

Copperbadge
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Stealing Harry

Chapter 1

Harry Potter was eight years old, and he had a wonderful secret.

Harry had a lot of secrets: that his hair, even when freshly cut, grew so fast it was always unruly the next morning...or that sometimes he seemed to make things happen without meaning to...or that he swore sometimes he could understand what snakes were thinking.

But this was the best secret, especially because it involved doing something that was Against The Rules, and any eight-year-old knows that Against The Rules is more fun than anything.

It had to do with the house on the corner, and the Sandust Books shop on High Street.

Sandust Books was the shop that he and Dudley were never allowed to go into, the one that Aunt Petunia always dragged them past with a tightly-set frown on her face and her considerable jaw jutting out. It was strange, too, because it wasn't like Woman's Intuition, the bookshop a few doors down. All the children were banned from that bookshop, but nobody else was forbidden to go to Sandust Books.

Dudley didn't like books, and so didn't care, but Harry had once stopped to press his nose to the glass of the front display, and seen all sorts of wonderful, colourful books in it, and instantly his heart was set.

He had to get into Sandust Books.

Perhaps he and Dudley weren't allowed in because, it was rumoured, the bookshop belonged to the strange man who lived on the corner of Privet Drive, the only one on the whole block who didn't own a car or have gnomes in his front yard. Instead his yard was overgrown with rows of strange herbs, and he owned -- this was the most brilliant part -- he owned a motorbike.

Harry didn't see why sharing a street with strange Mr. Black should mean he couldn't go into the bookshop. After all, nobody actually knew that he owned it, and he had it on good authority that the shop itself was mostly run by another man named Moony. Harry reasoned that anyone named Moony could hardly be a bad person. And he'd often seen a great black dog lazing on the doorstep, its coat dark and sleek in the afternoon sun. It had a collar that read "Padfoot" and all the children said it was a brilliant smart dog who would fetch books if Moony told him to, or do tricks or watch little children while their parents browsed.

Harry thought Sandust Books might just be the best place on Earth, especially since it was Forbidden.

So, today, he'd crept away from Aunt Petunia while she was doing some shopping -- knowing that, having met one of her friends in the market, she could gossip for hours -- and sidled along the

alley next to the bookshop, and peeped in the back door.

Inside it was dim, but he could see shelves and shelves of books crammed together, and tables, and large wing-chairs.

And two giant glowing yellow eyes.

He yelped and tumbled backwards, and saw teeth flash --

The enormous black dog, Padfoot, was gripping him by the shirt with his teeth, preventing him from tumbling off the back step. The dog gave a little growl and tugged him forward, and Harry realised Padfoot probably didn't want to eat him.

Probably.

Once he was inside, the dog let him go, and he put his hand on one of the tables for balance, pulling his shirt straight. The dog whined, almost apologetically, and nudged him with his nose.

"Padfoot, what are you doing back here? I thought I heard someone -- "

Harry looked up as a tall, well-dressed man appeared, towering over him. He was thin, with a strange face and brown hair; Harry thought he looked older than he really was, somehow. At the moment he was frowning, perplexed. Padfoot whined again, and moved to stand behind the tall man's legs, staring up at him.

"Pads, what did you do?" the man asked quietly, entirely as if the dog could answer.

"He caught me," Harry said. "Don't hit him."

"Hit him?" The man asked. "I'd as soon hit a child. Caught you from what?"

"Falling," Harry said, gesturing to the back step, then to his shirt, which was stretched slightly. "I got scared...he was just guard-dogging."

"Yes, well, I'll deal with Padfoot later. Are you all right?" the tall man asked. Harry nodded. "Not scared, are you?"

"Course not," Harry said scornfully. Padfoot slunk out from behind the man's legs, and nudged him again. "Hey, stop that!"

"I think he likes you, Harry," the man said, with a smile.

"How'd you know my name?" Harry asked, curiously.

"That's not important. My name's Moony," he said, holding out his hand. Harry took it, feeling

very grown up.

"I know. Everyone talks about you."

Moony smiled. "Does your aunt know you're here?"

"How do you know -- "

The man waved a hand. "That doesn't matter."

"She's in the market. She won't be done for hours," Harry said, expressively. Padfoot nosed under his hand, begging to be petted, and he skritch'd behind his ears.

"You'd best come in now, it can't be helped," Moony said with a sigh. Harry wasn't sure he understood, but he followed Moony through the shelves, to the front of the store. Padfoot followed him, head nuzzling under Harry's arm.

"What can't be helped?" Harry asked, when they reached the front of the store. Padfoot sat next to him, tongue lolling out.

"Oh -- I was just talking to myself," Moony replied. "You like to read, Harry?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Pads, what sort of book do you think Harry would like?" Moony asked the dog. Padfoot's tail thumped on the floor. "You find something," he said finally, and Padfoot, to Harry's amazement, rose and trotted away.

"He's a smart dog," Harry observed.

"A little too smart for his own good," Moony said cryptically. He reached behind the counter and located a jar of yellow humbugs, popping one in his mouth before offering them to Harry, whose eyes went wide.

"How'd you know I like humbugs?" he asked. Moony winked.

"Magic," he said. Harry took one, carefully, and crunched up the peppermint outside, until he could taste the caramel in the centre.

"Aunt Petunia never lets me have humbugs," Harry said, around the caramel in his mouth.

"I reckon there's a lot of things Aunt Petunia doesn't let you do," Moony said sadly.

"I get by."

"Yes, Harry, I'm sure you do. Ah, here we are," Moony continued, as Padfoot returned, pushing a book with his nose. "Oh, excellent. Pads has very good taste in books," he added.

"Good dog," Harry said dutifully, patting Padfoot on the head. "Can he read?" he asked, impressed. Padfoot yawned.

"Well, Padfoot's literacy is neither here nor there, at the moment," Moony answered. "Can I trust you to keep a secret, Harry?"

"Course," Harry answered stoutly.

"You know you're not supposed to be in here. So when you leave, you can't tell your aunt you've been, or else you'll get Pads and me in trouble."

"I won't tell," Harry said fervently. Padfoot whined.

"And you can't show anyone this," Moony said gravely. "It's a book just for you, Harry, and you're not to even show Dudley or anyone at school, or tell anyone where you got it."

Harry didn't even think to ask how Moony knew who Dudley was. He was quite sure that Moony knew the secrets of the universe, and if Moony couldn't answer a question, Padfoot could.

"I promise," Harry answered. "Cross my heart."

Moony smiled, and reached out, lifting up the hair on Harry's forehead. Harry felt him touch the odd-shaped scar there, gently.

"Boy's as good as his word, you think?" he asked suddenly, turning to Padfoot. The dog's tail thumped again. "Right then," he said. "Here you are, Harry. A present from Padfoot."

Harry accepted the book, looking down at the cover.

"The Magician's Nephew," he read aloud. He looked from Padfoot to Moony and back. "What's it about?" he asked. Padfoot regarded him solemnly.

"If we told you, it'd spoil it," Moony said. "There, will it fit in your pocket?"

Harry nodded, and shoved it in the front pocket of his oversized, hand-me-down coat.

"You should get back to your aunt," Moony said, with a small frown. "She'll be looking for you soon. Wait..."

Harry had turned to go, but Padfoot put out his head, blocking the boy from moving. Moony scabbled behind the counter for a small paper bag and poured some of the humbugs into it.

"There. Don't tell," he said, with a grin. Harry grinned back, and scratched Padfoot under his collar. The dog's tail thumped wildly against a bookshelf.

"Off you go, then. Padfoot'll go with you as far as the market," he said. Harry, proud master of a sack of his favourite candy and a new book all his own, put one hand on Padfoot's broad back and followed the dog out of the shop.

"Oh, bugger," Remus Lupin said softly, when they'd gone.

He walked around the counter and found a scrap of parchment and a ballpoint pen, writing quickly and neatly, before folding it and crossing to a window that opened into a side-alley. Outside, perched on a potted tree, an owl was sleeping, head under wing. He poked it.

"Claw, please take this to Dumbledore," he said, holding out the letter. Claw -- Sirius had been allowed to name her, a mistake Remus would never again make -- hooted irritably, accepted the letter, and flapped off.

He had barely turned around again before Padfoot returned, heaved a doggy sigh, and trotted into the back office, where they kept the books-to-be-shelved, the books-we-can't-show-the-Muggles, and the ancient electric teakettle. There was a soft noise, like an exhalation of breath, and Sirius Black walked out of the office, head bowed, face grave. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the counter, thoughtfully.

"You tell Dumbledore?" he asked.

"Just got through," Remus answered quietly.

"I couldn't help it."

"Wasn't your fault," Remus replied, without looking at him. He picked up the jar of humbugs, and turned it over in his hands, thoughtfully. "He came looking for us, not the other way around."

"I didn't mean to scare him."

"I don't think you did."

"He'll like the book."

"Course he will."

"Think he'll tell?"

Remus glanced at Sirius then, and shook his head. "I think Harry keeps too many secrets already

to go blurting this one out to that odious aunt of his." He turned the jar again. The remaining humbugs rattled. "You know when I found out he liked these, I started keeping them in the shop...I'm not sure if I was trying to lure him in, or just waiting so that when he did come -- "

"I know." Sirius took his hands out of his pockets, crossing his arms. "I put the book aside for him. I thought about Tolkien, but he's too young -- I thought, you know, he ought to be reading about magic and that..."

"We're pathetic, aren't we?"

"We're looking out for the boy." Sirius shrugged. "It's my job. Merlin, but he looks like James."

"That he does. Smart as a whip, too. You saw. He's got Lily's eyes."

"Wish I could've seen him in colour," Sirius mumbled.

"Well, I sent you off so that you could Change if you wanted. I thought you would."

"I couldn't."

"Of course you..." Remus trailed off. He set the humbugs back on the counter, slowly. "Oh."

"If I could talk to him I wouldn't have been able to keep myself from blurting the whole thing out. If I'd had arms to -- to hug him -- nobody thinks it's weird if a strange black dog wants to be petted, but god forbid his own damn godfather should want to..." he put a hand over his face, composing himself. Remus waited patiently. "It would have scared the boy."

"He liked you."

Sirius met Remus' eyes, and a smile spread slowly across his face. "He did, didn't he? He liked me. He wasn't even scared at all, was he?"

"Did you see the way he looked at us?"

"Like we were...magic."

They shared a happy grin, before Remus' fingers plucked nervously at the bookmarks sitting near the cash register.

"He'll come back, you know," he said. "It's dangerous. If That Woman finds out...or his uncle..."

"Well." Sirius looked grave. "We'll just have to make sure that he doesn't get caught."

"Which means...?" Remus lifted an eyebrow.

"Which means that next time, we find him."

"Sirius, you know what Moody and Dumbledore will say about that."

"Moody and Dumbledore don't have to know."

"We promised we wouldn't make trouble for Harry. We swore up and down and on Moody's disgusting removable eye that we would keep our distance."

"Well, we did, didn't we? It's not our fault That Woman wouldn't let him in our shop. He was bound to want to see what all the fuss was about, sooner or later."

"It's not right, Sirius."

Sirius gave a dramatic groan, and flopped into one of the wing-chairs nearby. "Listen, all right, here's what we'll do. The next time his aunt brings him along shopping, I'll follow around. If I see him sneaking away, I'll make sure she's occupied. By force, if necessary," he said, with a toothy grin. Remus smiled. "Woman's Intuition has a dog, he's unusually bright and I'm sure I could show him what he needs to watch for."

"Right. Somehow you'd think they'd own a cat, really."

Sirius shrugged. "Anyhow, he can keep a lookout and if we see That Woman coming, we can hustle Harry out the back door and claim ignorance complete."

"You know you'd think after seven years at school and ten years out in the world, I'd be able to say no to you, once in a while."

"Thwack me with a newspaper," Sirius grinned. He stretched, and Remus pushed away from the counter as a customer entered, fluidly transitioning into his professional, bookish 'shopkeeper' demeanour. Sirius, who had never mastered the art of politeness to strangers, left him to it.

Aunt Petunia hadn't even noticed he was gone, but Dudley had; Harry had to bribe him with a handful of the precious yellow candies before he'd keep mum about it, but there were still three or four left after Dudley's cut.

Moony was a magician. Harry was sure of it. You didn't get giant black dogs who could read if you were just a regular old bookstore owner. Moony was a magician and the reason Harry wasn't allowed in the store was because Aunt Petunia didn't hold with any fantastical nonsense.

When they got home he wanted to go straight to his cupboard and look at his book some more, but he had to help put the groceries away, and then clean up after Dudley dug a hole in the flower bed, and then he had to help cook dinner. He wasn't able to get away from the Dursleys until after

dinner.

He picked up his coat and pulled the book out of the pocket with some difficulty. It was a small, cheap paperback, with a yellow cover and a picture of a forest on the front. He curled up on his bed, back to the door so that even if someone did open it unexpectedly he'd have time to shove the book under his pillow. It looked exactly the sort of book Uncle Vernon would take away from him, if he was caught, and then what would he say when he went back to Sandust Books?

He grinned. Of course he was going back! A real live Magician was not the sort of thing you ignored, once you knew about it!

Eventually Aunt Petunia did thump on his door and tell him to turn out the lights, and he pulled on the chain that would turn off the one bare overhead bulb. After waiting to a count of four hundred, just to be safe, he fumbled under the bed for an old battery-powered torch he'd salvaged from the garage. The glow was dim and the batteries dying, but it was enough to read by.

He read through the night, fascinated. Evil magicians and good boy heroes and witches and lions, and animals that talked, and good magicians too. Maybe Moony was from Narnia, and Padfoot was a talking dog. Harry hoped he'd talk to him next time.

Across town, Remus stood on the front step of Sandust Books and locked the door, checking the knob as he had every day for nearly seven years. Padfoot sat on the step, patiently. He waved to a couple of fellow shopkeepers, shouldered a battered satchel, and began the walk down the street to the bakery, Padfoot at his heels. He always bought an apple turnover or a muffin for himself, and usually they had some treat or other for Pads, as well; three years ago the big dog had run down a thief who'd made off with most of their money, and Moony'd had to pull him bodily off the man, who by that time was gibbering in fear.

Everyone agreed that Moony was nice chap, a bit odd, but his dog was all right.

At the end of the street, they ducked into an alley briefly; Moony emerged on the other side alone, walking towards his flat. After a pause, a black-haired man in a leather coat walked out of the alley, got onto the motorbike that was always parked nearby, and drove off.

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Chapter 2

It was fully a week before Harry got another opportunity to go near Sandust Books, and even then he couldn't get away from Aunt Petunia -- she was taking Dudley to get his hair cut, and made Harry sit next to her the whole time. He gazed longingly across the street at the dusty-windowed bookstore and the glossy black dog who was delightedly eating ice cream off of the fingers of a couple of children. Moony emerged and seated himself on the broad front step, obviously basking in the late-afternoon sunlight; he noticed Harry and reached out to nudge Padfoot, pointing and waving. Harry very carefully waved back.

Padfoot bounded up and dashed across the street, wriggling with excitement, but stopped himself at the last minute from putting his paws up on the window when he noticed Aunt Petunia. His lips pulled back, teeth showing. Harry grinned and made a shushing gesture; Padfoot backed away, tail between legs, and trotted dejectedly back to Moony, who rubbed behind his ears and made a scowl of disappointment.

Harry watched as people came up to talk to Moony and pet Padfoot; children came and went and Moony occasionally followed a customer inside to help them find books.

Behind him, Dudley wailed in the chair that he didn't want to get his hair cut, that he wouldn't hold still, and that they were going to cut his ears and head and, though this did not seem logical to Harry, his nose. But on the other side of the glass, across the narrow street, Moony made faces at him and Padfoot did silly doggy acrobatics.

Harry decided he had to go back to the bookshop. And there was only one way he was ever going to.

He'd have to talk to Mr. Black, who owned the shop.

He resolved to do it that day, but three days later he still hadn't had his chance. He had to do it when Aunt Petunia wouldn't be watching, and when Dudley wouldn't follow him, and when Mr. Black was at home.

So Harry watched, and waited, and invented his excuse, and finally, after school one day, he got his chance. Aunt Petunia was having tea with one of her friends, and Dudley was upstairs playing video games. Harry heard the motorbike roll down the street, heard it cut off and thought he could even hear the faint sounds of the garage being opened.

He very quietly put on his coat, tucked the book into the pocket again, and crept out the back door. He circled around the house, down the street, and behind a hedge. He peered through the branches at Mr. Black, who had rolled his motorbike into the garage and was lying underneath it, tinkering with something.

He glanced around, made his decision, and dashed madly across the street, ducking behind the edge of the garage. Mr. Black, hearing his footsteps, slid out from under the bike and propped himself up on his elbows. Harry dashed inside the garage and hid himself to one side of a tool rack.

When Mr. Black saw Harry, he blinked and turned pale.

"Hello," Harry said, quickly. "Do you own the bookstore?"

Mr. Black continued to stare at him, open-mouthed.

"Only I'm a...I'm a friend of Moony and Padfoot and they gave me this book -- " Harry held out the book, " -- and I really liked it but it says there're a bunch of others and I wanted to see if I gave this one back if maybe Padfoot would let me have another one...but I can't go to the bookshop, see, because my aunt won't let me...and she says you own it..."

He trailed off. Mr. Black's unblinking stare was beginning to make him anxious.

"I...I'm sorry..."

"No, no no...stay right there," Mr. Black said. He pushed himself to his feet gracefully and backed away -- eyes never leaving Harry's face -- until he was standing next to a sink. Slowly he turned to wash his hands and wipe the grease off his fingers. When he finally turned back, Harry was trembling with nervousness.

"Don't be afraid," the tall man said, gently. He walked forward again and knelt to take the book from Harry's hands.

"I own the bookshop," he said. He thumbed through the book. "You read the whole thing?"

"It was brilliant," Harry answered. Mr. Black looked up sharply, and Harry wondered if he'd said something wrong. "Padfoot said I could have it," he added.

"Padfoot doesn't talk."

"Yes he does. I bet you anything he does. Cos Moony's a magician," Harry added. Mr. Black smiled.

"My name is Sirius Black," he said. "Like the star. You can call me Sirius."

"That's a funny name."

"I suppose so," Sirius said, turning the book in his hands. "You should keep this, Harry. Padfoot gave it to you. I'll give you the next one, if you like."

"I can't anyway," Harry said gloomily. "Aunt Petunia almost found it. If she gets hold of it she'll wreck it, and I'll get Moony and Padfoot in trouble."

"Ah, I see," Sirius said gravely. Something in his look reminded Harry of Padfoot's sober doggy gaze. "Well. In that case, I'll keep it safe for you."

"So...does Moony work for you?" Harry asked, as Sirius put the book in his back pocket.

"In a manner of speaking. I own the shop, and he runs it, so that I don't have to."

"Are you a magician too?"

"No, I'm a talking dog."

Harry scowled. Sirius grinned.

"As for being a magician..."

"Sirius!"

Both of them looked up. Harry beamed.

"Moony!" he said, excitedly, but the brown-haired man, standing in the drive, was glaring at Sirius.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Lad wanted to return the book," Sirius answered.

"Where's Padfoot?" Harry asked, looking around for the big black dog.

"Padfoot's in the doghouse," Moony answered. Sirius grinned.

"Harry thinks that The Magician's Nephew was brilliant, and he wants the next in the series," he said, standing and touselling Harry's hair. His hand was big enough to cover the whole top of Harry's head.

"Harry, you run along back to your aunt and uncle before they catch you," Moony said. Harry's disappointment must have showed on his face, because the older man sighed.

"I don't want you getting into trouble," he said. "I'm not mad at you, Harry, I'm mad at Sirius. Go on, run on, and I'll make sure you get your book, all right?"

Harry, still not understanding what was going on, nodded, and ran down the drive, nearly tripping on the sidewalk. As he left, he heard Moony say to Sirius, "You managed to restrain yourself, I

see."

"I had to."

"You can't just talk to him about magic like that, he's only eight years old."

And he thought he heard Sirius reply, "Well, he's got to find out sooner or later, and he thinks you're a magician, Remus."

Then Uncle Vernon's car roared by, and Harry ran to be home in time for dinner. It wouldn't do to be late -- there would be Questions, and then the whole thing might come out.

"You can't send him that one, Moony, he's a kid."

"Sirius, this book was written for kids. You're just upset because I'm sending him your copy."

"Well, it's mine!"

"He'll give it back, don't worry."

"He's a kid. He'll spill something on it."

"You own a bookstore. It's not as if this is the only copy of the book in existence. Don't you want your godson to read it?"

"Yes, but..."

"Well, that's settled then."

"I wanted to read it to him. I was saving it in case."

"Once he turns eleven you can visit him at Hogwarts and read to him all you like."

"He'll be too old, then."

"He's nearly too old now."

"I hate the Dursleys."

"The Dursleys protect him."

"Hell of a job they do of it. You know he goes about in The Piglet's castoffs, don't you?"

"His name is Dudley."

"I don't care."

"My, we are petulant this afternoon, aren't we?"

"It's not right."

"Listen, this is dangerous enough as it is. I know Moody yelled at you once already. If we get caught sending him things -- "

"What? What exactly are they going to do to us? I'd like to know. They can't lock us up for wanting to look after the boy. It's not a crime, you know."

"Dumbledore has friends at the Ministry. Arthur Weasley could make life really miserable for us."

"Arthur Weasley? You must be joking. The man doesn't swat flies, let alone make trouble for other people."

"Well, Sirius, you have a lot less to hide than I do, don't you?"

"Dumbledore wouldn't do that. He wouldn't, would he?"

"The point is, we're endangering Harry as well. If he leaves the Dursleys, he'll be a lot harder to protect."

"Fine. Fine, fine. I'll keep quiet. But if he comes to talk to me again I'm not going to throw him out of my garage."

Harry waited patiently for the rest of the week, wondering how Moony would get the book to him. He didn't have another chance to nip down and talk to Mr. Bla -- to Sirius -- though he kept a careful eye on the house. The only people who visited Sirius were Moony, once, and an old man with a peg-leg and a bowler hat tipped low over one eye.

He was sitting out in the backyard, hiding from Dudley, when the book arrived. He'd been behind a rosebush, studying history, and a package literally fell into his lap.

He looked up. A tawny, vicious-looking owl sat above him, clicking its beak.

He tore open the brown-wrapped package. Another yellow-covered book fell out, and a battered second book, and a piece of strange cream-coloured paper.

Dear Harry,

Don't tell!

When you're done with the books, bring them back to Sirius.

-- Moony

PS: If you want to write back, write on this paper and give it to the owl. He's trained to take letters for me.

There was an inky pawprint, too.

Harry excitedly pulled out his pencil and wrote a thank-you note and a promise not to tell. The owl accepted it, nipped him on the finger, and flew off.

Harry turned over the books in his hands, grinning. Another one by C.S. Lewis -- The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe -- as well as one called Truckers, by a man named Pratchett.

It took Harry three nights and two lunch periods at school to finish the second Narnia book; it wasn't as interesting as the last one. He went through Truckers almost as fast as he had The Magician's Nephew, and then -- since he didn't know when he'd get to return the books -- he read it again.

Sirius spent almost the entire next Saturday with the garage open, pretending to work on his motorbike, but Harry was trapped inside helping Aunt Petunia clean, and couldn't get away.

On Monday, however, something brilliant happened.

Just before lunch, Harry happened to glance up from his math problems, and saw a blur of black through the window. Sitting on the schoolyard grass was Padfoot, tongue lolling, ears perked towards the classroom. Harry's world brightened. Padfoot must be here to see him. Padfoot had come all the way from Sandust Books to see him, Harry Potter.

It seemed to take forever for the bell to ring; Harry gathered up his backpack (threadbare, falling apart, and covered with insane cartoon characters -- it had been Dudley's) and ran outside to throw his arms around Padfoot's neck. The dog whined with excitement. Harry threw himself down in the grass and pulled a somewhat smashed ham sandwich out of his pocket, offering half to Padfoot, who took it with grace and shredded it before devouring it.

"I saw Moony again. He gave me two new books. Did you pick them out?" Harry asked. Padfoot, mouth full of ham sandwich, whined. "I thought so. I met Sirius too. He said you couldn't talk, but I bet you can. You can around me, you know. I've never told."

Harry waited, entirely expecting that Padfoot would open his mouth to tell a joke, but instead he saw that the dog was looking past him.

Oh.

Dudley and his gang.

"Look, ickle Harrykins has a new best friend," Dudley said, stopping to put his hands on his hips. "Better make sure you don't give him fleas, Harry."

"Shut up, Dudley," Harry answered. There was a soft growl from Padfoot.

"Ooooh, what're you gonna do, sic a big stupid mutt on me?"

"He's not stupid," Harry answered. "He's the smartest dog ever, like movie dogs."

"He looks dumb to me," said one of the other boys.

Padfoot, very slowly, rose from his reclining position. Standing, he was as tall as Dudley. His lips were drawn back over sharp white teeth.

"Nyah, big dumb dog," Dudley said, throwing a wad of paper at him. Padfoot didn't even flinch, didn't track the paper with his eyes; instead he lunged for Dudley, and caught him by the waistband, ripping his trousers apart before flinging the boy to the ground.

"I'll tell!" Dudley screamed, and fled, the other boys already having deserted him. Padfoot snorted, and trotted back to Harry.

"You should go," Harry said. "You'll get in trouble."

Padfoot whined and nudged him with his great doggy head.

"Go on, go find Moony before a teacher shows up," Harry said. "Go on, Padfoot."

The big black dog huffed, but turned and ambled away reluctantly.

Harry faced the schoolyard again and composed himself to tell a lie about a stray mutt wandering through.

"That's it. That is the ultimate end."

Remus looked up from the counter of Sandust Books. It was late afternoon, a time when business was always at a low ebb; the only people in the store were the Baker brothers, ages five and two respectively, whose mother was next door shopping for shoes.

"Surely not," he said. "I was certain that the sun had at least another few billion years before the ultimate end. And you know the universe might go on quite a bit longer after that, even."

"Do you know where I was at lunch, Moony?"

"Yes, getting us into trouble," Remus replied, making a note in a ledger. "And then I have it on good report you went down to Diagon Alley and sulked for hours on end. Listen, we could have Pratchett in for a signing on the twelfth, but it's a full moon so you'd have to handle everything and I know you hate that."

"I went to his school. I waited for him to come out. I was going to spend lunch sharing his sandwich and having my ears skritch," Sirius stormed.

"You were also going to pick up the books from him. I see you got distracted."

"The Piglet won't even let the poor lad alone when he's just sitting on the grass minding his own business. I mean really. And have you seen how he looks in those old clothes? No wonder he hasn't got any school friends."

Remus looked up. "Dudley bothers him at school?"

"Not today," Sirius said, a trifle smugly. "I broke his trousers."

"Broke...?"

"Well. Ripped 'em. Reckon that'll show him. Wouldn't mind seeing that one sing falsetto if you get my drift."

Remus took his glasses off and folded them carefully. "Sirius, getting your drift is not difficult. It's really more of a projectile than a drift. You attacked Dudley Dursley?"

"He was picking on Harry!"

"We are in so much trouble," Remus murmured.

"No, I'll tell you who's in trouble. Petunia Dursley is in trouble. Vernon Dursley is in trouble. Dudley Dursley is in for a world of trouble as soon as I can arrange a pack of wild dogs to rend him limb from limb. We? We are not in trouble. We are going to storm that house and -- "

"Sirius."

Sirius subsided, when Remus indicated the two small boys in the corner, watching him rave.

"I mean it this time," Sirius continued, in a lower voice. "He's getting old enough that it's starting to affect him. I'm not going to stand for it. I'm his godfather. I have a right to make sure the boy's

happy."

"I think all we can hope for is that he's not dead," Remus murmured softly. "He's got to stay with his family. Dumbledore said so."

"I'm his family!"

"Not his blood."

"You're his blood!"

Remus lifted an eyebrow. "I'm a second-cousin of James' mother, once removed. There's a difference."

"James and Lily would be furious if they knew -- "

" -- but they don't know, Sirius, because James and Lily are dead," Remus snapped. There was a gasp from behind them, and Sirius whirled.

"Harry," the men said in unison.

Harry Potter was standing by one of the bookshelves, clutching his backpack in his hands, staring wide-eyed at them.

"How long have you been there?" Sirius demanded.

"Where's your aunt?" Remus said, cutting him off.

"We just...she wanted to buy...Dudley...new trousers..." Harry said, eyes still wide as saucers, staring at Sirius. "I..."

He let his backpack fall, and Sirius saw he was holding the books they'd sent him.

"I came to give back the books," he said, in a small voice. Sirius put out his hand to accept them, and Harry flinched back.

"You were talking about my parents," he whispered.

Sirius glanced at Remus, who laid down his pen and rubbed his eyes. Finally, he sighed.

"Yes, Harry, we were," he answered.

"You knew my parents," Harry said.

"Yes," Remus continued. Sirius seemed dumbfounded.

"You said you're my godfather," Harry continued, as if processing the information. Sirius made a strangled noise.

"Do you remember your parents at all, Harry?" Remus asked gently. Harry shook his head.

"Got a picture of them in my cupboard..." he said, eyes never leaving Sirius' face.

"In your bedroom?"

"Where I sleep," Harry said helpfully. Remus saw Sirius' fists clench.

Just then there was a shriek from next door, Aunt Petunia calling his name, and Harry gathered up his backpack and fled, dropping the books where he'd stood. They watched him go.

"Did you hear that, Moony?" Sirius said hoarsely.

"Well." Remus closed his notebook and tossed it on the counter. "Might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, as my dad used to say."

"What the hell has -- "

"I think we ought to pay the Dursleys a visit tomorrow afternoon."

Sirius glanced at him. There was something strange in Remus' eyes, something he didn't think he'd ever seen before. A mixture of pity and rage that perfectly echoed what he himself was feeling.

"I'm leaving in two days for India," Remus continued. "Apparently there's a cult in one of the northeastern provinces that worships the rat. That sort of thing would be very attractive to Peter, you know, and I think he may have gone to ground there. But I see no reason not to put the fear of God, not to mention Moony and Padfoot, into the Dursleys before I leave." He pointed at Sirius.

"You will stay very quiet, and look menacing, and let me do the talking."

"Can I menace them? Physically?"

"If you behave yourself I might let you give Dudley a clip round the ear."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 3

Remus had seen the outside of the Dursley house many times; in the days just after Voldemort's fall, most of the Order had, at some point or another, covertly come to gawp at it. When it became evident that Harry would have to stay there, and Sirius bought the house nearby to be close to the boy, Remus had spent hours standing at the window of Sirius' house, looking up the street. He imagined Sirius did the same, when he wasn't about.

He'd never seen inside the place, though. He wondered if, today, he might actually get to.

Sirius stood behind him, arms crossed. Remus had to admit that if you didn't know how idiotic Sirius could be, you'd probably be afraid of him.

Well. Up to Remus Lupin to be the voice of reason, as usual.

He knocked on the door. There was a pounding of feet, and Harry opened it, breathlessly. His eyes widened.

"WELL, WHO IS IT THEN?" drifted a voice from inside.

"We'd like to speak to your uncle, Harry," Remus said. Harry nodded, and turned.

"UNCLE VERNON!" he called. There was the sound of someone getting to their feet, and Vernon Dursley's heavy footfalls. Harry scurried away, fearfully, as the thick-necked, red-faced man reached the doorway.

"You," he said, eyes narrowing. "Black," he added, speaking over Remus' shoulder, to Sirius, who -- true to a promise coerced out of him earlier that day -- didn't say anything.

"Mr. Dursley, My name is Remus Lupin," Remus said smoothly. "I see you've met Sirius. May we come in?"

Dursley stood aside, and they stepped into the dim house. It was obsessively clean, but it smelled...well, wrong. Remus could hear Sirius sniff, behind him, and knew the other man was thinking the same thing.

"We'd like to have a word with you about Harry," Remus continued. "As I'm sure you're aware, Sirius is Harry's godfather, and while we understand -- "

"You? The freak with the motorbike?" Vernon said. Sirius let out a quiet growl. Remus, dumbfounded by the man's sheer audacity, gathered his wits.

"Surely you knew James and Lily had named Sirius in their will," he said, hurriedly. "We know that Harry needs protection and that's why he's been placed with blood family -- "

"HA! Protection from the likes of Black! And the rest of the -- the freak world his parents came from!"

"Mr. Dursley, please stop using that word," Remus said, trying to be patient.

"And you! I suppose you're one too," Vernon said, turning on Remus. "A wastrel like my wife's sister and her good for nothing -- "

"If you say that about James again, I will personally put your nose through the back of your head," Remus growled.

"I'd like to see you try it!" Vernon blustered. Remus gritted his teeth.

"Your son's bullying Harry. We want it stopped."

"Dudley's doing nothing of the kind."

"We saw it happen, Dursley."

"He's fed and clothed and has a roof over his head, which is more than you or that godfather of his ever did for him," Vernon said, face turning beet red. "Never saw a penny to help out with our expenses, either. The boy goes about breaking things, making the place untidy -- "

"He's eight years old!" Remus waited for Sirius to break in, but apparently he was exercising some modicum of self control. "Your son throws rocks at old women!"

"Lies and slander!" Vernon roared.

"Sirius, I think you can menace now," Remus said. There was no reply, and he glanced behind him.

Sirius stood in the doorway, one hand in Harry's, the other carrying a disturbingly cheery backpack. Harry's backpack. Harry was clutching a small plush frog in one hand.

"You keep him in a *cupboard* ," Sirius said quietly. "With no lights except a torch he had to steal. You *lock him in* when you're tired of dealing with him. Your son has broken every toy the boy has ever managed to scrounge up. He torments him mercilessly. So, I suspect, do you."

Sirius picked up Harry, and handed his bag to Remus.

"You're lucky I don't kill you," he said fiercely. Vernon Dursley was too stunned to do more than gape. "You're lucky I don't call the Aurors -- "

" -- police -- " Remus coughed.

"And have you arrested and sent up for being an absolute -- "

"Sirius," Remus said sharply. "Let's go. Now."

Sirius growled at Petunia, who had entered when Vernon started shouting, and was standing between him and the door. She scuttled aside. Harry, arms wrapped tightly around his neck, shivered.

And then they were outside in the sunshine, moving quickly down the street, Sirius grave and furious, Remus silent, inscrutable, Harry still clutching Sirius' neck, and the frog squashed between his hand and Sirius' collarbone.

The door of Sirius' small house slammed open, and he stormed inside, setting Harry down on the counter in the kitchen, so that the boy's legs hung over the edge. Remus laid the backpack carefully on the table.

"Everything the boy owns fits in a backpack," Sirius muttered.

"His clothes, too?"

"I wouldn't touch those clothes," Sirius said sharply. "he won't need them. We'll buy him his own clothes."

"Dumbledore's going to kill us," Remus said slowly.

"I don't care."

Remus looked at Harry. "Really, they locked you in a cupboard?"

Harry, terrified, nodded slowly. He had both arms around the soft toy, now, and was shaking.

"Nothing else to be done, then," Remus mused.

"You're damned right!" Sirius shouted. Remus saw Harry wince. "Did you see? You talked to that monstrous Muggle!"

"Sirius, you're scaring him."

"Well, I'm angry!"

"And he's eight! Shut it, or I'll shut it for you!" Remus snapped. Sirius, stunned by his words, stopped mid-diatribes. He glanced at Harry, who was staring at them.

"I...I'm eight and a half," Harry said quietly. There was a moment of absolute silence.

Sirius threw back his head and roared with sudden laughter. He moved to the counter, wiping tears from his eyes, and hugged Harry tightly. Remus sank into a chair, resting his head on his hands, exhausted.

"Well, what do you think of that, Harry?" Sirius said, when he finally got himself under control. "How'd you like to come live with your godfather Sirius?"

"Can I have books now?" Harry asked timidly. There was a distinctly amused noise from Remus' general direction.

"Absolutely," Sirius promised. "We could go to the bookshop right now -- "

Remus lifted his head. "I think we ought to," he agreed. "I don't think Harry ought to stay here. It's too close to the Dursleys. It's dangerous," he added, significantly, to Sirius, who nodded.

"Your flat?"

"It's a bit small," Remus sighed. "But I think it'll be safer."

Harry wouldn't let go of the frog, and wouldn't stop shaking, until he was installed in one of the enormous wing-chairs in Sandust Books.

"I think I'll put off that trip to India," Remus said thoughtfully, as Sirius located *Diggers*, his own personal copy, and gave it to Harry. The boy solemnly tucked his frog between his hip and the arm of the chair, drew his knees up to prop the book on, and began to read. "If we're going to get in hot water over it, both of us ought to be here."

"You'd think *you* were his godfather."

"James was my friend too," Remus said reproachfully.

Sirius crossed his arms, also watching Harry. "If you want to go, you should go, but I'd rather you stayed."

"Then I'll stay. Besides, you don't know where anything in my flat is," Remus said, lips quirking up slightly. "There's only the bed and the couch, I'm afraid."

"We'll put Harry on the couch, and he can share it with Padfoot," Sirius said.

"You shed."

"I'm getting my summer coat."

"You've been continually getting your summer coat for twelve years, then," Remus answered, aware that he was talking around the problem at hand. "So."

"So."

"Do you want to send the owl to Dumbledore, or should I?"

Sirius sighed. "I'll do it. Watch the lad."

"Doubt I'll be doing much else, for the next few years," Remus murmured, when Sirius was gone. He saw Harry's eyes dart up from the book, then back down. After a moment, he did it again.

"Harry," Remus said, slowly, "Are you scared still?"

"No," Harry said, clutching his frog. Remus crouched next to the chair.

"You did want to come with Sirius, didn't you?" he asked quietly. Harry nodded. "Can I see your frog?"

Harry offered it to him, and Remus turned the battered plush toy over in his hands. It was the cheap sort you got from carnival fairway games; Remus reckoned he'd found it somewhere, and turned it into a sort of teddy bear. It was threadbare, leaking stuffing from one of its webbed feet, and unwashed; he considered it for a minute before saying his next words.

"Sirius tells me you think I'm a magician," he said.

"Aren't you?" Harry asked. "Your dog is magic."

"Harry, what sort of magic do you suppose I do?"

"Making dogs smart and making things disappear and turning things into other things and all," Harry said promptly. "And knowing things about people."

"Harry...there are two different worlds, you know. There's the world your uncle and cousin and aunt live in. And we call them Muggles," Remus said carefully. "And then there's another world that you and Sirius and I are a part of. And that's called the Wizarding World."

"Me too?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I should say so, Harry," Remus said. "You're magic. Like us." He took his wand out of his back pocket, and pointed it at the frog. "Want to see some magic, Harry?"

Harry nodded eagerly.

"Scourgify," Remus said, and the dull green shade brightened as a brief cascade of soap bubbles passed over the frog. "Reparo," he continued, and Harry's eyes grew wide as the rip in the webbed foot healed, the stuffing snaking back inside it. The threadbare patches seemed to grow new plush. Remus shook it, making sure there was nothing else to fix, and handed it back to Harry.

"Are you from Narnia?" Harry asked, awed.

"No, Harry. I'm from Yorkshire," Remus grinned. "Listen, you understand you can't tell anyone about this magic, all right? About any magic."

"I won't tell!" Harry squeaked.

"Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart!"

"There's a lad," he said, as the door to the back office swung open and Sirius walked back in.

"I've sent it off," he said. "Hallo there, Harry, I see Moony fixed your frog."

Harry stroked the frog's head. "Are you magic too?"

"Yup," Sirius said, as Remus straightened. "Like you and your...your dad and mum," he finished, after only a slight hesitation.

"And Padfoot," Harry said. The two men exchanged a quick look.

"Harry..." Sirius said.

"Not right now, Sirius," Remus murmured. Sirius gave him a rebellious look, but subsided. "I think we ought to get Harry something to eat, and show him my flat. I want him fed and rested by the time Dumbledore hears."

"Got to get him some clothes, too," Sirius rumbled.

"Let's take care of that once he's settled. Come on, Harry, you can take the book..." Remus picked up his backpack for a second time, and stared as one of the shoulder straps snapped.

"I tell you what," he said quietly, to Sirius, "We'll get the boy settled, then we'll go back and massacre the Dursleys. Agreed?"

"I wanted to do it the first time round," Sirius said, with a grin.

It wasn't a long walk to Remus' flat, from the bookstore; they arrived about the same time a tall, red-headed man did, from the opposite direction.

"I floo'ed Arthur, too," Sirius said sheepishly, when Remus glared. "I thought he'd know what to do."

"Hallo lads!" Arthur Weasley called, hurrying up while Remus unlocked the door. "Oh, blimey, are you in trouble!" he said cheerfully. "Kidnapping and spellbreaking -- "

"We were hoping you'd come down on our side," Sirius interrupted.

"And is this Harry? Tiny bit of a lad, aren't you?" Arthur said, crouching and clapping Harry on the shoulder. Harry, behind his frog, grinned. "Just about the age my Ron is, I'd wager. Eight, eight and a half?"

"And a half," Harry said shyly.

"Harry, this is Mr. Weasley, he's a friend of ours," Remus said, as they trooped inside. Three grown men and an eight-and-a-half-year-old filled the small living room entirely, and Remus ducked into the kitchen. "Just be a mo, get us some tea -- do you like scones, Harry?"

"Yes, thank you," Harry said, as Sirius helped him up onto the battered, much-gnawed couch. Arthur dropped into a creaking chair, and Sirius leaned against the mantel.

"Now, I want the whole story, before the Aurors and the Ministry get hold of it," Arthur said, leaning forward. "You said something about abusing the lad, Sirius?"

"His cousin bullied him, continually," Sirius replied. "You should see the size of him."

"He eats all the breakfast I make," Harry scowled.

"You make breakfast?" Arthur asked.

"Aunt Petunia makes me."

"And he sleeps," Sirius said, slowly, "In a cupboard. That they lock him up in when they think he needs to be punished."

Arthur raised his eyebrows.

"Dudley has two bedrooms," Harry whispered.

"What sorts of things do they lock you up for, Harry?"

"My hair," Harry said, ruffling it. "It sticks up too much. And once I..." he glanced at Sirius, who gave him an encouraging look. "Once I said I was talking to an animal. Only really it was talking to me," he said mournfully.

Arthur rested a chin in one hand.

"I think I could make a case for child endangerment if I worked with the Muggles on it, but I'd rather we not bring them into this. Will the Dursleys complain?"

"I'll kill them," Sirius said calmly, "If they do."

"Now, now," Arthur remonstrated. Remus entered, carrying a kettle and three cups, against the laws of physics, in one hand, and a plate of scones on the other.

"They're not terribly fresh -- I was leaving, I hadn't done shopping..." he said apologetically. Harry eyed the scones covetously, looking surprised when Remus gave an entire one of them to him. He ate neatly, spilling no crumbs, and sipping his tea as silently as possible, while the other men held a conference of looks and significant throat-clearings. Finally, Remus gathered the remains of the

tea things, and asked if Harry wouldn't like to help him wash up. Harry obediently hopped off of the couch, and followed him into the kitchen, leaving his frog behind.

"Boy are you bollocksed," Arthur said frankly, when Harry had gone. "You do know the reason he was with the Dursleys was a protection spell?"

Sirius stared at him. "Of course I did. I didn't think you knew too."

"Which means now he's no longer protected."

"He's got me. He's got Remus. Aren't two better wizards in the world. We'll figure something out."

"There are a lot of old Death Eaters who'd like nothing better than to get their hands on him, you know that," Arthur said soberly.

"Nobody knows he's here. I'll sell my house and get a place somewhere -- maybe in Hogsmeade --"

"You know you won't be allowed to have the boy around other wizards."

"I don't see why not."

"He's famous, Sirius. He'll never have a moment of peace."

Sirius rubbed a hand across his face. "Well, I've lived around Muggles this long, a couple more years won't matter. Then he'll be at Hogwarts. He'll be safe there."

"If he's shown magical ability," Arthur replied.

"He's James' son! How could he not?"

There was a crash from the other room.

"All right, Remus?" Sirius asked.

"All right," Remus called in reply. "Just a broken cup."

"Well, you know poor Neville Longbottom still hasn't shown any magical ability at all," Arthur said. "There's rumours going about that he might be a squib."

"Sirius! Arthur! Come and see this!" Remus' voice drifted up from the kitchen. The other two crowded into the doorway.

Harry was sitting on the counter, absorbed in a pile of white stoneware chips. Carefully, he plucked one out of the dustpan, and stuck it to the jagged remains of what appeared to be a recently-dropped mug. The crack sealed itself over, and Harry grinned proudly.

"I think that answers your question," Sirius said quietly.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 4

Remus, declaring that Harry had been through more than any child ought to in one day, made Sirius talk him into taking a nap; the tall, dark-haired man left the boy curled in a nest of sheets and blankets in Remus' bed, and came back out to the kitchen, where Arthur and Remus were in solemn conversation.

"So now we wait for Dumbledore's wrath?" he asked lightly. Remus swallowed compulsively, a sure sign that his nerves were on edge.

"Dumbledore's reply, at any rate," Arthur answered. "How are the wards on this place, Lupin?"

Remus shrugged. "Pretty good. I'll be putting some more on, before nightfall. The ones on now are rather...specialised."

"Brilliant at Dark Arts, Remus is," Sirius put in. "Defence, I mean," he added hastily.

"Got to be," Remus muttered. "You spend half your time in zombie villages in Africa and the like..."

Arthur's brow furrowed. "Are you still running about?"

"Peter's still loose."

The red-headed man scowled. "You're the only one who thinks so."

"Listen, all I know is they didn't find a body -- "

" -- fingers! -- "

"And if there's no body I'm not satisfied," Remus continued. "Fingers aren't a body."

Arthur shook his head. "I never could fathom how Malfoy got there before you did."

"I have my theories," Sirius said darkly.

"I for one am glad he did," Remus continued. "Otherwise it'd've been Sirius."

"I could have handled him!"

"Well, that's a moot point."

"What on earth happened that day?" Arthur asked. "I've been meaning to ask you. Dumbledore never gives a straight answer, and you know what the *Prophet* reporting is like..."

Remus crossed the kitchen, opening one of the cupboards deliberately, and withdrew a bottle of firewhiskey. He uncapped it, and poured a decent amount into Sirius' cup, and then, after a nod, into Arthur's.

"Sirius was going to be their Secret-Keeper," he said. "But he knew the Dark Lord would look for him first. He thought it ought to be someone that wouldn't be suspected. At the time they thought I was a spy," he drawled, with the amused perspective of one who has had seven years in which to consider matters. "Peter went to the Dark Lord that night, and told him where to find them."

"I can tell it," Sirius said, sipping his tea. "By the time I got there it was over. Hagrid was there, with...with Harry," he said, clenching the mug. "I was going to go find Peter and rip his bloody arms off -- "

"I wasn't even supposed to be in the country, I had a job I was supposed to be taking in Rome," Remus put in. "They were sending me money for travel, but the owl got lost...when I heard, I left for Godric's Hollow."

"Made me send Hagrid off on the bike with Harry," Sirius grumbled. "We started looking, but we took a wrong turning -- "

" -- my fault -- " Remus muttered.

"And Lucius Malfoy got there first," Sirius finished. "They say there was a struggle, a duel. Twenty Muggles dead."

"The papers said eight," Arthur said, astonished.

"The papers lied," Sirius answered. "They got Lucius, and they found a couple of Peter's fingers."

"Which is not proof he died," Remus interjected.

"And the Aurors had Malfoy. Moody says it took three of them to disarm him," Sirius added. "They had him locked up and a Dementor got in..."

"...and he's now a raving maniac," Remus said, only a small note of triumph in his voice. "And serve him right."

Arthur was drinking his tea, listening carefully to the shared narrative.

"Sirius bought the house on Privet Drive, and the bookshop, and after realising that he hated selling things and I was about to be thrown out into the street to starve..." Remus grinned. "He hired me. And then we kidnapped Harry Potter and Dumbledore beat us to death with Harry's stuffed frog."

"He failed Divination," Sirius said, gesturing to Remus with his mug.

"I didn't fail. I refused on principle to take the test," Remus answered.

"And what are you going to do with the boy now?" Arthur asked. "Send him off to school as if nothing happened? You can't watch him every second of every day."

"I'm distant blood-kin to him, the protection spell should at least keep him safe out in the world. The rest of the time Padfoot can watch him."

Arthur grinned. "Where is the big oaf? I thought for sure he'd want to be underfoot during all the excitement."

"Hiding under the bed, I imagine," Remus answered smoothly. "We can keep Harry safe until he goes to Hogwarts. Then it's up to Dumbledore."

"I don't think he ought to go back to that school," Sirius said suddenly. "Not with Dudley Dursley around."

"There are bullies at any school," Remus reminded him.

"Not like Dursley there aren't. And anyway, I don't see why he has to go to school at all, they're not teaching him anything useful."

"No, only reading, writing, maths, and basic science," Remus said, a twinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"I think I'll leave you two to your fistfight," Arthur said. "I've got to get back. Owl me, I'd like to know what happens next," he added, and Disapparated with a crack.

Silence fell over the kitchen.

"Do you see me looking longingly at the remains of that firewhiskey?" Sirius asked.

"That's all I need, Harry Potter napping in my bed, Dumbledore on my front step, and Sirius Black drunk in my kitchen," Remus snapped.

"Didn't say I was going to DO anything about it," Sirius muttered.

When Harry woke, it was to the sound of faint doggy snores, and the heavy weight of Padfoot's head on his legs. The lights were out, and dim illumination from the streetlamp outside the window turned a stripe of Padfoot's black fur to silver.

Harry slid silently out of bed, and walked down the narrow corridor. Light shone out of one room, and he peered inside, carefully.

Moony was sitting at a desk, writing something with what looked like a feather -- a quill, Harry thought, recognizing it from paintings in history books. He took a pinch of something from a jar and sprinkled it over the paper, then poured a few drops of some cloudy green liquid into his palm,

and scattered that over the powder. There was a brief flash of light, and Moony looked pleased, folding the paper and tucking it into a crack in the wall.

Harry, not eager to be caught watching Moony do magic, hurried out into the kitchen. He found a glass in one of the low cupboards, and was contemplating how to reach the sink when a pair of hands lifted him, under the arms, and propped him against the counter.

"Thirsty?" Moony asked, with a smile. Harry turned the spigot and filled the glass, and Moony set him down.

"A little," Harry answered, sipping. "Where'd Sirius go?"

"Home, for now. He'll be back in the morning. You're safe here with Pads and me. Now back to bed with you, Harry."

"Where are you sleeping?" Harry asked.

"I don't think I'd sleep much tonight, even if I had a place," Moony said. "But if I'm tired I'll sleep on the couch."

"Are you in trouble cos of me?" Harry asked.

"Sort of. I spent a lot of this afternoon being yelled at, while you were asleep. There's a man named Albus Dumbledore -- you'll meet him when you start school at Hogwarts -- and he wasn't very happy that we took you from the Dursleys."

"I hate the Dursleys," Harry said vehemently.

"Fortunately, you're not going back."

"I'm not?"

"No. You're going to live here, with me. Or possibly we'll move somewhere safe. We don't know yet."

Harry looked up at him. Moony's hair was brown, but already going grey; his face was lined and worried, but his eyes were bright and warm. He wasn't used to seeing affection in anyone's face, and the sensation was unfamiliar to him.

"What if they take me back?"

"Nobody's taking you out of this flat, unless it's over my dead body, and I am a tenacious bugger," Remus said. Harry laughed. "And once they got past me they'd have to get past Padfoot," he added, following Harry into the bedroom. He took the glass from the boy, and set it on the beside table, clearing away several large books. "Go back to sleep," he said.

Harry curled up, his back pressed to the bony, fuzzy back of Padfoot, and closed his eyes. Remus

waited for a minute, looking down at the child -- he was smaller than Padfoot, still.

Remus could remember the day he was born; could still see James holding his son in his arms, absolutely incapable of saying a word. The first child of the four friends; back then none of them ever thought Sirius would marry, and Remus kept his affairs private, and Peter was...well, Peter...so it wasn't surprising that all four of them looked on the child as their own.

He could remember holding Harry in one hand, and wondering how on earth James Potter, of all people, could be a father.

He could remember standing in Godric's Hollow amid the wreckage of what had been the Potters' home, and wondering how on earth James could be dead.

Padfoot lifted his head and regarded Remus, over one shoulder, with solemn dark doggy eyes. Remus closed his eyes and shook his head. He turned and walked out of the bedroom, and down the hall to his small office. If they stayed, it could be Harry's room. If Sirius stayed too, he'd have to get a smaller bed and share his bedroom with Sirius, unless Sirius wanted to spend every night as a dog.

He'd no idea what he'd do when the full moon came again. Fortunately it wasn't due for nearly three weeks, so he had time.

He paused in the office. He could do no more wardings tonight. He'd put every possible protection on the place, at least every protection he could do alone. In the morning perhaps he'd make Sirius help him do a few more.

He turned out the lights and locked the office, continuing into the kitchen. The firewhiskey was still out, and he filled a mug with it halfway, adding cold tea and stirring with his wand to heat it.

Dumbledore had arrived that afternoon, furious and terrifying. He'd actually shouted, and Remus had never in his life heard Dumbledore shout.

Sirius had shouted back.

Remus had sat quietly until Dumbledore's wrath had turned on him, at which point he'd calmly repeated what Harry had told them about how he lived. He'd pointed out, heart thudding in his ribcage, that the spell was already broken, and that he himself was blood kin to Harry, however distant it might be. He'd listened to everything Dumbledore had said and then he had simply said no. No, we are keeping Harry. No, we will not give him back. No, he will stay with us. No, you don't get to tell us what to do.

He understood why Sirius was Harry's godfather -- James and Sirius had always been the closest of the four -- but sometimes he wondered if Sirius understood what was expected of him. He knew his friend would die, without hesitation, to protect the lad. He knew Sirius would kill without hesitation too. But he wondered if Sirius would or even could do the small things that Harry needed much more: feed and clothe the boy, consider his education, teach him some kind of

morals, show him how a man ought to live. Reassure him when he was frightened. Listen, even in the middle of the night, for the soft footfalls of a child who was thirsty, or sick, or upset.

He had no doubt that Dumbledore would send them instructions on what they would be allowed to do. They had already been expressly forbidden to take him to Diagon Alley, or Hogsmeade, or anywhere they were likely to run into wizards.

Tomorrow they would buy Harry new clothes, and some proper toys. In the afternoon they would sit at the kitchen table and decide what they were going to do, whether they would stay in the small flat near Sandust Books, or sell the bookshop and move somewhere remote, somewhere they were unlikely to be found. Whether Harry would be sent to a boarding school, perhaps, though Remus cringed at the idea of finally having freed Harry from the Dursleys, only to send him off again.

So many questions.

This must be, he thought with a bitter smile, how James felt, eight and a half years ago.

Harry was ecstatic. Shy, it was true, but deliriously happy. Sirius wasn't sure how one small body could hold so much pent-up excitement.

Remus had stopped only briefly at Sandust Books to hang a sign in the window, announcing the store was closed for the day. Several of the locals, including Clara, who owned Woman's Intuition, and one of the many brothers who worked at the bakery, had met Harry and made much of him as Sirius' godson. They'd gone to the shoe store and bought Harry new trainers; the department store yielded clothing, including a scarlet-and-gold rugby shirt that Sirius insisted on buying though it was a size too big, and which Harry rapturously refused to take off.

Remus found a baseball cap with a frog on it, and talked Sirius out of buying a child-sized safety helmet so that he'd have an excuse to take Harry on the motorbike. Harry was allowed to pick out a brand new book bag, one with thousands of pockets, and Sirius quietly slipped nearly ten pounds' worth of sweets into it, purchased while Harry and Remus were next door in the toy shop.

Sirius fully expected Harry to want one of everything, but the boy was grave and choosy as he picked out a robot that lit up, a new pencil-case shaped like a dragon, and a see-through globe of the world.

"Isn't there anything else you want?" Sirius asked, as he paid for the toys in strange multicoloured Muggle money. Outside, Remus was being accosted by a few of the bookshop's regulars, who probably wanted to know why they were closed.

"No," Harry said, easily. "I needed a new pencil case," he added, holding it up so that the dragon's face was pointing at his own, and growling at it.

"But there's thousands of toys here."

"Yeah, but I don't need 'em," Harry answered. "I like the robot though. It'll light up at night and then it won't be so dark."

"But you know you don't have to have a *reason* to want a toy," Sirius said desperately. Harry looked up at him, curious.

"I like globes," he said, finally, as if that settled things. Sirius tucked the box with the globe in it under one arm, sighed, and led Harry from the store. Obviously he'd got Lily's pragmatic genes.

They bought ice cream and sat down amid thousands of shopping bags, as Harry was tired and Sirius never passed up an excuse to eat ice cream. Remus has been silent ever since they'd bought Harry's book bag, and while Sirius was used to a certain amount of thoughtful contemplation on Moony's part, this was a bit much.

Harry wouldn't shut up.

"And then I'm going to put all my pencils in my dragon, and try on all my socks, and -- look," he said, pointing to the globe he'd removed from its box. "That's where we are. And there's a boy at school who's from..." he spun it carefully, and jabbed at China, "There, and he brings all sorts of funny food for lunch, it's brilliant. And that's America, and that's Australia, they're upside-down there, you know..."

"All right, Moony?" Sirius asked quietly, when Harry stopped to take a bite of his ice cream. Remus glanced up at him.

"Can't think and talk at the same time," he said, with a small grin. "And I'm thinking really, really hard."

"About Harry?"

"Among other things."

Sirius nodded. "You're thinking about school."

"Eight hours a day we can't protect him, you're bloody right I'm thinking about school," Remus answered.

"What're you talking about?" Harry asked curiously, standing on his chair to lean further over the table. Sirius reached over and lifted him up, setting him back down in the chair firmly.

"School," Remus answered. "And what we're going to do with you."

"I like school. Sort of."

"Harry, how'd you like to go to a different school?" Sirius asked, picking up the globe and re-

packing it. Harry fiddled with the sleeves on his rugby shirt. Remus glanced sideways at him.

"What sort?" Harry asked finally.

"Well, what if you could go to a really small school? With only a few other kids?"

"Sirius, what are you on about?" Remus asked.

"Molly Weasley teaches her kids at home," Sirius replied. "I know she sometimes has a few other kids, too, takes in a little extra money that way. Bet you anything she'd let Harry in."

"We're not supposed to expose him to other magical -- "

"Oh, come on, it's just the Weasleys, it's only school. He can play with Ron, they'll get on well together."

"It'll all end in grass stains," Remus sighed.

"I'd like that," Harry said decidedly. "Can I take my new book bag?"

"I'll speak to Molly about it," Sirius said. Remus gave him a peculiar look. "What?"

"Nothing...that's good. Good," Remus said, and bent to finish his sherbert. Sirius smiled as he watched the child play.

"He's where he belongs now," he said, very softly, to Remus.

"Now we've got to make sure he stays alive long enough to enjoy it," Remus replied.

So like Moony. Always the worrier.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 5

Remus didn't have a floo hookup in his flat; there was one in Sandust, in the back, and it was dangerous for him to have one at home -- occasionally he was required to lock himself in the flat for the full moon, and he never knew what might happen. So Sirius ended up at Sandust again, engaged in a negotiation-by-floo with Molly Weasley, who was understandably nervous about having Harry Potter in her informal little school. Still, Sirius was willing to pay -- Sirius had plenty of money to pay, especially after his mother's death -- and Molly had a soft heart for a little boy who'd spent his whole life among Muggles.

Remus, meanwhile, was clearing out his office, moving the books into the living room, floating the desk awkwardly through the door, showing Harry where his own bed would be, and the dresser and bookshelf, and a desk if Harry wanted it, until Harry was entirely overwhelmed.

Crowded into the tiny dining room of Remus' flat, the three of them ate dinner, Harry quiet and exhausted, Sirius thoughtful, Remus worried.

"Where's Padfoot gone?" Harry asked finally. Sirius sighed quietly.

"I think we ought to tell him," he said, to Remus, who nodded.

"Tell me what?" Harry's voice was curious.

"Harry...you thought Padfoot was a magic dog," Remus said. "And we didn't want to show you too much magic at once, it's hard to get used to..."

"I knew it! Padfoot can talk!"

"Not exactly," Sirius said. "Harry...you have to keep it a secret."

Harry nodded. Sirius wiped his mouth, stood up, and looked to Remus, who nodded.

"Don't be scared," he said.

Remus, who had seen the Change before, watched Harry's face as Sirius' body twisted, warping slowly into the shape of the big black dog who'd caught Harry from falling the first day.

Padfoot hung his head, and looked up at Harry warily. Harry glanced at Remus.

"Sirius is Padfoot," Remus said, feeling that this was unnecessary, but doing it anyway. "And Padfoot is Sirius."

Harry looked at the dog again. Carefully, he picked up a sausage from his plate, and held it out. Padfoot took it, delicately, and swallowed it. Harry patted his head.

"My godfather's a dog," he said.

"Well, only once in a while."

"Was he a dog and you changed him into a human?" Harry asked.

"No."

"Is he a werewolf?"

Remus felt something tighten in his chest. "No," he managed. "He's an Animagus. He's a wizard who can turn into an animal."

"Oooh," Harry said. He patted Padfoot on the head. "You can go back now," he announced. A second later, Sirius was standing there, hands at his sides, looking expectant.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Harry," he said. Harry looked up at him.

"Good dog," he said. Sirius smiled warily. "I knew you were magic."

He hopped off his chair and went to the sink. "Pick me up?" he asked. Sirius lifted him and let him fill his glass again. "We need a stool," Harry mused.

"Harry, your godfather's a dog," Remus pointed out. Harry climbed back into his chair.

"I knew Padfoot was magic," he repeated, calmly. "Do you change into an animal?" he asked Remus, who choked on a piece of chicken and had to be thwacked on the back by Sirius.

"Remus isn't an Animagus," Sirius said, while Remus recovered from a close encounter of the poultry kind. "Listen, Harry, I've spoken with Molly Weasley -- she's Arthur's wife -- and she says she'd like to have you come to see her tomorrow."

"Mkay," Harry said, finishing his dinner. "Can I go read?"

Remus waved him off, and Harry ran into the living room. They could hear him flop onto the couch.

"I erm...reckon you'll be around again this evening?" Remus said, when he'd fully recovered. Sirius was pushing food around his plate.

"I'd like to stay. I can take the couch this time."

"I think Harry's happier when Padfoot's the one sharing the bed."

"Your couch is not fit for sleeping on," Sirius said sternly.

"Never stopped me before. Listen...what're you going to do? With the house on Privet Drive?"

"Well, reckon I could sell it...not that I want to move in if you think there's not room -- "

" -- no, it's not that at all -- "

" -- just, you know, there's no point to keeping the house, now that Harry's here," Sirius added.

"I mean, Harry's going to have my office and you and I could -- there's enough room in the bedroom for two beds..."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You sound like you've been thinking about this."

"Well, someone had to, didn't they?" Remus sipped his water. "Long as you don't mind sharing a room again."

"I suffered your snoring for seven years, I can probably get used to it again."

"My snoring!" Remus snorted. "What about your bloody sleepwalking?"

"That was ONCE, and I still say James hexed me."

"You can have a doggie basket," Remus said magnanimously. Sirius made a face. "Listen though...what about your things?"

"I'll sell the furniture, most of the stuff in the house isn't important anyhow."

"And..." Remus looked uncomfortable. "Well."

Sirius waited patiently.

"If Harry's here, you know...you can't be bringing women back here all the time," Remus blurted. "I mean it's bad enough when I show up to drop off a book and there's some unknown girl running about -- "

"It happens THREE TIMES and he never forgets -- "

"Well, imagine what Harry would think."

Sirius leaned back in his chair. "Fine. But in that case, you can't be bringing men home anymore either."

Remus blinked at him.

"I've known you for seventeen years, I'm not blind you know," Sirius said with a grin. "You think Padfoot never noticed those 'rare-book collectors' hanging about?"

Remus was still staring.

"Pity of Merlin, Remus, I don't *care* ," Sirius said finally. "It was just a *joke* ."

"Oh," Remus said finally. "Well, I never do anyway."

"No wonder you're so anxious all the time."

"Not funny, Sirius."

"It is from this chair," Sirius grinned. Remus shook his head, and smiled slightly.

"Pads and Harry can have the bed again tonight. You are going to get Harry his own bed and set up the rest while he's at school and I'm working, tomorrow."

"Sirius Black, Homemaker of the Year," Sirius answered, saluting.

"And for the love of God, if you bring that hideous painting in your living room to my flat, I will burn it," Remus added, as he set their plates in the sink. A brush on the counter leapt up and began to wash them, automatically. They heard a snort of childish laughter from the living room, and Sirius rose.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, with a dignified look, "I have a godson to read to."

"Lunch?"

"Uh huh."

"Books? Quill? Sirius gave you some parchment, didn't he?"

"Uh huh."

"Got all the candy Sirius kept slipping you?"

"You weren't s'posed to see that."

"I see everything, Harry."

"Everything?"

"Well. Almost everything. You're to be polite to Molly, she's your teacher now."

"Kay."

"And no fighting with the others."

"What if they don't like me?"

"Harry, they're like you. They're special. They're wizarding children, same as you. Of course they'll like you."

"But what if they don't?"

"Well...give them some of Sirius' candy."

"Does that work?"

"Worked for Sirius when he was starting school. He gave your dad a fizzing whizzbee and they were friends for life."

"I got humbugs and a chocolate bar and some funny-lookin' jelly beans."

"You're armed and ready. You'll be fine. Go on now."

"Moony?"

"Mmm?"

"Are they gonna laugh?"

"No, Harry."

"Even if I've got Frog in my bag?"

"I guarantee you, Harry, with a stuffed frog, you will be the envy of all the children."

Time passed, it seemed, at once quickly and slowly. They settled into a routine, hard to adjust to at first but, as with most routines, soon so familiar that they couldn't recall it being any other way. Remus and Sirius had their beds on opposite sides of what had been Remus' bedroom, with dressers between them, subtly dividing the living space; Harry had his room off the hallway, and sometimes Padfoot, if Harry was having a particularly anxious day, slept on the foot of Harry's bed. In the morning, Remus took Harry to Sandust, and saw him off, via floo, to The Burrow; in the afternoon Harry returned, by which time Sirius (or Padfoot) was there to watch over him as he studied in the bookshop, or played with the other children.

They never let him go very far, certainly not out of earshot, and Harry chafed, but he had been raised to be obedient and quiet. And besides, there were few places he could go that Padfoot couldn't follow.

He even saw Dudley, once, shopping with his mother in the market, but he hid behind Padfoot, and the big black dog growled so menacingly that several passers-by stopped to make sure Harry was all right.

Their lives had settled so quickly, and so surprisingly seamlessly, that Sirius was almost taken aback when Remus, bent over his meal, remarked quietly that it would be the full moon in two days. Sirius hadn't noticed the gaunt, drawn look that Remus always got a few days beforehand;

Harry didn't know anything was wrong. Normally it was simple -- Remus would ask Sirius to dinner, and Sirius would realise that it was the full moon, and for two days and the full moon night he would stay at the flat, as Padfoot, to keep Remus company. It wasn't perfect -- the wolf often got restless -- but nobody got hurt, and Remus survived with his sanity intact.

"Wossat mean?" Harry asked, around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. He was still fascinated with magic, though he saw enough of it by now. "You gonna do a spell at the full moon?"

Remus looked uncomfortable. "No, not exactly. This is grownups business, Harry."

Harry looked sullen, and stabbed his roast beef viciously.

"Perhaps we ought to talk about it later," Sirius said pointedly, and Remus nodded. "Harry, how're you getting on at The Burrow?"

"Ron showed me how to get rid of gnomes," Harry muttered. "And Ginny pulled on my hair."

"Girls do that sometimes," Sirius agreed. "Having fun?"

Harry shrugged. "Guess so."

Remus sat back a little, kept out of it, as Sirius quizzed him about school, about his studies, about what he was reading from the bookstore. It was Sirius' job to do that; Sirius recommended the books he read, watched over his studies, tucked him in at night.

Remus, meanwhile, was going to have to find somewhere to go for the full moon, lest he turn into a slaving monster and try to eat his best friend's godson.

Somehow he felt this was vaguely unfair of the universe.

After dinner was done, and Harry'd washed and brushed his teeth and been put to bed to read, Sirius leaned in the doorway of the living room. Remus was working at his desk, checking the month's accounts for the bookshop.

"You should have told me sooner," he said quietly. Remus shook his head.

"Didn't think about it myself -- the whole Dursley affair put me off my schedule, having Harry here, all of it."

"We could send Harry to the Weasleys'."

"Not for two nights running -- you know how I get the night before the full moon, I might as well be a wolf anyway," Remus sighed. "I mean to say. What would they think? They're bound to ask questions." He put his head in his hands. "You ought to take Harry away," he said. "We can put wards on any other flat just as well as this one. Get your own place, you and him."

"Is that what you want?"

"Of course not. I want Harry here. Where I can watch him too. But what I want doesn't come into it. He's your godson, and you're not the one going feral every twenty-eight days."

Sirius considered this. "We couldn't ward another flat like this one. Not without your blood connection to James."

Remus let his head slide down onto the table, covering it with his hands. "Well, I've gone over my options. I was hoping you'd have some. I've just got the one."

"Sending Harry off?"

"No. But you've got keys and you know how the shop is run, you can look after Harry. I think I've got to go back to Hogsmeade."

Sirius flopped on the couch, confused. "What's in Hogsmeade?"

Remus lifted his head to look at him. Sirius' eyes widened.

"There is no way in hell you're going back to that pit, Moony," he said, urgently. "Not after all this time."

"It's the only safe way."

"You're not going back there!" Sirius insisted.

"Don't be ridiculous about it."

"I know what your transformations were like, I saw you afterwards," Sirius continued. "I didn't spend two years learning to be an Animagus just so you could go back to the Shrieking Shack and go through it all over again."

"Then come up with another option, Sirius, by all means." Remus spread his hands. "It's not like I want to go back to that. Merlin knows I don't."

Sirius could count the number of full moons that Remus had spent alone, after that first Animagus transformation, on one hand. Once when the tunnel had collapsed while they were still at school, and none of them but Remus could get to the Shack; once, after school was done, when Sirius had been in St. Mungo's with a vicious magical pneumonia; twice when he was traveling, in search of Peter, and couldn't make it back to Sirius and his flat in time. Four times in twelve years -- in over one hundred and fifty full moons.

"You can't, because there isn't," Remus said, calmly. "It's all right. Day after tomorrow I'll see Harry off to school and Apparate to Hogsmeade. I can take Dumbledore a peace offering, he's still furious with us...might even be a Quidditch game I could see."

"And then go lock yourself in a shack and try to rip your own skin off," Sirius growled.

"Better mine than Harry's," Remus replied evenly.

Harry didn't see why he couldn't go with Sirius to fetch Moony from wherever he'd gone. Moony'd been away for two days, and Harry missed him, which was odd, because Moony was quiet and never said much -- not like Sirius. Moony was like a dog himself, Harry decided; you didn't see him a whole lot when he was there, but when he wasn't, you missed his presence.

Instead, he stayed late at Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys' house, until Sirius came to get him. It wasn't so bad; Fred and George taught him how to pick locks, and Ron and he shared an apple, and Ginny spilled paint on him, which was always fun, as he got to watch Mrs. Weasley clean it magically.

When Sirius unlocked the door and swung it open, Harry dropped his book bag and immediately ran into the kitchen to find Moony; when he wasn't there, he pushed past Sirius and ran to the bedroom.

Sirius' hands caught him before he could get all the way to Moony's bed to jump up on it. Harry got only a glimpse of Moony, curled shirtless on the counterpane, but it was enough. There were large scratches along his ribcage, vicious open welts of a sort Harry had never encountered before. Moony was shaking, arms clutched around his body. There were scores on his face, too, and what looked like bitemarks on his hands.

"What's wrong with Moony?" he demanded loudly, as Sirius carried him away from the bedroom. He squirmed in Sirius' grip. "What happened to him? You didn't bite him, did you?"

"Shh, you'll wake him," Sirius answered, setting Harry down in his own bedroom, and closing the door. He crouched. Harry stomped his foot.

"Why's he hurt!" Harry shouted.

"Harry, it's a disease. There's nothing you can do by shouting. I didn't hurt Moony, all right?" Sirius said, his voice almost panicked. "It's okay. He's going to be fine. He'll be fine in the morning, you wait and see."

"He's all bitten and stuff!"

"It looks that way, I know, but I promise you, Harry, in the morning he'll be fine. Trust me, will you, kid?" Sirius pleaded. Harry scowled.

"Is he catching?" he asked, finally. Sirius shook his head.

"He's safe. He just got sick, that's all. Moony...he's going to get sick sometimes. He's not as strong as you and me."

Harry's eyes widened.

"So you just have to understand that sometimes you can't be with Moony, okay?"

Harry sat on his bed, and crossed his legs, looking thoughtful. Sirius stayed in his crouch, waiting for a sign of acceptance.

"Does he want Frog?" Harry asked, picking up the plush frog from a mostly-empty toy chest, and holding it out to Sirius.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only while it's...healing. It'll be fast. Usually doesn't...umm. Take more than a day."

"How much longer?"

"Another two, three hours. I think. Jesus Christ in stilettos..."

"You've been around Muggles too much, picking up their profanity like that."

"Ha bloody ha. Ow."

"Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Kill me."

"I told you it was a mistake."

"Oooh, or tell me what a fool I am, ta ever so, Pads."

"Sorry."

"..."

"What?"

"Harry saw, didn't he?"

"Just a glimpse. I told him it was a magic flu."

"I should have stayed in the Shack until I was healed fully. Shouldn't have let you Apparate me back. Next month. Next month."

"You can't do this, you're not thirteen anymore."

"I can do this. Argh."

"You'll scar."

"Sirius, go away and let me die in peace."

"I only came back to leave something off. Harry sent it."

"I'll bleed on it."

"We'll clean it. Take it."

"How stupid do I look?"

"Really stupid. You feel better?"

"...yes."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 6

In the morning, Harry peered into Remus and Sirius' room, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Sirius was curled up in a ball in his bed, as usual, but Remus was sitting up, a book propped on his lap, piles of photos and papers surrounding him. He looked up, held a finger to his lips, and gestured Harry forward.

"Morning, Harry," he said softly, hoarsely. Harry, clutching Frog -- who'd been returned to him at some point in the night, probably by Sirius -- came forward. Moony lifted him up and placed him in his lap, so that Harry could see what he was doing.

He was pasting photographs into an album, magical photographs. Harry never got tired of looking at the moving pictures.

"This is for you," Remus said, pointing to the piles of pictures. "I thought, I have all these photos and I wanted you to see them, and Sirius brought me a box too."

"Who are they?" Harry asked.

"Well, that's me," Remus indicated a barely-grown boy, who was standing in the photo holding a stack of books, in what looked like a library. "And there's Arthur and Molly Weasley when they were about my age."

Harry could have told him that; the couple were surrounded by redheaded children in matching knit jumpers.

"And this..." Remus flipped back a page. "Is Hogwarts, where your dad and mum, and Sirius and I, all went to school. It's where you're going in a few years."

Harry stared in awe at the castle, with its pennants waving and strange flying specks in the distance. Remus flipped back another page, and Harry gasped. His father and mother -- he recognized them from the one faded and torn photo he had -- waved at him as they held a baby that must be himself, eight years ago.

"That's James and Lily, your mum and dad," Remus said, unnecessarily. "You're about three months old there -- " he chuckled as the Harry in the picture squalled, and James looked stricken. The chuckle turned into a momentary cough, and Harry noticed the fresh pink skin on his hands, where bite-marks had been the night before.

"Are you gonna be okay?" he asked. Remus nodded, rubbing his throat before speaking.

"I'll be fine, Harry. Look, there's your dad -- " he pointed to what looked like a photo of the sky; after a second, Harry saw a broomstick sweep through it, and a young man that looked like himself, in a set of brilliant scarlet-and-gold robes, riding on it. "Brilliant Quidditch player, he

was."

"Fred and George told me 'bout Quidditch," Harry said. "They say it's brilliant. Mrs. Weasley won't let us fly till Ron and I turn nine."

"And right she is," Remus agreed.

"Can we go see a Quidditch game sometime?" Harry asked. Remus stared at the photos a while before answering.

"Perhaps once you start school," he said finally.

"Do people not like me?" Harry asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"I never get to go anywhere. Ron gets to go to Diagon Alley, and Quidditch games, and that," Harry said. Remus touseled his already-tangled hair.

"Harry, there are things I can't explain to you now," Remus replied. "Well...it's not my job. Sirius can tell you..."

There was a grunt from the other bed. "Wossum?" Sirius asked.

"Go back to sleep, you great git," Remus said amiably. There was another grunt, and the blankets shifted slightly.

"We wanted to make sure you were happy here," he continued. Harry turned to look up at him. "There are reasons you can't go to those places, Harry. But it's not my place to explain them. Sirius and I answer to other people about your safety."

Harry turned the pages of the album in Remus' hands. "That's silly."

"Seems like it, doesn't it?"

"Who's that?" Harry asked, pointing to another photo. Remus leaned forward, over his shoulder. A dark-haired boy looked up from a sheet of parchment, brushed hair out of his eyes, and smiled charmingly. Remus smiled.

"That's Sirius," he said, tickling Harry under the ribs. The boy giggled, and jumped off his lap, running to Sirius to leap onto the pile of blankets. Sirius yelped.

"Frog says wake up!" Harry cried. Remus watched as Sirius went through the morning ritual of stifling the urge to strangle Harry.

It was quite sweet, really.

They'd had breakfast, of course, after Sirius stopped being cranky, and Sirius and Moony had talked in low, serious "grownup" voices -- Moony had said it wouldn't scar, and Sirius had said darkly that he didn't like it, and Harry had put in that Sirius said that Moony was going to get sick again. Moony had said that he'd been getting sick for many years and never died yet, but after that, he went silent for the rest of breakfast. That seemed to end that discussion, and the rest of the week passed mainly uneventfully, except for Harry's excited anticipation of a visit from Ron and Ginny on Saturday.

They arrived by floo just as Moony was turning the "open" sign around at Sandust Books. Harry had made a deal that Ron should come visit him at the bookstore -- Ron wanted to see how Muggles did their shopping -- but the grownups had insisted that Ginny should come along too.

"Where d'ya wanna go?" Harry asked, sitting on the front step with Ron, Ginny, and Padfoot. Ginny was petting Padfoot, admittedly stroking his fur the wrong way, but he merely nudged her hand with his nose, making her giggle.

"Got a Joke Shop?" Ron asked. Harry shook his head. "How about a broomstick shop?"

"We've got a Hoover-repair shop," Harry said dubiously. "Or we could go to the pet shop. Ginny, you stay here," he said. "Padfoot, come?"

The great shaggy black dog heaved himself to his feet, and herded Ginny inside. They heard Moony say something quietly, and Ginny answer. Then Padfoot was outside again, and Harry led the procession down the street.

Ron was amused by how everyone knew Harry and Padfoot -- especially that more people could name Padfoot than could name Harry. He was appropriately impressed by the electronics shop, especially the televisions; he was nonplussed by the pet store, which hadn't a patch, he said, on the one in Diagon Alley. He laughed at the photo store where none of the pictures moved, and stared every time an automobile rumbled past.

"Ginny, we brought you an ice cream," Harry said, as they wandered back into Sandust Books.

"That was nice of you, Harry," Moony said. He was reading a newspaper behind the counter; Harry could tell by the moving pictures that it was the Prophet. "See your dad's made the news, Ron, tell him congratulations on catching that rogue Ever Talking Telephone. What's he going to do with it?"

"Dunno," Ron answered, licking a drip off of Ginny's ice cream cone before handing it to her. "Probably take it apart. Dad's always taking Muggle things apart."

"Yes, I remember the Transistor Radio Incident a few years ago," Moony murmured.

"Burns didn't even leave a mark," Ron said proudly. "Dunno how Muggles do it."

"We do all right," Harry said.

Ron, Ginny, Moony, and Padfoot all looked at him. He looked back, curiously.

"You're not a Muggle, Harry," Ron said. "You're a Wizard. Like us."

"Am I?" Harry asked Moony.

"I've told you that, Harry," Moony answered. "Don't you believe me?"

"Well, we don't live like Mr. and Mrs. Weasley do. She cooks by magic," Harry said.

"We're still wizards," Moony answered.

"M'kay," Harry said agreeably, not wishing to press the point. Moony watched him over the edge of his paper as Harry led Ron into the back room.

"S'wonderful, this Muggle stuff," Ron said, poking the electric kettle that Moony made tea with. "Dad ought to come by sometime. You could show him the 'ektricks."

"Electrics," Harry corrected. "Wish I could see your High Street."

"What, Diagon Alley? S'not so great."

"Really?"

"Naw, really it's the best," Ron said, grinning, as he crunched up the last of his ice cream. "Don't see why you can't."

"Me either."

"No, I mean, there's the floo and all. We could nip out and nip back, nobody'd miss us."

Harry looked askance at the fireplace in the back of the room. "I'm not s'posed to go anywhere without Padfoot or Moony," he said.

"Don't see why. Not like Padfoot did much, other than bark at that strange dog," Ron answered. "Fred and George go to Diagon Alley all the time."

"They're big kids."

Ron scoffed. "I'm tall as them already."

Harry considered matters. It was true that nobody would miss him and Ron for five minutes; he could hear Moony helping a customer, and Ginny was sitting on the back step sharing her ice cream with Padfoot.

"You could just see Flourish and Blott's and come right back," Ron said. "I know exactly how it's

done."

"And other wizards," Harry mused.

"Might even see a hag."

"And I could buy a chocolate frog."

Ron waited patiently. Finally, Harry went to the fireplace, and took down the jar with the floo powder in it.

"You first," he said, holding out the jar. Ron grinned and tossed the powder into the fire. He stepped inside.

"Diagon Alley!" he said, and grinned at Harry as he vanished.

Harry threw another pinch into the fire, set the jar down, and stepped inside.

"Diagon All -- Pads!" he said in a panic, as Padfoot pushed the door open.

The world spun, and Harry at least remembered to tuck his elbows in, but he knew something had gone wrong; when he tumbled out onto the hearthstone on the other end, it was into a dim, dingy, and apparently empty shop.

He glanced around, confused, as he pushed himself to his feet. This couldn't be Diagon Alley, could it?

There was a noise, and he whirled; someone was pushing open a door, and it was ringing a rusty, corroded bell on the handle.

A squat, elderly man appeared behind the counter on Harry's left, and waddled up to the front of the store without so much as glancing in Harry's direction.

"Ms. Malfoy, always a pleasure, always a pleasure," he toadied, bowing and rubbing his hands.

The tall woman who'd entered had a mane of white-blond hair, and was dressed in black and green; she carried a small leather sack in one hand, and was followed by...

Harry, half-hidden by a corner of the counter, stared. It was a small...green...thing, with huge bat-ears and bulging eyes, tottering under an enormous armful of packages and sacks. It appeared to be wearing a tea cozy and a pillowcase. Harry had never seen anything like it.

He was aware that the pair were speaking, but all he could do was stare at the green thing. It watched the blonde woman -- Ms. Malfoy? -- with unblinking attention. Harry was only brought back to himself when he heard the click of coins on glass, and saw money exchanging hands. She thanked the shopkeeper, added something to the leather sack, and turned, walking with a snakelike grace as she moved to leave.

There was a man standing on the step, hand outstretched to push on the door. Harry saw a pale, narrow face, long black hair, and slim white fingers.

"Narcissa," the man on the doorstep said, coldly.

"Severus," she replied. "Fancy meeting you here. I didn't think you were allowed in Knockturn Alley."

The pale man drew himself up. "I go where I please," he snapped.

"Still teaching at Hogwarts, Severus?" she asked, a sneer in her voice. "Surprised they pay you enough to do any shopping at all."

Harry watched as the pale man stepped aside, gesturing elegantly to the street. "You were leaving, I believe," he said.

Narcissa Malfoy swept past him, and the man she'd called Severus watched her go. After a minute, he stepped into the dingy shop, and the door closed again.

"I require no assistance," he said curtly, to the shopkeeper. Harry watched as his hands moved confidently over the jars on the table, taking measure of this and that, pouring them neatly into small glass vials produced from his pockets. He didn't realise that the man was moving closer and closer until --

He gasped and stepped back as the edge of the pale man's cloak nearly brushed his arm. The pale man turned, eyebrows raising in surprise.

"What have we here," he said, in a low voice.

"I'm lost," Harry blurted.

"Undoubtedly," the man replied. "Wander off, did you? Do you know what they do to children who are disobedient to their parents, in Knockturn Alley?"

Harry gulped. The man crouched until they were on eye level.

"They *eat* them," he said softly. "Or turn them into mice. Or perhaps they hex them so that they shrink down until..." he spread his fingers, expressively, "...they simply disappear."

Harry wished desperately for Moony, or Padfoot, or even his frog.

"So, little lost mouse, what do we do with you?" mused the man. He tossed a few silvery coins onto the counter, and swept the vials into his pocket. He took Harry by the arm, and pulled him from the shop, walking almost faster than Harry's short legs could carry him.

"Who are your parents?" he asked, as they walked along dirty, crowded streets.

"They're dead," Harry answered.

"Who did you come to Knockturn Alley with?"

"I was trying to get to Diagon Alley -- my friend's there..." Harry said, fighting the urge to cry. The man, frustrated with his slow pace, stopped and lifted him, impatiently.

"Why do I bother," he muttered, as he carried Harry out into a wider, more pleasant street.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, in awe. The man glanced at him, once again looking surprised.

"Diagon Alley. Where else? Haven't you been here before?" he demanded.

"No," Harry said. "I'm not allowed."

"Not allowed...then what are you doing here?"

"I snuck in," Harry said miserably. The man stopped at a bench, outside what looked like a pub, and stood him on it, examining him critically.

"I like you the better for that," he said frankly. "Who looks after you?"

"Moony, mostly," Harry said thoughtfully. "And Sirius."

The man went very still.

"Sirius Black?" he asked. Harry wondered what he'd done wrong. "What's your name, boy?"

"H-harry Potter," Harry replied, nervously. The man's dark eyes bored into him.

"So it's you," he said softly, sneering a little. "I might have known."

Harry was about to ask what he meant by that, but the man swept him up again, carrying him swiftly inside, where he leaned on the bar.

"I need your floo," he said, to the barman, who opened his mouth to ask a question. "I'm not interested in having a conversation about it, I need to use your floo," he repeated.

"HARRY!" someone shouted. Harry saw Sirius pushing his way through the lunch crowd. He arrived breathless, and then he, too, froze.

Harry could feel the tension in the pale man's body.

"Snape," Sirius said, low, and Harry was frightened by how much hate went into the single word. "Give him to me."

"Glad to unload the brat, I'm sure," the pale man replied, setting Harry down. Harry ran to Sirius, who bent to embrace him.

"Harry, I thought you'd disappeared forever," Sirius said, roughly, holding him tight. Harry saw, over his shoulder, Moony arriving behind him. "Don't ever, ever do that to me again."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, but Sirius was still talking, reassuring himself that Harry was all right, that he hadn't been hurt, that nobody'd laid a hand on Harry or so help him god he would kill them --

"Nobody hurt me. The tall man brought me back," Harry said, as Moony reached them breathlessly.

"I found Ron," he gasped. "I sent him back to The Burrow."

"I'll thrash him within an inch of his life," Sirius growled. "Him and anyone else who laid a hand on you."

"The tall man saved me," Harry said, twisting to point...

But the tall man was already gone. Harry saw the front door of the pub swing shut.

"Let's get out of here," Moony continued. "Now."

Sirius nodded, and picked up Harry. "Hold tight to me," he whispered, and Harry clung to his neck as they stepped into the floo. Harry found himself in the back room of Sandust Books again; with a loud noise, Moony appeared next to them. He hurried to the fireplace, and knelt on the hearth, calling Molly's name. Sirius carried Harry out into the shop, and set him down in one of the leather wingchairs.

"You're okay, Harry?" he asked. Harry nodded. "Nobody hurt you?"

"No, I told you," Harry said, slightly petulant. "The tall man found me in the shop and he took me to the pub."

"The tall man. Snape?"

"The lady called him Severus."

"Lady?"

"She had a green thing!" Harry said. "It had big ears and big eyes and it was wearing a tea cozy!"

Sirius blinked.

"Are you sure you're all right, Harry?" he asked.

"And then the lady went away and the tall man found me and he said if I didn't go with him someone would turn me into a mouse," Harry continued breathlessly. "And he asked me who I was and then he got angry and he took me inside and then you and Moony found me," he finished.

Sirius rubbed the back of his head, thoughtfully.

"Severus found you. Where?"

Harry screwed up his face. "Knocker Alley," he said.

"Knockturn Alley?"

"Maybe."

"Severus Snape found you in *Knockturn Alley*? " Sirius demanded.

"I didn't mean to go there!" Harry said, bursting into tears. Sirius stared at him for a second, in confusion, before pulling the boy forward into his arms. Harry, feeling foolish, sniffled against the shoulder of Sirius' shirt, listening to the low, calm reassurances that it was all right, he wasn't mad at Harry, Harry was just tired, he understood.

"I just wanted to see what Diagon Alley was like," Harry mumbled, after a while. Sirius sat back, brushing tears from Harry's cheeks with his thumb. "Ron said it was the best thing ever and I wanted to see it."

Moony emerged from the back room, then, looking suddenly tired, his face an unappealing shade of grey.

"I've spoken with Molly," he said, dropping into another wingchair nearby. "She says Ron and Ginny are home and safe, though from the sound of it Ron's only safe from the world at large, and not from the considerable wrath of his mother."

"It's not his fault," Harry protested. Moony leaned his head back, closing his eyes.

"No," he said quietly. "It's mine."

"Ours," Sirius corrected. Remus shook his head.

"My idea, Sirius, my responsibility, you were busy minding Ginny," he said. "I haven't the energy to argue right now, however, so if I might be allowed to simply have my heart attack in peace..."

Sirius smiled, and Harry risked a damp smile himself. "You all right, Moony?" Sirius asked.

"I'm fine. How's Harry?"

"I'm fine too," Harry piped up. "I *told* him."

"Guess who brought Harry back to the Leaky Cauldron?" Sirius asked, the smile fading from his face. "Severus bloody Snape."

Remus' eyes opened. "Severus? How on earth...?"

"Harry ended in Knockturn Alley. He says Snape found him and brought him back."

"Lurking about Knockturn Alley, is he? Remind me to be shocked," Remus murmured. "What'd he say to you, Harry?"

Harry glanced from one man to the other. "He asked who I was and who looked after me and that. And said that boys in Knockturn Alley get turned into mice."

"Round the twist," Sirius announced. "Absolutely starkers round the twist, that one."

"He found Harry," Remus answered. "And brought him back to us."

"Probably wanted to sell him to the highest bidder," Sirius grumbled.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 7

The day after Harry's misadventure in Diagon Alley was Sunday, and it was not surprising to Remus that Severus Snape appeared in his bookshop, shortly after it opened at noon. He'd been expecting it, in a way, and had asked Sirius and Harry to buy groceries. This was guaranteed to keep them out for hours, considering Sirius' attention span. He'd never gotten used to Muggle grocery stores, and was forever discovering strange new delicacies like 'Honey Nut Cheerios' and 'Marmite'.

Of course Severus Snape would come to the shop. He was not the sort to heroically and moreover anonymously save the day; he would vanish at the time, so no thanks could be forthcoming -- though Remus had owled him the night before, thanking him profusely -- and then reappear to rub their noses in (in no particular order) their lack of parenting skills, their lack of finding-Harry skills, his own heroic and unassuming rescue of the boy, and the indignities he suffered for the greater good. All of this was expected. Especially since one of the two men caring for the boy was Sirius Black.

What was unexpected was the sealed letter from Dumbledore which accompanied him.

"Severus," Remus said, looking up from his reading as the man walked into the shop. At least he'd had the decency to use the front door, and not floo in, like some of Remus' less astute wizarding customers did. "I thought you might be by."

"Lupin," the other man growled.

"Harry and Sirius are out, I'm afraid, but let me thank you again on their behalf -- "

"No need. I saw the boy and I knew he was lost," Snape said with a shrug.

"Still, it was good of you to bring him back to us. Sirius was out of his mind with worry."

"And you?"

"Well. I tend to be more sane than Sirius even on a bad day," Remus answered, with a small smile. "Is there something I can help you with? Do sit down. Humbug?"

Severus stared at the proffered jar. Remus set it on the counter again.

"I spoke with Dumbledore about yesterday's...incident," Snape said.

Tell-tale, muttered the voice in Remus' head that thought all the things he never let himself say. It usually sounded like Sirius.

"He has...concerns about the situation," Snape continued, handing Remus the sealed letter. "He suspects that you and Black may require some assistance."

Remus opened the letter, glancing at Snape as he did so. He read it quickly; frowned; read it again.

"You?" he asked. Snape nodded. "But you hate children!" Remus blurted.

That was probably a Sirius thought.

"I hate idiots, and most children are idiots," Snape replied. "The boy seems to have a spark of intellect. Dumbledore thinks I may be able to temper his natural...exuberance."

Remus set the letter down. "So. Because everyone knows that Sirius Black and Remus Lupin are caring for Harry Potter, we can't take him to Diagon Alley or -- or Hogsmeade or anywhere. And because everyone knows you hate James Potter, nobody will notice if you do."

"Dumbledore suggested a slight glamour on the boy -- perhaps a change of hair colour, and something to hide the scar, of course," Snape replied.

Remus was silent for a long time.

"No more than once a week, if that," he said firmly.

"I am no more eager for this than you are," Snape replied.

"You're not to go poisoning his mind with stories about -- "

"The less I speak to the boy, I feel, the better."

Another long pause.

"He wants to see a Quidditch game," Remus said quietly. "We'll pay for the tickets, of course."

Snape regarded him evenly. "Your face is scratched."

"Yes."

"It was a full moon, recently."

"Do you have a point, Severus?" Remus asked, slightly impatiently. The dark-haired man shook his head.

"Merely making an observation," he said, standing and tossing his hair out of his eyes. "I will owl you to arrange a time to collect the boy next week-end."

His hand was on the door before Remus said his next words. "You won't talk to him about James," he said. It was not a question. It was the closest thing to an order he'd ever given.

"Oh?"

"You will not talk to Harry about his father, Severus. There's no need for that. If you persist in

holding a grudge from before the child was born, you take it out on Sirius, or on me. You don't get to use Harry as a pawn."

"I'm surprised you'd think of such a thing," Snape said nastily. He pushed open the door, and was gone.

The shouting match that afternoon was truly epic in nature. Sirius, Remus had long ago learned, was not one to store up rage for when it was useful. Quick to hurt, quick to yell, quick to heal, that was Sirius. Remus had finally ascertained, after two years' experimentation, that if he didn't mind a few hours of noise, he could simply keep quiet and Sirius would eventually go hoarse. If he wanted it over quickly, all he had to do was yell back. This generally shocked Sirius into silence.

Even Remus Lupin yelling didn't shut him up this time, however.

Remus waited until they were home, to tell Sirius -- Sandust was only open a few hours on Sundays -- and he took the thoughtful precaution of casting a silencing spell outside their bedroom, so that Harry, happily drawing crayon pictures in the living room, could not hear the shouts.

In the end, of course, Sirius caved. He normally did. He didn't like it, and he sulked through dinner, but by the time Harry was ready for bed, he was at least not growling under his breath anymore about greasy-haired gits, Snivellus, and what he'd like to do to a certain Hogwarts Potions Master.

Besides, by Tuesday he had something entirely different to worry about.

"Sirius, I think you ought to find a wife."

Remus was so startled by the phrase, coming from Molly Weasley, that he didn't even realise what she'd said.

"A wife?" Sirius asked, and bits of Remus' brain promptly fused together. "What on earth are you on about?"

Molly had asked them to dinner as a gesture of goodwill -- she still felt bad about Ron tempting Harry into going to Diagon Alley, and none of them were sure Ron's grounding would ever end. Neither man was loathe to spend an evening eating her excellent cooking, and Harry was excited to be allowed to watch the twins demonstrate Quidditch tactics in the early spring evening.

"It's not right, Harry growing up with only men about," Molly continued. "A boy needs a mum."

"Well, he spends all day with you, doesn't he?" Remus managed.

"It's not the same," Molly said, passing Arthur the rolls. "Besides, you need looking-after. You're both far too thin," she added, elbowing Remus in the ribs. He glared darkly at her. "And if you

found a nice girl who was related to James, Remus could have his flat to himself again."

"I like having them there," Remus said sharply.

"Of course you do, but I imagine it's awkward, isn't it?" Molly answered cheerfully.

"Don't know any girls I'd fancy marrying," Sirius said, chewing thoughtfully. "Not really the marrying sort, me."

"Nonsense. You find someone who likes Harry and tolerates Remus, and that's that. Not that I think you oughtn't to marry for love, but if you're not in love with anyone, you might as well provide the poor boy with a mother."

"This *is* your wife, isn't it?" Sirius asked Arthur, who grinned.

"She's just looking out for the lad, aren't you?" he asked, and Molly smiled.

"Harry's got Sirius and me. That's more than enough. Especially so soon after the Dursleys. More change'd only upset him," Remus muttered.

"I tell you what, I happen to know a lovely young woman named Moira Sparrow, I'm sure you'd get on very well -- and her sister Allison might do for Remus, you know," Molly winked at him, and Remus gave up on being outraged, settling for numb, temporary hatred of Molly Weasley instead.

She went on to arrange the whole mess with Sirius, only giving up on Remus when he flat-out refused to consider the matter in a logical light, and instead went out back to make sure Harry hadn't accidentally died of excitement at being allowed to throw fake Bludgers at the twins.

He sat on the railing of the Weasleys' back porch, and watched Harry delightedly play at throwing Bludgers, while Ginny cheered him on. It was sunset, the light turning Harry's eyes a vivid green, just like his mother's, and making the shadows of the house fall slantwise away from them.

Of course he didn't actually hate Molly, he was quite fond of her in fact, but the last thing he needed was her trying to set either of them up.

Then again...

He sighed, and followed the arc of the Bludgers with his eyes. It wasn't that it was difficult, sharing a bedroom with Sirius Black. It was pleasant. It reminded him of school. It was best for all concerned. But there was one little corner of him that tugged away at his complacent life and said, *there should still be only one bed in your bedroom.*

He liked Sirius. He drew his salary from Sirius, though that had never really come between them, as he wrote his own salary cheques and Sirius never paid much attention to bookkeeping at any rate. He shared Sirius' anguish over losing James, losing Lily, losing Harry.

He loved Sirius. And had, for some long time now. Nearly a decade -- it would be a decade, on the anniversary of James and Lily's engagement.

It didn't hurt, loving Sirius. Sirius spent nearly every waking moment with him. It hadn't, until now, bothered him very much. There was the odd moment when he skritch'd behind Padfoot's ears and wished it were Sirius' hair he was touching. There were times when they'd gone out drinking when he'd been perilously close to pinning the man to a wall because he was so desperate for touch, and there were a lot of rather disappointed people in Remus' past who'd had to compete with, and fail against, Sirius Black. But it didn't hurt.

It was just...difficult. Seeing the man. Every morning, every night, eating every meal with him, sharing a bedroom with him.

A Bludger went stray and he reached out to catch it, tossing it back to Harry with a smile.

If Sirius married it would take him away. And Harry would go with him. And they would be a family, and Remus would be...a good friend, invited over for Sunday dinner, probably Harry's Uncle Moony or something similarly disgusting.

Well, what happened, happened. He wouldn't worry about it until he saw this Moira creature for himself.

Most of him wouldn't worry about it, anyway.

There was Owl Post waiting for them when they arrived home; a letter from Snape, saying baldly that there were no Quidditch games on Sunday, but Slytherin House had kindly agreed to allow Harry to watch practice. Remus wrote back, before Sirius could see the letter; at least that way it was a *fait accompli*.

He was glad the boy was going to see Hogwarts. He often found Harry gazing at the pictures of it, in the album he'd given him. And Hogwarts was safe. If someone didn't take Harry to see the places he'd heard about, sooner or later he'd run off again. It shouldn't be Severus Snape looking after him, that much was obvious, but Remus knew Snape, trusted him as far as their old Order connections went, and knew that he was a responsible if unpleasant teacher. He might not be kind, but he wouldn't be cruel, not to a child so young.

Sirius, when Remus told him, merely grunted.

"You're plotting something, Black," Remus said, as he changed into his pyjamas.

"When am I not plotting something?" Sirius answered, from the bathroom, a toothbrush in his mouth.

"You can't kill Snape, you know, it reflects badly on your character."

"I don't want to kill him. Maim him, perhaps," Sirius said, over running water.

"At least Harry'll be safe. Would you rather he try it on his own?"

Sirius was silent, and Remus listened intently for any sound.

"Why would Dumbledore let him do this?" Sirius asked finally.

"Perhaps he thinks you need to learn to get along with the man. I manage it, you know."

"You do not."

"Well, at least we can speak civilly to one another. And I tried to kill him, so -- "

"That wasn't you."

Remus sighed. "Are we going to spend the rest of our lives arguing about it?"

Sirius emerged from the bathroom, and lay on his bed, back to his friend.

"We were stupid kids, Sirius. You managed to grow out of it, lord alone knows how, so I think you might at least give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Why are you defending him?" Sirius demanded. Remus gave a shrug that his friend couldn't see.

"Because there's nothing we can do about it, so we might as well smile," he replied. He heard Sirius breathing, slow and even.

"I wish I could be like that," Sirius said finally.

"Like what?"

"You're a better man than I am, Moony," he answered, and no matter what Remus asked after that, he wouldn't reply.

The week passed more or less uneventfully, though Harry reported that Ron was grounded for a whole month, and seemed confused why he, Harry, was not. Sirius replied that having to spend his week-ends with Professor Snape was punishment enough for any boy, and Moony made him promise not to repeat that to Professor Snape. By the time Sunday came around, he was too excited to even remember it; he could barely sit still in one of Sandust Books' old leather wing-chairs, while he pretended to read his homework, and a growl emanated every once in a while from Padfoot, curled up under the chair.

"All right, Harry," Moony said, emerging from the back room. "I've spoken to Professor Snape. He's ready for you."

Harry nearly leapt off the chair and ran into the back room, where Moony caught him by the waist

and stopped him from grabbing the floo powder off the table.

"You be polite, he's a teacher at Hogwarts," he said. "In another few years he'll be your teacher. Say please and thank you."

"Yes Moony," Harry said impatiently.

"When you step into the fire say 'Dumbledore's Office' just like we practiced, all right?"

Harry nodded and held out his hand. Moony sighed and dropped some floo powder into it. He tossed it into the fire, stepped in, and said the words carefully; after a spinning, dizzy moment, the world ceased to move, and he found himself on the hearth of a richly-decorated office, staring up at a tall man with an enormous white beard.

"Hello, Harry," the man said kindly. Harry could see Professor Snape standing off to one side. "All in one piece, are we?"

Harry checked himself over. "Yes...sir," he said carefully.

"Splendid. My name is -- "

" -- Headmaster Dumbledore," Harry finished for him. "You're on a chocolate frog card."

Dumbledore smiled. "I see Sirius hasn't wasted any time introducing you to wizarding sweets. Severus, if you would inform Remus that Harry has arrived safely..."

Harry found himself led through the office, while Professor Snape crouched on the hearth to speak to Moony. When they stopped, Headmaster Dumbledore took out a wand, and smiled.

"We have to make you look a little different, Harry, and give you a new name," he explained. "*Cicatrix evanesce* ," he commanded, and Harry felt his forehead tingle. "*Capellum Muto* ," he added.

Something fell around Harry's ears, and he gasped. Dumbledore turned him so that he could see a small mirror on a shelf.

His scar, which had been a part of him for as long as he could remember, was gone; it would have been hard to tell anyway -- where his short-cropped, unruly hair used to be, instead he now had long, straight black hair hanging to his shoulders.

"And you need a new name," Professor Snape added, coming to stand next to Headmaster Dumbledore.

"Why?" Harry asked. The older men exchanged a knowing look.

"Because we have to keep who you are a bit secret, for now," Dumbledore answered. "Can you understand that, Harry?"

"No," Harry said honestly. "But okay."

"A name, now..." Dumbledore tapped his lips, thoughtfully. "Parvus."

"Parvus?" Harry asked.

"Parvus Rana," Dumbledore continued. Harry tried it out silently. He could see Professor Snape mouth it once or twice, and then smile. It was not a nice smile. Professor Snape didn't look like the sort of man who was able to smile nicely.

"Headmaster, if we do not leave soon for the pitch, my students may wonder..." Professor Snape said, and Dumbledore, who'd been staring at Harry, nodded.

"Of course, Severus. Enjoy practice, Harry -- Parvus," Dumbledore corrected. Harry grinned and -- after two months of living with Moony and Sirius -- automatically held up his hand to be taken by the Professor.

Snape looked down at him for a moment, in surprise, and then took his hand, leading him through the office and out, into a long stone corridor.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 8

As they walked through Hogwarts, Harry stared around him, eyes wide, trying to take in everything -- the paintings, the hangings, the big kids walking through the hallways. Few of them looked at him, though many of them stared at Professor Snape.

They made their way out of the castle, Harry turning as soon as they were outside, to take in the building he'd looked at so often in pictures.

Professor Snape led the way down to a large grassy enclosure -- a real Quidditch pitch, Harry thought with wonder, gazing at the golden hoops --

And the seven robed figures already soaring around them.

Harry stopped, stunned and in awe, so that Professor Snape halted and turned to him.

He'd watched Fred and George fly, and seen photos of professional teams, but that was nothing to seeing it live, done by experienced players. His eyes tracked the Quaffle as the students passed it quickly from one to the other -- he gasped when a Bludger nearly hit one of them.

"Come to the stands," Professor Snape ordered, but Harry didn't hear him; one of the students had gone into a dive, chasing after a small glint of gold. It vanished again, and the girl pulled abruptly out of the dive.

Professor Snape gave him a small shove, and Harry snapped out of his reverie, running ahead to the ladder that led up to the stands, already climbing it by the time Professor Snape, following at a more leisurely pace, arrived. The rungs were designed for bigger children, but Harry managed, tumbling breathless onto the landing at the top.

They were unutterably, completely graceful -- completely free. Their green robes flashed in the sunlight, whipping out behind them as they flew, their leather gloves and greaves creaking a little when they moved.

"That is the Slytherin House team," said Professor Snape's voice behind him. "My House team. They're favoured for champions this year."

Harry watched as one of the Beaters ducked the Quaffle and, in the same movement, batted a Bludger away from another player. He felt Professor Snape guide him down the aisle to a front-row seat in the stands, where he hung his arms over the edge and looked up, craning his neck to keep watching.

It was brilliant; it was Quidditch. Harry felt he could never get tired of watching them weave in and out of each other, play small skirmishes against one another, compete to get to a Bludger. He wasn't aware of how long he stood in the bright, chilly afternoon, his new, long hair whipping in

the wind, Professor Snape occasionally calling out orders from a seat nearby. Soon, however, he was being pulled gently away from the front railing, and led back down to the Pitch, where the students were landing, gathering with their brooms to talk, and stow the game balls, and begin to unstrap their gear.

"Oi, Professor!" called a tall, blond-haired boy. "Who's the sprog?"

Harry realised the boy was referring to him; he dropped back to half-hide behind the edge of Snape's robe.

"This is my nephew, Parvus," Professor Snape said, smoothly. The others glanced at the blond boy as if he might be in for trouble ahead. "He will be...visiting me, occasionally."

"Titchy little thing, aren't you?" one of the girls asked, crouching to be on eye-level with Harry. She was much older than most of the others, Harry could see that, but she was still the shortest on the team. "What'd you think of our playing?"

"It was brilliant," Harry said breathlessly, not moving from his place of safety behind Professor Snape's right leg. The girl drew a small golden ball out of her pocket, and Harry watched silvery wings unfurl. A real, live Golden Snitch. He followed it as she held it between thumb and forefinger.

"Think you can catch it?" she asked. Harry nodded. She let it go, and Harry's hand snapped out almost instinctively; he saw she was reaching for it too, and knew that she didn't believe he could -- but that didn't matter, because his hand was already around the small golden ball, fingers crushing one wing slightly.

The students were looking at each other in surprise. The girl almost tumbled backwards out of shock.

Professor Snape was staring down at him.

"Give her back the Snitch, Parvus," he ordered. Harry held out his hand and let the girl, righting herself, take it from his fingers.

"Chasers, your passing skills require improvement," Snape announced, while the students exchanged looks. "You will practice again tomorrow evening, after dinner. Beaters, know your vectors; Keeper, attempt to prevent a few goals next time. Seeker..." he turned to the girl, who was repeatedly releasing the Snitch and re-capturing it, as if to test her reflexes. "Try and make sure you can beat an eight-year-old child to the Snitch, if you please."

She flushed crimson, and Harry saw a sudden look of hate wash over her face, directed at him.

Then the players were turning to leave: talking, shoving, whacking each other across the backs of legs with their brooms. Harry, following at Professor Snape's side, had a moment where he wanted nothing more than to be a member of the Slytherin House Quidditch team, and wear a glittering

green robe and leather gloves, and get told he was a bastard by his captain, or get his hair pulled by the Seeker.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a mass of red, and he turned.

There was another team gathering on the Pitch, in scarlet and gold, talking and laughing together, one of the players obviously demonstrating a new trick -- his broomstick spiralling almost straight up, the player himself only clinging by his hands and tightly clenched knees. One of them had his arm slung around one of the girls, and the remaining players were showing a very young-looking boy how to capture a Bludger.

"Who're they?" Harry asked, pointing. Professor Snape took his wrist, lowering his hand.

"Gryffindor," he said, with loathing. "Come along."

"My parents were in Gryffindor, weren't they?" Harry asked, turning to look as Snape led him forward.

"As well as the pair of incompetents now looking after you," Professor Snape said. Harry scowled, but he remembered Moony's admonition to be polite.

They left the Slytherin team at a shed near the Pitch, and made their way back to the castle. Now that he could spend several minutes looking at it, Harry took in every detail -- the turrets, the gates, the narrow windows crowned with gargoyles and high carved arches.

Professor Snape had to speak to some of the other teachers, and he couldn't, as he pointed out, leave a child to his own devices, especially in a Potions workshop, so he took Harry along. It wasn't exactly a guided tour, but Harry generally got succinct if curt answers to his questions, and he got to see a good deal of the school. Professor Snape had to carry him up one staircase, as his legs wouldn't stretch to go up three steps at a time, and the steps inbetween, the Professor explained, were only half-real.

Another staircase started to move while they were on it, and Harry very nearly fell over from excitement.

By the time they'd picked up a book from Professor McGonagall, left a packet of strange green powder off for Professor Flitwick to use in class the following day, and quickly hidden from Professor Trelawney -- Harry didn't blame Snape for a moment, she looked decidedly frightening -- it was nearly dinnertime.

"You will eat in the Great Hall, with the students," Professor Snape said, as Harry followed him towards the front of the castle. "Find Alexander LeStrange, you met him this afternoon, he's the brown-haired boy from the Quidditch practice. He is to watch over you and make sure you don't break anything."

Harry thought the last was rather unfair, as he hadn't broken anything all afternoon, but he opened

his mouth to agree as they entered the Great Hall -- and then the grandeur of the seemingly-roofless, enormous, table-lined hall drove all thought of speaking from his mind.

Snape gave him another light shove, and he stumbled towards a table over which hung a black and green banner with a snake slithering its way up it. One table over, he could see some of the Quidditch players from Gryffindor House, and the much smaller boy in their midst. Alexander, the Slytherin captain, wasn't too far away from them, and Harry approached warily.

"Hallo, Sprog," the big boy said. "Lose your uncle, did you?"

"He said I should eat with you," Harry answered, successfully preventing himself from stammering nervously.

"Right then, up you go," Alexander said unconcernedly, and Harry climbed up on the long bench.

He listened to the others talk about the practice, and about classes, and in surprisingly derogatory tones about fellow classmates. Sirius would have his hide if he heard Harry talk about the Weasleys that way. He didn't take part, and except for a few inquiries about why 'Parvus' was there, they ignored him.

"Psst!"

Harry turned in his seat, slightly, trying to find out where the whisper had come from.

"Psst! Behind you!"

Harry craned his neck. The small Gryffindor boy from the Quidditch Pitch grinned at him.

"Our table's out of rolls," he said. "You got any?"

Harry reached for the basket and passed it over, unnoticed and unremarked by the Slytherins.

"Ta!" the boy said, taking two and handing the basket to the boy on his right. Harry turned in his seat, a little, so that he could grin back at the boy.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Oliver," the boy answered. "But I'm not supposed to talk to Slytherins."

"I'm not a Slytherin," Harry said. "I'm just visiting."

The boy took him in, cocking his head. "Yeah, you're a bit small, even for a first year. Why're you here?"

Harry lied, uncomfortably. "My name's Parvus. I'm Professor Snape's nephew."

"Yeah, I heard 'em talking about you!" Oliver said, grinning. "Gryffindor Captain said that

Slytherin Captain said that you're a better Seeker'n their House Team Seeker."

"Naw," Harry said, grinning. "You on the team?"

"Me? I'm a first year, we're not allowed," Oliver scowled. "See that big boy?"

Harry noted the tall, red-headed boy sitting nearby. He looked a bit like Ron. "That's Bill Weasley. He's Quidditch Captain. He's lettin' me carry brooms and chase stray balls and that, since I can't play till next year. I play Keeper. I'm gonna be the best Quidditch player ever," he added.

"Here, sprog, what d'you think you're doing? Wood, mind your own table," Alexander LeStrange said nastily. Oliver, blushing bright red, turned around quickly, and hunched over his plate. Alexander turned Harry around and shook him gently by his collar.

"We don't go talking with *them* ," he said.

"Why not?"

"Cos we're Slytherin. What do we need to be talking to a load of poufy Gryffindors for?"

Harry didn't understand it, but he understood that if he tried to turn around again, he'd probably get in trouble. So he sat, and ate, and continued to listen.

"And then I talked to this boy named Oliver and then we had dessert and it was pudding and then I got to go see the Owlry and there was owl poop everywhere and then we went back to Dumbledore's office and he gave me a sherbet and showed me all the other Headmasters and he's got a PHOENIX and he gave me short hair again and my scar again and then I came home."

Sirius had been unaware that a child with such small lungs could talk so continuously for so long.

He had been treated to a running thirty-minute monologue as he ate a late dinner, listening intently to Harry's description of his day while the boy bounced excitedly in his chair across the kitchen table. Harry didn't seem traumatised at all.

"And the BEST PART IS," Harry said, finally drawing a breath, "I got to see a real live Snitch."

Sirius stopped chewing. "Did you now?" he asked, pleased. Harry nodded.

"There was a girl on the Slytherin House team and she showed it to me and said could I catch it and I said yes and she didn't believe me but she tried to catch it and instead I did. I don't think she liked that much," he finished, thoughtfully.

"You caught a Snitch?"

"Mmmhm. Not on a broomstick, like. On the ground."

Sirius mulled this over. "Sounds like you had a good time."

"Uh huh. Where's Moony?"

"He's gone out tonight."

"Will you show me your chessboard?"

"Sure, if you like." Sirius had refrained, until now, from letting Harry see his wizarding chess set; he'd taught a few key pieces to swear, over the years, and it tended to scandalise people. Still, the lad had to learn sometime.

Harry stood on his chair as Sirius rose and walked to a closet in the hallway, taking down a thick wooden case. He opened it, revealing two compartments for pieces -- each piece nestled in an indentation in the velvet lining -- and an elegant chessboard, in shades of cream and black.

"This belonged to my grandfather," he said. "He gave it to me when I was fourteen."

Harry picked up one of the pieces, laughing when it squirmed and demanded to be set down. Sirius tapped twice on the edge of the board with his wand, and all the pieces, except the rook that Harry was holding, leapt into place.

"Come here, and I'll show you how it works," Sirius said, picking Harry up and settling him into his lap. Harry leaned forward eagerly. "Now this is the knight, and he moves in an l-shaped pattern..."

When Remus arrived home, he found Sirius slumped back in the chair, eyes closed, and Harry curled up against him, hand clutching at his shirt in his sleep. He shed his coat, took off his shoes, and picked up Harry, carrying the sleeping boy to his bed. Harry stirred.

"M'not tired," the boy yawned.

"You were asleep."

"Moony?"

"Mmhm."

"Where were you?"

"Out. I was meeting someone."

"I met a lot of people today."

"I'll bet you did. I want to hear about it after school tomorrow."

"Moony?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I want a racing broomstick for my birthday."

Remus laughed. "Sure thing, lad. I'll tell Sirius."

Harry's eyes closed, and Remus switched out the light. The nightlight -- Harry's toy robot -- glowed a pleasant yellow in the dark room.

In the kitchen, Sirius was sitting up, closing the latches on his chessboard.

"Didn't realise how late it was," he said, sleepily. Remus went to the sink, pouring himself a glass of water. He handed Sirius a second one. "Ta, Remus."

"Did Harry have a good time?"

"Sounds like it. Dumbledore showed him Fawkes, and he met a couple of the professors. And he saw a Quidditch practice."

"Full day for the lad. How about you?"

"Worked on the motorbike. You know Arthur Weasley says there might be a market for 'em. Thinking of buying another one and charming it, see if I can't sell it."

"Sounds good."

"How was your date?"

Remus shook his head. "Immensely boring. And a smoker. I give up."

"Molly could still set you up with Allison Sparrow. I'm taking Moira to the Muggle cinema next Wednesday. Did you know she's never been?"

"This is the woman Molly thinks ought to be Harry's mum?" Remus asked, somewhat sarcastically.

"Well, it can't hurt. I haven't had a decent date in ages, you know how it is with Harry about," Sirius answered. "I love the boy but he does put a bit of a crimp in one's social calendar."

"The way mine's been going, it's a welcome relief."

"Moony, not that it's any of my business, but after seventeen years you have yet to explain to me just whether or not you're even interested in girls," Sirius said. "You were at school."

"Does it matter so much to you?"

"Well, it'd matter to Allison Sparrow, you know."

Remus leaned back on the counter, looking up at the ceiling. "No. Not interested in girls so much."

"Because you know, it's not that I don't know any chaps who aren't -- "

"Sirius, don't finish that sentence. I'm not having my best friend set me up."

"Who else ought to do it?"

"I can find my own dates, I'm not quite that pathetic," Remus said, with a small smile to take the sting from his words. "I hope Moira is everything we expect her to be."

Sirius grinned. "You know, when it comes time to explain the birds and the bees to Harry, you'd better let me do it."

"We'll see. He might take after me, you never know."

Harry, tucked in his bed with Frog in his arms and a star-patterned eiderdown keeping him warm, smiled in his sleep as he heard Moony and Sirius laughing in the kitchen.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 9

"You're going *here* ?"

Harry was sitting on the bed in Remus' room, holding his world-globe under one arm; he was pointing at India, and looking up at Remus. Remus took his finger and moved it gently about half an inch to the northeast.

"I'm going *there* ," he said, returning to the medium-sized satchel on the bed. He picked up three books and laid them on top of some clothing.

"For how long?"

"Don't know yet. Not more than a week."

"Are you gonna get sick again?"

Remus smiled at the boy. "It's possible, but I shouldn't worry too much. I always get better."

"Harry? Where've you gone?" Sirius' voice boomed from the other room, and they heard the front door slam.

"In here!" Harry called. "I'm helping Moony pack!"

Sirius loomed in the doorway, shedding his leather jacket and boots. "Just been out to see Moira," he said, by way of explanation. "Playing world traveler, are we, Harry?"

Harry presented his globe to Sirius, gravely. "Where's Iowa?" he asked. Sirius frowned. Remus reached out an arm and spun the globe, his finger tapping the appropriate place gently.

"There you are then," Sirius said, as if he'd come up with it himself.

"I made up a game," Harry continued. "It's called Where."

"Where what?"

"Just Where. See, I spin the globe, and I find a place..." Harry demonstrated. "And then I go to the encyclopedia you brought from the book shop and find it." He peered at the globe. "Cuz...Cuzek..."

"Czechoslovakia," Sirius corrected. "Tell you what, how about you look up Kyoto instead. It's easier to say."

Harry nodded and left the room, globe under one arm. Sirius leaned against the door-frame, watching Remus pack.

"Thought maybe you'd given up on India," he said. "It's been weeks since you were going to go."

This was true; he'd meant to go to India before they'd even brought Harry to his flat, and that was months ago, now. Harry'd gone on one more 'field trip' with Severus, and Ron's grounding was nearly over. The full moon was looming next week, but he planned to be back before then. He shook his head.

"I won't be gone long, it shouldn't be too difficult -- I have a friend in Calcutta who's going with me, he speaks the local dialects."

"Listen, Moony -- " Sirius rubbed the back of his head. "Do you think Arthur might be right?"

"About?"

"About Peter. About him being dead."

Remus paused in the act of closing his satchel. "I don't know," he said.

"Then why do you keep...why are you still looking for him?" Sirius asked. "You know I'd come with you in a heartbeat if you asked me to, but you seem to enjoy running off alone, and you know how I feel about the whole mess."

"You'd rather it wasn't remembered at all," Remus murmured.

"I just think after seven years, if he hasn't shown himself, he's probably dead. The British Government thinks so, you know. After seven years missing they declare a chap dead. And I wouldn't put it past Malfoy to kill him, he killed all those Muggles."

Remus sat on the bed, one hand toying with the grips on his satchel. "And if he's not dead?"

"The Dark Lord's gone. Vanquished. Even if Peter tried to come for Harry, or for one of us, he was never a match for us. You and I, Moony, we'll protect the kid. We have so far."

Remus bowed his head. "I know. And this is my way of doing that."

"Chasing ghosts?"

"Dreams," Remus answered, impulsively.

"What?"

"I'm not chasing a ghost," he said, standing and rubbing his neck, distractedly. "I'm trying to settle something, all right?"

"Settle what, exactly? Make a bet with Dumbledore that you could catch Peter if he was still around?"

"Listen, three years ago I was entirely ready to give this up," Remus answered sharply. "Do you think I like getting stuck for days on end in some backwater in Chile? You think I actually enjoy awful seedy motels in Toronto?"

Sirius stared at him. Remus was...Remus was angry. That didn't happen. Not without Sirius yelling for at least half an hour first.

"I don't like it, I don't want to believe he's alive, unless it's so that I can strangle the man barehanded, but I think I've pretty much got that impulse under control," Remus continued. "And I was ready to give it up and if these bloody dreams hadn't started up I would have, but they did, and they won't stop, and they don't change, and so I'm stuck wandering the globe when believe me, I would much rather be here listening to you whine about Snape!"

Sirius waited until Remus had let out the rest of his breath. "I don't whine," he said sullenly.

"I'm sorry, Pads. I didn't mean that."

"What dreams? You never told me about any dreams. You sleep like the bloody dead."

"They're not the screaming kind of nightmare," Remus answered, calmer now. "They're not really nightmares at all, I suppose. They're just...things."

"About...about that night?"

"Sort of." He sat on the bed again. "You know how I'm always going on about how if I hadn't been held up from going to Rome, and hadn't made you take that wrong turn while we were looking for Peter, it might've been you who got to him first?"

"Well, I don't know about always, but you do seem awfully fixated on it."

"Listen to me. I have this dream." Remus took another deep breath. "And in it, somehow everything's gotten bollocksed up. It's not now, it's a couple of years from now, and I'm not me. I'm a teacher. At Hogwarts. Only I am me, but not..." Remus shook his head in frustration.

"You're mental."

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Go on."

"I'm in the Shack. And you're there, in the shack with me. Only you're not you. You're awful, and thin, and your hair's matted. It's a terrible sight, Sirius. And you're telling me that Peter survived, that you tried to kill him but he framed you, made it look like you were the spy, and he got away. And he left fingers behind. And you're telling me this and then you're saying that he's right there in the room with us. Only I can't see him. And I have all these thoughts. They're not mine, but they're about us."

Sirius tilted his head, listening to the low, grave tones. Remus was a werewolf, and werewolves were Dark creatures; still, he'd never heard of a prophetic one.

"The thoughts are...I think to myself, *oh god, Sirius has been in Azkaban for twelve years, and I've been spending the whole time just...drifting...* thinking you were the spy, and...Sirius, if you could see what you look like in the dream. And you keep telling me he's here, Peter's here, we have to kill him, and I can't *find* him."

Remus paused. Sirius had slid down the doorframe until he was crouched against the wall, looking up, hands clasped between his knees.

"I have to find him, Sirius. He's alive, and if I don't find him, he'll come for us."

Sirius nodded, slowly. "You believe the dream."

"I believe something really, really bad might have happened if you'd got to Peter before Lucius Malfoy did. And I do believe Peter is alive. And I do believe he's dangerous."

"You don't go about as often as you used to."

"Well, I've learned to tell a decent tip from a dead end, for the most part," Remus answered. "And I *won't* go about as often, not with Harry here."

Sirius looked thoughtful.

"Could you put the dream in a pensieve?" he asked, after a few minutes' contemplation.

Pensieves were expensive to purchase and difficult to make, but Remus balked at asking Dumbledore if they could borrow his. It seemed presumptuous, when they'd caused the Headmaster so much trouble so recently, to go asking him for something like that.

So Sirius did it.

It was the work of a few minutes to get to Hogwarts, and barely a few minutes more before Sirius was standing outside the entrance. He rapped the old Order knock, and sure enough, Dumbledore hadn't taken the charm off; he fancied he could hear, somewhere distant, a bell ringing. It had been their code -- if you knocked in the right way, Dumbledore knew you were with the Order, and a bell in his study notified him.

The door swung open, and it wasn't long before Sirius, nearly twenty-nine years old and a respected businessman, found himself standing in Dumbledore's study like an errant fifth-year.

"I hope you're not having trouble with Harry," Dumbledore said pleasantly, but there was a note of iron behind his blue eyes.

"No, Harry's..." Sirius realised he didn't have words for the way he felt about Harry. He settled for "...fine."

"Molly informs me he's doing well in his studies."

Sirius cursed inwardly. Of course Dumbledore was keeping an eye on Harry through the Weasleys.

"He's a smart boy. He made up this game..." Sirius grinned, and then realised this was neither the time nor the place to play the proud father. "He's fine."

"I notice Remus did not choose to come along for this visit."

"He doesn't know I'm here."

Dumbledore lifted an eyebrow.

"Listen, I'm worried about him and I need your help. I know you're furious that we took Harry and I know it's presumptuous of me to ask, and that's why Remus won't, but I need to borrow your Pensieve."

The other eyebrow raised. Sirius fought the urge to snicker.

"My Pensieve?" he asked, slowly. "Why on earth would you need that?"

Sirius toyed with a strap on his leather jacket. "You know he's still looking for Peter."

"As am I."

Sirius glanced up sharply. Dumbledore smiled. "In more subtle ways than your friend."

"Well, he says he's doing it because he's having these...these dreams," Sirius said. "About Peter. And truth be told, I've had a few screaming nightmares of my own about the man, but these sound like they're something more."

"Prophetic dreams?"

"Or...I don't know. Visions of what could have been?" Sirius shrugged. "I want to see them for myself."

"That's rather dangerous, sharing another man's dreams," Dumbledore pointed out.

"Also I want to..." Sirius felt a small shame creep over him, but he kept on. "Listen, Harry needs to be told who he is and what happened to his parents. He still thinks it was a car crash. I haven't told him, and it's a miracle one of the Weasleys haven't, but it can't go on forever."

"And you want to be rational when you speak with him of the death of your best friend," Dumbledore finished. Sirius nodded. "That is...more understandable. Are you familiar with their

use?"

"Yes, more or less. Remus knows more."

"You will be very careful, will you not, about what you show?"

Sirius nodded. Dumbledore rose, and walked to a locked cabinet, removing the Pensieve carefully. He placed it into a wooden case, and Sirius flicked the latches shut.

"I owe you an apology," Sirius said. "I knew it was wrong to take Harry."

"You seem to be settling into fatherhood nicely," was Dumbledore's only reply. "What is done, is done, and perhaps it was for the best, though that is yet to be seen. Severus Snape will collect the Pensieve when he comes for Harry."

Sirius nodded. "Thank you."

"Have a care, Sirius."

Sirius left the office, the wooden case in one hand, the warning still in his ears.

"You know who's really good at this?"

"Don't say Snivellus."

"I do wish you'd stop calling him that, Pads."

"When he stops being a snivelling git, I will."

"He saved Harry."

"And he'll hold that over our heads for the rest of our lives."

"It's probably good for at least ten years, that's true."

"So how do we do this?"

"Well, I very carefully do this..."

"My god, what is that?"

"It's a memory."

"Somehow I thought it'd be less...slimy."

"Thank you. My slimy thoughts."

"Why are you taking out more of them?"

"I've had the dream more than once, you know. I thought if I put a couple of them in there, it'd be more vivid."

"This is disgusting."

"I'm not asking you to drink it, you know."

"All right. So."

"Go ahead."

"Right. I just lean over?"

"Sirius, do you want me to come along?"

"If you think you should."

"All right, on three. One, two, three..."

The memory began in the middle of a word, spoken by Remus Lupin, though not at all the voice Sirius was used to; a hoarse, exhausted voice that was closest to how he sounded on full-moon days.

"...rius?"

Sirius opened his eyes, and felt Remus, next to him, gripping his arm. *And saw Remus in front of him, horribly changed, face lined and grey, eyes tired, shabbily dressed, even skinner than he was now -- badly underfed.*

"You see what I mean," said his Remus, the real Remus. Sirius turned in time to see...

Himself. Horrifying, but himself. Changed even more than Remus, skin stretched tight across his skull, yellow and dead-looking, eyes sunken beyond belief, matted hair falling past his shoulders. If Remus was shabby, Sirius was in rags, collapsed against one wall. He could hear a sharp intake of breath. There was a blurred moment, as though for a moment the dream faltered, and then he heard this other-Remus again.

" -- unless he was the one...unless you switched...without telling me?"

The guilt flooded Sirius. He had heard those words before, seven years before when he had explained to Remus that he wasn't the Secret Keeper.

He saw himself nod, slowly. *In the background were other voices, inaudible, high children's*

voices, asking questions, but in the room, only Sirius and Remus, staring at each other across an expanse of dusty board.

He heard a rustling and felt Remus brush past him, hurriedly. Remus seized Sirius' hand and pulled him up, embracing him tightly.

"You big girl," Sirius said.

"I haven't seen you in twelve years," Remus answered, watching the pair of them hug. "That's a hug of brotherly devotion, that is."

"Twelve years?" Sirius asked, and as soon as he said it he could hear dream-echoes -- the inside of Remus Lupin's thoughts. *Twelve years, twelve years, twelve years...*

Still children's voices in the faded background, but they were hardly important. Another jerk, as though the dream had for a moment lacked cohesion, and when it was clear again, the pair had separated.

"-- rauder's Map. I was in my office examining it," Remus said. Another disturbance. "And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black.... I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow --"

"What's going on?" Sirius asked.

"It's a story I'm telling someone, someone I can't see," Remus answered. "It explains how I got to the Shack."

"Little Peter got the better of me... not this time, though!"

They watched as the monstrous Sirius Black lunged for something neither could see, and Remus looked on in worried consternation.

"I can't see him," both Remuses said in unison.

"They need to understand -- we've got to explain --" Remus continued.

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Sirius, as Remus tried to grab hold of him. There was another jarring moment.

"-- ever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for..."

Sirius gasped.

"I told you," Remus said.

"There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die," Remus said. "A whole street full of them..."

"They didn't see what they thought they saw! The Marauder's map never lies...Peter's alive."

"Where?" both Remuses said in unison. *"Where, Sirius, I can't see him!"*

"Peter's alive..." Sirius insisted. "Peter's alive."

And then there was a rushing feeling and the sensation of being pulled away, and Sirius Black came to himself, sitting at the table in the back room of a tightly-locked-up Sandust books. Across from him, Remus was breathing hard, his eyes unnaturally bright.

"My god." Sirius exhaled shakily. "If you'd told me it was like that -- "

"Now you see," Remus was almost as hoarse as the man in the dream had been. He picked up his wand to begin replacing the memories, but his hand was shaking, and after a second he set it down again.

"You all right?" Sirius asked.

"I'm fine. It's more intense, seeing myself live it, that's all."

"I'll make tea," Sirius said decisively. If his back was turned it would hide the shaking in his own hands.

There had been emotion sensations, not quite identifiable, but Sirius imagined that a regular pensieve memory wasn't like that. It was a memory of a dream, and everything was intensified; taken with the fact that Lupin kept so much of his emotions in his head, it was bound to be a more powerful experience.

When he'd seen that shabby, grey-faced Remus hug his own ragged self, there had been some emotion there that was not the brotherly devotion Remus spoke of. Then again, laced all through the dream, there had been raw feelings -- feelings of loss, of frustration, of fear.

He wondered if his friend lived his whole life that way, with the feelings in his head. And that caricature of Remus -- he felt an overwhelming gratitude that he would never see that particular sight again.

"And you see it all the time," he murmured. Remus, who had let his head slide to rest on his arms on the table, looked up.

"What?"

"I said the tea's ready. Lemon?"

"Just milk."

Sirius brought the tea to the table. Remus wrapped his hands around the mug.

"Remus?"

"Mm?"

"You looked...gaunt."

"From what I can gather, the world is not kind to men who don't have their best friends to provide them with indoors employment and overpay them," Remus replied, with a wan smile.

"You been skimming the books again?"

"Yes, as soon as I get a million I'll vanish in the night," Remus answered. His hands were steady, now, and he began to slowly restore the silvery threads of memory. "Harry'll be home soon."

"You're leaving for India tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Want me to come?"

"Nonsense, Harry needs you."

Sirius nodded. "But I need *you* ."

He saw a brief flash of...of something, in Remus' eyes, quickly killed before it even fully became.

"You've got to learn to call out for pizza sometime," Remus said, with a smile. "I'll only be gone a few days. I'm planning on being back two days early for the full moon."

"The Shrieking Shack again?"

"It's not so bad."

Sirius shook his head. "Liar."

"Tu periurare timeto -- commodat in lusus numina surda Venus," Remus replied. Sirius grinned.

"I'll have that translated by the time you're back."

"You always say that, and you never do."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 10

Harry was drawing in the living room, after dinner, when Sirius picked him up -- both men had that habit, of simply lifting him by the waist or armpits, moving him about as if he was a piece of furniture, much to Harry's delight. Harry shrieked happily and let Sirius hold him up in the air, legs kicking.

"All right, Harry?" Sirius asked. Harry squirmed, and Sirius tossed him onto the couch.

"All right, Sirius!" Harry cried. "Do it again!"

"Not right now, Harry, I've got to talk to you," Sirius answered, dropping onto the couch. Harry crawled across him and grabbed a book. Sirius closed the book gently.

"We need to talk, Harry," he said, putting it aside. "I need to tell you a story."

Harry looked up at him and grinned, and Sirius ran a hand over his face. In the other room, the actual emotional memories were waiting in a Pensieve; he ought to be able to do this and retain his composure.

"Harry, your aunt and uncle told you that your parents died in a car crash," he said, as Harry settled in comfortably. "And now I have to tell you the real story."

"The real story?" Harry asked, curiously. Sirius nodded.

"Has Molly been teaching you about You-Know-Who?" he asked. "Voldemort?"

Harry shrugged. "A little. He was a Dark Wizard. He killed a lot of people."

"Aye, so he did. He was a very Dark Wizard, and there were...wizards in Britain who were fighting him."

Harry nodded. Sirius sighed.

"Your parents were two of the people fighting him," he said. Harry's eyes widened. "Along with me, and Moony, and Headmaster Dumbledore, and Professor Snape. Your parents found out he was going to try to kill them, and you, when you were just a wee one." Sirius paused, to make sure Harry understood, and then continued. "So they decided to hide, and they only told one person where they were hiding. One of our friends, named Peter Pettigrew."

"You and Moony talk about him, sometimes," Harry observed.

"That we do," Sirius answered. "He was a good friend, so we thought. But he was a spy for Voldemort, and he told him, and the Dark Wizard came to your home, to kill you and your parents."

Harry, caught up in the story, snatched in a breath.

"And that's what really happened to your parents, Harry," Sirius continued. "He killed them. And then he tried to kill you. That's how you got your scar," he added, lifting Harry's hair to press the small lightning-bolt scar with his fingers. "But for some reason he couldn't kill you. He tried, and the spell rebounded. It hit him instead. It killed him."

Harry leaned back against Sirius, curling into one of his arms. "So I killed him."

"No, Harry. He killed himself, trying to kill you." Sirius stroked his hair. "You, little one, are a hero. Everyone in the Wizarding world knows who you are. That's why when you go around with Professor Snape, you have to be in disguise. That's why we have to make sure you're safe, all the time."

"He killed my mum and dad?"

"Mmhm, and he still has followers out there, who might want to hurt you."

Harry considered this. "What happened to Peter?" he asked.

Sirius saw Moony's shadow, leaning in the doorway. "He ran away," Sirius said. "And one of Voldemort's followers tried to kill him. But he got away. He's in hiding somewhere."

"Oh."

"But you're safe here, Harry," Moony added, from the doorway. "There are protections on this flat, and on you."

Harry sat in silence for a while, secure against Sirius' warm body, while Sirius stroked his hair.

Sirius could only see the rise and fall of Moony's shoulders, but he knew his friend too well not to see that Moony was weeping, silently. He felt no need to join in the grief; he felt distant, detached from the story he'd told, and knew that the Pensieve had worked.

"Why is Moony crying?" Harry whispered.

"He misses your dad and mum," Sirius answered.

Harry slowly disentangled himself from Sirius' arms, and walked over to Moony, who crouched and hugged him when he held up his hands.

"I miss them too," Harry said, and Moony pressed Harry's face to his neck. He felt a few hot tears slide out of his eyes, for the parents he didn't remember.

"We will always, always protect you, Harry," Moony said hoarsely. "Sirius will always look after you, I will always make sure you're safe."

Harry nodded, against his neck. He heard Sirius moving, felt him brush past them into the kitchen, and after a while, felt him return. Moony gave him to Sirius, and wiped his face. Sirius was grave and silent, Harry's head pressed to his hip, one of his large hands covering the boy's head.

"It's so close to being done," he said, to Moony. "It's so close to being history. They're hardly ghosts anymore."

"Except for Peter."

"Except for Peter," Sirius agreed. "I hope you find the bastard."

"I'll keep looking until I do."

As it turned out, Remus didn't get back 'from India' for a week solid, and then some; he sent a desperate telegram to Sandust saying that he was going straight to the Shrieking Shack, and would Sirius please tell Harry he was simply delayed. The telegram was probably the best thing to have done -- Sirius was still wary around telephones, even after seven years in the Muggle world.

Harry knew better, this time, than to shout and stomp when he came home to find Remus curled on the bed, covered in cuts and scratches. Instead, he clung to Sirius, who made them a quiet, subdued dinner, and took soup in to Remus. Harry, not wanting to be left out, listened secretly at the door as Remus ate his soup, hunched over the bowl, Sirius sitting on a chair nearby.

"This can't go on," Sirius said quietly.

"Other people do it. I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're about as far from fine as you've ever been."

"It's not scarring," Remus said petulantly. "And your soup is awful."

"Don't change the subject."

"We've gone over this," Remus said, proving his lie by drinking the soup hungrily. "It's the only way to keep Harry safe. If neither of us are human it's as bad as if we'd left him alone all night. One of us has to be human and sane."

Harry stared hard at the two dim figures.

"What about that potion you were reading about in the Prophet?"

"It's not finished yet," Remus said, coughing as he choked on a noodle. "Mightn't be for years. It's just until Harry starts school, Sirius, that's not long at all."

"Twelve times three is thirty six," Sirius said.

"Two and a half," Remus countered.

"Thirty."

"Minus two -- "

"This isn't a bidding war! This is your life!"

"Yes, it is my life," Remus replied, softly. "My life, Sirius, not yours, not Harry's. We knew there'd probably be some time when you married, or when I moved on from Sandust. You can't be my guard-dog forever." A pause. "What? What's that look?"

"I always thought...I know you don't spend much, I thought maybe you wanted to buy half of Sandust. Someday. Own it with me."

"Oh."

The pair of them lapsed into silence, and Harry slunk quietly into the room.

"Hi there, Harry," Remus said, smiling suddenly. He set the empty soup bowl on his nightstand, and gave Harry a hand onto the bed. He might look sick, Harry thought, but his grip was still firm. "And how've you been? Haven't starved, I hope?"

"Nope," Harry answered. "How was India?"

Remus smiled. "Crowded. And futile. But I did bring you a present."

Harry's eyes lit up, but he waited patiently while Remus directed Sirius to his satchel, and a paper-wrapped parcel inside it, tied with twine. He untied the twine deftly, and Harry tried not to look at the marks on Remus' hands, as he accepted the box from them. He tore off the paper, pulling up the lid, mindless of the tape and slightly torn cardboard.

"What is it?" Harry asked, delightedly. He lifted an oblong bronze object out of the tissue paper. It had a scowling, toothy face on one end, and a strange triangular blade on the other.

"It's called a Phurba," Remus supplied. "Tibetan Buddhists believe it's the only kind of knife that can kill a ghost."

"You got him a *knife*?" Sirius asked.

"It's not sharp," Remus answered.

"Did you go to Tibet?"

"Of course not, do I look daft?"

Harry, meanwhile, was jabbing at Remus' pyjama-clad chest, prodding him with the rounded,

dulled blade.

"So if ghosties and ghoulies try anything smart," Remus said, catching the blade in one hand, "you'll be prepared."

"Where can I get one of those?" Sirius asked, with a grin. Remus gestured at the satchel.

"Under my socks," he said. Sirius lifted an eyebrow, and pulled out another parcel, rather more flat.

"What, you think I was going to bring Harry something and not you, o spoilt one?" Remus asked. Sirius grinned and tore the paper off with significantly more abandon than Harry. He pulled out a flat piece of glass, about the size of a Galleon coin, covered in what looked like gold leaf.

"It's your name, in Hindu lettering," Remus said. "It's for..." he tapped the side of his neck, and Sirius grinned, unbuttoning his shirt collar to reveal the thin nylon dog-collar, reading PADFOOT along one side, underneath. He hooked the glass onto the collar, and leaned over Harry.

"Think it's good?" he asked. Harry grinned, and nodded, and poked him in the collarbone with his dagger.

"Hey!" Sirius swung him up, holding him upside down; the dagger fell onto the counterpane. "I'm not a ghost!"

Remus watched as Harry wrestled his way around Sirius' side, grabbing onto his belt and hitching it up. After a moment they both tumbled to the floor, roughhousing, until Sirius cried uncle.

He thought briefly about the memory he'd shown Sirius in the Pensieve, and gave a little prayer of thanks to any god that might be listening, for the lost owl that had kept him in England on that awful night seven years ago.

This time, one of the cuts on Remus' face didn't heal fully, and there was a thin brown scar on his cheek, just in front of his left ear; when he returned to Sandust, several of their regulars commented on it, until Sirius -- slumped on the floor as Padfoot, enjoying the squealing attention of a couple of youngsters in the children's section -- began to growl whenever anyone brought it up. Remus didn't seem bothered by it, but then with Remus it was hard to tell.

It might almost have seemed that their lives had settled once more. Sirius wasn't satisfied with Remus' solution to things, but he accepted it. Harry was attending school, and every so often would go to Hogsmeade, or Hogwarts, or Diagon Alley with Professor Snape. Remus twice caught Sirius trying to sneak after him as Padfoot, and while he agreed that this would have been smart, he didn't approve of spying on them. How was Harry to trust the pair, if he knew they were following him? he asked, and Sirius...caved.

As usual.

It even seemed as though some kind of truce had been made with Dumbledore, between Remus' peace offering of a rare volume on Phoenix mythology, and their agreement to allow Snape to be a part of Harry's education. Snape kept his own counsel on that, though there were murmurings from both men living with Harry that he spent entirely too much time with Slytherins.

Which was why, though Sirius shouted, Remus was pleased when Harry tumbled out of the fireplace one afternoon, after a Saturday spent at Hogwarts, to announce that he'd been invited by Oliver Wood (whowaseleven, Sirius, andkneweverythingabout QUIDDITCH!) to stay in the Gryffindor dormitory for a night.

"He's arranged it with Dumbledore and everything," Remus said reasonably. "And it shows a remarkable independence of spirit..."

"It shows remarkable stupidity on Dumbledore's part!" Sirius was shouting, but at least he was shouting in the mainly-soundproofed back room of the shop, while Harry was out in the front.

"It'll do the boy some good, to see how Wizarding kids live," Remus countered.

"He's ours, Remus! He doesn't belong to Hogwarts yet!"

"Oh, I see," Remus said, only a trifle sourly. "This isn't about Harry, this is about what you own and don't own."

Sirius was suddenly dangerously quiet.

"He's ours only in as much as we raise him, Sirius," Remus continued. "He doesn't belong to us. He's a boy, not a book or a strange new toy to play with."

"I know that! Don't think I don't know that!" Sirius ranted.

"Then act like it," Remus said sharply. Sirius stopped, mouth open to reply. After a moment, he shut it.

"You have to be so fucking logical," he said sullenly.

"Well, excuse me for spending two minutes at a time in thought, I'm sure," Remus replied, not at all in the mood to deal with Sirius' hysterics.

"I don't want him sleeping in some strange place where we're not there in case he -- in case he needs us!" Sirius continued.

"Sirius, when was the last time Harry needed either of us during the night?" Remus asked mildly.

"He might yet!"

"He's a boy, Pads, he wants to spend the night with his friends in the dormitory. Wood's a Gryffindor, it'll do him good to escape the Slytherins for a while. Why are you so against this?"

Sirius gave him another sullen look, and Remus shook his head. He knew why Sirius was against it. He was used to the lad, used to him being there, used to expecting to wake in the night with Harry needing something, even if he never had.

They were used to Harry.

And Sirius didn't like change.

"He'll have fun," Remus said quietly.

"I know."

"Be good for him to make more friends than just Ron and Ginny and the twins."

"I know."

"Give us both the night off. You could..." Remus swallowed and played a bitter but important card. "Take Moira out somewhere. And...and stay out, if you wanted to. Without having to explain it in the morning to Harry."

Sirius rubbed his eyes. "If you make me go out with Moira one more time, Remus, I might kill her."

Remus stared at him. "*Make* you go out with her? You do realise how very little I like her, don't you? You know those remarks about her were sarcastic?"

Sirius stared back.

"But I thought you...you kept bringing it up..."

"Well, I'm not happy about the idea, you know! But I thought I ought to at least show willing!"

"Show *willing*?"

"Willing to let you marry if that's what you wanted," Remus answered, controlling himself. "I don't know that it's really very...healthy, the two of us giving up our lives completely, that's why I thought, I don't like the idea of marrying just to give Harry a mum, but..." he made a frustrated noise. "If that was what you wanted I thought I ought to at least offer to watch Harry for an evening."

He gave Sirius a sudden smile.

"And it's not right, you know, a sex maniac like yourself not getting any," he added. Sirius, who'd been staring in consternation and deep thought, grinned.

"Who says I'm not?" he asked.

"I see you in the mornings -- "

"Locker room talk from a shopkeeper like yourself! For shame!"

"Well, are you or aren't you?"

Sirius laughed. "No, as it happens, I'm not. And now that I know you aren't actually behind me going out with Moira, I can stop doing that, and I won't even have *any* female contact," he sighed.

"She's that bad?"

"She's just not for me. Perfectly nice girl on her own. Not my type."

"Well, what is your type?"

Sirius ran a hand through his hair, making some of it stand on end. "Well, you know. You've met my dates."

Remus made a gesture, that might have looked to a casual observer as though he was holding two cantaloupes in front of his chest. Sirius laughed. Harry's head poked through the door, and he emerged from the front of the store, carrying a quill, inkpot, and roll of parchment.

"I need help," he said plaintively. "Mrs. Weasley wants two inches on Muggle literature by tomorrow."

"Well, Harry, welcome to Sandust books," Remus said, with a wry look. "That's all we sell, you know. Mostly, anyway," he added, glancing at one of the high shelves, with the magical books locked in it.

"No, she wants it on someone named..." Harry consulted the scroll. "James Joyce. I'm supposed to find a bi'graphy and Copy Down Important Facts."

Remus saw Sirius' eyes light up. Sirius, against all odds, was passionate about Joyce. Remus privately decided it had something to do with a similarity in lack of coherent thought between the two.

"All right, Harry, let's see what we can find," Sirius said, leading him out into the shop and towards the back sections. Remus was going to follow, out of curiosity, but just then Mr. Barin came in, for his weekly helping of gory murder mysteries, accompanied by his daughter, and Remus stopped to talk to them instead.

When he glanced over from his conversation on the merits of Rex Stout, he saw Sirius lifting Harry up so that the boy could pull a weighty volume on Joyce off the shelves. Sirius pulled the boy back, whispering something in his ear, and Remus could tell by Harry's reaction that he'd just told him he could spend the night in Gryffindor with Oliver.

It would have been impossible for Remus to say which of the two he loved more, in that moment.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 11

Most of the Gryffindors knew of Parvus, Professor Snape's nephew, because they'd seen him in the halls or heard talk of him; none of them but Oliver had ever had anything to do with the boy, and there were some disgusted looks at Oliver for having invited the eight-year-old to stay in Gryffindor. Some of the seventh-years were a full ten years older than Harry, after all, and were put out enough that they had to share a Common Room with sprogs like Wood.

But Oliver shared a love of Quidditch with Harry, as well as the feeling that he was always the youngest in the room -- he'd yet to hit any kind of a growth spurt, and was easily the smallest of the Gryffindors. One student, a Slytherin, had remarked nastily that Oliver just wanted someone around who was tinier than he was.

Oliver didn't care. It was worth it to see the look on Harry's face when he walked into the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Hallo then, Wood, is this Parvus?" someone called. Harry glanced up at the portraits on the walls, the old Gryffindor banners, the high windows, eyes wide.

"Say hi," Oliver urged. Harry grinned shyly, and set down the knapsack he was carrying.

"Hi," he said. "Do you really live here?"

There was a general wave of amused laughter.

"Most of the time," one of the bigger kids said. "You like it?"

"Oh, yes," Harry breathed. It was much...well, it was warmer, and friendlier -- though a little shabbier -- than Slytherin's dungeon quarters, which he'd seen a peek of once, on his way to Professor Snape's office.

"Wotcha, Parvus, I'm Bill," said the big red-headed boy, who bore more than a passing resemblance to Ron. "That's my brother Charlie," he added, and another redheaded boy, somewhat younger, waved where he was bent over some schoolwork. "And that's my *other* brother, Percy." he pointed to a first-year even smaller than Oliver. Percy waved. "Oi, Perce, come say hi."

"I'm studying," Percy complained. Harry wandered over and peered at his book, which was full of strange symbols.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Percy's *advanced* ," one of the other Gryffindors said, rolling her eyes. "He's already taking second-year Transfiguration. *And* he's at school a year early."

"Transwhat?" Harry inquired.

"Transfiguration," Percy said. "Want to see?"

"Here, Perce, better not be like last time," another of the bigger kids called. A couple of the younger ones crowded around to watch.

Percy took a chocolate frog out of his pocket and unwrapped it, holding it between his fingers until the charm wore off and it stopped squirming. He set it on the table, pointed his wand at it, and said a few words in what Harry vaguely recognised as the same language Remus and Sirius used when doing magic. The frog twitched.

"Did it work?" Bill asked, leaning over the smaller students.

"I don't think so," Percy sighed.

Suddenly, the frog twitched again. There was a collective gasp. It seemed to leap into the air, and Harry watched, utterly fascinated, as it changed into --

A small, yellow rat fell to the table with a thud. Percy looked pleased.

"Caramel!" he said, picking the rat up. He snapped it in half and offered the head and shoulders to Harry. Harry, in turn, broke off half and gave the head to Oliver before popping the front legs into his mouth.

"Not bad, Weasley," Oliver said, around the caramel. The other Gryffindors, with looks of approval, began to disperse. Oliver led him over to a table where some children were playing Gobstones.

Harry cast longing looks at the other end of the table, where there was a Wizard's Chess game going on. One of them noticed, and grinned at him. "Like the chesspieces?" he asked, holding up one of them. "Kinda looks like Gryffindor Tower, doesn't it?"

"That's a Rook," Harry said, a trifle scornfully, and the boy grinned.

"D'you play, then?" he asked, as Harry moved away from the Gobstones game.

"Siriu -- " Harry stopped, realising he'd almost made a mistake. "My dad taught me how," he said carefully.

"Want to watch?"

"Check mate," said the girl he was playing against. The boy thudded his head on the table. "Ought to let Parvus play, I bet you two'd be a match," she teased gently.

"I can play," Harry said stoutly. The girl grinned, and gestured him forward.

"You sit with me and play Richard, and I'll help you," she said, scooting over and pulling up another chair. Harry sat down, and realised his eyes were about level with the table. Bill grinned

and, with a flick of his wand, the chair shot upwards, legs lengthening until Harry was on a level with Richard.

Oliver found him, ten minutes later, deep in contemplation of the chessboard. He was looking at it carefully while explaining to Richard how his dad had trained some of the pieces to swear. Richard had obviously decided this was a good idea.

"Who's winning?" Oliver asked.

"He is," Harry answered. "But I'm..." he glanced at the girl, who'd given her name as Nina.

"Making him work for it," Nina said. Harry nodded. Richard made a move, amidst jeering from Harry's pieces.

"He's got the house chess champion helping him," Richard complained.

Oliver patted Richard on the back, comfortingly, as Harry moved a knight, and took one of Richard's bishops.

Harry lost, though it was a close thing, and Oliver took him up to see the first-years' dormitory rooms, showing him the big four-posters, and the pictures pasted over peoples' beds, the school trunks and books and rolls of parchment that were the normal detritus of a student bedroom. They looked at Oliver's Quidditch books until the others began to troop into the room, and Charlie Weasley, who was apparently a Prefect, poked his head in.

"Lights out, lads. Parvus, are you bunking with Oliver?"

"My dad gave me a bedroll," Harry said, digging in his knapsack and pulling out what looked like a small, squashy red sack. He shook it once or twice, and it snapped out into a full, child-sized sleeping bag. Charlie looked impressed.

"Your dad's got a knack, all right," he replied, ducking out again. Harry climbed into his sleeping bag, next to Oliver's bed, and listened as the others talked about classes, traded quips and teasings. Somehow, he felt as though they were trying to include him, in a way the Slytherins, when they talked about things, never did; with the Slytherins he sometimes felt a little ignored, while with the Gryffindor boys it seemed as though they were sometimes talking for his benefit alone.

He sighed, happily, and curled up in the thick scarlet sleeping bag, listening until he drifted into sleep.

In the night, the wind howled around the Gryffindor tower rooms, and Harry woke with a start as something crashed; he could see the other children sleeping, and thought it must be something they were used to, but not before panic had made his heart thud in his ribcage.

Oliver snorted and rolled over. Harry fumbled for his knapsack, and dug around until he found

Frog in the very bottom. He hadn't wanted to take Frog out in front of the older boys, but they were all asleep and he wanted something from home. He curled around Frog, pulling the sleeping bag over his head, and tried to block out the sound of the whistling wind, the spring storm that was attacking the castle.

Inside the sleeping bag, it smelled of good things; their flat, and Sirius -- who smelled like leather and motor oil, and usually chocolate -- and Remus' old dusty books, that he was forever bringing home to read. Harry inhaled, deeply, comfortably.

"Parvus?" a voice said softly. There was another crash; Harry identified it as thunder. Oliver Wood lifted the top of Harry's sleeping bag, slightly. "Are you scared?"

"No," Harry mumbled, against Frog's soft fur. There was a rustling, and Oliver crawled into the sleeping bag with him.

"I was, the first time there was a storm. It's all louder up here," Oliver said. The bag was big enough that Oliver could sit crosslegged in it, though the top pressed against his head and made him slouch. Harry grinned, a little, at the way it flattened his hair. He sat up too, trying to pretend that he wasn't holding onto a plush frog for dear life.

"We don't have to be scared, though," Oliver continued. "I mean really, we don't, the castle is safe as anything."

"It's loud," Harry whispered. Oliver grinned.

"But we're Gryffindor!" he said. "We're stronger and braver than any other house."

"Do you get to pick what house you go into?" Harry asked. Oliver shook his head.

"You get Sorted," he said. "You should come watch the Sorting next year if Professor Snape lets you. It's brilliant."

"What happens?" Harry asked. Oliver launched into a whispered, detailed description of the Sorting ceremony, complete with a boat ride across the lake, a singing hat, and Professor McGonagall, who could turn into a cat, Harry recalled, whenever she liked, just like Sirius could be a dog.

Harry held Frog, and listened, and thought about the fact that years ago, before he was born, Remus and Sirius would have slept in Gryffindor Tower, and his dad and mum, too.

At that moment he wanted nothing more than to be Gryffindor House, and play Gryffindor Quidditch, and wear a scarlet-and-gold badge on his school robes.

"It's quiet without the lad around, isn't it?"

Remus looked up from where he was stirring the sauce, and grinned. "You can say boring if you want."

"I'm not bored," Sirius replied, checking on the noodles. "Five more minutes...you have to admit it is quieter without him."

"He's a good lad."

"I'm just used to being pelted with a thousand questions while making dinner," Sirius continued. "Here, let me..." he took the spoon as Remus stepped aside, and licked the end of it. Remus made a disgusted noise.

"Yes, because you never borrow my hairbrush, or razor, or anything," Sirius replied. "Meatballs ready?"

"Mm, I think so." Remus pushed Sirius' legs out of the way, and took a pan out of the oven. "Looks it. Shall I?"

"Be my guest." Sirius stepped back and let Remus add the meatballs to the sauce, turning down the heat on the noodles. "Shame neither of us took magical cooking seriously."

"Well, I personally remember a black-haired young man announcing he was going to live on Chinese take-away the rest of his life," Remus said, stirring again. Sirius moved to a foil wrapped package on the table, and pointed his wand at it. It began to steam.

"I'm glad Harry asks questions," Remus continued. "Shows he's thinking. He'll be years ahead of everyone else when he finally gets to Hogwarts."

"Molly says he's a bright lad."

"Of course Molly says that, she loves the boy like her own," Remus answered with a grin.

Sirius took two wide, shallow bowls from the cupboard, along with a colander. "Well, it's easy, isn't it? I mean, he's smart, and he's a happy little lad, though Merlin knows how that happened, growing up with the Dursleys, and he's going to look -- "

"-- just like James," Remus finished in unison with him.

"I took him to lunch last weekend and the waiter asked me what my son was going to have, when he took our order," Sirius said, slightly wistfully.

"Well, it's the hair," Remus answered. "And probably the predilection for making trouble."

Sirius grinned, and poured the noodles into the colander, shaking it before dumping them into the sauce. Remus obligingly spooned the spaghetti into the bowls, and Sirius added the garlic bread from the foil package.

"Not too bad, for two confirmed bachelors," Sirius announced.

Remus gave him a dry look. "It's a Friday night, and our idea of a good time is Muggle cooking."

"Well, it's sort of like a hobby, I suppose. And besides, it's a full time job, caring for the lad."

"Mm. I don't know about you, but by the time he's in bed, I'm knackered myself."

Sirius, who didn't often talk at dinner, nodded over his meal. They ate in companionable silence, occasionally broken by a comment on the food, or a question about something to do with the bookshop. When they were finished, Remus gathered up the plates, carrying them to the counter and putting the garlic bread away. Sirius took the glasses and the pots to the sink, where the scrub brush began to wash them. He turned to take the dishes from Remus, who was hovering behind him. They nearly collided, and Remus froze, dishes in hand.

Sirius was slightly taller than he was, and Remus had to tilt his head up just slightly, while Sirius, in surprise, looked down.

Remus held his breath, pulse humming. Sirius' nostrils flared.

"Good thing we stopped," Sirius said, after a second. "That could have been a mess."

He stepped back, and Remus exhaled quietly, moving to put the dishes in the sink.

"What cologne are you using now?" Sirius asked, as he bent to wipe down the kitchen table. Remus raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I borrowed some of it. Good stuff, thought I might get a bottle."

"Use mine, it's all right," Remus offered. "Less clutter that way."

"Ta. I'll pay you back."

"Wasn't that expensive."

Sirius set the rag next to the sink, washing his hands with some spare suds from the scrubbing brush. Remus leaned on the counter, hip propped against it, watching him.

Sirius stopped, dried himself on a towel, and in one swift, fluid movement, turned and twined both hands in Remus' hair, and kissed him.

Remus was so stunned that for a full three seconds he didn't even tense, and by then Sirius' tongue was working its way between his lips and warm laziness was flooding his body. His hands reflexively gripped Sirius' biceps, mouth opening to deepen the kiss, skin oversensitive to the touch of his fingers down his neck, across one shoulder, around his jaw --

He stopped, and pushed Sirius away, slowly. The other man looked puzzled, breathless.

"Did I do it wrong?" he asked, tense and wary. Remus reached up unconsciously to touch his own

lips.

"No," he said, hand slipping down to rub his chin. "I'm sure you never do it wrong. Why...?"

Sirius looked embarrassed. "Erm. You all right, Moony?"

"Sirius, I..." he shook his head. "Listen, if you want to know what it's like, that's great, I could show you ten or twenty men who'd be glad to tell you, but...you don't get to use me to find out, all right?"

"I wasn't *using* -- "

"No, it's fine, I know you'd never -- but I'm not a toy, Sirius. For anyone. I stopped that game a long time ago," Remus added. "However good your intentions are, I'm not the one to try them out on. For my sake, for Harry's sake -- not me."

Sirius, dark eyes watching him, nodded slowly. Remus felt his shoulders relax, felt his body settle back into something approaching normal.

"I'm sorry," Sirius muttered.

"It's fine, I said," Remus replied.

He wandered out of the kitchen, sitting at his desk in the corner, neatly sorting the papers waiting for him there. He heard Sirius go into the bedroom, and then duck into the bathroom. Water ran for a moment, before Sirius re-entered with a book, and settled into the battered old couch to read. Remus breathed a barely-perceptible sigh of relief.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 12

Remus, recovering from the kiss he'd just received and the feel of Sirius' body against his, was halfway through a calming letter to Dumbledore, carefully and possibly redundantly updating him on Harry's progress, when Sirius, from the couch, cleared his throat. He glanced up. Sirius was staring at his book, one leg drawn up against his chest.

"You know when we were in school, James and I..." he said, trailing off. Still looking at the book, Remus noted. "Well, we'd been down to the pub after the Cup match, sixth year, you remember after the party, we went out."

"Yes, because the Slytherins came looking to murder you and nearly got hexed by Lily instead."

"We nicked some firewhiskey and went up to the Shrieking Shack to celebrate."

"Hell of a place to have a party."

"And James said to me, *oi Sirius, you ever kissed a boy?*"

Remus' breath caught, sharply.

"And we were drunk, and stupid, and what the hell, right?" Sirius said, an embarrassed crimson creeping over his cheeks.

Remus examined himself for bitterness, and was pleased to find none; ten years ago he would have hated Sirius for having let James do that, for having played that game with James and not with him, but James was dead and Sirius was a grown man now, and Remus had done some growing-up of his own.

"Is this supposed to make me feel better about the fact that I'm not going to let you fool around with me because I'm in love with you?" Remus asked, before he could think what he was saying.

Sirius stared at him. It took Remus a minute to figure out why.

"Me?" Sirius asked, slowly, while Remus panicked with his usual quiet grace.

"If you must know," Remus answered tightly, dipping his quill in the ink and bending to finish a sentence.

"Me, Moony?"

"You're not stupid, Sirius, don't act like it."

"You're in *love* with me?"

"Yes, well, why else would anyone tolerate your atrocious taste in art," Remus replied. "You daft idiot, did you think I kept working at Sandust because I didn't realise I liked it there? I could have bought a partnership in it twice over. I didn't want to. I wanted to work there, still, not have you hire some spotty teenager to do my job while I took in profit and did nothing. I wanted to be around you. Or for you to keep me around. Either way," he added, with a shrug.

"Moony, that's a hell of a thing to tell a man you're supposed to be platonically sharing a bedroom with."

"You're the one who kissed me. Don't tell me you weren't planning to drag me down the hall and seduce me on one of those twin beds."

Sirius brooded for a while. Remus kept writing, though he'd no idea what he was saying; words about Harry and school, his friendship with Ron and Oliver, and Molly's regard for the boy kept flowing from the pen without any attention on his part.

"You don't seem too upset about it," Sirius said finally.

"About the fact that I'm in love with you and you sleep with any female who'll give you the time of day?" Remus asked. Sirius winced. "Well, after nine years -- "

"Nine bloody years, Moony? "

"-- one becomes rather resigned to one's fate. Besides, the physical aspect of any relationship is the least satisfying."

"Wow, have *you* been sleeping with the wrong people."

Remus laid his quill down, and rested his chin on one hand.

"We spend every day together, Sirius," he said softly. "Whether you're you or Padfoot. We've talked about everything there is to talk about in this world and still we find new things, every day, so that neither of us like it when an actual customer comes in and I've got to help them. You come to me when you need reassurance, when Padfoot wants to be skritch'd behind the ears, when you don't know what to do. I come to you when I want company, when I'm unsure of myself, and you keep me sane during the full moon, or patch me up after it. We almost never fight. We get drunk together. We're raising a child together, Sirius, for God's sake. You tell me I need to have sex with you to be happy? I have a good life. I don't regret much. I love you. That's enough."

Sirius looked as though his world had been destroyed, and Remus felt a moment of regret, but what could he have done? The words were spoken. There wasn't any way to unspeak them.

"Nine years?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Probably longer," Remus admitted. "But you know, it was James and Lily getting engaged, that really made me think about it."

"For crying out loud, Moony. Why didn't you say something?"

"Because you'd sit there with your jaw open and ask ridiculous questions. Love isn't all grand passions and dying confessions, Sirius. You read too many Russian novels."

Sirius seemed to check himself, and rubbed a hand over his face. Remus finished the letter to Dumbledore, and set it aside to be sealed and sent. What was next -- oh yes, he had a list of things to buy for Harry in Diagon Alley, from Molly, and he wanted to send a note back asking if she wanted him to get anything for her class while he was there...

"Moony, what am I supposed to say to you?" Sirius asked finally.

"Unless you're planning to radically readjust your sexuality and your idea of what love is, I doubt you can say anything," Remus replied.

"What you said about us, doing all those things together, I'm half of that, you know."

"Yes, and you love me like a brother, I'm sure. But you don't *want* me, you don't desire me, and, ergo, you don't get to seduce me just so you can feel what it's like to be with another man, which, aside from the fact that you haven't been laid in too long, I can only assume is your motivation. Now let's close the book on this and forget it happened," Remus added, setting Molly's note aside. He found his desk clear, and glanced up. Sirius was staring at him still. Remus stood, and walked to the bookshelf, taking down a copy of Euripides' selected plays.

He felt the warmth behind him, the hand on his, before he even realised Sirius had stood. Sirius' hand made him push the book back into the shelf. Sirius' other arm went around his waist.

A small ache started in Remus' stomach. Sirius didn't understand, he was still going to try this, and Remus would have to push him away again.

"I've done my experimenting," Sirius said softly, into his ear. The ache spread upwards, changing as it did so. Remus was familiar with pain, and he knew that it was modulating from the ache of wanting something you couldn't have to the ache of being touched after so long without touch...

"With James," Remus answered.

"I know how it feels."

"Bully for you."

Sirius nuzzled him in the place where his neck met his shoulder, and Remus twitched.

"You smelled so good," he said, his hand bringing Remus' -- still raised to touch the book -- down and across, until both his arms were wrapped around Remus' slim body.

"You didn't borrow my cologne, did you," Remus moaned. "Sirius, stop it -- "

"No," Sirius answered. "I'm half of all we've done, Remus."

The ache had clenched the muscles at his throat, now, and the pleasurable pain where Sirius' lips were pressed to his pulse was almost unbearable.

"You like women," Remus protested, tilting his head back a little to provide Sirius easier access to the sensitive skin of his throat.

"I like you," Sirius replied, breathing small puffs of air along his skin. They stood there for what seemed like too long, until Remus relaxed, slowly, into Sirius' embrace. He turned his head, let Sirius kiss him on the lips again, let Sirius' tongue explore his mouth. He could feel the same sensual, tingling ache in every place their bodies touched; lips, throats, Sirius' chest against his shoulderblades, Sirius' hips against his, the arms around his body, very nearly holding him up.

"Sometimes love *is* about grand passions," Sirius murmured, into his mouth.

"Too many Russian novels by half," Remus replied, a sigh catching in his throat as Sirius released him, steadied him on his feet. He turned. Sirius was staring at him as if he'd seen a revelation. "It's no good, Sirius," he said softly. "Don't think I don't want this, I'd kill for it, but I don't want you if you're going to enjoy yourself for a few weeks and then go back to chatting up the customers in Sandust."

"That must have killed you," Sirius whispered.

"You are who you are," Remus shrugged, unwilling to admit that the first time it had happened, seven years before, he'd nearly put his fist through the wall. He ran his fingers through his hair, re-ordering it where Sirius' attentions had tangled it. Sirius smiled and stepped close. Remus lifted his head and Sirius bent slightly and their foreheads pressed together, and Remus thought he might just die from the ache that was now covering his skin, making it hypersensitive to touch.

"I don't know why I thought it," Sirius said. "God, you smelled good, and I thought...I wanted to touch you. I didn't know how, Moony."

"You did all right," Remus answered. Sirius moved slightly so that their lips were touching again -

There was a knock at the door, and Sirius let out a moan of frustration.

"We're *not* finished," he said, as Remus pushed past him to answer it.

It was Arthur, a sheepish grin on his face. "Harry forgot his books," he explained. Remus held out a hand to accept them, examining the titles carefully before passing them to Sirius. "Molly says they've reading for Monday, so I thought I ought to bring them by."

"I've a note for Molly, actually..." Remus ducked back towards his desk, fetching the parchment.

"Thank you, Arthur," Sirius said, with a smile. "I'm sure Harry will appreciate that."

"Also, I wanted to ask if you wouldn't mind showing me -- that is to say, I know Harry took Ron around the Muggle shops near Sandust," Arthur said. "As a curiosity, I'd like to see them too, but I'd rather not get into trouble without a...well, a guide."

"No trouble at all," Sirius said, over Remus' shoulder, as he passed him the letter for Molly. "Drop by anytime."

"Ta, lads," Arthur said, giving them a jaunty grin as he and Disapparated from their doorstep. The pair of them stood there for a minute, looking out, before Sirius closed the door, slowly. He turned, and leaned against it, crossing his arms.

"What do we do now, Moony?" he asked, handing Remus the books. Remus set the books down on the hall table, and tried to breathe. Sirius was giving him a look that made it difficult.

"Tea," he said finally. Sirius blinked. "I need tea," he repeated.

"You do realise you're compulsive about tea?" Sirius asked, following him into the kitchen.

"I'm English."

"You're compulsive even for an Englishman."

Remus filled the kettle with water, and pointed his wand at it. It sparked, and steam began to emerge.

"D'you want some?" he asked, taking down two cups. He heard Sirius walk forward, felt his arms go around him *again* ...he was not going to be able to take much more of this relentless affection...

Sirius' right hand turned the cups over, dropped a measure of loose tea into each. Remus leaned back into him, slightly, covering Sirius' left with his where it slid around his waist. Sirius poured the hot water.

"Sugar," Sirius murmured, picking up the shaker and pouring some into one of the mugs. "Honey," he continued, adding it to the other. "Milk?"

"No..." Remus moaned.

"Drink," Sirius said, picking up the cup with the honey in it, and holding it to Remus' lips. He drank, smoothly, the hot tea warming him. Sirius' fingers made small circles against his shirt, just above his hip.

The mug clicked on the counter when Sirius set it down.

"You don't understand," Remus said, gently and reluctantly prying Sirius' arm away.

"I do," Sirius answered, stepping back. "I do understand and you're just frightened."

"I have everything to lose."

"Me?"

"Yes. And if I lose you I lose Harry -- he's not *my* godson -- "

"You won't lose me."

"Prove it," Remus said quietly. Sirius looked lost.

"How?"

"Be you," Remus replied. "And I will be me. And we'll go on for a while. Like we have been."

Sirius let out an impatient whine, a note of Padfoot in it.

"And if you stay, knowing what you know -- at least until the next full moon is done -- then I'll believe you," Remus said finally. Sirius bent his head, rubbed his neck anxiously.

"Fine," he said. "But after that you don't get to tell me what I'm thinking anymore."

Remus felt a twinge of shame and fear, but Sirius smiled, and reached around him to take his tea.

"I think I'll go read a Russian novel," he said loftily.

In the morning, Harry woke to find himself draped across the foot of Oliver's bed, rolled up tightly in Oliver's blanket, while his own sleeping bag seemed to be covering the other boy, who was sleeping properly on the bed, snoring and tossing occasionally.

"Morning, Parvus," said one of the other boys, and Harry slid off the bed. "Sleep all right?"

"Yes, thank you," Harry said politely, digging in his knapsack for clean clothes. The other boy didn't seem at all worried about undressing, so Harry merely turned his back as he changed, packing up his pajamas and laying Frog carefully on top.

"Coming to breakfast?" Percy Weasley asked. "The rest of them'll probably sleep through it, but you can come with me if you like. When're you going home?"

"This afternoon," Harry said sleepily, falling into step with the red-headed boy. "I'm s'posed to go to the Headmaster's office before lunch."

"Right, I can show you were that is," Percy said, as they crossed the silent common room and passed through the portrait hole. "It'll probably be a bore, but you can come to the library with me if you want. I've a paper to write."

"On what?"

"Dark Creatures," Percy answered.

"What're they, then?"

Percy looked down at him curiously. "Like vampires and werewolves, and ghouls, and all. We don't really get to learn about 'em until third year, but we're supposed to write a paper about the different kinds. Sort of a...an overview," he concluded. "It's for Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Harry nodded, and let Percy ramble on, while they found their way down the stairs and into the Great Hall. A couple of early-rising Slytherins waved to him as he sat across from Percy at the Gryffindor table, and he saw Professor McGonagall talking to Headmaster Dumbledore at the high teachers' table.

Once he'd woken up a bit, with help from some really excellent fried eggs, he peppered Percy with questions about his classes, until Percy laughed and said the younger boy could help him with his research in the library. Harry, who had been quickly infected with Remus' love of books, followed Percy eagerly, and helped carry books to a study-table.

"You look for pictures of werewolves I could copy out," Percy ordered. "I'm going to find some facts about vampires."

Harry paged through the volumes slowly, staring in awe at the printed plates of various monsters and magical creatures. Percy muttered to himself, copying things down occasionally.

Harry turned a page, and looked down. There was a cartoonish drawing of a normal-looking man, with a little diagram nearby; arrows pointed to his hands and his eyebrows.

"The only way to tell a werewolf from an ordinary human being is to look for hair on the knuckles and a single eyebrow crossing the bridge of the nose," Harry read aloud. "Though not all werewolves possess both these traits, one or another will usually mani...mafi..."

Percy leaned over. "Manifest," he said.

"Manifest itself in an adult werewolf," Harry finished. "Golly, they look just like everyone else."

Percy nodded. "They're savage during the full moon, though. I heard my mum talking about it once. If there aren't any humans around to attack, they'll attack themselves."

Harry, staring at the illustration of a slavering wolf on the opposite page from the smiling, cartoonish man, felt a sudden shock.

He's just sick, Sirius' voice said.

A vision of Remus, lying on the bed and shivering, covered in clawed cuts and bite marks, rose in Harry's mind.

"But they only change on a full moon," Percy said. "And there's only twelve, thirteen of those a year."

Twelve times three is thirty six, Sirius' voice continued.

Two and a half, Remus' voice replied.

Twelve full moons a year and two and a half years until Harry started school...

One of us has to be human, said Remus, in his head.

Harry let out a small gasp, and nearly fell off his chair.

"What?" Percy asked, anxiously. "What is it?"

"N...nothing," Harry stammered. "A picture scared me, that's all."

Percy gave him a tolerant, slightly condescending smile, and returned to his essay.

Moony's a werewolf, Harry thought, staring in shock at the vicious, frightening drawing in front of him. He could even see Remus' hands, deft, nimble-fingered, tying one of Harry's shoes, and the light-brown hair across the knuckles.

He slid off the chair, closing the book suddenly. "I have to go," he said. Percy looked at a clock on the wall.

"There's an hour yet," he said.

"I need to talk to the Headmaster," Harry insisted. "And get my knapsack."

"All right, do you want me to -- "

"No, I know the way," Harry said, hoping he did.

"Are you sure?"

Harry nodded, and fled the library.

He ran down the hallways, navigating by faint memories of following Professor Snape through the castle, until he reached Gryffindor Tower. Oliver and the others were dressing, and Harry pulled the sleeping bag off Oliver's bed, squashing it up until it was once again about the size of his fist.

"Thank you for inviting me," he gasped, because even Moony being a werewolf was not more important than the good manners Moony had taught him. "I had a wonderful time."

"Are you going already?" Oliver asked, disappointed.

"Got to. I'll be back...thanks again..." Harry called, as he ran out.

He found the Headmaster's office without error, but ran into a problem once he arrived; he could knock all he wanted, but the door remained firmly shut.

"Password," a gargoyle said, and Harry almost burst into tears of frustration.

"Cadbury Creme Egg," came a voice from behind Harry, and Harry nearly jumped out of his skin.

Albus Dumbledore stood behind him, smiling gently. "I had not expected you for a while yet," he said, offering his hand to lead Harry into the stairs that led to his office. "Homesick already?" he asked, going to Fawkes' cage and dropping in a handful of some kind of strange feed.

"I...I wanted to ask you..." Harry stammered. Last time, Oliver had asked permission for him to come stay; Harry was still in awe of the Headmaster.

"It's all right, Harry," the Headmaster said, tapping him with his wand to remove the glamour on his scar, the extra-long hair. After nearly two days of having it, Harry felt strange to feel his own close-cropped cut again.

"Is Moony a werewolf?" he blurted. Dumbledore looked down at him, thoughtfully.

"I did think you might come to that conclusion, though I don't think anyone expected it to be so soon," he said, still in the same gentle tone. Harry thought for an awful minute that the Headmaster might tell him that it wasn't his business to tell, but instead he said bluntly, "Yes. Remus Lupin is a werewolf." He paused. "You aren't frightened of him, surely?"

"No," Harry said angrily. "He's Moony."

"Ah, the logic of youth," Dumbledore smiled. "You understand that he can't help the way he is?"

"He's not bad, is he?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, he's not. Merely unlucky."

Harry contemplated this. "Should I tell him?"

"That he's unlucky?"

"That I know."

Dumbledore regarded him gravely. "That is your decision, my boy. Now, I believe your guardians are expecting you..." he guided Harry to the large fireplace, and tossed in a handful of Floo powder. "Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black?"

"Here, Headmaster," came Sirius' voice, faintly. "You're early."

"I'm sending Harry through now."

"All right..." Sirius's voice trailed off as Harry stepped into the fire, and announced, "Sandust Bookshop!"

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 13

There was a certain amount of tension that Harry could sense, when he arrived in the bookshop; having grown up with the Dursleys, Harry was unusually attuned to the moods of the people around him. It was a survival trait more than anything.

Sirius, though he welcomed him back, didn't stay human very long after Harry returned. Remus smiled and was happy to see him, but he was also quiet -- even for Moony -- as Harry sat in one of the wing-chairs, Padfoot's head resting on his knee, and told them about his sleepover in excruciating detail.

Except, of course, for what Percy had been researching.

It was a quiet group that left Sandust as Remus locked up, and Harry, arm slung across Padfoot's broad doggy shoulders, followed him down towards the bakery. The brothers who worked there had already assembled their evening purchase -- a day-old bagel with honey for Padfoot, an apple turnover for Moony, and an oatmeal cookie for Harry.

Harry fed Padfoot the bagel in little bits, as they walked towards the flat. Moony was silent, lost in his own thoughts; Harry was watching him, covertly, to see if it was really true -- if you really couldn't tell a werewolf from a human.

By the time they reached the front door, he'd decided it didn't matter.

"Come into the kitchen, Harry, you ought to wash up. I don't care if he's an animagus, dog drool is dog drool," Remus called, setting his satchel down in the kitchen. Harry came in and climbed the stepstool to the sink, while Remus unpacked his turnover and set it on a plate, leaning on the counter to eat it tidily with a fork.

"Is Sirius changing back tonight?" Harry asked, hearing Padfoot throw himself down in front of the couch in the living room.

"I don't know," Remus replied. "You could ask him."

"Are you fighting?"

"Who?"

"You and Sirius." Harry dried his hands. "When Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia used to fight, she wouldn't speak to him."

"No, Harry, we're not fighting," Remus said, around a mouthful of apple. "When civilised people fight, they sort out their differences as they go, so that they don't have to resort to childish things like the silent treatment."

"But Sirius *can't* talk when he's Padfoot."

Remus considered him shrewdly. "Harry, you know how you have Frog?"

"Yep."

"And you know how afraid you were when you first came to live with us? And you wouldn't let Frog go?"

Harry grinned and nodded.

"Well, being Padfoot...for Sirius, it's rather like Frog. When he's upset...it gives him space to think about things."

Harry reached up and broke off a corner of his apple turnover. Remus pushed some icing onto it. Harry popped it into his mouth and chewed, thoughtfully.

"So what's he upset over, then?" he asked.

Remus looked startled. Harry waited patiently.

"Well...erm...it's difficult to explain," he began. Harry sighed.

"Is this another grownup thing?" he demanded, slightly impatiently.

"I guess we've used that excuse a lot, these past weeks, haven't we," Remus admitted. "It's just...Sirius is sorting a few things out. He needs to think really hard about them. That's all."

Harry considered the wary-looking man in front of him. After a moment, he nodded.

"All right. But if he isn't Sirius again by tomorrow I'm going to make him take a bath," he concluded. Remus smiled and ruffled his hair.

"Run on in, maybe Padfoot wants you to read to him tonight," he said, watching as Harry left the kitchen and clambered up onto the battered old couch. Padfoot joined him, and Harry took a copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* from the end-table. He listened to Harry read for a few minutes, over the occasional thump of Padfoot's tail against the couch when Harry spelled out a particularly long word, before turning back to the kitchen. There was dinner to make, after all.

He'd stood just about here when Sirius had kissed him. And he'd stood just about here when they'd made tea together, and --

Crockery crashed, and Remus swore.

"All right, Moony?" Harry called from the living room. Padfoot's ears perked.

"Fine, Harry, I just knocked a plate off the counter," he called back, hurriedly fixing it with a

Reparo! and a flick of his wand.

Enough of this foolishness. They would go on as they had gone on, hadn't he said that himself?

Better get on with going on then, hadn't you, Lupin...

Padfoot slept on Harry's bed that night, though he was human and hogging the shower when Remus woke the next morning. He seemed as though whatever issues he'd been sorting out had been sorted, and for Harry's sake, Remus tried to treat their interactions as normal, but it was difficult. He hadn't realised how much they ribbed and teased each other, until he was no longer comfortable doing it.

It was almost a relief to leave for Sandust, and know that Sirius was taking Harry to a Sunday matinee at the cinema. Sometimes he rather thought it was Harry taking Sirius -- Harry was much more accomplished at handling Muggle money, and better at choosing which movie they ought to see.

This week it was a comedy of some sort, as far as Remus could tell, when Harry and Sirius met him at the door. It was Sirius' turn to cook, which meant that as long as he didn't smell smoke when he stepped inside, it would probably be edible. He sniffed; pork chops. Mashed potatoes...and mushy peas.

Sirius Black comfort food. The sort of thing you'd cook if your best friend was upset with you. Despite the fact that Remus didn't like mushy peas, or have a particular affection for pork chops.

He shook his head. Sirius, so haplessly self-absorbed sometimes.

"Early dinner tonight," Sirius called, from the kitchen. "We're going stargazing."

"We're what?" Remus asked, as he walked towards the bedroom, Harry trailing him.

"Astronomy. Do you know Harry doesn't know a single constellation?" Sirius said, from the kitchen doorway. Remus pulled off his shirt, changing it for a Muggle t-shirt and a jumper.

"Not one?" Remus asked Harry, who shook his head. "Well, that definitely has to be solved, but..."

"I thought we could take the motorbi -- " Sirius paused at Remus' look. "Or the train, the train works too. Get outside the city a little, take a star-chart, you've still got your old textbooks, haven't you?"

"Somewhere."

"We can be back in plenty of time for Harry to get a good night's sleep for school tomorrow, and they're going to start on constellations soon anyhow, Molly said," Sirius continued. Remus, realising that Sirius had planned this carefully, if quickly, dug around in the bureau for his gloves.

"Sounds fine," he answered, walking back down the hallway, Harry running on ahead. Sirius looked at him blankly.

"It does?" he asked.

"Sure, as long as Harry'll get enough sleep. I haven't done any astronomy since school," he said. Sirius continued to look at him. He flashed the other man an enthusiastic grin. "Let's eat, then," he continued.

Sirius, after a few seconds, matched his grin.

"Splendid," he said. "Grand. Let's eat."

"Yay potatoes!" Harry said, climbing into one of the dining-room chairs. Both of them looked at him.

"Did you like mashed potatoes when you were eight?" Remus asked.

"Hated them."

"Me too."

Sirius shrugged, and pushed Remus gently towards the table. "He can have my peas, too..." Remus called after him.

"Oi, Moony."

"Hm?"

"Cold?"

"Not after the brandy. You?"

"Got a warming charm on."

"Where's Harry?"

"Asleep. On top of my leg."

"Serve you right."

"For what?"

"Being all...parental and that. Serve you right, kid falling asleep on your leg."

"You weren't supposed to drink the whole flask."

"I didn't. You had at least half."

"A quarter, and I hold my liquor better."

"Lies and falsehoods, Padfoot!"

"You'll wake Harry."

"Well, we did come all the bloody way out here on account of him."

"Look at that."

"What?"

"There's the dog star."

"Hmm, and Orion. I always liked Orion."

"Why?"

"Easy to find."

"No, really, why?"

"First constellation I ever learned. My dad taught it to me."

"One of the first Harry learned, too. We taught him."

"Indeed we did, Pads."

"Taught him the dog star first, though."

"Well, of course."

"I don't mind, you know."

"Mind what?"

"Harry sleeping on my leg. I don't mind...I love him, Moony."

"Course you do. Course you do."

"No but like...not on account of he's James' son or on account of I'm supposed to. I love him. Cos he's him."

"Good."

"D'you hear something?"

"Like what?"

"Dunno. Probably nothing."

"Move over a bit."

"What're you on about?"

"You're warmer than me. I'm cold."

"We ought to go soon."

"Hmm. Soon."

Harry was indeed lying on Sirius' right leg, head pillowed on his calf, but he wasn't asleep; he was looking past Sirius' boot, to where a pair of low, shining eyes glittered in the dark.

Hello , said Harry, barely above a whisper. *Do you live here?*

Hello, big one , said the snake. *I live here. Do you?*

No, I live in the city , Harry answered.

Then why are you in my field?

Harry thought about this. *Sirius took me to look at the stars.*

The snake bobbed its head. *The what?*

The stars.

What are those?

Look up above you , Harry said.

The snake turned its head to look up, then looked back at Harry.

I don't see anything , it said.

I'm sorry , Harry said politely. *Maybe you're too small.*

There's a mouse next to you , the snake said. *I'm going to eat it.*

Harry heard movement, felt Remus shift his weight on the blanket the three of them were sharing, moving closer to Sirius. When he looked back, the snake was darting away, after a shadow -- the mouse it had intended to eat.

"Sirius?" he said, sleepily.

"Yes, lad," Sirius' voice, low and even. "I think it's time we packed it in for the night."

Harry pushed himself up, and saw Sirius sitting up too, rubbing the back of his head. Remus was lying next to Sirius, hands behind his head, still staring up at the stars. "Come on, Moony," Sirius said, poking him. Remus smiled, barely visible in the starlight, and rolled off the blanket. Sirius folded it a few times, then wrapped it around Harry and scooped him up in it. Harry shrieked, surprised.

"Come on, we'll catch the last train back," Sirius said, setting Harry down again and giving him the blanket to wrap around his shoulders. "Coming, Moony?"

Both turned to see Remus, standing there, looking up at the moon. He glanced at Sirius, then back up again.

"Moon's waxing," he said quietly.

"Does every month," Sirius answered.

"So I'm told," Remus said, with a sudden smile. "Right, we'd better get back or Harry'll fall asleep in school tomorrow and Molly will tan both our hides."

The next week-end, Harry visited Hogwarts again, excited to be able to see his first actual Quidditch game. It was going to be Slytherin against Hufflepuff, and Harry wanted to sneak away to sit with Oliver and listen to his play-by-play, but he was content enough to sit next to Professor Snape and cheer on his friends in Slytherin house.

"I hope you aren't cold," said Professor Snape, as he followed Harry up the ladder and into the stands. Harry waved his black knit gloves, and pulled his red hat tighter on his head. "You must take care, it's quite windy today."

Harry didn't point out that he'd been in the stands when they were empty, many times before, without accidentally falling to his doom. Instead he let Professor Snape put a steadying hand on his shoulder, and lead him to a pair of really great seats. He waved at Oliver, who grinned and waved back.

"You may see your friend after the game," Professor Snape said, coolly. Harry perched himself on the bench, and sat, fidgeting excitedly. "Do be still, child," Snape said. Harry satisfied himself with looking over every inch of the Pitch, and trying to name off all the students nearby. He knew a good number of them, by now, mostly Slytherins and Gryffindors. He still found it peculiar that the two houses didn't talk.

A small waxed-paper sack appeared next to him, and he glanced up at Professor Snape, who was apparently watching the players walk out onto the Pitch. He picked it up, feeling it warm against

his palm. The sack was filled with sweet roasted almonds, the sort that one of the students was selling before the game.

"Thank you," he said, below the cheering of the students. Professor Snape didn't answer.

He cheered fairly indiscriminantly; it was fun to yell for Slytherin, who were winning, but also a secret sort of joy to root for the underdog Hufflepuff, who were obviously trying harder. Oliver seemed to be pulling for Hufflepuff as well.

Then he saw the Slytherin Seeker dive, and knew she'd seen the Snitch -- he fancied he could make out the small golden ball as well, and he actually caught his breath when her hand snapped closed around it, and she pulled away from the dive, circling the stands to riotous cheers.

"They won! Did you see?" Harry asked, forgetting himself and tugging on Professor Snape's arm. He let go immediately, but the older man merely glanced at him, and the edges of his mouth quirked momentarily.

"I did see," he said, calmly. "It was well done."

He waited while Harry ran across the stands to talk to Oliver, who was less cheerful, but no less excited.

"This means Hufflepuff's out of the Cup running, and it'll be Gryffindor and Slytherin for the cup," he explained, sharing the last of Harry's roasted almonds. "Bill Weasley promised me I could help them get dressed and carry their brooms for them before the cup, what'd'ya think of that?"

Harry was awestruck. "I'll root for Gryffindor then!" he said. "I'm sure I'll be let come back to watch the last game. I've got a red and gold shirt even, and Si -- and my dad'll give me a sickle to buy a pennant with."

"Parvus," Professor Snape called.

"I've gotta go. Tell Hufflepuff I'm sorry!" Harry called, as he ran back towards Professor Snape, shoving the empty waxed paper into his pocket. He held out his hand, and like second nature, Professor Snape took it, leading him through the crowds, towards the ladder.

"Where're we going now?" Harry asked.

"Back to the dungeons, you've had enough excitement for one day," Professor Snape replied. "You may help me feed the animals."

Harry clambered down the ladder, waiting at the bottom for Snape, who dusted himself off before joining the crowds walking back towards the castle.

"Will you take me to see a grownup Quidditch game sometime?" Harry asked. "In a stadium and everything?"

"We shall see," Snape replied. "I think you are rather too exciteable."

"I'll be good," Harry promised. "Please?"

"We shall see," Snape repeated. "Until I decide, do not speak of it further."

Harry obediently fell silent. He'd found the best way to please the cranky professor was to be quiet, and do as he was told; it was hardly ever a chore, especially if he was being quiet and doing as he was told in a place like Diagon Alley, where one didn't need to talk to experience the wonders of the magical shops.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 14

When they arrived back at the castle, Snape unlocked the small, warm room labeled "No Students Allowed", and Harry stepped inside, enjoying the heat on his face after the chilly outdoors. He knew the dungeons quite well by now; there was the Potions classroom, with a storage closet on one side and the artificially-warmed animal room on the other, and the large rack of student-access ingredients in the back. Beyond that, the Slytherin common room, and Professor Snape's quarters, neither of which he'd seen for more than a minute or two.

He'd been in the animal room once before, but only briefly; now, Snape led him inside, and gave him a small jar of white pellets.

"The far wall, the mice," he said, and Harry crossed the dim space, curiously eyeing a glass case full of mice. Snape appeared behind him, his hand dipping into the terrarium to retrieve a small blue bowl. Harry filled it, stopping when Snape told him to, and watched the mice rush to the bowl as Snape set it down again.

"Does it tickle?" he asked, seeing the mice brush past the Potions Master's pale fingers.

"I don't notice it," Snape replied.

"What're they for?"

"Snake food. And some spells," the man added thoughtfully. Harry watched them, thinking of the snake in the field when he'd gone stargazing with Sirius and Remus. "The larger ones have already been fed, or I would demonstrate," Snape said, with a toothy, not-very-pleasant grin. Harry followed him to a stand against one wall, climbing on top of a chair to press his nose to the glass of another terrarium. A small garter snake lay lazily in this one, forked tongue flicking out every once in a while.

"You like snakes, huh?" Harry asked.

"Whether I like them is immaterial," Snape answered.

"Then why've you got so many?"

"They're necessary. Snake-skin is a common potions ingredient, and some breeds are useful for augury."

"What's that?"

"A method of telling the future. Far more accurate than pasteboard cards and tea dregs," Snape said, and Harry formed a mental picture of Professor Trelawney. "This specimen is useful mainly for its unique skin. It's called -- "

"Hello, snake!" Harry said, as the snake began to move. Professor Snape scowled.

"Don't you want to know its name?"

"Snakes haven't got names," Harry replied scornfully.

"How do you know?"

"I asked one once. She told me," Harry answered absently. *How are you today, snake?* he asked. The snake bobbed its head. *Are you hungry?* he continued. *What d'you eat?*

Little things, came the reply.

Harry grinned up at Professor Snape, who was staring at him in shock. "What do you feed this one?" Harry continued, blithely.

"Can you understand what it's saying?" Professor Snape asked.

"Oh, yes. Sometimes, they don't like to talk. They're shy."

The professor didn't seem to be doing anything, so Harry jumped off the stool and went to the opposite counter, where a large jar of crickets stood. Crickets were little, after all.

"How do I just get a few?" he asked plaintively. As if pulled out of a trance, the man picked up the jar swiftly, releasing a catch on the lid, and let two or three insects slide out through a narrow gap, into the snake's cage. The snake made short work of them, hissing with delight, while Harry watched in fascination.

"Mm, Crickets!" Harry exclaimed. "I bet those are like chocolate for them, huh?"

"I...had not considered the matter," Professor Snape replied, fingers tapping on the glass of the cricket jar. "How did you know it wanted crickets?"

Harry sighed. "He *told* me."

"How?"

Harry paused, and met Professor Snape's eyes directly, something he very rarely did. They were dark, but gleaming with curiosity.

"My aunt and uncle didn't believe me either," he said.

"Didn't believe you?"

"I told them I could hear what snakes were thinking," Harry explained. "And I can," he added angrily. "I'm not telling tales."

Professor Snape was very quiet. After a moment, he turned, and picked up a strange-looking contraption from the table.

"Come with me," he said, leading Harry deeper into the gloom. They ended in a dark corner, where the only light was cast by a heat lamp above a small case. Inside was a thin, black, angry-looking reptile.

"This is a Black Tiger. Its venom is prized for its magical properties. It is the basis for a number of extremely complicated potions, the compositions of which are..." he paused. "...of no interest to eight year olds. The venom is collected through a process known as milking."

"Like a cow?" Harry asked.

"Rather not. The snake bites the rubber pad, here..." Snape indicated the lid of the contraption, "...and the venom drips down into the jar. Unfortunately, they are...tempermental beasts."

"Oh," Harry said thoughtfully. He regarded the snake. "He looks mean."

"As such, I have been unable to successfully collect any venom. So," Snape said, lifting the lid. "Let us try an experiment, shall we?"

"Okay," Harry agreed.

"You believe snakes can understand you?"

"Yep."

"Can you tell this one to do as I've shown?"

"To bite the rubber bit?" Harry asked.

"Precisely."

Harry leaned over until he was on eye level with the snake, took a deep breath, and said, *Hello, snake.*

Sod off, said the snake. He sounded remarkably like Professor Snape, and Harry grinned.

Don't you like your cage? Harry asked.

My what?

Do you like the heat?

Yes.

Harry nodded. *Bet you wouldn't like it much if the heat went away.*

Sod off, the snake repeated.

My uncle wants you to bite the little thing he's sticking into your cage, Harry continued. *And if you don't we'll make the heat go away.*

The snake stared at him. He reared, suddenly, and hissed. Harry felt Professor Snape grip his shoulder, ready to pull him back.

Bad snake, Harry scolded. *Do as you're told.*

Why should I bite a silly thing like that? the snake said sullenly. Harry thought about it.

If you do, we'll give you a mouse, he said.

A whole mouse?

"Can we give him a mouse?" Harry whispered. Snape glanced down at him.

"Yes."

A whole mouse, Harry promised. *Still alive, even.*

The creature darted forward, faster than Professor Snape could draw back; before either human knew it, the snake had thrust its fangs into the rubber covering of the jar, and was thrashing back and forth.

Snape held it until the snake was exhausted, thumb behind the head, deftly keeping it in place. When he released it, it snapped half-heartedly at his hand before slinking into a hollow in one of the rocks.

Harry ran back to the terrarium with the mice in it, and reached in, unsqueamishly grabbing a small one and carrying it back to Snape, who was fascinated -- glancing from the jar to the snake and then back to the jar again.

"We promised," Harry said. Snape took the mouse and dropped it, by the tail, into the cage.

"Come away now, boy," he said, though Harry wanted to stay and see if the snake could really eat an entire live mouse at one go. He covered the jar with a glass stopper, placed it in a chilled cupboard, and led Harry out into the Potions classroom. Harry sat on one of the workbenches, and Snape leaned on his desk.

"Did the experiment work?" Harry asked, suddenly afraid he'd done something wrong.

"Yes, Harry," said Snape, using his real name for once. "I do believe it did."

Harry's visits with Snape always made Sirius cranky, and Remus tried to distract him; in this case (though it wasn't what Sirius would have picked) he had slyly arranged an invitation to an early dinner out of Molly. Sirius, who knew when he was being manipulated, refused to change back from Padfoot. Remus, undaunted, brought the dog along, giving the excuse that Sirius wasn't feeling himself, much to both of their amusement. At least this way he didn't have to make dinner conversation and answer questions about Moira.

He'd spent a lot of time as Padfoot lately, Remus reflected. It was slightly worrying.

Still, being a gigantic black dog did nothing for Sirius' desire to be left alone; all through dinner the children slipped him scraps of Molly's excellent meal, and afterwards his presence was demanded on the lawn. Fetch might not be as entertaining to an animagus as to an actual dog, but it did give him a chance to stretch his legs a bit. Remus, meanwhile, sat with Molly and Arthur near the back door, watching the children play and sharing the wine he'd brought as his contribution.

Ginny and Padfoot ran up as Fred and George got into a wrestling match, and threw themselves down on the lawn near Remus, who, it was suspected, was the object of Ginny's seven-year-old adulation.

"There now, Pads, don't smash her," Remus chided, as Padfoot nearly sat on Ginny, who squeaked and moved out of the way.

"That your only worry, with a dog his size?" Arthur asked.

"Pretty much. The worst he ever does is accidentally knock over furniture," Remus answered, while Padfoot allowed Ginny to rest her head on his neck.

"He's such a gentle dog," Molly said. "And good with the children -- Harry's always talking about him. Really, it's rare to find that in big dogs."

"He's a child himself," Remus murmured. There was a twitch of the ears from Padfoot.

"Ought to breed him, Remus," Arthur said. Padfoot snorted suddenly, and Remus hid a smile.

"Oh, I don't know, perhaps he wouldn't take to it," Remus replied.

"Well, then you ought to get him neutered -- my!" Molly exclaimed, as Padfoot yelped. "Ginny, don't pull his ears."

"I wasn't!" Ginny said petulantly. Padfoot slunk most of his enormous bulk under Remus' chair.

"Especially since you don't keep him on a lead. I mean who knows what he might get up to while you're not watching him," Molly continued.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Remus answered easily. Padfoot, head poking out from under the chair, was glaring balefully at him. He reached out to skritch him behind the ears. "He's a good

dog."

"Well, if you do stud him out, we wouldn't mind a puppy, would we, Moll?" Arthur said. Molly looked dubious, even at the prospect of gentle Padfoot's pups. Arthur reached over and pulled Padfoot's muzzle up slightly, checking his teeth.

"Ought to have some of these looked at," he said, with the air of a professional. "There are chew toys that clean the teeth, I've heard..."

Remus coughed to hide his laughter as Padfoot tugged away, resting his head across Remus' shoes.

"Is he a mutt, now, or purebred?" Arthur asked.

"Oh, very pure," Remus replied. Padfoot bit his ankle. "His mother was quite a fine bitch."

Padfoot lapped at the bite, apologetically.

"How does Sirius like him? I thought he and Sirius didn't get on so well."

"Not at all. Sometimes Pads even sleeps on Sirius' bed," Remus said, amused. "Though of course he likes Harry better."

"Really? I'd think an eight-year-old wouldn't hold much interest for a dog like him."

"Well, Harry feeds him," Remus grinned.

He was going to get thoroughly yelled at later by Sirius, but it was entirely worth it.

"It is not so unexpected, Severus. We know Voldemort was a Parseltongue, and that the boy is closely linked to him, in ways we are only beginning to understand."

"But in a child so young, Headmaster, certainly something ought to be done."

"What precisely would you do?"

"...I don't know. Educate him somehow."

"He is receiving an excellent education at the hands of Molly Weasley, and will be attending Hogwarts. Do you propose to tell his guardians?"

"I hardly see how we can keep it from them. Surely we have an obligation to use this knowledge."

"Do we? Of what use is his ability, at the moment?"

"Use? He's a boy, he shouldn't be talking to snakes. And let us not forget many dark wizards began as parseltongues."

"Many dark wizards *were* parseltongues, Severus, there is a difference."

"Black and Lupin ought to know."

"Surely they'll notice, in their own time."

"I don't *like* them, you know, but they are responsible for Harry's welfare."

"And you like Harry."

Severus paused in his pacing of Dumbledore's rooms, stopping so sharply that his robe hems swirled around the tops of his boots. He stared at the Headmaster, dumbstruck.

"He is a charming little boy, there's no sin in being fond of the lad," Dumbledore continued imperturbably.

"I'm responsible for his education in what it means to be a wizard, that is all," Severus said tightly.

Dumbledore smiled. "And you have no personal feelings towards the boy."

"None whatsoever."

"Purchasing treats for him at the Quidditch match, I suppose that's merely -- "

" -- making sure he's well-nourished. I don't trust Black to keep milk cold, let alone fix edible meals for him."

"And your boasts to Minerva of his intelligence?"

"Observations shared with a fellow teacher."

Dumbledore's fingers tapped on his desk, thoughtfully.

"It's..." Severus began, stopped, tried again. "When he is...Parvus...it is very easy *not* to see his father in him. It is easy to think of him as...a nephew. Family."

Dumbledore's gaze was unnerving. Severus shifted his weight and changed the subject quickly. "He doesn't think it's anything unusual, you know. All children think they can talk to animals, it's - - young ones have vivid imaginations. He simply never grew out of that delusion, because that delusion happened to be true. To him it's as natural as speaking to you, or to myself. Perhaps more so. He perceives them as his equals. He's not squeamish, either, he wanted to feed that mouse to the viper himself."

"He understands the orders of nature," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Severus, let the boy be. You will not speak of this to Sirius. If he discovers it on his own, well and good; if not, I see no

harm in allowing it to continue."

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape said, sullenly. "Shall I fetch Harry?"

"Please do."

The dark-haired man passed into the outer chamber, and held out his hand. Harry glanced at it for a moment, surprised -- Professor Snape had never offered his hand before, merely taken Harry's when it was held up -- and took it, allowing himself to be led into the office. Dumbledore was just leaning out of the fireplace.

"You're ready, Harry," he said, as Severus removed the glamour from his scar and hair. "Do travel safely."

"Thank you," Harry said politely, well-used by now to the trip. He tossed a handful of floo powder into the flame, stepped inside, and said, "Sandust Books!" clearly.

Dumbledore looked up at his Potions master, who was watching Harry vanish from sight.

"There is no harm, sometimes, in letting a child be a child," he said gently.

"Harry is more than a child," Snape replied. "But I hardly imagine that will change anything. Good day, Headmaster."

Harry returned to Sandust to find Remus gone again; Sirius was quiet and Harry thoughtful as they ate, and Harry spent the evening reading about Wales, where Remus had apparently gone exploring. Harry slipped a glance at the calendar, where the full-moons were pre-printed, and realised that Moony was timing his travels now. He'd get sick while traveling, and come back in...well, Tuesday was the full moon, so, four days from now...

He curled closer against Sirius' hip. His godfather was reading a novel of some kind, and he glanced down as Harry shifted.

"You look worried, pup," he said quietly.

"M'not," Harry answered. "Just thinkin'."

"About?"

"Snakes," Harry lied. "Professor Snape's got tons of 'em."

Sirius grinned. "You like reptiles?"

"Yeah, I guess. Snakes are neat. They never lie," Harry added. Sirius rubbed his hair, and closed his book.

"I know we've been asking you to keep a lot of secrets, Harry," he said. "But they're for your own good. When you start school, everything'll change. Not so many secrets," he continued.

Harry privately reflected that Sirius didn't know the half of it.

"And we're better than the Dursleys," Sirius said. "Er...we are better, aren't we? You don't want to go back there, do you?"

Harry shook his head vigorously. Give up Sirius and Remus, his new friends, his books and toys, Professor Snape and the snakes, all because of a couple of secrets?

Sirius was smiling at him. "Good lad," he said. "No fear, eh?"

"No fear," Harry replied. "Am I really gonna go to Hogwarts?"

"Course you are, why wouldn't you? You've got magical ability and you're a Potter. Very old respected wizarding family, the Potters," Sirius said, almost to himself. "And you've got me and Moony too. There's nobody better at Dark Arts than Moony, you know."

"What about you?"

Sirius paused. "I'm more sort of an all-over wizard," he said. "I do a little of everything."

"Are you from a Very Old Respected Wizarding Family?" Harry asked.

"Well, I don't know about Respected, but Old certainly applies. The Blacks are a very ancient house."

Harry got the mental image of a house made entirely of mummies. Sirius saw the look on his face, and grinned.

"What I mean is, they've been around forever," Sirius said. "It's not a literal house."

"Do you have a dad and mum?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry, they died. All I've got is -- " he paused. "Well, you. And Moony. It's us three, you know. All we've got is each other."

"And the Weasleys," Harry added.

"All right, and the -- "

"And Professor Snape and Oliver."

"Well, that might be stretching things a bit," Sirius temporised. "Not that Oliver's not a nice enough lad, I'm sure, but he doesn't feed and clothe you, you know."

Harry grinned and jumped down off the couch. "Let's go play chess," he said. "Nina's been teaching me."

"Oh?" Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Who's this Nina now?"

"A girl in Gryffindor."

"A girlfriend?" Sirius drawled. Harry laughed and hooked a hand in his pocket, pulling him along. "All right, short stuff, calm down..." He reached up into the cupboard and took down the gameboard.

All in all, he thought, there were far worse ways to spend an evening than playing chess with his godson.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 15

It was the third full moon since Harry had come to live with them, and things were not getting easier.

Remus had expected that at least the years of Changing with Padfoot around would have taught him some self control, in that he felt more...more himself, when he was with someone else who was both animal and human. He'd feared that the opposite would be true, as well, that the years of not having to control himself would result in having no control.

The truth was somewhere in the middle; it was just like it had been when he was a young boy, only now he was more conscious of what happened when he Changed -- he couldn't stop himself from clawing and biting, but he remembered it more clearly afterwards.

This was not exactly a comfort when he found himself on the hard, dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, and had to slowly pull himself up onto a bed, uncoordinated, half-blind, and nauseated.

He was nearly asleep, so exhausted that breathing was an effort, when he heard the sound of someone Apparating into the dim, dusty room. He didn't have the energy to move.

"Moony?"

Sirius.

"Give me the day, Pads," he said, appalled at how little sound actually made it past his cracked lips. "Come back tonight. I can't travel right now."

"I didn't come to take you home," Sirius said, and he heard him draw closer. "I wanted to see how you were."

"I'm okay. Where's Harry?"

"School. Molly's taking the boys and Ginny on a picnic."

"Harry'll like that," Remus said, trying hard to concentrate on the words, and what they meant. "I'm fine, Pads. Just sleepy."

There was a brief rush of cold air, and he hissed; then warmth again, under the thick, ratty old blanket that had been in the Shack time out of mind. A separate warmth, human and physical, pressed against his back.

"Sirius..."

"Shh. I read about this," Sirius said, body molding to his angular lines, knees curling against his. "You know, your whole body's one big heating pad, right? And heat's good for healing."

"You're mad," Remus replied, but he let Sirius pull the blanket closer, let the heat of the other man seep into his skin.

"If I were Padfoot you'd let me sleep on the bed," Sirius pointed out. Remus winced, slightly, as Sirius' hand, draping over his hip, touched a sore spot just below the waistband of the cotton pyjama pants he wore.

"Sorry," Sirius mumbled, and Remus felt the roughness of Sirius' trousers on his bare waist.

"It'll heal," Remus answered. The world seemed unreal; warm, to be sure, full of a distant pain, and somehow slow -- as if time was not passing the way it normally did.

"How are you, Moony?"

"M'okay."

"You smell dusty."

"Can't be helped."

"I didn't say I minded."

Remus was aware of Sirius' face, pressed against his neck; of Sirius' lips, moving against his skin. He did not wince, this time, when they slid over a healing cut on his back. Sirius' breath warmed his skin, his shoulder now, and the sensitive, uninjured stretch of his neck...

"Sirius," Remus muttered, the light kisses moving closer to his jaw. "What're you doing..."

"Shh, don't worry," Sirius answered. "Just lie still."

Sirius' hand, Remus realised, was rubbing small circles on the mostly-intact skin of his stomach.

"Sirius, you should stop..." he said, turning his head with supreme effort, and Sirius, now propped on one elbow over him, silenced him with his mouth.

Remus moaned into the kiss and fell back, face upwards, with Sirius bent over him, hand still pressed to his stomach, lightly. Sirius leaned forward, moving gingerly, not wanting to hurt him.

"Heat's supposed to be good for you," he said, his body shifting to cover Remus entirely -- jumper soft against him, hands now holding Remus' head gently, thumbs stroking his cheekbones. Remus closed his eyes, too exhausted to do more than feel -- Sirius' warmth, Sirius' careful movements, Sirius' lips tracing electric sensation across his jaw, back up to his mouth again.

"Lie still," Sirius repeated, into his mouth. "I'm here. I'll take care of you."

Remus gasped softly, through the fatigue and the pain and the sudden joy pooling in his stomach at the thought of Sirius, his Sirius, here, caring for him...

He didn't know how long they lay like that, Sirius propped over him, legs and hips lying against his, kissing him, hands on his face -- had no idea how much time passed until he began to feel numb, even to this, as fatigue overcame him. He heard Sirius murmuring reassurances as he slid into sleep.

Sirius felt the moment Moony slipped from consciousness, and drew back a little, moving to curl around his body, covering as much of it as he could with his own. The other man's breathing deepened and slowed, and Sirius felt it slowing his own; he had time to sleep a little, if he liked. Harry wouldn't be arriving at Sandust until late this afternoon.

Moony had said *wait until the next full moon* , and Sirius was not a patient man. The full moon was done; he was here.

It was different, wasn't it, from women; he knew that vaguely from one rather fuzzy night with James, years ago. For one thing, most women weren't ridiculously tall, as Moony was. There were more angles to his body, fewer curves, though part of that was simply because in addition to being ridiculously tall he was ridiculously skinny, for a man who ate three square meals a day. His jaw was stubble-rough, which was certainly something Sirius had never encountered in any of the many women he'd taken out.

But he was Moony.

Sirius took care of him, had always taken care of him. Since the first day of classes at Hogwarts, when one of the older Slytherin girls was picking on him in the hallway for being the smallest (and for the way, the night before, the Sorting Hat had fit over almost his entire head), and Sirius had made her shoelaces tie themselves together magically while Remus tried not to laugh...

They'd grown up together, explored Hogwarts together -- there had been two or three years when Remus was looking for a job and Sirius was being a useless ass, living off his inheritance -- but then after James and Lily died, and Sirius realised that Remus wasn't eating, couldn't afford to -- *Merlin, Moony, you couldn't have told me you were starving?*

He paid his salary, kept him company on the full moon, gave him free rein in running Sandust, and in return Moony...

Loved him.

He sighed, and pressed his face to the soft brown hair which was already turning silver. Had he been doing this for years because Moony loved him or had Moony loved him because he'd been doing this for years -- or had he been doing this for years because he...

...or did it matter?

You like girls , Moony had said, and Sirius had replied *I like you* .

Well, he wasn't going to break Moony's big stupid heart. He liked Moony and liked the sound of Moony's voice and the way he always crouched to hug Harry goodnight and the look in his eyes when he was frustrated and Moony when he was tired and Moony when he burned the scrambled eggs in the morning and then ate them anyway, and he liked how Moony's body felt against him.

The idea of a life where Remus Lupin wasn't the one behind the counter at Sandust was a chilling one. He would do what he had to, to keep the happy life he'd built.

"Moony," he said softly, and felt the other man shift to curl closer to him. He repeated the name, over and over, soothingly.

"Pads," Moony muttered softly, in his sleep.

"Ninety-six...ninety-seven...ninety-eight..."

Remus woke to the comfortingly familiar sound of Sirius counting his press-ups, and drowsed his way through Sirius counting his sit-ups before bothering to move. He was warm, and surprisingly comfortable; not nearly as sore as he'd been the past two Changes. Perhaps he really was getting used to it. He vaguely remembered the morning after the Change, being bundled up by Sirius and brought back to the flat, and the usual trauma, the shakes, the pain, the half-consciousness; seeing the sunlight now on the floor of their bedroom, it was probably morning again already, day after the Change. Moon waning.

He pondered, watching Sirius through slitted eyes as he performed some kind of bizarre slow-motion martial arts.

A strange memory from the day before floated to the surface, and he prodded it, while his hands explored the few vicious wounds still healing on his ribcage and hips.

It wasn't as though he'd never had dreams about Sirius before. They spent all their time together, after all. And it was true that his dreams did tend to be more vivid around the full moon. But that one, sometime between Changing and waking again to Sirius bringing him home, had been...particularly so.

Well, obviously he'd heard Sirius talking and worked it into a dream, or some such.

He gingerly pushed himself up, carefully noting just where it hurt. Less stiffness in his back than usual. Good shoulder rotation. He turned his head.

"Daft underwater kung-fu," he said, in a hoarse voice, and Sirius at once dropped what he was doing, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Good morning," he said, and Remus thought he detected a note of caution in his voice. "Sleep well?"

Remus rolled his shoulders. "What time is it?"

"Coming on ten. Feel all right?"

"Sort of." He shook his head to clear the last of the cobwebs from it. "I had strange dreams."

"I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself -- "

"Yes, yes," Remus cut him off, a trifle irritably. "That was *bad* dreams, and you're not allowed to inflict Shakespeare on me until at least after tea."

Sirius shrugged and tossed him a shirt from a nearby chair, following it with underwear and trousers, turning so as to give him some privacy as he dressed.

"Close up Sandust for the day?" Remus asked, buckling his belt. Sirius heard the clasp, and turned to look over his shoulder.

"Just the morning. Thought I'd see you with lunch and then go in and do a half-day. Got to pick up Harry, anyhow."

"Mm. He only has another week of school, you know."

"I know," Sirius said calmly. "I've been talking to the Weasleys about it. He's going to see the Cup next weekend, at Hogwarts, and then I thought perhaps we'd...do something."

"You can't take him to a game yourself, Sirius, you -- "

"No -- I know," Sirius said, and Remus saw a wistfulness in his face that made him turn away, as if he were seeing something he had no right to intrude on. "But -- we can do Muggle things. A touring trip, somewhere. Italy or Egypt or something."

"Well, I'd be happy to run Sandust," Remus offered. Sirius threw himself onto the edge of the bed, flopping back to stare at the ceiling.

"I was hoping you'd want to come along," he said. "You've been all over, you'd know where to go."

"The places I go aren't really hot tourist spots."

"Well, if you don't want to come, don't feel you must," Sirius answered crossly. Remus was silent, wandering into the bathroom. He never really felt functional in the morning until he'd had a shave.

He examined himself in the mirror, not entirely displeased; he didn't look so much like a walking skeleton as he sometimes did. He touched the corner of his jaw, and suddenly flinched.

The memory crossed his mind so fast he almost missed it. Sirius' lips on his jaw, at the precise point where the joint was, where the muscles bunched and ached after a night of trying to keep them from latching onto his own skin as a wolf.

Sirius lying in bed with him, not only in a dream set in the Shrieking Shack but in his own bed here, as well. Perhaps part of the same dream. Waking twice to find Sirius' arms around his body -

He lifted his shirt, unsure what he would find; nothing but fast-healing dark patches which had been nasty open wounds yesterday.

He probed his memory, laying out the day's events like tools on a surgeon's tray.

He had woken from the Change and crawled into bed, dreaming of Sirius. Woken again to muscle spasms and aches that had made it nearly impossible to stand, even with Sirius supporting him. A few fuzzy moments which must have been their Apparation onto his front step. The sight of Sirius' fingers wrapped around the key to the front door. Bed. Pain. Tremors.

Harry's voice, high and childish, comforting as he and Sirius brought in some dinner. The odd, unpleasant tang of soup broth, irritating his dry throat, followed by cold water -- one of Sirius' hands on the back of his neck while the other hand held the cup to his mouth. Stumbling into a bath, at least able to do that on his own, which allowed him some shred of dignity. Then cotton pyjamas and hot tea with a shot of firewhiskey in it.

Slipping back into sleep and...and dreaming again, the same dream in a different place, warm bodies pressed together, hands covering his.

And then waking this morning to Sirius' usual routine.

He gave up on the mystery and lathered his face, shaving carefully around a small scar, sharp bones, slightly-twitching lips. He almost felt good enough to go in to Sandust himself, and said as much to Sirius, as he patted his face dry.

"You should rest," Sirius rumbled. "It's not like I'm going to dock your pay, you know."

"I like work," Remus answered softly. "And it's nice to be there when Harry comes in."

Sirius was silent for a while. Remus sat on his bed, elbows on knees, thinking.

"Hungry?" Sirius asked, after a while.

"Not really." Remus considered things. "Do I talk much in my sleep?"

Sirius sat up, forehead wrinkling in perplexity. "Not that I've ever heard. Why?"

Remus shrugged. "Just curious."

"Dream about Peter again?"

"No," Remus replied, cheeks reddening slightly. "Other dreams. Nothing really."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 16

"You know, I was thinking," Sirius said, over dinner that night, after Harry had given his usual monologue about the day's events.

"Oh, dear," Remus sighed. He'd been quiet through dinner; there were a few new scars, and he was self-conscious about the one on his hand. "It's never good when Sirius has been thinking," he said to Harry, who laughed and took an enormous bite of his roll.

"Smaller bites, please," Sirius scolded, before continuing. "As I was saying before the peanut gallery interrupted, I've been thinking that there's no actual reason we can't go see the Cup, as well."

Remus and Harry both looked at him, perplexed for a moment.

"But I thought Professor Snape was taking me," Harry said.

"Well, there's no reason Remus and I can't go root for Gryffindor as well," Sirius said reasonably. "Plenty of parents come to see the Cup. I'd be willing to bet Arthur and Molly are going. Bill's captain now, they'll want to see his last Cup game."

"It might be dangerous. If people see us they'll be looking for Harry, and I've never thought that a little glamour and some long hair were enough to hide him," Remus said warily.

"Well, they won't look for him in the Slytherin stands," Sirius answered. "Which is where he'll be."

"I wanted to sit with Oliver but he gets to carry broomsticks and towels and all so he's going to be out on the field," Harry interjected. "I guess I'll sit with Professor Snape."

"Who're you going to root for?" Sirius asked. Harry looked pensive.

"Snakes are cool," he said. "But Oliver's cooler and he's a Gryffindor."

"If you're in the Slytherin stands you should probably root for Gryffindor very quietly and circumspectly," Remus advised.

"Up Gryffindor!" Sirius cheered.

"Up Gryffindor!" Harry chimed in.

Remus smiled.

"We'll go and cheer for you, won't we, Moony," Sirius said.

"Perhaps we can get seats with Arthur and Molly, make an afternoon of it," Remus agreed reluctantly.

"Molly makes good potato salad," Harry advised. "But she puts ham on her sandwiches. So I fed it to the ducks."

"Ducks?" Remus asked. "Is she keeping ducks now?"

"The whole sandwich?" Sirius asked.

"No, we were in the park," Harry replied amiably. "Just the ham. I took it off. I didn't know ducks liked ham."

"When were you in a park?" Remus inquired.

"Yesterday. We all went for a picnic and to study..." Harry thought hard. "E-co-systems. Molly says it's a Muggle idea. Bout how everything feeds everything else. And then we fed the ducks, which just goes to show," he finished, setentiously.

Remus was staring at Sirius.

"Where's Harry?"

"School. Molly's taking the boys and Ginny on a picnic."

"Harry'll like that. I'm fine, Pads. Just sleepy."

He thought he'd dreamed it, though...

Sirius stared back, guilelessly, eyes almost inviting the question. Not here at dinner, however, not with Harry going on about ecosystems.

"...so we tried to catch a real frog, but they're too fast, and Ginny said she didn't want a frog anyway, she wanted a rat like Percy has. Sirius?"

Sirius broke the stare, and glanced down at Harry. "Yes?"

"I'm done."

"Take your plate to the kitchen, then, and I'll be in to read with you in a little while."

"Can I bring my markers?"

Sirius nodded, and touseled his hair as he took his plates to the kitchen.

"I want a word with you," Remus said, in a low voice, when Harry was out of earshot.

"After Harry's asleep," Sirius answered.

"I don't like this, Sirius -- "

"You were hurt, you needed me. We'll talk later," Sirius added, as Harry returned, carrying a package of cheap coloured markers and a pad of thick white paper.

Remus worked at the desk in the corner, settling Sandust's book-keeping -- which was always a little fractured after the days Sirius had minded the shop -- while Sirius read a book about sled-dogs to Harry and Harry drew picture after picture of sleds, and dogs, and occasionally a little green frog off in one corner. Neither man could honestly claim that they thought Harry had any great talent, but by god he knew what he liked. Dogs and frogs.

It was very difficult to stay angry with Sirius.

It was very difficult to figure out why he was angry with Sirius in the first place.

It was an abuse of trust, that was what it was, crawling into the bed of a man who could barely move and kissing him like that. He couldn't shake the belief that this wasn't Sirius-in-love (and Sirius had been in love once or twice, Remus knew, but for one reason or another it never worked out). This was Sirius, knowing that his best friend fancied him, and enjoying the fact.

Sirius hadn't asked him for anything, though. He'd just lain there and held him and been a really good kisser.

Remus watched as Sirius closed the book and crawled down onto the floor to lie there on his stomach, next to Harry, and admire his drawings. It really wasn't fair that Sirius was such a natural father on only three months' practice.

It wasn't fair that he was forced to live with Sirius and Harry and watch that and not really be a part of it. It wasn't fair that he wouldn't leave now even if he could.

It wasn't fair that Sirius was such a bloody genius when it came to magic and yet too stupid to realise that he wasn't in love, he was just...bored, or lonely, or something.

It wasn't fair that Sirius should kiss him like that. It wasn't fair that he didn't even remember it fully and it was still better than anyone else he'd ever had.

It wasn't fair that Sirius was charming and handsome and his best friend.

Sirius glanced up, smiling from something Harry had said, and caught him staring. The look in his eyes darkened, into something like desire.

Remus glanced away, then back down at his figures. Accounting. A steadfast rock of mind-numbing boredom in a world that was rapidly going to pieces.

Sirius looked back down at Harry's drawings, realising that he'd just embarrassed his friend, and

also that he was far more turned on by the intensity of Remus' amber-brown stare than a man ought to be when he was supposed to be playing at markers with his godson.

"What's that now?" he asked, as Harry drew a lopsided square in black, colouring the bottom a sandy tan shade. Harry uncapped a dark brown marker and drew a squiggle. He was pleased that his voice didn't tremble.

"It's a...terr...arr...ium," Harry said carefully. "Professor Snape showed them to me."

"And this?"

"That's a tree for the snake to crawl on."

"The snake, eh?"

Harry nodded and drew a black lump in the corner. "An' that's a place for them to hide. Snakes like to hide."

"Is the snake in there?"

"No," Harry said scornfully. "Where's the fun in that?"

Sirius heard Remus chuckle, from the desk.

"Where's the snake going to be?" Sirius asked.

"Right here," Harry said, pointing to a little dent in the sand, beneath the squiggly tree. He looked up. "Remus, what colour should I make the snake?"

Remus glanced up from his paperwork, surprised. "I don't know, Harry."

"Well, what colours do *you* like?"

Remus considered the matter. "Red," he said finally. "And brown."

Harry nodded, and selected a red marker. "I saw one that was white and red striped with Professor Snape."

Sirius watched as Harry finished the snake, drawing careful diamond patterns and a brown outline, and then tore the page out of the book of paper, standing and carrying it to the desk. He presented it gravely to Remus.

"That's for you," he said.

Remus accepted the paper, looking down at it, perplexed. Sirius could see Harry's face, hopeful and growing worried. Remus' fingers traced the square of the terrarium, drifted up to a couple of small frogs in one corner of the page. Finally, he smiled.

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "It's great. I'll hang it on my wall."

"Next to the picture of the tree?"

Remus nodded. "Sure. I'll get a frame for it tomorrow."

"Harry can help you hang it," Sirius suggested. "Come on, lad, it's time you were getting to bed."

Remus set the drawing carefully on a corner of the desk, rising once Harry and Sirius were brushing their teeth, to tidy up the markers and set them and the paper in a neat pile for Harry to take back to his room. He went into the bedroom, fingers drifting idly over the assortment of things on his dresser top, the detritus of emptied pockets and knick-knacks collected over the years, odd bookmarks, spare change in a small wooden bowl, the bottle of cologne Sirius had said he'd borrowed, a tin of Magic Hair Demessifyer he used occasionally, when he had to look more presentable than a casual bookshop-owner generally did.

How had he filled this room on his own? Well, his bed had been a bit bigger, and he'd taken out a bookshelf, but still. The flat must have been echoingly empty without Harry and Sirius here. How had he not noticed?

And what would he do if one day Sirius decided to leave? Harry would, anyway, and sooner than it seemed. Two years was hardly anything. Sirius would no doubt get a place in Hogsmeade so that he could be near the boy, probably sell Sandust. It wasn't as though Sirius lived on the income from Sandust, though you probably could.

You probably could, he heard himself think. *You could buy Sandust, you've enough saved for a down payment.*

He heard Sirius close Harry's door, and pad down the hall to their bedroom, closing that door too. He was still standing, staring at the things on his dresser, when Sirius spoke.

"I was going to explain it to you," he said. "After Harry was asleep. I was."

"I'm sure you were," Remus replied. "Tell me, was it both times, or did I dream the second time?"

He glanced up at Sirius, who looked vague, and spread his hands. "Both times."

"Was this time the first time you'd done that?"

"Listen, it's not as though I committed a crime," Sirius tried. "You were hurt."

"It's exactly as though you committed a crime," Remus sighed. He hadn't even the energy to shout. "You didn't give me a choice. I couldn't very well push you away, could I. You took advantage of that."

"If you'd told me to stop I would have."

"I did tell you to stop, Sirius."

"Yes, and then you kissed me back." Sirius leaned on the top of the dresser, so that Remus could either meet his eyes or move away. "If you'd told me to stop twice, I would have."

"And if you didn't? Would it have been three times?" Remus crossed his arms, bowing his head. "What you did was wrong, whether or not I...enjoyed it."

"Did you?" Sirius' voice cracked. Remus looked up.

"I trust you to help me when I'm sick, Sirius. I trust you not to use that to your own ends. And now I can't. So whether I enjoyed it is immaterial. Whether I want you coming to the Shack the next time is a question we have to settle now."

Sirius turned pale.

"Was it so awful?" he asked quietly.

"How do you think I felt, thinking it was just one more dream and then finding out it wasn't and I'd been acting like a fool all day? Do you think I enjoyed finding out from Harry that it hadn't been?"

Sirius looked like he might even be near tears. "You were in pain. I hate to see you like that. Why do you think...why do you think James and Peter and I spent three years trying to find a way to help you? And now because I have everything I wanted, because I have Harry, you have to go through it all again. I just wanted to help you. I wanted to make you feel better."

"If I want your help, Sirius, I'll ask for it," Remus said, gently.

"But that's just it, Moony, you *won't*," Sirius exploded. "You weighed nine stone when I hired you for Sandust. How much do you weigh now?"

Remus muttered something rebelliously. At Sirius' look, he cleared his throat. "Twelve, maybe thirteen."

"You won't even ask for things you *need*, let alone things you want."

"I'm a grown man -- "

"Starving, Remus. You were starving to death. Every bloody week you said you'd a new job and you were sure you could hold this one and every bloody week you lost it because they found out what you were which is *not your fault*, or they wanted you to work a full-moon day." Sirius growled. "And you didn't say anything until you went to stand up and fell bloody over and I had to take you to St. Mungo's. And it's the same now. I don't know what you want me to do because you won't tell me -- "

"I don't want you to do anything! You have Harry and you're happy, that's all I care about."

Sirius regarded him carefully. "What about you? Don't you want anything?"

Remus sat on his bed, miserably. Sirius circled the dresser and crouched next to him, brushed hair out of his eyes. He flinched away, and Sirius sighed.

"Everything you want is right here for you to have, if you ask for it," he said softly. "Harry loves you. You can care for him too, it's okay. You can take him places and read to him, and tell him to do his homework and buy him things and teach him things. All you have to do is ask." He swallowed. "And...you can have me, too. Everything you want. Harry and me and a partnership in Sandust and a place in the world."

Remus was silent, lost in some inner thought process Sirius couldn't decipher.

"But you have to ask for them," Sirius added. "If you want it you have to take it."

Remus leaned forward and put his face in his hands.

"I need more time," he said finally. Sirius sighed.

"Another full moon?"

"Please, Sirius. If you lose me all you lose is me. You still have Harry and Sandust and stable income. If I lose you I lose Harry, I lose Sandust, I lose everything." He looked up. "And I need to know that I can survive that, first. If we...have...anything, it needs to be because we want it, and not because if it ends one of us is going to starve again."

"I'd never let that happen."

Remus gave him a bitterly amused look. "You'd be surprised what happens when people start to hate each other. One more full moon, Sirius."

"Let me show you," Sirius said, as persuasively as he knew how. "Just until then let me show you, Remus -- " he swayed forward, and pressed his face in Remus' neck. This time the other man didn't shy away. "Look what you could have," he murmured, against his skin.

Remus made a soft little moan, in the back of his throat. "Egotist," he replied, breathlessly. Sirius, in reply, slid his lips up over the edge of Remus' jaw, pushing him slowly backwards.

He resisted.

"Harry's in the next room," he whispered, though he was turning his head to find Sirius' mouth as he said it. Sirius ran his tongue along his lower lip, heard that pleasant moan again. "Sirius, please."

Sirius leaned back, heart racing.

"One more full moon," he said. "I can wait that long."

A small smile curved Remus' lips. "The patience of Atlas," he said.

"But..."

Remus lifted an eyebrow.

"Can I kiss you?" Sirius asked plaintively. "Not when Harry's around or out in public, just -- once in a while -- I think you ought to know what you're missing," he added, with a stab at his usual good humour.

Remus reached out, hesitantly, and touched his hair, stroking it a little.

"All right," he said quietly.

"And can I -- "

"No."

Sirius smiled again. "Can't blame a chap for trying."

"Can and would," Remus answered. "Don't do that again, Sirius. Bad dog," he added lightly, though it sent a shiver down Sirius' spine.

He nodded. "I should...change. For bed. My own bed," he added virtuously.

He was halfway across the floor before Remus said, "Sirius."

He turned.

"If...if Padfoot liked, he could sleep on my bed," Remus offered. "I...did...like having someone there."

The next morning he woke with the heavy weight of Padfoot's shaggy head resting on his hip, the enormous dog curled up between him and the wall. Padfoot didn't move or even open his eyes when Remus stroked the silky fur between his ears, and murmured, "Good dog."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 17

Sunday came hard on the heels of the full moon, and Sunday meant the Quidditch Cup. Harry barely slept from excitement, the night before.

Sirius was wiser and Remus more cautious than to dress him in Gryffindor scarlet and gold, despite the fact that he had a plenitude of clothing in the colours -- his rugby shirt was already fading from continual wear. They did, however, have just enough House spirit to keep him from wearing green. Instead he went in carefully chosen black and blue...but only after Sirius promised to wear the same.

Sirius brought his field glasses, but spent more time scanning the stands than the grounds; they found seats in the informally-declared Parents' section, a row behind Arthur and Molly, across the aisle from their boy Percy, who was willing to sit *near* his parents if not precisely *with* them. When Sirius finally saw a black-clad shape rise over the edge of the Slytherin stands, he elbowed Remus, and indicated Harry following the dour Potions Master. Neither of them had ever seen Harry in his disguise, and even Remus had to admit that he mightn't have known Harry if they passed on the street.

"Big git," Sirius muttered, watching Snape lead Harry to a seat next to a couple of big Slytherin boys, who gave him familiar if not terribly *friendly* waves. Remus was grateful that Sirius had a grudge to occupy his mind with; it kept Sirius from pestering him. There hadn't been a repeat of that angry, confusing night; sometimes he woke with Padfoot on his blankets, but more often Sirius was in his own bed, and he was beginning to grow comfortable with the idea of...of all of it, he supposed...

There was a sudden crash, and bits of burning things peppered his shirt and arms. Remus flinched and brushed at them -- not actually on fire, just very, very hot --

"Oh, bloody -- Dora?" Sirius asked, brushing his own shirt to get rid of the extremely hot popcorn that had showered on him as well. Remus wasn't sure where to look first; the great crashing thing turned out to be a thin young woman, already trying to help him pluck the fast-cooling popcorn from his clothing.

"Listen, if I have to yell at one more person to call me Tonks -- " the girl stopped, suddenly. "Sirius?" she asked, gaping at Sirius.

"Little Dora?" Sirius demanded. "Merlin, look at you!"

"I haven't seen you in ages!" the girl blurted. Remus, now completely at a loss, gave up and concentrated on brushing salt from his arms.

"Not since you left for Hogwarts -- "

"Mum's been wondering where you'd got to!"

"Oh -- you know how it is...do you remember Lupin? I'm sure you met him at least once before you went off -- "

"...yes..." the girl called Tonks said uncertainly. Tonks -- Sirius' cousin had married a Tonks, hadn't she? And they'd had a little girl -- he'd met her once when visiting Sirius over a school holiday. "I'm so sorry -- "

"It's fine," Remus said, giving her a reassuring smile. He shook the last of the kernels from the folds of his shirt, flicking one into the aisle, where Percy's pet rat darted out and grabbed it. Percy gave him a shy grin as the rat raced up the outside of the boy's trouser leg and perched on his knee to eat it; Remus turned back to the conversation.

"...like Muggles, it's sort of like long-term camping," Sirius was saying. "Of course we have some conveniences..."

"You should write to mum, dad's Muggle-born you know, and he gets Muggle post all the time," the girl replied. "She says she hasn't heard from you in months."

Sirius looked uncomfortable, and then the girl's mouth formed a small 'o' of surprise.

"It's true, isn't it?" she asked, her voice dropping. "You went into hiding!"

"I wouldn't say hiding. No, I wouldn't call it that," Sirius stammered. "Listen, I meant to write to your mum and I just didn't -- "

"Is it true then? You've got Harry Potter? There were rumours going around that someone saw you with him in the Leaky Cauldron, but everyone says if you haven't had him up till now you wouldn't be allowed -- " she clapped a hand over her mouth.

A slow smile spread across Sirius' lips.

"That's a good way to be, Dora," he said quietly. "Hand over mouth, when it comes to Harry Potter."

She nodded, wide eyed. Remus coughed.

"Oh, I've gotten your shirt greasy, haven't I?" she asked, flustered. "I'm so sorry. Here, I'll clean it -- "

"No -- " Remus put up a hand quickly. "Thank you, I'll just do it myself," he said firmly. He was remembering more about Sirius' cousin's daughter, now -- Sirius sometimes came back from lunch with Andromeda Tonks with amusing stories about Dora's latest mishaps.

"Well -- all right then..." she looked uncertain, and he smiled at her as he charmed the shirt clean again. "I should go -- friends waiting -- game about to start..."

"Run on then," Sirius smiled. "Say hi to your mum for me!" he called after her. She waved and dashed off, tripping several people in the process.

"Rumours," he said darkly, while Remus, amused, watched her extricate herself. "I've wondered what the Wizarding world had to say about us..."

"Yes, I'd rather thought we'd have more people gawking at the bookshop," Remus agreed. "But then, nobody's known where Harry was for almost eight years, so why that should change at all -- and we were only seen in the Leaky Cauldron for a minute. I know Molly and Arthur are circumspect, and the other children probably simply haven't had the opportunity to mention it to anyone who would care. It's remarkable how well some secrets get kept," he added.

"I should have words with Andromeda," Sirius said.

"I agree. It's not as though you actually *are* in hiding," Remus answered. "Look, the game's about to start."

"Where's Harry?" Sirius asked, picking up his field glasses again.

"Aren't you going to watch the game?"

"No," Sirius said with a grin. "I'm going to watch Harry watch the game."

Silence. He glanced over at Remus, who was looking at him with an indefinable expression; confused wasn't quite the word for it, but it came close. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Remus said quickly, turning to watch the players enter the Pitch. "Sometimes you surprise me, that's all."

The game was a good one, close and well-played; Slytherin cheated, but Remus had somewhat resigned himself, long ago, to Slytherins being cheats. Normally he would have had to hold Sirius in his seat to keep him from crying foul and trying to start a riot, but Sirius wasn't paying the slightest attention.

Sirius didn't even notice Gryffindor had lost until they were back at Sandust, waiting for Harry.

Remus, listening to Sirius talk, was rather reminded of Harry, come to that.

"Did you see his face? It just -- it just lit up. He followed everything. He's going to play Quidditch, you know. We'll get him the best broomstick you can get. What is that now, a Nimbus?"

"Probably," Remus murmured, doing a crossword. He always felt drained after a Quidditch match; he'd never particularly liked the sport. He hoped Harry was eating all right -- Snape had said he would feed the boy dinner in Hogsmeade after the game, before sending him back.

"He says one of the Slytherin girls once let him catch a Snitch. Small enough to be a Seeker. James was too, really, but he didn't think there was enough action -- the way he looked when Gryffindor made that save, you'd think it was him." Sirius vanished into the back room, but his voice drifted out. "We had some books on Quidditch, didn't we?"

"Had an enthusiast come in, he bought a few," Remus called. "Try the shelf above the Dark Arts books."

Sirius came out carrying *A Beginner's Guide to Quidditch* and *Quidditch Through The Ages* . Remus gave him a mild smile.

"He's read those."

"Has he?"

"He asked me for them a few weeks ago. And I think his friend Oliver's been lending him copies of *Quidditch Monthly* ."

Sirius looked mildly dismayed. "He never told me."

"When you were nine, Sirius, didn't you have hobbies you didn't tell your parents about?"

"I didn't tell my parents anything, ever, but please, tell me you're not comparing me with them. I'll slit my throat."

"They weren't the most hospitable of people," Remus murmured. He'd met Sirius' mother once, before her death; she'd actually come to Sandust, Merlin alone knew why. It had been ugly.

There was a whooshing noise from the fireplace, and a young voice piped "Sirius!"

Sirius dodged into the back room and swept Harry up into a bear-hug, dragging him out into the bookshop and settling him on the counter. Harry helped himself to the jar of humbugs, greeting Remus with a wave and a grin.

"Were you there?" he asked. "Did you see me?"

"We did," Sirius answered. "Have you eaten?"

"Mmmhm, Professor Snape bought me dinner at the Three Broomsticks," Harry said. "And he said he wants to see you tomorrow."

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Me?"

Harry nodded. "He said he wants to talk to you and will you please floo his office tomorrow at two," he recited.

"Did he say why?"

"Nope. Maybe he needs books," Harry shrugged. "He reads a lot."

Remus and Sirius exchanged a look.

"Two o'clock tomorrow," Sirius repeated. Harry nodded.

"I'll bring the teacakes," Remus said grimly.

A letter arrived by owl post the following morning, and Remus handed it to Sirius, who took it sullenly and slit it with the air of a long-suffering martyr. Harry was off at the Weasleys', his last week before Molly closed up the little home-school for the summer and the other Weasley boys came home -- Percy from his first year and Bill, no doubt, to recuperate from NEWTs; Charlie had got a very prestigious assistantship, and wouldn't even be home before he packed it off to Japan for two months.

Sirius was grumpy. He hadn't slept well or enjoyed his breakfast. He hadn't actively, personally encountered Snape since the day in the Leaky Cauldron, and before that, well, not in a long, long time. He used to hate Snape for no reason, and after Harry's weekends with him, he had a thousand reasons. But all that was forgotten for a moment as he sat up and stared at the letter.

"Good news?" Remus asked, shelving a handful of books.

"It's from Andromeda -- Dora must have spoken to her about seeing us at the Quidditch game. She and Ted want to buy the townhouse on Grimmauld Place."

"That old deathtrap? Isn't it...still...full of things?" Remus asked. "I didn't know you owned it."

"Yes, well, my esteemed mother didn't leave a will, at least not that anyone could find. Everything comes with the house, and *that's* entailed on the male line or she probably would have left it to that Malfoy spawn by Narcissa. As it is, I got saddled with it. I haven't even thought about it in years. "

"Your family," Remus sighed. "So charmingly archaic."

"She says now that Dora's leaving school next year they want a big place, in London -- want to make the bottom floor into some sort of shop." Sirius grinned and shook his head. "They can have it for a sickle. I certainly don't want it."

"Might want to hold onto it for Harry."

"I'll buy Harry something nicer than a mouldering ancestral home full of Dark materials and House-elf heads," Sirius replied. "Goodbye and good riddance."

"Speaking of which, it's about time you floo'ed Snape," Remus said, checking the clock on the wall. "Shall I close up shop and come chaperone the pair of you, or do you think you can be civil?"

"I can if he can."

"More reassuring words were never spoken," Remus said, and turned the sign on the shop door to "closed", following Sirius into the backroom. Sirius knelt on the hearth, and Snape's head appeared in the flames.

"Harry says you wanted a word with me," Sirius growled.

"Not hunched on a hearth, if you please," Snape replied. "I'll come through."

Remus opened his mouth to remark that this was an incredibly bad idea, as Severus and Sirius in one room could very easily destroy themselves and ten surrounding blocks, but Snape was already appearing in the fireplace, stepping out, dusting ash off his severe black robes.

"An inelegant way to travel," he remarked. Sirius crossed his arms. "Do all your patrons receive such a warm welcome, Black?"

"You're not my patron, Snape," Sirius replied. Remus, behind him, poured himself a cup of hot water and added tea contemplatively.

"I should think not," Snape answered.

"Did you want something from me?" Sirius asked.

"Thankfully, no. Except your permission."

Remus cocked his head, interested. Sirius was silent. Snape cleared his throat.

"I understand Par -- I understand Harry will be nine on the thirty-first," he said slowly, in the deep-throated growl which, doubtlessly, struck terror into the hearts of his students. "I would like to give him a...gift. A pet. Something to teach him some responsibility."

Sirius looked stunned, but gathered his wits a little too quickly. "What do you know," he drawled. "It has a heart after all."

Remus began to wonder if perhaps he should have brought popcorn. Or something heavy with which to separate them.

"I am not required to stand on your hearth and accept your abuse," Snape snapped. "I merely thought that *someone* ought to be teaching the child something more than..." he flicked his fingers, "pranks and bad cooking."

"And you're the one to do that, are you?" Sirius asked, dangerously still now. Remus remembered that stillness. He'd seen it at school whenever Sirius was about to do something violent, or stupid - usually both, really...

"May I remind you that it is on Dumbledore's orders -- "

"To hell with Dumbledore's orders! I'm his godfather!"

Snape smiled a terrible, cruel smile. "Ah, yes. So trustworthy that the boy was sent to live with Muggle relatives -- "

Sirius was across the intervening space before Remus could move, and in reality he was disinclined to try. Snape was no slouch at fighting, even without wands; he had his hands up and had got hold of Sirius' collar by the time Sirius was drawing back to punch him in the head. Sirius couldn't get enough leverage for one really good hit, but Snape couldn't get away; they grappled for a few seconds, shouting obscenities at each other, before either even thought to go for their wands. Fortunately both thought it at the same time, and each blocked the other's hand.

Remus sipped his tea.

When they were coming close to knocking up against a shelf of rare books, he thought perhaps it was time to intervene. He never had at school, and Sirius had never tried to assault someone since, so it required a little thought.

"Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, Harry?" he said.

Both men instantly stopped and glanced around, expecting to see the boy. Remus continued, addressing an empty chair.

"That's how immature people solve their problems. No, I don't understand it either."

He knew that both Sirius and Severus were staring at him as if he'd gone round the twist, but at least embarrassing himself in front of them was going to get them to stop for a moment.

"Oh, I shouldn't, if I were you, Harry, you're far too intelligent to go wasting time hitting people who don't agree with you," he said, to the imaginary Harry. "You're far better off trying to *set an example* for those who look up to you."

Sirius sullenly shoved his hands in his pockets. Severus dusted off his sleeves, imperturbably.

"You wanted to give Harry something for his birthday, I believe?" Remus asked mildly. "That's very kind of you, though not at all expected."

The professor glanced warily at Sirius.

"I thought...perhaps..." he began, sulkily. "He seems to have taken a liking to the snakes I keep. It crossed my mind he would like one of his own. I felt it would be *polite* to speak to you first," he said, to Sirius, who looked away, studying the bookshelf. "I will supply everything necessary, of course."

"Harry'll like that," Sirius muttered, rebelliously.

"Then you have no objections," Snape stated, straightening his collar slightly. Sirius shrugged.

"Do what you like," he said, and brushed past Remus, out into Sandust again, slamming the door after him. Snape turned to go.

"A moment please," Remus said amiably, crossing his arms. The Potions Master turned back. "If I ever catch you coming here and deliberately provoking Sirius in that fashion again, Severus, I will personally make sure that you don't walk for a month, and don't speak for two. Understood?"

Their eyes met. Severus nodded slowly.

"I'm sure Harry will love anything you give him. He speaks very highly of you," Remus continued. His tone hadn't once changed. "For the sake of my own nerves, I would appreciate it if you didn't give him anything too poisonous."

"I'll arrange things," was all Snape said, before vanishing back into the fireplace.

The last day of school, Remus and Sirius both came to the Weasleys' for dinner, bringing soup and a bottle of wine to celebrate the end of Molly's classes and the return of the Hogwarts boys. They also had to have words with the Weasley parents about their children; it seemed obvious that Harry would still visit over the summer, and as Bill and Percy -- who knew him only as Parvus -- would be home, they would have to be sworn into the secret.

The pair of them minded the children while Arthur and Molly went to gather their sons from the station; Harry joined in the rush of redheaded children as they ran out to greet the two.

"Hallo, Parvus, what are you doing here?" Bill cried. "And your nice hair's been cut -- "

He stopped, then, when a breeze lifted Harry's fringe off his forehead, and looked up at his parents, who were standing with Remus and Sirius.

"What...?" he said, confusedly.

"His name's not Parvus," Ron said scornfully. "That's Harry Potter!"

Percy joined Bill in his bewildered stare.

"Bill, you remember Sirius Black, don't you?" Molly said significantly. Bill, still looking at a loss, shook Sirius' outstretched hand.

"Like a word with you boys," Sirius said, slinging an arm around Bill's shoulder and leading him away, his other hand guiding Percy with a firm but gentle grip on the back of his neck. Bill glanced over his shoulder to watch the others hustle inside.

"I could swear..." he said, slowly. "That's Harry Potter? The rumours -- "

"Yes, all true," Sirius said, turning the boys so that they faced him.

"He's got a bloody twin, you know," Bill said.

"Professor Snape's nephew looks just like him!" Percy blurted.

Sirius sighed.

Remus, helping Ginny up from a spill on the steps, watched as Bill and Percy's faces changed from confusion to shock, and then to recognition, while Sirius explained the situation. They were both very quiet when they passed through the house and out into the back garden, where Molly and the twins were laying a table. Neither boy took their eyes off Harry -- who was busy sticking the blunt end of a fork up his nose to impress Ron and Ginny -- until the meal began.

"Did you know, Bill's taken his specialty in hexes and charms?" Arthur said to Sirius, who nodded politely. "He's going to India in a few months, they've had some nasty problems with some old tombs there."

"Interested in Eastern work, then?" Remus asked.

"Nah," Bill shook his head, and accepted the potatoes from Fred. "Pyramids are where the real work is. This is just a stepstone."

Molly tsked. "Far too dangerous if you ask me."

"Aw, but they're brilliant, Mum!"

"I've some very interesting manuscripts on translating magical idiograms at the bookshop, if you'd like to come by sometime," Remus offered. "Sirius, pass the rolls? -- and I'm sure we're never going to sell them otherwise. We don't get all that many magical customers."

"D'you sell Muggle books?" Percy asked.

"Mostly," Sirius rumbled.

"Sirius rather likes Muggle novels," Remus said with a sidelong smile at him.

"Don't suppose you sell car-repair books," Arthur inquired. "Only I've acquired an automobile and I'm trying to discover what precisely makes it tick."

"A real auto, dad?" Bill asked. "Can I see it?"

"After dinner, if you please," Molly cautioned them. "At any rate, you'll have a solid month before you've got to leave for India, and I shouldn't wonder if you need it, poor boy," she added.

They spent the next few minutes coming to the satisfied consensus that Bill looked ruddy awful, that NEWTs were a grueling and terrifying ordeal, and that what he wanted was rest and lots of feeding up.

"And what're you doing this summer then, Harry?" Arthur asked. "Godfather of yours going to take you on a holiday, perhaps?"

"Thinking about it. Might take a house in the north and spend a month or two teaching him Quidditch," Sirius answered. "Haven't made any plans yet."

"But you'll be here for your birthday, Harry?" Molly inquired. Harry grinned at his godfather and nodded, mouth full of chicken. "Your first birthday in the Wizarding world. We ought to have a party."

"I don't --" Remus started, but Ron and Ginny drowned him out.

"Do lets," Ron begged. "He's never had a proper birthday, he told me so."

"Would you like a party, Harry?" Sirius inquired.

Harry put down his fork and appeared to think seriously about it for a minute.

"Can I have a cake?" he finally asked. Sirius grinned. "And party hats?"

"And balloons if you like."

"I'd like that."

"Then it's settled. We'll have it here," Molly announced. "With the twins and Ron and Ginny, and Percy and Bill."

"Can I invite Oliver too?" Harry asked Remus, who glanced at Molly.

"Oliver?" she asked.

"He's a friend from school," Percy put in.

"The one who's always loaning out his Quidditch magazines to Harry," Remus reminded Sirius.

"I don't think so," Sirius said gently. "He doesn't know who you are, Harry, and the more people who know...the more danger you're in."

"Percy, don't let Scabbers up on the table," Molly scolded. "It's unhygienic."

"He got away from me," Percy protested, plucking the unlucky rat from a bowl of roasted potatoes.

"But you'll have all the Weasleys, and Sirius and I," Remus continued. "That'll be enough, won't it, Harry?"

Harry nodded and exchanged a grin with Ron, who flicked a piece of chicken at him.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 18

"We are going," said Professor Snape, the next weekend, as he led Harry down the now-empty corridors of Hogwarts, "to get you a haircut today."

Harry, trailing behind him, felt odd wandering through the nearly-empty castle without his usual long hair, but still wearing the glamour on his scar. "It never works, you know."

"What never works?"

"Haircuts," Harry said, slightly morosely. "Aunt Petunia used to give 'em to me all the time. They never worked. My hair always grew out again."

Professor Snape stopped, and turned to regard him curiously. "Do you mean to say it grows like that on purpose?"

"Shouldn't it?" Harry asked.

"I had assumed your maladjusted guardian had something to do with it," Snape muttered.

"Besides, Sirius said I could grow it long," Harry added. "Like yours. Only I didn't tell him that part. He doesn't like you much."

"The feeling is mutual," Snape growled, leading him onward again.

"Why doesn't he like you?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say."

"Why don't you like him?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't be allowed to use words like that in front of you."

Harry pondered this as they walked, finally giving up. "What about Remus?"

"What about him?"

"Do you like him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Small children who ask too many questions about things that don't concern them get turned into frogs," Snape said sharply.

"I wouldn't mind being a frog," Harry said contemplatively. "They get to swim all the time and hop and such."

"You'd mind very much having to live your whole life under a log, or on a lily pad."

"My friend Ron says if you hold a frog too long you can get warts."

"And what does your friend Ron have to say on the subject of haircuts?"

"Dunno," Harry answered. "I saw pictures of Remus and Sirius, they had long hair when they were at school. My dad didn't though. His hair looked like mine."

"Regrettably."

They wound their way across the Hogwarts grounds, down to the bridge that passed from the school through the Forbidden Forest, to the main street of Hogsmeade, Harry asking his usual rapid-fire questions, Snape answering calmly but shortly. When they reached the steps of the barbershop, Harry stopped.

"You're just trying to make Sirius mad," he said, crossing his arms and fixing the professor with a defiant gaze. Snape looked down at him in surprise. "Cos you know he wouldn't let you do it if you asked him nicely."

"We don't have to cut your hair, Harry, if you'd rather not."

Harry considered this.

"I'll do it if you will," he said finally. Snape blinked.

"What?"

"If you get your hair cut, I will," Harry said.

"I have no need -- "

"Your hair's all long and greasy."

Snape paused.

"We are," he said slowly, "at some point, going to have to look up the definition of 'tact' together, Harry."

"If you get your hair cut I will," Harry persisted. Snape sighed.

"Entirely too little discipline at home," he muttered, as they passed inside. He continued a low, internal monologue on Sirius' failings as a parent while they settled into chairs, and a pair of magical scissors suspended itself over Harry's head.

"Bit of a trim for young Master then?" a voice asked behind them, and a man emerged from the back room carrying two towels. Harry stared at the reflection of him in the mirror.

"Professor Snape," he whispered. "He's blind!"

"As a bat, young Master," the man said cheerfully. "Hasn't stopped me yet. Hallo Professor, your usual trim?"

"Something a bit different today," Snape said, and the scissors moved to hover above Harry's right ear. Harry noticed, only slightly disturbed by such things now, that the scissors themselves had eyes. He watched in fascination as a brush, with a single eye in the handle, floated over to join them, and the barber began conducting them, almost like a symphonic conductor would. "The boy first, please."

"Oooh, a challenge," the blind barber continued. Harry closed his eyes tightly as the scissors began to snip. "Curly hair's always a bit difficult, isn't it lad? Friend of yours, Professor?"

"My nephew," Snape said, while the scissors and brush danced around Harry's head.

"And what'll it be for yourself today?" the barber continued. Harry wished he'd concentrate on controlling his scissors, and not on talking.

"The same as the boy."

The scissors stopped moving.

"The same as the boy...but that's nearly all your hair!" the barber blurted.

"You heard me."

"Well, damn me. You've done what his barber of seven years couldn't do, lad," the man said, to Harry. "A proper haircut for Professor Snape, post-haste before he changes his mind -- "

"That will be quite enough, thank you," Snape snapped. "Please try not to lop off an ear in your excitement."

"Nosir, of course not, Professor Snape." The scissors left Harry to the mercy of a floating comb and a tin of mysterious ointment, and moved on to Professor Snape. "So have you heard the news yet today?"

"News? I thought Hogsmeade seemed emptier than usual. Large Quidditch game somewhere, I suppose."

"Anything but, Professor! I just had it now over the Floo News Network -- ain't even in the papers yet, though no doubt the evening Prophet'll have something about it. That Lestrangle woman's escaped from Azkaban!"

"Bellatrix Lestrage?" Snape's head whipped around so fast the scissors nearly did take off an ear. The barber tsked.

"S'right. Her what was You-Know-Who's left hand and all. They say she's stark raving mad."

"How?"

"Dunno, like. Alert just went out. People're locking 'emselves up, I can tell you that. Say it's a sign when You-Know-Who's leadin' supporter just up and walks out of Azkaban."

"Can't you go any faster?" Snape demanded.

"Now, then, Professor, there's plenty of anticipation's gone into this moment, you can't rush a good haircut." The man chuckled. "Ain't like she's going to come after yourself, now, is it? Reckon she's got some scores to settle with her own folk before she goes bothering good honest -- here now, hold still!"

Harry watched in fascination as the older man seethed under the scissors, rising as soon as they were finished and shaking his head to dislodge any loose hairs. The scissors had clipped his hair short, close to the skull, and Harry thought he looked like one of the old Roman wizards from Molly Weasley's history books. He paid the man carelessly, didn't wait for change, and led Harry quickly away from the shop, glancing over his shoulder every few feet.

"What's Azkaban?" Harry asked as they walked, trying to keep up. "Who's Bell...a...trix -- "

"Be silent," Snape answered. "I'm taking you back to the bookshop."

"But I've all afternoon -- "

"Not anymore."

As they approached the steps of the castle, Harry saw Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall waiting for them on the steps.

"I assume you've heard," Snape said, as they approached.

Harry saw Professor McGonagall hide a smile behind her hand.

"As have you," Dumbledore replied, leading them inside. "You will return with Harry, to ensure his safety on the other side of the floo network..."

"...of course, Headmaster..." Snape murmured.

"...bringing this with you." Dumbledore reached into his voluminous robes and pulled out a sealed parchment letter. "If you are needed there, you will remain; otherwise please return here at once. Harry is not the only one in danger from Bellatrix Lestrage."

"Longbottom," Snape breathed. "Of course."

"Indeed. Now, Harry..." Dumbledore was leading them, not to his own office, but to a close-by classroom with a hearth in it, "Professor Snape will go ahead of you to be there when you arrive."

Harry nodded, and waited while Snape stepped into the floo, and vanished.

"Did you arrange his new appearance, Harry?" Professor McGonagall asked, quietly.

"Yes, Professor."

She smiled at him. "Good lad. Off you go then..."

He saw her exchange an amused if somewhat strained look with Dumbledore, which quickly faded from his view when he called out "Sandust Books!"

He stumbled out into the warm, familiar back room of Sandust, and felt Professor Snape catch his arm to keep him from tumbling over.

"Harry?"

He looked up and saw Sirius standing in the doorway, staring. "You're not supposed to be -- ah -- hah -- "

Harry watched Sirius point at Professor Snape, cover his mouth, and go into the sort of badly-hidden convulsions of laughter that he sometimes had when Remus did something silly without meaning to.

"Oh my god, what did you do to him?" Sirius asked, gasping for air.

"I did nothing to the boy -- "

"I wasn't talking to you -- bloody hell -- Remus, come have a look at what Harry did to Snape -- "

Harry saw Professor Snape's eyes flash with annoyance and scowled. "Sirius, stop making fun, something awful's happened," he chided.

Sirius stopped, as Remus walked into the room, carrying two copies of *The Empty Space* in his hands. He blinked.

"It's not that awful," he said. "I rather -- "

"Bellatrix Lestrange has escaped from Azkaban prison," Snape said sharply.

"Who is she?" Harry demanded. Sirius crossed to him and picked him up, forcing Harry to let go of Snape's robe.

"Someone very bad," he said softly.

"Where did you hear?" Remus asked, his voice tight and tense.

"Dumbledore. He's sent this," Snape added, passing them the parchment. "I imagine it's instructions."

Sirius, busy with Harry, nodded to Remus, who accepted the letter and slit it open. Snape waited expectantly.

"He says we're to stay here -- not here, but at my flat. Harry's not to leave the shop or the flat until we hear word. They'll run a story about her in the evening Prophet edition. We're to put extra wards on the flat again..." Remus' eyes widened slightly. "Dumbledore wants you to leave, Sirius."

"What?"

"You might be more of a target than Harry -- " Remus began, as Sirius freed a hand and snatched the letter from him.

"I'm not leaving my godson. Not again," Sirius said.

Snape cleared his throat. They both looked at him.

"If I might suggest," he said slowly, "You may be useful in locating her."

Sirius glared at him.

"If it is publicised that Sirius Black has joined the search..." Snape trailed off delicately. "If she is indeed bent on destroying you, in particular, then you make excellent bait, Black."

"So do you, Snape. You're Voldemort's traitor, remember?"

Snape closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and then re-opened them. "Put the boy down and come with me. Lupin can take him home."

"No. I'm not leaving Harry."

Remus touched Sirius between the shoulderblades, lightly.

"Go with him," he said, and Sirius turned, an almost accusatory look on his face. "Sirius, go with him. I'll take Harry home. We'll be safe."

"She killed Regulus," Snape said, voice slick and persuasive. "This is your chance -- "

"Don't talk to me about Regulus -- you -- you have no right -- " Sirius stammered.

"Regulus was my friend," Snape answered him.

Sirius only released Harry, and then with great reluctance, when Harry reached for Remus' neck, wrapping his arms around it.

"Straight home," he said, to Remus, who nodded.

"I'll put up new wards when I arrive. Don't worry about finding us, I'll find you."

Sirius nodded, curtly, and kissed Harry's head.

"Behave yourself," he said. "I'll be home tonight."

Harry glanced from his godfather to Snape, and then back again, watching until they had both floo'd out to Hogwarts. Remus set him down but didn't release his hold on Harry's shoulder as they walked out into the front of the store. Harry was silent while Remus locked the doors, pulled down the blinds, and secured the till; it wasn't until they were out the back door and away that he felt he could speak.

"Who is that woman? Who's Regulus?" he asked.

"Not now, Harry," Remus answered. "Wait until we get home. I want you to be silent until we get home, all right?"

Harry nodded, wishing for Frog, or Padfoot -- something warm and comforting to wrap himself into. Remus made sure Harry walked just a little ahead, and he could feel Remus' eyes on him, when he wasn't peering down side-streets and around corners.

Remus locked the door with extra energy when they were finally inside the flat.

"Come with me. From now until whenever Sirius comes back, you're not to be out of my sight," Remus said, leading him into the bedroom. Harry got up on Sirius' bed, crawling until he could sit next to Sirius' pillow, which smelled like his godfather.

"Normally," Remus said, fingers drifting along the shelves of books, "I would leave this sort of thing to Sirius, but it's best you know now." He began removing books, mostly small, thin, handwritten manuscripts, the ones on the high shelves where Harry wasn't allowed.

"Why's everyone so afraid? Sirius is the best wizard in the world and so're you. And Professor Snape knows all sorts of things," Harry said, burrowing his feet under Sirius' blankets.

"It's down to family, I'm afraid," Remus sighed. "Bellatrix Lestrange was one of Voldemort -- "

"You-Know-Who?"

"Yes -- one of his inner circle. She was a very powerful woman, very evil -- like her husband. She's also Sirius' cousin."

Harry watched as Remus' deft fingers sorted through the books. "I didn't know Sirius had cousins."

"Yes -- you'll meet some of them someday, I think. One of them has a son about your age. Bellatrix...did some quite awful things. Sirius had a brother, too, named Regulus. Younger than Sirius, quite as brilliant, though not..." Remus paused, and looked at Harry. "I liked Regulus, very much -- Sirius and he were close, once. But the Blacks, by and large, are not very nice people, Harry. They're a very old family, very prejudiced in their thinking."

"Not like Sirius."

"No, Sirius is certainly a sport. Regulus was too, in his way. He was one of -- one of You-Know-Who's followers as well. He tried to escape, because he decided he didn't like killing people." Remus looked down at his hands, holding the manuscripts. "Bellatrix killed him herself. Her own cousin...and that's not the worst of it -- I'm sorry, Harry, these are awful stories for you to hear. But -- necessary, for you to understand where Sirius comes from."

He set two books on his dresser, opening one of them.

"She was sent to Azkaban prison, a wizarding prison -- a horrible place, by all accounts. She went mad there, and now she's escaped."

Harry found that he was not particularly afraid, except because the adults were afraid. But that was only in an abstract way. He didn't fear this Bellatrix woman herself. Really, it was all like something out of an adventure novel, the sort Sirius gave him to read.

"And she might want to hurt you, or Sirius. We don't know what she's thinking," Remus continued, opening the bottom drawer of the dresser and taking out several bottles. "Now, on short notice there's only so much I can do -- will you help me, Harry?"

"Can I?" Harry asked, sliding off the bed.

"You're going to have to. I think a Deception charm, a Misdirection Potion, and..." Remus pressed his palm flat to one page. "Well. One more."

Harry followed him as he took the bottles from the dresser into the kitchen and pulled a few more out of the cupboard, putting them in a saucepan to boil. He continued outside briefly as they laid herbs in the corners of the front landing and along the windowsills they could reach, Remus clutching his wand and chanting in Latin under his breath. Back inside, the flat smelled pungent, like some kind of strong tea, and Remus stirred the ingredients before adding more water and sitting down at the kitchen table.

"How's it work?" Harry asked.

"It's working already. The vapours fill the rooms, misdirecting anyone who comes near. We'll have to watch for Sirius," Remus added.

"As soon as we do the last spell, right?" Harry asked. Remus looked at him sharply.

"You may not want to watch it, Harry," he said slowly.

"I want to help."

"Have you ever seen blood?"

Harry was thoughtful. "I skinned my knees a lot when I was little."

Remus seemed to find this very amusing. "When you were little, of course. All right, well, if you want to close your eyes, you can. In the drawer by your elbow there's a white-handled knife with a silver blade. Bring it to me, please."

Harry did as he was told; it was a small knife, but Remus lifted a napkin out of another drawer, wrapping it around the handle, before he would hold it.

"You're going to learn, sooner or later, that blood is powerful magic, Harry. You and I are related - your father was my second-cousin, two generations removed."

"Are we cousins?" Harry asked. Remus looked down at the knife.

"Sort of. Very distantly."

Harry laughed. "But you're old!"

"Thank you," Remus said with a small smile. "The reason you've been allowed to stay with us is that my blood, being your blood, protects us. It's an ancient magical quality that can't be overcome, except with great difficulty."

"What's it got to do with now?" Harry asked.

Remus held out his hand. "I'm going to cut myself, Harry, and put the blood on the doorway. This is very old, very frightening magic. You don't have to watch."

Harry looked at him carefully.

"You're just a child," Remus said, slightly desperately. "You shouldn't have to watch."

"Why's it always you?" Harry asked. Remus tilted his head. "Why're you always the one has to get hurt?"

"Harry -- "

"It's not fair," Harry said.

"No -- but nobody ever promised me life would be," Remus sighed.

"I'll watch," Harry said. Remus nodded.

"You can close your eyes, if you want," he repeated, walking into the foyer. When he saw Harry

was resolutely standing behind him, he tightened his grip on the blade, and drew it slowly across his left palm.

The cut wasn't deep, but Harry saw red blood well up, and Remus reached above his head, running his hand over the lintel of the door. That done, he cut across the index finger, and wrote, above the drying red streak, *NOMOS* .

"Bandages," Remus said briskly, moving back into the kitchen and setting the knife in the sink. He seemed to relax once the silver blade was further away, and he dug one-handedly in the cupboard, coming up with white gauze. "Healing charms don't work well on me," he said, wrapping his hand and finger in the stuff, and tying it off, biting the end to separate it from the roll.

"What's Nomos mean?" Harry asked. Remus tapped the bandages with his right hand to make sure they were secure, and began to run water over the knife. It had all been done so...efficiently.

"It's from the ancient Greek," he said. "It...means a number of things. It's part of the rules for the way they live, sort of. It's about...the way people are treated, protected. It's about providing shelter. The way we do for you. Now," he added, businesslike once more, "let's get something for you to read -- we're going to have to sit near the window so we can watch for Sirius, because odds are until he's been inside he won't be able to find the place."

He followed Harry even into his room, to get the book (and Frog) and back out, into the living room, where they settled into the couch, Remus with his legs propped up sideways so that he could look out, Harry on the end with Frog. When Harry looked up from his book, Remus was gazing out the window, rubbing the bandaged hand back and forth across his chin.

"What if she hurts Sirius?" he asked softly.

"She won't. Sirius is smarter than she is."

"But she killed his brother."

"Sirius isn't his brother."

"But what if she does?"

Remus was quiet for a while.

"Professor Snape will make sure she doesn't," he said finally.

"Professor Snape hates Sirius."

Remus bowed his head. "Perhaps. But that doesn't mean he won't protect him."

Harry turned to look at him. "Really?"

"Really," Remus said, absently, without explaining further. Harry was left to muse, in silence, on

the contradiction.

And then...

...nothing happened.

The Aurors could find no trace of Bellatrix Lestrange. Sirius, doing all he could to look like unprotected bait, didn't even get a nibble from her. For three days he went out with the Aurors, under the careful (and magical) eye of Alastor Moody; he came back to the flat only briefly to sleep. He and Remus both lived on nerves, eating little, speaking little except to Harry, and never letting him out of their sight -- or out of the flat.

Harry slept in Sirius' bed, with Padfoot curled up on top of the blanket. Sandust bookshop remained closed so long that when Remus finally did leave Harry with Sirius to go check on it, half of the High Street business-owners cornered him to ask what was wrong. He excused it with an illness in the family, and fled back to their home.

He opened the door with a password, a key, and a tap with his wand on what appeared, to outsiders, to be a solid brick wall. One made enough noise these days just getting into the flat that usually anyone who came in could expect to be greeted by Harry and whoever was looking after him; when he opened the door into a silent room, his heart jumped into his throat.

"Shh," Sirius said quietly, and Remus breathed a sigh of relief. He was sitting on the couch in the living room, next to a bundle of blankets and pillows which looked like it might at some point have devoured Harry.

"Asleep in the middle of the day?" Remus asked softly.

"He was restless last night. I think he's having nightmares, but he won't tell me," Sirius answered, setting down his book and standing, rolling his shoulders.

"I didn't notice."

"Well, you sleep like the dead," Sirius answered with a grin, as Remus shed his coat and set his keys on the table. "Plus, you're not the one he kicks at night."

"We could move his bed -- "

"I'm fine with it, he pulls on my fur or kicks for a little while and goes back to sleep," Sirius said. "Besides, it'd be more cramped than it already is."

Remus turned to agree with him, and found Sirius standing dangerously close.

"You can't give a man a little warning?" he said quietly, as Sirius slipped one hand over his neck, pulling him forward. The last word was almost against his lips --

"If I warned you, you'd run away," Sirius said, into his mouth. Remus heard a whimper, realised it was him, and pulled back slightly.

Sirius followed, gripping his neck firmly, backing him into the table. Remus closed his eyes, tasted Sirius, felt his broad warm body. And bent a little, into it.

"See?" Sirius said, breaking the kiss. Remus felt an inappropriate blush crossing his face. Sirius was breathing hard. "Got to catch you by surprise."

Remus ducked his head, unwilling to scold, and Sirius sighed.

"You watch Harry -- I'll make lunch," he said resignedly. Remus dropped down onto the couch, and poked the pile of blankets experimentally. Something deep inside it giggled sleepily.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 19

And still nothing happened.

Three days stretched into a week, and then a week and a half. There weren't even any sightings of the woman. Slowly the tension in Sirius' shoulders began to ease, and Harry was allowed out of their sight as long as he was still in the flat. Remus began to talk of opening Sandust after Harry's birthday. Sirius was home more often.

Someone suggested that Bellatrix had drowned swimming to shore. Others thought perhaps her madness went so far that she was incapable of coming up with anything so complicated as revenge. The rest of the Wizarding World began to go about their business again, though still with an ounce of caution; people could be heard saying they wouldn't let their children out alone until she was captured.

Severus Snape was still staying, extremely reluctantly, with the Longbottoms. After all, Bellatrix had gone to Azkaban for the torture of Frank and Alice Longbottom. Young Neville Longbottom had not, for fear of the man, come out of his bedroom except when absolutely necessary.

Sirius asked for and got permission for them to take Harry to the Weasleys' for his birthday, although Dumbledore was quite worried. Remus received a private owl from him requesting that he be on special alert. It only made sense -- Bellatrix might be Sirius' cousin, but Remus had far more experience defending against the Dark Arts.

And, as Dumbledore reminded him -- not that he could ever forget -- most Unforgiveable curses didn't work on a werewolf. The worst thing Avada Kedavra had done to Remus, during his dangerous days with the Order, was give him a two-day splitting headache.

Remus, like the Aurors, had trained himself over the years to run towards danger, instead of away from it. Not because he was willing to give up his life, but because it was bloody hard to take it away from him. Aconite in sufficient doses; silver; fire; other werewolves. Beyond that he was well-near indestructible, and that meant that if he got between Bellatrix and Harry, they had a pretty good chance of survival.

Which, as it turned out, was a good thing for all concerned.

The day of Harry's birthday, the first he could remember where someone else would care what the day was, dawned bright and sunny and noisy; Sirius, singing "Happy Birthday" at the top of his lungs, carried him, still in his pyjamas and squirming happily, to a breakfast table laden with food and brightly-wrapped gifts. There was a new bookshelf, and books to go in it; two magical moving posters of Quidditch stars, a few Muggle toys, lots of sweets from Sirius, and one rather plainly-wrapped object in brown paper, as tall as Harry was -- a new Nimbus Racer Twelve, one of the

finest brooms on the market.

Harry could barely eat his breakfast, he was so excited. He'd never been given the chance to tear wrapping paper before, or open cards meant for him and only him, or have Sirius tell him which gift to open next. There was a new wallet with ten whole Galleons in it, from Remus, and the sort of rugby shirt Harry liked...

There was more, too; a cloth-covered crate on one end of the table turned out to be a medium-sized terrarium with a muddy-blue snake drowsing lazily inside it, much to Harry's delight, and even a card from Professor Snape -- admittedly it was plain white, and merely gave instructions on the snake's care and feeding, but it did say Happy Birthday in quite small letters and that was all that really mattered.

"Are you going to take him out?" Remus asked, while Sirius tried not to scowl. Harry peered through the glass and shook his head.

"He's sleeping. I'll wait till he wakes up," he said decidedly.

"What're you going to name him?"

"Snakes don't have names," Harry said absently. "They're just called Snake."

Remus exchanged an amused look with Sirius. "All right, then. Do you like him?"

"Very much," Harry replied. "Almost as much as my racing broom."

Sirius smiled at that.

Remus opened Sandust for the morning, and several of the locals came past to wish Harry a happy birthday and make much of his nine-year-old self. Being nine was wonderful, Harry decided, and although he didn't see how, he was sure being ten was going to be even better. For the moment, he forgot the deep worried lines in Remus' face and the constant if suppressed fear lurking at the back of Sirius' eyes, and allowed the future to stretch out before him, full of wonderful things -- holidays with his godfather, Hogwarts school, showing off how well he could take care of Snake to Professor Snape -- there would be flights on his new racing broom, Quidditch with the twins and one day at school with Oliver, and sharing sweets with Ginny and Ron. He'd get to find out what the Groundskeeper, Hagrid, was growing in his garden, and explore every nook of the school, and one day he'd graduate and be an animagus like Sirius and ride a motorbike too, and read all the books that Remus kept on the top shelf because they were Big Dangerous Magic.

But before all that he was going to have his first ever birthday party -- at least, that he could remember.

There were *party hats*. Of course, they were wizarding party hats, which meant that in addition to the usual cone they had a floppy brim and sometimes a feather or a few artificial cherries on them, but the point was that there were party hats, and there was a cake, and a jumper from Mrs.

Weasley, a set of quill pens from Bill and Percy, a pan of fudge from the twins, and a copy of July's *Broomsticks Aloft* magazine, which featured an article on the Nimbus Racer 12, from Ron and Ginny (along with a handmade card). Everyone crowded around to watch Sirius show Harry how the Nimbus flew, and once confident he could steer it on his own -- "Boy's a natural," Sirius proclaimed proudly -- he was even allowed to take Ron and Ginny on rides, as long as he didn't go too far off the ground.

By the time the sun was setting, even Remus had relaxed a little; Molly and Arthur were sitting at the table with Bill, discussing his packing for India, while the rest of the Weasleys watched Harry try to hover without using his hands -- a feat that resulted in more than one grass-stain on his trouser legs, though there hadn't been any serious injury thus far. Sirius was spotting for him, and Remus was settled on the grass next to the table, keeping one ear on the India conversation, one on the flying lesson.

"Next year Harry'n'Ron can play and then we've nearly got a team," Fred was saying. "Reckon Ron for a Chaser?"

"Nah," George answered. "Your classic Keeper, Ron."

Ron, Remus noticed, was gazing longingly -- and a little enviously -- at Harry's new broomstick. Remus remembered that gaze. It was the look of a child who was happy for his friend, but who was also regretful that he could never have what they had, and would be forced to plead to borrow theirs. He remembered it a little too well.

Seven children raised on a Ministry salary didn't leave much overage for whatever the youngest son wished he could have.

"Harry," he called, "Let Ron have a go on his own, there's a lad."

Sirius glanced quizzically at him, but helped Harry off the broom, and Harry happily gave it to Ron, helping him get it into the air. Ron raised it a few more feet, until he was over their heads, and zoomed around the yard, laughing, Harry and Ginny following him on the ground. Sirius put his hands on his hips, watching.

"Never thought I'd see the day I trusted Sirius Black with a child," Molly said quietly. Remus leaned back, propping himself on the bench of the picnic table, and glanced up at her.

"He does well with the boy," Arthur added.

"Harry's very tolerant of our mistakes," Remus replied, with a grin. "After the way he was living, my little flat might as well be a castle." He watched Ron dismount and offer the broom shyly back to Harry; he could tell Molly was pleased when they saw him mouth "thank you" politely.

"Complete with moat?" Arthur asked.

"We've done everything we can. Sirius is restless, he's tired of being locked up. So am I. I -- "

Arthur and Molly looked down at the brown-haired man, but Remus' body had gone rigid, nostrils flaring, eyes wide and scanning the yard.

"It's her," he breathed, and he was up and running in a fluid motion that was so quick it took Arthur and Molly by surprise. Bill was after him in an instant, because Bill had seen it too -- a pair of eyes behind the hedge the bordered the yard.

"Harry, get down!" Remus cried, but it was too late -- A bolt of blue light flashed through the sunset sky and slammed into Harry's broomstick, pinwheeling it. Harry shrieked a sound that blazed itself into Remus' mind and, with that detached logic which comes while the rest of the brain is panicking, Remus thought that he now had new fodder for his nightmares.

Sirius dove but Remus, with werewolf reflexes, was faster; he caught Harry around the shoulders in a dive and rolled, curling his body protectively around the boy --

Green light burst behind his eyelids and he heard another scream, this time from Ginny -- a high, childish scream of fear. Pain ripped across his body. Killing curse, they'd tried the killing curse. *Please god let it not have hit Ginny.*

Then there were arms hauling him up, and in the confused half-balance of the spinning world, he could see Sirius charging forward after a flitting shadow. But only one, and suddenly he had the terrible certainty that Bellatrix was not alone.

"Sirius, no!" he shouted, as Sirius crashed through the hedge, an opening forming at a shouted word and a flick of his wand. He shoved Harry at Bill, shouted for him to take the boy inside, and pulled his own wand.

Another burst of light hit him off-centre as he turned, and he slammed into Bill, taking the brunt of the second killing-curse. The younger man collapsed, and Remus clutched at his head, gritting his teeth. He pulled Harry against him, steadying himself on the boy's shoulder, and looked up.

Peter Pettigrew stood between them and the door to the Weasley house.

Remus heard his own breath rattle in his throat. His wand lay on the ground a few feet away, and thank god Harry was behind his hip, because he was everything between Harry and Peter now.

"I knew he didn't kill you," he said, and was surprised at the roughness of his own voice, through the pain.

"Give me the boy and I won't kill you," Peter said.

"Peter -- Wormtail -- he can't mean anything to you. He's just a child."

"Give me the boy, Remus."

"You killed his parents, isn't that enough?" Remus pleaded. He did not let his eyes flick past Peter to the doorway, but he could see Arthur padding silently through it, wand out, waiting to get into

range.

There was a shriek somewhere out in the fields, where Sirius was pursuing Bellatrix. Peter's eyes flickered. Arthur raised his wand --

In a heartbeat Peter had whirled to cast another curse, and Remus didn't wait to see if it was another bolt of green light. He picked up Harry bodily and flung them both sideways, around the corner of the house, running like a batallion of Death Eaters was after them. There was a gap between wall and hedge and he slid through it, desperate to be anywhere away from the house, to get Harry somehow to safety.

"Remus -- " Harry shrieked, and Remus realised he had the boy gripped by an arm and a hand on his hip, a painful hold for the child. He shifted Harry without missing a stride, though his head pounded and his legs were already protesting the run, plus the weight of a nine year old boy. Harry's arms wrapped around his shoulders --

And suddenly Sirius was there, matching stride, shouting that Bellatrix and Peter were giving chase, and they'd have to find somewhere to turn and fight. Remus slipped and slithered into a gully, and released Harry roughly.

"Give me your wand," he said, and Sirius tossed it across as he covered Harry with his body, their years of Order training leaping to the fore.

But then there were two more bodies in the gully, and it was suddenly hands and hooked fingers and good god, Bellatrix very nearly had claws. Her face was ravaged by her time in Azkaban, hair cut to uneven lengths around her head and flying out like a harpy's, and there was suddenly a glint of silver in Peter's hand, arcing towards Sirius, underneath him, and Harry screamed. And screamed, and screamed.

Remus watched in horror as Peter raised his face over the limp body of Sirius Black. His cheeks and hands were smeared with blood, and he held a small vial between two fingers.

"Good to see you, Moony," he said.

Remus scrambled for Sirius' wand and heard footsteps approaching; Peter looked up and, apparently not liking his odds, vanished with a crack, Bellatrix following a half-second later with an insane laugh.

Harry was still screaming.

Remus, fingers numb, scrambled across to Sirius, rolling him aside and lifting Harry away, conscious that the blood had not been Sirius', but dripped from a deep gash on Harry's shoulder. Arthur skidded to a stop, kicking dust over them, and Bill leapt down, rolling Sirius the rest of the way as Molly accepted Harry from Remus' hands. His tongue felt thick in his head, as he stared at Bill, who was running his palms over Sirius' neck and chest, searching for -- for a pulse?

God please --

It had been short and brutal and Peter hadn't hesitated to use the killing curse on Remus --

"Missed him," Bill breathed. "He's just stunned. Dad -- "

Arthur slid down next to them, helping Bill haul Sirius up onto flat ground. Remus crawled up with their help, was promptly ill, and collapsed.

Sirius woke to a splitting, world-rending hangov --

Harry.

He didn't know where he was or who had wrapped his head in cotton wool, but he had to make sure Harry was all right. He rolled off the bed (bed -- always a good sign)...

...and fell over.

There were a few confused minutes after that, composed of hands lifting him, voices shouting insensible things at him, and something cold and wet smacking him in the face, but when the confusion lifted he found himself seated on the edge of a mattress, a cold cloth being held to his face, and Ted Tonks physically restraining him.

"Harry's all right," he heard Andromeda's voice, and immediately the world was a better place. "Stay there. He's just in the next room with the Healer, I'll get him."

"Thought you were done for, mate," Ted said, as Sirius pulled the cloth from his face. The older man gave him a cheerful smile. "You should've seen it when they brought you in. I thought Lupin was going to pass out again."

"Is everyone all right?" Sirius managed.

"More or less. Nasty gash your lad took. Nasty shock my Nymphadora had, too, she's the one answered the floo. Dunno that Lupin's right in the head yet, but I'm sure he's getting there."

"And here's our boy," Andromeda announced, leading Harry into the room. He broke into a run when he saw Sirius, and Sirius caught him around the waist, lifting him carefully into his lap, pulling his head against his chest. "The better for some rest, I'd say."

Sirius felt Harry shiver against him; he also felt a swath of bandages under his shirt, and pulled him back a little. The white crept up his left shoulder, over his neck.

"Merlin, what did they -- " Sirius stared, but Ted put out a hand to stop him.

"Not around the lad," he said softly. He and Andromeda exchanged a glance. "Listen, there's food

downstairs if you think you can walk, old man, and tea and all."

Sirius let Harry slip to the ground, but kept hold of his hand as he stood.

"Andromeda," he said slowly, as she gave him a supporting shoulder, "not that I'm not glad, but what are we doing at -- "

And then it really, really hit him.

"What," he repeated, "in the bloody hell are we doing at Grimmauld Place?"

"Safest place," Ted grunted. "Bout a million wards on this monstrosity. Arthur called us soon as they could, and we agreed to meet here. Andromeda found a Healer who'd come with a minimum of stories told -- old Black name's good for something, eh?"

"Damn Peter Pettigrew," Andromeda muttered. "I always knew that little kiss-up was going to cause trouble..."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, Sirius with his ears ringing, and emerged into a warm kitchen, lit by what must have been every butt-end of a candle in the whole house. Andromeda and Ted pushed past him, walking towards the far end where a very shy, frightened looking Nymphadora was absently spilling the sugar as she added it to a cup for Bill. Remus sat near them, and --

Severus Snape, black robes swooping around him, was pacing back and forth. He looked older without the long, lank hair hanging about his face, and almost unrecognisable -- he hadn't seemed to change over the years from the weedy teenager he'd been, but now Sirius could appreciate that they had all grown up -- that they were adults now. Snape clearly had no idea how to deal with short hair, and it bristled a little, around the edges; in fact he looked almost a little like James...

When he saw them, he stopped, and then moved forward quickly. Harry took a hesitant step away from Sirius, who let go of him, reluctantly. Snape bent to examine Harry, and Sirius noticed suddenly, to his shock, that the other man's hands were shaking.

He was sure he could detect sarcasm in Snape's tone and was nearly sure that Snape was saying something in that half-insulting way he had where he could take the most innocent of statements and make it into something hateful, but all of Sirius' attention was focused on the slight tremor of Snape's right hand as the pale fingers ran over Harry's cheeks, his shoulders, plucked up his wrists to examine his hands, pressed on his chest to make sure he was all right.

And then, tearing himself away from the odd phenomenon of Severus Snape showing some emotion that wasn't anger or hatred, he looked up as Snape stood to see badly-hidden fear in the man's dark eyes, tension in his jaw.

Sirius had not realised anyone else might love Harry the way he did, with no thought of self or pride, because Harry was Harry and you couldn't help love him. He knew Remus did, of course,

but...Remus was...well, Remus liked everyone, it was only natural he'd take to the boy.

In his mind Harry's visits with the Potions Master had been Snape's way of manipulating something in Sirius' life, to annoy and enrage him.

He glanced at Remus, who was sitting with his face in his hands, not shaking but looking quite shaken. And then he looked back again to Snape's trembling fingers. Harry was smiling up at them, looking from one to another with a gaze of polite bewilderment that he should be the subject of so much attention.

Something momentarily monstrous in Sirius told him that this was a new and interesting weapon he could use against someone who had been more or less his enemy for almost twenty years, and he hated himself. When good sense spoke up, he let it override the small, petty voice, and instead he thought to himself *My god, Snape's actually human.*

"Perhaps now, someone will be kind enough to explain to me why my student nearly had his throat slit," he said, and Sirius was back to the old, smoldering rage at the utter insolence of Snape even existing.

"Pettigrew," Remus rasped, from the table. He wrapped his hands around a chipped and dusty-looking teacup. "Peter and Bellatrix. They surprised us at the Weasleys' house."

"I told Dumbledore this party notion was a -- " Snape said, wrathfully, but Sirius held up a hand and for once, the other man fell silent.

"If I don't sit down," Sirius said unsteadily, "I'm going to fall over. So your diatribe is going to wait."

Andromeda helped him to a chair across from Remus, and Harry followed. Ted put a hand on Snape's arm, pulling him across the other room with the promise of an explanation, and a request that Snape have a look at some really nasty Dark goblets that he wanted the good Professor's opinion on. Sirius noticed with amusement that both Bill and Nymphadora, recent students of Snape's, skittered out of his way quickly.

"Like to tell us what happened?" Andromeda asked quietly.

"I was about to say the same thing," Sirius replied. Remus pushed his tea across the table, and Sirius nodded his thanks before taking a sip.

"Molly Weasley floo'd us, said she didn't know who else she ought to call on. She called Dumbledore, too, once we'd gotten you here and called a Healer. When we arrived, Harry was bleeding, you were out cold, and Remus was in no condition to explain much of anything...the Headmaster sent Snape to help -- he hasn't been here long..."

"All right now?" Sirius asked Remus, who nodded.

"From what Bill tells me, he took two direct killing curses without missing a beat," Andromeda

continued.

"Well -- yes -- " Sirius stumbled.

"It's all right, I've told her what I am," Remus put in gently. "Had to anyway, she tried to serve the tea in a silver service."

"Sorry about that," Andromeda murmured. "All I could find around this place, at first."

"Not at all." Remus gave her a crooked grin. "Adds flavour."

Sirius, whose worldview had just shifted to include the definite existence of Peter Pettigrew, the likely humanity of Severus Snape, and his own sudden presence in his childhood home, felt that this was all a bit much.

"I don't know what they were after," he said miserably.

"Harry," Andromeda supplied.

"No," Remus corrected. "Just part of him."

"That's very reassuring, Moony," Sirius muttered.

"Peter took a vial of his blood. I uh..." Remus hesitated. "I think he might have drunk some."

Andromeda looked vaguely horrified. Remus continued hurriedly.

"I, I think he would have killed him, but Sirius was on top of him and he...couldn't really get enough leverage."

"I don't remember that," Sirius muttered.

"No, you wouldn't," Bill said, joining them. Nymphadora hung back, vacillating between wanting to see the Dark things her father was showing to her Professor and wanting to be as far away from Snape as possible. "Tried to kill you too, but he missed. Barely. That's why you feel like a dragon trampled you."

"Two dragons," Sirius answered. Harry smiled up at him, at the mental image. "Is there a reason we've got him bandaged up like a Muggle, then?"

"Enchanted knife," Bill answered. "I think. Wouldn't heal up under a spell. Mum and Mrs. Tonks and I all tried, and the Healer too."

Sirius sat for a while. Nobody seemed to be willing to bother him, which made for a pleasant change.

"How did he know?" Remus finally asked. "How did *they* know?"

"Wormtail," Sirius muttered. "Bloody rat probably -- "

There was a thoughtful pause.

"Not all this time," Sirius said, horrified. "He hasn't been...not the Weasleys."

"Not us what?" Bill asked, glancing from one to the other. "What's he on about, Lupin?"

"I'll go," Remus said. "I can walk without thinking hard about it."

"Go where?" Bill demanded. "What's going on?"

"You should come too," Remus said. "I think I may have to replace Percy's rat."

"Scabbers?" Bill raised his eyebrows, as they walked towards the fire burning at one end of the kitchen. "Why -- I don't -- "

"I'll explain after we've gone," Remus said, and he and Bill vanished into the flame, back to the Burrow. Andromeda reached over and put one of her hands over Sirius'; they sat in silence until she cleared her throat softly.

"Hadn't seen you in a while," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"When we came through and saw you laid out on Molly Weasley's dining table like some kind of corpse -- "

"I'm *sorry* , Andromeda."

She lifted her hand and smoothed his hair. "Don't be angry with me, Sirius. I'm trying to tell you..." she sighed. "Listen, we were scared, all right? And it's...it's down to you and me now, really, there aren't many Blacks left. Everyone else is dead or Narcissa -- "

Sirius gave a snort of laughter. Andromeda smiled.

"Ted got some time off from work, and Nymphadora's not starting training until September, so we can stay here with you for a while," she continued. "If you are...that is, if you do want to sell us the place, we could start on cleaning and such."

"Yes -- of course..." Sirius paused. "Training?" he asked curiously. Andromeda flushed with pride.

"Dora got into the Auror's academy. Top NEWTs across the board. Ted's that proud."

"That's grand, Andromeda. Really and truly."

Andromeda smiled. "I'm just glad she survived Hogwarts," she murmured, as Nymphadora came

back into the kitchen, followed by her father and professor. There was a clatter, before she could get very far, and Remus and Bill came tumbling out of the fire, Bill smacking into Nymphadora, Remus stumbling a few feet before straightening.

"I think we have a problem," he said, a small grey rat held firmly in one hand.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 20

"Try him again."

Remus, chin resting on his crossed arms on the table, watched as Scabbers heartily, and with no sign of being an evil traitor, nibbled on a cob of corn.

"He's a rat, Snape," he sighed.

"If you tell anyone -- *anyone* -- about the Animagus transformations -- " Sirius began, but Snape held up a hand, and prodded the rat with his wand. It squeaked.

"I'm not going to go squealing your dirty little secret," he said drily.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Sirius muttered rebelliously.

The three men, along with Andromeda, were crowded around the kitchen table, while Nymphadora and Bill went about the business of making up enough beds for people to stay the night. Ted kept Harry occupied by making various bits of crockery crash into the wall. Sirius had given this activity his wholehearted permission and approval as nominal owner of the place, and Andromeda had finally admitted she'd always hated that pattern anyhow. Snakes, the pair of them agreed, had no place being painted onto plates, creamers, water jugs, or sippy cups (the sippy cups were proving extremely durable).

"If I could go over this again, for clarity's sake..." Andromeda said, crossing her arms as Remus began to pull bits of corn off the cob for Scabbers to eat. "Remus."

"Werewolf," Remus said, without looking up.

"Sirius?"

"Animagus," Sirius replied.

"At age fifteen?"

"Aye."

"How?"

Sirius rubbed his jaw. "Lots of trial and error."

"And Peter too?"

"Even more trial and error," Remus sighed. "And James too."

"And Lily?"

"Nah -- she thought it was sort of..." Sirius wrinkled his nose. "Well. She thought it was a bit like playing dress-up, you know."

"And none of you were suspicious of the fact that one of your closest comrades' inner animal was a rat?" Snape asked sardonically.

"I'm more concerned with the fact that when Peter vanished, nobody mentioned this," Andromeda said sternly. Sirius gave her an utterly unashamed look.

"Nobody would have believed us," Remus replied. "Sirius didn't even believe that Peter might still be alive. And it would have meant trouble for us. It seemed safer to do it this way."

"Up until he tried to slit Harry's throat," Snape put in, glancing over his shoulder. Harry cheered as a large platter smashed to smithereens.

"Listen, the point is, this isn't Peter," Remus said, tiredly. "It's just a rat. I don't see any reason Bill can't take him back to Percy with my most heartfelt apologies."

"So how did he know?" Sirius asked, rubbing his eyes. His head still ached, though it was slowly improving. "They must have known we'd be there on that particular day. The only people who knew were you and I, and the Weasleys, and Dumbledore and Snape."

"We didn't talk about it -- except at the shop, but then only..." Remus paused. "Do you suppose..."

"No. No, there's no way, we'd know," Sirius said. "If Peter Pettigrew was hiding out in my bookshop, we'd know."

"If he was there when we put the wards on it they'd have -- " Remus covered his mouth with his hand. "If he was in the shop -- like you -- the wards wouldn't affect him, he'd be a part of them, he'd be able to hurt Harry anytime he liked."

Sirius let his head drop to the table, quietly. "He must have...seen an opportunity. Helped Bellatrix escape -- a rat can go a lot of places in a prison. Do you think -- "

Remus nodded, slowly. "He must have been."

"In *my bloody bookshop!* "

"It'd be a very Peter thing to do," Remus shivered at the idea of Peter Pettigrew, living as a rat right under their noses. And he foolishly running off to the four corners of the earth in search of him --

"How long, do you suppose?" Sirius asked softly.

"Years, if I know Peter," Remus replied. "He wouldn't have tried to do anything so long as we

were stronger than him -- and where's more safe than where he can hear every word we say? There's the bakery down the road if he's hungry, and an animagus knows better than to make noise during the day when someone's about..."

"I need a long bath," Sirius growled. "And then I'm going to burn the bookshop."

Andromeda stroked the hair on the back of his head, comfortingly. "We're safe here, though. This place was warded empty. Everyone in here's safe."

"We should go to Sandust, just in case -- " Remus began to rise, but Andromeda stopped him.

"The pair of you are in no condition to check anything out -- you shouldn't even have gone to the Weasleys'. Severus can do it, can't you?" she asked. Snape looked taken aback.

"I see no reason -- "

" -- no reason why not? Excellent. You're welcome to stay here once you've returned, or -- you can floo back to Hogwarts from Sandust, can't you?"

Snape was silent, but there didn't seem to be any way out of it. "I'll look in on it, on my way to Hogwarts," he said finally, and swept towards the fireplace. When he was gone, Andromeda sighed.

"Such a nice-looking man to be such an absolute prat," she said, and Sirius grinned at her as she summoned Ted and Harry.

"I think it's time for bed," she said, giving Harry a small shove towards the stairs. "Bill! Dora!"

"Don't call me that!" came Nymphadora's reply.

"We're going to bed!" Andromeda called. Bill came down the stairs, accepting Scabbers from Andromeda and tucking the rat in his pocket.

"I'll sleep with Harry," Sirius said, but Andromeda shook her head again.

"You need to *actually sleep* . Bill can stay with him. Ted and I'll be next door, and Nymphadora can have the little bedroom next to that. You can have the room across the hall," she said firmly, and before Sirius could object, she'd begun to lead Harry up the stairs, followed by Ted, and Bill.

"Did you ever have even the slightest upper hand against her?" Remus asked.

"Not in my life," Sirius sighed. "Good thing she likes me. Let's go then..."

They climbed the stairs slowly, calling good-nights as doors closed, until they were alone in the dim corridor.

"I think the bedroom only has one bed..." Sirius began, but Remus laid a hand on his arm, stopping

him. He rubbed his face again. "I don't know if it's wise, leaving him in another room."

"Sirius."

"I know that Andromeda's nearby and Bill's there, but -- "

"Sirius -- "

"I just think..." Sirius ran a hand through his hair, and met Remus' eyes. "What is it?"

Remus moved forward, forcing Sirius back against the wall with his presence, a serious look on his face, though his eyes were warm.

"Are you all right?" Remus asked slowly. "Your head, I mean, and all."

"Yeah, reckon so. Be better in the morning, if I can get any -- " Sirius broke off. Remus had bowed his head a little, and his breath warmed Sirius' jaw. "Are...are *you* all right?"

Remus' nose bumped against his cheek, and Sirius exhaled slowly.

"So...full moon..."

"Not waiting," Remus murmured, and Sirius felt the press of his body, pinning him to the wall. It was rather sudden, but not unwelcome, to feel the warmth of another person after a very long, painful, confusing day.

"Any...reason?" he asked, barely finishing before Remus kissed him.

His mouth was warm, lips smooth, and his hands, always stronger than they looked, slid down Sirius arms, fingers twining around his wrists. Sirius closed his eyes, having run out of stupid questions for the moment.

"I thought you'd died," Remus said, against his cheek, lips moving along his jaw. "I haven't..."

Another warm breath stirred the hair behind Sirius' ear.

"I haven't been very grateful for what you've done," Remus said, tugging on an earlobe with his teeth. Sirius moaned. "And I was wasting time when I knew..."

Sirius raised a hand to turn Remus' head, pulling it back so that they could kiss properly again. They pushed away from the wall and stumbled backwards, into the other side of the corridor. Remus winced and reached up to rub the back of his head, laughing, when it knocked against the stone.

"The door would have more give," he said, smiling. Sirius smiled back, in relief as much as anything. Compared to what was happening here and now, the pain and fear was becoming something pleasantly distant...and Bill was watching over Harry...

"Bed'd be favourite, though," he answered, and then realised he'd probably said too much. Remus was going to bolt again --

Remus' smile spread slowly.

"Yeah...door has a knob on it. Might poke," he agreed, reaching to his left to open the door. Sirius, hardly believing his luck, allowed himself to be tugged inside.

The door closed behind them, and Sirius absently slid the lock, while Remus lined kisses down his neck, nipping and sucking. Sirius hadn't been aware people could kiss like that, and certainly hadn't expected Remus to --

Remus laughed against his skin, when he met Sirius' shirt collar, and began work on the buttons on his shirt. It was all Sirius could do to find his hands, let alone do more with them than tangle in Remus' hair, head tipped back, breathing deeply against the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm.

"Don't fall down," Remus said, one arm slipping around his waist as he straightened, and Sirius realised he'd been about to overbalance.

"Bed," Sirius answered, and Remus nodded against his forehead.

"We did discuss that," he murmured. "Sure you're all right?"

"...overwhelmed..."

"Yes," Remus said critically, slipping his shirt off his shoulders as he walked Sirius towards the enormous old bed, sheets musty but freshly laid. "I've been doing this a lot longer than you."

Sirius dropped backwards onto the bed, propping himself up on his elbows, watching Remus undress with remarkable grace. When he fumbled with his belt, Sirius reached out and took his wrist, pulling him forward.

"Wasting time," he said, and Remus laughed against his neck, nuzzling the nylon dog collar Sirius wore under his shirt, the one with the nametag-charm he'd given him hanging off of it.

"Put a little effort into it, Pads," he replied, and Sirius gripped his hips suddenly, pulling them tight against each other.

Remus growled, and for the first time Sirius realised it was a heartfelt reaction, that it was him, and not even the idea of someone, anyone, touching Remus -- that it was his hands making Remus plead into his mouth, it was his body Remus was pressing further onto the bed, his stomach that those long deft fingers were brushing against as they pushed his trousers down.

Remus was pleased, and it was Sirius' doing.

Sudden jealousy washed over Sirius -- jealousy of all the 'rare book dealers' who had come to see

Remus in the shop over the years, of the other men who'd discovered Remus before he had. He wondered if Remus had felt this flare of loathing and regret for every woman he'd seen Sirius with --

They struggled out of the rest of their clothes, wrestling a little on the bed, until Sirius ended up pinned by Remus' hips and legs, brown hair brushing his forehead, brown eyes open on his as they kissed. And then closing as his hands slipped down over Sirius' hips and thighs.

Sirius tensed, suddenly in unfamiliar territory, unsure what was expected of him, and Remus immediately froze.

"What's wrong?" he asked, voice rough and low. Sirius dropped his head back, closing his eyes again. This felt so good, and so confusing, and so much a release that he wasn't sure he could form words.

"I just...I've never..." he swallowed. Remus' hand left his thigh and slid up his body, stroking his cheek lightly. "I don't quite know what to do."

Remus' voice was rich with confusion. "But you said...you and James -- "

Sirius swallowed again. He'd thought he could wing it, but this was a little more complicated -- and he didn't want to screw it up. This was Remus. This *mattered* .

"We never really got this far," he whispered, feeling himself turn scarlet with embarrassment.

"Sirius Black," Remus said, and the confusion had modulated to something that sounded perilously close to rage. "You utter, utter sham."

Sirius opened his eyes. It wasn't rage -- it was amusement. Remus was laughing, silently, eyes dancing.

"Faker of the first order," he gasped, dropping his forehead to Sirius' collarbone, resting it there. Sirius, relieved, tipped his chin up again.

"But you've done this before," he prompted imploringly.

"Many, many times," Remus said smugly. "I don't know how your luck's been over the years, but there is a certain segment of the population who enjoy the sight of a scruffy werewolf in a waistcoat..."

"Like me," Sirius said. Remus' breath hitched, and Sirius became suddenly aware that they were naked, and that when Remus breathed in like that, his whole body moved -- sharply -- against Sirius'. Remus bent, hooked a finger in the collar and used it to lift him an inch or two from the bed. He kissed him almost chastely, and then nuzzled him just under the jaw, releasing him back to the bed. Sirius felt his own breath draw in sharply when he realised Remus wasn't going to take the collar off...

"Fake," Remus murmured, kissing his way over his collarbone, down his chest. "Phony."

"I had to be -- uhm -- persuasive," Sirius answered, as Remus' teeth grazed the smooth skin of his abdomen. Remus' hands were on his thighs again, thumbs drawing small circles.

"I wonder," Remus continued, lips sliding along the edge of a hipbone, "Why you bothered, when you know..."

Lower still, and on skin sensitive to the touch.

"That sooner or later I always say yes to you," Remus finished, lifting his head for a moment.

"It's the -- " Sirius had intended to say it was the getting there that mattered, but Remus had just done something with his tongue that made Sirius incoherent, and then he gave up; Remus, after all, had his mouth already occupied. Sirius wanted to push himself up on his elbows again, watch just how Remus' mouth worked around him, see his tongue dart out to lap over sensitive spots, but he could only arch and moan and promise himself that next time -- a world of next times -- he'd make Remus teach him that, and the idea of doing to Remus what Remus was currently doing to him, with such thorough enjoyment that Sirius felt him moan, nearly put him over the edge. Remus heard the ragged quality of his cries, and leaned back slowly. Sirius whimpered.

"It's been rather a long day," Remus remarked conversationally, although Sirius could hear the desire welling up in his voice. "Perhaps tonight isn't the night to try *everything* new."

"Remus, I don't know what you're on about," Sirius gasped, "but please make your point and let's go back to doing that..."

Remus' warm weight left his thighs and moved up, along the length of his body, slightly to the side. He rested a hand on Sirius' stomach, and when Sirius turned his head, smiled.

"This?" he asked softly, backs of his knuckles brushing Sirius' body tantalisingly.

"Something like that," Sirius moaned. Remus continued the gentle stroke, two or three times, before tightening his fingers and breathing into his ear.

"I thought I'd lost you," he said, as Sirius bucked and thrust, writhing against the steady rhythm of his hand. "I'm sorry -- I was an idiot to wait -- when I could have you like this -- an idiot -- "

Sirius fumbled, hands still not quite his own, finding the hard, smooth muscles of Remus' hip. He walked his fingers down the skin until Remus jerked and caught his breath.

"Please, Sirius," he said, softly, in his ear. The quiet, imploring tone, combined with the sudden heat of his arousal, made Sirius' fingers twitch. Which in turn made Remus tighten his grip, slightly, and stroke faster --

He tensed as he came, mouth open but silent, muscles clenching, eyes tightly shut. Remus continued to move, against him, brushing his hand, and Sirius was just barely conscious enough,

above the distraction of his own pleasure, to open his eyes and watch Remus' face as he came, and gasped, and collapsed a little.

They lay, Sirius exhausted and Remus warm and heavy on top of him, until Sirius began to shiver. They parted company just long enough to mutter a cleaning charm and crawl under the heaps of blankets on the bed, and then Sirius curled close, Remus drawing up against him. He wanted skin contact, everywhere possible, and Remus seemed more than agreeable.

"Long day," Remus whispered again. "Time for sleep now?"

"Yeah," Sirius answered, feeling his body fully relax for the first time in -- well, weeks, at least.

"D'you know," Remus mumbled, already drowsing, "why I always made you shelve the books at the shop?"

An odd question to ask, but then it had been a very strange day.

"No, whyzat?" Sirius muttered against his shoulder.

"Hands," Remus answered. "I always thought you had the most splendid hands."

"Mmh."

Remus inched closer, until Sirius could comfortably bury his face in the soft hair at the back of his neck. "I wasn't wrong."

Sirius drifted one of the hands Remus had so admired, over his waist and down across his body. "Thank you," he murmured.

"For what?" Remus asked, around a yawn.

"Trusting me."

"Mmh. You made it worth my while, I feel," Remus remarked, and Sirius smiled. "This is what I wanted. It's...what I didn't remember. From the Shack. This part."

"This part?"

"Warm. Safe. You," Remus mumbled, as his breathing slowed and deepened. "M'sorry," he muttered sleepily.

Sirius, feeling as though he'd somehow won a prize he didn't really deserve, fell asleep with Remus' skin under his lips, the smell of him in his nostrils, feel of his body against him.

Andromeda Tonks (though she'd never, in her mind, stopped calling herself Andromeda Black, a

conceit common to the women of the Black family) was a wise and forgiving woman, if somewhat negligent in the baby-names area. She knew Sirius and Remus were friends; had suspected something more, as indicated by two unmarried men pushing thirty who spent all their time together. She hadn't known Remus was a werewolf, but she suppressed the instinctive horror of it which most old Pureblood families instilled in their children. After all, it wasn't as if he wasn't also a nice person.

She certainly hadn't known Sirius was an Animagus, but nothing her cousin did could surprise her anymore -- really it had been that way since he was eleven, and the Sorting Hat called him for Gryffindor.

Sirius answered her knock, the morning after Peter and Bellatrix's disastrous attack, half-dressed, trousers hanging loosely off his hips.

Over his shoulder and only out of the corner of her eye, she could see Remus, quite clearly naked, sprawled and tangled in the sheets of the bed.

"Sleep well?" she asked innocently. Sirius tried to put his hair into some kind of order, and nodded. She kept her eyes firmly on him. "Good. There's breakfast, if you'd like. Ted's cooking."

"Thanks -- we'll be down -- " Sirius said muzzily. Behind him, Remus stirred. "Ten minutes?"

"I'll hold you to that," she said, and kissed him on the cheek.

And murmured "Well done, Sirius," as she walked away.

"Who was that?" Remus asked, pushing himself up, blinking sleep from his eyes. Sirius shut the door.

"Andromeda. She says breakfast's up."

"Mm." Remus rubbed his eyes, and Sirius allowed himself to enjoy the sight of Remus Lupin, naked, newly-awake and entirely unself-conscious about it. "Good, I'm starving."

He slid out of bed and was halfway through dressing before he paused, and turned.

"Sirius," he said slowly.

"Yes?" Sirius asked, pulling his shirt around his shoulders.

"Last night..."

"Don't tell me you thought *that* time was a dream, too."

Remus blushed deeply. "No, it was...much...better..." he stammered. "I just -- are you -- "

Sirius looked up from his buttons. Remus' face was crossed with fear and concern, eyebrows vaguely knitted together. He crossed the room, holding out Remus' discarded shirt as a sort of bizarre offering. When Remus grasped it, he pulled, bringing the other man off-balance up against him.

His arm went around Remus' waist, and his mouth was on Remus' before either of them could properly draw breath.

"I'm not scared if you're not," he said, and Remus laughed at the ancient in-joke between them -- that had always been what they'd said at school before starting some monstrous prank or other.

"Is it okay if I'm scared?" Remus asked quietly. "A little?"

"Yes -- yes of course -- Moony..." Sirius cupped his face with one hand. "You did it. You took what was there for you. I'm there. Here, I mean."

The reaction he was having to the proximity of their bodies could, he thought ruefully, leave very little doubt of that.

"I told Andromeda we'd be down in ten minutes," he said, "or I'd remind you."

Remus grinned wickedly then, and slipped a hand down over his stomach, and lower -- stroking him gently through his trousers. "Feels as though you'd like to anyway."

"Moony -- I can't go down to breakfast with -- " Sirius' half-whine was cut off by a gasp as Remus' fingers slipped his flies open, tugging his trousers and underwear down. Mouth followed fingers a moment later and Sirius moaned, softly, as Remus used his tongue again -- really, one day, must learn that --

He was still barely awake, and susceptible to all sorts of things; Remus kneeling in front of him and the *idea* of Remus kneeling in front of him, the warmth of his mouth and the slight graze of teeth all seemed to hit him at once, in a wave. His hips thrust, body moving seemingly independent of thought, and he doubted they'd even taken five of their ten-minute allotment before he sucked in a tight breath and tried to push Remus away. Remus gripped his hips tighter, pulled him closer, and Sirius came, legs nearly giving out.

Remus smiled and licked his lips, and then Sirius' legs did give out and he stumbled backwards against the bed.

"We now have..." Remus glanced at the clock, "three minutes to make ourselves presentable."

"But you -- " Sirius stammered. "I mean I could..."

Remus grinned as he pulled his shirt on.

"Some of us have a little more self-control," he said loftily. Sirius stared.

"I'll take that out of your hide, later," he growled.

"I look forward to it."

They dressed, more or less neatly considering their clothes had already seen a birthday party and an attempt on their life, and descended the stairs in a clatter. Harry met them halfway, cannoning into Sirius.

"Morning!" he cried. "Come have sausages and waffles!"

"Sausages and waffles, how can I say no?" Sirius asked, allowing the boy to lead him into the kitchen. Remus followed, a hand placed gently on the small of his back until they parted to sit. A nearly-empty plate showed Bill must have gone home with Scabbers already, and Ted and Nymphadora were helping themselves to the dish of sausages, passing the syrup and jam.

It was the most bizarre breakfast Sirius had eaten in some time. To be sitting in the home he'd spent his mostly wretched childhood in, listening to his godson prattle on about Bill and having just survived a spirited attempt on his life -- all this was strange enough.

But then he would find his attention had drifted to where Remus was very carefully licking a bit of jam off his fingertip, with a tongue that, half an hour before, had been --

Sirius had to pause, at this point, and take several deep, calming breaths.

Remus smiled wickedly at him over his plate.

"Have you thought what we ought to do next?" Andromeda was asking, and Sirius turned to face her.

"Next?" he asked, and then remembered that someone had tried to *kill them* the day before.

"Clearly you're going to have to tell the Ministry about Peter's abilities," she said, cutting up her sausage. "Arthur Weasley's already given the Aurors a report about the attack. Severus Snape sent an owl to say he looked in on the shop but didn't find anything, and Albus Dumbledore's in a state." She whistled low. "I don't think you're in the running for Head Boy right now, Sirius."

"Never wanted to be," Sirius replied evenly.

"Yes, well, Remus is about to lose his prefecture," she added. Remus cocked a half-smile at her.

"You know, they act as if we do this sort of thing on purpose," Sirius said to Remus. "I don't *enjoy* fleeing for my life."

"Did enough of it at school," Remus answered.

"Yes, but the point is, I didn't arrange it. It's not our fault my psychopathic cousin and ex-best friend want my godson dead."

"Sirius," Andromeda warned, and cut her eyes to Harry, who was putting syrup on his latest helping of waffles.

"If we can't keep him safe..." Remus left the thought hanging in the air until Andromeda put her hands, palm down, on the table.

"We'll find a way," she said. "If I have to find her myself. Harry belongs with you. And besides," she said, more thoughtfully, "She's wrecking our good name."

Sirius had a moment of déjà vu -- Andromeda was a good woman and had never shown an ounce of the old Black priggishness or bigotry, but she was still a Black, to the very core, and the Black name still meant a lot to her. He met her eyes, and finally, nodded. It was his name. It meant something to him, too.

"So we'll have to tell the Ministry -- can we pass it through an Auror? Moody'd be able to handle them. Do we..." he paused. "Do we have to tell them about me? Or Remus?"

Andromeda glanced at Remus, who was studiously helping himself to some sausages. "I don't see why," she said finally. "Though you ought to register, Sirius, if only to avoid trouble later."

Sirius grunted noncommittally.

"Snape had an...an interesting suggestion," Ted said hesitantly, from the end of the table. "He thinks Peter might go back to the bookshop."

Sirius chewed thoughtfully. "You know, he's just dumb enough he might."

"Surely not," Andromeda said. "Peter wasn't very good at magic, but he had a deviant little brain."

"Not a very original thinker, though," Remus put in. "I mean. Once he found something that worked he stuck with it. He wouldn't have gone after us for no reason -- life was more comfortable with us in it. He wouldn't leave somewhere safe unless he had to."

"We could set a trap," Nymphadora suggested, then flushed scarlet when all eyes turned towards her.

"Auror training, did you say?" Sirius asked Andromeda, who grinned and nodded. "Bout time she met an Auror proper then, isn't it?"

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 21

Alastor Moody hung up his Muggle bowler hat on a hook inside the front door of 12 Grimmauld Place, and growled a greeting at Sirius as he stumped inside.

"Dumb luck," he said. "Pure dumb luck."

"Seems to run in the family," Sirius replied, knowing that Moody's grim and threatening tone was an act; Remus was still somewhat in awe of the older man, but then Remus liked to circumvent authority by other means than confrontation. One or two good shouting matches, over the years, had brought Sirius and Moody to an equable if somewhat tense understanding.

"Not a single ward on the Weasley place. Big high hedges for hiding in. Are ye daft, man?" Moody continued.

"No, sir," Sirius said. "Just wanted to let Harry have a real birthday for once."

"Constant vigilance!" Moody boomed, following Sirius into the kitchen. He thumped his way to the middle of the floor, and took in the breakfast table where Ted, Remus, and Andromeda were sitting. Nymphadora stood nervously behind her mother, and Harry behind Remus. Moody let the sack he was carrying fall to the ground.

"Lupin!" he barked. Remus nodded. "You saw her first."

"Smelled her," Remus answered. "Bill Weasley saw her, though, I think."

"Smelled her?"

"She hadn't washed," Remus said simply. "She smelled like rot."

"Where's the Weasley boy?"

"Gone home," Sirius said.

Mad-Eye seemed resigned to this, and nodded, with muttered greetings, to the Tonkses. "Speak with him later."

He kicked the sack he'd dropped towards Remus, who bent and lifted it, untying the knot holding it closed. "Brought the lad's broom. What's left of it," Moody added. Remus took out a handful of slivers, each about as long as his hand, and glanced over his shoulder at Harry, who bit his lip.

"My racing broom..." the boy said, voice shaking a little.

"We'll get you another one," Remus said softly. "We should be grateful. This could have been your leg," he added, holding up a smashed piece of wood.

"Never mind that now. Black's got a plan," Mad-Eye prompted, turning to Sirius, who was staring at the piece of wood with a hard, cold look on his face.

"I'll kill them both," he said softly. "With my bare hands."

"Better to toss 'em in Azkaban. Really make 'em suffer," Moody put in.

"The plan is Nymphadora's idea," Sirius said, pulling himself back to the present. The girl opened her mouth to protest the name, but Sirius continued. "Snape -- "

"Right," Moody barked. "That one. Taking the lad places he oughtn't be going, Dumbledore said something about it. Go on then."

"Peter must have been hiding out at the bookshop. Snape thinks he might go back there, especially if he doesn't know we've guessed he's holed up there. We thought we ought to try trapping him."

Moody scratched his chin with a sound like sandpaper on wood.

"There are spells to expel an animagus from animal form..." Nymphadora said hesitantly, suddenly shy in front of this strange, claw-legged man.

"Aye," Mad-Eye agreed, regarding her. "You'd be the trainee, then."

"Yes, sir."

"Scared of me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Ought to be," Moody grunted. "Right then. Takes care of half the problem. Can't find the fugitive without the rat, though. Any ideas on that front, trainee?" he asked.

Nymphadora bit her lip. "Veritaserum on him when we catch him, though that's dangerous. Or...we could...use him to catch her...he's hiding her somewhere. Probably warded," she said, gaining speed. "And if we want to catch her we've got to lure her out, so -- get her to come to the bookshop -- "

She faltered under Moody's unblinking gaze, and fell silent.

"I think it's a good idea," Harry piped up, fearlessly. Moody glanced at him.

"Not bad," he agreed, and Nymphadora swelled with pride. "Black, you're the chess player. Your own home, your own child, so we're at your disposal."

Sirius sat, and let his fingers drift over an empty teacup, considering matters. Remus coughed quietly, and Sirius glanced at him. The brown-haired man tilted an eyebrow, and stroked the scar on his jaw.

Message sent and received. *Indestructible Lupin is also at your service.*

Damned if he'd send Remus into danger alone. Not now. Not when he was so close to everything he needed for happiness, with only Peter Bloody Pettigrew and his own cousin Bellatrix standing in the way.

Besides, Remus didn't have it in him to kill two people.

At least, Sirius didn't think he did.

"We need to make them think they're safe at the bookshop," he said slowly. "Bellatrix needs a reason to come after us there."

"I think they already took what they needed from us," Remus said, touching Harry's hand where it rested on his shoulder. "Though I don't know why."

"We should...find out," Sirius answered. "And...we should -- we need to know what they're thinking, what they're planning."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Andromeda put in. Sirius glanced at her. She looked down. "She's family," she said. "We remember."

Sirius bowed his head. He couldn't deny it, much as he wanted to. And Peter had been one of their inner circle; no matter what he was now, ten years ago only James and Remus had been closer to Sirius than Peter.

Moody was watching him with a look that was almost smug. He and Dumbledore had warned them of the dangers of taking Harry from the Dursleys.

"Right then," Sirius said finally. "Harry stays here. Andromeda -- "

"We'll stay also. We can clean," Andromeda said brightly. Nymphadora let out a tiny groan.

"Remus, can you find out why he'd want that blood?" Sirius asked. Remus drew his eyebrows together.

"I'll need a few books from the flat. And..." he paused. "It would help if I had...well -- "

Moody cleared his throat. "Saw Dumbledore before I came here. Said we might put Snape to work. Man's climbing the walls for lack of employ."

"He could mind his business, if he wanted a job," Sirius grumbled.

"Snape would be a help," Remus said. "He has access to Hogwarts' library, and he...well, he knows Dark Arts."

"So d'you," Sirius replied.

"Not the way he does," Remus murmured. "Not from the inside."

"Merlin forbid you ever should," Moody snapped. "Blood magic and kin-protection charms! Damn mess, the lot of it."

"Can I see Professor Snape?" Harry asked, and most of the adults looked at him. "I'm good at books. I could help."

Sirius covered his face with one hand, rubbing his jaw in thought.

"Why don't we go and look at the library," Remus suggested. He gave Sirius a warning look as he left, leading Harry. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, children."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nymphadora demanded, as the kitchen doors swung shut.

"He's worried we're going to hatch a half-witted plan," Sirius answered absently.

"Well, you have done in the past," Andromeda pointed out. "Really, Sirius, stealing the boy from his family without even making any preparations beforehand -- "

"How many times do I have to say this? They were *locking* -- " Sirius began to snarl about what the Dursleys had done to his godson, then caught himself, glancing at the door Harry had just passed through. "I'd rather take my chances with Peter than with the Dursleys," he muttered.

"And I'm sure Harry feels the same," Ted said smoothly. "That's not the problem right now. The problem right now is that Bellatrix Lestrange is loose, and Peter Pettigrew too, and they clearly have a plan. We might consider telling the Ministry there's a dead man on the loose. They've got a lot more firepower than an Auror and a couple of shopkeepers," he added ruefully.

"I'll talk to the Aurors," Moody grumbled. "Ought to know there's been a sighting of Lestrange, and that Pettigrew's still alive, fingers or no." He pointed at Sirius. "You give Lupin and Snape today and tomorrow to find out what the wicked pair're after. If we don't know by then, we'll bloody start putting out mousetraps."

Sirius nodded, slowly. "In that case, I ought to help with the research also," he said, almost as a question.

"I'll go back to your flat with you," Ted said. "Looks like your wards may or may not work -- you can fetch clothes, and anything you're worried Pettigrew might get his hands on."

"Take the lass," Moody grunted. Nymphadora blinked. "Nothin' like field work. I'll fetch Snape, explain everything. How're the Weasleys holding up?"

"Fine, so far as I know," Ted answered. "You might check in on your way to get Snape."

Moody nodded curtly, and without another word, floo'd out to the Weasley house, leaving the Tonks family and Sirius in the kitchen.

"Well," Andromeda said, after a brief moment. "That'll clearly take some time, he'll have to argue a bit with Severus. I'm going to go home and get some cleaning supplies."

"You don't have to do that," Sirius protested weakly.

"Well, I might as well, if you're going to be here a while, and anyway, if you're serious about selling it to us, I'd have to do it then." Andromeda gave him a falsely bright smile. "Besides, it'll keep my mind off of things. Don't wait for me; I won't be gone long, but you might as well get a jump on the day."

She tossed a pinch of powder into the fireplace, stepped inside, and vanished; Ted glanced at his daughter, who was watching Sirius, wide-eyed.

"I'd better go tell Remus we'll be gone," Sirius said. "I'm not sure we ought to leave just the two of them alone in the house."

"Moody and Snape'll be back soon, I'm sure they'll be fine," Ted said reassuringly. "We'll wait here."

"Ought to lock them in the library," Sirius grumbled, as he climbed the stairs. He heard Ted chuckle, behind him, and ask Nymphadora something indecipherable. He caught the words "Moody" and "dangerous job", and grinned a little to himself.

He let himself into the library quietly; his father had charmed the bookshelves to spit books at anyone who talked above a certain level, and he'd been a very bruised young child when he'd finally taken an interest in reading, but hadn't figured out the charm. It had, on the up-side, taught him to be nimble, since he was forever dodging large leatherbound books until Bellatrix had taken pity on him, despite her belief that he was insane for wanting to read for pleasure, and told him about the charm.

Bellatrix had once been beautiful and nice to her young cousin and everything Sirius wanted to be.

He shut his eyes, standing in the entranceway of the library. He'd genuinely liked Bellatrix, as a child.

Then they'd grown up, and it had all gone to hell the day Sirius walked out of this awful old house, if it hadn't already gone to hell when Bellatrix joined Voldemort.

And she's the one, he reminded himself, *who's responsible for that bandage on Harry's shoulder.*

The thought gave him strength, of a horrible sort, and he opened his eyes, taking in the long, dusty shafts of sunlight thrown across the floor by the library windows. If he listened hard, he could hear Harry's high, child's voice asking a question, and Remus' deeper reply. He followed the sound silently until he could make out the words.

" -- actually read all these books?"

"I don't know, Harry. Some people buy books just to own books."

"Why?"

"Because they like having books around, perhaps. Or they think it makes them look clever, I suppose."

"I don't think some of these books would make anyone look very smart at all. This one's too big."

"Put it on the table, there, I need that one."

"I guess just about everything in the world is in these books somewhere, huh?"

"Everything we know about it, anyway. You know, all these books belong to Sirius. He inherited them after his mum died."

"Sirius had a mum?"

"Course Sirius had a mum. So have I. Well -- his mum and mine are both dead, like yours. And Sirius' dad, too. Which is why all these books belong to Sirius."

"Sirius hasn't any parents either?"

"No, Harry."

"Like me?"

"Sort of. His parents weren't as nice as yours."

"Sirius could open another bookshop with all these books."

"That he could, but I don't think he will. Some of them are...not very nice books."

"Like the ones you keep on the top shelf?"

"In a way. If I lift you up, can you take that one for me? Grand, Harry, thanks."

"Are there fun books in here? Like storybooks?"

"I doubt it. Maybe. Sirius told me he used to spend a lot of time in here, reading. Which explains a lot, really."

"What's he gonna do with all these books, then?"

"I don't know. Sell them to Andromeda, maybe."

"I like her. When I grow up I'm going to marry Nymphadora."

"Have you told Nymphadora that yet?"

"She said she wouldn't have me till I was eighteen, and I'd have to fight Bill, but that's all right, as he's wretched at duelling, she says. I'd definitely marry her if her mum has all these books."

"Well, Sirius might give them to you, instead, you know."

"I'd rather have Sandust's books."

"Me too, Harry."

"Sirius hasn't any parents? Really?"

"Really."

"He must get lonely."

Sirius rapped on the edge of the bookshelf, softly, and Remus looked up from the book he was reading, startled. "Making trouble, Harry?" he asked. Harry, who'd been happily building a tower out of *Caspan's Magical Grimoire Index*, volumes E through X, smiled brightly at him.

"Harry's been helping me get books off the high shelves, haven't you lad," Remus said, setting a red, cloth-bound book on a table he'd apparently charmed to follow him around. It was floating an inch off the floor, already groaning under the weight of dozens of various-sized volumes. Harry nodded solemnly.

"Finally earning your keep, eh?" Sirius asked, leaning against one of the shelves. "Harry, there's a window-seat the next shelf over, if you lift it up there should be a box of comic books in a hole under the cushion."

Remus lifted an eyebrow as Harry crossed the central aisle. Sirius gave him a grin, and a shrug. "Had to stash them somewhere, and the house elves were always poking around my room."

They heard Harry laugh delightedly, and Sirius leaned just enough so that he could see the boy settling onto the cushion with a Wizarding comic in his hands.

"What's the decision?" Remus asked softly.

"We have until tomorrow evening to figure out what they want. After that Moody's going to call the Aurors in, I think. I'm going back to the flat to pick up some clothes, and Frog -- is there anything you need?"

"My shaving kit, and a few books -- I'll give you a list," Remus said, taking a scrap of parchment

out of his pocket and scrawling on it with a quill from the table.

"Andromeda's gone to get some cleaning supplies -- she's determined to dust from cellar to attic," Sirius added. "Ted and Nymphadora are going to come along with me."

Remus was nodding as he wrote. Sirius grasped the end of the quill between two fingers, and the brown-haired man looked up.

"You'll be all right? Here alone with Harry?" he asked.

"We're safe here. From the outside," Remus added, dusting off a book. "Nothing in here I can't handle."

Sirius let go of the quill, and Remus dotted a final i, handing it to him. Sirius' index finger brushed his thumb, and they both smiled.

"Listen...I don't, you know. Get lonely," Sirius said. "I hated my parents."

"You heard us talking."

"Some of it. I'm not lonely," Sirius repeated. "I'd better to say bye to Harry. I won't be long."

He felt Remus' eyes on him as he bent to kiss the top of Harry's head; as Harry lifted his face to Sirius, stiffly because of the bandage, and smiled encouragingly. He felt Remus still watching him as he turned to leave, letting himself out as quietly as he'd arrived. It made his skin tingle in unfamiliar, not entirely unpleasant ways.

Andromeda was noisily cleaning the kitchen when Sirius and the rest of the Tonks family returned; Moody was sipping tea in a corner of the kitchen, and indicated with a mutter and a wave of a hand that Snape was already in the library. Sirius barely paused to set down two hastily-packed satchels of clothing in their bedroom, snatch Frog, and grab the pile of books Remus had requested, before he pushed his way into the library.

The table Remus had charmed to follow him was now resting firmly on the ground, in the central atrium of the library; he was hunched over it, sunlight turning the book-pages, and his hair, bright gold. Snape was standing to one side, leafing through another volume, and Harry was sitting crosslegged on the table itself, still reading comics. He looked up when Sirius entered, and grinned. Snape looked up also, and scowled.

Sirius set the books at Remus' elbow, deliberately brushing his arm with his hand, and passed Frog over to Harry.

"Thanks, Sirius," Harry said, tucking Frog next to his hip. "Gonna read with us?"

Sirius reached into his pocket and took out the rest of his cargo for Harry -- the blue snake that

Snape had given him as a birthday present. He saw Snape's eyes follow his hand as the small reptile curled close to Sirius' fingers, before sliding across them and around Harry's wrist. Harry, delighted, held up his hand to Snape, who gave him a brief nod before returning to his reading.

"Ted and Nymphadora are going to help Andromeda -- they thought they'd get in the way here. Where've we got to, then?" Sirius asked, seating himself next to Remus and picking up a book off the pile. Remus rested his cheek on his hand, a gesture left over from their Hogwarts days.

"I'm on blood rituals, and Severus is looking at hexes aimed primarily at children. Though I do think if he'd wanted Harry dead he could have been more direct about it than he was. Wouldn't have taken all that much effort to roll you off him," Remus said quietly. Snape flicked the fingers of his left hand dismissively before turning another page. "Most blood rituals require willingly-given sacrifices on the part of the wizard performing the spell -- like the *nomos* spell I cast on the flat. Things that require innocent sacrifice..." he glanced at Harry, who had hung the docile snake around his neck; he leaned closer to Sirius, lowering his voice further. "This is deep, dark magic, Sirius. We're talking necromancy, demon-raising, torment curses...the sort of thing Bellatrix would practice, I suppose -- I always pegged Peter as more of a yes-man who found the wrong person to say yes to." He took the book out of Sirius' hands, replacing it with another. "Have a look at some of the necromancy stuff. Possibly Peter's trying to resurrect...someone. I don't know that he's bright enough, but..."

"Lupin." Snape's voice was quiet but crisp, as he held out the book he'd been reading, so that Remus could examine the text. "Quite possibly it's not actually for a spell at all. There's a compendium of potions by base ingredient, I believe; I'll retrieve it from Hogwarts tonight. Have you a copy of *Libris Sanguinorum*?" he asked Sirius, who looked surprised at the directness of the question.

"The one with the bloody hand on the cover?" Sirius asked.

"Yes, the third edition."

"I think so. Fascinated me as a kid," Sirius said, not quite able to believe he was being civil to his archnemesis. "Try the third aisle down, with the house-elf head on the end."

Snape swooped off, and Remus made a notation on his parchment. Harry appeared to be watching them over the edge of his comic.

"Can people talk to frogs?" he asked, when he saw Sirius watching back.

Even Remus tore his attention away from his book, for that one.

"Not normally," Sirius answered cautiously. "I guess there are spells...don't see why you'd want to, really. Frogs can't have much to say."

"Snakes do," Harry answered. "Snake says he likes me better than your fuzzy old pocket."

Remus looked amused.

"He says you had coins in your pocket and they were lumpy," Harry added. Sirius reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of sickles. "Also they were cold," Harry added, as Snape returned, carrying a ghastly green book with a lurid bloody hand on the front cover.

"It was that or he starved," Sirius answered. "I don't know when we'll be able to go home again, Harry."

All three men stared as Harry hissed.

"Harry -- " Sirius began, but Harry continued to hiss and make small, strange noises in his throat, as the snake curled up over one of his ears and down near his mouth, looking for all the world as if it were trying to hear him better.

"What on earth..." Remus said, now totally distracted from research.

"He says it was still cold." Harry shrugged and returned to his comic.

"Harry, did you just talk to that snake?" Sirius demanded. Harry grinned and nodded. Remus' jaw had dropped. "Not for play, Harry. For real."

"I'm not playing," Harry replied. "Or telling tales. Ask Professor Snape, he believes me."

Sirius turned, ever so slowly, to regard Snape, wearing one of the most smug expressions Sirius had ever seen.

"Is he a Parselmouth?" he asked, feeling like the biggest fool in the world.

"I was," Snape said, silkily, "forbidden from telling you. Dumbledore's orders. I understand you take great delight in defying such things, but I, unfortunately, had a career to consider. I cannot, after all, be responsible for your lack of obser -- "

"YOU KNEW?" Sirius roared, and a flock of books immediately flew out of the nearby shelves in attack formation. Harry squeaked and ducked, Remus tried to fend them off, and Snape stood very still, like a Zen master witnessing an avalanche of a very literary nature. When Sirius emerged from the melee, Snape raised his index finger to his lips and made a very soft shushing noise.

The shush may have been his death knell, except that Remus instinctively blocked Sirius from getting his fingers around Snape's throat, and after a second, Sirius realised that Harry was watching with great interest.

"Outside," Remus ordered. "Now. Go. Shout at Dumbledore if you have to, but if you're going to be uselessly loud, you may as well let the rest of us work in peace. And you," he added, turning to Snape, "Are going to tell us everything you know, just as soon as I get through this section on poisoned daggers."

"How can you -- " Sirius sputtered, but Remus pressed his thumb over Sirius' lips, silencing him quite effectively.

"I have a limited capacity for dealing with crises," he said, emphasising each syllable. "I cannot at once process an attempt on Harry's life, Peter living as a rat for eight years in your bookshop, two grown men who can't be arsed to be civil to one another, and Harry's Doctor Doolittle act simultaneously without a great deal more alcohol than I currently have. Either go shout somewhere else, the both of you, or stay here and actually make yourselves useful."

Both men were silent for a minute; finally, Sirius picked up a book and plonked it down on top of the first one, flipping angrily to the index. Severus, hesitating, took a careful seat well on the other side of the table. Harry leaned forward over his comic, and whispered to Remus, "You're not going to turn them into turtles, are you?"

"I'm seriously considering it, Harry," Remus replied. "How long, incidentally, have you been able to talk to snakes?"

Harry shrugged. "Since I can remember. Nobody ever believed me. Am I in trouble?"

"No. But I wouldn't start hissing in public, all right?"

"It's not like anyone ever notices," Harry sulked.

"As a favour to me, Harry?"

Harry lifted a hand to delicately stroke the snake's head. "All right, Remus." He bent forward. "I'll keep your secret, too."

Remus bent forward. "What secret is that?"

Harry turned his comic around, and showed Remus one of the picture pages. In it, a caged werewolf was savagely attacking the bars of its prison.

"Oh bloody hell," Remus said, with feeling, right before five or six books attacked him.

"Those were some very bad words," Harry said over his crisps, as he and Remus recounted the library attack for the Tonkses and Moody, minus a few key details.

"Indeed they were," Remus agreed. "I'm sure a couple of grimoires upside the head were only what I deserved."

Down the stairs floated the muted sounds of Sirius and Severus having a really mighty row. Harry seemed unconcerned by it; Remus was going to leave them to it. Moody seemed to be positively enjoying it. The general drift seemed to be that Severus ought to have told Sirius his own godson was a parseltongue, and Sirius ought to have noticed it himself if he was so bloody great at being a

godfather in the first place. Remus had quietly confiscated both their wands just before announcing they ought to stop for dinner.

"We should look into getting rid of that particular charm," Ted said, around a mouthful of sandwich. Nymphadora had made the sandwiches, and none of them wanted to see what the kitchen looked like after half an hour of crashing and clattering, but he had to admit they weren't bad-tasting.

"You say you wanted to put in a shop on the ground floor, Andromeda?" Remus asked.

Andromeda smiled and nodded. "We thought we could get one of those new portkey-storefronts, have you seen them? The storefront opens onto Diagon Alley but the actual shop can be nearly anywhere in London. Certainly wouldn't get much business around here. Neighbourhood's definitely gone downmarket in the last ten years."

"Give you a hand, if you like, once everything blows over," Remus offered. Upstairs there was a crash.

"Reckon we ought to go make sure nobody's going to die?" Ted asked.

"Let 'em to it," Moody grunted. "Do 'em no harm."

"I could certainly show you how to set up accounting, I've been keeping Sirius' books for a few years," Remus continued. Andromeda seemed to choke on a piece of chicken, and Ted thumped her back.

"We'd appreciate that," Ted said, scraping the tomatoes off his sandwich. There was a muttered "Sorry, dad" from Nymphadora.

"How did your research go?" Andromeda asked, when she'd cleared her throat. Remus frowned.

"I'm not sure. It...worries me," he said slowly. "I don't think it's meant to harm Harry at all, or Peter wouldn't have --" he broke off, glancing at Harry, who was stealthily stealing one of Ted's discarded tomatoes. Andromeda nodded. "Severus thinks perhaps it's a potion, he's going to do more research tonight."

They all listened philosophically to another thud from upstairs.

"It's a good thing he likes Harry," Remus said with a smile. "I can't imagine either of them would take the sort of abuse the other dishes out, otherwise."

"Hard to imagine him liking anyone," Nymphadora muttered.

"At any rate, we're narrowing the field on why they wanted that blood. Slowly. We won't know what to do until we know what Peter's planning, but by the time we find out he may have already done it."

"S'why there's a time limit," Moody put in. "Can't afford to wait any longer, not with that crazy b - - " he looked at Harry, who was interestedly examining his false eye. "With that Bellatrix on the loose."

"Why's it move on its own?" Harry asked. Moody reached up and, to a chorus of disgusted groans from the rest of the company, took the eye out, dropping it in his water glass and holding it out for Harry to look at. The eye rolled around in the water until the electric blue pupil was fixed on Harry.

"Must you give anatomy lessons at the dinner table?" Andromeda asked delicately.

"He asked," Moody grunted. He took the eye out of the water and popped it back into place, where it swiveled upwards. "Looks like Black and Snape're pretty well finished," he added, as Sirius came clattering down the stairs. He gave them all a sullen, angry look, and threw himself into a chair next to Remus. Snape followed. Andromeda offered sandwiches.

"Nymphadora made them," she said, just as Sirius bit into one. Sirius paused for a moment, apparently decided to go through with it, and bit the rest of the way. Snape eyed them with the suspicion of a man who's seen exactly how many ways the sandwich-maker in question could screw up a potion.

"I'm going to Hogwarts," Snape growled. "For further research. I'll return tomorrow."

"Don't hurry back," Sirius said under his breath. Remus kicked the back of his leg. Harry got up from his chair, took a sandwich off the platter, and offered it to Snape. He hesitated a moment before accepting.

"I'm sorry Sirius yelled at you," Harry whispered.

"I'm not," Sirius added. Snape gave them all a sweeping, slightly disgusted look, tried to look as though he wasn't actually bending to hug a nine-year-old boy goodbye, and then vanished into the kitchen fire with a toss of floo powder and a snarled "Hogwarts!"

"Good talk, was it?" Remus asked mildly.

"He should have told us."

"Does it occur to you he was trying to, without breaking a promise?" Remus asked.

"No, that doesn't occur to me, why didn't he just tell us?"

Remus sighed. "He gave Harry a snake, Sirius."

Sirius frowned for a moment, until comprehension dawned in his eyes. Remus saw his suddenly understanding look, and nodded.

"Why didn't you point that out before?" Sirius demanded. Remus shrugged.

"Does you both good to shout a bit," he said calmly, and Andromeda began to laugh.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 22

After dinner, Remus returned to the library, and took Nymphadora with him as a research assistant. Ted and Andromeda did the washing-up, while Moody stumped around the place hexing all the creepy-crawlies that the Tonkses hadn't felt were within their abilities to dispatch. Sirius betook himself and Harry to a quiet corner of the library, keeping one eye on Remus and Nymphadora while he pored over decades-old Wizarding comics with Harry. He wondered how many other things he'd stashed about the house were still there, waiting for him to remember and rediscover them. He hadn't gone to see his old bedroom; he wasn't sure whether they'd locked it up, or cleaned it out, or perhaps turned it into new House-Elf quarters. He didn't really care to know. He'd never kept anything of particular worth there, because Kreacher was likely to steal it or destroy it "accidentally". Sirius decided he'd let Andromeda take care of it.

None of them seemed to want to go to bed that night; the library, ghostly as it was, still felt better than the cold, musty bedrooms, however clean Andromeda had made them. Remus, he knew, was most at home among books; Nymphadora, he suspected, quite possibly harboured a lingering fear of the dark, which Twelve Grimmauld Place did not exactly put to rest.

Sirius just didn't want to leave Harry alone, though sooner or later he'd have to. Bill wasn't around this evening, after all; they'd had an owl from him saying he was staying with his father in St. Mungo's until Arthur had fully recovered. He couldn't spend the rest of their lives together sleeping in Harry's room, even as Padfoot. Besides, the house might be an evil, tired old place full of decay, but he couldn't deny it was safe. Even Bellatrix couldn't get in, not since he'd changed the passkey to the hexes on the doors.

Harry clearly didn't want to go to bed, either. He seemed all right, most of the time, but Sirius had seen the way he watched the adults, always keeping near one of them, putting Sirius between himself and the others if he could. He clung a little more -- like he had in those first days after they'd taken him from the Dursleys -- and he was more watchful than he had been. Sirius wondered what was going on inside his head, and if he ought to do something about it, but he didn't know quite what.

But it was well past Harry's bedtime, and Harry was beginning to nod off against Sirius' arm. Sirius shook himself out of his contemplation of Remus, bent by candlelight over the books, and closed the comic that was slipping from Harry's fingers. He cleared his throat, quietly, and Remus and Nymphadora both looked up.

"We can't do anything more tonight," he said quietly. "You both look done in. You'll start to miss things you can't afford to miss," he added, as Remus opened his mouth to protest. Harry, rubbing his eyes, looked up at his godfather sleepily.

"Both of you had better get to bed," he continued, sliding off the window-seat, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder to make sure the boy didn't stumble. He made sure Nymphadora had put down all her books, and Remus had left his parchments behind, before following them out of the library and

locking it with a tap of his wand. Neither of them protested, as they broke away to go to their bedrooms, while he followed Harry into his. Harry held up his arms, and Sirius tugged the shirt off over his head with one hand, pulling his glasses off with the other. He folded the shirt, turning away to give Harry his privacy as the boy changed into a pair of flannel pyjamas, and climbed into bed.

"I could stay with you tonight, or you could stay with Remus and me," Sirius said quietly, as Harry curled into his pillow. "If you're scared."

Harry shook his head, green eyes bright, if a little unfocused without his glasses. Lily's eyes, in James' face; it was still bewildering, even after all this time. "I'm okay," he said stoutly. "I've got Snake," he added, as the small blue creature coiled itself near Frog on the nightstand.

"Brave lad," Sirius said with a smile, bending to kiss him on the forehead.

"Aw," Harry replied, squirming away. Sirius grinned.

"If you get scared in the night, or you need anything, you just yell," he said. "I'm right across the hall, and Nymphadora's next door."

"M'kay," Harry said, eyes drooping. "Sirius?"

"Yes?"

"Are you my dad now?"

Sirius bowed his head. "Your dad is James, Harry. Always will be. But I'm like...you know how Remus has that first-edition E.W. Hornung?"

Harry nodded.

"Right, okay, and you know how you've got a copy of it that's...sort of newer?"

"Yeah. It's brilliant," Harry said. "When I grow up I'm going to be a jewel thief like Raffles."

"I hope not," Sirius said. "Listen, it's sort of like...they're the same book, right? It's just...you can't read the first-edition, because it's delicate. So you've got a new edition. One that you can beat up on and read and drop in puddles and such. It's all the same words, but it's not quite the original. I'm like your copy of the book. You get it?"

Harry considered him solemnly for a moment. Finally, he nodded, and Sirius breathed a sigh of relief.

"Night, Sirius," Harry said. Sirius noticed that Frog had been placed on the nightstand -- not quite on the bed, but within easy reach in the night.

"Night, Harry," he answered, as he left.

Remus was in bed, already half-asleep when Sirius opened the door quietly, throwing a flare of light onto the floor through the doorway.

"Harry's tucked in," he said.

"He could have slept in here," Remus murmured, half-against his pillow.

"He said he didn't want to. He said he'd be okay."

"You believe him?"

"No."

Remus yawned. "Me either. He'll yell if he's upset."

"Yes."

There was a moment of silence, and then Remus realised that it had definite awkward overtones. He rolled, leaning on one elbow to look at Sirius, who was standing in the dim room, unbuttoning his shirt anxiously.

"You all right?"

"Fine," Sirius grunted. "I thought maybe..."

Remus looked up at him, peering through half-open eyes. "Yes?"

"Listen, I can't...that is...I think tonight -- " Sirius sighed. There was a noise like air shifting over shapes, and Padfoot nosed his way along the bed, looking up at Remus with pale doggy eyes.

"If you kick in the night I'll kick back," Remus said, sliding his legs over so that the enormous dog could haul itself up. Padfoot curled against the bend of his knees, pressed nose to bottom, and let out one large sigh before his eyes closed. Remus, who understood that sometimes Sirius needed to be Padfoot in order to clear his head, ruffled the short bristly hair behind his ears, and fell asleep to Padfoot's even breathing.

He woke, the next morning, just before dawn, to find himself on his side, arm curled around Harry's slim body over a blanket the boy must have dragged in with him sometime in the night. Padfoot's head rested on Harry's hip, and both boy and dog were snoring lightly. He grinned, and lay back on the pillow; he was just drifting off to sleep again when he heard Padfoot change, and Sirius was bending over them.

"I'll put him back in bed," Sirius murmured, gathering up Harry, almost too big now to be carried. Remus waited for him to come back, expecting possibly a cold nose under his palm, but instead of changing into Padfoot, Sirius pushed him over gently, and slipped under the blankets, facing him,

curled close on the small bed. He kissed him, slowly, fingers tipping his chin up just slightly.

"You all right then?" Sirius asked. Remus grinned.

"A bit, yeah," he replied, just as casually. Sirius pulled him close, and Remus happily buried his face in Sirius' neck, inhaling the smell of his skin. "You're a quick study," he said, and Sirius laughed low.

"Dunno what I'm thinking, really," he said. "Never fancied blokes before."

"Not once, Sirius?"

"Worl, James, but you know. That was friends really. I mean -- not that you and I -- "

Sirius' suddenly panicked tone made him laugh again.

"It's all right, Sirius. I've had years to work this out. You've had...well, days. Hours."

He felt Sirius nod. "You were right, you know. I'd no idea what I was doing, really."

Remus pulled back a bit, brought one of Sirius' hands up to his face, resting his knuckles against his chin. "Why'd you do it then, Sirius? Why now? And not sometime in the last ten years, thereby saving me the trouble of comparing everyone I went out with to you. Some of them were quite a lot better-looking than you, you know. Bastard."

"I dunno," Sirius muttered.

"You do. I know you, Sirius. You amble along in life until you have some great revelation and then you act on it and that usually gets at least one of us in deep trouble. And then you amble along until the next epiphany hits. So. Why now?"

Sirius scowled. "Just...staying with you and all -- "

Remus lifted an eyebrow.

"All right, it was that blasted blond fellow."

Remus blinked.

"What?" he asked, confused suddenly.

"I don't know his name, and I'm sure I don't care," Sirius said defiantly. "The blond one. The nancy."

"Some nerve, Sirius, calling anyone a nancy in your current position."

"You know the one. Buys old bibles and silly Muggle prophecy books."

"Mr. Fell?" Remus said, with a sudden smile. Sirius' look told him he didn't like that smile at all. "Sirius, of all the people to be jealous of, you picked the pudgy blond with an unhealthy interest in bibles?"

"It's not like I was asked," Sirius muttered. "But he came by the shop, you know, a few days after Harry and I moved in with you. And I saw you talking to him, and there was this book, and you were both leaning over it..."

Remus rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You can't do *anything* normally, can you?"

"I saw the way you smiled at him, you know. And I thought you're *my* Remus, and here you are being blatantly -- blatantly -- "

"Flirted with?"

"Yes -- no! Wooed!"

"Wooed? Sirius, *you big nancy* ."

Sirius growled. "But you were seeing him, weren't you."

"Not just then, but I had at one time, yes. I gave up extremely good sex, by the by, when I gave him up."

Sirius paused. "Why'd you give him up?"

Remus sighed. "Because he wasn't you. And it always comes down to that."

Sirius looked rather pleased at this.

"And I'm bloody glad something finally lit a fire underneath you, because sometimes you're no picnic, you know," Remus added. "Jealous of Fell, of all people. Next you know you'll be wanting to throw Anthony Crowley out of the shop."

"Which one's he?"

"Tall chap, follows girls in sometimes, buys comic books. Looks like you."

"Flash bastard," Sirius grumbled.

"I never slept with him."

"And never you shall."

"Big talk," Remus said affectionately, and they were silent until he cleared his throat softly. "So Sirius...what precisely are you?" he asked. "Granted, there's me. But then there's also half the female population of England."

Sirius didn't reply for a while. Finally Remus closed his eyes, and relaxed against the pillow. "It doesn't matter," he started, but Sirius overlapped him.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm...Harry's godfather. I'm your friend. I'm Sirius."

"You're scared."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I was," Remus yawned. "You forget you've finally found something I did first."

"Yes, I envy your forays into shirt-lifting when I was still learning how to unhook a bra," Sirius said sarcastically.

"Rude," Remus mumbled, against his cheek, eyes closing.

For a while, in the predawn gloom, Sirius lay in the bed and thought. He'd known Remus would understand his changing into Padfoot; he'd needed to sort things out, and he always saw clearer through the big black dog's eyes. It wasn't that the world was any less complicated, but dogs didn't have a whole lot of room for extra thoughts. It sort of...streamlined the process.

Which he needed, because now that...whatever it was...had actually happened, he wasn't as confident anymore. Now that it had, he was free to be just as anxious and upset and uncomfortable about it as he pleased.

Or, if he wanted, he could be deliriously happy and enjoy being in love and finally having got what he wanted. Namely, Remus Lupin.

Remus, he realised, was frightened of having him; fine, let him be scared. Sirius knew the truth. Remus was only frightened because he didn't know he'd had him for the last ten years, as well.

Three of the six events which had changed his life since he was eleven had involved Remus, and two of those after they had already left Hogwarts. Going to school and graduating were two, of course, and the third was the death of James and Lily; one could hardly push that aside, and that had been the turning point to end all turning points. But that didn't mean there weren't others, others in which the lanky man sleeping with his hand curled around Sirius' hip was inextricably entwined.

He'd become an Animagus at the age of fifteen for Remus, he and James and Peter, the little tag-along. Granted, back then he'd been seeing one of the Ravenclaw girls on a fairly regular basis, but then a man changes, doesn't he, between fifteen and twenty-nine? The point was, the three of them had been thinking of Remus -- and possibly a little about what a grand adventure it would be -- when they'd finally made the transformation.

Becoming an Animagus changed a person. Yes, you became an animal physically, but the animal

also became a little bit of you. Sirius knew this, and he didn't mind it, but he also knew it had shaped the man he became.

The other two events that had altered him...well, they'd brought him to this point, hadn't they? He supposed he ought to count stealing Harry from the Dursleys as a turning point, but that was too recent for him to know what it would mean in another ten years. Not the way he knew, now, where the last two had led.

They even started the same way.

"I'm looking for Remus Lupin."

The waiter wrinkled his brow, then nodded, and jerked his head at the far corner. "Brown haired chap? Third booth from the end."

Sirius thanked the man, took the menu handed to him, and crossed to where Remus was seated, sipping a glass of water.

"Ordered yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Remus replied. "I just ate. You can if you like."

"Might do. Christ, Moony, you look awful."

"Ta, Sirius."

"No, I mean -- you getting over the full moon all right? You're sort of drawn about the eyes."

"I'm fine, Sirius," Remus said, but even this wasn't snapped, merely sighed.

He knew Remus had been having a bad time of it lately, between the full moon and finding a new job, but the man looked downright ill. Sirius wondered how long he'd looked that way -- surely they'd seen each other since the full moon...

No, they hadn't really, had they? After James and Lily died, they met for the full moon, and once in a while for drinks -- Remus usually teetotal so that at least one of them would be sober enough to get them out of the bar. But not so much in-between. Remus always brushed it off.

"Sure you're not going to eat?" Sirius asked, as he ordered. Remus sipped his water.

"I told you, just had a huge lunch," he said.

They spoke of nothing much, over Sirius' sandwich and Remus' lemon-water; news of old school acquaintances, what Sirius was doing, what Remus was reading. Sirius was paying the bill, well-satisfied from a decent lunch and good company, when he realised Remus was eyeing the remains

of his lunch, hungrily. Remus glanced up, saw him, and sat back nonchalantly.

"I should go," Remus said reluctantly. "Listen, I'd like to come by the bookshop sometime, maybe we could meet there the next full moon?"

"Right," Sirius agreed. "Not a proble -- Remus?"

His friend had slid out of the booth gracefully, but he'd stumbled on standing; now he was pale, clutching the table for balance.

"I'm fine, just a head-rush," Remus mumbled, but when Sirius touched his elbow, he leaned into the support. Sirius was shocked to feel how little he weighed -- light and almost breakable, like a bird.

"You're ill," Sirius said firmly. He began to notice things the table had hidden -- a tight belt and too-loose trousers, a shirt that seemed a size too large.

"No, it's just some..." Remus trailed off, and Sirius watched in horror as his eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped to the ground.

The next hour or so was probably blissfully blurred; waiters had stopped, and someone had called for a Healer, who tsked and took a pulse and before Sirius really understood what was happening he was sitting in St. Mungo's, on a remarkably uncomfortable chair, listening to some other Healer's promise that the service was confidential and nobody would be told Remus was a you-know-what.

"It's amazing how long they can survive, as a species, without food," the man said, and Sirius hated the way he referred to Remus as a "species". "The truth is, it's impossible to starve a werewolf to death -- they just get thinner and thinner until their body shuts down. You're lucky we caught this one when we did."

"We" consisted of Sirius, but he paid no attention to that.

"How long has it been since his last meal?" the man asked. Sirius considered it.

"He had broth on the ninth, after the full moon," he said, trying not to think about the fact that it was the twenty-seventh. "I haven't seen him since then."

"Has he done this sort of thing before? Some werewolves do -- they get in the habit of not eating because they don't have to. Or they do purposefully dangerous things, knowing it won't permanently injure them."

"He's not like that," Sirius said sharply.

"Then he's never shown any signs of malnutrition before?"

"Well, he's never been the most ravenous person. But he's always eaten."

The man consulted another form. "When was his last date of employment?"

Sirius thought back. "I'm not sure," he admitted.

"Did he have a fixed address? Was he paying rent?"

"As far as I know. Look, I'm his friend, right? He'd have told me if he was starving."

The healer merely nodded. "He should be waking up soon. That restorative potion the nurse poured down his throat is pure energy, so he should be out of danger soon. I'll leave you here."

Sirius nodded, and the man left. When he was gone, Remus groaned quietly, turned his head, and opened his eyes. Sirius almost flinched. They were too bright, too sharp -- how had he not noticed?

You can't notice what you can't see, a guilty little voice said in his head. *You can't notice if you aren't there.*

"All this fuss," Remus muttered.

"You, shut up," Sirius said, suddenly furious. "What the bloody hell do you think you were on about?"

"Did I think," Remus corrected, rasping a little.

"What?"

"You used a tense shift -- "

"I should beat the hell out of you myself," Sirius shouted. "Starving! What sort of idiot idea is that?"

"I wasn't starving. I would have bought food when my next paycheck came in. It was food or rent," Remus added.

"You couldn't have borrowed a few quid?"

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be," Remus groaned, pushing himself up to a sitting position. The hospital pyjamas hung on his frame, loosely, and his cheekbones and collarbones stood out against his skin with frightening sharpness.

"You were *starving yourself*," Sirius said. "Why didn't you say something?"

Remus shrugged. "Didn't want you worrying."

"You *complete* idiot."

"Listen, do you think it's easy trying to support myself on three-day jobs and commission work? I can't work two or three days out of every twenty-eight, and I can't find a job where they don't figure it out and fire me like I'm some kind of monster. I'm trying to get by, Sirius, and you don't - "

" -- fine, I'll hire you."

"Sirius -- "

"I need someone to run the bookshop. You're hired."

Remus looked down at his hands. "I don't want to live on someone's charity my whole life."

"Work for me a week and try calling it charity," Sirius said. He did, however, smile a little.

Remus was silent for a while.

"Can I have a sandwich?" he asked softly. Sirius rose and went to the door, catching the nearest orderly by the arm.

"Be a mate, pilfer a few lunches for us, will you?" he asked, pressing a few Galleons into the man's hand. When he turned around, Remus still hadn't looked up.

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to prove I could do it," he said. "I'd have asked if I thought I was really sick."

"You are," Sirius said drily. Remus put his face in his hands, fingers rubbing his forehead.

"You had your shop and all," he said. "You seemed happy -- not like after -- after James, you know, and I thought here we are, almost putting our lives back together again, and there didn't seem to be...I just didn't want to wreck what you'd built by barging in and being miserable at you."

Sirius sat, perplexed. "But we're friends," he said slowly. "Isn't that sort of the point?"

Remus looked up at him, dropping his hands back to the blankets. "Do you actually need someone at Sandust?"

"Yeah, I hate doing the shelving and book-keeping myself," Sirius said with a grin. There was a brisk knock on the door, and the orderly had returned, carrying a handful of sandwiches. Sirius, brushing off Remus' protestations, crumbled them up into small bits, and fed them to him slowly, refusing to let him eat too much at once.

Two weeks later Sirius led him into Sandust and put a pile of books in his hands.

"I've no idea where these go," he complained. Remus smiled, and looked down at one of the titles.

"I'll figure it out," he said. And he did.

Then he'd gone on to figure out the till, and the accounting, and the inventory. He'd figured out the whole shop. And there came a point when Sirius realised that his bookshop would probably have failed, or fallen apart, or caught fire, if it wasn't for Remus. He found that if he left Remus to his own devices when it came to fixing a paycheck, the other man's pride and independence were assuaged enough that he didn't mind being his best friend's employee.

After all, Sirius needed him. And it was good to be needed.

"I'm looking for Remus Lupin?"

Sirius looked up from his crossword, sitting behind the counter of Sandust, and jerked his head towards the back. "He's sorting new stock. Can I help you?"

"Oh -- perhaps so -- you must be Mr. Black."

The man who held out his hand was friendly-enough looking, with a mop of curly yellow hair and a round, cherubic face. Sirius took it, wondering if this was Remus' latest "rare book dealer". Come to think of it, the man did look a bit dodgy. Nobody wore cardigans anymore, did they?

"I am," he allowed, shaking the hand grudgingly. The other man's smile stayed in place.

"I was wondering if you'd had that order in yet, the one from the estate sale a few weeks ago. I spoke with Remus about purchasing one of the collection he won the bidding on; an old family bible, not worth a terrible lot, but interesting as a curiosity."

Sirius slid off his stool. "Probably what he's sorting now," he said. "I'll check."

He walked into the back room just as Harry tumbled out of the fireplace, fresh from Molly's lessons, and touseled his hair as Harry hugged his waist. "Bloke for you out front, Remus," he said. "The fellow who likes the bibles."

"Oh -- Fell!" Remus said, with a broad grin. "Yes, I've found three for him -- " he lifted a few more volumes out of a packing-crate, carefully, and then picked up the crate, carrying it out into the front room. Sirius followed, dragging Harry, who was still attached to him at the hip and laughing loudly.

"There you are," the man said, as Remus set the crate down on the other side of the counter. Sirius stood back, just past the door to the back room, and detached Harry, dropping into one of the overstuffed chairs and listening idly to Harry's chatter while watching Remus and the blond fellow.

Remus reached into the crate and held out one of the bibles he'd acquired, opening it carefully, smoothing down a page gently with one hand. Fell's eyes lit up when he saw it, and Sirius narrowed his own. Remus began showing off good points and bad points -- foxed corners, frayed edges, illuminations and annotations. Sirius, annoyed with himself for glaring at a customer,

turned back to Harry, and helped him sort out his books and homework. He wished the ridiculous decree for the restriction of underage wizardry wasn't in effect; he wanted to be teaching Harry charms and hexes and pranks, as well as boring history and composition. Still, Harry was bright, every bit as bright as James had been, if perhaps a little behind from living with Muggles for so long.

When Harry was settled and engrossed in his latest pleasure-reading, a new book Remus had recommended, Sirius leaned back in the chair and looked up again.

Remus and that man, whatever his name was, were examining another one of the books, heads bent over it, speaking quietly. Remus' eyes were on the man's thin blond hair, or examining his face as they spoke. Really, Sirius didn't like the look of the blond man at all. He looked like trouble. Clearly he was no good for Remus, and Sirius ought to know; hadn't they been friends for years?

He paused, then, and straightened in the chair, slowly, though it felt as if he'd been hit in the head with a bludger.

That man was trouble, and not because he looked suspect or was far too interested in strange Muggle religious literature. He was trouble because Sirius didn't want him having anything to do with Remus.

Because Sirius wanted Remus.

And clearly, so did the blond man whose face was currently two or three inches from Remus'.

Sirius took two deep breaths, to stifle the urge to throw the man out of his bookstore then and there. He hadn't had to learn much self-control, over the years, and it was quite an effort, but he managed to wait until money had changed hands, and Remus had put a lid on the crate, and the irksome blond fellow with the suspiciously cherubic face had left.

Only then did he relax, shoulders lowering, muscles in his neck loosening slowly.

And that was when he decided on the Plan. It was a good Plan, and it only really had one problem, which was that Sirius had never fancied a man before and had really no clue how to go about it. All he knew was that he was going to have to somehow prevent himself from hitting the next used book dealer who came through that door and within ten feet of Remus Lupin.

Clearly he'd gone insane, Sirius reflected, lying in the dim room in his family's house, grey dawn filtering through the drapes.

Not a bad insane, howev --

Oh.

"Morning," Remus said, against the skin of his throat, which he'd just...licked.

"Do that again," Sirius ordered. Remus smiled.

"Good thing you went canine last night," he said, hair tickling Sirius' chin. "Harry's had enough trauma without coming into the room in the middle of the night and finding his godfather curled up naked with a werewolf."

"He's not an early riser..." Sirius pointed out.

"Doesn't matter."

"Oh? -- *oh*."

"While you were off meditating on the cracks in the ceiling," Remus said, "I was putting an alarm on the door."

"From the bed?"

Remus shifted a little, and held up his left hand, spinning his wand across his fingers. "Just a little charm to warn us if Harry gets close. Ever prepared, me," he said, and bent to kiss Sirius on the lips.

Sirius hadn't known it could be like this; not tripping over discarded clothing in the dark and fumbling with flies and hooks and straps; there wasn't that familiar sort of desperation to have it done with. It wasn't that he hadn't enjoyed all those times, it was just that there had always been...a goal. Now he didn't actually feel any particular desire to...well, he felt plenty of desire, actually, but...

He hadn't known you could wake up and find someone waiting for you and simply enjoy seeing the way the light caught the folds of the blankets, the fall of hair in their eyes. Remus tilted his head, and propped himself on his elbows.

"Did I do something you don't like?" he asked softly. Sirius closed his eyes, and shook his head.

"We're new together," Remus continued, bending to kiss his shoulder, brushing his lips over his collarbone. "Frightened?"

"No," Sirius grunted, sliding a hand over the ridge of his spine, fingers working up along his neck and into the hair just above the nape of his neck.

"Bet you are."

"I'm not if you're not."

Remus laughed.

Sirius was not accustomed to being laughed at in bed. Which was probably a good thing, he reflected, but now he wondered why. He liked that laughter.

He rolled, without warning, and tangled them in the sheets as he pinned Remus down, kissing him fiercely, wanting to lay claim -- wanting to drown out the voice in the back of his head saying maybe it had never been this way because maybe fancying girls was a habit and not an instinct.

Girls were nice. Remus was nicer.

Remus was also pulling him closer, twisting a little so that their bodies fit together, moving with a practiced grace that made Sirius moan and bury his face in Remus' chest. Fingers stroked his hair away from his face, smoothed it around his ears, lifted his jaw and tugged a little so that they could kiss again.

"How much," Remus asked softly, "Do you want to learn?"

"Everything," Sirius breathed. "Right now."

He leaned back, and Remus drifted a hand up to stroke his arm, thoughtfully. His fingers moved up over Sirius' neck and jaw, pressing his thumb to his lips as he had earlier, when he'd wanted to silence him.

Sirius opened his lips and nipped the pad of his thumb, gently. Remus closed his eyes.

"I'm not sure," he said huskily, "That you need all that much teaching, Sirius."

Sirius shifted his weight, hips sliding forward, and they both gasped. Remus arched his back, and the sensation, rippling up through his body, didn't stop. Sirius couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, just wanted to keep moving, keep feeling what he was feeling. Eager heat, a pulse that had nothing to do with blood and everything to do with the rhythm of his body against Remus, the almost painful pressure of Remus' fingers on his hips now.

None of it was more than touch, just pressure and movement, but Sirius didn't even realise he was growling until Remus growled back, and pulled himself up using Sirius' collar as leverage, and kissed him. The change in position made Sirius dizzy, and he clutched warm skin and bucked his hips once more and came, almost howling, as Remus tried to swallow the sound, moaning into his mouth when he followed a moment later.

They fell back on the bed, Remus boneless and smiling blissfully, Sirius feeling like a dead weight on top of him but too comfortable to move, skin tingling pleasantly.

"Well," Remus said. "I think we can consider your first lesson a resounding success."

Sirius would have laughed if he hadn't been devoting all his energy to the feel of Remus' skin under his cheek. He heard the other man retrieve his wand from the bedclothes where he'd dropped it, and murmur a cleaning spell, just before the door glowed bright yellow.

"That'll be Harry," Remus said, and Sirius slid out of the bed hurriedly, fumbling for his trousers.

"Remus! Sirius!" Harry yelled through the door. "Time to get up!"

Remus pulled the tangled sheets up far enough to preserve his dignity, and Sirius managed to fasten the flies with one hand while opening the door and catching Harry with the other.

"Good morning!" Harry shouted, bumping into Sirius and almost knocking him over. "Come make breakfast!" he demanded, running to the bed and grabbing Remus' hand, trying to tug him off it. "Professor Snape's here and we're hungry."

"Andromeda put a big bowl of fruit on the table if you're starving," Remus chided.

"I want oatmeal!" Harry said. Remus watched, amused, as Snake slithered up around his neck and peered at Remus from over one ear.

"He wants *oatmeal* . He *wants* oatmeal. There's clearly something wrong with the boy," Remus said, over Harry's head. "I blame you, Sirius."

Harry grinned as Sirius pulled a shirt on and buttoned it, hardly waiting for him to finish before pulling him out the door. Sirius cast one look back over his shoulder, as Remus slid out of the bed and began to dress also, before it closed behind them. Remus flashed him a grin that even Snape's surly early-morning scowl couldn't ruin.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 23

Remus dressed quickly, but by the time he reached the kitchen, he could smell food already cooked and hear voices at the kitchen table; perhaps Snape had started the oatmeal while Harry had run up to fetch them. Considering his skill with potions, it ought to be more than edible.

Remus paused in the shadows of the kitchen doorway, watching as Sirius carried a small tin to the table and sat down next to Harry; Andromeda and Ted sat on the other side, with Snape at the head -- he'd probably staked that for himself -- and Nymphadora at the foot. There was just enough room for a skinny werewolf on the bench next to Sirius, he noted with a smile.

" -- easy on him," Andromeda was saying, as she daintily cut the crusts off her toast.

"He does all right," Sirius answered. "Trooper, he is."

"Didn't I read somewhere -- Snape old man, you ought to know this -- some sort of potion for sedating them?" Ted asked.

Remus realised they were discussing him, and drew a little further back into the shadows.

"It's still being formulated," Snape growled. Harry had pried open the tin and was sprinkling tiny, shining eggs into his oatmeal, while Sirius helped himself liberally to the strawberry jam. "The base is a middle-eastern formula; they have trouble with loup-garou on some of the nomadic trade routes. Apparently the brewing is a rather delicate process."

"Is it a daily dosage?" Andromeda asked. "I mean, I don't see why they'd need sedating the rest of the time. I'd hate to see Remus..." she gestured with her spoon in the air, and glanced at Harry. Remus saw Sirius' head turn to regard his godson, though he couldn't actually see his face. Harry was anointing the eggs in his oatmeal with milk, which was making them hatch -- ah yes. Harrison's Wondrous Eggs; you added them to any cereal with milk, and they hatched into animated candy dragons. He could see the little creatures, made of maple sugar, crawling around in Harry's bowl.

"Monthly," Snape said. "So I'm given to understand."

Remus leaned against the doorway, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. Everyone in that room knew what he was; barring Snape, none of them seemed to bear him any particular ill will on account of it, and Snape could hardly be blamed for disliking a creature who'd once spiritedly tried to disembowel him.

They all know, he thought.

It was comforting, in a way. Even if he wasn't keen on their discussing ways to sedate him in his absence. Ted was Muggle-born, and probably had no fear of werewolves -- probably hadn't been

aware they even existed, as a child. Snape and Sirius had known since they were schoolboys, and while their feelings on the subject were probably polar opposites, at least neither of them walked on eggshells around it. Andromeda had been raised in a family of taste and good manners, if not the best social philosophy, and she handled this as she handled everything, with poise and confidence. Dora was their daughter and would no doubt do the same; besides, any girl who had bright blue hair was probably fairly progressive in her thinking.

Harry was Harry, and had solemnly promised, in his little-boy way, to keep Remus' secret. Remus wondered idly, watching Harry devour a squirming maple-sugar dragon, how long he'd known.

"Is that you lurking in the doorway, Remus?" Andromeda called, with a smile. "Come in, your oatmeal's getting cold."

Remus smiled back and ducked inside, helping himself to a bowlful from the pan on the stove. He reached around Harry, took a handful of candy eggs, and sprinkled them on his cereal, wrinkling his nose at the vaguely pink cast of Sirius' breakfast.

"Jam again?" he asked.

"You'll rot your teeth with those," Sirius answered, as Remus added milk.

"Tell your godson, not me. Morning, Severus," Remus said cheerfully. Snape grunted, and plucked a miniature dragon off of Harry's spoon as the boy offered it to Snake. The creature didn't seem to be in any danger; he was clearly having no part of this strange human food. Snape dropped the squirming candy dragon fastidiously onto the table, where it disintegrated completely. Harry, eyes big as saucers, tried dropping one himself -- or rather, throwing one down onto the table -- and it splatted quite satisfyingly. Snape wiped the area next to his bowl with his napkin, and set a book down there.

"If any of you are remotely interested in the welfare of the child we have apparently gathered to raise, as it were, as a village," he drawled, "you may want to pay a desultory sort of attention to this."

Remus leaned around Sirius, interestedly, while Harry peered at the book.

"The particular element in question," Snape said, "Forms the base of a number of more advanced potions. I believe we ought to seriously consider the thought that Pettigrew is attempting a resurrection. I don't think we need look very far for the name of his intended beneficiary. There are a few other uses for this...fluid, but they require other ingredients -- " Snape reluctantly allowed Remus, who had stretched out his hand, to take the book.

"For speaking to the dead...fortunetelling using the -- er, yuk," Remus said, reading one of the potions. *"Preservation of the dead...Resurrection ,* under certain magical circumstances...having the body in one's possession is rather important in these, isn't it?" Remus asked, flipping the page. Snape nodded, grudgingly. "I don't know, he didn't leave a corporeal body behind, which is one of the reasons Dumbledore's convinced he's still out there...*for the empowerment of the spirit ..."* he

trailed off, eyes scanning the potion.

"What?" Sirius asked, mouth half-full of oatmeal.

"This requires the blood of two innocent children," Remus said, "taken forcibly, and consumed in part shortly thereafter..."

Snape's eyebrows drew together.

"I saw blood on Peter's face," Remus whispered. "What if -- "

Upstairs, a door slammed, and Moody's voice called urgently. "Black!"

"Down here, Moody!" Sirius called, rising and walking to the doorway. Moody clunked down the stairs, moving as fast as Remus had ever seen him move, and growled when he reached the bottom.

"We're not waiting any longer," he announced. "Pettigrew went after the Longbottoms early this morning. If he's set up in your bookshop, odds are he'll be back by this evening; probably isn't risking getting caught Apparating, specially with a broken leg. Setting traps even as we speak," he added. "Broke the lock on your shop, sorry about that. Aurors'll reimburse you if we catch the little bastard."

"Are the Longbottoms all right?" Andromeda asked. "It's just Frank and Alice's child and his gran, isn't it?"

"Just the child now," Moody grunted. "Far as we can tell, the gran caught them takin' the blood, and there was a right row. Found the boy hiding under the bed, half-dead, told us his gran hexed that Bellatrix woman and from the sound of it broke one of Pettigrew's legs. Boy should be fine," he growled, when Andromeda gave him a look. "Got a great-uncle can take him in -- "

"Algernon Longbottom?" Andromeda demanded.

"Aye, that was -- "

"The man dropped him out of an upstairs window! It was in the Prophet!"

"A concern for later, darling," Ted said, putting a hand on her arm as her eyes flashed indignantly.

"Traps in the bookshop?" Sirius asked. "They're not lethal, are they?"

"Course they're lethal," Moody scoffed.

"Yes, what's the point of traps that let you off with a static shock and a light warning," Remus murmured. "I should make sure they don't destroy anything valuable," he said, to Sirius. Snape was already making notes on the potion Remus had been looking at, muttering to himself under his breath. "Coming?"

Sirius shook his head just as Moody growled that he didn't want the entire city descending on Sandust Books. "I don't want Harry anywhere Peter might be," he said quietly. "And I'm not leaving Harry."

Remus gave him a quick nod, and turned to Moody. "I'll come back with you. Snape -- "

"I need a book," Snape said, snapping the one he was holding shut. "Have you a copy of the *Obscurato Legionis*?" he asked Sirius, who shook his head.

"Our father thought it was too liberal," he said. "Bought a copy for burning, I think, back in the day when that sort of thing was done."

"It would be illegal for Sandust to stock one," Remus said properly, glancing at Moody, who shook his head in disgust and began clumping up the stairs. He risked a quick confirming nod at Snape.

"The eye sees through walls," Moody called, and Remus looked guilty. "That's a thirty Galleon fine for importing contraband, Lupin, and twenty more for possession."

"I didn't import it," Remus answered, as they climbed the stairs. "It came in a lot I purchased at auction."

"Ten for receiving illegal goods, then," Moody replied, as they emerged from the stairwell into the main hall, and followed him out the door.

"Might we continue this discussion after I've seen the book?" Snape asked impatiently.

"Sandust Books," Moody said. "Remember to Apparate behind the shop; it's on a Muggle street."

They both nodded, and followed a split second after his own Disapparation.

"Algernon Longbottom indeed," Andromeda said, as the three men vanished up the stairwell. She reached for her cloak, hanging by the fire, and began to pull it on. Ted put out a hand to stop her.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Going to see the poor boy," she replied, "and prevent Algernon from coming anywhere near him. You remember, we met him at that dinner party, he's quite entirely mad, Ted."

"The hospital isn't open to visitors for another two hours, and you'll only get into trouble if you go now," Ted said calmly. "I'm sure they have guards on him, knowing Moody, and if he was as badly hurt as Moody implied, he'll probably be there some time."

Andromeda lifted her chin imperiously and Sirius, watching, had a moment of déjà vu; it was a gesture not uncommon in the family, when a woman of the Blacks was being argued with.

"Who's Neville?" Harry asked, before Andromeda could speak. "Did they do to him what they did to me?"

Andromeda, distracted, turned to look at the boy.

"Worse, love, because he didn't have Sirius protecting him," she said, as Sirius pulled Harry close to his hip, careful of the bandage on his shoulder and neck. "That's why he's in hospital," she added, glaring at her husband, "And that's why we ought to go see him."

"I'm not saying you shouldn't go see him," Ted sighed. Sirius glanced at Nymphadora; she was calmly finishing her cereal. Clearly she'd come to an understanding of her parents'...*dynamic* relationship. "I'm saying you ought to wait until he's allowed to have visitors. We could take Harry to see him, get us out of the house for a while. We could have Harry's cuts looked at while we were there. I'm sure they wouldn't deny the Boy Who Lived a chance to visit with Neville."

Sirius took a moment to admire the sheer brilliance of Ted Tonks.

Even if Andromeda had gone during visiting hours, they weren't likely to let the sister of the woman who'd helped to maim Neville in to see him. The Boy Who Lived, on the other hand, would make a lovely photo op for the reporters and good publicity for the hospital. And it would still get Andromeda in to talk some sense into anyone attempting to send Neville Longbottom home with a man who'd dropped him out his bedroom window last year.

"Can I bring Snake?" Harry asked.

"As long as you hide him," Sirius said. Andromeda pulled off her cloak, grudgingly.

"We'll go promptly at ten," she announced. "Dora, I want you to take Harry to the library. Sirius will be up shortly."

"I will?" Sirius asked.

"I'll do the washing-up here," Ted said, kissing his wife, who accepted the kiss with only a slight sulk.

"Yes," Andromeda said to Sirius. "I'd like a word with you."

Sirius obediently followed her up the stairs, and down the corridor that led to the front door. Near the entryway she stopped, and leaned against the wall, regarding him with a look so like his father's that he almost flinched. It wasn't anger, though; it was just that piercing gaze that she and Bellatrix and Narcissa all shared.

"I know we haven't always been close, Sirius," she said quietly, "and with you living mostly-Muggle, and especially lately, I guess I can understand that, though I always felt perhaps...we being the only two decent ones left..." she shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I think you ought to know I know about you and Remus."

Sirius gaped at her.

"And you're two grown men, and while I'm sure I don't know how it's done, what you two do in the privacy of your own home is your own business..." she said, waving a hand dismissively. "I don't mind you sharing a room here, either. But I think perhaps you ought to consider telling Harry soon. And consider how you ought to. He's getting bigger, he'll start noticing. If he hasn't already."

"Harry?" Sirius fumbled. "But we haven't even told -- how on earth did you know?"

"The man was naked in your bed, Sirius," she said, with a hint of a smile. "I saw when I came to wake you up yesterday. I can't say I disapprove of your choice."

Sirius put a hand over his face. Andromeda continued.

"And I suppose -- you could have told me, you know. When you ran away from your parents. I know you wanted to stay with the Potters so as not to cause trouble for me, and that was very thoughtful of you, but you could have told me it was because you were in love with a half-blood. I assume you didn't tell them about the werewolf part." He saw a thoughtful look cross her face, through his fingers. "Did they know it was a man? I can imagine that part wouldn't go over well either -- "

"No, Andromeda -- you've got the wrong end of the stick," he said, desperately. Her smile widened.

"It's all right, Sirius, we're family, you don't have to lie to me."

"I'm not lying. I didn't run away because of him -- well, sort of," he allowed. "But it wasn't because -- oh, any of those reasons. You know how Dad was. He just...he said something about Dark Creatures once too often and I let him have it."

"Yes, I remember the bruise where he punched you," she said, a trifle sadly. "But you are in love with Remus, aren't you?"

"I..." Sirius paused. "Yes, but -- no, wait, there is a but -- it's not like it's been ten or twelve years, Andromeda. It's barely been two days."

It was Andromeda's turn to stare. "Two days?"

Sirius nodded. "Just since the attack. Well. I'd been...we'd been...discussing things for a while before that, but not nearly so long as you think. A few weeks at most. Night before last it sort of...exploded on us."

"But you've been friends for years, I just naturally assumed...and nobody ever asked you?" she asked. Sirius shook his head.

"Wait, you assumed?" he demanded. Andromeda nodded. "When? Why did you assume?"

"Well, you never were the settling-down-with-a-nice-girl type, and you spend an awful lot of time with him, and it's so easy to see what he feels," Andromeda said. "When you come into the room, he could get mauled by a Hippogriff and not notice it. The rest of us become background noise."

"That's not -- " Sirius crossed his arms, ducking his head. "Is that really true?"

Andromeda nodded gravely.

"Oh." Sirius rubbed his jaw with one hand. "That's...good. Thank you, Andromeda."

"You should still tell Harry," she said, stopping him as he began to walk away. "Especially if it's new. He'll see it. I'm not one to tell you how to raise your child, Sirius, but it'll only lead to a very confused young boy if you don't at least give him a few facts of life. There are books," she said helpfully.

Sirius turned and stared. "Books?" he asked, voice cracking slightly.

"Well, of course. Don't you have a shelf for that kind of thing in the bookshop?" she said, with a laugh.

"Books about...that?" he asked. "For...for men?"

"Sure. I wouldn't recommend you give them to Harry directly, but they might pave the way a bit."

Sirius resolved to stop by the shop that afternoon and have a brief and instructional discussion with Remus about Books On This Sort Of Thing. Forget educating Harry -- he needed an education of his own.

"Don't look so thunderstruck, Sirius," Andromeda said, taking his arm as they walked towards the library. Clanking from the kitchen told them Ted was doing dishes Muggle-fashion. "I bet," she said, teasingly, "there are even a few in the Black family library."

"Never," Sirius answered. "Blacks Don't Do That Sort Of Thing, Andromeda, you know that. I'm fairly sure my mother was working on a needlepoint concerning that when she died."

Andromeda grinned. "We shall see."

She pushed open the doors to the library, and stopped on the threshold. "Now if I were a book about naughty things like this," she said, tapping her finger on her chin, "I'd be on a high shelf, in a very dim corner, perhaps hidden behind something..."

"I'm going to go sit with Harry," Sirius said. "Remus left some reading, might as well be thorough about it."

Andromeda nodded and wandered off; her daughter poked her head around a corner and waved to Sirius, who picked up a handful of books from Remus' study table as he passed.

When his father and mother had still been alive, the reading nook was, it was always clear, a place to See, rather than a place to Sit. It commanded the best view of the front street outside the house - - which was not all that splendid a view anymore, really -- and it was a place his father might take someone to have brandy after dinner. It had several lush couches and chairs, but Sirius had never, of course, been allowed on any of them on pain of one of his father's infrequent but not ineffective whippings.

No wonder I became a dog, he thought, only slightly morbidly. *Even when I was a kid they didn't want me on the furniture.*

Now, of course, he grinned to see Harry, tucked in a corner of a richly brocaded couch, his sneakers up on the end of it, a book propped on his knees. Dora was lounging across a chair, blue-tinged hair falling over one armrest, listening to him read. Snake was gliding silently across the couch, towards an unsuspecting spider spinning a web on the windowsill.

"-- advancing over the sea, two immense serpents. They came upon the land, and the crowd fled in all directions. The serpents advanced directly to the spot where he stood with his two sons. They first attacked the children, winding round their bodies and breathing in their faces. The father, attempting to rescue them, is next seized and involved in the serpents' coils," Harry read. Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Brilliant," Harry added, lifting up the book to show Sirius a picture in it.

"What on earth are you letting him read?" Sirius asked. Nymphadora grinned.

"Bullfinch's Mythology. Muggle book about Greece," she said. "Brought it from home, it's mandatory reading in the Muggle Studies course I've got this fall at the Academy. Harry likes it, don't you?"

"It's all gods and magic and all," Harry agreed. "I don't see why the snakes had to kill his sons though."

Sirius settled in next to Harry, taking great delight in propping his feet on the low table in front of them. *Take that, house*, he thought.

"Anyway, they're the bad guys, because La...oo..." Harry gave Dora an inquiring look.

"Laocoon," she said.

"Right. He's trying to stop the Spartans invading Troy. Bit stupid, really," Harry decided. He leaned on Sirius' arm, and flipped through the rest of the book. "And they're not the only ones who die, Dora says."

"Maybe this isn't a book you should be reading," Sirius said gently, lifting it away.

"I'm not gonna die, am I, Sirius?" Harry asked.

"Not in the near future. Why?"

"Mr. Moody said they almost killed another boy like me."

"Well, he didn't have me protecting him, and you do." Sirius looked down at him. "All right then, Harry?"

"I'm scared," Harry whispered, which is a large admission for a nine-year-old boy.

"It'll be okay," Sirius answered, when what he really wanted to say was *I'm scared too* . He put his arm around Harry, pulling him closer, and thought to himself *Hell, I think I've finally grown up* .

"Sorry," Dora murmured. "I didn't think it could do him any harm."

"Not your fault," Sirius replied, as Andromeda appeared. She smiled.

"Aren't you three a picture," she said. "Here, Sirius, I brought something for you."

Sirius took a look at the book she was offering, blushed, and quickly tucked it under a cushion, away from Nymphadora and Harry's curious eyes. "Where'd you find something like that?"

"There's a row of suspiciously healthy potted plants on one of the shelves. Turns out they were an illusion charm," Andromeda replied, as Nymphadora snuck the book out from under the cushion. Her eyes grew wide as dinner plates, and she shoved it back quickly.

"I'll...read it later. Thank you, Andromeda," Sirius said firmly. "For now..." he sighed as he picked up one of Remus' books. "I hate doing nothing, you know. Being stuck here."

"Better to be here with Harry than off somewhere trying to get yourself killed," she said comfortingly. "It's only until the hospital's visiting hours, then we can go see the Longbottom boy. In the meantime," she said, settling herself composedly on a chair, "Dora, sit up straight and don't make Harry do your homework for you."

Sirius exchanged a grin with Nymphadora, who rolled her eyes and straightened in the chair, opening Bullfinch's Mythology, while Sirius found a more appropriate book for Harry from the pile on the table, and opened one of the ones Remus had been annotating, handing one to Andromeda. Comfortable, bookish silence settled on the room.

When he thought everyone was sufficiently distracted, Sirius pulled out the book Andromeda had brought him, and placed it inside the larger book he was reading.

Andromeda grinned behind her own volume.

There was an owl for Sirius just before they left for the hospital, a hastily-scrawled note from Remus saying all was well and he'd meet them at St. Mungo's for lunch, unless there was a change of plan. Sirius tucked the parchment in his pocket and gestured for Andromeda to Apparate; Nymphadora floo'd out first, and Sirius wrapped his arms around Harry, floo'ing with him

cautiously.

St. Mungo's smelled of antiseptic and made Sirius nervous. He kept a grip on Harry's shoulder while Andromeda wrangled with the mediwitch, backed up by Ted; Nymphadora had wandered off and knocked over someone's chair, and was trying to help right it and repair it, apologetically.

"All right, let's have a look at the lad," someone said, and Sirius instinctively stepped in front of his godson, snarling. The Healer almost leapt backwards.

"It's all right, Sirius, I asked him to," Andromeda said sharply. Sirius stayed where he was, Harry peering around his hip. "Perhaps a private room?" she asked, with all the self-assurance of five centuries of good breeding behind her. The Healer, still looking warily at Sirius, gestured to a room down the hall.

"As soon as Harry's checked out, we're all going to go see Neville," she said, while Sirius watched the Healer prod Harry, warily. She showed him the satchel she'd been carrying, which had two pairs of Harry's pyjamas and some books in it. "I can't imagine he's had much to do, sitting in hospital all day."

"He looks fine," the Healer interrupted, pressing a new bandage over the vicious slice that ran from the corner of Harry's shoulder and neck, across his collarbone, and nearly over the hollow of his throat. Sirius winced, seeing the deep gash. "There's not much more to be done for him; I think you're right, Madame Tonks, the blade must have been spelled. Here you are lad, I think I've got a box of juice around here somewhere..."

"He's fine," Sirius said, brusquely, and helped Harry off the table. "We'll go see Neville now."

Andromeda and the Healer exchanged a look, but she shrugged, and he seemed content to follow her lead. Up a flight of stairs they went, down another hallway, past two Aurors without trouble, and into a small white room. A young boy in white hospital issue clothing was lying in the bed, curled up, back to the door.

"He hasn't spoken much. His great-uncle was here early this morning, but he's not able to stay -- pressing business, apparently," the Healer said. Andromeda snorted. "I understand you've brought young Harry to give him a bit of company?"

"Yes, that's right," Andromeda said smoothly. "Thank you, we'll call you if we need anything."

The Healer, looking as though he'd like to object, shut his mouth at a glance from her, and left, door swinging a bit behind him.

"Is that him?" Harry whispered to Sirius, who nodded. "Is he asleep?"

Andromeda leaned over the bed. "Doesn't look like it. Hi, Neville. My name's Andromeda."

The boy didn't move, except to raise a hand to rub one eye, irritably.

"We heard you were here and thought we'd bring you some books and things," she continued. "And we brought Harry along. He's about your age, aren't you Harry?"

"Hi, Neville," Harry said, following Andromeda's example. The boy buried his face in the pillow. Harry and Andromeda exchanged a look so comically helpless that Sirius hid a grin. Ted didn't bother to hide his.

"Wouldn't you like to have a look at a book?" Andromeda asked. "It must be boring, being here alone."

"No," Neville said, into the pillow.

"They're good books," Harry said. "They're about magic and -- "

"I hate magic!"

Harry frowned. "Why? Magic's brilliant."

Neville didn't answer.

"You wouldn't feel like that if you grew up with Muggles," Harry said confidently. Andromeda put a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe we ought to leave the books on the bed for him," she said, eyeing Neville curiously. "And we brought you some nice soft pyjamas, much nicer than the hospital ones."

"They're mine, but you can use them," Harry said. "They're clean, and all. You want red stripes or Snitches-and-Broomsticks?"

Neville lifted his head a little. "You've got pyjamas with Snitches on?" he asked. Andromeda beamed and held up a pyjama shirt.

Sirius, who had become a father without going through the intermediary stages of birth or toddlerhood, watched with a little awe as Andromeda deftly helped the boy into the new clothing, seemingly without disturbing the blankets at all. Neville looked down at the cuffs, when he was done, and smiled a little. Then he moved his head too quickly, to look up at Andromeda, and whimpered when the bandage at his neck pulled. Harry watched, idly, as the other boy breathed deep.

"Mine hurts too," he said, pulling down the collar of his shirt. "It's getting better though. Hey, you want to see my snake?"

Neville looked rather alarmed at this. "You've got a snake? Does it bite?"

"No, he's tame," Harry said, pushing up his sleeve and showing off where Snake was wound around his arm. Neville made a small noise of fear, and Harry stroked Snake's head.

"He'll be nice if I tell him to," Harry reassured the boy. "Go on then. He's sleepy."

Neville, hesitantly, stretched his hand out, barely touching the smooth, soft snakeskin. "He's warm!"

"Yeah, had him under my sleeve all morning," Harry said. Andromeda stepped backwards, until she was standing with Sirius and Ted. Harry launched into a detailed lecture on how snakes were cold-blooded creatures and what that meant, as he unwound his pet and placed him on the blanket, so that Neville could pet him more easily.

"Poor boy," Andromeda said softly. Sirius glanced at her. "I know the Longbottom family, passingly. Not to speak ill of the dead, but I'll bet this is the first time he's been allowed anywhere near someone his own age. And I'm sure it's the first time he's been let near a snake."

Sirius watched as Snake, apparently on command from Harry, reared up and hissed. Neville smiled anxiously.

"Andromeda," Ted warned.

"Yes, dear?"

"You've got that look in your eye."

"What look is that?" Andromeda asked, as Harry and Neville giggled over something.

"The same look you had when you took in that boot-faced stray cat for the sole reason that it was horribly ugly," Ted answered. "That mama-lion look."

"Nonsense," Andromeda replied. "I just think it's madness to entrust the boy to a man who pushed him off a pier."

Neville had consented to have Snake coiled up on top of his head, and was sitting very still while the animal explored his fringe.

"He does look like a very sweet boy, doesn't he?" Andromeda mused, with an absent sort of smile.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 24

Between the power of the Black family name and that of the Boy Who Lived, they were mainly undisturbed that morning; mediwitches came and went occasionally, giving Neville a potion or taking his pulse, but that was all. Neville accepted the solicitude shyly, as he did any attention from the other adults. He seemed fascinated with Harry, and especially with Nymphadora when she joined them -- by the time Remus arrived for lunch, Nymphadora was sitting on the edge of Neville's bed, legs crossed, running the complete range of odd faces she knew how to make, with Harry imitating voices he thought would go with them. When Remus entered, she glanced up and immediately let her hair fall down into shaggy brown, turned her eyes the same light brown shade, and jutted her chin out into a more masculine shape.

"Now then, young Harry," she said, in a voice that was not-quite-convincing, "Run along with you, it's time for your lunch."

Sirius covered his mouth with one hand, and even Remus looked amused; Dora shook her head and her features settled back into the more familiar snub-nosed, heart-shaped face that they recognised as her own. Harry jumped off the bed and ran to greet Remus.

"Did anyone die?" he asked. Remus frowned. "Sirius said that Mr. Moody said that the traps you were putting on the bookshop could kill people."

"Well done, Sirius," Remus drawled. "No, Harry, nobody died. We hope nobody's going to, either."

Sirius saw Andromeda glance at Neville, who was plucking at the blanket on his lap, suddenly shy and quiet again.

"Let's have some lunch, eh?" Sirius asked. "I'm sure there's somewhere in this building to get a decent sandwich."

"Go on then," Andromeda said. "I'll stay with Neville."

Neville glanced up. "You can go," he said. "It's okay."

"They'll bring me something," Andromeda said firmly. "Now, I think you'll like this book," she said, picking up one of the volumes she'd taken from the Black family library. "Why don't you help me read it?"

"That's our cue," Ted said, giving Sirius a nudge towards the door. They trooped out, Sirius and Remus following Harry, Dora trailing behind her father. When they were safely in the hallway, Ted sighed.

"Guess we'll have to muck out another bedroom at Grimmauld Place," he said. "Should have

known better than to let Andromeda near the boy."

"She can't be thinking she'll be allowed to bring him home with her," Sirius said.

"That's exactly what she's thinking, and the worst is, she probably will. You know, Sirius. You're a Black. The name means something, even if she did marry a good-for-nothing Muggle-born," he added, with a grin. "She'll probably badger and charm the Longbottoms into believing that it's best for all concerned if she takes in the child. And it probably is, if what she says about his great-uncle is true."

"It's the boot-faced cat all over again," Nymphadora agreed.

"It's not any business of ours," Remus said firmly. "I need to talk to you about the traps, Sirius."

"I want to hear!" Harry complained.

"So do I," Dora put in.

"Food first, I don't want anyone starving," Remus announced, leading them unerringly towards the little hospital canteen. When they were settled with only slightly soggy sandwiches and cheap bags of crisps, he seemed to relax a little.

"We cleared out the inside first -- or rather, they did, before I got there -- so we know at least that Peter wasn't there. They've put hexes on the floo, both doors, and the attic-trap, not that I've ever been able to get it open, I think it's got about eight layers of paint sealing it shut," Remus said. "Nothing fatal on the doors, just some boils and a nasty warning, in case someone legitimate tries to get in, and once they're in, there's a Slime-Slogging curse -- you remember, we put it on that idiot little Ravenclaw who used to try and tell on us..."

"Right. Slows you down till you stop and lock up altogether," Sirius grunted.

"That's the one. If he does manage to break that, the till will now knock you unconscious if you don't enter zero two two as a code first. The doorway between the shop and the back room does have a fatal hex on it, but only if you try to charm it unlocked. I've shifted all the really valuable books there. The rest of the books have the same hex as your library -- they'll attack anyone making too much noise."

Nymphadora was listening interestedly; Ted, only mildly paying attention, was playing a stealing game with Harry, sneaking crisps from his bag and allowing Harry to steal them back.

"If Peter comes back, odds are he'll trip at least a few of the hexes. In theory, we'll nail him to the floor and we can use him to get to Bellatrix," Remus said, somewhat more bloodthirsty than Sirius had seen him in some time. "It's impossible to search every corner of the shop -- he may be hiding things there," he continued. "Hell, without us there, he may think it's a perfect place to do the ritual."

"How's Snape's research coming?" Sirius asked.

"He seems to have found what he needs. He tells me, for the spell -- the one that...well, there's a potion needs brewing, a charm dipped into it, and an incantation. It's tricky, but not impossible. It could give Peter a...a lot of power," Remus said hesitantly. "He has the two vital ingredients."

"Now could I drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on," Sirius murmured.

"He's likely to come at night," Remus said. "We've been invited to sit guard duty in shifts with the Aurors -- Moody has some influence, and you and I know that shop better than anyone." He paused. "Snape sort of...volunteered the first watch, as well."

Sirius glanced up from his sandwich. "Why would he do that?"

Remus shrugged. "I think he'd like to get his hands around the throat of the man who hurt Harry."

"Not if I get there first," Sirius growled. Harry butted his head against Sirius' arm, and Sirius responded, ruffling his hair.

"I'll take that as a yes on the guard-duty front," Remus replied, a slight smile on his face. "He'll fetch me at eleven and I'll fetch you at three. That way you don't even have to see him, and I don't have to wake up and stop the two of you fighting."

"What if Peter's not coming back?" Sirius asked.

"His picture is in every Auror office in the country. Man *and* rat," Remus said. "He's got to be human to make the brew. We'll find him."

"I'm more worried about that Bellatrix," Ted said. "She's a right nasty character. Was even before Azkaban. Bad egg, through and through."

"Takes after her family that way," Sirius muttered. "Reckon Narcissa'd take her in?"

"Aurors are already watching her," Remus said.

"I hate this, you know," Sirius said. "I hate having to hide. And depending on Moody's people to hide us."

"We'll get them. Sooner or later, and probably sooner. Neither of them are precisely candidates for World's Sanest Evil Mastermind," Remus said. Sirius snorted. Dora laughed.

"And it gives us until ten to...talk," Remus said, in a low voice meant for Sirius' ears only. Ears that flushed red when he realised what 'talking' meant.

"Andromeda gave me a book about *talking*," Sirius answered, just as quietly.

Remus choked on his sandwich, and Ted had to thump him soundly on the back, while Harry and Nymphadora looked on amusedly.

On their way back to Neville's room, with a hastily-wrapped meal for Andromeda, they ran into Bill Weasley, coming down the stairwell.

"Fancy seeing you here!" Bill cried. "We're just getting dad discharged, you should come say hello. Wotcha, Harry, how's things?"

"Wotcha, Bill," Harry said, grinning up at the redhead who towered over him.

"Just now getting out?" Remus asked, curiously.

"Oi, yes, some complicated hex," Bill replied dismissively. "Dad's been fine, they just wanted to make sure. Here, what're you lot doing here?"

"Had to get Harry checked out," Sirius said. "And Andromeda wanted to visit a friend of hers."

"I owled you," Remus said. "Well, I owled the Burrow, anyway."

"Mum probably got it," Bill shrugged. "I'll ask her. She's here now if you'd like to come see her, and dad. I know they'd like to see Harry," he added.

"I'll go with him," Nymphadora said, a little too eagerly. Ted grinned.

"I'll come," Sirius said, and Ted looked approving. "Remus?"

"Actually, I need to see to something," Remus said. "You go on. Give Molly my love, and tell Arthur thank-you, would you, Bill?"

"Sure," Bill agreed amiably, leading Nymphadora and Harry down another flight of stairs, followed by Sirius. Ted gave Remus an odd look.

"See to something?" he asked. Remus nodded almost absently.

"Won't take long. See you in a bit, yeah?" Remus said, effectively preventing Ted from volunteering to come along. The other man smiled, tapped his finger to his lips, and began walking back towards Neville's room.

Remus checked the directory and went down a flight of stairs, passing unobtrusively into a part of the hospital that looked more like an office wing than a medical establishment. The man behind the counter looked up when he approached, hesitantly.

"Can I help you?" he asked briskly.

"I was...er, wondering if Healer Rubin was in," Remus said hesitantly. "I don't have an appointment, I'm not really here for a professional visit..."

"I believe he's having his lunch," the mediwizard replied. "Go on back, if you like. If he doesn't want to see you he won't answer."

"Thanks," Remus said, wandering down the corridor until he came to a door with "Healer Seth Rubin" charmed on it. He knocked, and heard a muffled "Come in!"

He pushed the door open into an office cluttered with paper and piled high with folders, some of them charmed to float in the air. From within the chaos, someone cried out "Lupin! How are you?"

"Seth, I didn't know if you'd remember me," Remus said with a smile. "where are you?"

"Left...not quite that far...look past the folder near your right hand..." Remus stepped carefully through the office, ending in a space free of paperwork, in which sat a small, studious-looking man, who was bent over a plateful of what looked like shepherd's pie. He waved at an empty chair. "Sit! Sit. This isn't a professional visit, is it? You're not due up for another assessment for at least two years -- but I'm sure I have your file -- "

"No -- purely social call," Remus answered. "And it's two-and-a-half years."

"So it is, so it is. You've had no incidents?"

"Going on fourteen years, I think, except the malnutrition admit, but even they had to admit that wasn't purely a lycanthropy-induced incident."

"Ah yes, that Snape business. Bad stuff, that."

Remus, as always, marveled at the perfect memory of a man with such disorganised habits. "Yes. I actually did want to ask you a few things, off the record."

"Always, my dear boy. Still having the dreams, are we?"

Remus looked down. "Well, sort of. It's not the same dream anymore."

The man chuckled. "You're not going to be dramatic on me like last time, are you? 'I think I'm going insane, I've caught a Muggle psychology'..."

Remus grinned. "No. Caught a psychology indeed. I finally told someone about the dream, by the way. One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you."

Seth set his meal aside, and leaned back, fixing dark, analytical eyes on Remus. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you finally told the man you were having the dreams about?"

"No, it was -- got to show him, actually. Pensieve."

"Useless things, except for that kind of work," Seth wrinkled his nose. "We're not speaking, I suppose, of the dreams which thrust you into such excruciating sexual confusion?"

A slight blush crossed Remus' cheeks. "I'm not all that confused anymore," he murmured.

"I didn't think so."

"Neither is he."

Seth leaned forward. "Not to be a gossip, but do you mean you converted the womaniser?"

"He converted himself -- that's not the point."

"Beg pardon, I think it's very much the point."

"No, I mean...the dream's changed now," Remus said, anxiously. Seth tilted his head slightly.

"How old were you when you came to me, nineteen, yes? Saying you had a frightening dream and were in love with another man. You thought you were going mad. You seem to have survived it," he added drily, before continuing. "I used what Muggle skills I have to counsel you, and it seems to have worked for the better part of ten years. I can only imagine that this self-conversion, as you say, of the object of your desire is responsible."

"There's been a lot going on," Remus said quickly. "I just...I wanted to tell you about it and see what you thought, as long as I was here -- we're visiting a friend."

Seth smiled. "Tell away then, lad. I have no appointments until two."

Remus took a deep breath. "I need to tell you about Harry first..."

Ted arrived back at Neville's room to find Andromeda sitting, working on a parchment tablet with a portable inkwell clipped to it; she seemed to be doing figures. She smiled, and put a finger to her lips when he entered, nodding at the bed. The boy was curled up once more, but he seemed to be sleeping this time; round face smoother and younger-looking, more relaxed.

He had a right to be tense, Ted thought; to lose one's parents so young, and he'd probably seen them kill his grandmother...

"What are you working on?" he whispered, leaning over the back of his wife's chair.

"Conversions," she said. "I think the Galleon's a bit weak against the pound right now. Converting to Muggle money might turn a slight profit."

"Oh yes? Inconvenient though, as we do all our shopping at Wizarding shops at any rate," he answered, kissing the crown of her head. "We're not wanting for money, love, are we?"

"No, not in the slightest -- I was thinking of when we buy the Grimmauld house from Sirius. If we changed all the cash to Muggle money, we'd do well, and Sirius would, too. Plus I think there's

some sort of tax break that way," she added, making a notation in the margin next to a few calculations.

"You really want to go ahead with this? Turning that old mausoleum into a shop?"

"Yes, and the upstairs would make nice guestrooms and a lovely big flat for us, with a few walls knocked out. Especially if we're going to need three bedrooms."

"Three?" Ted asked, trying very hard to sound surprised.

"Yes -- one for the two of us, and one for Nymphadora, and one for Neville."

"Mmm. Of course, how silly of me," Ted murmured. "Do you really think you can take him from his great-uncle, Andromeda?"

She cast a glance at the sleeping boy, and Ted saw that look again; the one she still gave Nymphadora when she thought the independent young woman couldn't see her. Her fingers twiddled the quill she wrote with, getting small drops of ink on the parchment.

"Dora's leaving," she said finally. "Whether she lives with us or not, she'll be off, and I know she was always gone for school, but it feels...different now. I've gotten used to the...the difficult years."

"Masochist."

She lifted her face just enough for him to be able to kiss her forehead. "What does that make you?"

"Mr. Masochist."

She laughed, softly.

"Everyone else still at lunch?" she asked. He shook his head.

"They went to see the Weasleys -- apparently Arthur's still here, getting discharged today. Remus ran off, said he'd be back soon."

"I don't think he likes hospitals much," Andromeda mused. "Then again, I guess nobody actually likes hospitals."

Neville stirred in his sleep, a little, and brushed ineffectually at some hair falling in his eyes. Ted reached over automatically and smoothed it away; when he realised what he was doing, he glanced down, and saw Andromeda beaming at him.

"Remus, I'd like to say something that may sound, in my profession, rather mad. Will you bear

with me?"

"Of course."

"You know of the theory of alternate universes? Existences in which our choices were different, and led us along different paths?"

"Yes...I've read books...the, er, Trousers of Time."

"Hah! Good, yes. Excellent metaphor. And you are aware that, as a creature at once human and non-human, you are particularly sensitive to magic of an intrinsic kind that is not necessarily...oh, how do I put this. You're familiar with Muggle electricity?"

"Yes, we use it."

"Good. There is electricity of the sort you plug into a wall, and then there's a more free-floating sort, the kind that gives us static shocks. As a werewolf, you're sensitive to magic of the second sort; not necessarily usable, but intangibly there."

"I'd read studies about it, but I can't say I've ever felt it personally."

"To you, being Changed so young, it would seem normal."

"What does this have to do with my dreams?"

"Patience, Remus. I think you may be tapping into this magic, and it may be leading you down a path to these other worlds."

"Oh. What does that...are you saying I'm seeing what might-have-been?"

"No -- what is, in another reality."

"So this...but it can't get into this one, can it?"

"I don't think it works that way, no. And anyway, it's just a theory. Who knows? I certainly can't see how it all fits together psychologically. Not in a way that makes sense given your personality."

"But in some other world...?"

"It would appear so."

"Excuse me, I -- I should go, I didn't realise we'd talked this long. Thank you...this was...enlightening."

"Come speak to me whenever you wish, Remus. Especially if the dreams change again. Free of charge. I'm fascinated by the idea, frankly."

"I -- yes. Thank you. Goodbye..."

Sirius didn't really listen to the talk going on around him, in the little hospital room; instead he watched the door.

Remus had gone off without saying where he was going, and while Sirius realised that he had, in fact, done this thousands of times before, in their lengthy acquaintance, right now the world was crawling with people who might be Peter in disguise, people who might be helping Peter, people who might realise that as a hostage for Harry, Remus was a good deal...

It was absolutely ludicrous, but he was still mildly anxious. Ted had told him Remus said he'd only be a minute.

"Don't you think so? He's going off to be a charmbreaker," Nymphadora was saying. "So I said he ought to send me something from Foreign Places and he asked for our address..."

The door clicked, and Remus let himself in, looking vaguely embarrassed but not at all as though he'd just battled off ten or twelve villains who were after his head. He nodded his greetings to the four of them, and pulled a chair quietly up next to Sirius. Their knees bumped, his left with Remus' right, and Remus smiled when Sirius gave him a sidelong look.

"The mediwizard outside said that they're closing visiting hours soon," he said. "I'm willing to bet you can stay, but I think it's best if we take Harry back," he said, glancing at Sirius for confirmation. "They'll probably want Nymphadora out too."

"Yes, I'm a troublemaking adolescent," Nymphadora said, with an uncrackable ego that someone twice her age might have admired.

"Be a good girl," Andromeda said, as her daughter stood and straightened her robes. Harry, unusually solemn and silent, allowed himself to be led -- walking between Sirius and Remus, with Nymphadora on his heels -- out and down to the floo network, where they returned to Grimmauld Place.

"I don't guess I'm gonna be a Healer when I grow up," Harry said, reaching for some fruit on the table. "Hospitals're boring. And creepy."

"Thankless job, anyway," Sirius said, dropping into one of the chairs.

"Dora, can we go finish reading Bullfinch's Mythology now?" Harry asked. Nymphadora gave Sirius and Remus a questioning look.

"I don't see why not," Sirius said, touseling the boy's already-disorderly hair as he passed. "We'll come up later. Mind the naughty bits, Dora."

"Bullfinch already did that for me," she said sourly, stealing some crackers from the pantry as

they headed for the staircase. "And why," came the rhetorical plaint from the stairwell, "can nobody remember to call me Tonks?"

Remus chuckled, leaning on the kitchen counter, shaking his head. Sirius rubbed his eyes.

"Hell of a day," he said.

"We've definitely had better," Remus agreed. "And I imagine we'll have worse if Peter abandons the bookshop. I hope we're right about all this -- if he's already long gone, we'll never find them in time. Especially if he has a safe place to brew the potion..."

"I wonder," Sirius said. "I wonder if it's even for him. Bellatrix was...there were many stronger men than Peter that she'd already wrapped around her little finger by the time she met LeStrange, you know. My mother..." and he spat the word, "admired her reputation as a man-wrecker. That was her idea of power, you know, seducing men and then destroying them."

"I hardly know where to begin listing all the things wrong with that," Remus sighed. Sirius stood, and walked to the pantry, rummaging around and coming up with a handful of peppermint humbugs.

"I had Andromeda buy some, and then forgot we had them," he said sheepishly. "I'll take some up to Harry later."

"I'm sure he'd like that," Remus said, somewhat distractedly, and Sirius realised the other man was watching him eat one, watching the way he rolled his tongue around the sweet...

"You did say we should talk, though," Sirius said, coming to lean on the counter, facing Remus, who was standing in profile. Remus turned to grin at him, and dropped his head shyly. "I got about halfway through the book, and it's not a slow-moving book," Sirius continued. "I'd no idea people got up to some of the things they did." He moved closer, so that Remus' shoulder touched his chest, his hip touched his stomach.

"Trust you to go to books," Remus murmured, and Sirius grinned, crunching up the peppermint.

"Andromeda recommended it," he pointed out.

"And I thought Molly Weasley was meddlesome," Remus replied. "How are they, by the way?"

"Fine. We're not discussing the health of the Weasley clan right now," Sirius chided. He swallowed the last of the sweet-toffee centre, and reached out, touching Remus' jaw, turning his head. His body naturally followed, and they leaned away from the counter, kissing, touching, exploring each other's mouths. Sirius shared the taste of mint and toffee, and Remus accepted it eagerly, palms pressed flat on Sirius' chest, while Sirius pulled him close by the waist.

He hadn't known it could be this good, and it was *just getting better* .

Remus broke the kiss and nuzzled his neck, lips finding his pulse and resting there, saying

something he couldn't hear, but felt through his skin. He slid his hands up, over the other man's back, tangling them in shaggy brown hair.

"Think we can make it upstairs?" he asked, gasping as Remus' palms slid across his shirt, teasing him through it.

"How accurately can you Apparate?" Remus replied, with a grin. Sirius growled and they Apparated nearly at the same time, Sirius first to the bedroom with his usual pinpoint precision. Before Remus could recover, he pushed him back onto the bed and climbed over him, straddling his thighs and sliding his hands up his outflung arms, until their fingers tangled together. Remus arched up to meet him, arousal evident even through his trousers, and Sirius moaned into his mouth.

"So you've been doing your homework," Remus said, around kisses that made Sirius feel seventeen. "Care to give a practical demonstration?"

Sirius grinned at him and released one hand, reaching into his back pocket for his wand. He pressed it to the collar of Remus' shirt, drawing it down in a line over his chest to his belt, and muttered, "*destringo* ." Remus gasped when his clothes vanished, and Sirius' a second later.

"Some other time," Sirius said, as he bent to bite Remus' neck gently, Remus nuzzling the dog collar he still wore, "I'm going to spend an hour undressing you." He slid his lips down Remus' throat, licking delicately at his collarbone. "Touch every inch of skin on your body..." lower, cheek sliding over his chest, "...with my mouth..."

He felt Remus thread his fingers through his hair, enjoying the pleasurable pinpricks of sensation, akin to being petted, and he loved being petted; this, however, was not a child sharing his ice cream with Padfoot on a sunny stoop -- this was Remus begging him for more, as he nuzzled the line of his hipbone and explored a single scar on his belly.

"Sirius, let me show you -- " Remus gasped, as Sirius nipped the inside of his thigh, but Sirius shook his head.

"It's all right," he murmured, grinning. "I've read books."

Remus laughed, head tilting back, the line of his neck as beautiful a thing as Sirius had ever seen, and then gasped in the middle of it when Sirius slid his lips over him, tongue working gently. His hips bucked upwards and Sirius pinned them, exploring this new thing, wondering a little that this should arouse him -- to have Remus at his mercy, back arching, fingers clenching now in his hair...

He let his teeth graze the sensitive skin just a little, and was rewarded by a moan he hoped they couldn't hear in the library. He tried to take more, and heard Remus swear; his throat closed up for a minute, and he withdrew, heart racing.

Remus, chest heaving, propped himself on one elbow. "All right then?" he asked, worriedly. Sirius

grinned, and swiped his tongue across sensitive skin, and the other man collapsed again.

"All right," he answered, vibrations in his voice making Remus tremble. "How'm I doing?"

"Please don't stop," Remus moaned, and Sirius was nothing if not obedient; by the time he had satisfied himself that he was getting the hang of things, Remus was incoherent, writhing beneath him, thrusting up into his mouth. He sat back for a second, hearing Remus whine in protest, and crawled over his body again, settling on top of him, kissing him, stroking his hair. Their bodies rubbed together in a slow rhythm, almost unconsciously, skin-on-skin, fever-hot.

"Top marks," Remus gasped. "Must thank Andromeda -- "

"Shh," Sirius answered, kissing him to quiet him. "Want to feel this -- feel you -- "

Remus smiled wickedly at him, and they were rolling suddenly, Sirius landing on his side and feeling a warm body curl around his back.

"Another lesson?" Remus inquired in his ear, voice low and compelling, and Sirius pushed back against him -- he wanted to feel...everything...

"Yes," he managed, and then, "There was a spell -- "

"I know it," Remus replied, one of his hands sliding down Sirius' hip, slipping over his belly to stroke him, slowly, lightly. "*Restare aselli ...*"

Sirius gasped and bit his lip when he felt warm slickness flood through him, followed by an almost unbearable pressure.

"All right, love," Remus murmured soothingly, still stroking him, "You'll get used to it, relax -- that's it..."

Sirius consciously relaxed, breathing deeply, concentrating on Remus' hands, his voice, and the aching fullness began to fade to something more pleasurable. He felt Remus press against him, tantalisingly slow, and then the fullness of before was nothing compared to this --

Remus moaned low as he pressed inside him, and sudden pleasure raced through his body, white-hot in his veins; another movement and he could breathe again, but then Remus thrust once more and he couldn't bite back a cry.

"Am I hurting you?" Remus asked roughly, buried inside him, face pressed to his neck. Sirius shook his head, trying to find words to plead for more. "I want to please you, Sirius..." he continued, as his hips began to move in a slow rhythm that was probably going to kill Sirius from the pleasure of it. "Oh...I want..."

He caught his breath, the motion tensing his whole body, and Sirius tried to fall into the movement of hips against his, shuddering when Remus' fingers tightened, and right...there...and Remus said his name...

He arched and came, feeling the pulse of orgasm through his entire body, barely aware that Remus came also, senses overloaded with the feel of warm skin, nimble fingers.

When he thought he might be able to speak coherently again, he drew a deep breath.

"I could have done that spell," he said. Remus, catching his breath, buried his face in the nape of Sirius' neck, and laughed.

"Full marks for effort," he said, voice pleasantly low, sounding satiated.

"I should think so. That was..." Sirius fumbled shyly for words.

"...better than I'd even imagined," Remus finished, muttering some spell to clean things up a bit. How *did* Muggles manage without magic...

Sirius realised what he'd said, and the mental images flooded him -- Remus imagining this, imagining him. Pleasure that was nearly over the line into pain flooded him. He moved, turning so that he could face the brown-haired man, seeing something almost desperate in his eyes.

"You don't have to imagine now," he said, and Remus smiled, a true, honest smile. When had the world begun to light up when he smiled like that?

"I know," he said, drawing him closer for a kiss. "Are you all right?"

"You can stop asking," Sirius said, nibbling the corner of his mouth. "That was....very good."

"Good," Remus nuzzled his cheek, their bodies fitting together, arms securing each other in place. "I wanted to let you try it the other way round, first, but...sort of, in the moment -- "

"Shut up now," Sirius ordered, and Remus laughed again. "I'm bigger than you. If I wanted to stop you, I would."

"You always can," Remus said softly, eyes closing as he rested his head in the hollow between his neck and shoulder. "Never want to hurt you," he said, breath deepening. Sirius closed his eyes also, enjoying the warmth of his body, the fact that this was Remus -- here -- trusted -- the man he trusted above anyone else in the world.

They lay together for a while, silent, matching each other's breathing, until Remus stirred, and pulled back a little, sitting up. "We should check on Harry," he said, sliding a hand possessively down Sirius' arm, exploring the corners and ridges of his knuckles.

"So we should," Sirius answered reluctantly. Remus slipped off the edge of the bed, and picked up his clothes from the floor where they'd been sent, offering Sirius his shirt. Sirius watched the way he dressed; settling the shirt around his shoulders, tightening his belt around his hips. He'd never paid particular attention to men, or to Remus, not as objects of desire; now he wondered why. The fall of white linen over broad, unmistakeably masculine shoulders shouldn't do this to him, but he had trouble caring. Remus turned, and grinned at him.

"You're supposed to put that on, you know," he advised, laying Sirius' trousers on the bed. Sirius broke away from his contemplation, and nodded, pulling the shirt back on, doing up the buttons slowly. He saw Remus' eyes darken, slightly, and glanced down; just his hands, doing up his shirt...

Hadn't Remus said something, before they slid into sleep at some point in a past that seemed more distant by the hour, that he'd admired his hands? Sirius smiled, and did his buttons slower, slipping fingers under the edge of the shirt occasionally, to graze bare skin. Remus caught his breath.

"You're supposed to put those on, you know," Sirius said conversationally, indicating the socks Remus held clenched in one hand. He watched in fascination as the blush spread all the way down his throat.

"Hoist on my own petard," Remus muttered. They made themselves presentable, more or less, and Remus smiled suddenly when Sirius spread his arms, tacitly asking if there was anything amiss.

"What is it?" he asked, and Remus shook his head. "What?"

"You've got a bite-bruise, just here," he said, tapping his own shoulder. Sirius touched it, and felt a slight tenderness. "Sorry, I don't think anyone who isn't looking will see it under the shirt..."

"Are you sure?" Sirius asked. "Not that I mind all that much -- "

"Fairly sure," Remus answered. "That wasn't why I laughed."

"Oh?" Sirius asked, drawing closer. Remus kissed him, seductively.

"I was just wondering how I'm going to get through dinner if I get hard every time I see it," he whispered in Sirius' ear. A pleasant tingle worked its way down Sirius' spine and settled in his own groin.

"You'll just have to, now, won't you?" he answered, lowering his voice. Remus growled and nipped his earlobe before stepping back. Sirius, conscious of the bruise now, felt it ache a little; he wondered if he ought to heal it, or put a prolonging charm on it.

He rather liked belonging to someone, and didn't at all mind being marked for it.

"You're going to have to lend me that book," Remus said, as they walked down the hallway towards the library.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 25

Severus did not return for dinner that night, and Neville didn't, after all, come home with Andromeda. Instead, Ted took a basket of food to the Aurors who, with Snape, had set up camp above the hair salon across the street from Sandust, watching for Peter's return. Andromeda arrived home with an armful of hospital paperwork, and spent a significant amount of the evening filling in her name, her birthdate, her references, her economic status, and her intentions towards young Mr. Longbottom. His great-uncle had been almost relieved not to be burdened with a young child, but St. Mungo's wanted to make sure that the boy wasn't being taken willy-nilly like a picture book from the library.

"I'm sure I can steal Nymphadora's old tutor back from the LeVances, they don't know what he's worth anyhow," she said, as she shuffled papers. Remus, next to her, filled out the Black family tree for God-only-knew what purpose, with the help of an elderly book. "He'll have a proper education that will prepare him for Hogwarts. None of this pushing-off-piers business. His parents would be horrified, I'm sure."

"Be sure you put something in that short-answer question about taking him to see them on weekends," Ted put in. "He told me while you were getting the papers that his gran takes him every Sunday."

"Morbid," Andromeda sniffed. "Scaring the poor child that way. Still, I suppose seeing the truth is better in the long run. I wonder if anyone's bothered to sit him down and explain it to him what's happened, or if they presume he somehow just knows. Really, people oughtn't to be allowed to raise children without taking some sort of class first."

"Yes, love," Ted murmured, exchanging a mildly amused glance with Remus. "Speaking of raising children, where's Dora got to?"

"Research in the library," Sirius answered, walking into the room with a handful of books. "Is it normal to be studying this much before she even starts classes? She's reading loads more than Lily did when she was getting ready for the Academy."

"Competitive field, I would imagine. That's what Lily always said, and I'll bet it's worse now. Harry asleep?" Remus asked.

"Very nearly," Sirius answered. "I thought I'd read up in -- " he coughed, "the room across from him...."

"Your bedroom?" Andromeda asked helpfully. Both men turned slightly red. "Remus, you should sleep too. Isn't Severus coming to fetch you at eleven?"

Sirius frowned at her. "Andromeda, are you meddling?"

"Yes, Sirius," Andromeda replied, head once again bent over her paperwork. Ted couldn't quite stifle a laugh. "Now run along."

Sirius glanced at Remus, who shrugged and smiled a little, eyes drifting down the line of his neck to the purpling bruise on his shoulder. He left, and Sirius glared uselessly at Andromeda before following.

They didn't make it quite to their room before they gave in, hands hooking in belts and cupping chins to kiss, noses bumping, pulling each other along the hallway and into the room they shared. It was good, in general, Sirius felt; though it *was* very peculiar that the first bed they shared should be a musty guest-bed in the house of a family that would have screeched in shame to see what went on in it.

They fell back on the bed together, Remus curling against him as though that was the only place he fit.

"I should sleep," he said in Sirius' ear, as their hands roamed, exploring each other, learning new sensations.

"We're lying down," Sirius answered. "That's almost sleep."

"Not by half," Remus murmured, but he didn't protest when Sirius dipped his head, tasting his skin. They kissed and touched, tangling the bedclothes around them, until Remus lay back again, breathing hard. Sirius sank down beside him, nuzzling shoulder and neck.

"I have something I need to ask you," he said quietly, and Remus closed his eyes, smiling.

"Oh yes?"

"Mm." Sirius lay his hand possessively across Remus' stomach, fingers curling over his hip. "This afternoon. When you left. Where did you go?"

Remus covered the hand with his own. "Is it so important you know?"

"I'd like to. If you'd rather not say, I'll understand, but these are," he kissed his shoulder again, "uncertain times. I didn't like you being alone and unprotected."

"I can defend myself," Remus answered, but his tone was gentle. "I went to see the man in charge of my..." he sighed. "My registry file with the Ministry. The one I had to see after I tried to kill Severus."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are."

"I never meant -- "

"Sirius, if I was still angry at you, I would have left you behind long ago."

Sirius considered this in silence, until Remus drew a breath and continued. "The dreams are changing."

"The ones about Peter?"

"Yes..." Remus put one hand over his face, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "They're not about Peter anymore, not directly."

"What are they about?"

"Harry."

Sirius felt his breath hitch. "What about Harry?"

"Him being hurt. I don't know." Remus rolled away, turning his back, legs curling slightly. Sirius let his hand slip until it was just barely resting on his hip, afraid to move closer for fear Remus would move away again. "There's a...it's some empty place, there's a tree, and Harry's there, but he's -- he's older. At first I thought it was James, but he has green eyes."

"How old?" Sirius asked, sliding closer slowly. Remus didn't shy away.

"Fifteen, maybe. Maybe a little younger. He's hurt -- his blood -- like Peter actually took. I think...I don't remember it very clearly. Peter has a silver hand, I don't know why, and when I see that I always wake up. It's blurred. But Harry gets hurt, and Peter somehow...resurrects Voldemort. Like Snape said he might."

Sirius pulled him closer. "How long have they been going on?"

"A few days. Only since Peter attacked Harry, but every time I sleep, they're there. It worries me."

"But your last one didn't come true."

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

"Peter did come back, though. And he was right under our noses."

Sirius sighed. "Harry's already been hurt."

"He could be hurt again."

"We won't let that happen."

He heard Remus draw breath to remind him that they hadn't been able to stop it, and he spoke

before the other man could. "They're just dreams."

"But they might be things that are happening, somewhere. In some other world. This one isn't like the last one; it feels like a story I've been told, not one I've seen. But it still feels too real, Sirius." Remus sighed. "I need to sleep. Unless you want a very cranky werewolf on your hands come morning."

Sirius curled every inch of his body he could against the other man, trying to comfort him with heat and contact. "Planning on sleeping here?" he asked lightly. "Snape's going to have a really fascinating reaction to coming to fetch you and finding me," he said, "wrapped around you like a second pair of pyjamas..."

Remus snorted. "With Snitches on, I suppose."

"Any way you want," Sirius answered. "I -- what is it?"

Remus was sitting up, pushing him away gently. "Do you hear that? It sounds -- "

He slid off the bed, crossing swiftly to the door and opening it, peering out into the hallway. Ted and Andromeda's door was closed, and Nymphadora's also, though a light was on under hers; there was a thudding noise, as though someone was running up the stairs...

"Snape," he said, as the black-cloaked man turned onto the landing. "What on earth -- "

"There's no time," Snape growled, running down the hallway. "Sandust -- Peter -- "

"He's come back?" Sirius demanded. Snape shook his head.

"Come back, yes -- but not captured -- the shop, set it on fire -- "

Remus bolted for the stairs, and Sirius gripped the doorframe tightly. Nymphadora had come to the door of her room, and Andromeda moved to stand next to her daughter, Ted nearby.

"Peter," Snape said more clearly. "He's set Sandust on fire. Go."

"Neville," Sirius said, pointing at Andromeda, who nodded agreement and ran inside to change, Ted following her. "I'm going. Stay here. Dora, you mind Harry. Do as Snape tells you!" he shouted over his shoulder, as he followed Remus' mad dash for the stairs. He heard the Tonkses following him, and barely paused to toss floo powder into the flame before ducking into it and shouting "High Street Watchroom, Little Whingeing!"

He emerged into confusion, backlit by a fierce, terrifying orange light; ahead of him, Remus was slithering down the stairs and out into the street, running towards flame -- flame licking out of the windows of Sandust, his bookshop, his haven --

"Remus, no!" he shouted, dropping hard to the ground and running off-centre to catch up with him. Remus stopped barely shy of the flames, staring in horror, and then turned to Sirius.

"The spell," he said. "The books -- your wand!"

Sirius drew his wand almost on instinct, and Remus steadied his arm, wrapping his wrist around Sirius', his own wand clenched tightly.

Flame was consuming the wooden wall-beams; heat-shattered glass littered the pavement, and the air reeked of smoke and burning trash. Inside, he could just barely see shelves, beginning to warp with the heat, books beginning to blacken and char. For a split second he thought he saw a long-limbed, almost apelike shape moving within the flames, but a second later it might have been a trick of the light; Remus was holding him with his left hand so hard he was going to break bones if he wasn't careful, and it distracted him.

"Eripio libris," Remus said in his ear. "Say it, Sirius."

"Eripio libris," Sirius repeated, chanting the words. "Eripio libris. Eripio libris. Eripio libris -- "

"Get back!" Moody was running towards them, pulling them away as the storefront began to crumble, but Sirius could feel the magic coursing through them now -- an old spell they'd put on the bookshop, just in case, to rescue the valuable volumes should something dire happen. But why was the fire burning still -- the Aurors should have been able to put it out with a simple freezing charm...

Moody finally tore them back just as the facade of the building fell forward, and they were pelted with sparks and burning ash. Sirius heard himself cry out and felt Remus move to block the cinders even as others pulled them across the street again.

"Did we save them?" he panted, as they backpedaled, running back into the brick wall of the hair salon. Remus pushed his hair out of his eyes and gasped for breath, a nasty burn showing livid on his throat. Fire, Sirius recalled. Silver, beheading, other werewolves, and fire...

"I think so," Remus rasped. "Felt like it. We can check with Dumbledore in the morning, they should have gone to the Hogwarts library -- oh, Sirius..."

Sirius turned to face him properly, and saw tears soot-streaking Remus' cheeks as he stared at the flame-engulfed remains of Sandust.

"My bookshop," Sirius said brokenly. Moody pressed cups of water into their hands, turning to stare at it also.

"Tis an awesome sight," he agreed, seamed face etched with anger and sorrow. "Been enchanted against simple fire-fighting charms -- called in specialists -- " he faced Sirius, curiously. "And how'd ye know about it, then? Alarms we weren't told about?"

Sirius shook his head. "Snape came for us. We left as soon as we heard."

Moody stared. "Snape? That one hasn't left the Healers -- " he gestured with his hand to where a small crowd of Aurors were being treated for burns, and sure enough, in the thick of them they

could see a pale, soot-smudged Snape, bereft of his outer robes, holding a bandage to his temple, another taped over his cheek.

"But he came to -- " Sirius paused, then ran across to the knot of Healers, shoving them aside roughly, lifting Snape with one hand. "Did you call us?" he demanded. When Snape looked at him, bewilderedly, he shook him. "Did you come to Grimmauld Place this evening?"

"No -- I was attacked..." Snape winced as he was set on his feet, and took the bandage away from his head, where a square patch of flesh was missing along his hairline. "They only found me because -- "

"Polyjuice," Sirius growled, turning to Remus, who was helping support Snape as he eased himself back down. "He's polyjuiced himself -- "

"Merlin," Remus breathed. "We left Harry and Dora with him -- "

Sirius Apparated out of instinct, back to Grimmauld Place, running through the wards and nearly knocking down the front door, bursting inside and up the stairs.

"HARRY!" he shouted, dashing into Harry's room. Nothing. "DORA!"

He could hear Remus, on the floor below, pelting up behind him. "HARRY? NYMPHADORA!"

"HARRY!" Sirius shouted desperately. "HARRY!"

Remus caught him as he passed, almost swinging him around. "Sirius -- "

"No -- "

"Sirius, they're gone."

He had not been treated as an equal by the Aurors, which rankled Severus Snape deeply. If there was one thing he knew, it was how to keep watch. Wasn't he just as responsible for the boy's welfare? Hadn't he spent hour upon hour of his own spare time with the child, trying to give him some kind of civilised upbringing?

So, when he saw the shadow scuttling into the bookshop, rather than alert the others, he simply slipped out of the watchroom, down the stairs, and into the darkened street, black cloak hiding him from not-terribly-attentive eyes -- Moody was on break, otherwise he never could have made it -- and down the alley to the back door of the shop. If he could catch Peter himself, the reward would be great, and not just in terms of showing up the arrogant Aurors chatting away to each other in the watchroom.

He let himself into the shop, mindful of the hexes, and stalked stealthily towards the front, where he could hear voices -- that was Pettigrew's irksome squeak, he remembered it, and the other must

be Bellatrix...

He stepped out from behind a shelf and raised his wand, the end glowing faintly with a hex at the ready.

"Don't move," he said.

He had a moment in which to examine the almost cherubic face of Peter Pettigrew, blond hair shaggy around his head, pudgy fingers clenched around a chalice. The look was faintly surprised, eyes slightly wide, though still not terribly intelligent -- much as they had been at school, when someone had said something that didn't fit into Peter Pettigrew's mental script.

He had another moment to notice that Bellatrix was not in his line of sight, right before something hard and cold connected with his temple and the world went away for a while.

When he woke, it was to choking smoke and unbearable heat; a pain in his head told him he'd been cold-cocked, and worse, sucker-punched, by a woman. A tiny rational voice in the back of his head said that at least it was a Black, and their women hardly counted, they were that manly, but this was not a comfort when one of his shoes was *on fire*... his robes were gone, just his tunic and trousers remained --

There were shouts outside, and he crawled towards the noise, eventually pushing himself upright, stumbling against the white-hot front door, trying to shoulder it open. Fire; the bookshop was on fire -- the books --

He had that moment's hesitation which comes when all true book-lovers are faced with a decision between personal destruction and literary travesty, but his self-preservation instinct got the better of him, and he staggered out into waiting hands, which dragged him away from the awful, awful heat and into the cool night air.

Bandages were pressed to his head, lung-clearing charms were applied and a salve for burnt skin was spread on his hands. When he was finally fully aware of his surroundings, he found himself in a small knot of concerned Aurors and Healers, holding the bandage to his head, watching in horror as a bookstore burned. It didn't matter that The Most Despised And Hated Sirius Black was its owner; setting books aflame simply Wasn't Done.

"Are they getting the books?" he thought to ask. "Is someone saving the books?"

"It's a goner, mate," replied one of the Healers. "Be lucky if there's slag left by the time that thing burns itself out."

"But the books..." Snape insisted, just as he saw Black and Lupin arrive.

The man said something else, but Snape was intent on the pair standing too-close to the fire, arms outstretched, wands at the ready; some sort of charm? They couldn't stop the flames or the aurors would have by now, but perhaps there was hope yet --

The world became a blur for a while, as actual pain began to set in, and he began to wonder if the dizziness was lack of oxygen or blood, or simply confusion brought on by being left for dead in a burning building. He didn't pay attention to anything else until he saw Sirius charging towards him, and then he could hardly move before he was being lifted off his feet and shaken until his teeth rattled. Black was shouting something about Grimmauld Place; Snape winced and took the bandage off so he could hear better.

"No," he replied, trying for Haughty and barely making Coherent, "I was attacked...they only found me because -- "

Black cut off his explanation, and Snape realised something was very, very wrong.

"Merlin," Remus breathed. "We left Harry and Dora with him."

He saw both men Apparate, and realised finally what was going on; the fools had left Harry with Peter Pettigrew, disguised as himself, and run off to protect their bookshop. Cursing them for idiots, he stood and took two swift steps away from the knot of people trying to restrain him, and Apparated also, praying the concussion he was no doubt suffering from wouldn't cause him to splinch.

"This isn't Hogwarts," Nymphadora said, which may have been stating the obvious, but clearly did need to be stated anyway. Professor Snape had taken them here with a crudely-made Portkey, since Harry couldn't Apparate; she didn't consider it odd that he carried a Portkey to a deserted graveyard in his pocket. This was, after all, Terrifying Professor Snape, who for seven years had reminded her just how stupid she could be. She trusted him, to a point, in that he had still helped her score highly on her Potions NEWT, but that didn't mean she didn't fear him.

"No," Snape said. "We'll be safe here."

Nymphadora looked around at the windswept graveyard. "We will?" she ventured, holding Harry's hand tightly.

"Cool," Harry said, looking around.

"Come with me," Professor Snape snapped, and she followed as he stalked through the gravestones, towards a tree overlooking the back edge of it. Harry trotted to keep up.

"Slow down, Harry's out of breath," she said, but he whirled on her and nearly snarled.

"Do you want him happy or do you want him safe?"

She felt Harry's hand tighten in hers, and saw Snake's head poking out of Harry's collar, the rest of the coiled body wrapped around his shoulder and arm. Harry bowed his head a little, and then stopped walking altogether.

"Come on, Harry," she urged, but Harry shook his head stubbornly. "What's wrong?"

"That's not Professor Snape," Harry said. Nymphadora looked at the tall, black-clad man, who had turned ominously when he heard the words. "That's not Professor Snape, and I don't trust him, and neither does Snake, because Snake says he taste-smells wrong."

Nymphadora met Snape's eyes, which flickered for the barest second. She went for her wand, but he was faster; roots sprang from the ground, grabbing her wrists like bony, withered hands, clawing their way up the back of her robes and settling in a choke-hold around her neck. Harry went for the wand, but offshoots wrapped around his whole body, pinning him against her hip, snaking down his legs to keep him from struggling. He hissed, and Snake wriggled out of his shirt, but a single branch forked around and caught Snake's writhing, wriggling body in a v-shaped prong against the bindings on Harry's arms.

Snape leered down at them.

"My old companions are too trusting by half," he said. "But then Moony always was a fool and Padfoot never did well in emergencies. I suppose you're meant to be his nanny. Plain little thing, aren't you?"

Nymphadora snarled and tried to lunge forward, but the branches throttled her, and eventually she gave up struggling. Instead she tried to change face, but the plants moved with her, tightening when her neck narrowed, expanding when her body widened.

"And a metamorphmagus! Perhaps I spoke too soon." The man in Snape's body clapped his hands delightedly. "We might keep you. Bellatrix would have a use for you, I have no doubt. Shame about the boy. He looks rather like James."

Harry gazed up at the man, eyes almost placid behind his glasses. "I'm not scared of you," he said. "I bet you're Peter Pettigrew. Everyone says you're dim."

"Hold your tongue," came the reply. Nymphadora tried to calm herself, but her heart was threatening to pound so hard it would break her ribcage.

"So you're Peter," she said softly. "I remember you."

He glanced at her, almost idly. "You're far too young."

"I'm Nymphadora, Andromeda's daughter. You came to our house once, when I was seven or eight. Sirius made fun of you for falling out of our orange tree," she said, with an almost preternatural calm. He backhanded her hard, and the branches caught her other cheek when her head turned.

"You keep your hands off her!" Harry shouted, struggling again, but the branches tightened and, when Snake hissed and writhed, he stopped.

"It's impolite to hit a woman, Peter," said a new voice, with the velvet-softness that comes from psychopathic insanity. The man with Snape's face turned, and Dora craned her neck as much as

she could.

Bellatrix, the aunt she'd never seen, was perched on an old above-ground tomb as if it were a park bench, one leg crossed elegantly over the other, though her clothes were a tattered Azkaban prison uniform and a disturbingly jaunty hat. She wasn't much older than Andromeda, Dora remembered; her face was lovely, pale and smooth except for deep shadows under her eyes, and her black hair was swept back in two shining braids, which lay like silk rope over the dusty tatters of her clothing.

She took the hat off and turned it about. "I found this. Do you think it belongs to Sirius?" she asked.

"That's Remus' hat!" Harry squawked, indignantly.

"The halfblood werewolf?" Bellatrix wrinkled her nose, and threw it at them, trying to get it on one of their heads as if they were a carnival game. She slid off the bench with disturbing grace, and circled them, picking up the hat and placing it on Nymphadora's head. She giggled.

"Queen!" she declared. Nymphadora shook her head, trying to dislodge it, and felt Bellatrix's fingers clamp down on her scalp, through the brim of the hat. "Hold still, my dear," Bellatrix breathed, and Nymphadora held her breath against the stench.

"This," Peter said, wrinkling Snape's nose in disgust, "is Andromeda's daughter, Bellatrix."

The woman made a vaguely displeased noise. "You shouldn't have hit her, Peter. It's wrong to hit girls. Especially Blacks. Even if they are unnatural mudblood spawn. We tend to hit back."

"I'll do as I please," Peter answered sullenly. "We should begin."

"Pretty baby," Bellatrix murmured, moving to crouch in front of Harry.

"Leave him alone!" Dora ordered, struggling to free herself until the branches tightened so much she could barely breathe.

"Pretty green-eyed baby boy. Will you be my baby boy?" Bellatrix asked.

Fast as lightning, Harry craned his head forward and bit a chunk out of her jaw.

Bellatrix drew back, shrieking, and clawed at his face, but only succeeded in knocking his glasses away. Harry spat blood at her, straining against his bonds, while Peter yanked her away.

"You can kill him in due time," he growled in Snape's voice. Bellatrix shrieked, and he held onto her until she had spent herself trying to get to Harry, who glared defiantly at her. Peter pressed the tip of his wand to the wound, healing it.

"You're a crazy old woman and when my godfather gets here he'll show you!" Harry shouted, and then Nymphadora heard him drop into Parseltongue, furiously. Bellatrix stopped cold, staring in

fascination as the small, tightly bound child hissed and spat.

"Call for help, Harry," Nymphadora urged softly, but if Harry heard her, he paid her no mind. "Harry, call for help in Parseltongue, maybe there are snakes nearby -- " she cut off as the bindings tightened again, squeezing the breath out of her briefly.

Bellatrix wrenched Peter's wand from his hand and said a word, tremblingly, and the branches holding Harry clamped his jaw shut, encircling his head. Harry continued to glare fiercely, if somewhat unfocusedly.

"Quite finished?" Peter asked, taking the wand from her trembling hand. "Very well."

Bellatrix dropped to the ground, and began drawing in the dirt; at first Nymphadora thought she'd gone into a fit of some kind, but then the etchings glowed green, and earth seemed to fall away, leaving a narrow, deep pit into which she reached.

Was that rustling in the wilderness beyond the graveyard?

Bellatrix drew out a sack, cackling to herself as she unpacked it.

Tails in the tall grass, or merely a trick of the moonlight?

A cauldron, full of liquid; two vials, and a strange circular wooden pendant, on a tattered green ribbon.

Nymphadora was sure she saw eyes watching them, but if Harry couldn't talk, he couldn't tell the snakes what to do. She looked sidelong at Harry; he'd gone almost rigid, and his eyes had closed; his lips moved, even though his jaw couldn't.

Then Peter picked up a shining metal knife from the ground where Bellatrix had thrown it, and Nymphadora's whole world closed to a single tunnel with that knife at the end of it.

"What're you going to do with that?" she asked. "You have his blood, you don't need -- "

"I have his blood," Peter agreed, almost absently. "But you see, we're doing two spells tonight, aren't we, Bellatrix?"

The woman grinned up at him.

"One is going to make me powerful," Peter continued, tipping up her chin with the point of the knife, "beyond your wildest dreams -- beyond anyone's," he corrected smugly. "And the other is going to help me find my master, and to find my master, we have to use the boy. Because the boy, you see..." he added, drawing the blade now down Harry's cheek, not quite opening the skin, "carries my master's scar."

He seemed to choke then, for a moment, and Nymphadora wondered if they were saved, but all that happened was he began to shrink, his face to puff out and nose to shorten. Before long, he was

not the intimidating, tall potions master, but a small, rodentlike man with beady eyes and wispy, dead-looking hair. He smiled a sharp little smile at her that was completely unterrifying in his round face. She'd never felt so much like laughing in her life, somehow.

"Handy of him to happen along into Bella's trap," Peter said, as his hands shortened. Nymphadora hadn't noticed what elegant fingers Snape had until they were growing back into the stubby, ugly ones that belonged to Peter Pettigrew. "We were hoping for Padfoot, but Snivellus isn't too useless. And of course the floo recognised him. Couldn't have got into your house, otherwise. Dear, trusting Padfoot."

Harry was too still, but Nymphadora didn't dare stare, and Peter didn't seem inclined to notice.

"It's ready," Bellatrix said, behind him, and Peter turned away, shoving the knife into the turf near the now-bubbling cauldron.

"Stewed in a grave," he said. "And brewed by a madwoman. Fed the blood of two innocents..." he added, breaking the seals on the two vials and dumping them unceremoniously in, "...and bathed in the moonlight. Old magic, older than Latin, older than book-learned charms."

He hovered his hand over the seething mass, the odd wooden amulet clutched in one hand. Bellatrix drew her legs up and rested her chin on them, watching him.

"Get on with it then," she muttered.

"It's going to hurt," Peter said. "I'm steeling myself."

"Life is pain."

Nymphadora heard him mutter something extremely similar to "Thank you, Nietzsche" under his breath, and tried to suppress hysterics. Harry was beginning to twitch a little.

"Harry," she said, in a whisper, without looking away from the hesitating Peter, "snap out of it. We've got to get out of here. If you move your jaw just a little you can call the snakes. Come on, Harry."

Harry wasn't listening. Harry, she suspected, wasn't actually there.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Bellatrix said, and slammed her hands down on Peter's wrist, forcing his entire fist into the seething cauldron. He screamed, shrilly, and cursed as she held his hand there -- seemingly for an eternity before he broke, panting and sweating, body going limp. Then she smiled nastily and lifted his hand again. Nymphadora closed her eyes against the sight of his scalded skin.

She couldn't stand not knowing, however, and when she looked again Bellatrix was lovingly holding the amulet against his lips -- no --

Nymphadora watched as she shoved it, ribbon and all, into his mouth. Peter gagged and tried to

scream again, but she kept pushing, and finally he swallowed.

He ate it, she thought. *Oh Merlin he ate it look at his hand we've got to get out of here --*

Peter toppled backwards onto the weedy dirt of the graveyard, chest heaving, right hand flexing and unflexing spasmodically.

The little shining snake eyes were still watching. Nymphadora willed them forward, not that it was likely to do any good.

Then Peter sat up again, and opened his eyes. She stared. They were jaundice-amber, and the pupils had changed into the strange cross-shape of a goat's eyes, horribly *intelligent* goat's eyes in a human face.

He pushed himself to his feet. Bellatrix giggled. He lifted the cauldron with his right hand, which looked as though it had scarred over in the ten seconds between his falling and rising, and emptied it onto the ground. Mud splattered across Bellatrix's legs.

Peter held out his right hand, and Nymphadora quite literally felt her heart stop. He squeezed, and it beat. Palm; stop; squeeze, beat. He dropped his hand and she sagged into the now-welcome support of the restraints, heart finding a normal rhythm again.

"Now," he said, kneeling before Harry and cupping his face in one scarred hand, "We get to play with your baby boy, Bellatrix."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 26

The house on Grimmauld Place was heavily warded, but it could recognise its owner; Sirius and Remus had no difficulty getting inside, and Snape felt barely a tingle as he followed them. He caught up to them on the landing just as they were turning, and suddenly froze. The look of loathing on Sirius Black's face had, he realised, nothing to do with him, but it was still one of the most chilling sights he'd ever seen.

"Where would he take him," Sirius said hoarsely. "They could be anywhere -- how do we find him?"

"I need Frog," Snape said determinedly. Remus opened his mouth, confused. "Show me his bedroom. *Right now*."

"What are you going to do?" Remus demanded, even as he stepped back to lead the way. "Sirius, tell Moody. Get the Aurors searching, we'll find you at Sandust."

"No, stay here, we'll go together," Snape said, deftly picking through the bedclothes until he found the well-loved toy near the foot of the bed. He picked it up, eyes glittering, and turned to Sirius. "The Aurors can't help now. I can find the boy."

"You -- " Sirius said derisively, then stopped himself. "Can you?" he asked, and Snape heard every ounce of pride that it cost him. Sacrificed for Harry.

Because that was what one did for Harry.

"Be silent. Both of you," Snape said, and clutched the toy tightly, aware of how ridiculous he looked. Children didn't have the barriers that adults did, but finding Harry in the mass of humanity that populated England -- if he was still *in* England --

He'd gone into the boy's mind precisely twice in the months he'd known him; Harry had never noticed. It wasn't invading his privacy, he reasoned, if the child's own welfare was at stake. The first time, he wanted to be sure Harry was safe with his new guardians, that Harry was well-fed and well-loved. He had been satisfied to see the utter contentment of a child who was cared for, adequately, for the first time ever.

The second time he'd gone into Harry's mind had been the petrifying, terrifying day after Harry's birthday -- only a few days ago -- when Harry had been hurt, when he'd seen his own hands shake with anxiety over the child's safety. And then it had been, he told himself, no different from a Healer closing up his wounds; if Harry was upset or troubled, he merely smoothed it over.

The touch of the boy's mind was unmistakable. The thoughts of most children were more or less alike to any witch or wizard without a personal attachment to them, but Harry's always carried with them a distinct touch, associated in Severus Snape's mind with Voldemort and the night he'd

been given his Mark, a bitter mental taste, like a bad memory.

"Please," he heard Black's ragged voice. "Tell me what to do."

"Be quiet, damn you!" Snape snarled, spreading mental touches out across vast distances. It would never work; Harry was too far away, too young. He was not that unique, just another child; the only uniqueness he possessed was that the first child Severus had cared for was --

Harry.

Pain and terror flooded his mind, heavily tinged with defiance. He saw through Harry's eyes, blurred; the boy must have lost his glasses. After a brief second he pulled back instinctively, caught halfway between where he was and where Harry was, unable to locate either one.

Tell me where you are, Harry.

Professor Snape?

Don't speak, Harry. Tell me where you are.

An uncertain moment. I don't know.

Are you in a room?

No, it's a graveyard, but I don't know where --

Tang of blood.

Did they hit you, Harry?

There's plants holding me down.

Are you bleeding?

No, a satisfied thrill, but she is.

She?

The bad woman. Bellatrix.

Sirius grabbed his arm. "Bellatrix?"

He must have spoken aloud. "Be quiet or leave -- " *Harry, are you there?*

I'm scared. Where are you? Where's Sirius? I want Sirius.

Show me where you are, Harry. Do you remember names on the gravestones?

He's here, Peter's here, he's going to hurt Nymphadora --

Harry, stop panicking this instant. Can you see houses? Trees?

I saw a big tree.

Harry, open your eyes.

Sight blended into shadow and Snape fought the urge to pull back again; looking through someone else's eyes was sickening and difficult. He saw Peter Pettigrew, arm outstretched, and heard through Harry the sound of Nymphadora Tonks' erratic, laboured breathing. A surge of power from Peter's direction nearly knocked him off his feet.

Harry, we're coming for you. I have to leave you now but we'll be there soon. If you get free, find a place to hide, stay low to the ground.

Don't go --

I won't be gone long, Harry, I promise.

In a graveyard in Little Hangleton, Harry opened his eyes into Peter's goatlike amber ones.

"Now," Peter said, "We get to play with your baby boy, Bellatrix."

"My godfather's going to kill you," Harry replied calmly. "And then you're going to be sorry."

In the house at Grimmauld Place, Severus Snape opened his eyes.

"I know where he is," he said. "It's an old meeting-place for Death Eaters. I can take you there, but you'll have to follow close. It's heavily warded."

Sirius stared at him. "*You're* the spy," he breathed, as Severus began to walk quickly towards the door. "The one Dumbledore's been protecting for seven years. You're the Death Eater who turned traitor for us -- "

"And if we don't leave now another traitor is going to kill your child," he answered, as they swept down the stairs and towards the front door. He turned once they were outside. Sirius surged forward.

"I left Harry alone with you, alone with a Death Eater -- "

"Do *shut up* , Black," he snapped, grabbing the other man at the side of his throat, his other hand catching Remus' wrist. "Look where I'm going. Follow me there. Look," he urged, and Sirius drew a quick breath, as the image flooded his mind. "Can you follow?"

Sirius nodded, and let the breath go when he was released. "Go. We'll follow."

Severus looked at Remus, who nodded also, gulping. He closed his eyes and Apparated to the graveyard of Little Hangleton, somewhere he never thought he'd be forced to go again. He wasn't even fully sure he was there before two cracks followed him, and Sirius and Remus stumbled out of the air.

Peter stood in front of them, one hand wrapped almost gently around Harry's throat, pinning the boy back against his body. He looked only mildly surprised.

"I heard you coming," he said pleasantly. "Just like old times, isn't it?"

"Let him go, Peter," Sirius growled. Behind Peter, Nymphadora was struggling with some sort of plantlike restraint. Bellatrix held a dagger in a perfectly flat line across her throat.

"You even brought a substitute for James," Peter said, still smiling a horrible smile. "Doubt Snivellus is James' calibre, but then, so few were."

Severus was staring at Harry, unblinking. Harry stared back calmly, then flicked his eyes to Sirius.

"Move and I'll crush his little lungs," Peter continued. He held out his free hand, and light crackled around it.

"He's done the spell," Remus murmured. "I didn't think you had it in you, Peter."

"I wouldn't, if you hadn't left your books lying around," Peter answered. "Good show, Moony. I blame you, personally."

"Kill him and we'll kill you, so it comes out even in the end," Severus said, because it was obvious Sirius wasn't going to.

"Oh, I doubt it," Peter laughed. "I very much doubt it."

The light crackling around his hand took on form, and seemed to rise in a spiky, flashing column, behind which he and Harry could hardly be seen.

"Can you get through it?" Severus asked, softly.

"Got a plan?" Remus replied. Severus thrust the idea directly into their minds, and felt Remus tense, Sirius' hands clench into fists.

Remus dove for the column of magical light at the same time Sirius raised his arm and shouted "Stupefy!" at Bellatrix, who dodged away from Dora, nicking her with the knife. Severus saw Peter and Remus hit the ground together, rolling, as he dealt with the burst of energy caused by a werewolf passing through a sheer magical barrier. Harry, landing hard on his elbows, began to scabble towards Sirius, who scooped him up and shielded him behind a gravestone, against a sudden attack by Bellatrix. The stone cracked and began to crumble.

Remus screamed in pain as Peter pressed hands to his bare skin, hands that transmuted the air around them into silver for as long as it took to burn a werewolf, and Severus leapt, rolling and pulling Remus off of him, both of them slamming up against a tomb.

Light crackled around them, and he felt his muscles cry out, his very bones scream. *Crucio* --

It lasted only a second before it ended, but he dropped to the ground, exhausted. Next to him, Remus was panting for breath; Sirius, nearby, was trying to get his strength back. He'd hit all three of them at once with the Cruciatus. The power it would take --

Why had he *stopped*?

Then Severus looked up further and saw Peter reel and catch himself on a tombstone, forehead split open and bleeding.

Harry had a piece of the broken gravestone in his hand. Another one, sharp and bloody, lay near Peter's feet. All three men stared as Harry hurled the second, less effectively than the first one -- it glanced off Peter's chest, tearing fabric -- before picking up a third.

Severus shouted a warning just as Bellatrix lunged from behind, and Sirius turned, wand out, casting a killing curse at close range. Bellatrix screamed once, but only once. There was a dull thud as she fell.

Sirius pushed her body off of himself, crawling towards Harry, who was advancing on Peter. Peter pushed himself upright, finally, and stared at the boy. Remus reached down and pulled Severus bodily up by the collar of his shirt. Sirius stood, supporting himself on a gravestone, reaching uselessly for Harry.

Harry hissed.

From every direction, thousands of slim, sinewy bodies converged, crawling over stone, over grass, slithering their way with eerie, silent speed over the shoes of the men watching Peter, only Harry cutting a swath in their way. They twined up Peter's arms, around his legs, his waist; he shouted in Latin and some of them dropped away, but there were far too many --

"They'll kill him," Remus breathed.

"Good riddance," Severus couldn't help reply.

Sirius reached Harry, finally, pulling the stone from his hand and wrapping his arms around the boy's slim body. Harry pointed to a white object on the ground, a little china dog, and Sirius picked it up, closing Harry's fist around it and whispering a word. They vanished with the Portkey, a disant sound compared to Peter's shouted hexes. Snakes fell, writhed, surged up again; Peter was bodily tearing them from him, now.

Severus turned to see Remus supporting a nearly unconscious Nymphadora.

"We have to leave him," he said. "If they win, they win; if he wins, we're all in trouble."

"He's too powerful," Severus answered. "He'll win."

"She's going to die," Remus answered. "And if you stay you'll die too."

He nodded. "I'll follow you to St. Mungo's."

Peter's screams continued to ring in his ears as he Disapparated.

Nymphadora was bleeding, but they'd staunched it before it became life-threatening, and she'd managed not to splinch; Bellatrix had apparently kicked her in the head, but the Healers seemed optimistic that she'd be all right. Snape followed Remus' instructions up a floor to fetch her parents, who immediately took control of the situation, found her a private room, had a specialist woken and dragged in to the hospital, and generally made it known that if Nymphadora so much as sneezed wrong when she woke, there would be hell to pay.

Remus was bleeding from open sores on his arms where Peter's silver had burned him; Ted and two Orderlies had to restrain him from leaving the hospital when it was discovered that neither Sirius nor Harry were anywhere to be found. Moody was summoned from the aftermath of the Sandust fire, and stomped around shouting orders until he was thrown out of patient care; then he stomped around in the lobby shouting more orders. Snape, when he heard, had to be sedated while they treated him for aftereffects of the Crucio hex.

Remus, bandaged shoulder to wrist and across part of his collarbone and throat, finally slipped away and ran down to the receiving area, skidding to a stop in front of Moody.

"Any news?" he asked breathlessly. Moody crossed his arms.

"Not hide nor hair, though Bellatrix Lestrangle is dead," he said bluntly. Remus sank into one of the chairs, stunned. "Pretty clearly self defence. Had a knife in one hand still. Haven't told Tonks and her brood yet. Don't think she'll take it well."

"What about Peter?"

"Found some bloody footprints. Hell of a tangle of snakes. Probably escaped," Moody grunted. "Next time, finish the job."

"You can have Peter dead or you can have the rest of us alive but you can't have both," Remus answered sharply. Moody snorted. "No word on Sirius or Harry? None at all?"

"Sure they're somewhere safe," Moody said almost placidly. "You'd know where. You know 'em better'n I do."

Remus raised his head, slowly, and met Moody's eyes.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I suppose I do."

The library was always empty this late at night, but especially, almost tangibly so in the summer; it was also dark, but that was the reason Remus had learned one of the few wandless tricks he'd learned, years ago. Ignoring the fire that burned along his arms from Peter's attack, he held up his right hand, green light licking across his palm.

He wandered quietly through the stacks, remembering the smell of old books that even Sandust had never quite imitated -- Sandust, which was now ash and ruin. He passed two tables piled high with books, probably the ones they'd sent here; valuable, rare, and magical volumes, irreplaceable knowledge.

Remus walked until he heard soft breathing, quiet sobbing. He cleared his throat, scuffed his feet on the floor as he moved, so that he wouldn't frighten them.

Sirius was sprawled in one of the enormous sofas the library boasted, next to a window that looked out on the moonlit Hogwarts grounds. Harry was curled on his lap, face buried in his shoulder, sobbing softly.

"It's me," Remus said unnecessarily. Sirius didn't move. Harry stilled, when he rested a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"He won't wake up," Harry said indistinctly. Remus knelt, fingers shaking, and checked for a pulse. The steady throb of blood through the vein seemed to take forever to find, but it was there, strong and even, and Remus felt his whole body relax with relief. He spread his hands across Sirius' face, over his shoulders and down his chest, searching for lingering effects of the hex, or any major wounds; when he was satisfied, he sank down next to them, pulling Harry from Sirius' lap to his, cradling the boy.

"He's just tired," he murmured. "He'll be fine. Are you all right?"

Harry nodded against his chest. "Peter killed Snake," he said softly. Remus stroked his hair.

"How do you know?"

"I heard him die. When he bit him, when the others were biting him..."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry's limbs seized up for a second, and Remus recognised the whole-body sob of a grieving young child. "He tried to kill you and Sirius..."

"We're okay. Shhh, we're all right," Remus soothed. "It's going to be okay."

"Is Professor Snape okay?" Harry asked.

"He's at the hospital with Dora. They'll be fine. Hush now," Remus said.

"He tied us up and the awful woman hurt Dora..."

"Shh. It's okay. We're safe here."

"That's what he said right before -- "

"It's okay, Harry. It's me. Sirius is right here and so'm I. This is Hogwarts, nothing bad can get us here."

Harry fell silent, but Remus could feel him still shaking; when Harry finally began to breathe normally again, to slip into sleep, Remus realised he was shaking, too.

He shifted a little, careful not to wake the boy in his arms, and leaned against Sirius. He ought to be notifying Moody and St. Mungo's; he ought to be there for Andromeda and Ted, and be seeing to it that someone stopped Snape from tormenting the mediwitches. But this was the Hogwarts library, in a stone castle far away from the rest of the world, and he very nearly believed it when he told Harry nothing could hurt them here. If it could just be easy enough, for one night, to believe that there was Somewhere The Bad Guys Can't Get Us...

He listened to Harry and Sirius' even breathing as the moon moved through the sky; not until it was near to setting did he fall asleep, cheek on Sirius' shoulder, Harry still huddled in his arms.

"Oh Merlin, Sirius -- "

Sirius, walking stiffly into the ward the morning after the fight in the graveyard, accepted Andromeda's hug gingerly, head still aching, muscles sore and complaining. Ted, not far behind her, clapped him gently on the shoulder, and he winced; they moved on soon enough to Harry, who was in his arms, Andromeda lifting the boy into her own and making much of him, while Ted greeted an extremely exhausted Remus, who plucked shyly at the edge of his bandages. A whole cadre of Healers and Aurors descended, and Sirius clung tightly to Andromeda's arm, unwilling to be separated from Harry. They worked their way through the crowd, to the room Nymphadora and Neville now shared, and Andromeda set Harry on Neville's bed, carefully. Nymphadora waved, and changed her nose to a pig's snout. Harry smiled at her in greeting, and waved back a little.

"Worried about you, old man," Ted said to Sirius, who was suffering a Healer to examine him impatiently. "Snape's been telling us horror stories."

"All true," Sirius said grimly, as a mediwitch scolded Remus for pulling one of his bandages loose. "I thought it was better to keep Harry away from everything until morning."

"Could have told us where you were going," Andromeda said severely. Harry looked like he might burst into tears again. "I'm not mad at you, Harry," she said quickly. Harry scooted back on the bed, away from the Healers, until his back was against the wall.

"You let him alone," Neville said, to the world at large. Harry drew his knees up against his chest, and wrapped his arms around them.

"Snape all right?" Sirius asked Ted gruffly. Ted gestured to the doorway, where the Potions master was lingering, watching the rest of them warily; a patch of his hair near his temple was still missing, and a large plaster was fixed over one cheek. Sirius turned, and after a moment's eye contact walked forward, hand out.

Snape eyed it, before accepting.

"Thanks," Sirius said gruffly. "You found him; you saved him."

"I didn't do it for you," Snape replied.

"I know. I'm grateful anyway." Sirius released his hand. "No permanent damage?"

Snape touched the plaster on his cheek self-consciously, then peeled it away. Three jagged clawlines ran from temple to lip. Andromeda sucked in her breath sharply.

"It's not a scar," he said. "It's his mark. He clawed me -- when we fought he...changed it somehow." He rolled back one sleeve of his tunic, revealing a faint stain on the skin of his left arm. "Like this one."

Remus and Sirius both looked at him, curious and confused.

"He's gone to find Voldemort," Snape continued, and nearly everyone in the room flinched. "But he has his own power now. He has his own followers, or will soon. And he'll have his own mark. I doubt," he added drily, "that theirs will be as conspicuous."

"Can't it be removed?" Andromeda asked softly. He shook his head.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "It only means he's used me. A cheap taunt, and I've suffered cheap taunts before."

"But your face..."

"It doesn't matter," Snape repeated sharply, and Andromeda fell back a little. Sirius sat on Neville's bed, pulling Harry close, and Ted began quietly to herd everyone else out of the room, until it was just them -- Ted and Andromeda, Dora and Neville, Harry, Snape, Sirius and Remus. There was a collective moment when it seemed everyone was simply too tired to do anything more. Sirius gathered Harry into his arms, cradling him, and Andromeda reached out to stroke Neville's head when she saw the envy in his eyes. Remus picked at his bandage again, looking down.

"I kept Dark Arts books in the shop," he said quietly. "It wasn't a secret. They were curiosities, I always checked buyer references before I sold them, and I almost never did, you know. Sell them, I mean. The spell he found...could have been there. Or there could have been other spells, that

would help him find what he wanted."

"It's not your fault, old man," Ted said.

"He said himself he wouldn't have had it in him to do what he did, if I hadn't left those books out - - " Remus stopped in a convulsive choke, still picking at the gauze wrapped around his wrist. "Our shop's gone. Harry's hurt and Neville...he never did anything to deserve -- "

"It's just a shop, Remus," Andromeda said.

"It was our home." Remus sighed, and looked up. "It was the only place I ever belonged. I'm so sorry, Sirius."

Sirius, head bowed over Harry, looked up.

"Don't pick at that," he said, and Remus' hands froze in the act of plucking a stray edge of bandage out. "You'll scar."

Remus stared at him.

"Peter laid hands on him, you know," Sirius said, to Andromeda.

"I know, Sirius," she answered.

"He went right through all Peter's magic," Sirius continued.

"I threw rocks," Harry added.

"You were very brave," Sirius said, and while it was clear from his tone he was talking to Harry, his eyes didn't leave Remus' face. Remus ran his fingers up and down his sleeve, scratching through fabric and gauze. Ted moved slowly to sit on his daughter's bed, and a great sense of exhaustion filled the room.

After a moment, Snape cleared his throat.

"If we're done feeling sorry for ourselves and each other," he said, "I'd like to point out that we are still in danger. Harry won't be able to stay in England. Not with Pettigrew so powerful. You're not safe here."

Sirius glanced at him. "We can find him -- "

"And what, let him kill you? I think not," Snape said sharply. Andromeda put a hand on Sirius' arm.

"He's right, Sirius," she said softly. "Until Peter's caught, you're going to have to take Harry away somewhere."

"This is his home," Sirius protested. "He goes to school here, all his friends are here."

"This is bigger than school and friends, you know that," Andromeda answered. "Remus, tell him."

Remus was still scratching his arm, almost absently.

"Remus," Andromeda prompted, and he started, turning to face her.

"Do try to pay attention, Lupin," Snape drawled.

"There's nothing left," Remus said, with a shrug that was made stiff by bandages and pain. "Not here. We'd only endanger the Weasleys. Until Harry's old enough for Hogwarts..."

"Unless," Snape said, very carefully, "He came to Hogwarts now."

"No," Sirius said.

"I know the boy's habits -- "

"No," Sirius repeated.

"Then you had best prepare him for hiding," said a new voice, and they all turned towards the door.

Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway, hands clasped, looking grave and unflappable.

"Arrangements are being made," he said, calmly. "I've been informed of events. You were warned, Sirius, when you took Harry from his family -- "

"I won't let you take him," Sirius growled. Remus moved slowly to stand between Dumbledore and the bed where Sirius and Harry sat. Andromeda drew closer to Neville.

"Then you must go with him," Dumbledore said smoothly. "Peter should have no more use for young Longbottom," he continued, and Andromeda sighed with relief, "but if he is to find Lord Voldemort, he will require Harry. We cannot allow that to happen."

"Clearly," Snape said, sarcastically, but also very quietly. Remus fought a sudden, hysterical smile.

"Harry will be taken to Hogwarts, and conveyed from there to a safe place until an Auror escort and a Fidelius charm can be arranged to take him into deep hiding," Dumbledore continued. "This is not a point for debate, Sirius," he added, as Sirius opened his mouth to protest. "You may either accompany him or entrust him to my care."

"We'll come with you," Sirius said. Dumbledore gave him an inquiring look.

"We?" he asked.

Sirius gestured with the hand that wasn't wrapped around Harry's waist. "Remus and I."

"Remus cannot come."

Remus turned to look at Sirius, and then back to Dumbledore. His mouth worked for a moment. "Why not?"

"You're needed for the Fidelius," Dumbledore answered. "You will be the Secret-Keeper."

"But I'm -- "

"-- not necessary," Snape said suddenly, cutting him off. "Surely you see what an easy target he'd be, Headmaster. He hasn't an ounce of guile, and aside from sheer bloody-mindedness, very little grip."

Sirius was glaring daggers at Snape, but the dark-haired man moved forward, until he stood next to Remus. "You'll use me," he said. "My qualifications are far superior. This is not a *point for debate* either."

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. Snape met the headmaster's eyes unflinchingly, though colour rose in his face and the mark on his cheek seemed to throb faintly. Finally, the silence broke.

"I'm hungry," Neville said petulantly.

Dumbledore turned away from Snape as if he'd just noticed the small boy in the hospital gown, and they heard a slight snort of triumph from the Potions Master.

"Sherbet?" Dumbledore offered.

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 27

"What about France? France has some lovely bits."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's *France*, Remus."

"Your Francophobia is appalling, Sirius. It borders on misfrancophy."

"That's not a real word."

"It could be. Fine, not France. Germany's nice. Good music, good beer."

"Nah. Can't speak German."

"Sirius, if we're confined to places that speak English, that's pretty much the States and Canada, Australia, bits of South Africa, and New Zealand. Not that New Zealand isn't lovely, but there are more sheep than people and I am not going to spend the next two, possibly nine, years where the livestock could outvote the residents."

"I wouldn't mind Canada. I've been there, I like Canada."

"One week every few years for a booksellers' convention doesn't count for much."

"Yeah, but it's big, Moony. Easy to get lost in."

"Yes. Easy to get lost in."

"Point taken. Fine. Australia. Anything wrong with Australia?"

"You mean, other than it not being England?"

"Well. Yeah."

"Nowhere's going to be England, though."

"No."

"How's Harry?"

"He's all right."

"How're you?"

"I'm all right. How're you?"

"Righteously pissed off, Sirius."

Sirius gave Remus a small smile, and went back to examining the extensive list of materials required for the Fidelius charm. It'd been eight years since they'd cast it last, and he hadn't been in on all of the work; Peter and Dumbledore had taken over from him in the last stages, so Sirius only knew theory a lot of the time anyway.

They weren't required to gather any of the items, at least; Snape was doing that, in bits and pieces, supplying most of them from his private brewing stash at Hogwarts.

"Me too," Sirius said, in answer to Remus' calm expression of rage. Remus glanced at where Harry was sitting at the boarded-over window, peering through cracks into the summer sunlight below. If they had gone to Sirius' hell when they went to Twelve Grimmauld Place, now they were in his own. He'd cleaned the dust and debris as best he could, when he started coming here again after they took Harry from the Dursleys, but there was no disguising the fact that it was a ripped-up, run-down empty building and no place at all for a child.

He smiled at his own judgementalism. It was the same thing his father had said on being shown the place where his son would spend his transformations. No place at all for a child. But it had heavy locking charms on the doors, and a place to keep food, and beds enough. The logic was sound; they would leave from the Shack for -- well, not-France-or-Germany-or-New-Zealand -- at the same time as decoys left from Hogwarts, and if they were being pursued, the decoys would be the ones followed.

Until then, however -- until Snape had the ingredients for the charm, and the pair of them picked a place to hide -- they spent their days and nights here, and Harry, as any nine-year-old would, was beginning to chafe.

He'd been quiet, at first, and withdrawn to a degree that worried Sirius. Not until Snape had arrived with their belongings from Grimmauld Place, including Frog, did Harry show any glimmer of interest in what was going on around him. He clung tightly to Remus or Sirius, often curling up next to one or the other of them with a book brought from the Hogwarts library by Snape. The rare volumes saved from Sandust by the *eripio libraris* spell were being left in Madam Pince's excellent care, and putting her into fits of bibliophilic glee.

They, for their part, could do nothing but wait, and watch Harry, and try to induce him to go exploring in the old house with them. At night he slept in the largest of the beds, with Padfoot curled up on top of the blankets and Remus on a cot, reassuringly close. After three days, they no longer worried about Harry, except as parents of any child will do; he smiled and laughed more easily, and had stopped kicking Padfoot in his sleep over the nightmares he had.

Remus had nightmares too, but he hadn't anyone in the bed to be kicked, and besides, they weren't

his usual sort. They were almost reassuring in their surreality, not at all the frighteningly-real dreams that showed him might-have-beens in other worlds, where Sirius was a convict and Harry perhaps dead, he could never tell.

If Severus Snape had nightmares about having lost Harry and being unable to find him, or about Harry wrapped in roots that grew and thickened until the child was part of a tree he could only pound on in a panic, he never said.

The touch of Sirius' fingers on his arm drew Remus back from his idle contemplation of Harry, and the worries circling in his head.

"We'll have to decide soon," Remus said, and Sirius nodded.

"My vote's for Australia," he replied, still touching Remus, hands moving gently over the lighter bandages Remus had been able to wear this morning; not the full-gauze wrap, just squares taped over the worst of the burns. Some of the lighter ones, more like bad sunburns than a reaction to silver, were visible, shaped like Peter's stubby-fingered hands. Remus hadn't let him see the worst ones, but assured him that in shape, if they did scar, they wouldn't look like handprints, for which Sirius was grateful. The idea of Peter's hands marking Remus for the rest of his life was something Sirius didn't want to think about.

"I don't want to leave Great Britain," Remus said quietly. "But...Sandust is gone, Grimmauld Place is Andromeda's, or soon will be, the lease on my flat was up in a month anyway...the bridges are burnt, Sirius."

"I should never have taken him away," Sirius murmured. "He's still locked up in a cupboard. Or might as well be, in this place."

Remus leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "If you hadn't, he'd be in that cupboard and still be stuck with the Dursleys, too. He wouldn't have people who love him. Even Snape." He swallowed. "And I wouldn't have you, would I?"

Sirius touched Remus' knuckles, scarred where he'd manage to crack Peter across the face.

"I don't know," he said. "We don't know what consequences our decisions have."

"We know some of them," Remus murmured.

"We can't help but wonder," Sirius continued, the tips of his fingers exploring every ridge and valley of Remus' left hand. "But we won't ever know, not really. In another lifetime, I guess I didn't take Harry."

Remus smiled mirthlessly at the cobwebbed rafters. "In another lifetime you couldn't."

"Do you think that's true?" Sirius asked. "Do you think there's a...a me, out there somewhere, who never bought Sandust, or moved to Privet Drive, or any of it?"

Remus didn't answer.

"I think you died," he said finally, in a voice so soft Sirius almost didn't catch it. "I haven't dreamed that. Yet. But I think one day I will. I have these half-memories...I think I lost you in far worse ways than I was afraid of losing you, here and now."

"But I'm not dead," Sirius said, voice deep, not questioning. Certain. His thumb brushed Remus' wrist before he withdrew his hand.

"You are not," Remus agreed, sitting up. "So there's no use dwelling on it, I suppose."

"No. No use dwelling." Sirius drew a breath. "What do you think Peter's likely to do, if he can't find us?"

"You remember Peter. He needs someone to tell him what to do. With Bellatrix dead...he'll pick up someone. Maybe even break someone else out of Azkaban. That's not our worry, Sirius."

"If it involves bloody Pettigrew -- "

"Our concern is keeping Harry safe. Let Dumbledore and Moody worry about Peter. It's what Moody's paid to do, you know," Remus said, drily.

Sirius' gaze drifted to Harry again, only to find Harry watching them talk. He spread his arms, and Harry jumped down from the windowseat, crossing the room to hug his godfather, hanging a bit on his neck. Sirius turned his head a little to kiss Harry's cheek, and Harry grinned and wiped it away.

"Tell us, Harry," Sirius said, turning to face him. "If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?"

Harry considered it thoughtfully. "On a holiday?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Hogwarts," Harry said promptly. Both men smiled.

"That's my lad," Sirius said. Remus raised his head, holding up a hand. There was noise on the stairs, and he picked up his wand, crossing the room to open the door.

"It's Severus," he said, over his shoulder, as the other man rounded the end of the staircase. Harry ran to meet him, and Snape spared enough of his dignity to pat him on the head before walking into the room, nose wrinkled with disgust at its state.

"I've spoken to Dumbledore," he said, without preamble. "You're leaving tonight. Be packed and ready to leave by sundown."

Remus glanced at Sirius. "But we don't know -- "

"A place has been chosen. Aurors will escort you directly there. Your flat is being packed as we speak," he continued.

"My flat -- "

"Alastor Moody is there."

"Couldn't warn us in advance much, could you?" Sirius drawled. Snape barely spared him a look. "Where is it then?"

"I've not been told. Headmaster Dumbledore -- "

"I don't suppose we get any say in it," Remus asked, slightly bitter. Snape turned to him.

"If you hadn't taken the boy from his family -- " he began, but Harry took a sharp breath, and all three men turned to him. Snape hesitated. "Harry, I didn't mean..."

"It's not your fault," Sirius said swiftly, pulling Harry towards him. Harry went reluctantly, but eventually relaxed against Sirius' side, his godfather's arm slung around his shoulders.

"Well," Remus said, into the strained silence that followed, "Looks like it might be New Zealand after all. Best get on with it then. Thank you, Severus. I presume we'll be performing the Fidelius late tonight, after we've arrived?"

"Early tomorrow morning, by that time," Snape replied. "Everything's been prepared. I suggest you sleep this afternoon as well."

"We'll take that under advisement," Remus agreed, taking Snape's arm and guiding him towards the door. "Thank you for bringing that message. Is there anything else you require from us...?"

Sirius felt Harry relax a little further as Snape left the room. "He didn't mean it that way, lad," he said, more out of sympathy for Harry than any desire to defend Severus Snape.

"S'true, isn't it?" Harry asked. "If I wasn't here -- "

"Don't say that, Harry."

"But it is true," Harry insisted. Sirius cocked his head.

"Would you rather have stayed with the Dursleys?" he asked, heart in his throat. Harry shook his head without hesitation, and Sirius could breathe again.

"It's not fair," Harry said, rebelliously, as Remus returned. "I'm just me. I can't help it."

"Nobody blames you," Remus said reassuringly, as he sat at the table again, eyes sweeping the room. Sirius released Harry, gently, and began to pick up odds and ends that had accumulated over the days, piling them haphazardly near the door to be packed. Harry threw himself into Sirius'

chair and watched, sulking.

"Don't see why I'm so special anyway," he said, into the back of the chair. "Don't see why stupid Peter Pettigrew cares."

"Harry -- " Remus began, then stopped. What should he say, after all?

"Don't see why I have to leave all my friends *and* Professor Snape *and* the bookshop," Harry continued. "He's not so great. I hit him with rocks," he added. It had been a familiar phrase, since the battle; Remus fretted about some sort of memory-impairing brain damage, but Sirius had realised it was simply Harry's way of remembering that he had some kind of power. Dwelling on the ways he'd hurt Peter rather than the ways Peter had hurt him.

"Stupid Peter Pettigrew," Harry finished sulkily, and kicked the table leg. Sirius straightened from where he was collecting a pile of parchment sheets covered in crayon drawings, and began to roll them into a tube.

"It's only two years," he said lamely. "And then you'll get to go to Hogwarts and see everyone again. And you'll make friends in the meantime, wherever we are."

They were silent for a while, the only noise the crinkling of the paper as Sirius rolled and unrolled it, anxiously. Eventually, Remus rose from the table and began to help pack, and Harry moved back to the window once more, contemplating the road leading out of Hogsmeade wistfully.

Shortly after sundown, Severus returned for them, carrying a bound bundle slung over one shoulder -- three broomsticks, plus a paper-wrapped packet of ingredients for the Fidelius, and a small packet of letters for Sirius. While Remus checked their bags and Harry pulled his cloak on, only slightly sullen with the Potions Master still, Sirius picked open the twine and flipped through them.

"Andromeda says goodbye," he said regretfully, reading one of the letters. "She has permission to take Longbottom in."

"Well, that's something," Remus said, taking one of the broomsticks Snape carried. Sirius made a small, surprised noise. "What?"

"You opened a bank account for me?" Sirius asked Snape.

"Moody," Snape said curtly.

"This is more than my Gringott's account had," Sirius said, holding up a formal-looking, cream-coloured letter. "Even accounting for the exchange rate."

"Yes, that was Andromeda Tonks and her annoyingly cheerful husband," Snape replied. "Down payment for the health-hazard you call an ancestral home."

"Samuel Brackenridge?" Sirius asked, reading the name on the bank-statement. "Remus, there's

one for you too. John Langley."

"A small precaution, for banking purposes only," Snape said, as Remus made a face at his new alias. "Identification is included. Moody is very thorough."

Sirius scowled at the address of the bank. "Where the hell is Llangynog?"

Snape smiled mirthlessly. "Your new home."

Harry flew with Sirius, flanked by two Aurors, with Snape as point and Remus following below and behind, eyes scanning the empty night sky keenly. It was a long journey south from Hogsmeade, and Sirius kept one arm firmly wrapped around Harry's waist, for fear the boy would fall asleep and lose his balance. He grumbled continually about the idiocy of not simply using a portkey, but portkey travel was more easily detectable than broomstick flight, and clearly Dumbledore was taking no chances. They'd seen two separate teams of Aurors leave Hogwarts as they'd walked through the foothills outside of town, dark shapes against moonlit clouds; Sirius wondered if any of them had encountered trouble.

Harry had drawn an excited breath when they kicked off, and he sat a broomstick like a natural -- like his father had, Sirius thought, and he felt the familiar twinge in his chest for James, dead nearly eight years now. Harry didn't notice the slight tightening of Sirius' arm around his waist, too enthralled by the sight of the ground dropping away, the glow of Hogsmeade in the distance back-lighting the view. Sirius had made sure Harry was well-wrapped in a thick cloak and a woolen hat Snape had brought; he and Remus both had gloves and cloaks, but he still felt chilled to his fingertips.

They were leaving his *home* behind. Not the house on the corner of Privet Drive where for years on end he'd lived each day in the hope of seeing even a glimpse of his godson, or the tiny flat where he'd shared rooms with Remus and learned new ways to love, or even Grimmauld Place, where he'd tried to lay old memories to rest. He was leaving Sandust, the place he'd built as his life, and that hurt most of all, because there wasn't even a Sandust to leave. It frightened him, made him cold from the inside out.

Snape's words from that afternoon rang in his ears. *If you hadn't taken the boy from his family --*

Harry would still be in his cupboard under the stairs, ignorant of who his father and mother were, of the world he came from. But he wouldn't have the shallow, pink scar on his collarbone; Remus wouldn't be bandaged shoulder to wrist, and Snape wouldn't have three jagged clawmarks across his face. Sandust would still be standing.

Decisions done and sealed. A misstep eight years ago had meant the difference between Sandust and Azkaban prison for Sirius Black, if he believed Remus; who was to say this misstep was anything other than a miracle.

After all, he thought, as Harry turned to ask him, voice nearly snatched by the wind, how much longer it would be -- after all, he had Harry. And Remus. That was what mattered. Their new home would probably be all right. Maybe the High Street would be in need of a bookshop...

They touched down a little later, Sirius following Snape's lead, the Aurors dropping more slowly, scanning the darkened field for any sign of danger. There were two figures awaiting them; Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall, the latter carrying a small black case and a plaid Muggle thermos.

"Welcome," Dumbledore said, as Sirius helped Harry to the ground before dismounting the broom himself, and allowing one of the Aurors to take it from him. "I hope your flight was not entirely unpleasant."

"Where are we?" Remus asked, and Sirius noticed he was rubbing his throat, fingers scratching irritably over his skin -- he looked uncomfortable, downright twitchy.

"The feeling will pass," Dumbledore said calmly. "This is Rhos Y Beddau, near the town of Llangynog, county Powys. Housing has been arranged for you nearby, but you must understand something first, and this is the simplest way to show you. Are you cold? Harry, are you well?"

Harry, standing next to Sirius, shifted uncomfortably. "Yessir," he mumbled.

Remus was still fidgeting. McGonagall offered him the thermos, and he sipped judiciously before passing it to Sirius, over Harry's head. Sirius tasted firewhiskey in the hot mulled drink; it didn't seem to do much for the werewolf, but a slight tension in Sirius' chest faded. The Aurors waved it away, and Sirius set the thermos on the ground near his feet. Dumbledore held out his hand, and McGonagall put the black case in it, carefully.

"Rhos Y Beddau was once a stone circle, of fair size and some import," Dumbledore continued, opening the case to reveal several pairs of glasses, neatly folded in velvet pockets. "It has since, however, sunk into the bogs on which it was built. We are standing in what would have been its centre, once."

Sirius didn't bother to ask Dumbledore what his point was, yet; he had learned Dumbledore would get there in his own time, though he was impatient to be out of this windswept bog, with Harry tucked up in a proper warm bed, and if Remus didn't stop fidgeting soon --

Dumbledore was offering him one of the pairs of glasses, delicate wired contraptions with thin, tinted lenses. Sirius held them up to the light of the moon, and scowled.

"Rose-tinted glasses, Headmaster?" Remus asked, a tinge of amusement in his voice as he accepted one also. The Aurors looked on disinterestedly, and Harry flopped to the ground to sit in the grass until the grownups decided to come to their senses.

Sirius raised the glasses to his face and hooked the earpieces over his ears. Dumbledore touched the bridge between lenses, gently, and suddenly the world filled with white. He could tell by the

surprised gasps nearby that Remus and Snape had done likewise.

Looking through the glasses, their surroundings glowed bright; no longer a small darkened valley in the middle of the Welsh countryside, the small bowl of land they stood in was ringed with columns of white, as though Muggle spotlights had been planted in the ground. The ground itself glowed dimly as well; Remus was outlined in a vibrant amber halo, and a point of green light on Harry's forehead all but obliterated his scar. Dumbledore seemed backlit by a faint blue glow, a little stronger than McGonagall's and Snape's; Sirius looked down at his own hands to find them surrounded by the same nearly-invisible blue light.

"You are seeing the world," Dumbledore said, as Remus raised on hand and turned it, examining the amber glow curiously, "as Peter Pettigrew now sees it."

"We're seeing magic," Sirius deduced, gazing again at the white lights encircling them. Off to his right, an avenue of light led away from the circle, off into the distance. Dumbledore gave him a faint smile.

"Peter will, of course, be able to manipulate it as if it were solid; he cannot avoid seeing it. Likewise, however," he added, "there are some magics which will indeed be solid against him."

Remus pointed to a halo of white light in the distance. "What's that?"

Dumbledore turned to regard it, beyond the avenue leading out of the circle. "Walk with me," he said, and turned towards the avenue. Snape fell into step behind him with McGonagall -- teacher's habit, Sirius guessed.

"Up, lad," Sirius said gently, and Harry stood, moving instinctively to walk between him and Remus, the Aurors following.

"Beyond the avenue is the village of Betwys Beddau," Dumbledore said, loud enough for them to hear, as though he were leading some sort of peculiar field-trip. "You're to live on the outskirts. It's a very pleasant little house, comfortable, with a river running past the back garden. Your belongings have been placed in the garden shed for safekeeping; you may unpack at your leisure."

"Why here?" Remus asked, and Sirius watched in fascination as his halo rippled slightly. *Werewolf*, he thought. *His magic's different from ours.*

"Betwys Beddau is smaller than Llangynog, and has...other advantages," Dumbledore replied. "As with Rhos Y Beddau, it is surrounded by bog-land, though we've determined the foundations of your house are sound."

Sirius, annoyed with Dumbledore's whimsey, crossed his arms over his chest as they entered the avenue, and the white of the stones -- stones swallowed centuries since by bogland -- rose like columns all around them.

"What does it mean?" Remus asked, reaching out to trail his fingers through the white light,

curiously. His amber light spread through the white for a second before fading. "Rhos Y Beddau..."

"Moor," Dumbledore translated calmly. "Moor of the Graves."

"Ill-omened," Sirius muttered. He opened his mouth to ask what Betwys Beddau meant, since it wasn't likely to be much better, when they crested a low rise at the end of the avenue, and the distant white glow was suddenly visible -- and spectacular.

It looked like a night sky, Sirius decided; spread below them was another hill-ringed valley, larger than Rhos Y Beddau, containing a small village laid out in the old medieval plan, with a spired church at its centre, shadowy against the sky. White columns ringed the village in a perfect circle that must be miles across, and within the circle, among the houses and shops, the streets and gardens, rose strange, intangible constellations of light.

"This is Betwys Beddau," Dumbledore said softly. "Known to its founders as the Temple of the Graves."

Sirius felt Harry grope for his hand, and took it, holding tightly.

"The earth has swallowed the stones, but they remember," Dumbledore murmured. "Men defiled by blood sacrifice cannot cross here. Here you will be safe."

"But then -- the Fidelius -- " Remus began.

"Merely a precaution," Dumbledore said briskly, all business again. "You'll be able to come and go as you please; I leave it to you whether to enroll Harry in the village school. Your wands will be charmed with restrictions to the most necessary magic only; they'll be attuned to Harry, and available only when he is in mortal danger. You will not be connected to the floo network, or allowed Owls except in an emergency. Severus, once the charm is completed, will not return."

"And that's our new home, is it?" Sirius asked. "Living like Muggles, in fear for our lives?"

"It was your decision, Sirius, to take the boy into your care. If you were not willing to sacrifice for him, you would better have left him be."

"So I'm continually told," Sirius muttered, gazing down at the village of Betwys Beddau. Remus put a hand on his back, just below and between his shoulderblades, as he removed his glasses. It was a comforting reminder of one more thing they'd gained from all this, but after the first pleased rush, Sirius felt himself flush at the casual intimacy of it. He glanced at the others, who were removing their glasses as well.

"Come," Dumbledore said. "It's a short flight to the village."

As they settled on the broomstick again, Harry twisted around, and craned his head upwards so that he faced his godfather, questioningly.

"Do you wish you hadn't taken me away?" he asked, and Sirius tried, for the thousandth time, to smooth the hair off his forehead.

"Never," he said, gently pushing Harry's shoulder so that he faced forward, as the others kicked off from the ground. He leaned over Harry's shoulder, and whispered in his ear.

"Stealing you was the best idea I ever had."

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Stealing Harry

Chapter 28

They reached the small house on the outskirts of town a few hours before sunrise, and they were busy hours; Harry, who had moved past childish fatigue into childish hyperactivity, explored the little home from cellar to ceilings, laying claim to the rear room that overlooked the back garden, and opening and shutting all the doors as he passed them. Severus, McGonagall, and Dumbledore went about preparing the Fidelius charm, while Sirius chased after Harry.

Remus, because it was what he defaulted to whenever he was upset or frightened or bored, made tea.

Sat and drank tea.

Watched Severus through a window as he spread strange oils on the corners of the house.

Watched the Aurors charm their wands not to respond to any but the most dire of emergencies.

Drank more tea.

Fixed tea for Sirius, who had finally managed to corner Harry and wrestle him into a chair in the kitchen. Found crackers for Harry to eat, in the well-stocked pantry.

"You're twitchy," Sirius observed, as Remus sliced open a lemon for his third cup of tea in two hours.

"I can't think why," Remus answered. "My flat is gone, your bookshop is gone, we've vanished with not a word to anyone, we're hiding from a psychopath who used to be our best friend, and we're living in a place named the Temple of the Graves."

Sirius couldn't argue. Remus flexed his fingers around the cup, and sighed.

"I feel like my skin doesn't fit right," he admitted. "I have since a little before we landed."

Sirius nodded. "Perhaps it's the circles. Didn't you say you...pick up on things like that?"

"It could be."

"Dumbledore said it would fade."

"I hope so," Remus answered. "If I have to spend the next two years like this I'm going to be a wreck inside of six months."

Sirius glanced at Harry, who -- once stationary -- had begun to gnaw on a cracker and was nodding off slowly. If Dumbledore was to be believed, their beds were with the rest of Remus' flat, out in the garden shed, but he hadn't the energy to consider fetching them. At the moment there was a

table in the kitchen, a rather battered sofa in the living room, and one large bed, in the room that Harry had decreed would be Sirius'.

The door opened, and murky grey predawn light filtered in from outside. Severus, looking exhausted, stepped inside.

"It's nearly complete," he said tiredly. Remus offered him tea, but he waved his hand away, placing a cauldron full of shredded herbs and various objects on the table. "You'll need to dispose of these," he added. "Burn them in the cauldron."

Remus nodded, and Snape began to turn, when Remus put out a hand, not-quite-touching him.

"Severus -- " he said stumbingly. Snape stared at him. "Er...thank you. For this. Doing it instead of me, I mean."

"I'm the better candidate," Snape said stiffly, dismissively, and beckoned to Sirius, who stood and walked around the table to face him, slightly defiantly.

"As householder, this involves you," Snape said. "Hold out your hand."

Remus watched as Snape placed the key to the front door in it.

"Do you trust me?" he asked ceremonially.

"Yes," Sirius replied.

"Do you entrust your lives to my discretion?"

"Yes."

"Come outside. All of you."

Harry hopped off the chair and stumbled sleepily through the kitchen door, out into the dew-damp grass after Sirius and Snape. Remus followed, and heard a soft exhalation behind him; when he turned, the house was invisible, seemingly hidden by the grove that was actually on the other side of their new home. Sirius covered his face with one hand.

"It is done," Dumbledore said softly. "Tell them, Severus."

Snape turned to the three of them. "Listen closely," he said, crouching to speak to Harry with their faces on a level, "because I won't be returning to see you before your Hogwarts letter arrives. Your home is The River House, Nineteen Cwndu Road, Betwys Beddau, Powys, Wales. Say it after me, Harry."

"The River House, Nineteen Cwndu Road, Betwys Beddau, Powys, Wales," Harry repeated obediently. Remus closed his eyes and memorised the names, unfamiliar syllables strung together with familiar -- Cwndu Road; Powys, Wales....

When he opened them, their house stood before him again. Small, gabled, with large windows and slightly shabby paint, with a garden that was more "fertile" than "pretty".

Home. For now.

"There are other duties to attend to," Dumbledore reminded them gently, and Severus stood abruptly, turning away from the house. Remus watched his shoulders pull in, his fingers flex -- he remembered that posture from years ago.

The Aurors were already preparing to fly. Harry touched the Potion Master's arm, and Dumbledore -- who could see his face, though Remus and Sirius couldn't -- gave them a sage look. Slowly, Severus crouched again, turning his head slightly so that Harry could speak into his ear. Harry said a few quiet words, and Snape replied with a nod, and a hand on Harry's shoulder, briefly, before he stood and dropped his hand, moving away.

Harry ran to Sirius, burying his face in Sirius' shirt as the others mounted their broomsticks, rising and vanishing quickly in the sudden yellow light of the sunrise. Remus shaded his eyes to follow them as long as he could, then turned to the River House once more.

Back inside, Sirius lit a match from the box near the stove, and tossed it into the cauldron on the table, which flared up and burned quickly, settling to ash within seconds. Remus cleared away the tea things, already missing the charmed scrubbing brush. Harry sat, chin on hands, at the table, swiping at his eyes once in a while in embarrassment.

"We should sleep," Sirius observed, while Remus rinsed out the mugs. "When we wake up we can walk into town, it'll be good to stretch our legs. We can buy bicycles -- Harry should learn to ride one. We'll start unpacking the garden shed, too. Harry's new bedroom is bigger than his old one, we could put up some more shelves..."

"Please don't," Remus said softly. Sirius bowed his head. "Let him grieve for a bit."

"There's something in the cauldron," Harry said suddenly. Both men looked over, worried.

"Harry, don't -- " Sirius warned, but Harry was already reaching into the cauldron, making ash fly up.

"The flowers turned into something," Harry announced, lifting out a square, twine-tied packet. The two men watched as he picked the knot and brushed the last of the burnt "flowers" off the cover of a book -- two books.

"What are they?" Sirius asked, with unusual gentleness.

"Books," Harry answered, distracted by the slick card cover of one of them. He set it aside and opened the larger one, in hard black binding, with some kind of fantastical illustration on its cover. Sirius, as if shaking off a freezing charm, came forward to pick up the smaller book.

"The Dark is Rising," he read aloud. "Apt," he muttered.

"And the other one?" Remus inquired, crossing to the table as well.

"The My...big...onion...." Harry tried.

"Mabinogion," Remus corrected.

"Snape must have left these for him," Sirius said.

"Figures he'd leave that one."

"For Harry Potter," Harry read aloud. Remus and Sirius leaned over his shoulder to read the inscription on the inside cover of the Mabinogion.

For Harry Potter,

To keep you from making mischief, as you will no doubt be encouraged by your godfather to do. Please make study of this volume in particular, as its educational value is of great import in the absence of

*Your Professor
Severus Snape*

PS: You will be tested for content.

Sirius scowled; Remus smiled slightly.

"This is quite enough excitement for one day," Sirius said, closing the book and lifting it out of Harry's hands. "Run on to bed now."

Harry slipped off the chair and made for Sirius' bedroom, and the only bed in the place. Sirius glanced up at Remus, whose fingers were, of their own accord, flipping from front to back in the paperback novel, and then back to front again. He put a hand on Remus' to stop them.

"Still twitchy?" he asked. Remus nodded. "Going to be able to sleep?"

"I don't know," he replied truthfully. Sirius took the book from his hands and put it on the table. "You sleep with Harry," Remus continued. "I'll take the sofa. I don't want to kick," he added.

Sirius wrapped his arm around Remus' waist for a brief moment, and kissed him, their foreheads touching.

"When Harry has his own room, we'll turn yours into a library," he whispered against his temple, "And my room into ours. How does that sound?"

Remus gave him a reassuring smile, one he didn't quite feel. "Of course. It'll wear off soon, Dumbledore said."

Sirius had shut the heavy curtains in his room, and curled up on the bed as Padfoot -- at least this magic was still allowed to him -- with Harry's head pillowed on his ribcage, Harry's fingers twined in the wooly fur of his forelegs. Remus had made sure they were warm, and then walked back into the sparsely-furnished living room, sitting on the sofa. He didn't expect he'd be able to sleep; it was daytime, for starters, and however tired he was, the strange itch just under his skin persisted. Deep magic in this place; sacred stones swallowed by the earth itself, leaving their protection behind. Rubin was right -- werewolves were sensitive to background magic, but he'd always found the magics at Hogwarts and Diagon Alley comforting, welcoming, whereas this place seemed designed to thrust him away.

He sighed and stared at the ceiling, arms pillowed behind his head. If he had to leave, he could at least come back to visit; he wouldn't think that far ahead right now. After all, thinking ahead had nearly lost him Sirius once.

It wasn't any use.

He stood and wandered down the hallway, lingering in the door of Sirius' new bedroom. Harry's chest rose and fell, and he scratched his cheek in his sleep; Padfoot's legs twitched a little, and his breaths were deeper than Harry's, slower. They were barely more than two shadows in the dim room anyway, but they were his shadows.

Yes. It had been right to take Harry. Surely it had. He had no idea how they'd lived their lives without him. He had no idea how he'd lived his life without the promise of Sirius every morning, every evening.

He crossed to the bed, and Padfoot woke. In a heartbeat he was Sirius again, curled protectively around his godson, who slept on, exhausted and oblivious. They regarded each other across Harry for a moment, and then Remus circled, easing himself onto the bed and wrapping his arms around Sirius' waist from behind, burying his face in the back of Sirius' neck.

"All ri', Moony?" Sirius inquired sleepily. When Sirius spoke, something inside him -- something physical, he *felt* it -- cracked and snapped, like a twig under pressure, and warmth filled his body. His muscles relaxed, one by one, and the itch faded.

"Oh," Remus said softly. "That's better."

"Gon' sleep?"

"Yes."

"Got Harry," Sirius mumbled. "All ours now."

"Ours," Remus echoed. There was time enough later, after all, to be afraid or worried, and time to worry over the proper things; packing boxes and bicycles, school lessons and bookshelves -- time

enough to turn a house into a home, to raise Harry to be a man.

Their home.

Their Harry.

Soon the house was silent, as they slept, and the golden sunlight filled the garden and the river and the grove.