darkness drops again; but I have seen  
Twenty centuries of human life  
Are vexed the more by Prophets such as you.  
That rough beast slouching towards the eastern sky*

*Is dawn, and nothing more, reborn each day.*

Harry went to close the book, carefully replacing the napkin, but another sheet of paper fell out; he bent to pick it up, studying the typewritten words.

*There are two classifications of werewolf in wizarding society, the feral werewolf and the non-feral werewolf. It is in itself an objectionable pair of terms; one implying outright barbarism, the other implying not any form of conscious civilisation but merely a lack of barbarism. A man cannot be identified by what he is not, but yearns to be known for who he is.*

*The feral werewolf is no less a human being than any other, but has chosen or been driven to a life outside of civilised society, on the verge of conditions which would disgust any right-thinking person. Some are illiterate, many are undernourished, and all are unemployed; temporary work of the most menial sort is all they may expect, and many must steal to survive. They are unable to even to beg, thanks to the restrictive new laws which triple the allotted punishment for any given crime if the perpetrator is known to be or proven to be a werewolf.*

*If a werewolf is arrested for vagrancy, he may be punished by up to six months in Azkaban and fines which he is ill-equipped to pay. If he is not known to be a werewolf and a blood test is performed illegally to determine such, the ends justify the means and the blood test is admissible in trial. Werewolves have no medical rights; their medical status – for it is a disease – is not protected under Healer confidentiality. The blood test becomes legal if it is positive. This is a monstrous miscarriage of justice...*

“Did Ellis Graveworthy write this too?” Harry asked, offering the paper to Remus, who frowned.

“No,” he said briefly.

“Is it a quote from somewhere? It’s very good...”

Remus shook his head. “Schoolboy scribbings. I wrote it—dreams of being a political journalist or a novelist like Ellis,” he said sheepishly. “Nothing ever came of it.”

“Oh,” Harry said, offering him the book back. Remus took it almost possessively, carefully placing the typewritten page between the cover and the frontispiece. “I’d think that’d be a great book, though. I mean. Sensational, novels by a werewolf.”

"Yes—selling my novelty was the reason I never bothered," Remus sighed.

At that point, George Weasley burst through the back door, fell over Padfoot, sent the ice-cream bowl flying and skidded through the dirt, rolling to a stop at Harry's feet. It happened so fast that nobody but Tonks had moved; she had her wand pressed to the back of George's neck before anyone could think.

"It's me, Tonks!" he cried, facedown in the grass. "Lemme up!"

"George?" Remus asked, while Padfoot madly licked all the melted ice cream off his fur. "What's happened? Tonks, let him go before you blast his head off."

Tonks leaned back and turned him over, offering him a hand up. "Sorry."

"Charlie's come home, and he's in a bad way," George said. "You've got to come, he's demanding you and it's—" he looked pale and worried, a frightening emotion on his usually genial face. "He might—they say—please, come quick."

"Of course," Remus said, even as Fred's voice was heard over the wall shouting "OI! LET ME IN!"

"We couldn't Apparate in," George said.

"We've put up wards. FRED!" Remus shouted. "GO BACK TO ST MUNGO'S. WE'LL MEET YOU THERE."

"RIGHT YOU ARE!" Fred shouted back.

"I'd better go too," Tonks said.

"No—stay with Harry and Sirius."

"I'm not staying here!" Harry protested.

"If it's some sort of trap, you're safer here," Remus said. "We can fight about it later. Send Glastonbury to find me, and when everything's cleared I'll send him back to fetch you."

Sirius, who had changed back when Fred started shouting, whistled shrilly and Glastonbury's head poked out the window even as Remus and George ran back inside.

"Glas, find Remus and stay with him until he sends you back," Sirius said, as Glastonbury tilted his orange head and regarded Sirius with one beady black eye. "Go to Remus, all right?"

Glastonbury puffed himself up, smoked a little, and vanished. Sirius turned to Harry.

"You'd better have a quick wash, you've got ice cream in your hair," Harry said.

\* \* \*

At St. Mungo's, George led Remus quickly past the admitting mediwitch and through the maze of hospital corridors until they arrived at a consulting room, not unlike the one Sirius had recently been treated in after his encounter with the Crypt King. Arthur and Molly were standing outside, clutching each other tightly.

"Bill's gone in to look," Arthur said, when he saw George and Remus approaching. Fred came from another direction, having Apparated back to a different part of the hospital. "We didn't...it's very..."

"It's all right, Dad," Fred said. "Remus, you'd better go in."

"Am I allowed?" Remus asked, looking through the slightly-open door. Healers were clustered around a bed, talking in low, urgent tones.

"You'd better," Arthur repeated his son's suggestion, and Remus slipped into the room. One of the Healers looked up.

"Family only," he said.

"Please, I was told I should come—I was told he's asking for me," Remus said.

"Right—you're Lupin?" another one asked.

"Remus, thank god," a third one said at the same time, and Augustus Pye's head poked up out of the huddle. "He's been near on to screaming for you. Can't think why, but he says he has to speak with you."

He beckoned Remus closer, sliding over to make room. Charlie did look awful; he was bloody from head to toe with huge gashes on his chest and arms and a nasty-looking puncture wound near his jugular. His eyes were open, though, and fever-bright. His arm, being tended to by a pair of Healers, looked...wrong, and Remus realised what he thought was a bandage was actually a shard of bone sticking out.

"Is he here?" Charlie asked. When he spoke there was an ominous sucking noise.

"It's me, Charlie," Remus answered. "Don't speak too much, all right? Tell me only what you have to."

"My trousers..."

Remus glanced at Pye.

"We cut them off; they're in the corner," he said, indicating a heap of filthy rags in a bin.

"Left back pocket," Charlie rasped. "Cigarette case."

Remus went to the pile and dug through it, eventually coming up with what looked like a gold cigarette case.

"Transfigured," Charlie continued. "Your friends in Russia...found something."

"All right, Charlie, it's fine," Remus said. "I've got it. Don't tell me how – I'll have Fred and George look at it."

"Very important...no note..."

"Be quiet and let them help you, now," Remus said. "I've got it; it's safe."

Charlie nodded, swallowing painfully. Pye broke away from the others and pulled Remus to a far corner of the room.

"Some of his wounds are two days old, at least," he said. "Some are fresh. Do you know where he's been?"

"Traveling from Romania, as far as I know. He said he was coming to see us. He didn't say why, not outright."

"I think he must have met a few enemies on the way – so whatever that is, you'd better keep close watch on it," Pye said soberly.

"Is he going to be all right?" Remus asked. "He looks bad, but not...fatal."

"The damage is pretty extensive and there's a nasty curse on him. I can't honestly tell the family he'll survive, not yet – but he's young and I've found that Weasleys in particular are durable," Augustus said quietly. "I think he'll pull through if they can get the curse off him."

"Best Healers in the hospital?" Remus asked, tucking the cigarette case into his pocket.

"Of course," Pye replied. "And as soon as we leave we'll have a guard put on the door."

"You're a master, Pye. Thanks," Remus said. "Let us know as soon as you can."

In the hallway, the Weasley clan *en masse* hadn't moved except for George, who had disappeared.

"He's gone to get Ron and Ginny," Arthur said. "And...and probably try to fetch Percy. Is he...?"

"He doesn't look as bad as I thought he would," Remus said. "Pye's optimistic."

"Thank Merlin. Why did he call you?"

"I..." Remus frowned. "I'm not sure—he had a message for me but he could have given it to you. He's not well, likely not thinking straight." He moved aside as a handful of doctors left the room without looking at the people waiting in the hall. Pye and two others remained inside. "It may be vital information—he hand-carried it from Romania, and if I'm right, he had it from some friends of mine from Moscow. Too dangerous to trust to regular post or even floo express, and transfigured to disguise it."

"That's two, now," Arthur said dangerously. "Two sons attacked, one risking his life every other day and one who won't speak to us—how many sons does the Order expect me to give up, Remus?"

"Arthur, I didn't—"

"Who next? Fred and George? Ginny?" Arthur demanded. "You can talk all you like about whose choice it is and the good of the country, Remus, but these are my *children*."

"What do you expect me to do?" Remus replied. "I didn't ask Charlie to do it, I didn't even know he had done until it was too late to stop him."

Arthur opened his mouth for an angry answer that he probably would have regretted later, except that Ron and Ginny appeared around a corner and began shouting questions at him. Remus moved unobtrusively aside and gestured for Fred and George to follow.

"Lads, Charlie brought this to us and it's extremely important," he whispered, showing them the cigarette case. "He said it was transfigured to hide its original appearance, but he wasn't in any kind of shape to tell me how. He might not even know. I need you to work out what it was and change it back. I'm sorry—I know it's not a good time, but Charlie risked his life for this."

He glanced up and was stunned to see Percy Weasley standing against the opposite wall, ignoring them completely and staring at his parents.

"I thought he wouldn't come," Fred said to George.

"I dunno, I banged on his front door and shouted through it and didn't get any answer," the other brother replied.

"We do that a bit," Fred explained. "Bang on his door and all. He's talked to Mum and Dad once or twice—they have great loud rows about the Order, but it sounds almost like Dad's coming round to Percy's way of thinking."

"Which is?" Remus asked.

"Better to stand back and let the Ministry handle it," George said disgustedly. "Or at any rate better not to take the dangerous jobs. Load of bollocks, I think, but it's brave talk when I'm not the one with the sucking chest wound."

Pye emerged from the room just then and went to Arthur and Molly, speaking quietly; from the relieved look on Molly's face, Remus deduced that they'd been able to fix the curse. Fred and George went to speak to their parents while Remus and Percy waited like ghosts in the hallway; eventually they returned.

"We're going to the canteen," Fred said.

"Come along," George added. "We'll work on things there."

Remus nodded and followed them up the stairs to the canteen level, the cigarette case heavy in his pocket. While they bought food he sat at a table and turned it over in his hands, considering it carefully. It didn't have anything inside it; it did, on the other hand, seem to have that look about it—like a mediocre stage prop, it didn't seem quite real. It lacked detail. For one thing, it was so *shiny*.

With the cigarette case, two bags of crisps, an enormous soda and a small pile of chocolate bars sitting on the table before them, the twins bent their heads in earnest discussion. The case twisted and stretched, shrunk and grew as the boys experimented with it; at one point it vanished for a few seconds, only to reappear a little ways away. Remus, meanwhile, sent Glastonbury back with a note for the others with a little information, and then had what he considered was a rather well-deserved cup of tea.

"I think we've got it," Fred said finally, clearing away the junk-food wrappers and setting the cigarette case in the empty space. He and George touched the tips of their wands to it and concentrated.

With a soft *pop*, the case vanished. In its place was a large, flat square object.

Remus stared at it. "You're having me on."

"Normally we would be," George assured him, "but this is the real thing."

"It can't be."

"It is," Fred said. He tilted his head for a better look. "Mint condition, looks like. Dad's got loads of these—it's called a Vy Nell, isn't it?"

"Vinyl," Remus muttered, picking up the LP delicately. It was in the original paper sleeve, which had very simple red print on it.

*"Igor Stravinsky – The Fire Bird,"* Fred read. *"Nineteen-ten complete ballet score."*

Remus shook it out of its sleeve and peered inside, hoping for a note, a map, something other than a dusty old vinyl record.

"Could it be double-transfigured?" he asked.

"We'd have found it," George said. "Whatever your contacts wanted to tell you, it's all there."

"The record might have something informative on it," Remus muttered. "Can you change it back, for now?"

"Sure," Fred answered, tapping it with his wand. It shrank down and fattened out into the gold cigarette case once more. Remus gathered it up into his pocket and stood, pausing to think before speaking again.

"Harry and S – and Nigel and Tonks will probably be with the rest of your family by now," he said. "We can go down to see them; then I think I'd better take Ron and Ginny back to Hogwarts. I'll have business there this evening."

"If you think you're leaving us behind, you're mad," Fred said.

"You want the Vy Nell player from your office, don't you?" George asked.

"We can get it for you."

"Stop doing that," Remus said, annoyed. "I know you practice it."

"What?" they asked in unison. Remus rubbed his eyes. Finally, he took his office key out of his pocket and offered it to them.

"And I shall know if you make any duplications of it," he said. "Bring the record-player – you recall what it looks like?"

"Small wooden box, big horn-looking thingy," Fred confirmed, and they both vanished.

\* \* \*

Everyone had gathered in Charlie's room by the time the twins returned; Tonks was speaking outside with Pye about security arrangements, the Weasley siblings (except for Percy) were sitting in a tight knot near Charlie's head on one side and Arthur and Molly sat on the other.

Harry and Sirius lingered near Remus at the doorway, looking rather like they weren't sure what to do. Percy stood next to them, hands in his pockets, head down, eyes occasionally darting up to examine Charlie's sleeping face.

"What is it he brought you, then?" Arthur finally asked, looking at Remus. Remus took the cigarette case out of his pocket.

"It's transfigured; Fred and George solved it," he said. "It's a record—vinyl," he added, recalling that the twins had said Arthur had a few. "They're bringing me the phonograph so I can play it."

"What does it say?" Molly asked.

"Well...it says it's the Fire Bird suite, by Stravinsky," Remus said uncomfortably. "He was a squib composer in Russia, he wrote for ballet. I don't know if that's actually what it is; if so it might tie in somehow to the phoenix egg we discovered."

Sirius reached up and stroked Glastonbury, who was sitting on his shoulder and giving his ear a sunburn.

"What could it possibly tell you?" Bill asked. "Why would they send Charlie all the way here just to bring you a record?"

"Perhaps it's something in the music," Remus shrugged. "I don't recall it, fully, but it had to do with a phoenix somehow."

"Remus," Tonks said, leaning through the doorway, "Fred and George are here..."

Remus looked at Arthur and Molly. "You have a right to listen, but you can send us out if you like."

"It's only music," Bill said to his father. "It might help him. Charlie *deserves* it."

Arthur frowned disapprovingly, but gestured for Remus to bring them in. The twins appeared carrying the phonograph between them and set it down in a chair that Ron vacated. Remus offered them the cigarette case and they retransfigured it, then looked at him hesitantly.

"I'll do it; it's a little tricky," he said, placing the record on the turntable and setting the sheath aside. Arthur looked interested despite himself as Remus switched it on, started the wheel turning, and put the needle on the edge of the record.

The quality was, as usual with old vinyl, somewhat scratchy. Still, with the volume turned up a little, the sound was perfectly clear: the vaguely familiar strains of the ballet suite which made Stravinsky famous. Fred consulted the paper sleeve.

"Introduction and first Tableau," he said. "I guess it really is what it says it is."

Everyone jumped, however, when a voice suddenly spoke over the music; after a few seconds they relaxed, but Remus listened intently to the words being spoken.

*Although later Stravinsky would be critical of his early work, The Firebird remains a pivotal piece in an understanding of his later work and comprehending Rimsky-Korsakov's influence on the young composer.*

*The Firebird concerns the journey of its hero, Prince Ivan, who enters the magical realm of Kaschei the Immortal, known also as Koschei the Deathless. In Russian mythology, Koschei is a monstrous man who is seemingly invincible. In Stravinsky's suite, he is also the master of a world in which magical objects and creatures are commonplace, represented by a chromatic descending motif, usually in the strings.*

Remus glanced at Sirius who was also listening intently, looking like nothing so much as a hound on scent.

*Ivan, the hero, enters Koschei's dominion and chases a fire bird, or phoenix, which when captured begs for its life and agrees to assist Ivan in exchange for its freedom. Ivan is distracted, however, by thirteen princesses whom he sees and immediately falls in love with. Ivan confronts Koschei and asks to marry one of the princesses; the two eventually quarrel. Koschei sends his magical creatures to kill Ivan, but the Firebird bewitches them in the famous Infernal Dance, which eventually puts them and Koschei to sleep.*

Harry and Sirius were both staring at Glastonbury now, who looked unsettled by their attention.

"Regulus," Sirius muttered. "You bastard."

*In the mythology regarding Koschei, it is said that he cannot die because he has placed his soul in an object: a needle inside an egg, hidden inside a series of animals who are themselves locked in an iron chest buried under an oak tree on the island of Buyan.*

Harry sucked in a sharp breath.

*Koschei may only be destroyed, according to folk legend, by the destruction of the needle in which he has placed his soul. However, in Stravinsky's work, it is the Firebird who kills Koschei, awakening all the magical beings, including the princesses, who then celebrate their victory. Please enjoy this recording of the 1910 Firebird Suite, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under conductor –*

Remus lifted the needle carefully and set it aside. He turned to look at Harry, whose breathing was quick and shallow.

"We've heard what we need," he said to the Weasleys, who were looking confused – all but Ron, who was also staring at Harry.

"Was it worth it?" Molly asked softly.

“It may mean the difference between winning and losing this war,” Remus answered. In the silence, Glastonbury warbled musically. “I think I’d better find someone to cover my classes tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER XXXVII

Although they were all eager to escape the hospital and discuss the ramifications of Charlie's message, Remus refused to hurry; once arrangements had been made for guards to be put on Charlie's door, he sent Tonks to Fourteen Back with the phonograph, then sent Sirius and Harry with Glastonbury to follow her back.

"How can we help?" Fred asked, fearless of the glare that this garnered from his father.

"Stay with your brother. Make sure at least one person is with him whenever possible—your job right now is to make sure nobody tries to hurt him," Remus said, glancing at Arthur. "When he's conscious, try and find out how he got here and who he spoke to in Romania. I want the whole story, including what happened while he was traveling. Don't press him; get what you can, and try not to upset him."

"Is there anything else?" Bill asked.

"Not for now—this is better handled by Harry and myself. Charlie needs you more," Remus answered. "I'll be back tomorrow afternoon—I'm so sorry, Arthur, Molly," he added distractedly as he left. Percy slipped out after him, but he hardly noticed; he was already Apparating to the dirty, muddy alley behind the cottage.

He let himself in through the garden gate, grateful for the warmth of the garden after the snowy chill of the alley. The kitchen door was open; inside, Harry and Sirius were sitting at the table with Glastonbury between them and the phonograph playing—the record was already past the all-important narration, and now the strains of the Firebird Suite filled the room. Tonks was sipping her tea, leaning against the counter near the cupboard where the cup and the locket were kept.

"It's Glastonbury somehow, isn't it?" Harry asked, as Remus passed through the kitchen and into his bedroom. He took down a book from his shelf and held it in the flat of his palm, paging through it as he brought it back to the table where they sat. "Does he know how to destroy them?"

"I doubt it," Remus replied, still thumbing through the book. "It's not the phoenix's knowledge but the phoenix himself—Stravinsky was a squib, he must have known something—perhaps someone who knew Rasputin..." He shook his head, laughing only slightly hysterically. "He put old Wizarding legends into his

music all the time—James did a paper on it for Muggle Studies while we were at school. I should have thought of the Fire Bird, but I'm more fond of Tchaikovsky..."

He set the book down on the table, fingers splayed across a particular passage. "Fire's an elemental force, a violent cleansing force. Wizards don't like to use it if they can avoid it; it's much easier and gentler to use some other kind of charm. I would imagine..." he added, "...that Dumbledore had other methods on his mind. In fact, we know he did—Harry used poison to destroy the first one. The ring, however...I don't think he tried fire first, if he tried it at all."

"But fire won't work anyway, we know that," Harry said. "Melting a thing doesn't necessarily destroy it..."

"Not regular fire, no," Remus said, and his eyes were drawn to Glastonbury, who was preening nearby. "Dumbledore knew Voldemort was afraid of phoenixes, but he never knew why..."

"Regulus did," Sirius whispered. "Regulus found out. That's why he left the egg, isn't it? To show that he knew?"

"It's not unlikely," Remus agreed. He held out his arm and gestured invitingly at Glastonbury. The phoenix hopped across the table and fluttered onto his wrist. Remus stroked his vivid plumage affectionately, examining his skin and feathers as he did so.

"I think we'll know if it's true in another three weeks or so," he said. "He's just starting to moult a little, and he's young enough that it'll take a bit of time. When he—er—goes up, as it were, we can use that flame. I hope."

"Will it work?" Sirius asked, staring at Glastonbury.

"It ought to. Phoenix fire notoriously burns away impurities; it's been known to strip base metals out of alloys. I don't know how it will work, but it should." He shook his head. "I owe my Russian friends a large favour."

"But that still only takes care of the cup and the locket," Harry pointed out. "We've got to find that other horcrux."

He looked at Remus and clearly saw something Remus hadn't meant him to see in his face. Before he could help himself, Remus cut his eyes away. Harry's silence became thoughtful and expectant, but he didn't speak.

"At least we can get two," Sirius said. "That's something. That's a lot, really. It'll buy us time, don't you think?"

"Time," Remus repeated, nodding. "Unfortunately, now we have nothing but time. Three weeks from now...it'll be December, not long from the winter holiday. Near your birthday too, Sirius. Seventeen – big day. "

"Not that it matters," Sirius muttered. "Everyone thinks I'm twenty-something anyway."

"This is all good news, though, " Remus said. "Let's just leave it at that, shall we? Besides, we need sleep – I want to find out everything I can about the relationship between phoenixes and horcruxes tomorrow, and that means a full day in the library. Sirius," he called, as the boys headed for the door into the living room, "Would you prefer teaching tomorrow? If you'd rather research with us, I can ask Nick to do it."

"Nick?" Harry asked scornfully.

"Who better to give a guest lecture on ghosts?" Remus asked. "He's very keenly political, too, which makes it much more real."

"That's fine, I'll do it," Sirius assured him.

"Grand, I'll have notes for you in the morning," Remus said. Sirius made a gesture of resignation even as he followed Harry to the stairs.

"Long evening," Tonks remarked in the bedroom, unself-consciously taking off her robes and tunic in favour of an enormous t-shirt to sleep in. It was blazoned with the faded slogan "*I Go Bump In The Night*" and Remus desperately hoped that it had been either a hand-me-down or a novelty purchase a long time ago. He knew in his heart of hearts that he would never, ever be able to ask.

"Poor Charlie. He didn't deserve that," Remus said. "I'll pick up some flowers for him in Hogsmeade tomorrow, and one of those really embarrassing balloons that shriek *Get Well Soon* every time someone comes in the room."

"Fred and George have probably already taken care of the balloon," she replied, turning down the blankets on the bed while he undressed. "I guess you could get him a second one and they could shriek in harmony."

"Hah," Remus answered, falling back on the bed and looking up at her from where his head hung, upside down, across the other side of it. "But just think of what we accomplished tonight."

"We haven't *actually* accomplished anything yet," she answered. He sat up on the bed and turned to face her, rather stiffly. The moon wasn't that far past.

"But we will. Phoenix fire is the key, I'm certain of it. With the cup and the locket gone, there's only two remaining."

"One as simple as bashing its head in," she agreed. He winced a little, inwardly. "But that still leaves one."

The urge to talk to Tonks, to confess to someone and to trust them with the knowledge, was overwhelming. He had almost told Severus, and he didn't even like Severus. He was in *love* with Tonks.

"If nothing else, it buys us time. We can still fight him. If he dies this time, we'll know to hunt him down even if we never destroy the sixth horcrux," he said instead, taking her by the arm and pulling her down against his body, the pair of them an awkward, affectionate tangle of limbs. "He can be trapped, imprisoned –"

"You know there are no half-measures," she said, her smile turning grave. "You know as well as I do that Dumbledore always intended he should die. I'm an Auror, Remus – every day we struggle not to become judge and executioner. But this is different. This isn't idealism. It's a bloody struggle for our future. In prison he still has power. He still has followers ready to break him free. My aunt Bellatrix is out there somewhere..." she shivered, disgustedly.

"Yes, but if we can't find the other horcrux, it's an option," he said.

"You sound like you wish we wouldn't," she answered.

"No, of course I want him defeated. I just wonder if we don't assume rather much when we assume that only death equals defeat."

"But in this case, surely it does? The only way this ends is with his death. If it's in a fight, in self-defence, so much the better – but if you told me we had all six horcruxes, the same night you destroyed the rest I'd kill him in cold blood myself."

"Would you, I wonder," he said, shifting so that he lay properly on the bed and leaning back to study the ceiling. "I can't imagine you slitting a man's throat while he slept, Tonks."

"Wouldn't you? This man's? He doesn't even look human, Remus," she said, dousing the lights. "If you thought about what he'd done to Sirius, to the Longbottoms, to Harry's parents..."

Remus breathed deeply, remembering Fenrir's face behind the glass in that poky little Auror holding cell. It seemed like much longer ago than a bare two months. The bed creaked a little as she lay down next to him, pulling the covers up over their hips.

"Horcruxes are made," he said slowly, still staring at the ceiling, "when we capture a piece of a soul in an object. You can see what happens when a man

loses his soul in shreds. Depravity, despair, violence...when you kill, you lose that little piece of yourself, whether or not it goes into a locket or just...flitting off into the air somewhere. It would be indecent not to learn from the horcruxes what value to place even on the most worthless-seeming human life."

Fenrir hadn't valued life, unless it was on his inflexible, terrifying, ignorant terms. He'd been willing to kill too, without provocation and without warning, for his ideals. They were bad ideals, of course, but you couldn't change the rules just because you were the self-proclaimed good guys.

"So you wouldn't kill him, if you came across him sleeping in the Restricted Section tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Remus replied, feeling his stomach twist unpleasantly. He rolled over, turning his back to her. "I don't know if I could. Maybe."

Tonks was silent for a moment; then he felt her fingers stroking his hair, occasionally twisting one of the short locks a little, affectionately.

"I wonder about horcruxes," she said.

"You'd do much better not to."

"Not like that. I think that if a good person made a horcrux, it must be much more powerful than if an evil one did."

"Do you suppose anyone who commits an act like that could really be called good?"

"Certainly," she replied. "I come across good men committing crimes every day. Good people can do bad things out of fear, desperation...say a man knew he was dying and made one so that he could be revived, because he had small children who needed him..."

"Without concern for his victim's children, I suppose."

"Perhaps not, but that doesn't make him evil—just thoughtless."

He pondered it as she ruffled the hair near his ear. "Why do you suppose a good man's horcrux should be any more powerful than a bad man's? Tom Riddle had a soul just like you and I do."

"From what Harry's said, he hadn't much of one. Or maybe...it was just that he had no moral code. To him, killing was like swatting flies. It didn't mean much. I'm surprised it tore at his soul at all. But even if it did, it can't have torn off very large pieces, can it?"

"I'm not sure the soul is quantifiable in that way, Tonks."

"All right, but you can't deny that a man who valued human life would have a much more difficult time killing than a man who killed for pleasure. The cost would be more. Sacrifice is old magic. It's powerful."

"Perhaps it would be more powerful," he said. "Perhaps it would simply be more wrong. Further to fall for a good man."

She smoothed down the hair she'd ruffled and kissed the back of his head, curling up against him.

"Murder is murder," he said softly. "It doesn't matter if the cause is good or bad...in the end, it only matters whether you own up and take the consequences or not. If not, you're a coward; if so, you're still a murderer, but at least you made a choice. *Evil is unspectacular and always human* —"

"—and shares our bed and eats at our own table, yes, I know," she finished the line for him. He took her hand, now resting across his hip, and held it in his as she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. Before too much time had passed, she slept; he lay awake a little longer, but eventually his eyes closed as well.

\* \* \*

"Headmistress McGonagall has spoken to me."

Sirius, who was reciting the twelve qualities of the zodiacal figures and their influences on each other, had paused to think further when Firenze suddenly spoke. He looked at his teacher mildly; it wasn't often Firenze interrupted a lesson with trivialities, especially since he had missed a few lately.

There were thirteen figures in the zodiac, though most wizards only used twelve. Each had twelve qualities, in the Centauric form, and a thirteenth hidden quality. Sirius was uncertain what, precisely, this would help him with when it came time for NEWTs, since he reckoned not many people had even made it this far, let alone wanted to test him on it. Still, he supposed it was good to know. He had stopped halfway through the qualities of Ophiuchus, which was just as well, as he couldn't remember the second half of them.

"About what?" Sirius asked.

"Your examinations," Firenze rumbled, a hint of distaste on his voice.

"But those aren't until next June!"

"Nevertheless, she wishes to ascertain your progress. She requested that I furnish her with a complete account of your apprenticeship." Firenze gave him a small, frosty smile. "I informed her, of course, that you were just as qualified to provide such a thing as I am."

At the start of the school year, Sirius would never have understood the centaur and might have felt rather insulted. Now he smiled back, pleased at the double-compliment; that Firenze considered him an apprentice, and that he trusted Sirius had retained all he was taught. "Thank you, Professor."

"No matter. Do you intend to take up the study of the stars after your year-and-day are done?"

"Hm?" Sirius asked. "After graduation? Oh. No, I don't suppose so."

"What do you intend?"

"I—I hadn't thought about it," Sirius stammered.

"You are a poor liar, Sirius Black," Firenze said, swishing his tail.

"Sorry, sir."

"Are you ashamed of your profession?"

"No," Sirius scowled. "It's just private."

"Ah. And will you practice it in solitude, away from the prying eyes of men?"

"If you must know," Sirius retorted, "I'm going to be a Healer."

Firenze's expression didn't change. "A strange profession."

"In general? Or just for me?" Sirius demanded.

"Perhaps not so strange. Soldiers understand the value of such knowledge." Firenze pawed at the edge of the small fire Sirius had kindled, studying the flickers of smoke that rose as a result. "You are not an apt student of the fates, in the strictest sense of the word, but you are able. You comprehend far more than most. Look up to the stars."

Sirius obediently did so, wondering what was coming next.

"Close your eyes and find the stars beyond the horizon, as many as you are able. See how they move. Follow their courses."

Sirius felt his head begin to ache with the enormity of the task, but he anchored himself in Firenze's deep voice.

"There are patterns visible. Find them. You are a part of them; it should not be difficult."

For a split second, Sirius had a view of the stars spread out around him, whirling under his feet as well as above his closed eyes. There was a hint of pattern, untraceable but bright gold among the silver spatters that he used to populate this sky inside his head. Somewhere a distant dying sun, carrying his name, shone far more brightly than it ought; somewhere Mars was passing

through a constellation that bespoke turmoil and death. Somewhere, Leo's tenth quality – sacrifice – was becoming brighter by the day.

He gasped sharply and opened his eyes, glancing up at the centaur who loomed over the fire. Firenze nodded.

"What is it?" Sirius asked. Firenze shook his head as if he were tossing a mane.

"You know well enough."

"Danger – sacrifice – the war increasing. But that could be –"

"Tch!" Firenze made a swift, silencing noise. "I do not wish to know. It matters very little, in this place and to me."

"Then why show me?"

"Show you?" the centaur asked, a little contemptuously. "You saw for yourself, Sirius Black. I merely asked you to look."

"But why?"

Firenze gave the barest shrug. "Forewarning. It can be a tool, or a dangerous weapon. There is a dark time coming...the moon at last quarter on the longest night."

"The full moon on my birthday – I know," Sirius said resignedly.

"Be guarded," Firenze warned. "We will have no more lessons until the spring."

"What? *Why*? We're safe here!"

"It is not a matter of safety. We will meet again after the longest night, if we meet ever again," Firenze said.

"What do you mean, IF?" Sirius asked, really worried now.

"We all will die; it is a natural law and good. Some of us will die sooner than others, that is all," Firenze continued. "I..." He paused, then looked even more grave than usual. "I have grown fond of you, insolent and ignorant as you are. You have farther to go in much shorter time; you cannot be weighed against a centaur but on your own merits, which are not entirely worthless. I will not waste more time or...attachment, on a student who may not live to see the next breeding season. It is folly."

Oddly, the first argument that leapt to Sirius' mind was not the fact that he wasn't going to die; it was entirely more academic.

"Not worth teaching anyone who might die? That's a bit limiting, isn't it?" he snarled. "I suppose the only reason you know divination is so that you'll always know what you're having for dinner tomorrow night."

"Divination is an art—" Firenze began, his face darkening in anger.

"An art only people with a guarantee on life get to know?" Sirius asked.

"You are not afraid of death?"

"I'm not afraid of spending my time on people who might die," he growled. He stood and kicked snow over the fire, dousing it. "I'll see you in the New Year, then—if you're willing to waste your time."

He didn't know whether Firenze watched him go back to the castle; from the sound of it, the centaur didn't move until he was completely out of earshot.

It had been a long day, anyway; he'd taught Remus' classes while Remus worked feverishly in the library, looking up everything and anything on phoenix myths and fire-purification with Harry and Hermione's help while Ron took notes for Hermione in classes. Sirius had even brought dinner up to the library, smuggling it into the Restricted Section past Madam Pince and a table full of rowdy second-years. Ron and Hermione had gone off to be disgusting with each other somewhere; Remus and Harry had been grateful but distracted, and after a hurried meal they both went home to chew over what they'd found with Tonks. Sirius, tired and a little annoyed, had gone down to see Firenze for his lesson and even that had turned out to be a waste and a frustration.

He returned to his rooms in the same cranky state, glad that he hadn't met anyone on the way, only to find Hermione waiting outside his door.

Sirius was grateful to Hermione, of course, for not throwing fits the way Ron had done. And truth be told, he liked her—sort of. She was intelligent, which he could appreciate, and she didn't take any cack from anyone, which he certainly agreed with. On the other hand, she was bossy, imperious, loud, and something of a know-it-all. When he'd mentioned this to Remus, the older man had merely laughed and remarked that it reminded him of someone else he knew. Sirius assumed he meant McGonagall.

"Evening," he said shortly, as she stood aside so that he could unlock his door. "Need something?"

"I was wondering if we could talk," she said, biting her lip. "Um...privately."

"Sure," he sighed, gesturing her inside. "Have a seat. I'll make some tea."

"It won't take long," she said. "It's just I was wondering if you and Harry wanted to have dinner with us, next Thursday. In Hogsmeade."

"That all?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "As a date, I mean."

"What?" he said, turning to face her.

"Well, you know. Me and Ron, and you and Harry. Without me setting you up with Katie Bell and that kind of thing," she said. "Now that we know. I thought it might be nice."

"Ah," he said, feeling unaccountably annoyed.

"Don't you think so?"

"Reckon so."

"It's only, I think it would help Ron sort of...not feel so strange about it, and you shouldn't either. You and Harry, I mean."

"Why would we feel strange about it?" he asked sharply.

"Sirius, I didn't mean it that way," she answered. "I just meant that you shouldn't feel odd about us knowing, that's all."

"There's nothing to know. It's just a..." he groped for polite words, then gave up. "It's just sex and all," he muttered.

"Really?" she asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I thought you were, um...seeing each other," she said, rubbing her fingertips together nervously. "Because, Harry..."

"What about Harry?" Sirius was aware he was barking questions at her, but he was exhausted and not in the mood to have a heart-to-heart about buggery with Hermione Granger.

"I just don't think he'd—risk things this way—people finding out, all the awful publicity there'd be because of who he is. And risk losing you, you're still important to him, he really likes you—I don't think he'd risk all that just for sex," she said. "It's fine and all, but it's not worth *that* much, is it?"

He opened his mouth for a sarcastic retort about Ron needing lessons if she really felt that way, but the rest of what she'd said hit him hard enough to stop him.

"That's Harry's choice," he muttered.

"But you'll come along and have dinner with us next Thursday, anyway?" she said.

"Sure. S'not like it'll be the first time. Meet you at Moony's office around six?"

"Okay. Thanks, Sirius," she said, still looking as if she were torn between fleeing and saying something even less appropriate. "I should go—Prefects' meeting."

"Right you are," he replied, glad she hadn't decided to stay for tea. When she was gone, he locked the door again, drew the curtains on the windows, and sat down in a heap of blankets on his bed to drink his tea and read.

Once, in such a different time and place that it felt like long ago, he would have spent his evenings prowling the school and causing all kinds of trouble. He had hated to be alone in the dormitory or the common room and always went in search of someone to joke with or tease, some fight to pick. Regulus was reliable for a good screaming match; James or Peter never said no to a bit of mischief and Remus could usually be blackmailed into it. The school was a playground which always had some new treasure or secret to unveil.

But Regulus and James were dead; Peter and Remus were grown men on the opposite sides of a war. The school was his responsibility now; he had to protect it and its inhabitants from what went on beyond the front gates. He was nearly a professor himself, and not yet seventeen. Half the people he knew, it seemed like, were aware of a secret he'd once gone to immeasurable lengths to hide. He was too tired to cause trouble.

He reached out for the Maurauder's Map in the pocket of his robes, which hung on a peg near his bed. He found his private journal with very little effort and read the final entry again, words written a few months ago to him, twenty years ago to the rest of the world. Even decoded from the babble-speak, it read like someone else had written it.

*Tired of lying, tired of hiding and running away. "I fancy you" should never be something one is afraid to say.*

The map replying in Remus' handwriting, Remus' voice. *No, you should not be afraid to say it, if it's true.*

*I don't know if it's true, really, I'm not sure how to discover if it's true. I wonder if this is something someone did to me, not something that's true at all. I wish it was; then I could get it broken, like with a Healer or something and I wouldn't be afraid to tell them because it's just a hex.*

Remus and James spoke together in reply: *We love you, Sirius, and it doesn't matter to us...Moony's right, we just don't want to see you hurt.*

And his own words were so bitter and afraid.

*Maybe not, but I don't think I should be so honest with you. It's not a hex or a curse, I know that and I oughtn't to try and indulge in some daft fantasy. I fancy boys; it's unnatural and freakish and I hate it and I'll never be able to tell anyone, not anyone, but it's the truth and you can't say no to the truth. And I'd rather live alone my whole*

*life and never once have any kind of sex I'd actually enjoy or fall in love with anyone than pretend, so I guess that's that. I'm me and I'll always be me and there's nothing to be done so I just have to decide what I want the rest of my life to be about.*

*Maybe I'll buy a motorbike.*

He rubbed his eyes and smiled a bit to himself at that last part. Harry told him that he had, in fact, and charmed it to fly; with hindsight he could see himself quite clearly pouring all the energy and frustration of his situation into something physical, something he could touch.

He missed his own life, even now. Even with all the misery he had felt, even knowing that in another life he was destined for a horrific life in Azkaban and a pointless death at the hands of that bitch Bellatrix (and if he ever met her again he'd gladly return the favour), even if it had been a hard life...it had been his.

He cleared the map and folded it up, laying it aside resignedly. The words were in his head now, at any rate.

*Would you trade Harry for your past? Would you trade being Nigel Padfoot for being that Sirius Black again?*

He fell asleep without an answer.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

That Thursday, the first Thursday after Firenze abruptly ended Sirius' stargazing lessons, Remus and Tonks were sharing a late dinner at the cottage when Harry and Sirius finally stumbled in from the floo, laughing themselves sick.

Actually, the plan had been that, since Harry and Sirius would be gone, the older residents of Fourteen Back would share an early dinner and enjoy the time alone, since they hadn't had much of late. However, dinner was delayed while they made up for the lack of time together—twice—well, Tonks three times, actually...

The point was that dinner was only barely begun when Harry and Sirius reeled into the room, Harry going for the sink to get a glass of water, Sirius leaning in the doorway and covering his eyes with one hand.

"Good dinner?" Remus asked mildly, looking up from his carton of spicy pork and rice. The makings of a splendid salad and roast were still in the chilled cupboard; if they had decided to make dinner after all their time-alone, they'd still be ravenous.

"Oh, sweet Loki in a hoop skirt," Sirius groaned, still laughing. "Harry, you tell them."

"I'm not repeating what Hermione said," Harry answered, drinking deeply. Sirius went off into another gale of laughter.

"Let's leave them to their hysteria," Tonks said, making as if to pick up her meal and move elsewhere.

"No, no, we'll explain it," Harry said. "It's too good not to share. Do you want to start from Hermione, or...?"

"What a mess," Sirius moaned, sliding down the doorframe until he sat, back propped against one side and knees pressed against the other. "The whole bloody night was the most excruciating thing I think I've ever encountered."

"Surely it wasn't that bad," Remus said. He offered a carton of vegetables to Harry, who took it and began eating with the aplomb of a never-quite-fully-fed seventeen-year-old.

"That's the problem, really," Sirius said. "Ron was spending so much time pretending not to pay any attention to us, and we weren't even doing anything..."

"You felt me up under the table!" Harry accused. Sirius gave him a scandalized look, then glanced at Tonks warningly. "Oh, who cares if there's a woman in the room, there were several women in the room when you did it!"

"You didn't announce it to *them!*"

"Anyway," Harry continued, "Ron was a bit...well, he knocked his drink over a few times, and he didn't eat much, but he did try."

"You should have seen him when I brought up fairies," Sirius said wickedly.

"We *are* studying them in seventh-year Dark Arts," Remus explained to Tonks. "Everyone smirks horribly."

"I reckon he'll get over it," Harry said confidently. "He did try, Sirius. You didn't help him any."

"I didn't like the way he kept glaring at me, as if I'd corrupted the great pure Boy Who Shagged Girls Until I Came Along," Sirius muttered.

"He did stare a bit. I suppose he was trying to get used to the idea."

"Yes, well, Hermione didn't seem to have *any* trouble getting used to the idea," Sirius said, grinning again. "What was it she said, not after dinner – right when you took that huge bite of beef."

"Oh – Merlin..." Harry shook his head.

"I don't think she said anything, I think it's a conspiracy to make us feel inadequate," Remus remarked to Tonks.

"Knowing Hermione, she definitely said something," Tonks replied.

"She asked Harry if he had all the books he needed, about blokes having sex," Sirius sniggered. "And then she turned to me and said –"

"*I assume from his reputation that Sirius doesn't need any books, but you'll have to keep up with him somehow,*" Harry said, in a passable imitation of Hermione's voice. Remus choked on his mouthful of rice.

"That's exactly what Harry did," Sirius said, pointing, as Tonks thwacked Remus on the back. "While I asked if Hermione really thought Harry hadn't any experience himself. That DID set Ron off for a while."

"Well, it's over now, anyway," Harry said. "But I will never forget your face...so we were ready to go back, right, and Hermione and Ron were already out the door of the restaurant, when Hermione came running back in and grabbed Sirius by the arm and looked at me very gravely."

"I thought she was going to tell us good luck or something," Sirius put in.

"And after this long, soul-searching look in my eyes, she says to me, *Harry, if the two of you ever did fancy having a girl along, just to see what it was like –*"

"To see what it was like!" Sirius hooted.

" – then I promise I'd never tell Ron," Harry finished.

Remus stared at him in shock. "Little Hermione Granger – the Head Girl of Hogwarts –"

"HEAD GIRL!" Sirius roared with laughter.

"Hermione Granger who had a terrific crush on me once upon a simpler time, *Hermione* offered to be the *trois* in your *ménage à trois*?" Remus asked, horrified.

"Good for her!" Tonks cried. "Well done Hermione."

"We're not going to do it, you know!" Sirius said, looking momentarily nervous. "We haven't even –"

Both he and Harry blushed at the same moment, and Remus and Tonks became suddenly absorbed in their Chinese food cartons. There was a long moment of silence. Finally, Tonks let out a giggle.

"Saving up for a special occasion, are you?" she asked. Remus snorted with the effort of not laughing, then gave in and howled until Harry and Sirius, with exaggerated dignity, stalked out of the room and up to bed.

\* \* \*

Ten days after the horrifying double date, Glastonbury exploded in an enormous ball of flame.

Remus, on a trip to Diagon to acquire a redcap to show to one of his classes, had also bought a shallow, wide-bottomed copper bowl and brought it to Glastonbury that Monday. The phoenix, who by that time was heavily moulting and occasionally scorching peoples' clothing, took to it with great delight and spent a lot of time sleeping in it, head tucked under one straggly, ugly-looking wing.

Sirius had brought him home when he came to Fourteen Back for the weekend, the bowl tucked carefully under one arm, and Hedwig spent much of Saturday perched on the rim of the bowl, clicking her beak threateningly if anyone came near.

"What do we do when he finally goes up?" Sirius asked, over Saturday lunch. Tonks was, rather inappropriately he felt, toasting a sausage over Glastonbury's copper bowl. "As regards the locket and the goblet, I mean."

"Well, according to what I've managed to find about purification in *general*, they ought to be right in the flame," Remus said, feeling the side of the bowl with the back of his hand. "I think after dinner we'd better start keeping watch in shifts with the horcruxes nearby. I don't like to have them out, but it's unavoidable. We won't have any reliable way to tell when it's about to happen. The egg from which he...re-hatches isn't really laid, he sort of burns around it."

"You seem like you have experience handling phoenixes," Tonks said.

"A little...Dumbledore used to let me care for Fawkes after I left school," Remus said. "They're such comforting creatures. Very intelligent. When he went off on business or was gone over some holiday or other, he'd bring Fawkes around and pay me a little to look after him. You've done very well with Glastonbury, Sirius."

"Doesn't take much," Sirius said, but he was bursting with pride at the praise. "He looks after himself, mostly."

"He's likely to be a little agitated right before he goes," Remus said. "It's his first time, after all. I would be."

"He'll still be Glastonbury when he hatches, won't he?" Sirius asked, a trifle worried.

"Oh, yes," Remus said, leaning over to smooth down some straggling tail feathers. Glastonbury hooted at Hedwig, who hooted back soothingly. "There's a good bird," Remus murmured absently.

"Shifts, then," Tonks said. "Remus can take first shift from eight to eleven so that he gets a full night's sleep; Sirius doesn't mind staying up late so he can have the next one from eleven to two. I'm used to being woken up, so I'll take third shift from two to five, and Harry can get up early and take the five to eight shift. We'll just cycle that way until he combusts."

"She's an Auror," Remus stage-whispered to Harry, sitting on his right. "Big on schedules. Very bossy."

"If you'd care to take *four* hour shifts *without* me..." she said, mock-threateningly.

"I never said it was a bad thing," Remus answered politely. "Now, listen. There are a few things that go without saying, but I'm going to say them anyway. When he starts to go up, put the cup and the locket into the bowl with him. Get him to perch on the cup if you can—it's going to be hard to keep the heat steady on a large object like that."

"Do you think they'll actually melt?" Sirius asked.

"I've no clue. They're both alloys, I think, but they're very old and very powerful artefacts in their own right. It's a shame to destroy them..." Remus glanced reluctantly at the cupboard they were kept in, then sighed and went on. "At any rate, it should be obvious that you should certainly not touch either of them any more than necessary while you're keeping watch. Do not under any circumstances hang the locket around your neck or try to open it, even in fun. Don't put anything in the goblet—not just liquid, I mean *anything*—or try to drink from it. Don't even put it up to your lips if it's empty. Don't talk to them."

"Why would we talk to them?" Harry asked, scornful.

"You'd be surprised how many old wizarding stories involve someone becoming trapped by an object because they talked to it," Remus answered. "Best not to risk it. That's why we've kept them locked up."

"Basically," Tonks put in, "don't treat them as toys. They're parts of Voldemort—treat them like it."

Harry and Sirius nodded solemnly. Glastonbury, in his bowl, huffed uncomfortably and continued to smoulder.

After dinner, Remus dutifully took a book and settled down in the kitchen, uncharacteristically propping his feet on the table so that they could be warmed by the significant amount of heat Glastonbury was now putting out. The cup and locket, sitting on the table next to his crossed knees, looked more like props in a school play than two Dark objects of significant power. Tonks sat in the living room and heckled Sirius and Harry as they played an extremely inept game of chess.

"What do you want to do for your birthday, anyway?" she asked, as Sirius began systematically destroying Harry's pawns. "It's only five days away."

"I dunno," he shrugged. "It's not a big deal."

"You're going to be seventeen. That's a big deal!"

"Well, technically not, really. I mean, I'm sure the maths aren't right there," Sirius said. "It's just a day."

"But it's a day that's supposed to be all about you!" Tonks said. "Everybody gets one day that's just about them. That's the point of a birthday, really. We could have a big dinner somewhere. You've got lots of cash for it."

"Nah," Sirius said. Harry took one of his knights, and he scowled.

"Well, we have to do something," Tonks insisted.

"We don't," Sirius replied. "Who cares about stupid birthdays, anyway?"

"What's got into you?" Harry asked. "Everyone cares about birthdays."

"I don't! I'd rather not even have one," Sirius answered. "Besides, it's always right in the middle of exams and packing for hols and I don't see what's so special about being born."

Harry fell silent; Tonks studied Sirius for a moment before speaking.

"This is about being a Black, isn't it?" she asked. "Mum doesn't like celebrating her birthday either. She says the family always used to make a big deal out of it and it was all rather horrible."

"It's not about being older," Sirius muttered. "It's about how grand it is to be born a Black and a pureblood. When I left I said I might as well celebrate that day as another. My re-birthday," he added, with a hint of a smile. "Only I didn't, did I, because of coming here. It was in August and I forgot it completely."

"Well, that'd be letting them win, anyway," Tonks said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sirius demanded.

"They still get to keep your birthday, if you do that. If we celebrate it, it doesn't belong to them anymore," she said. "Besides, it's only mad aunt Bellatrix now —"

"If I see her again I'll cut her eyeballs out and feed them to Glastonbury," Sirius declared.

"Well, that'd be a decent birthday present, but the point is that you might as well take your birthday back and enjoy it to spite them," Tonks said, looking amused. "Come on, Sirius. We'll go out somewhere and get you drunk and make a fuss over you. It's a Friday night, it'll be splendid."

"Got to do it on Saturday," Sirius said, reluctantly admitting defeat. "Friday's the full moon."

"Ah, bollocks!" Tonks said, slapping her forehead with one hand. "That's right. And that means Remus'll be miserable for your birthday. *Utterly* lame, Sirius."

"It's not his fault," Sirius said sharply.

"No, of course not. I didn't mean it like that," she said. "Well, we'll have to tuck him up in bed on Saturday night and go out, that's all there is to it."

"Nothing fancy," Sirius warned. "The Three Broomsticks is good enough for me."

"We'll see," Tonks said ominously, as Remus appeared in the doorway.

"I'm going to bed," he said. "Sirius, you're up."

"Come keep me company," Sirius said to Harry.

"Bollocks to that, if I have to get up at five am I'm going up to sleep," Harry replied.

"Just as well," Remus called from the other room. "I don't want to come out to get a drink of water in the middle of the night and have to turn the hose on the two of you."

"He thinks you're cute," Tonks said, ruffling Sirius' hair as she followed him into the kitchen. "Wake me up at two."

By breakfast-time the next morning, however, Glastonbury was still fretful and scraggly, putting out enough heat to make the kitchen as a whole uncomfortably warm. Remus sat the first watch after breakfast with a pile of papers he was marking, and a sort of Sunday-morning peace settled over the little cottage.

The tranquility was broken at about half-past eleven by Hedwig, who began to screech and flap around Glastonbury's bowl, blowing Remus' papers around with her wings. The others, in various parts of the house, were summoned with a yell; they arrived to find Remus gathering up his papers while Tonks tried to coax a frantic Hedwig away from the table with one hand and grab the goblet with the other. Harry took Hedwig firmly in both hands and shoved her outside in a flurry of feathers, slamming the door behind her. When he turned around, Sirius was hovering anxiously over the bowl while Tonks dropped the locket into it and Remus tried to find a way to wedge the goblet in next to Glastonbury.

"Any minute now," Remus said above the enraged cries of Hedwig, who was rattling the windowpanes with her wings. Glastonbury, breathing heavily, reared and spread his wings, feet scabbling against the bottom of the bowl. Remus tucked the goblet under the bird's breast and pulled back just in time; with a surprised squawk, the phoenix burst into flames.

The cup seemed to catch fire as if it had been filled with alcohol; green flame licked along every surface, turning the gold to a vivid yellow and making an odd hissing noise. The locket rattled and jumped around the bottom of the bowl as if it were a living thing.

"It's not very elegant, is it?" Remus observed, even as the bird's shape became indistinguishable and seemed to collapse in on itself, forming a little heap of white-hot embers in the bottom of the bowl. The locket was somewhere underneath; Hufflepuff's cup, looking oddly soft around the edges, began to make soft little pinging noises as it cooled. Outside, Hedwig was hooting in rage.

"Is that all?" Harry asked, glancing at Remus and Tonks.

"We'll know soon, I suspect," Remus replied. He held his hand over the cup, then drew it back quickly. "It's hot still."

Something rattled and they all took an involuntary step backwards. The embers near the top of the heap were turning to white ash, and as they watched the ash began to bump and move. With a crack it slid aside in a mini-avalanche and a bit of eggshell appeared. There was another loud crack, and a beak became visible, followed closely by a head and one wing.

"Don't touch him," Tonks said, stopping Sirius who had reached forward to help the little phoenix free itself. "Look, the egg's steaming."

The little fledgling hopped out of the egg after another few struggling efforts and slid down the pile of ashes, squeaking in pain when it bumped its head on the side of the bowl. Sirius, heedless, reached in and scooped him up into his hands. The little bird promptly bit him.

"That's Glastonbury," Sirius said, laughing with relief and dropping weakly into a chair. Harry went to the window and let Hedwig back in; she whacked him angrily with her wing as she flapped across the room to perch on the chair behind Sirius, peering down at the hatchling.

Remus carefully sifted the ash aside and used a bit of eggshell to spread the remaining embers evenly around the bottom of the bowl to cool. He plucked the rest of the shell fragments out and put them into a small tray nearby. Tonks was examining the cup as well as she could without touching it, peering into the bottom and studying the outside edges.

"It survived pretty well," she said finally. "It's cooling fast..."

She carefully lifted it out, setting it down quickly and shaking her fingers where they'd been burned a little. She used a nearby fork to lift the locket's chain and pull the whole thing out, holding it up at eye level.

Harry leaned forward to study it; it didn't look any different, really, and he was opening his mouth to ask if she thought it had worked when the locket burst open of its own accord.

Remus swore and pulled Harry back by the shoulders just in time; Harry had a brief vision of a small painting inside the locket before green light exploded out of it with a scream and shot straight up like a roman candle, bursting into a thousand glittering iotas that eventually dissipated into the air.

Harry glanced at Tonks, whose eyes were wide.

"Well," she began, "I think that —"

There was another scream at that point and something began to froth and bubble up out of the cup, sitting on the table.

"Blood," Sirius said, awed. The red liquid boiled over the edge of the cup, sliding down the sides and spreading across the table. It left deep grooves in the wood where it ran, filling the air in the kitchen with an acrid stench as it evaporated away. It reminded Harry of the ink bleeding out of the diary when he'd stabbed it; he turned away, pressing his face into the familiar, slightly dusty-smelling fabric of Remus' jumper. He felt the older man's hand on the back of his head, anchoring him there.

"I think it worked," Tonks said shakily. Glastonbury peeped, hungrily.

"I wonder if he felt it," Remus said. Harry leaned back, turning around again to stare at the deep, blackened stain on the table. Sirius held out his hand and Tonks slowly let the chain slide off the fork she'd been holding it with until it pooled around the locket in Sirius' palm. A tiny, charred fragment of wood tumbled out and Glastonbury snatched it up in his beak, swallowing it happily.

"It was a portrait of Tom Riddle," Harry said, pointing at the now-empty locket. "He put a little portrait in it..."

"Makes sense," Remus added. Their words seemed to echo in the unnatural silence of the kitchen. "That's four gone."

"No bad day's work," Tonks murmured.

\* \* \*

Although they all felt that the destruction of the horcruxes called for celebration, no one actually felt like celebrating; for the rest of the day they were all very quiet, busying themselves with simple chores like washing dishes or, in Sirius' case, feeding and comforting his hungry hatchling. Remus asked them all to write down what they saw, for the sake of research; Sirius tried to tease him about being too much like Hermione, but the joke fell flat. Eventually, when they were finished, Harry picked up a book and began idly paging through it. Remus went back to marking papers and Tonks sat next to him, breaking Glastonbury's eggshell into tiny pieces in the tray Remus had provided for it.

"It's very useful, phoenix-shell," she said quietly to Sirius. "You could sell it in Diagon to a licensed potions supplier, or save it and use it yourself."

"Slughorn might be interested in it," Remus added, equally subdued. "He'd give you fair market value for it."

"I'll have to see," Sirius answered, and the room was silent again. Nobody even remembered to eat until about four o'clock, when Remus finally looked up from his papers. Without a word he went to the cupboard and took down a loaf of bread, slicing it by hand with a bread knife. Silently, Sirius went to the cold-cupboard and took out butter and jam. They had tea in a sort of stunned daze, and eventually went to bed without ever having eaten dinner.

Over the next few days, the unnatural calm that had settled on the cottage with the destruction of the horcruxes slowly began to dissipate. Sirius recovered more quickly than the others, since he lived at the school and was routinely taken out of himself by students and the professors. Likewise, Remus began to recover; he had to, in order to properly teach his classes, and though his health began to flag with the waxing moon, he still smiled and laughed more readily than Harry, who spent what Tonks thought was an unhealthy amount of time at home. She herself was more used to violent magical outbursts, and by the time Thursday rolled around, she was the one who began pestering Sirius once more about his birthday.

"Listen, it's not as though I have tomorrow off as well as tonight," Sirius said, drinking from the mug of soup Harry had brought him from the kitchen. "I'm teaching."

They were seated on Remus' bed, all four of them; Harry and Sirius with their shoulders pressed together, leaning on the footboard, while Remus sat huddled under an enormous pile of blankets and most of Tonks. Remus had yet to touch his food.

"Sorry about that," Remus muttered. "Can't stay warm."

"Shut up, you," Sirius said, pointing the mug at him. "I've told you thousands of times not to apologise."

"Sorry."

Sirius rolled his eyes heavenward and downed the rest of his soup. "So we'll just move my birthday to Saturday when you're going to be unconscious anyway, and promise to raise a drink to you when we go out on Saturday night."

"We'll bring you back some curry, you'll like that," Tonks added. "And I'll make sure you have plenty of books, because if you think you're bored now, you'll redefine boredom while you're in bed all day tomorrow."

"I like boredom," Remus said, his voice muffled slightly by the blankets. "It's the brief and torturous excitement of tomorrow night's full moon that I could live without. Before I forget..."

The blankets moved and Tonks was momentarily dislodged as Remus leaned over and pulled open the second drawer of his bedside table. A white-wrapped package was produced and thrown on the bed before Remus dove back under the blankets. Sirius picked it up, raising his eyebrows.

"You didn't have to get me anything," he said.

"I can finally afford to. It's fun. Really," Remus insisted.

"It's a book," Harry said, as Sirius poked and prodded it. "I can tell. Open it up, then!"

"Keep your robes on, Potter," Sirius replied, pulling off the scarlet ribbon and unsticking the ends of the paper. On unwrapping, it did indeed appear to be a book.

"*Merwyddin's Contemporary Magical History, 1950 through 1990*," Sirius read. "Sounds a bit dry..."

"Open it, twit," Remus groaned. Sirius lifted the lid and found an envelope in the inside cover. He slit it expertly and unfolded the parchment document within.

*"This document hereby grants the bearer and possessor with special permit and licence to own, operate, and maintain the vehicles specified below and to modify said vehicles magically to perform functions, also identified below, by permission of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office and the Bureau for the Advancement of Magical Studies,"* Sirius read aloud, eyes scanning the official-looking form. *"Provident upon the bearer's possession of official documentation entitling legal operation under Muggle law. What...?"*

"Keep reading," Tonks said, a huge grin on her face.

*"Any single motorized bicycle, motorcycle, or otherwise engine-driven two-wheeled vehicle; functions may include transfiguration, invisibility, magically-oriented tracking charms, and voluntary levitation and/or locomotion,"* Sirius read.

"It's not a motorbike itself," Remus said. "That was confiscated by the Ministry years ago and it's still a bit beyond my means at any rate. But when you do get one, that's your legal permit to operate it."

"Brilliant!" Sirius said, clutching the paper in both hands.

"You've got to have a driver's licence—well, and a motorbike," Remus continued, "But once you have that, you can basically do whatever you like to it."

“And you never know what else you might get for your birthday,” Tonks said cheerfully. “Although I can tell you right now that my gift to you is going to be footing the bill at the Three Broomsticks on Saturday night.”

## CHAPTER XXXIX

It probably would have been cheaper in the end for Tonks to buy Sirius a motorbike rather than paying the substantial pub tab, but to be fair she did her share of the celebrating that Saturday.

The moon had, for once, been mercifully easy, and Remus was even well enough to sit up and read a little by Saturday afternoon. He was fractious and bored, as Tonks had predicted he would be, but he made no trouble about them going out for the evening. He seemed content to stay at the Shrieking Shack with a reading light and a warming charm, and Kingsley Shacklebolt taking time off from his busy secretarial job with the Prime Minister to stand guard as a favour to Tonks.

Nobody went alone anymore, anywhere. Especially not werewolves weakened by the full moon.

Sirius had been mildly sullen about his birthday all day, but the Three Broomsticks was cheerful enough and after a mug of buttered rum he had loosened up a bit. The twins had come along, as well as Ron and Hermione, both of whom were trying extra-hard not to be awkward. Augustus Pye showed up during the second round of drinks and tendered his congratulations as well; apparently Tonks had invited him.

And there were gifts, of course, which appealed to the materialist soul that ten generations of noble breeding had, despite his best intentions, planted in Sirius' breast. A bucket of Weasley Wizard Wheezes jokes from the twins, an appropriately neutral gift of a new hat and muffler from Ron and Hermione, an "I Spleen St. Mungo's" shirt slipped to him with a book on first-year Healer-apprenticeship charms by Augustus on the sly, and from Harry...

Well, Harry's official gift was a black corduroy book bag, durable and of a style that would make the rest of Hogwarts envious and acquisitive when they saw it. The inside was lined with red to match his robes and the buckles were all black steel, forming the shapes of lion mouths and heads.

When Sirius opened it, however, he saw a hidden pocket at the back gap open, and a quick glimpse was all he needed to confirm that there was a book with a cover that screamed "plain brown wrapper" and something made of leather hidden away there. He glanced at Harry and wondered, momentarily, how he had managed to lay his hands on such things, between his famous face and his incredibly *innocent* look. Then he glanced at Tonks, who was also

grinning and watching Harry, and he realised that his cousin was really a very helpful woman indeed.

They stumbled out of the Three Broomsticks well past midnight, Sirius carrying his book-bag full of gifts and using their more-or-less continuous drinking as an excuse to keep his arm around Harry's shoulders. Ron and Hermione, slightly more sober, were escorted back to Hogwarts by Augustus, who had declined drinks, and Tonks had sent Harry and Sirius ahead to the Shack while she made sure the twins got home all right in the floo.

"This," Sirius said to Harry, sliding his arm down from shoulder to waist now that they were out of view of the pub, "was a brilliant birthday, Harry."

"Brilliant," Harry agreed. "More fun than any birthday I ever had."

"Me too. Me too. Because," Sirius said, forming his thoughts slowly, "Because it wasn't about being *me*. It was about being *old*."

"Not old," Harry murmured, shifting his weight so that they stumbled to one side, up against the darkened storefront of a shop a few doors down from the pub. He pinned Sirius to the wall with his hips, tasting of whiskey and salt when he kissed him. "I thought," he said, around kisses, "that tonight maybe when we got back—"

"Yeah," Sirius agreed fervently, shifting a little so that his new book bag wasn't digging into his side.

"You don't even know what I—"

"Yeah I do," Sirius said, arching his hips up into Harry's just a little. Harry gasped.

"Only if you—"

"Oi! Faggots!"

Harry turned in shock at the shout, trying to see where it had come from in the darkened street. Sirius caught his breath and reached for his wand, heart racing. He saw Harry doing the same, as far as he could judge in the dim shadows.

"Fuck off!" Harry shouted. Something hard and heavy hit the wall near Sirius' head; a thrown rock.

"Fuck off yourself, pervert!" the voice answered, and there it was—the chorus of nervous giggles that meant someone was showing off for a crowd of admirers.

"Tonks'll be here soon," Harry whispered. "Sounds like at least four of them. I don't think they can see clearly."

"If we keep quiet she won't even know we're here," Sirius answered.

"Hey, perverts, I was *talking* to you," the voice called. Another rock was thrown; it skittered across the ground and hit Sirius' shoe harmlessly.

"Oh, sod *this*," Sirius said, starting forward.

"Don't lose your head," Harry answered, throwing an arm out in front of him. "There's too many to fight. Besides, they don't even know who we—"

He cut off with a sudden yelp; there had been a soft thud, as of rock hitting flesh, and Sirius felt Harry bend slightly to rub his leg.

It wasn't as though Sirius had been keeping a tight lid on his temper all these years; he'd gotten into fights like any student and he'd sometimes shouted at people or sulked or thrown things—that was all in the course of growing up, especially growing up in the Black family. But this was different; this was a direct confrontation with his secret, and his secret had *been* a secret for so long and had made him so angry, never mind having had to *keep* it a secret in the first place, that there had been a little tight coil of bloodletting fury deep inside him which he wasn't even aware existed.

Five years of resentment at a world that was never, ever fair to him boiled over when these arseholes hit Harry, his Harry, and before he knew what he was doing he'd cast a *lumos* that lit the night sky like a floodlamp. Targets acquired, he'd thrown himself forward and knocked two teeth out of the lead bastard's mouth even as Harry was shouting *Sirius, stop*.

The lead bastard turned out to be a youngish man in wrinkled robes, not much older than Sirius himself and a terrific coward; he turned and tried to run even as his little gang surged forward to try their luck. Harry got two of them with a well-placed hex and, from the sound of it, kicked the third in the kneecap.

"Pervert, am I?" Sirius roared, grabbing the lead bastard by the throat and throwing him one-handed against the shop wall. "Do I throw rocks at strangers in the street?" he asked, as the other man turned around and blindly swung with his fists. Sirius broke his nose. Behind him, he could hear Harry casting another hex and hoped he could hold his own, because no force of nature was going to stop him from turning this one into a sack of broken bones. "Do I go looking for people to spy on?"

He was still *struggling*. Sirius punched him flat in the chest and heard the breath wheeze out of him.

"Now you listen to me, you worthless piece of dragon-shit impersonating a human being," he said in the man's ear, propping him up against the wall by

the simple expedient of holding his throat tightly in one hand. "You have just fucked with Sirius Black, and so help me Merlin if I ever learn your name I will make sure that every single member of my family spits on your shadow and murders your relatives if they are unfortunate enough to meet them. You do not want to be throwing rocks at Harry Potter, because he is *mine*, and —"

"Sirius, you're going to kill him," someone shouted, and two pairs of hands were pulling him away. The man sagged to the ground, grasping his throat and coughing. Sirius glanced up to see Tonks holding one arm while Harry pulled him away with the other. The enormity of what he'd done hit him like a gut-punch and he surged back again, trying to break free.

"If you breathe a word of this to anyone you'll wish you'd never been born," he shouted. "I can pull your stomach out through your mouth with a word and make your cock fall off with a *thought*."

"That's Rosmerta and reinforcements — we'd better get him out of here," he heard Tonks say, and that was the last he heard before the stunning spell hit him.

\* \* \*

"Well, I've convinced him not to press criminal charges, not that he needed much convincing, and they all signed a binding charm not to tell the newspapers," Tonks said, flopping down on Harry's bed and groaning. "Thank Merlin for magic. How do Muggles manage? I suppose they must just kill people who know their secrets."

Harry, holding a bag of ice against his thigh, leaned back disconsolately. "Thanks, Tonks."

"Not that I think they really deserve to live," she continued, "but it's bad form to commit murder as a member of law enforcement, unless they were trying to kill you first."

Harry smiled at her. "You should sleep."

"Adrenaline. I'll probably crash in an hour or so," she said, staring at the ceiling. Sirius, still sleeping off the stunning spell, snorted and twitched in his sleep. "Bit scary, wasn't it?"

"Dunno," Harry said. "It's not like I didn't know Sirius could...do things like that. He was just defending me," he added. "I told him I didn't need it, I mean I tried to, but I think after that first punch it wasn't really about me anyway."

"They were odious little cretins," Tonks said.

"Thanks for taking us home first. Were they still there when you went back?"

"Yeah, getting seen to in the Three Broomsticks. Wasn't hard to convince people I was doing my official duty." She regarded the sleeping man curiously. "He must have been really angry. That one he was fighting with had a broken nose, a hairline fracture in his jaw, and two cracked ribs."

"You didn't obliviate them?"

Tonks sighed. "I considered it, but...I *am* an Auror, Harry. That would be a cover-up. If it ever got out somehow I could lose my job—they could send me to Azkaban. Getting them to sign nondisclosure charms was within my bounds; obliviation wasn't, not in this case. Even then, I could only get them to do that for the newspapers. Though I don't think they're going to go around boasting that two drunk teenagers beat the holy hell out of them. Besides, as far as I know, they didn't get your names."

"I may have shouted *Sirius* at some point," Harry said. "But I don't think they were paying attention, and how would they know, anyway?"

"True." Tonks sighed. "It's an awful end to a nice birthday. At least he's got Sunday to recover in. The charm I used on him might be a good thing, actually—should get rid of any hangover he might've had. Anyway, I'd better go downstairs and crawl into bed. I've got to be up at an ungodly hour to go fetch Remus from the Shack. I'll let you sleep."

"Thanks again," Harry said. "Sorry about all this."

"Don't worry too much about it. Just try not to get into any more stupid fights, all right?"

"Only the really relevant and well-timed ones," Harry promised. Tonks grinned at him and vanished downstairs while he slipped under the blankets and curled up against Sirius, feeling oddly triumphant.

\* \* \*

Remus was up and moving around again by Sunday afternoon, and while he didn't precisely shout at them as Harry had feared, he did have a lot of questions to ask. Most of them weren't completely answerable, in fact, since the whole thing had happened so fast.

"It was all a bit of a blur, to be honest," Sirius said, when Remus finally began to ask questions about the fight itself and not the lead-up. "I remember swearing."

"You said you could make his cock fall off with a thought when we pulled you off him," Tonks reminded him. "That's all I heard, though, other than Harry shouting for help."

"So Harry stunned two of them and was fighting with the third in the street, and you had one of them pinned up against a shopfront?" Remus asked.

"That's right," Sirius said. "Wasn't much of a fighter."

"Mmh. Do you think they got a good look at either one of you?"

"What does it matter?" Harry asked.

"Well, as I understand it, they can't talk to the newspapers or anyone who would reasonably be expected to, according to the agreement they signed," Remus said, glancing at Tonks. She nodded. "On the other hand, I wonder how little or much you care about the idea circulating that the Chosen One is having an affair with the male tutor at Hogwarts. That's the kind of thing that could cause trouble for Sirius, too. You haven't got a job to lose; he has, and if he's not at Hogwarts I don't see how we're going to weasel him into his NEWTs."

"People won't believe it," Sirius said. "They won't, will they?"

"They'd believe any old thing about me," Harry replied glumly. "They have before."

"Well, we'll hope it doesn't come to that. It's not as though we can do anything about it," Remus said.

"It's stupid anyway. It shouldn't matter," Sirius mumbled angrily.

"Of course not, but to pretend it actually doesn't is just as stupid," Remus said, though his voice was kind. "I'm sorry that happened to you boys. It would have to happen at some point—you know as well as I that the world is unkind to those who don't fit in it—but I had hoped it wouldn't be something so primitive. *Rock throwing*, for heaven's sake."

"I'm not sorry I broke his nose," Sirius said.

"It'll certainly make him think twice before trying it again," Remus agreed. "Now, I think I'll be all right to lecture tomorrow, so I have some notes to go over..."

"I'm going to go look through the history books again," Harry said, rubbing his forehead. "There must be something in them about a sixth horcrux. Something of Ravenclaw's."

"Just her experiments with wands," Remus answered. "And we're not even certain any of them survived. Hoaxes have surfaced from time to time, but nothing's ever been proven conclusively."

"Why not, I wonder?" Sirius asked.

"She worked with glass, mostly. Magically speaking, it's a difficult material. It responds in unexpected ways," Remus said. "It's hard to cast spells on glass objects to begin with, so trying to reverse-engineer from anything to find out who made it..."

"Did she put cores in them?" Sirius asked.

"I don't think it says," Harry sighed. "In the books, I mean. Do you suppose there's a book specifically about glass wand-making somewhere? Not related to Ravenclaw, I mean."

"I wish Ollivander hadn't done a bunk," Tonks said. "He'd have known."

"Well, off I go, anyway," Harry said, standing up and taking a few books from the kitchen counter. "I'll be upstairs."

"I'll come along and help you look," Sirius said, following him.

"They won't get much research done that way," Tonks said with a grin, once they'd disappeared up the stairs in the living room.

"That's all right," Remus answered, without looking up from his lecture notes. "I don't think they're on the right track, anyway."

"No? You ought to tell them so."

He set his notes down and looked up at her, biting his lip. "I'd rather they keep chasing their tails, actually."

She stared at him. "You know, I really do think you don't want to find six at all."

"That's the problem, really. I...call it a feeling," he said. "I don't think we'll much like six when we do find it."

"Why? Do you know something about it?" she asked, studying his face. He glanced away.

"It's just that we're in a good position, and I don't want to lose it through haste."

"Why would we...? Remus, you're being awfully cryptic."

"I know," he said, regretfully. "Just...trust me, Tonks?"

"Of course," she answered immediately. "You know that. But I don't take well to having it abused, Remus."

"I promise," he said gravely.

\* \* \*

It was two days before Harry found what he was looking for, and another two before the significance of it was made clear. By then, though no-one would have thought anything would be more important than finding the sixth horcrux, they arguably had bigger things to worry about.

Harry had spoken to Hermione, who floo'd Flourish and Blotts and spoken to someone there who enjoyed research. They'd bundled up a package, put it on Harry's account, and sent it post-haste to Remus at Hogwarts, who'd brought it home Tuesday evening.

"It's good to see you taking so much pleasure in books," Remus said, as Harry ripped into the parcel and settled down next to the fire with the top volume on the stack. "Reminds me of your mother."

"Not Dad?"

"Your father never had much need for books. He was a fast reader, but he only used them when he had to. Great one for improvising, was James."

"Mmh," Harry said. "Well, if I manage to improvise up a sixth horcrux, I'll let you know."

He glanced up to find Remus studying him intently, a sad look in his brown eyes. The older man turned away quickly, and Harry put it down to what must be painful for Remus – the memory of Harry's parents.

That Wednesday, while Harry was poring over the books on wand-making with titles like "Waving It Proudly" and "Wandcraft Through The Ages" (several of which had been written by, if not *the* Ollivander, then *an* Ollivander), Sirius was spending his morning in sixth-year Transfiguration. McGonagall had asked him to come by and be an extra pair of hands; they were turning croquet mallets into flamingos – much easier than the reverse – and generally someone had to be around to help corral rogue mallets and prevent any of them from escaping.

By lunchtime he was glad enough to flee Transfigurations for the peace and quiet of his rooms; he could ask a House Elf to bring him up some food, then go straight to his afternoon Potions intensive with Slughorn and the seventh-years.

He had let himself into his rooms and thrown down his bag, easing the red Tutor's robes off his shoulders and loosening the collar of his Hogwarts shirt, before he realised there was someone else in the room.

The sallow man sat as still as a panther, an inky shadow taking up one of the wing-chairs facing the door. He looked eerily at ease—one leg crossed over the other, hands resting lightly on the ends of the chair-arms, head tilted a little to the left. The tip of his black boot twitched, slightly. The expression on his face was a mixture of anger and hatred, tinged with disgust. Sirius dropped his hands, inching his left one towards the pocket of his robes, where his wand rested.

“No wards on your windows, the barest and most obvious on the door,” Severus Snape drawled, eyes narrowing slightly. “I’m surprised no little brat has slit your throat as you slept. Don’t—even—think about it,” he added, as Sirius reached more openly for his wand. “Typical Black arrogance.”

Sirius knew that Remus hadn’t told Snape who he was, and Snape had seen only the barest glimpse of him before. Still, it was possible Snape was bluffing—

“I am not bluffing, you loathsome little twit,” Snape said, rising out of the chair in a fluid motion. “You have ten minutes to pack whatever pathetic belongings you deem necessary.”

“Or what?” Sirius challenged.

“You try my patience, whelp,” Snape snarled. “You’re going wherever the Potter brat is hiding. You’ve allowed yourself to be found out.”

“I don’t believe you,” Sirius answered.

“You are not required to *believe* me, you are only required to *obey* me. We will speak with Lupin when you are prepared.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Nine minutes.”

Sirius had barely tolerated Snivellus while they were at school and he was not about to take shit from him now, even if he was two decades older. He was still Snivellus, failing to grasp the obvious and playing annoying, stupid little games. He held out his hand and the wand, halfway out of his pocket, slapped into it; he spun it across his palm and flicked it at the trunk in the corner, which popped open. Several articles of clothing vanished and reappeared in the trunk, neatly folded. An advanced Potions text flung itself across the room as well, barely missing hitting Snape in the head. Within seconds, the packing was complete and the trunk had slammed shut. Sirius flicked his wand again as he shrugged into his Tutor’s robes, and the trunk shrunk drastically. He picked it up and tossed it at Snape.

"Carry this for me, would you?" he asked, and had the pleasure of seeing Snape glower. He had already automatically caught the trunk, however, and would never stoop to simply dropping it. As they left, Snape sipped from a flask he produced from his pocket, and soon Sirius was walking down the hallway with a tall, fair-haired stranger at his side.

"Nice disguise. You should make it permanent," he said, out of the corner of his mouth. "You could change back to yourself for Hallowe'en—"

"Shut up," Snape growled. "When we arrive at the Dark Arts classroom you will politely request that Lupin join us in the hallway."

"Do it yourself."

"I cannot do it myself, *idiot*, because he will not recognise me," Snape answered. He opened the door to the Dark Arts classroom and shoved Sirius through. Remus, who was lecturing while the chalk drew an intricate diagram on the board, looked up at him in surprise.

"Mr. Padfoot," he said in measured tones. "Are you planning to sit in on class this afternoon? I was under the impression that Professor Slughorn had requested your presence."

"Professor, I was wondering if I could speak to you outside for a moment," Sirius said. Ron and Hermione had turned around in their seats to stare at him, concerned. To his relief, Remus didn't ask if it could wait or whether it was urgent; he simply caught the chalk out of the air, tossed it to Hermione, and walked down the aisle.

"Granger, you can finish the diagram from my notes—everyone, start copying it down," he said. "Backtalk will not be tolerated and obedience is encouraged, because school is not a democracy but a benevolent police state...now," he said, as the door closed behind him, "What's going—hello..."

"Lupin," Snape said darkly. Remus recognised the tone at once.

"How nice of you to join us for the afternoon. Why in Merlin's name are you here?"

"Your protégé has been indiscreet," Snape said. "I don't know where you're keeping the so-called Chosen One and I don't wish to know, but he will have an unfortunate house-guest for the indefinite future."

He shoved the trunk at Sirius, who clutched it to his chest.

"Send him there. The Dark Lord has discovered his true identity. Better you kept it from me before now; I would have had him put down," he added bitterly.

Remus looked from Snape to Sirius, eyes widening.

"How?" he asked.

"Do we have time for this?" Snape demanded.

"Sorry, of course not – Padfoot, you'd better do as he says. Go home and wait for me there. I'll make your excuses to McGonagall." He turned to Snape.

"Clearly, we need to speak in private."

Snape looked pointedly at Sirius.

"Can I floo from your office?" Sirius asked, rolling his eyes. Remus waved him on; he stepped inside the office and then paused at the door, listening.

"Two doors down from the same place as last time," Snape said. "No earlier than eight or later than ten. If I don't arrive by ten, don't come back."

"I see. Bring Arcadia if you can; I need to speak with her."

"I'm not your courier, Lupin."

"I have a class to teach," Remus replied. "Can you leave as you came without being seen?"

"Tell McGonagall to brush up the perimeter wards in the north-eastern corner," Snape said, and Sirius heard a door slam, followed by receding footsteps. Quickly, he ran to the floo and within seconds he was bursting out of the fireplace at Fourteen Back. Harry was – or rather had been – sitting on the sofa, a half-fledgling Glastonbury curled up and sleeping on his chest, beak under wing; when he emerged, Harry leapt up and Glastonbury was forced to take flight mid-fall, chirruping angrily as he circled to settle on Sirius' shoulder.

"What's happened?" Harry asked. Sirius spread his hands.

"The Dark Lord knows," he said. "I don't know how. Snape was in my rooms and he sent me home –"

"Wait, *what*?" Harry asked.

"That slimy bastard was in my rooms – told me that the Dark Lord knows who I am."

Harry swore. "It must have been those idiots in Hogsmeade. I knew it was too good to be true that they'd keep quiet. He sent you here? Are you sure it wasn't a trap?"

"Hells, no, I'm not sure!" Sirius said. "We should floo Tonks, where is she today?"

"Field work. We could send Glastonbury, if he can travel."

Glastonbury, hearing his own name, flapped his wings indignantly.

"I think we'd better make sure someone keeps tabs on Remus," Sirius said, as Harry tore a sheet of paper out of the notebook he was working in and began to scribble a note. "Tell her I've been sent into hiding and Remus needs a discreet guard. Don't use names."

"Course not," Harry answered, folding the paper in half and offering it to Glastonbury, who clenched it in one foot, hopping up and down eagerly with the other. "*Tonks*, Glas," he said. "Take it to Tonks, then come straight back, all right?"

The phoenix took off from Sirius' shoulder, vanishing mid-flight. The pair of them paused to take a mutual breath, Sirius rubbing his forehead anxiously, Harry watching him.

"He's meeting Remus tonight," Sirius said finally, pacing back and forth. "I didn't get much information."

"Do you reckon word'll spread?" Harry asked.

"Don't know. Don't think anyone'll believe them, really. Then again, someone obviously did..." Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't mind people knowing who I am—make me a bit famous, won't it?—It's just *him*, treating me like some kind of child—and if they know my name, then they know about, about you and me..."

Harry grasped his arm gently, stopping him in mid-pace.

"Would that really be so terrible?" he asked.

"For the war? It'd be disastrous—"

"After the war." Harry made a gesture, turning his free hand from palm down to palm up, as if to indicate time passing. "For the first time I think I really might live to see eighteen, Sirius. For the first time—this year it feels like we're winning, despite everything. After everything, I might still be standing. You might, too. I don't know what this is, but I don't think I need to tell you it's not just fucking."

Sirius glanced away. "You can't know that."

"Yes, I can. Because when the dust settles I want to be proud of this," Harry said fiercely. "I deserve a real life, Sirius, and I deserve that life to be just exactly the way I want it to be, because it *never has been*. And that means not hiding people and things that I'm proud of. Like this house, like you. When the war is over—you can hide, but I won't."

Glastonbury reappeared then, dropping a return letter from Tonks into Harry's hair and flapping into the kitchen to be fussed over by Hedwig.

*Sent Moody to Hogwarts. I'll be there myself by dinnertime. If in trouble, send for the twins. N.T.*

Sirius threw himself down onto the sofa, scrubbing his face with his hands.

"It's too much right now," Harry said. "Right. Problem at hand – what do we do now?"

"Wait, I suppose," Sirius answered, secretly relieved that Harry had let the subject drop. "Wait and see what Remus says after tonight. Wait to see if rumours show up in the Prophet tomorrow."

"Wait to see if Voldemort comes after you next," Harry said thoughtfully. Sirius looked up at him. Harry's eyes were distant. "Whenever we wait for him, he wins..."

Realisation dawned on Sirius. "So we won't wait too long, will we?" he asked.

"No," Harry agreed. "Not long at all."

He seemed to snap out of his thoughtful mood then, dropping down on the sofa next to Sirius. "In the meantime, at least you'll be here for a while. That'll be good, don't you think?"

Sirius gave him a doubtful look, but then he remembered one of the items that had been packed in his trunk before he left.

"Well, I *have* been reading that book you gave me," he said. Despite the tension, Harry grinned.

"Plenty of time for that in the next few days..."

## CHAPTER XL

The greasy little Muggle eatery that they'd met at last time was two doors up from a slightly more elegant coffeehouse, the sort with tinted windows and deep seats in the back for those who didn't want to sit at tables. Remus bought a cup of tea and sat down in a chair that was visible without being obvious; he'd have gone for one with a clear view of the till, but Snape would undoubtedly be in disguise, and would have to find him rather than the reverse.

But Snape never came; instead Arcadia, looking a little cleaner and more well-fed, appeared in the cafe. Remus watched as she bought a small cup of coffee with great hesitancy, handling the money as if it were made of delicate china; when she had accepted the change and turned to study the room, he lifted his face so that she would see it clearly. She sat on the edge of the chair next to him, cradling the coffee in both hands.

"He sends his regrets," she said. Remus smiled a little. He did not show his teeth.

"I doubt that," he replied. "But it's good to hear you going through the motions."

"He has taught me a little, even about manners," she answered, also smiling. "He sees me often. He gave me money for this," she added, holding up the coffee. "I don't like the taste, but when I go in an eating shop I must buy something or I cannot stay."

She recited it as if by rote, then glanced at him for approval. He nodded without making eye contact.

"I need to know how the Dark Lord found out about Black," he said. "I assume he's given you the information."

She offered a small sealed bottle, filled with silvery liquid—a pensieve memory. He held out his hand for it, tucking it away in his pocket when she relinquished it.

"He says to tell you that he...made a connection which the Dark Lord did not," she said. "The Dark Lord assumes that this is some offspring of Sirius Black, a bastard child..."

"Of course," Remus murmured. "But Snape—"

"He believes you have resurrected him, perhaps with a..." she took out a slip of paper and read from it. "Time-turner."

"You're reading now," Remus observed.

"He teaches me. In secret."

Remus raised his eyebrows. She studied her hands. "He is not a very nice man, but he is a good man. He says he seems to find students everywhere because the world is filled with idiots."

Remus grinned. "Severus never did tolerate ignorance well. So the Dark Lord thinks Sirius is his own bastard son, and Severus knows better. Tell him from me that I'll explain what happened when all this is over, but in essence he's correct—this is a resurrected Sirius."

Arcadia watched him keenly, her intelligent eyes showing she was remembering everything said.

"There is more," she said. "In the jar. He says you should study it at once."

"Tell him I'll do so before the night is over. I'll need to speak to both of you again soon—not later than Friday."

"He is much taken up with serving the Dark Lord. He will send to you when he can come."

Remus nodded. "Thank you, Arcadia."

She broke into an enormous grin. "*It is my pleasure,*" she said politely.

\* \* \*

Remus arrived home earlier than expected but later than hoped that evening; with him he carried a large wooden case, bound with leather straps and brass buckles. He wrestled it onto the low table in the living room and sighed with relief as he set it down. Harry and Sirius regarded it with interest.

"Pensieve," he grunted, throwing himself into a chair. Tonks began unbuckling the straps.

"What did Snape have to say?" she asked.

"He couldn't come. He sent Arcadia instead."

"Oh," Tonks said, in a tone of voice which made it very clear what her opinions on young, pretty female werewolves having drinks with *her* boyfriend were. Remus allowed himself a few seconds to bask in her protectiveness before moving onward.

"He also provided this," he said, taking the bottle out of his inside coat pocket.

"Pensieve memories," Harry said. "What of?"

"I'm not quite sure. Apparently they have more information than I was given, which wasn't much. The Dark Lord knows who you are, but he thinks you're Sirius Black's bastard son—most people wouldn't be surprised," Remus added, as Sirius blinked at this information. "You did see a different girl each week."

"Didn't have to snog any of them, that way," Sirius muttered. Tonks grinned at him.

"I've arranged to meet with them again, soon, to discuss our options," Remus continued, lifting the pensieve out of its case. Tonks moved the case aside and he set it down in the middle of the table. Harry touched it cautiously.

"Is it Dumbledore's?" he asked quietly.

"It was," Remus said, studying the younger man. "It was left to the Hogwarts Headmaster—or Headmistress—in perpetuity, so it's in Minerva McGonagall's possession now. She didn't let it go easily, either."

McGonagall was apparently not one to use pensieves much, or perhaps the fact that it was Dumbledore's had prevented her; the inside of the bowl was dusty, and Remus knelt to clean it gently with a handkerchief before sitting back on his heels and looking up at Harry and Sirius across from him and Tonks nearby.

"Out of caution," he said, "And because memories *can* be used to trap people, I want Sirius with me. Tonks, you'll supervise here with Harry, all right?"

She nodded. "There's procedure for dealing with pensieves. If you get stuck, we'll get you out."

"All right."

Remus tipped the silvery contents of the jar into the bowl, where they lay in a shimmering pool. He and Sirius together leaned over the broad bowl, until the falling sensation began...

\* \* \*

They landed in a dim room, lit only by weak torches burning in brackets along the walls. People in dark robes stood in little clumps here and there, hoods over their heads, speaking quietly. Remus turned to see Severus standing next to him and he thought he caught a glimpse of Arcadia's pale face nearby.

"Some kind of meeting room," Sirius said, his voice unnaturally loud.

"The inner circle, I would imagine," Remus answered. "His most trusted people. Look, there's Draco – and –"

Two men had just entered the room from a door at the rear of the chamber; Draco was pale and composed, his face utterly and unnaturally blank, while the man next to him...

He did look like a man, but his features were blurred and distorted; his nose seemed ill-defined and his eyes glowed red within dark pupils. What hair was visible under the hood was short and wispy like an old man's. His skin was white, papery, and his lips were merely dun-coloured smudges around his mouth. He didn't look like the slit-eyed, snake-nostrilled monster that Harry had described, but then Harry had only encountered him in moments of violence and terror.

Or perhaps the horcruxes were driving him mortal again; only two were left now...

"Gather around," Voldemort said in a shrill voice, gesturing to the others to join him. Draco took up a position on his left, Snape on his right; Pettigrew (his silver hand glowing) next to Snape and the rest ranged beyond. Remus saw Narcissa next to Draco and Bellatrix next to her, but he didn't point her out to Sirius. He could be a little irrational about the woman who'd killed him. To be fair, Remus would have been, too. "My son has news to share."

Remus glanced at Sirius, who looked bewildered.

"I thought you said he never had children," Sirius said, edging closer for a better view.

"As far as I know, he doesn't," Remus answered. Then Voldemort put his hand on Draco's shoulder. "Ah."

"That's creepy as fuck," Sirius said. Narcissa was beaming proudly. "You don't suppose he really is...?"

"Two youths have come to us with interesting news, so he tells me," Voldemort continued.

"I mean, I know Death Eaters can get up to some pretty kinky stuff with all those masks and stuff..."

"Draco looks too much like Lucius," Remus answered, as Malfoy snapped his fingers and gestured for a handful of people outside the circle to come forward. There were two pairs of burly men in dark robes, each of whom held a third tightly between them. Inside the circle of watchers, they deposited their prisoners and moved out again, respectfully.

"Bow," Voldemort said. "You are in the presence of an immortal."

The two men, looking terrified, dropped to their knees and pressed their foreheads against the grimy floor.

"Here—I know him!" Sirius said suddenly. "That's the bastard that hit Harry!"

"You have information for us, I think," Voldemort continued with a terrible grin.

"Yes, sir," one of them quavered.

"Yes, my lord," Voldemort corrected.

"Yes, my lord," they both said hurriedly.

"You may sit up. Do not stand."

They sat up, kneeling uncomfortably. The one Sirius recognised spoke first.

"We...we saw Harry Potter in Hogsmeade. My lord," he added quickly.

"People have seen that abomination in many places. Of what interest is this to me?" Voldemort asked Draco, who gestured that the men should continue.

"We saw him with a young man who claimed to be Sirius Black, my lord," the other one said, a little faster on the uptake than his terrified pal.

"Sirius Black is dead!" Bellatrix said sharply. Voldemort held up a hand to silence her.

"Many of us saw him put down before our eyes," he said.

"Well, he..." the man swallowed. "He didn't look like the, the posters and things...younger, a lot younger. We seen him before, saying his name was Nigel Padfoot. He's a tutor at the school."

Voldemort looked at Draco, who shrugged. He turned back to the men.

"How old?" he demanded.

"Not older than myself, my lord," the man said.

"My lord," Snape said, startling both Remus and Sirius, "If I may suggest..."

Voldemort glanced at him.

"It is possible that Sirius Black, being who he was, may have fathered a child unwittingly," Snape said.

"Clever, clever," Remus murmured. "Well done, Severus."

"Ah, yes," Voldemort agreed. "Perhaps. Is that all?" he asked the two cowering men in the middle of the circle.

"There...was one other thing, my lord," one of them said. He glanced at the circle of watchers and cleared his throat. "I told Mr. Malfoy..."

Draco leaned close to Voldemort and spoke softly; Remus could see the others straining to hear. Snape must have been close enough to hear, because the words sounded in the chamber like a megaphone:

"They were having indecent relations with each other."

"I'll kill that little—" Sirius said, starting forward, but Remus grabbed his arm.

"It's a memory, you can't touch him," he said. Voldemort's eyes had lit with unholy glee as he turned back to the men in the circle. He held up his wand and waved it casually; both men screamed in pain for a moment before falling back to the ground, breathing heavily.

"That is a taste," he said, "of what you may expect if you speak word of this again outside of the circle. However," he continued, as the guard from before picked up the struggling men and held them fast, "your service will be rewarded in due time. When this...so-called Black stands before me, rest assured, all that you wish for will be yours."

The room faded at that point and the floor underneath them began to swirl and change; Sirius yelped in a startled manner and Remus closed his eyes against the dizzying sensation of falling.

"It's a second memory," he called. "Just be patient, it'll end soon."

When he opened his eyes again they were still standing in what appeared to be the same chamber, now empty of people except for a tight knot in the centre. Voldemort; Draco, Severus, and Bellatrix, with Peter cowering nearby.

"He is of value to Potter. Once before the boy lost his head and went to help his dear godfather; who is to say the son will not elicit even more irrational results?" Voldemort was saying, his pale, spidery hands steeped together.

"Perverts," Malfoy said contemptuously.

"But a useful perversion nonetheless," Voldemort replied. "He is at the school, virtually unprotected; he has been seen in Hogsmeade. We must have him followed. If he leads us to the Potter boy, so much the better. If he does not, we shall make the boy come to us. Draco, my son," he said, turning a little to face the young man. "I leave you to your preparations; I will not distract you from Azkaban with this."

"He must have been put in charge of getting his father out," Remus said. "Merlin pray he botch the job like he did most of his homework."

Sirius snorted as Voldemort continued.

"Bellatrix, my dear, he may well be your blood kin. Follow him when he leaves the school. Learn his secrets, discover where he goes. If the opportunity presents itself, bring him to me. Cleanly, Bella," he added in a warning voice. He must have seen the mad glint in her eye that Remus knew all too well; indeed, it was the same look as the one she'd had when she killed Sirius, and that was forever burned into his memory. "I do not want him dead before we have spoken. The trap must have living bait."

They came back to themselves in the warm, cosy living room of Fourteen Back, but there were chills over Remus' skin as he carefully tipped the memories back into the bottle and sealed it tightly.

"What did you see?" Tonks asked. Sirius knotted his hands in front of him, hunching forward and looking frightened. Remus glanced at Harry.

"Trouble," he said.

\* \* \*

One of the most pleasant things about having Sirius back as a young man was that he was incredibly predictable.

There was the usual posturing and several declarations of courage, but once Remus got him to shut up and listen for the space of five minutes, he saw enough sense to stop him from running off to Hogsmeade and finding Bellatrix himself. It saddened Remus, in a way; if he had reached Sirius before he went haring off after Peter, all those years ago, he could have made him see sense. The unspoken observation hung over their heads as they discussed their options.

"He'll have to go back to school," Harry said. Sirius glanced at him. "Otherwise they'll know we're onto the plan. Besides, that would be like admitting we're afraid."

"I *am* afraid," Remus said. "Bellatrix Lestrange is a madwoman with no moral compass and a sadistic streak that makes the rest of her family look tame by comparison."

"She used to pull the wings off pixies," Sirius murmured.

"Yeah, but she can't get into the school, can she?"

"Snape and Arcadia did," Sirius pointed out. "But – well, she's insane, not stupid. He's told her not to kill me, and she wouldn't come for me unless she had a reasonable chance of actually taking me in. So as long as I'm never alone, I'm all right. And...Harry and I thought of something."

Remus glanced from one boy to the other. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Probably not," Harry said.

"All right. Tell me."

"Sirius goes back tomorrow," Harry said. "This weekend he goes into Hogsmeade and lets her take him. If he doesn't fight, it's a lot more likely he'll survive the abduction."

"I was right. I really don't like that at all," Remus said.

"Sooner or later she'll get past us anyway," Harry said. "We might as well be the ones who control when."

"That doesn't stop them slaughtering Sirius when they have him," Tonks said quietly.

"No, but *we* can still stop them," Harry answered quickly. "If we know when they take him, it's not hard to find where—"

"—and call in reinforcements," Remus said, catching on. "A locator charm—no, it would have to be something that wasn't dependent on charms—that doesn't matter..."

"The end," Harry said. "They're not very good fighters, and if we get the jump on them for once instead of the other way around, we could finish it."

"We still haven't found the sixth horcrux," Tonks said.

"But at least he'll be weaker, and it buys us time," Remus said thoughtfully. He studied Sirius, looking grave. "I hardly need to tell you that baited traps almost never spring as they're supposed to, Sirius. If for some reason we can't find you—"

"I can take out five or six before they touch me, and you know it's the truth," Sirius said, with no trace of humour. "More if I'm booby-trapped. I have pretty good odds of getting out."

"Not good enough," Tonks answered.

Sirius bit his lip. "Listen...Harry told me I once said I would have died for James, and I would have—but I never got the opportunity."

"Oh, Sirius, no," Remus said.

"I've already had a second chance; that's more than most people get. And I will not be pent up inside again while others fight," he said.

There was a silent pause.

"Besides, I probably won't die anyway," he said.

"The other option is..." Harry bit his lip and glanced at Tonks. She shook her head.

"I can't hold his shape for long enough to be convincing."

"I can't really see a better plan," Harry said.

"Perhaps if we had more time—" Remus began.

"No. The more time we give them, the more they'll know—the more Sirius is in danger," Harry said.

"I agree that we have to send him back tomorrow, or tonight," Tonks said. "They'll know we're onto them, otherwise."

Remus steeped his fingers, rubbing the pads of his thumbs against his lips.

"Not alone," he said finally. "I want someone to stay with you in your rooms, in case they move faster than we can. And not you, Harry," he added without looking at Harry, who had opened his mouth to volunteer. "I'll go myself. We can sleep on this plan Harry has and decide tomorrow evening after I've spoken with Snape again. In the meantime, I'd better pack a bag—can't show up to class looking less than tidy, can I?"

\* \* \*

They transfigured the sofa into a bed for Remus; transfigured furniture never felt quite right, but he'd slept on much worse and it at least felt better as a bed than as a sofa. Sirius sat up reading while Remus piled blankets onto the bed and changed, discreetly, into a pair of dark green pyjamas.

"I'll put out the light, if you want," Sirius offered.

"That's all right; I never can sleep unless I've—"

"—read a little first. I remember, Peter used to get narked at you about your reading light."

"And James threatened to buy me a Hand of Glory," Remus said with a smile. "That's right, of course you remember."

"Did I? The other me?"

Remus took a book out of the small bag he'd brought, setting it on the bed. "After Azkaban, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I never asked. The truth was that he—" Remus hesitated, then continued in the third person, "—seemed to remember the past much more clearly than he saw the present. I imagine he did. You don't ask much about him anymore."

Sirius grinned. "The novelty passed."

"On to new novelties?"

"I have grown up, and put away childish things," Sirius said, mock-solemn. Remus sat on the edge of the bed and rested his elbows on his thighs, hands holding the book between his knees. He bent his head to study the page, shoulders slumped forward, mouth set in a pleased, studious line. He looked, for just a moment, as though he were sixteen again; until he shifted slightly and the light caught the premature lines in his face, picking out the silver in his hair.

"What are you reading?" Sirius asked, lest he ask something far more personal, about what time had done to his Moony. *Death has quite undone his hair, quite has kissed his lips away...*

"Graveworthy again; the poem I showed Harry made me think I ought to go looking for the poetry book he published," Remus said, holding it up so that the cover was more visible. "He was a very comforting man, and I find comfort in his poems. They're decent enough; not exactly Shelley or Chaucer, but they mean more to people who knew him. What are you studying?"

"Order homework," Sirius said, making a face. "Harry's given me a biography of Ravenclaw to read and make notes on."

"If nothing else comes out of this war, it has made Harry Potter a scholar," Remus observed. "I remember when he used to completely make up his Divination homework. Not that I blame him."

"Trelawney's a fright," Sirius laughed. Remus smiled, and Sirius eventually fell silent. "Amazing how you laugh when the world might end in a day, isn't it?"

"You needn't do it if you're frightened, Sirius. No one would think the worse of you."

"Shouldn't be. I've already died once."

"That wasn't you. Not you, any more than you're a fugitive from prison. You have no less right to live simply because your method of survival was a little..."

"Redundant?"

"Unorthodox."

Sirius propped himself on one elbow and set his book aside. "I think we have to, Moony. *If it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come...*"

"*The readiness is all,*" Remus finished for him. "Try quoting comedies, Sirius; they're not so grim. We'll decide tomorrow. In the meantime, sleep."

Sirius turned over, face to the wall, and closed his eyes obediently; he heard Remus turn out the light and crawl into the other bed.

At that moment, he would have given anything to be Padfoot, curled up on Harry's bed in Fourteen Back.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Harry was awoken by a crash and a string of curses that could only be Sirius; he'd have speculated Tonks, but if she swore every time she broke something she'd never stop.

He came down the stairs to find Sirius rummaging through the china case at the back of the living room, now used for keeping mostly books and the odd knick-knack in.

"What's going on?" he asked sleepily. Sirius turned to grin up at him.

"I think I've solved it," he said.

"Solved what?" Harry asked. "Where's Remus? Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"He ran off to have a wash and I nipped back here. I've had an epiphany," Sirius announced. Tonks, similarly dishevelled from sleep, appeared in the doorway as Sirius wrestled the jewellery box open.

"Whass alla this?" she mumbled, yawning. Sirius, with a triumphant yelp, pulled his hand out of the jewellery box, sending bracelets and earrings flying.

"Hey! Watch it!" Harry said, gathering them up. "Those were my mum's!"

"This wasn't," Sirius said, holding up a thin silver rod.

"Didn't Remus say he thought it was some kind of award?" Harry asked. "What are you on about, Sirius?"

Sirius stood and held the rod across his palms, offering it to Harry. "What does this look like to you?"

"I dunno," Harry said suspiciously. "A wand, I guess."

"Yes. A wand," Sirius said. "And what wand have we been looking for?"

"Ravenclaw's, but that one is glass—"

"—*with a silver core*. You can't make a wand out of any one thing; it's got to have a core. The biography I read said that she knew metalsmithing. She spent half her life dressed up like a man, doing craftsman apprenticeships..."

"Glassblowing, fine metalwork, and alchemy," Harry said quietly. "Of course." He picked it up, weighing it in his palm. "You think this is a core from one of Ravenclaw's wands?"

"Hear me out," Sirius said, dropping down onto the sofa. Tonks came forward and slipped quietly into a chair; Harry stayed standing in front of the sofa, still holding the wand-core in his hands.

"He's got five ready-made and only one more to go. Gryffindor's too tough to pin down, so he finds one of Ravenclaw's wands—Merlin knows how, but he must have had a ton of connections. He brings the wand here and decides that he's going to use your death to make the last horcrux," Sirius said, eyes never leaving Harry's. "He—well—you know, and when he finally gets to you, the house is pretty near destroyed already, so when it doesn't work the glass wand breaks because glass is unstable in magical use. The core falls to the ground and gets picked up when Bowman Jenkins refurbishes it. The glass is swept into the dustbin..."

"...and the core is a horcrux?" Harry asked.

"Or not," Tonks said suddenly. They both looked at her. "He didn't actually kill Harry. If he tried and didn't succeed—that means there isn't a sixth."

There was a moment of silence. Finally, Harry's fingers closed around the core and he offered it back to Sirius.

"Take it to Remus—oh. Put it in something first. Tell him what you've told us. Tell him we'll set the trap soon."

Sirius nodded and accepted the wand-core. He stood and rested his head against Harry's for a moment, eyes closed, ignoring the fact that Tonks was nearby.

"By the new year it'll be over," Harry said.

"One way or another," Sirius agreed.

## CHAPTER XLI

By lunch-time, Remus had sent a note back by owl with very few words: *S. warned, will notify A. Plans imminent. R.* It was a tacit agreement to the plan, but Harry could read his disapproval between the lines.

Remus waited for Sirius to finish his Friday-evening tutoring session and then they came home together, bringing an abundance of hot food from the Hogwarts kitchens with them to celebrate the end of the school term and the commencement of the winter holiday. They ate well and happily, all things considered; Remus had gone into Hogsmeade and had a haircut while waiting for Sirius, and Tonks teased him about his short, tidy new hair while Sirius regaled them with stories of students who'd come to see him during the week. Sirius and Harry played knut-ante Exploding Snap after dinner and Remus read on the sofa. Tonks, it became apparent, did her best to seduce him away from his book.

When Remus finally gave in and made his excuses for the night, Harry and Sirius finished playing out their hand, tidied away the cards, and glanced at each other before going up the stairs.

Harry walked to his dresser, shedding his shirt as he went; Sirius flopped onto the bed, tilting his head back to watch him upside-down, a slight grin curving his lips.

"Tonks couldn't have done me more of a favour if I'd asked and paid her," he said.

"You wanted Remus out of your hair?" Harry asked, unbuckling his belt.

"I wanted them *both* otherwise engaged," Sirius said, rolling over. He stretched out one arm and hooked it in the back of Harry's trousers, pulling him away from the dresser. "So that we could be otherwise engaged as well."

Harry curled the fingers of his right hand in Sirius' hair, affectionately.

"I thought I might take you up on that offer you made on my birthday," Sirius said. Harry turned the caress into a headlock and tumbled onto the bed, laughing and wrestling with him until they ended up breathless and the movements of their legs and hips began to resemble wrestling less and less. Finally Sirius came out on top, holding Harry's wrists to the bed.

"I win," he said with a grin. Harry gazed up at him, solemnly.

"You know what that means," he replied.

Sirius felt a sudden rush of—not just lust, he'd been perfectly familiar with lust for several minutes now. Deeper want. He felt possessive, pleased that it was Harry. *Warmed* by the idea that out of everyone Harry could have chosen—the famous Harry Potter who had everyone from Colin Creevey to Ginny Weasley for the asking—he had chosen Sirius. Was lying beneath him now, offering...

Sirius paused.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, bending low to whisper in Harry's ear, "I'm not sure I *do* know what it means when I win. You could tell me. Or better yet..."

He rolled off of Harry and slid to his side of the bed, opening the pack he'd set there. Along with a change of clothes and his toothbrush, he'd packed the little leather bauble that Harry had given him for his birthday.

"...you can explain this," he said, holding it up. Harry's eyes gleamed. "Imagine the story this would make—Harry Potter, kinky boy wizard..."

"You haven't tried it on yet, have you?" Harry asked. Sirius shook his head. "Let me put it on you, then."

Sirius offered it to him, enjoying the way the thin strap looked in Harry's hands; soft, flexible black leather with heavy brass fittings, just small enough to be discreetly hidden by his shirt-collar. Harry held the dog-collar in one hand and unbuttoned Sirius' shirt in the other, then slipped the leather around his neck. It was oddly warm.

Harry slid the end through the brass buckle and tightened it, just shy of snug, against Sirius' throat.

"So that when you are Padfoot," Harry said, "People will know you belong to someone."

"What about the rest of the time?"

Harry tucked the end into its loop. "Then too."

The other boy dropped his hand back down to Sirius' shirt-buttons, undoing them slowly. Sirius closed his eyes and tilted his head back until Harry kissed the hollow of his collarbone and slid his hands under the shirt, pulling it out from its neat tucks.

Sirius was as impatient as any seventeen-year-old, a good deal more impatient than many, but soon—perhaps even tomorrow—he was going to voluntarily walk into the jaws of death and hope that Harry could save him. Trust that Harry could save him. It didn't weigh on his mind, it was not real

enough for that, but it made him conscious of every touch, every casual brush of fingertips as they undressed each other. It was as real as the collar around his throat, and in a way they meant the same thing.

Harry leaned back on the bed and Sirius settled his hips against the other boy's, falling into an easy rhythm as they moved against each other, but after a few minutes Harry crooked his fingers in the collar and moaned "Stop, please..."

Sirius froze. "What – what did I –"

"No," Harry said, breathing hard. "I mean..."

He tilted his head back on the pillow, exposing his thin, pale throat, and Sirius sucked in a sudden breath.

"I want you," Harry murmured, drawing his legs up until his knees clenched on either side of Sirius' ribcage. "Like in the book..."

Sirius laughed, low and deep and more confident than he felt. He slid one palm down Harry's thigh and whispered a spell that made Harry squirm and gasp. He hesitated then, but Harry begged *please* and *it's all right* and *please, Sirius...*

They were both young and flexible, but Sirius couldn't quite reach Harry's lips to kiss him, not like this; instead he pulled Harry's hand up, the one with the scar that read *I must not tell lies*, and kissed each line.

\* \* \*

Afterward, sweat-damp and breathing heavy, Harry rubbed his thumb over the brass fittings, then up over Sirius' chin and mouth. Sirius smiled against the pressure on his lips.

"My clever Sirius," he said quietly. "Is it egotistical to think you and I are going to save the world together?"

"That's healthy ego," Sirius said.

"I'm asking the wrong man," Harry moaned, burying his face in Sirius' neck.

"Egotistical it is not," Sirius said, stroking his hair. "Overly romantic, maybe."

"Well, maybe that's allowed," Harry said. He took a breath and let it out slowly; his body was limp against Sirius', happily warm and reassuring. "You know...when I was really little, I used to dream about the day I'd get to leave the Dursleys—I thought I'd do all right in school, I always have done, and I'd go to

some trade school or a local college. Or be a fireman or a policeman. I really did plan it at night, after they went to bed, the day I'd leave them behind."

"Well, you have now."

Harry nodded. "When I was...when I was a first-year all I wanted was to be a seventh-year and know everything and everyone, and have everyone know me, not some version of me they'd read in a history book." He laughed a little. "And two years ago I had an actual job picked out and everything. Well, sort of. I was going to be an Auror. I'd only drifted into it, really, but it was something anyway. And at the same time..."

He paused.

"At the same time, from that first time I saw Voldemort's face, I didn't think I'd live to see eighteen."

Sirius tightened his hand on the back of Harry's head. "Don't say that."

"It's all right, Sirius. I do now. For the first time, like I told you. I see a future that isn't just a headstone." He kissed Sirius' throat. "What about you? You must have had plans, before. You have them now, don't you?"

Sirius shook his head. "From what I'm told of who I became—before Azkaban—it's pretty obvious I never had a plan. I knew I'd have Uncle Alphard's money when he died, and I got by all right on the odd ten Galleons he'd send me on the sly. I wasn't planning to be anything in particular. Now..."

He took a deep breath. "Harry, I've arranged to take my NEWTs in the spring. I'm going to apply to St. Mungo's for a Healer's apprenticeship—Augustus Pye is helping me."

"A Healer?" Harry asked, and Sirius braced himself for the scorn and amusement he knew would follow. When he opened his eyes, however, Harry was studying his face, not a trace of humour in his expression.

"That's grand, Sirius," he said. "Because of Remus, yeah?"

"Yeah. And I'm good at it, too. I don't want to spend my life destroying things, Harry. I want to spend my life fixing things, and—" Sirius actually stammered. "—and I didn't learn that until I came here, and I might never have learned it—I *know* I didn't learn it in my other lifetime."

Harry closed his eyes, slowly, then opened them again.

"I wonder how you went into that map," he whispered. "It was the best day's work you and I and Remus ever did."

Sirius smiled and curled close to Harry, breathing slow and deep until he fell asleep with the smell of him, of them, filling his whole world.

\* \* \*

The wand-core lay in a long wooden box on Remus' writing desk at Fourteen Back, and the box shielded it enough that Remus wasn't constantly aware of its presence. Simply being in the same room with silver didn't really bother him; it was just that the closer it got, the louder the hum in his ears and the pressure in the back of his head became. It wasn't unbearable, generally speaking, until it was only a foot or two away. Any closer and the air became thick and viscous, making it difficult to breathe; if he touched it, his skin blistered and burned.

Remus himself sat on the edge of the bed that Saturday morning and turned a handful of coins over and over in his palms. It was his change from yesterday, from the lunch with Snape to discuss the setting of the trap. Snape had taken some handling, but in the end he'd agreed to notify Arcadia and set up a few safeguards of his own. So long as Lupin brought reinforcements, they would be fine; if Lupin never showed, he was bloody well going to abandon the whelp to his fate. Remus had reluctantly agreed.

"There's something else," he'd said, as Snape picked at the food he'd been eating. "In the memory you gave me, the Dark Lord looked...different."

"More human."

"Yes."

Snape had leaned back, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Even in Polyjuice disguise (shorter, pale-haired, younger) he looked tired.

"He believes the body which was given to him two years ago has begun to acclimate itself to the human world; I think perhaps he believes part of it is a natural glamour. I've encouraged this belief. Lately, however, he has been making...remarks about going in search of things he has lost, and I do not think we would have kept up the charade of the horcruxes much longer. How will you find the meeting-place? It's often different."

"Leave that to us," Remus had said.

"Yes – Potter's not likely to let him out of his sight for long, is he?"

Remus had ignored the jab and they'd spoken of one or two other things before leaving; now he sat on the edge of the bed and contemplated the means by which he would ensure that Sirius could be found.

Like most phoenixes, Glastonbury was fairly vain; at the moment he was perched on Remus' desk chair, preening himself in the sunlight streaming

through the window from Bowman's garden. The orange crest on his head was perfectly groomed, bobbing slightly as he used his beak to smooth his pinfeathers. Remus set down the coins and picked up the other object on his desk – the Black family signet ring he'd asked Sirius to loan him the day before.

Sirius wore it often when he wasn't at school; Remus didn't know why and didn't bother asking, because he doubted Sirius himself knew why. He'd hated his family and gladly would have sent them all to hell, but in this strange new place and time, perhaps it was...well, at least a reminder of the past, a steadying symbol. Something he could still hate.

Or maybe he wore it because he was the oldest male heir to the family, and even Sirius couldn't escape the pull of blood.

"Glastonbury," Remus said quietly, not wanting to wake Tonks, who was asleep on the other side of the bed. Glastonbury looked up at him, curiously. Remus held up the ring. "See it?"

Glastonbury's eyes tracked it as he moved it back and forth, up and down. Finally, the bird stretched out his neck and clicked his beak around the band, stopping its movement. Remus pulled it out of his grasp, gently.

"I need you to help me," Remus continued softly. "Wherever this ring goes, I want you to know it. Can you find the ring?"

The phoenix looked vaguely insulted.

"Like carrying the post. If I ask you to find this ring, can you find it?" Remus asked. Glastonbury peeped softly. "I'm going to go away. You come find me with the ring, okay? Can you do that?"

He walked into the kitchen, Glastonbury following him, and held up the ring so the bird could see it. After making sure his bedroom door was closed, he Apparated away, ending up in a field outside of town. After a few seconds, there was a pop as Glastonbury appeared.

"Good bird!" Remus said, grinning. He disappeared again, promptly, aiming for the Apparation alcove of the Leaky Cauldron; Glastonbury followed regardless.

The third time he disappeared, he returned to the alley behind Bowman's garden and ran inside quickly. He dropped the ring and darted out again, Apparating away. When Glastonbury didn't appear in five minutes' time, he Apparated back.

Glastonbury sat in the grass, one clawed foot hooked over the ring, looking annoyed.

"You will do nicely," Remus said softly. "There's a splendid bird. Now, let's see if you can do something a little more complicated..."

\* \* \*

Sirius didn't always return to Hogwarts on Sunday morning, but he'd done it often enough that it would go more or less unnoticed by anyone paying close attention to his schedule. He had wanted to return on Saturday night, once Glastonbury had proved himself fully trained, but that might have tipped their hand.

Tonks went with him, hidden under Harry's invisibility cloak; after all, they'd have to know when he was taken if they were going to find him once he had been. Only the most trustworthy Order members were allowed to take shifts on watch. Tonks went first, of course; Harry had volunteered, but everyone knew that was a bad idea. Tonks was to be followed by Bill Weasley instead, solid and dependable and not Harry's first pick *at all*, and then Moody. In the meantime Remus had to find someone to follow Moody. If times got desperate, they could always use Hermione or Ron, but someone had to be with Sirius at all times.

Sirius didn't want to break habit, so he didn't dawdle down to Hogsmeade until it was time to meet Remus there for lunch. A very strained lunch, silent and conscious of the invisible presence of Tonks next to them. Harry was not allowed to come, for reasons which were obvious but still irritating. Harry, instead, stayed at Fourteen Back and fretted.

Remus had not, it appeared, even slept since Friday night; he had sent messages to every Order member to be ready to assemble at a moment's notice at Grimmauld Place, and to come prepared to fight. The twins had leaked word down to Ginny and Colin, who had sent word that Dumbledore's Army was ready to do their part. Remus could not bring himself to agree to call upon them, but he knew the twins would anyway. He suspected the old coins Hermione had used to summon the DA had been turned into portkeys while his back was turned.

"They're only children, Tonks," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets as they walked along the ridge of hill overlooking Hogsmeade. They'd successfully transferred the invisibility cloak to Bill Weasley and sent him off to follow Sirius around Hogsmeade until dinner, which was now fast approaching.

They hadn't spoken much since, but he felt he had to say something or his nerves would fail him completely.

"So were you," she reminded him. "You weren't nineteen yet when you signed on."

"Some of them aren't sixteen yet."

"My dad always says revolutions are won by the young."

He sighed. "This isn't a revolution. If anything, it's the reverse. We're not fighting for a new world, just...an extended lease on the old one."

"Oh?" she asked, smiling sideways at him. "Is that why that Arcadia girl is learning to read? And this attempt to defeat people who are against Muggle-born witches and wizards, that's not at all revolutionary."

"That's not how things change," he replied. "You don't make ordinary people believe differently than they have by killing the people who voice the opinions they're afraid to. Even if I was in favour of killing people in general, which I'm not."

"I know," she said, linking her arm in his. "You'd be a vegetarian if you liked vegetables more."

"I think," he said, "that what we're really struggling for is a world where it's *possible* to change. Without all the old fear, and without the hysteria it induces. No more kangaroo courts this time. No more imprisonment without trial. Not if I had my way, at any rate. The problem is..." he sighed, bowing his head and scuffing his shoes on the frosty ground as they walked. "The problem last time was that we had no hero. There was no-one to stand up and say *I won and I won't stand for you ruining my victory with your stupid little infighting*. Harry was a baby, and nobody else survived."

"But Harry's a man now."

"Yes. If he survives this time round," Remus said reservedly. "But that's not the point, really."

"Then what is?"

"That killing Voldemort takes away only the immediate threat, if it even does that," he replied. "I have no illusions that we have to kill him; he's much too powerful to be allowed to live. But killing him doesn't make your average person any less bigoted or ignorant. If he dies, our problems aren't—well, *magically* solved. The world that made Tom Riddle into what he is hasn't changed all that much."

Tonks kissed his cheek. "Remus, you're beginning to sound like a politician. And also a terrible pessimist."

"I've always sounded like a terrible pessimist. You're just beginning to realise your utterly bad taste in men."

"Well, if you didn't have any flaws, I wouldn't have anything to complain to my girl friends about."

He smiled a little. "I'll try to cultivate a few annoying habits."

"Do. Pessimism isn't going to last nearly as long as I'd like."

"Oh yes? How long do you intend to complain about my failings, pray?"

"I thought the next hundred years, give or take."

He was silent for so long that she glanced at his face, almost worried about what she would find there. He was still smiling.

"I really shouldn't be quite so happy," he murmured.

"That's just your pessimism talking," she replied. She tugged on his arm and turned him around so that they both gazed down on the glowing streetlamps of Hogsmeade and, beyond it, Hogwarts rising like a crag out of the valley.

"Without the Dark Lord, we can work on the rest," she said. "You aren't wrong; his end won't solve all our problems. Still, it'll give people hope."

*"All things are changing and all things will change / And death, if meaningless, will yet still bring / Fresh fodder for the yearly-dying grain,"* Remus murmured.

"Graveworthy?" Tonks asked with a smile.

"He's on my mind a lot, recently," Remus answered. "I suppose it shows."

"A little."

*"Fine girls and boys,* he called us. He knew what was going to happen, I think. Indeed, he must have, or *Shop Gods* would have been a very different book. He knew about war." Remus shook his head. "And he loved Sirius quite fiercely. I think he would have laughed himself stupid over what's happened since August."

Tonks opened her mouth to answer, but suddenly Remus flinched; he reached into his breast pocket and took out a coin that buzzed furiously between his fingers. They both stared at it.

"Bill will be looking for us – they've taken Sirius," Remus said. "Go rouse the Order –"

" – Grimmauld Place –"

" – I'll find Bill and fetch Glastonbury."

Tonks disappeared with a loud crack; Remus closed his eyes and Apparated directly into the middle of Hogsmeade's High Street. Bill came pelting up it, Harry's cloak bundled under one arm.

"I don't think she hurt him," he gasped. "He went quietly. Bloody hell, Lupin, she's mad as a hatter."

"Not news," Remus said. "Go straight to Grimmauld Place and start briefing everyone there. I'll be along soon."

"Right," Bill said, looking pale. Remus Disapparated, heading for Bowman's garden, with a silent prayer to Merlin or the spirit of Ellis Graveworthy to watch over the boy until they arrived.

\* \* \*

There had been a moment of bright clarity and then the fall of darkness like a curtain, blotting out the pre-dusk sky and the shops and people. What Sirius had noticed more than the darkness, actually, was the sudden cessation of noise, as if the world had been cut off.

Then there was Bellatrix, standing before him, smiling a little.

"Hello, nephew," she'd said, while Sirius wondered frantically if he was still visible to Bill—or to anyone else, for that matter. He'd never encountered this spell; it seemed to turn the world into shadows. "Cousin, more properly. What a pretty little toy you are."

"Who are you?" he'd asked, which he thought showed remarkable presence of mind on his part while the rest of his instincts screamed that he ought to be attacking this monstrous perversion of humanity.

"Why, I'm Auntie Bella," she said, coming forward to stand toe-to-toe with him. To his surprise, she was shorter than he was. Bellatrix had always loomed in his mind like a gorgon; she'd still been taller than him when he left the family and he hadn't seen her since—not from closer than a few hundred feet, at any rate. She was quite small, in fact, compared to him. "I thought we might have a little chat. What do you say?"

She'd grabbed him then, one hand on his wrist and the other, gloved, holding up a small jade snake—a portkey that she pressed to the skin of his bare arm. His stomach lurched, breath was snatched, world began to spin and tilt unpleasantly and then he was tumbling through the air.

When he landed on his feet, hard, the sound was almost metallic—his boots rang deep on hard stone and he felt the jolt up through his legs. With his

thumb, he checked his finger for the Black signet ring; still there. It was an oddly warm comfort, given what it had been to him in the past; he had sworn, once, that he would never wear it. It was a symbol of things that he hated, but in this time and place it was also a comfort. It was a promise—that Harry would come for him, that Moony would come for him. His tie to the world outside the dim and dismal chamber he found himself in.

He could see enough, and recalled enough from their hunt for the Hufflepuff goblet, to know that this was a Muggle church, long-abandoned. Most of the windows were broken and had been patched over with opaque charms that shimmered like pearl, rippling a little in the wind from outside. There was only one source of light, and that was a gently rotating globe of green flame high above the stage at the front, a few steps above the long aisle he stood in.

No, not true; there was a real fire as well, burning off to one side, and the snake Nagini was curled close to it, her thick coils moving only slightly in the flickering light.

Even as he saw all this he heard a whispered charm and two thick rings grew out of the flagstones beneath his boots, chains following behind him. They circled him like snakes before they clamped around his wrists, anchoring him just behind the first row of benches facing the stage. In the shadows along the walls he saw people in robes and hoods, wearing smooth white masks—Death Eaters. Twisting his head, he could see that others sat on the benches behind him. Bellatrix had vanished, taking up her position somewhere within the mass of uniform blank faces.

A sigh rippled through the crowd and Sirius turned back in time to see two men enter from some side door and walk across the stage, neither wearing masks. One was the pale, clever-faced boy, Draco Malfoy; he looked frailer in person than he had in Snape's memory. His eyes were strange. His mask hung from his belt, carelessly.

The second was—

Well, he was balding and dressed in greasy robes that had seen better days; one of his hands shimmered oddly in the light. Still, the thin fair hair and round, not terribly intelligent face were all too familiar under that terrible obsequious grin.

Sirius reflected that Remus, even grey-haired and careworn as he was, had aged much more gracefully than Peter. It was still half-alien to him to think of little Pettigrew, little Wormtail, as a villain; he wasn't cut out for the role at all.

Peter was the one you protected, because he was a mate of sorts and only you and James were allowed to pick on him.

He set his jaw. Peter had set Voldemort on James. Peter would cheerfully have killed Harry, given half the chance.

Peter was bowing. Not to him; in the direction of the side-door he'd come through.

Sirius watched as a third man walked onto the stage and halted between the other two, hands clasped in front of him, a slight smile on his lips. He recognised him all too well from Snape's memory. The slightly blurred features, the odd nose, the reddish glint in his eyes; his hair was the unhealthy yellow of a diseased man's.

"Mr. Black. Very kind of you to join us," Voldemort said. Peter giggled nervously. Sirius glared hatefully at him. "I apologise for any rough treatment you may have encountered, but in this day and age one can't be too careful, can one?"

Sirius frowned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Arcadia's face glowing in the shadows; she wasn't masked, and neither were those clustered around her.

"I doubt very much that you wonder why you're here, but I assure you that you have quite the wrong idea about my motives," Voldemort continued. "No doubt you know who I am—"

"Tom Riddle that was," Sirius said loudly. The other man didn't miss a beat; with a flick of his wand he filled Sirius' world with pain.

Sirius had known what the Cruciatus curse was, of course, but he hadn't understood—so much pain—

When he'd managed to stop his scream, Voldemort continued.

"I prefer Lord Voldemort," he replied. "I would advise you for your own sake not to interrupt me, Black."

Sirius discovered that he was on his knees. He slowly climbed to his feet again. The stone chains that held his wrists rattled squeakingly against each other.

"I am told that you claim to be a descendant of the Black clan, Sirius Black by name, and since we know—don't we—that he is dead, one must assume you are some, shall we say, error in judgement on his part." Voldemort stepped down into the aisle. "He resembles his father, does he not, Wormtail?"

"Yes, my lord," Peter answered.

"Surely you must be proud of your father; intelligent, talented...foolish. You would not wear *that* if you weren't," Voldemort added, pointing to his hand. For the first time, Draco looked interested in the proceedings; he gazed covetously at the Black ring.

"Does this have a point?" Sirius asked. Voldemort smiled.

"I will forgive that, because it does," he said. "You're a powerful wizard, young man. Many members of your family are already proud servants of our cause."

Sirius stared at him . The retort that true Blacks served no man died halfway to his lips because he wasn't sure it was possible that Voldemort meant—

"Aren't you tired of being on the losing end of a losing war?" Voldemort asked, bending to whisper in his ear. "Join me and be with your true family. Join me and live forever. I will raise up your house to its former glory and you will have power beyond your wildest adolescent dreams."

He leaned back and smiled at Sirius, who was far too stunned to react.

"Redeem the mistakes of your father and uncle. Join me, Sirius Black."

## CHAPTER XLII

A hush fell over the church at Voldemort's words; all rustling of robes and whispered discussions had ceased. Sirius doubted that any of them had known ahead of time what their lord was planning to do with the young scion of the Blacks.

In the silence, there was a gentle cough. Voldemort, who had been staring into Sirius' eyes, turned his head slightly.

"Yes, Rodolphus?"

The man who had coughed stood and pushed his mask up on his forehead so that he could speak more clearly.

"My lord, you know I am the last man in the world to deny the power of the Black family line," he said slowly. "Nor to deny that my wife and her sister have been loyal to your cause. More loyal than some I could name."

Sirius saw Bellatrix next to Rodolphus, her mouth done up in a pert smile. She winked at him.

"And yet..." Rodolphus hesitated, then plunged ahead. "He is just a boy, my lord, and he is known to be a close companion of our enemies. He has no reason to join us nor any motivation to remain faithful."

"Are you questioning my judgement, Rodolphus?" Voldemort asked. He looked faintly amused.

"No! No, my lord! Never would I!" the man said hurriedly. "I am merely...curious as to how we are to ensure that he does not run with mouth open back to his companions. And in addition to this..."

Sirius realised with a start that Voldemort had no eyebrows; one *brow* lifted, but the effect was still not quite the same.

"...there is the fact that the men of his family line have proved...unstable," Rodolphus finished. "We all remember Regulus, and the boy's own father was quite mad *before* Azkaban."

"There is no doubt that your family has often misallied itself," Voldemort remarked to Sirius. "And I am well aware that the Potter child has quite a charismatic air about him. Surely, however, you have felt yourself occasionally...under his sway? As though you fought your true nature, in siding with Muggle-lovers and mudbloods?"

Sirius swallowed. His mouth was dry; he was still trying to grip the fact that Lord  *fucking*  Voldemort had asked him to *join the Death Eaters*.

*And where the hell was the Order?*

"As for how we are to keep him safe..." Voldemort held up one hand, palm facing Sirius, and curled his fingers inward; the stone shackles fell from Sirius' wrists at the same time that Draco came forward to stand next to the other man in the aisle. "I think we may place him in his cousin's care. Draco will teach him and ensure that his loyalty is true; such a boy, parentless and lost, should be cared for and guided by his remaining family. Do they not make a splendid study in contrasts?" he asked.

Sirius gazed deep into the eyes of Narcissa's son and saw something in them that made him very, very afraid.

Voldemort rested his hand on top of Draco's head, pale fingers threading through the white-blond hair. He tugged, slightly; Draco bowed his head and returned to stand next to Peter on the stage.

"No, Rodolphus, I do not think I am mistaken," Voldemort continued. He turned to Sirius, backing up a little as he did so. "Your decision, young man, if you please. Join us or perish slowly. I would give you more time but alas...we have other business to attend to, tonight."

Sirius forgot about the Order, forgot about Harry, forgot that this was not his time, forgot that he was a prisoner here. He poured seventeen years of being the Popular Boy and twenty generations of pureblood arrogance into a single, scornful syllable.

*"You?"*

\* \* \*

The Order had gathered with remarkable efficiency when Tonks gave the call; in four minutes all but the Twins, Harry, and Remus had appeared at Grimmauld Place, which had taken on the dim, dusty appearance of an un-lived-in house—essentially what it was, in fact. Remus had come running in with Glastonbury on his wrist and Harry at his side just as the Twins appeared, looking like cats who had eaten a couple of canaries.

"All right," Remus said, immediately the centre of attention. "I'm going to find him; I'll be back to lead the rest of you. When you arrive, keep quiet for Merlin's sake and try to spread out as much as you can. If you can take someone by surprise without making any noise, do it. Do not," he said sharply, "attack anyone who isn't wearing a mask. Those are members of a werewolf pack who've infiltrated the organisation. Do not try to attack Voldemort, either. Your

primary targets are the snake and the Death Eaters. If you are injured or if you see someone injured, grab them and get out. We'll do without you. Don't be martyrs and don't be heroes."

"Augustus is standing by at St. Mungo's. Don't be afraid to take the injured there," Tonks added.

Remus nodded at her. "If you're lost, look for Tonks, myself, Sirius, or Harry. Ready?"

Harry nodded at him and Remus vanished. The expectant silence was broken not by his return but by the slamming of the front door.

"Cavalry!" Fred cried with a grin. Neville and Luna stood on the threshold. "Harry, allow me to re-introduce you to Dumbledore's Army, rallied and prepared for the fray..."

"Fine, but you're in charge of them – you'll have to figure out how to take them there," Harry answered. George held up a glass globe.

"Ready-to-set portkey," he said. "Just say the word and –"

Remus burst back into the room in a flurry of red feathers.

"Found him," he said. "He's chained up in an old church. We'll go in from the sides. *Don't fight* until I give the word. If we do this right we can have them completely surrounded. If you can follow me, do it; if you can't, grab hold of someone who can."

Harry put his hand on Remus' arm and gripped tightly.

"Try not to get killed," Remus said, and then Harry felt the familiar crush of Apparation.

They reappeared in a dark alley between two tall and windowless brick walls; soon the alley was rather too full for comfort. Remus put his finger to his lips and pointed across the street, where a large church stood in a bare lot, blocked off by a chain-link fence. Tonks led a handful of people down the back of the alley and a moment later they could be seen creeping across the street. Remus waited until they were gone before taking Harry's wrist and jerking his head forward. Just as they left the alley, the rest of Dumbledore's Army appeared. Fred ran up to Remus, his feet hardly making any noise.

"Hold back as reinforcements," Remus whispered. "I'll send up a flare when you're needed."

Harry followed him up to the fence and then, with a whispered set of charms, right through it; he felt himself passing through a series of wards, as

well, and was reminded that Remus had managed to hold his own with James and Sirius for seven years, which meant he must be a pretty good lockpick.

There were two guards just inside the front door; Remus flattened them without a sound. Harry gave one of them a sound kick in the ribs for good measure as they passed, peering through a crack in the inner door that led to the nave. Remus held up his hand to stop those coming in behind them, then waved it; the others began to spread out along the side-halls, and Harry could hear the soft thump of bodies as they went.

He could also hear Voldemort's voice, and just barely see Sirius standing in the aisle of the church. His breath caught.

"—not think I am mistaken," Voldemort said, and Harry saw his face over Sirius' shoulder. "Your decision, young man, if you please. Join us or perish slowly."

"Oh Merlin," Remus whispered.

"I would give you more time," Voldemort continued, "but alas...we have other business to attend to, tonight."

Harry held his breath. Had Voldemort just offered Sirius a chance to *join* him?

His question was answered when Sirius spoke again, in a voice dripping with scorn and disgust.

"You?"

Harry heard murmuring from those in the pews, which nicely masked the sound of Kingsley arriving behind them.

"Snape knows," he said. "And Arcadia."

Remus nodded even as Sirius continued over the murmurs. "You want me to *serve* you? *You?*"

He could see the insulted, almost incensed look on Voldemort's face. "You will not speak to me in that tone, child."

"You dare to tell me what I will and will not do?" Sirius said loudly. "I am Sirius Black, *paterfamilias* of the house, sole name-heir of the clan." Harry could see him tilt his chin up with indescribable insolence, his posture radiating arrogance and pride. "If my cousins were not *whores* and *fools* they would know better than to displease their *paterfamilias*."

"YOU DARE—" Bellatrix shrieked, rising from her pew, but Voldemort raised a pale hand and she choked off in mid-scream, clutching her throat.

"Yes. You are the son of a very proud house, a pure house," he said, visibly controlling himself. "All the more reason you should take my side, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't touch your filthy side with gloves on," Sirius snarled. "You're nothing but a jumped-up half-blood –"

"I am the descendant of Salazar Slytherin!" Voldemort roared.

"Yeah, on your mum's side," Sirius said disdainfully. "Who's your father, eh? What great wizarding feats have his family accomplished? Regulus Black beat you when he was eighteen years old –"

"A lie! I killed him!"

Sirius grinned, insanely, and took something out of his pocket, holding up his fist. His fingers loosened slightly and Salazar Slytherin's locket fell from his palm, dangling at the end of its chain. Remus groaned softly.

"He nicked it, the bloody little fool," he whispered.

"Give me that," Voldemort said dangerously.

"Sure," Sirius said. He threw it easily and Voldemort's fingers twitched, stopping it in midair. It spun slowly, the chain twisting around it like a golden cloud. "It's broken, by the way. We killed the bit of you inside it. You were never a match for the Blacks. Probably your *weak blood* showing," he added with a sniff.

*It's just a goad,* Harry told himself, watching Sirius in horrified fascination. *He doesn't mean it.*

"When I say, push the door open and shout for Sirius to duck," Remus said. "Go right and find cover behind the pews."

Voldemort turned his hand over and the locket floated gently into it. He studied it curiously; then his fingers curled around it into his fist, and he raised his hand.

"Now," Remus said, and Harry's heart pounded in his chest as he shoved the double-doors wide open and shouted "Sirius! DUCK!"

"*Avada k—*" Voldemort said, but Sirius dropped to the floor instinctively. The air sizzled in a shower of green sparks.

People exploded through every door and out of every dark shadow; Harry actually ran past Tonks, running the other way, as he dove for cover. Bursts of light filled the air as the Death Eaters tried to defend themselves, but in the confusion not many of them were doing very well, especially since the werewolves had thrown back their hoods and were savaging anyone within reach.

Harry lay flat on his belly and stared through the moving legs, under the pews; he saw Sirius crash down behind one, clutching his arm, and fury filled him. He stuck his head out the side of the pew; Voldemort was rallying Death Eaters to the aisle. As much as he wanted to strangle him with his bare hands, he had other targets just now...

He darted out when space opened in front of him and ran, hunched low, dodging hexes thrown his way. It wasn't all that different from darting around Bludgers in Quidditch, except that now he had only his own legs to carry him. He was almost hit a few times, but somehow everything aimed at him seemed to go wide; when he looked over his shoulder he saw Remus following him with more deliberation, covering him and methodically felling Death Eaters one by one.

Draco was still standing near the altar, though Peter Pettigrew had vanished. The pale-haired young man looked around as if seeking guidance, rooted to the spot. Harry had no time for him, however, because suddenly there she was – Nagini, Voldemort's tame serpent, the fifth Horcrux. He could *hear* her, calling for her master, crying out in fear. She was wrapped around a cracked stone baptismal fountain, just in front of the first pew, ducking her head away from the light and noise.

*Come here*, he called in Parseltongue. *Come here, Nagini, come to me...*

To his amazement she obeyed trustingly, slithering away from the fountain and towards him, across the steps leading up to the altar.

*I'm so sorry*, he said, taking her head in his hands. With a sudden jerk he snapped her neck.

Suddenly his world was filled with green light and pain, bowling him over with that singular memory from his infancy, the flash of green light that he'd thought for so many years must have been the oncoming car which killed his parents. His scar throbbed and stabbed, even as he saw the snake twitch and die. He stumbled forward and tripped over her, crushing her already-limp spine, falling down the steps.

A stranger caught him at the bottom, and for a moment he thought he was done for; they were wearing a Death Eater's robe.

"Chosen One," the man rasped, pulling him away from battle. "Are you hurt?"

"W – who –"

"One of Arcadia's," the man explained, turning with a feral snarl to backhand someone else against the wall. "Her mate is injured – I must go."

"What?" Harry asked, bewildered, but the man was already running away again. Harry breathed deeply and ran back into the scrum, looking for Remus; he seemed to be fighting with his bare hands too, as though his wand had been lost somewhere.

A dedicated knot of Death Eaters in the centre aisle were repelling all comers, even the reinforcements that the twins had just led through the doors, though Hermione and Ron seemed to be dealing out plenty of damage in other areas. Harry lifted his wand to help, but even as he did so he heard an anguished cry that drowned out all the other noise. He turned away from the fight, trusting in Remus and the others to protect him.

At first all he could see was Draco, still standing confusedly in front of the altar, but then he heard a low hiss from nearby, and came slowly forward.

Behind the first pew, someone was crouched over the crushed and bloodied body of Nagini, cradling the snake's large, wedge-shaped head in his hands. He had a thick mane of white hair, and when he lifted his face Harry saw traces of Tom Riddle's handsome youth in it.

Voldemort, mortal as Regulus Black had hoped. Just an old man – wrinkles in his forehead and around his mouth, pale pink human skin, sunken eyes – a strong jaw, a pointed nose, tufty white eyebrows.

"You killed her," he said brokenly. "You killed my Nagini."

Harry watched, bewildered and almost paralysed, as this terrible parody of a man bent again to stroke the snake's blood-streaked head. Tom Riddle, who had killed countless people, who had murdered Harry's parents and his own father, cold-bloodedly, was crying over the crumpled body of his pet snake.

"Nagini," Tom whispered, softly. Then his shoulders tensed and he let the snake's head fall to the ground. He lifted his face once more to gaze at Harry, standing as he did so.

"You'll suffer for this," he growled, and suddenly Harry saw what Tom Riddle intended for his future – and he saw why.

He saw himself blinded, hobbled by chains, naked – captive. Clean, well-fed, but imprisoned like a pet, like Nagini had been, forced to serve Voldemort as his lord and master, the scars on his skin far outnumbering the ones on hand and forehead until those faded into insignificance. Tortured for Tom Riddle's delight.

*Because if he kills you, he kills part of himself...*

He saw also, at the same time, a scene from sixteen years before – from the cottage at Fourteen Back. His mother's body curled around a tiny black-haired child, himself. A wand raised.

No. Two wands; one wood, the twin to his own, and one almost invisible, made out of the palest, clearest glass tinted by a faint hint of cobalt blue – with a silver core. A flash of green light and the glass glows red and then yellow and then white with the heat, but *the reason we don't use glass wands, Tom Riddle, is that they are unstable and they –*

Shatter. A glass wand formed and tempered by Rowena Ravenclaw herself, shattering and scything off into a million pieces, one of which strikes the child and slices open his skin as it passes. And the precious piece of soul ripped away from Tom Riddle goes with it, goes into the child.

"You'll suffer," Tom repeated, voice low and hoarse as the visions from his mind washed over Harry.

*I am the sixth horcrux.*

The battle was unnaturally silent, suddenly, and Harry turned with great effort to see Remus off to Voldemort's left. The haunted look on his face told him all he needed to know. Guilt, apology, and a question in his too-old eyes.

In a split second of stunning, glasslike clarity, Harry met his gaze unflinchingly and nodded.

Remus raised his wand for the killing blow, but before either he or Voldemort could move, Snape came barrelling out of nowhere, blood running down his forehead, and knocked Harry aside, away from the Dark Lord's hateful glare.

"Let go of me!" Harry cried, skidding backwards on the polished stone floor. They collided with another body just as Snape's head thudded against the pew. Harry saw his eyes roll up in his head as he passed out, then turned to see who they'd ploughed into –

Sirius, feet braced against one pew and back against the other, breathing heavily, sweating.

"Sirius," Harry gasped.

"Arm's broken," Sirius answered, biting down on his lip so hard it threatened to bleed. "I tried to fight as long as I could –"

Harry looked down and saw a splinter of bone protruding from Sirius' forearm.

"I can't heal that," he said.

"I know," Sirius replied.

"Sirius, listen—" Harry said, suddenly wanting to tell him everything he'd ever felt or thought, because it would be the last chance he'd have. "Sirius, I love you."

Sirius pressed his head to Harry's forehead, still gasping for breath. "I know. I love you too."

"But I have to go—it's me."

"What's you?"

"I'm the sixth horcrux—"

"Oh..." Sirius said faintly. "So that's what I saw."

Harry stared at him. "You saw it?"

"Everyone saw it," Sirius replied, moaning as he tried to tighten his arm against his ribcage. Harry leaned forward and cupped the back of Sirius' head, kissing him.

"Then you know—"

"Shut up," Sirius said suddenly. His eyes were brilliant, too bright; he swung his right arm around and grasped Harry by his shirtfront, suddenly.

"He won't die until I do, that's prophecy," Harry said desperately, aware that any moment Voldemort might be making his escape. People were still fighting in the aisles.

"Bollocks prophecy," Sirius said, and to Harry's horror he lifted his broken arm, pressing the heel of his left hand against Harry's forehead. The pain was so intense that Harry felt it, radiating off of him in sickly waves, but then he felt something else.

Sirius' fingers were curling forward, slowly, pressing against his scalp and then—then through it, through hair and skin, like a ghost's touch. Only warm, so warm, and at once Sirius' pain flooded through him coupled with a strange feeling of lightness...

When he opened his eyes, Sirius was holding his left arm, palm up; blood ran down his fingers but floating in his palm was a little ball of green light.

"Nigenae said I had the power to touch souls," Sirius whispered, staring wide-eyed at it. He scrambled against the back of the pew, trying to clamber up it one-handed; Harry took him by the shoulder of his robes and pulled him up, trying to ignore the scream of pain Sirius stifled.

"TOM RIDDLE!" Sirius shouted, and Voldemort stepped over the bodies of two Death Eaters before halting when he saw the light floating in Sirius' palm.

"I've killed your pet werewolf," he said calmly. "Do you think a ball of light is going to hurt me?"

"Oh, this one will," Sirius said, almost hysterically. "I took it out of Harry."

"Move and I'll crush you both," Voldemort snarled.

Sirius gave him a crazed grin and closed his fist. The illumination winked out between his fingers and there was a shriek of pain from the little light that seemed to crumple in the air even as it rose.

Tom Riddle dropped to his knees on the cold stone, clutching his heart. Sirius slumped forward into Harry and he eased him down onto the pew, left arm hanging grotesquely awry. He had passed out from the pain.

The church was very quiet now; apparently whoever had been left standing had fled, except for Draco, still standing near the altar like some kind of pale mannequin. The only sounds were the moans of the injured and the soft murmurs of Order members speaking to each other, looking for one another. Harry wondered how many were dead.

*I've killed your pet werewolf.*

Harry stepped up onto the pew and walked along it, avoiding Snape's limp body on the floor below. He felt oddly childlike, as if he were five or six years old again and walking along the edge of a pavement kerb, arms outstretched for balance.

When he dropped down to the floor again Tom Riddle was still there on his knees, hunched over, snowy-white head bowed.

"They're gone," Harry said. Tom looked up, despairingly, and Harry saw the same pain he'd seen when Tom was grieving for Nagini. A childish loss. Then again, he'd lived his life by childish fears. "All of them."

"You don't know," Tom rasped harshly.

"I do know. Diary and ring, locket and cup—and two living things," Harry said. Only a short distance separated them, hardly ten paces. "They're gone. It's over. You've lost."

Tom began to weep again, quietly, arms wrapped around his body. Harry saw Tonks watching warily from the periphery of his vision.

"You're a murderer and a torturer," he said, more because he needed convincing not to pity this man in pain than because he wanted to hurt him any more. "You killed your own family and mine. You killed my godfather. You killed Dumbledore. You don't deserve to breathe."

Tom didn't appear to hear him. Harry raised his wand.

He wanted to say it. For his father and mother, for Sirius that had been, for Neville's parents, for Dumbledore. They were two easy little words, easier even than killing a snake. He knew he had to say it, because no one was safe while the monster kneeling in front of him was still alive.

*I don't reckon my dad would've wanted them to become killers – just for you.*

*Your mother's coming...she wants to see you...it will be all right. Hold on.*

*My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died.*

Harry lowered his wand.

"You'll be sent up for a trial, properly," he said, voice hardening like stone. "If you fall down a flight of stairs on your way to the court I won't cry, but I won't kill you with my hands. You aren't worth being a murderer for."

It took Harry a good deal of time, much later, to puzzle out precisely what happened.

He knew that he turned to Tonks to gesture that she should come forward and as an Auror take him into custody as was proper. He knew that for some time he had been hearing a soft melody in the background, akin to the elegy Fawkes had sung for Dumbledore almost a year ago, but much gentler and much less mournful. He knew that he heard a snarl of rage and turned in time to see what might have been Tom leaping forward to kill him, but none of it was truly clear in his mind until he saw Remus standing with one arm around Tom Riddle's throat and the other around his ribs, the pale-bladed knife he'd used against the Dementors in his hand.

He heard something, too, but he didn't credit it, not from Remus; it must have been a trick of his hearing that made him think someone had said "I was waiting for you to do that". And surely it was a trick of the light that Remus thrust the knife up into Tom Riddle's ribcage and through his heart – surely Tom impaled himself as they struggled together, Remus only trying to protect Harry from a powerful wizard lunging forward at him.

There was a wet thump as Tom's body fell to the ground, and then silence.

Glastonbury fluttered across the church, swooping low and gliding in to land on the edge of the pew next to Harry. His feathers were wet with tears, and there was a healing scar across Remus' throat.

"Go to Sirius," Harry whispered to the bright scarlet bird, and Glastonbury obediently hopped down onto the pew and strutted along it, butting Sirius' left arm with his head. The bone crackled and groaned as it slid

back into its proper place. Harry looked away, nauseated, and found himself meeting Remus' gaze. Remus opened his mouth.

"Don't apologise," Harry said. "I would have done the same."

"What happened?" Tonks asked.

Harry glanced back at Sirius. Glastonbury had curled up on his chest and was steaming contentedly.

"Things ended," he said.

## CHAPTER XLIII

In St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, things were a little bit mad.

The place was crawling with Aurors, for a start, ever since the first few people had staggered in carrying other, less conscious people and claiming that they were Death Eaters who'd been knocked out or killed in battle. As soon as the Death Eaters began arriving, so did a score of others, some of them still *children*, injured in what appeared to be the same battle.

There were bodies.

Augustus Pye seemed to be the only one who kept his head and understood what was going on, and as such soon found himself suddenly in charge of several wings of the hospital. It was a heady sensation, but he had other matters to attend to as well; a hospital crawling with Aurors was sooner or later going to be a hospital crawling with reporters.

He only really began to worry, however, when a thick flood of people suddenly appeared, crowding into the emergency services area. Firstly, because he hadn't expected this many casualties; secondly, because Harry and Sirius didn't seem to be among them.

The first news he had was when a young blond woman arrived carrying Severus Snape in her arms.

"He's hurt," she said. "Fix him now."

"Listen, I have thirty people waiting—"

"*Fix him now*," she snarled, and Augustus found himself automatically helping her lay the unconscious man out on a bench. A good thing, too; the injuries along his scalp were more severe than they looked, and he'd lost a lot of blood.

"He'll be all right," he said, working first on the laceration itself and then taking measurements to determine how much blood-replenishing potion he'd need. "Is it over?"

"Yes," she answered shortly.

"Did we win?"

"He was slain."

He looked up at her, startled. "You-Know-Who?"

She nodded.

"He's *dead*?"

"I saw it," she replied. "Stabbed, like so," she continued, demonstrating the movement of a hand holding a knife against her body. "Look, there."

He followed where she pointed and nearly swallowed his tongue in shock.

\* \* \*

Despite the sudden influx, Augustus had managed to find them a room away from the noise and fuss, which Harry was grateful for. The young Healer had run off after ascertaining that nobody was immediately dying, but he returned within ten minutes to see to Sirius' arm and the still-raw scar on Remus' throat. Tonks had escaped with only a scraped-up elbow, which was an irony that nobody had the energy to laugh at.

"Where's the body?" Harry asked when Augustus returned. Remus had left it with a pair of Aurors and gone with Harry and Tonks, nearly falling over when he finally released the *Mobilicorpus* spell that held Tom Riddle's body suspended in the air at his command.

"Under guard," Augustus replied reservedly. Harry sighed. "It's safe, don't worry."

"I'm not worried about it coming back to life or anything," Harry said. "I'm worried about someone stealing it."

"Ah. People need to see the body?" Augustus inquired. Remus chuckled wearily, then coughed. Augustus leaned back and glared disapprovingly at him.

"You've a bruised windpipe and some scarring. I'll have some potions and hot soup sent in when things calm down a bit. In the meantime, try not to talk," he said. Remus nodded.

"Now, let's see to young master Black," Augustus continued, bending over the bed where Sirius lay. Glastonbury, perched on the headboard, hissed warningly. "It's all right, I'm sure you did a very good job," Augustus said, and Glastonbury's feathers settled a little. Harry watched as the Healer examined the arm from all angles, listened to Sirius' chest, checked his eyes, and muttered a number of charms.

"Cracked ribs and a little mending left on the arm. I'm going to have a bones expert come in. If he wakes up, don't move him," Augustus said.

"What if he...doesn't wake up?" Harry asked in a hushed voice. Augustus put a soothing hand on Harry's shoulder.

"There's nothing wrong with him. At a guess, I'd say his body's taking some time to heal. I'd suggest you lot do the same – if you don't sleep now you won't sleep for quite a while to come. Um, there's one other thing..."

Harry saw Augustus' eyes dart to Tonks and back, nervously.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's...Harry, your scar..." Tonks ventured. Harry touched his forehead, but he couldn't feel the familiar raised, jagged lightning-bolt.

"Is it gone?" he asked. Augustus went to a small cabinet in the wall and took out a round mirror, about the size of his palm, offering it to Harry. He brushed his hair up off his forehead and looked down into his own tired face.

It didn't register immediately; he saw dark smudges under his eyes, blood on his cheek and chin. Then he saw it; where his scar had once been was a deep red bruise, about the size of a knut. He rubbed it, wondering if it was another spatter of blood, but it didn't change – merely ached, dully, as bruises do.

"I think it's a fingerprint," Augustus said quietly. Harry glanced up at him, then back at the mirror. "I don't know why it's changed and I'm not sure I want to, but if you're inclined to tell me what happened..."

"Sirius reached into me and took it out," Harry said to Remus, who rubbed a thumb over his lips thoughtfully. "He held it up and called his name and crushed it."

"Took what out?" Augustus asked, looking bewildered.

"Augustus, I think you'd better go," Tonks said gently. "For your own good."

The Healer glanced at Harry, then back at Tonks, and nodded slowly.

"I'll send that specialist in for Sirius. Oh...I thought you'd like to know, Severus Snape is still alive and he's having the most awful row with three or four Aurors and a werewolf," Augustus added.

"I'll straighten it out," Tonks said, standing up. "What about that Malfoy boy? He looked to be in a bad way..."

"*Imperius*, I'd say. Hard to tell..."

The door shut behind them and Harry found himself with one man who was unconscious and another who couldn't properly talk.

Remus spread his hands, gave him a small, tired smile, and gestured him forward. Harry stood in front of him where he sat on the hospital bed. He lowered his eyes.

"I couldn't kill him. I know what he did..." he said, his stomach knotting and churning. "But I couldn't."

Remus laid a hand on his head, thumb pressing gently over his new scar.

"Thanks," Harry said.

There was a quiet, urgent sort of noise and Harry looked up into the other man's face. Remus' other hand was a fist, knuckles pressed against his lips. When their eyes met his fingers flexed and he cupped Harry's cheeks in both his hands, pulling him forward and kissing him gently on the forehead.

"He did kill you, didn't he?" Harry asked, leaning back. Remus' eyes flicked to Glastonbury.

"Nine lives," he said hoarsely.

"That's cats."

Remus bowed his head and rested it in his hands, laughing silently.

\* \* \*

In the morning, of course, every Wizarding paper in Great Britain headlined Harry as the hero of the hour, never mind who had killed Voldemort or who had died in the battle. A photo snapped of Harry, standing uncertainly outside of Sirius' door, hollow-eyed, blood still smeared across his cheek—that was the image that went around the world. That and the body of Tom Riddle, lying as if in state on a stone slab in the St. Mungo's morgue.

Very few Death Eaters had escaped—Peter Pettigrew was caught not two hours after Voldemort's death, trying to sneak into a magical pet shop in Diagon Alley. Enough had been captured and had talked loud and long enough in captivity for the Aurors to become aware of Sirius Black, that scoundrel masquerading as Nigel Padfoot. The morning *after* the morning after the battle—everything was now dated from that day, it seemed—it was Sirius' picture, from a casual snapshot Colin had taken of him at the high table, that made the front page. *Heir Apparent: Sirius Black The Second In Cahoots With Potter.*

"Well, it's a very good use of the word cahoots," Tonks said, trying to sound light and cheerful. Sirius still wasn't awake, which meant that light and cheerful around Harry was somewhat hard going. Ron and Hermione were probably coping the best; they merely sat with Harry and kept quiet most of the time. Harry hadn't left the hospital since he'd arrived.

"The funerals are starting tomorrow," Harry answered. Tonks glanced at him. "I saw the paper while you were sleeping."

"It could have been much worse," Remus said, coming into the room. "It could have been all of us. As it is, we got off lighter than they did."

"How's Arcadia?" Harry asked.

"Grieving. Severus is with her. He's completely at a loss, but she doesn't seem to want much more than somewhere to cry, right now," Remus replied. "She lost a lot of her pack." He hesitated. "Bellatrix died about twenty minutes ago. They couldn't stop her bleeding and the potion wasn't working as it ought. They think she'd put some protective hexes on herself that may have backfired."

Harry nodded. "Neville?"

"He's hanging on. Everyone else—well, all the children—have been discharged."

"I'm sorry about Fred's eye," Harry said quietly to Ron.

"Don't be. He loves the new one. Moody's showing him how to use it."

Harry smiled a little. "Good."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand. "We should go eat."

"Go—bring me a sandwich?" Harry asked.

"Sure, mate," Ron said, taking Hermione's hand and giving her a silent signal not to object. "Back in a few."

"I'll go too, I'm famished," Tonks said.

"Take your time," Remus murmured to Tonks, as they left.

"I heard that," Harry said. Remus came to take the seat Ron had vacated, studying Sirius.

"You should at least go home and sleep a little, Harry," he said.

"At Fourteen Back?" Harry asked. "Without Sirius?"

"He's going to be fine, the Healers all say so. It just takes time."

"Like with you and the map? You're a werewolf and it took you days to recover, months to be really healed," Harry said. "He's human."

"He's Sirius. He finds ways," Remus replied. "What I want to know is how he did it."

Harry shook his head. "He said something about having the power to touch souls...I don't know."

Remus leaned forward, resting his arms on the bed. He looked strangely childlike, as if he were seventeen again too, silver hair notwithstanding.

"Didn't Nigenae say something about that?" he asked, studying Sirius' face. "When he was talking about how Sirius might have put himself into the map...he said that someone drawn from the map might have the power to touch

another person's soul. He poured so much of his soul into that map, all his private thoughts and pains and loves...when he came back to us...he's made up of soul, not like ordinary people who have souls and bodies. He's through-and-through, maybe. With all the magic and mystery that implies. Intrinsicly, in a way he may not even be able to consciously articulate, he understands souls. They're not mechanical, Harry, not everything can be laid out for you in a diagram."

"But to reach into my head and—" Harry gestured in the air.

"It might have been easier in some ways. That part of Voldemort didn't belong to you. To take your own soul out—that would take the power of a Dementor. To take someone else's out of a place it never belonged...well. We discover our strengths when we're most vulnerable," Remus concluded. "And Sirius was always strong in his magic. He'll be all right, Harry."

"When?"

Remus sighed. "I don't know. But you sitting in a dark hospital room won't help him any."

"I need to talk to the *Prophet*, don't I."

"I won't force you, but it would be helpful. I have already, to try and cushion you a bit. But half of the papers in England think you're dead, you've disappeared so completely since yesterday."

"Are they waiting?"

"They're...loitering, I'd say," Remus said. "Even if you just talked to one or two people, it would be good. People have been celebrating—Diagon's just shy of being a riot scene."

"Is this how it was last time?" Harry asked. "The celebration?"

"Yes. As far as I know. I wasn't much a part of it."

"Did you hate it?"

Remus nodded. "I'd lost three of my friends to the fourth, so I thought. I wondered, in the celebration of his death, where the mourning for my friends was."

Harry nodded. "Remus...I have to ask. All those werewolves who died. It's a good thing, politically, isn't it?"

Remus frowned. "I would never wish anyone dead, Harry. They died because they didn't have magic, not the sort that would really protect them. If they'd been allowed to go to school, like I was...but they didn't. So they died. And Fenrir's legacy goes on."

"But if someone had to die...you can use them, can't you? To stop what Fenrir began?"

"Don't you think their deaths would be rather empty, otherwise?"

"What will you do?"

Remus bit his lip. "Go to the Wizengamot. With your help, if you'll give it, and with Arcadia's if she will. Show them that werewolves were willing to die to protect people who hated them, who made them live like animals. Show the world that we're not monsters. I owe them that at least."

He gave Harry a sidelong smile. "Finally ready to fight that battle I ran away from when you were thirteen, I suppose. It takes me a while to screw up the courage for these things, but I get there in the end."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with having to get a permit to marry Tonks, would it?"

"A permit they'd never give," Remus answered. "Not to a Dark Creature who wants to marry an Auror."

Harry nodded. "I used to think it would be really *easy*, you know. Just kill Voldemort! Then everything will be normal."

"Not finding it quite so normal?"

"There's funerals, and trials that I'm going to have to go to, and some of them are going to go free—just like last time. And last time Dumbledore hid me away somewhere, but now I'm going to have to face people, every day, who think I'm a hero for something you did."

"Do not ever think that you are not a hero, Harry. Without you, we never would have had a chance. If you couldn't kill a man in cold blood there's no shame in that."

"Are you ashamed of yourself?" Harry asked, curiously.

"I should be. I've tried all my life not to be the murderer that Fenrir is, before I even knew *who* Fenrir is. I'm not, though—ashamed, I mean. Voldemort killed the only people I loved, and then when I found a new family he tried to kill them, too. I'm..." Remus rubbed his eyes with his hand. "I'm proud that I made the choice. There are a thousand times when I wouldn't have had the choice to become a murderer, so when I finally did commit the act—I'm proud that I could own it. That it was me and not the monster who killed him."

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

"Don't be. Better me than you. There's no blood on your hands, Harry, and if people think you're a hero for committing murder—and they will, no

matter what we tell them and no matter how loudly we say it—at least you have the comfort of knowing you didn't do it. Imagine going through life being loved and idolized for the single thing you're most ashamed of doing. At least you can say you didn't do it, to yourself if no one else will believe you." Remus smiled. "Besides, you make a better idol than I do. Which reminds me, I almost forgot—you and Sirius are being awarded the Order of Merlin, first class. Tonks and Neville too, and Snape, now that we've straightened everything out with the Aurors. Pretty much everyone else who was there is getting a second-class."

"What about you? And Arcadia? You deserve more than seconds."

"Werewolves can't receive civic awards."

"But you bloody well *killed the Dark Lord* with your bare hands!" Harry said furiously. "All Snape did was get hit on the head!"

"Thank you," said a voice in the doorway, and Harry looked up, startled. Severus Snape stood there, eyes deep-sunk, a strip of white bandage across his forehead. There was a dark purple bruise along the left side of his face. "It is nice to find consistency in ingratitude; at least that way one grows to expect it."

"He did save your life, Harry," Remus said.

"One does not stand and gape slack-jawed at the Dark Lord while waiting to be murdered," Snape said.

"I wasn't gaping at him," Harry retorted. "I was waiting for *Remus* to kill me."

Snape lifted an eyebrow at Remus. "Oh?"

"He was the final horcrux," Remus said. "Didn't you see the vision? I thought everyone in the church saw it."

"I am a skilled enough occlumens to conceal my betrayal of the Dark Lord; do you think he goes into my mind without my permission? And yet...here you sit, alive," Snape added to Harry.

Harry shifted in his seat, embarrassed.

"We managed to get it out without having to resort to drastic measures," Remus said. "So in that sense you still saved his life."

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

"It was instinct, nothing more," Snape replied ungraciously, turning to regard Sirius. "So this is the troublemaker himself, is it? Time-turner, I suppose."

"He preserved himself in a diary," Remus answered calmly. "Much as Tom Riddle did, without quite intending it. A sort of anti-horcrux, you might say."

Snape sniffed. "As arrogant as ever; I might have suspected. Do try to keep him from creating public scandal. No doubt, unleashed on modern society, he will enjoy himself to the disadvantage of others."

"That's not true!" Harry said furiously. "You don't know anything about him!"

"Harry," Remus said warningly.

"He's done all kinds of things for the Order and risked his life just as much as you have, and he's going to be a Healer and cure lycanthropy—" Harry broke off, realising he'd said too much. Both men were staring at him.

"We're back! Oh, hello Severus," Tonks said, pushing past him through the doorway. "Harry, we brought you a turkey sandwich and some crisps—"

She hesitated, so suddenly that Ron and Hermione ran into her. "Bad time?"

"No," Remus said. "Come in, Tonks. We were just congratulating Severus on his Order of Merlin."

Harry opened his mouth to say they must be giving them out like candy, but Snape *had* saved his life. Damn him.

"Congratulations," he said instead. "Thanks for the sandwich, Tonks, but I need to go do some things. Remus...?"

"You have a visit to pay before you speak to anyone," Snape said sharply. Harry looked at him. "Draco Malfoy is asking for you."

"Draco Malfoy can kiss my—"

"*Imperius*," Tonks said. "He was under *imperius*, Harry. They don't know for how long, but it's really strong—they're still bringing him out of it."

Harry looked to Snape. To his shock, a faint blush of shame appeared on the professor's face.

"I am not the only skilled occlumens," he murmured. "I was angry with him; I looked no further. I did not know."

"That's why he didn't fight, during the battle," Remus said. "He hadn't been told to. It's a miracle somebody didn't kill him outright."

"He wishes to speak with you," Snape repeated. Harry considered.

"No," he said finally.

Snape stared at him. "*What* did you say?"

"I'm not going to see Malfoy. I'll see him when I'm done," Harry answered.

"You impudent little—"

"I will *see* him when I am *finished*," Harry repeated, in a voice so steely that even Snape paused. "Remus, come with me?"

Remus nodded, wide-eyed, and followed Harry out of the room.

"That was...unusual," he remarked as they walked down the corridor.

"I'm done being anyone's pawn, especially his," Harry answered. "They don't get to have their Chosen One and order him about as well."

He arrived in a little lobby where a handful of reporters were standing, some of them dictating to Quickquotes quills. As soon as they noticed him they rushed forward, but Harry said "*Stop*," and they stopped, so suddenly that a photographer actually skidded into Rita Skeeter, knocking her over.

"I have something to say," he said, glancing up at Remus before continuing. "I'll tell the whole story later. It doesn't need to be told now, and some of it isn't mine to tell. Don't talk," he added to one short, balding man who was opening his mouth to ask a question. "Tom Riddle was stabbed to death two days ago, and most of his supporters are scattered or imprisoned by now. I don't know how everyone is yet—you probably know more than I do. I don't know where I'm going yet, either; probably home for a few days, once I know everyone is out of danger. At the moment, I have nothing else to say, so you may as well not bother. Except," he added, grasping Remus' sleeve without turning around, as Remus moved to leave, "that I've been told I'm going to have an Order of Merlin. I wanted to say thank you to the Ministry, because I know it's a big honour. And I want to say thank you to them for ignoring the stupid and biased law about werewolves and awarding Remus Lupin an Order of Merlin First Class as well. I think he's the first ever, aren't you Remus?"

Remus blinked at Harry, confusedly. The reporters all glanced at each other. *This was News.*

"Mr. Lupin," said one particularly bold reporter, into the silence that stretched out between Harry and his audience, "how do you feel about being the first werewolf to be awarded an Order of Merlin?"

"Surprised," Remus said faintly.

\* \* \*

"I never believed you when you said you were almost a Slytherin until now, Harry," Remus said, standing outside of Draco Malfoy's hospital room. "You just lied to a whole crowd of newspaper people!"

"It won't be a lie tomorrow, after the papers are printed," Harry replied. "The Ministry can't possibly *not* give you one now. Can you imagine them trying to retract your Order of Merlin?"

"You are *just* like your father!"

"Thanks," Harry said, and pushed the door open, leaving Remus behind in the hallway.

Draco was sitting up in bed, separated by a curtain from another bed, where Harry could see Neville's tousled hair peeping out from underneath a blanket. Neville...had not got off lightly.

"He's sleeping," Draco said dully. "Been doing that a lot."

"Yeah, I see," Harry answered. "Snape said you wanted to talk to me."

Draco swallowed. "I didn't do it. Any of it."

"Yeah you did," Harry replied. "You just didn't want to."

"It wasn't me, I mean."

Harry nodded. "That all?"

"Potter – Harry –"

Harry turned, one hand already on the door.

"My head's...cloudy," Draco whispered. "I don't remember things the way they happened."

"You were a git to me for six years. You called my best friends names and made fun of people who couldn't fight back. What more did you want to know?" Harry asked.

Draco's eyes fell, and Harry felt suddenly horrible. Sirius would be ashamed of him.

"Listen, it wasn't your fault," he said, returning to stand at the foot of the bed. "You didn't kill anyone, least not that I know of. He did it to you. You didn't ask for it."

"What're they going to do to me?"

Harry shrugged. "Put you on trial, maybe. All they can really convict you of is being an ass, which isn't something they put people in prison for, more's the pity. Snape'll probably speak up for you."

"What do I do?"

"Why ask me?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Who else can I trust?" Draco said, smiling mirthlessly. "You're a bastard, Potter, but you're a Gryffindor. You're morally obligated not to kick an enemy when he's down."

Harry shrugged. "When I figure out what happens next, I'll let you know. You might start by giving Neville a hand when he needs it, and he will for a while. You owe us, from before. Help Neville out and I'll make sure we're even."

"Does that mean I have to be nice to dotty Luna?" Draco asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, and since Draco didn't seem to have anything else to say, he left.

Remus and Tonks managed to coax Harry home that night so that he could get a few hours of real sleep; Bowman was waiting for them in the garden and hugged Harry and Mrs. Jenkins cried a little and said he was a dear boy, which was a dire indication of Harry's life to come.

He had to sleep, Remus said; there were funerals in the morning and it was bad form to fall asleep at a funeral. Harry smiled, just a little. He hadn't even realised it, but three days after the battle was December twenty-fourth; Christmas Eve. He wondered what the Dursleys were doing. Muggle England probably didn't even know.

There were three funerals; there was also a memorial for the werewolves, led by one of Arcadia's young pack-companions, a boy who'd had enough schooling before Fenrir got him that he could speak well and read a short speech. Remus wore the Order of Merlin that had arrived by owl express that morning and stood next to Arcadia, with Severus on the other side. Arcadia wore Severus' Order. The newspapers ate it up. Harry felt very tired.

When they came home from the funerals on Wednesday, Sirius was still asleep. Harry slept in the hospital.

He woke on Christmas morning around three am to the sound of some mediwitch's heels clicking in the hallway. He stretched and crawled off the cot he'd transfigured from a chair, rubbing his eyes and finding his glasses on the table next to Sirius' bed.

"It wasn't worth it, you know," he said softly to Sirius, one hand touching his arm. Sirius' head and shoulders were twisted away, towards the other wall; he sometimes moved in his sleep but never woke. "I mean, I wasn't. I'm not any great brain, I'm not the best wizard of my generation, I'm not destined to do great things. I would have done it."

To his shock, Sirius answered him.

"I'm a selfish bastard. I did it because I'd rather see the world end than see you dead."

Harry gaped as Sirius rolled over and smiled up at him, pushing himself up onto his elbows.

"How – were you – when –"

"About an hour ago. I had to pee like you wouldn't believe. Didn't want to wake you," Sirius added.

Harry dropped down into the chair next to his bed in shock. Sirius sat up and swung his legs around, then held his head dizzily. Harry immediately stood up again, almost banging his head on Sirius' chin, and stared at him.

"Pfwoo. I feel like hell. What's going on? He is dead, isn't he? I thought I heard him scream..."

"He's been dead three days," Harry said, almost hysterically.

"Oh. That's all right then," Sirius replied. "How'd we do? Where is everyone?"

"It's three in the morning."

"Is..." Sirius hesitated. "Is everyone still alive?"

Harry started to laugh and cry at the same time, which *hurt*. He wrapped his arms around Sirius' shoulders and felt his reassuring warmth, let Sirius pull him close and whisper ridiculous reassurances in his ear, since Sirius had no idea whether or not it even was all right, let alone whether it ever would be.

But he believed him.

\* \* \*

*"Is this a happy ending, Cerastes?" Polaris asked me, standing in the chilly garden of the hospital. He had thrust his hands into his pockets and was staring at the road, idly.*

*"No," I told him. "There are no happy endings, Polaris. There are happy moments; times we stop and find ourselves joyful. But they're not endings. The only endings are when people die."*

*He gave me a sharp and all-too-perceptive look; this was not the laughing Polaris who came to my town and upset my happy life nine months ago. Then again, I was not the shallow shopkeeper who had sold him his book, nine months ago.*

*"I thought death could make me happy."*

*"Death only makes you dead, Polaris."*

*"Yes; I know." He scuffed the grass with his shoe. "I'm going to Oxford, Cerastes. Wren invited me and I can't say no. I love you but I have to go to Oxford. I have to go searching for something instead of running from something, for once in my life."*

*"That's probably for the best," I said, and saw his face fall. "I'd have been lonely without you, and my new shop needs a guard dog."*

*"Your new shop?"*

*"Indeed. I couldn't stand one more winter in Wales."*

*I handed him my new card. The Oxford address was in small but elegant print in the corner. "It's not happily ever after, Polaris, but I hope it will do."*

*"It is happily ever after," Polaris said fiercely, as the sun went down and lit his face in one last brilliant flash of golden light. "It is, Cerastes. It is."*

**END**

## EULOGY FOR THE WALKING DEAD

ELLIS GRAVEWORTHY, 1978

There is triumphant change in human life;  
The old begets the new in steady wheels.  
And those who fight for stasis are as like  
To bring down wounds that fester as that heal.  
No good e'er came of silencing a man  
Whose beauty, ripe for picking, shows itself  
If truly it is beauty, it will stand  
Though hell and heaven bar the way with death.  
And though you think the dead may not go on  
Yet bodies turn to dust and thus to earth;  
The transmutation comes to everyone  
Lives ending from the moment of our birth.  
So any who draw breath, fine girls and boys  
your choice lies here before you, in your hand:  
Will you be soil for living human joy  
Or will your only gift to this green land  
Be when you lie beneath it feeding spring?  
All things are changing and all things will change  
And death, if meaningless, will yet still bring  
Fresh fodder for the yearly-dying grain.  
You may plant joy, reap love, and beauty give,  
Or die alive and only dying, live.

## EPILOGUE

Sirius was not well for many months after the Yule Battle, as the newspapers had begun to call it. He was mentally sound as anything and often grew impatient with his own weakness, but whatever he had done—and he refused to speak much about it, except in private, low-voiced conversations with Harry, who was at St. Mungo's often—it had taken all of his strength and it was slow in returning. He was in hospital until spring had well and truly begun, and after that still walked slowly and tired easily.

Despite all of this, however—or perhaps because of it, since he had little else to do—he and Harry both took their NEWTs with the Hogwarts School seventh-years. Harry did adequately enough in a broad variety of subjects; Sirius passed with ridiculously high scores, bested only by Hermione. Moody grandfathered Ron into the Aurors and, to the surprise of many, Hermione joined their ranks as well.

Sirius was accepted to the St. Mungo's training program almost before he applied; he never did have to write the application essay they usually required. His secret ambitions had somehow got out during his sojourn in St. Mungo's, and he was there all the time *anyway*, so they might as well make it official.

That summer, however, he and Harry Potter mysteriously vanished.

When questioned, Remus Lupin couldn't say where they'd gone; he just shrugged and said they'd probably gone on holiday. Sirius showed up on time for his first day of training in the autumn, with a dark sun-tan and a healthy smile and an absolute refusal to answer any questions put to him. Harry began to be seen in Diagon Alley again and at Quidditch matches, including the first Hogwarts match of seventh year where Ginny Weasley fouled the Slytherin Keeper three times in four minutes, a new Hogwarts record, and was recruited for the Holyhead Harpies on the spot. Harry was seen to be sitting with Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom, both of whom were in for a second final year; Draco didn't seem very interested in Quidditch, but he was doing well enough in his studies.

After a year back teaching at Hogwarts, for which he claimed to be, and was, fully capable, Severus Snape turned in his resignation and founded a school of his own. A primary school. For werewolves. You could have knocked Minerva over with a feather. Remus, still teaching Dark Arts, merely grinned and pointed

out that Severus would get on well with eight year olds; he really thoroughly *understood* their maturity level.

All of Wizarding Britain was set to talking about this bizarre new school, and really what could you expect from a man who lived openly with a werewolf—only semi-literate and quite feral by all accounts, raised in the wilderness by that terrible Fenrir man who'd killed himself in prison. They said that very quietly, however, since Severus Snape's temper regarding the treatment of werewolves fast became legendary.

That was the second year of Sirius' Healer training. Harry Potter still hadn't taken up a career, though he taught short courses in broomstick flying at Snape's school, and as long as the two men didn't have to actually speak to each other everything went rather smoothly. Arcadia proved to be an excellent go-between, but then she was an Alpha and used to soothing over the frets between packmates. Harry seemed content to do nothing, after having carried so much weight for so long. He read a lot, played pick-up Quidditch with the Hogwarts kids, helped Bowman tend his garden and visited often with Draco Malfoy, who had done fairly on his NEWTs—better than he ever expected—and was training to be a Ministry Dark Arts inspector. Malfoy was courting a Muggleborn woman who worked as a copyeditor in Luna Longbottom's department at the *Quibbler*. It was quite possible that he was doing this to annoy his mother, who had got off with a few months in Azkaban (now Dementorless, which made it ever so much less trying) by agreeing to have her wand snapped. Lucius was still in prison, but Draco didn't visit him.

It was around this time that Colin Creevey, cub reporter for the Prophet, got a floo call at eight in the morning from Remus Lupin.

"Creevey, you may want to go down to the Wizengamot proceedings today," Remus said. "Bring your camera and a Quickquotes and anyone else at that damn paper capable of intelligent discourse on politics, if there are any."

"All right," Colin said, sensing a scoop. "What's going on?"

"Well, Harry and Sirius will be there, and so will I, and Tonks and a few dozen of Arcadia's people, and maybe Snape if he can get away from the school," Remus said. "If you can't assemble it from that, you'll never make a proper investigative journalist. Nine-ish?"

"I'm on my way now," Colin promised, which is how an eighteen-year-old's name went out on the Wizarding Press wire when Professor Remus Lupin (O.M 1st, Hogwarts Deputy Headmaster) addressed the Wizengamot on the

subject of the mistreatment of werewolves in British society and refused to leave the chamber until he was answered to his satisfaction. The Werewolf Talks, as the history books called them—but then what did they know; if they'd been accurate they'd have been called The Werewolf Shouting Matches—went on throughout the year after that. They weren't easy on Remus or Arcadia, or Snape for that matter; every time he saw his nose made fun of by the political cartoonists, he flew into a fury and sent Howlers to the *Prophet* by the dozen. Remus grew resigned to always having wolf ears and a tail. Arcadia was very amused by it all and romped around in politics as if she'd been made for it, since she had nothing to lose and nowhere to go but up. Tonks gaily braved it out as well, since it's very hard to discomfit an Auror, and when Remus finally gave her a ring (small but pretty, using money he'd borrowed from Sirius) her mother united every woman in her upper-class, polite-society circle of friends against the Wizengamot. Some of them were *in* the Wizengamot, which made things even more exciting.

Two years after the Werewolf Talks began (as every child in third-year History of Magic class knows, having read Creevey & Potter's textbook on the subject), Apprentice Healer Sirius Black helped deliver Canis Theodore Lupin, son of Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin, technically born illegally since the kid had the gall to be conceived without a permit.

The ensuing riot when members of the Wizengamot gave orders that the child was to be taken into government custody, and Minister Rufus Scrimgeour (who knew what side his bread was buttered on) refused to give his approval, involved the arrest of twelve Aurors who wouldn't budge from Tonks' door when MLE came for young Canis. Ron and Hermione Weasley were the most vocal of the lot, followed by Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. It looked especially terrible in the papers that Hermione, seven months pregnant herself because no contraceptive in the *world* apparently worked on Weasleys, was led away in handcuffs.

A few days later, the Wizengamot attempted to privately and quietly repeal a number of very embarrassing laws. It was a brilliant plan right up until the point where the Quibbler broke the story wide open. Colin never really forgave Luna for that scoop, even if he got to take the first photos of the squalling, red-faced baby who'd caused all the fuss.

The Academy for the Education of Young Lycanthropes began formal negotiations with Hogwarts School for the admittance of its pupils to those

hallowed halls, and Severus was gratified when the first openly lycanthropic Hogwarts student to be sorted by the Hat went into Slytherin, where he thrived.

After time, even legendary feats and mythical heroes fade from the mind a little, which Harry Potter personally couldn't have been happier about. Of course it caused plenty of talk when he kissed Sirius at his graduation to Healer rather more passionately than Sirius thought proper, but the papers had learned that whenever they pressed Harry Potter, Harry Potter simply disappeared, so he was left more or less to his own devices. These often included Sirius, a portkey to the north of Scotland, and a week in a vacation cottage on the windy coast, cut off from the troublesome, complaining, argumentative world.

It wasn't that nobody would call Harry names, since we like to see our heroes fall as often as thrive, but Harry simply refused to hear them.

Remus never quite got past the name-calling of politics, but on the other hand he didn't mind them *too* much. He didn't seem to be able to keep his hand out of politics, in fact; after the Werewolf Talks ended, he moved on to lobbying for increased funding for Hogwarts and partial Ministry subsidy for Snape's school. When he got that, he asked for reform of the Wizengamot selection process, and when he *didn't* get that, he talked Rufus Scrimgeour into taking him on as chief of staff, where he was a happy thorn in the side of everyone, indiscriminately. After teaching at Hogwarts for years, being the second in command to the Minister for Magic was a bit of a relief, actually.

Severus left the Academy in Arcadia's capable hands and went to teach Dark Arts as Remus' replacement, around the time Sirius began his in-depth work on Lycanthropy. In four years he had advanced the Wolfsbane potion considerably and in ten years had perfected it, but it would be another twenty years before his breakthrough. Even then the process of separating wolf from human only worked on those who truly put in the effort and were willing to stick it out, but the Black Process was offered free to every werewolf over the age of seventeen and made most of Remus' work for adult Werewolf rights obsolete.

Minister for Magic Remus Lupin took this fairly philosophically and declined to participate in the process on the grounds that he was a bit old now to be changing his ways, and the new Wolfsbane meant that he lost hardly two days to the full moon anymore, and could they please bugger off because he was trying to have a quiet dinner with his wife (MLE supervisor Tonks) children (Canis, Albus, and Andromeda) and friends (Harry and Sirius).

Harry Potter never got a regular job. He worked off and on for the Academy or for Hogwarts, occasionally helped out in the Minister's office, and could often be found working in the Black Lycanthropy Programme he helped to found, but he never had a steady salary or regular occupation. Unless one counted his collection of antique maps, which he grew to become quite an expert on.

Whenever anyone asked him if he was bored with his life, he smiled.

## APPENDIX: THE RULES OF "EMPERORS"

### *Required*

Betting currency of your choice

Tarot deck (Major and Minor Arcana), and a working knowledge of the Tarot

### *Premise*

The game of Emperors is based on the old cliché that in any group of people having their fortune told, at least one will always be told they are going to be a huge success and do great things—in other words, be an Emperor. The goal of Emperors is to predict who will have the best future, based on a sequence of three tarot cards, revealed in steps. The game is played in rounds, like most betting card games, and most closely resembles Blackjack.

### *Rules of the Game*

Before the cards are dealt, each player antes into a central pile. The dealer deals out three cards per person—one face up and two face down. Players are not allowed to look at anyone's face-down cards, including their own. Players may fold out at any time after paying their ante.

Players examine the face-up cards and determine whom they believe will be the Emperor based on that card. They put a coin on the face-up card of the person they think is going to be Emperor. In round one, players cannot bet on themselves to be Emperor. Betting begins with the person to the Dealer's left, as per usual.

The second card dealt (the first card that was dealt face-down) is then turned over. At this point players may consider the two cards, and change their bet—remove their coin from the person they had originally bet on and place it on another person's, adding a second coin. Players must bet at least the minimum they ante'd every round, but may go as high as they please; there is no matching betting in Emperors. Players may also bet on themselves in the second round.

The third and final card is then turned over. Players must now come to a consensus on who has the most powerful fortune.

Once the Emperor is determined, the player who correctly bet on the Emperor takes all the money betted that round. If more than one person has bet on the Emperor, the money is divided equally, no matter how much was bet by

any individual player. If no one has bet on the Emperor, the Emperor takes the winnings.

In determining who is Emperor, consider:

Emperor is not necessarily the result of three “powerful” cards. An Emperor can be one who undergoes a transformation in the process from card one to card three. The importance here is not always of the cards themselves, but of the story they tell.

The Emperor is decided upon *by consensus* and Emperors is therefore not a game for sore losers. There should, if things are working properly, be a clear Emperor, but if there is not, the cards must be discussed. This means that the meanings of the cards should be identified and agreed upon beforehand, to have as much clarity as possible.

Losing with grace—i.e., admitting someone you did not bet upon is the Emperor—is considered a way of acquiring luck for the next hand.

## APPENDIX: THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ELLIS GRAVEWORTHY

*Wizard Bird*, published in 1973, set between 1931 and 1938

Ellis Graveworthy's first novel became a best-seller primarily through scandal, though it was not lacking in quality. A scathing satire of the conservative values of the wizarding world, *Wizard Bird* revolves around a young child named Wren, raised in a mixed home with one magical and one Muggle parent. At the age of eleven he is invited to attend Hogwarts school and refuses, choosing to attend an elite Muggle preparatory school instead. The parallels drawn between Muggle and Magical cultures are sharply pointed up as Wren begins to use Muggle mythology and history to create his own particular form of magic in the days just prior to the second world war. When a nearly-grown Wren is finally forced to choose between becoming a Muggle professor or a Magical schoolteacher, he makes a decision to join the Muggle army, which shatters boundary lines in both of the worlds he inhabits. *Wizard Bird* became particularly popular amongst young adults as a peek into the way Muggle children attended school.

*Two Kneazles*, published in 1975, set in A.D. 991

Aimed at the middle-teens who found *Wizard Bird* so entrancing, *Two Kneazles* is a historical fantasy which became popular with children and adults alike. Set in the year Hogwarts School was founded, it tells the story of the founding as seen through the eyes of two young, feral kneazles. Found abandoned in the castle and nursed to adulthood by Salazar Slytherin, the animals build a mythology of their own around the four Founders and are witness to the most commonplace and most intimate events of the early life of the school. As the Kneazles are tamed, so is the magic that the students are learning to control; the pair declare themselves the school's guardians and play a vital role in the climax of the story, a battle between the students and a band of invading Dementors bent on reclaiming "their" castle. When the Dementors are defeated, the Kneazles make a promise to protect the school so long as it stands, a promise echoed by the students and their professors. Graveworthy was acclaimed for his attention to detail and the thoroughness of his research, although some historians found his interpretations of events to be fanciful and even melodramatic, particularly his chapter on the creation of the mythological "Chamber of Secrets". Graveworthy was particularly fond of and sympathetic

towards Salazar Slytherin, perhaps a result of being a Slytherin house student during his own time at Hogwarts.

*Shop Gods*, published in 1977, set between 1945 and 1953

Wren, the hero of *Wizard Bird*, returns in *Shop Gods* as a battle-weary young man, having served for God and Country in the second world war. At the age of twenty-one, he has come back not to teach, as was expected, but to open a small post-owl and Muggle-knickknack shop called Wren's Rest in Diagon Alley. Wren befriends a child named Charles whose parents own a shop in Knockturn, and over the course of eight years attempts to undo the terrible, bigoted things Charles' parents have taught him. When Charles leaves Hogwarts a grown man and makes a final decision to repudiate his parents' way of life, Wren confesses his love for the younger boy, hoping for nothing but platonic friendship – only to discover that Charles is, in fact, not a young boy at all, but a woman glamourised by her mother to “protect her from the world”. Critics suspect that the “glamour” plotline was merely a tacked-on addition to legitimize a homoerotic love story; it is claimed (though there is no proof) that Graveworthy wrote an alternate ending in which Charles, as a male, accepts and returns Wren's affections.

*The Yearly-Dying Grain*, published in 1978

A slim volume of spare, carefully-crafted verse, *The Yearly-Dying Grain* was composed of sixty-two poems, mainly epigrams, sonnets, and variations on the sonnet structure. In these poems, Graveworthy addresses a wide range of subjects, from classical history to modern politics and the danger of forgetting one's responsibilities to society. While not acclaimed as a work of overwhelming genius, critics agreeing that Graveworthy's strength lay in prose, *The Yearly-Dying Grain* sold well and indicated a promising beginning to Graveworthy's poetic efforts. Highlights of the volume include “Eulogy for the Walking Dead,” a central piece expressing Graveworthy's belief in living fully; “His Illumination,” an ode to a lost lover; and “Because She Said History Is Dead,” a meditation on the nature of memory. Recent editions also include “In Reply to Mr. Yeats,” a response to a Muggle poet's vision of the apocalypse.

*Animagus Winter*, published in 1980, set in 1978

*Animagus Winter* is Graveworthy's final, crowning achievement, published barely a month before his death. In the early autumn of 1978, a man named Polaris moves into a cottage in Wales and strikes up an uneasy acquaintance with shop-clerk Cerastes when it is discovered that Polaris, like Cerastes, is a wizard. Polaris has isolated himself from the rest of the world; he is purportedly doing so in case his attempts to become an animagus fail, but Cerastes is convinced that Polaris, a brilliant social misfit, is hiding himself from the world. Throughout novel, Cerastes attempts to break through Polaris' defensive shell. Eventually, Polaris attempts to commit suicide after realising that his ability to shape-shift changes nothing. He is saved by Cerastes, who, while visiting Polaris at St. Mungo's in London, introduces the young man to an Oxford don (Wren, in a final and amusing cameo). Wren offers Polaris a place in the world—but not one more important than Cerastes offers him when he follows Polaris to Oxford. Often considered the most brilliant of Graveworthy's works, both printed and unpublished, *Animagus Winter* embraces the sexual dynamics which are only hinted at in *Shop Gods* but also digs deeply into issues of ethics, morality, and taboo in wizarding society. Graveworthy died almost completely unaware of the scandal it would cause in the wizarding world.

**APPENDIX: SELECTED POEMS FROM *THE YEARLY-DYING***  
***GRAIN***

**Because She Said History Is Dead**

Not so; their ancient words are not forgot—  
 Vesuvius the phoenix bodies show:  
 Their bones unbleached by the waning sun  
 Which our full faces and strong fingers know.  
 More famous Virgil's measured words and lines  
 Yet known to we who at the day's end lie  
 Than all the passing 'lectric records kept  
 Beneath an ever dissatisfied eye.  
 Unblest by knowledge we these later times  
 Have sought and to our ruin unwise seen,  
 Pompeii and Herculaneum sleep fast  
 While wasteland where Hiroshima had been  
 O'ergrows once more in tempered steel and glass—  
 Far better to have died these centuries past.

**How Much For Three?**

History, that Hellene Sibyl, speaks  
 In riddles, burns the pages, stays the price.  
 Like Virgil, she recites and we misread;  
 Unto *aeternitas* we grope for light.  
 This stone and clay, papyrus, sheepskin tanned  
 Which shows as time progresses what she was  
 Is even so destroyed by that which reads  
 The roots of our humanity. So thus  
 We look on History's face through crystal eyes  
 Surrounded by a thousand clacking gears  
 Which keep a record of our scars on her  
 In magnet tapes and discs. Down through the years  
 Will little tape-wheel rounds read easier  
 Than painted walls which heard Iskander sing?

(Fate, History's sister, never promised us  
 More kindness than she showed Etruscan kings.)  
 Alas, the books which foolish Tarquin bought  
 Burned on the Capitoline, and answer naught.

### In Reply To Mr. Yeats

*Dedicated "to Remus Lupin and the Edinburgh Gang"*

And why should some poor tethered bird  
 Once-hooded, hear his master's call  
 When now he has again been sent to wing?  
 Things fall apart; thus ever is the way  
 That we move upwards. Anarchy  
 Does this at least: new things arise.  
 I see no tides but that the moon pulls in  
 A necessary ceremony, and most innocent.  
 The best lack no conviction, but are young  
 And we deride their passionate beliefs.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Perhaps *your* second coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming! Vanity makes  
 You certain of your own great destiny  
 That some most fearsome god selected you  
 To be our final prophet of the end.  
 A shape with lion body and the head of an ass  
 A gaze blank and hopeless without light  
 You move your slow lips while all about  
 Reel your disciples, shadows ignorant.  
 The darkness drops again; but I have seen  
 Twenty centuries of human life  
 Are vexed the more by Prophets such as you.  
 That rough beast slouching towards the eastern sky  
 Is dawn, and nothing more, reborn each day.

Type set by Simon Crowley.