

Tales from the River House

Russian Literature

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

"Harry! Sirius!"

Remus entered the River House with barely a shiver; passing the threshold always pinpricked his skin, feeling the Fidelius charm at work. He'd asked Sirius, once, and Sirius had said he didn't feel anything, but then life within the hidden circle of stones surrounding Betwys Beddau was more peculiar for Remus than for Sirius at any rate.

Since coming here, seven months ago, Remus had gotten used to the odd twinge or tickle on the edge of his consciousness, subtle magical variations more detectable to a werewolf than a human. His dreams were remarkably peaceful; no more visions of Sirius starved and ragged from Azkaban, or Peter slicing his own hand off in service of Voldemort. Still, when he went into the town proper he passed three sunken stones that always gave him the creeps, and he had to be careful not to twitch nervously whenever he was near the school-house. He'd never been inside it - - they'd come to the agreement that Sirius handled school matters, and Remus handled issues of feeding and clothing, because if let Sirius would order Indian food four times a week and allow Harry to run about in Remus' cast-off old shirts.

He tossed his keys on the table near the doorway, and closed the door behind him, doing a double-check that his bicycle was locked to the post out front -- not that anyone could see it, but it was habitual by now. The rooms were dark, the sunny kitchen empty; Sirius' boots were missing. They must have gone down to the river below the back garden. He noted with approval that Harry's cloak and the blanket off the back of the couch were gone too.

He passed down the hallway towards the back door, peering in Harry's room, in his own office and in the bedroom he and Sirius shared -- still peculiar to see one bed, and imagine what the neighbours would think. Except they only had one neighbour and nobody came to the River House anyway, as they couldn't see it unless Severus Snape told them. And Severus Snape was in Scotland, and would not come to see them again before they put Harry on the train to Hogwarts in a year and a half.

It was nice though. Nice to see only one bed in a room where two people slept. Or didn't sleep, he added to himself, with a small, wicked smile.

He lingered outside of Harry's room, smiling at the neat bedspread, the general messiness of the rest of the room, the books strewn everywhere and the new posters on the walls -- constellations, dinosaurs, drawings Harry had done. He was improving at a marvelous rate; Remus still had the red-and-white snake he'd drawn, a typical childish marker portrait, but lately Harry's sketches of the wildlife in their garden had taken on a decidedly realistic style. Birds, hares, the occasional stray cat, fish and frogs, even funny looking plants...

But not snakes.

Harry didn't draw snakes, didn't talk to snakes or seem to notice them. Remus knew they were around -- he'd seen one or two, harmless little garden snakes, and a slightly larger one that was probably the reason they had no troubles with mice -- but as far as Harry was concerned, they didn't exist.

He hefted the courier bag over his shoulder and pushed the back door open, ambling down the path Sirius had worn to the river, the banks just out of view down a slope at the garden's bottom. Harry was there, on the blanket, propped up against the rock, Sirius' boots and his own backpack nearby.

"Wotcha, Harry," Remus said, dropping down next to him and unshouldering the pack. "How goes it then?"

"All right," Harry said, wrinkling his nose and scratching the cast on his right leg. "I itch."

"Good! Shows it's healing."

"You always say that."

"It's always true," Remus replied. Harry held up the drawing he was doing, a rather cartoonish sketch of Padfoot with a fish dangling from his mouth. Remus glanced up and saw Padfoot himself splashing up the river, fishless but perfectly happy, splattered with mud. "Are you cold?"

"Nah," Harry said, turning his face to the afternoon sun. March in Wales was still chilly, but there were beginning to be warm days again, and Harry had a good thick cloak. "What'd'ja bring me?"

"Oho! 'Bring me anything', he says," Remus replied, unbuckling the top flap of the courier bag. "Padfoot!" he called, and the enormous dog bounded out of the river, shaking himself on his way up the incline. Just before he reached them, he changed, and Sirius dropped onto the unoccupied corner of the blanket, hair wet, wearing only a white shirt and trousers rolled to the knee.

"Lend us your coat, Remus," he begged, and Remus slipped out of the thick warm tweed, passing it to Sirius, who covered his chest with it and curled so that he faced them both, pillowing his

head on Harry's backpack. "Brilliant fishing," he added.

"Bring us dinner?" Remus asked.

"Brilliant, not successful."

"I'm sure you'll catch one someday," Remus grinned.

"What'd'ja bring us?" Sirius asked. Harry giggled.

"Let's see." Remus dug in the bag. "Wee pencils?" he asked, holding up a handful of small library pencils. Sirius snorted, but Harry took one and started drawing with it idly, while he watched Remus dig further. "Overdue notice in the amount of eight pounds, two pence," he continued, passing the bill to Sirius, "and half a chocolate bar from the library vending machine."

"Mine!" Harry claimed it and ate it enthusiastically.

"Books, Remus! The people must have books," Sirius cried.

"Next time you go, the mud on the road is unbelievable, and I nearly got run down twice," Remus answered. "You're lucky I brought you anything at all. I did get a rather nice biography of Byron -

- " -- scandalous. Don't let Harry read it."

"He was in love with his sister," Harry said, not looking up from his drawing.

"Who told you that?" Sirius asked, flabbergasted.

"Boy at school," Harry replied.

Remus shrugged. "Your job, not mine," he said wickedly to Sirius, drawing out another volume titled Guards! Guards! "New Terry Pratchett paperback... "

"The suspense is killing me," Sirius said, clutching his heart and wrinkling Remus' coat. Remus peered into his bag.

"Well, I have the Mabinogion -- have you read it, Harry?"

Harry scowled at the teasing. "I have and you know it," he sulked.

"All right then. Here's a good one! Poems about dinosaurs."

Harry glanced at it. "That's a kids' book," he said dismissively.

"Who said it was for you? I rather like it." Remus opened it and read aloud. "Dimetrodon, Dimetrodon, you were here, and now you're gone. More lovely verse was never spoken. True, too, which is an added bonus."

Harry put down the pencil and paper, and tugged at the bag. Remus relented and took out a handful of books.

"For Harry, we have *The Hobbit* and *A Wrinkle in Time*," Remus announced. "Also a book on art, as per requested, and one on treasure hunting."

"When I get outta my cast, I'm gonna go treasure hunting in the river," Harry announced. The list of things Harry would do when he got out of his cast was an impressive one, and included chasing the neighbour's cat that kept tormenting Padfoot, building a tree fort, and discovering the secret entrance to Narnia he was sure was somewhere nearby. He was also going to excavate for dinosaur bones, which was part of the reason he had the cast in the first place; a misstep while climbing a tree so he could "see like dinosaurs did" put him in a leg cast and Sirius in hysteric parental hyperventilation until the ambulance arrived.

"Somehow, Harry, I doubt there's any Spanish gold in the river, but I'm sure it'll be fun to look," Remus said.

"Me next," Sirius added, leaning across Harry. Harry tickled his ribs, and he pinned the boy against the rock playfully, until Harry cried surrender.

"For Sirius Black, gourmet of depressive literature, I have *Anna Karenina*, *Heart of Darkness*, and a couple of cheap murder mysteries. And the paper," he said, passing across the local rag, irredeemable except for the crossword, which it stole from back copies of *The New York Times*.

Sirius accepted the books, and gave Remus a grin that made his pulse race before withdrawing back to his side of the blanket. "Librarian recommending things again?" he asked. "I think she fancies you."

"She's got very low standards, then," Remus replied.

"Eight pounds in late fees and she still lets you take books out. She glowers at me if I even go in."

"Miss Howards fancies Sirius," Harry announced, drawing up his good leg and propping *The Hobbit* open on it.

"Does she now?" Remus asked, amused.

"She always makes sure she looks good before he comes to get me," Harry said. "And she does this, you know, when she says hi to him." He put his hand on Remus' arm and threw his head back. "Ahahaha, Mister Black!" he said, in a high voice.

"That's her!" Sirius said, falling over laughing. "Reckon if I asked her to dinner she'd let you skip a grade?" he asked, and Harry grinned at him.

"Well, while you two plot to commit felonious acts, I'm going to go start dinner," Remus said, kissing Harry on the forehead, even though Harry pulled away and scrubbed at it afterwards. Sirius kissed the boy too as Harry leaned back, and Harry wailed in nine-year-old embarrassment.

"We'll be up in a bit," Sirius promised, settling back against the rock and opening Anna Karenina.

"I'll call you for dinner," Remus replied, rising and passing towards the house. He turned as he crested the incline, and could see two black-haired heads bent over their books, in the waning spring light.

Sirius was deep in the first chapter of his novel when Harry took a deep breath, the sort small children take before speaking, and often have to hold when they decide whether to speak or not. Harry, apparently more indecisive than most, let out the breath, and then drew it in again.

"Sirius," he said, then exhaled once more.

"Yes?" Sirius asked, sensing that he should probably pretend he was still reading his book.

"Why d'you read sad books?"

Sirius hmphed. "I don't know. I like tragedies. I like seeing how people can be brave and dignified even when they're in trouble."

"Like Aslan in the Narnia books."

"Yes, like Aslan. It was sad, but it was sort of good, wasn't it?" Sirius asked, glancing up at Harry, who shrugged.

"I guess so."

"Something troubling you, pup?"

"Dunno." Harry broke the lead on the little pencil, and picked up the big one he'd been using before. "People die a lot in sad books."

"Sometimes they do."

"Do they become ghosts?"

This would have been much easier if they'd been Muggles. Muggles didn't have ghosts as House

chaperones at school. "Sometimes. Usually not."

"What happens if they don't become ghosts?"

"Nobody really knows. Some people think they get reborn into other bodies, some people think there's a place they go after death," Sirius said, rather pleased with himself for being so rational and coherent about this.

"You think snakes go somewhere when they die?" Harry asked, in a very small voice. Sirius closed his book, and wrapped his arm around Harry's still-thin shoulders.

"Of course, lad," he murmured, kissing Harry's hair, and this time the boy didn't pull away. He glanced down and saw Harry was drawing a coiled, sinuous figure. "Thinking about Snake?"

"Sorta." Harry curled into his godfather's warmth, slightly. "A snake came and talked to me today."

"Really?"

"Right up on the rock, while you were fishing. She said Hello Boy and I said Hello Snake without even thinking about it." Harry put the drawing pad down. "She was nice. She's got a burrow down by the river."

"Yeah? You have a good talk?"

"Yeah. She didn't know my Snake. Snakes aren't really very bright, sometimes," Harry added. "My Snake was pretty smart, for a snake."

Sirius smoothed Harry's hair, gently. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"S'okay," Harry said. "When I get outta my cast I'm gonna go see her burrow. She said I could if I kept you and Remus from walking on it."

"Promise we won't," Sirius said, with a grin.

"I liked talking to her," Harry continued. "Maybe...after school some day can we go to the pet store? They have snakes there. I could say hi."

"You could," Sirius agreed. "As long as we distract the owner."

"And if one of them was smart, like Snake, could we take him home?"

Sirius wondered how he'd ever lived without Harry, without the swell of his heart when his boy was near, the cold-sweat terror when he was hurt, the stunning pride when he'd done well. And sometimes, like now, all three at once.

"Of course, Harry," he said. "Whichever one you like."

Harry nodded, and gently pulled out of his godfather's embrace, pushing himself up on the rock and reaching for his crutch nearby. "I'd like that," he said, as Sirius gathered the drawing supplies, and folded the blanket over his arm. "I hope we're having potatoes for dinner..."

Sirius much preferred washing up after Remus cooked to cooking himself; not a little of this was the fact that Remus, being a tidy-minded person, tended to wash as he went, with the result that usually there wasn't much left to clean by the time he got to the sink. So he dutifully rolled up his sleeves and set to work with the distinctly non-magical scrubbing brush and soap while Harry went to his room to study and Remus, as usual, lingered in the kitchen, either reading or doing the crossword.

It was a comfortable existence for the most part. During the day, Remus worked at the little bookshop in town, cycling in every morning and evening while Sirius walked Harry to school. For a while he had Loafed, something he was extremely good at, until it was time to pick Harry up; eventually he'd taken up studying the town's history and found a job giving once-daily tours of Rhos Y Beddau, the less-than-impressive moor which had once hosted a fair-sized circle of standing stones and now hosted the bog that had swallowed them.

It was easy enough work once he learned how to operate an automobile, and made him an object of attention, which he somewhat enjoyed. It also meant he was back at Betwys Beddau in time to pick Harry up and take him wandering or, lately, try to occupy him with more sedentary activities. Harry was not, by and large, a sedentary child.

"What's a six letter word for an aging muggle rock star?" Remus asked, tapping the pen against the newspaper.

"Harry wants a new pet snake," Sirius said, resting his hands on the rim of the sink.

"That's a lot longer than six letters," Remus said mildly, looking up. "Really more of a band name, that one."

Sirius glared at him, over his shoulder.

"Sorry," Remus muttered. "Well, I think that's grand, of course. How do you know?"

"He told me."

"I'd hoped he might, sooner or later. I was..." Remus pursed his lips. "Sorry, I suppose, that he'd stopped."

"I wasn't," Sirius grumbled. "Well, all right. I'm sorry the lad's pet died and all, but it's a very Dark Arts sort of a talent to have, you know."

Remus folded the paper and stood, crossing to lean on the counter near the sink. "You are," he reminded him, "Cohabiting with a Dark Creature, you know."

"You aren't a creature," Sirius answered, drying his hands on the dishtowel. "But you know, Voldemort was a Parselmouth. A lot of Dark wizards have been."

"A lot of Dark Wizards have also come from the Black family," Remus said with a smile. "It doesn't mean anything, beyond what it means. Which is that somehow Harry ended a Parselmouth, and would like a new pet snake."

"It worries me."

"He's a bright, cheerful little boy, Sirius. We're raising him right. He's seen what Dark Arts do to a person, even more than you and I have."

Sirius bowed his head, and Remus reached up to brush a lock of hair away from his temple.

"We never saw it coming, with Peter," Sirius murmured.

"We didn't want to," Remus corrected, gently.

"Well, I bloody well don't want to see Harry -- "

"Harry won't," Remus said quickly. "We'll make sure of it."

"How?"

"We just will."

Sirius looked pensive. Remus sighed.

"Too much Russian literature, Sirius, I've told you. When he said he wanted another pet, what did you think?"

Sirius shrugged. "I was glad. He'd stopped mourning Snake."

"And have you ever been known to ignore your impulses?" Remus asked with a smile.

Sirius scowled, and muttered, "No."

Remus took his arm and led him gently down the hallway, stopping outside Harry's door. Harry was perched on a chair, one leg awkwardly tilted off it, bending over his desk to take notes out of

a history textbook. They stood there for a moment, watching him, until Remus' fingers slipped down Sirius' sleeve and twined with his.

"That's your boy, Sirius," he said softly.

Sirius was still a little while longer, and then his thumb brushed the back of Remus' hand. Remus smiled and left him there, watching Harry work until the boy turned and gave him a bright smile. Sirius smiled back, and went to do the rest of the washing up.

Tales from the River House Fever Dream

FEVER DREAM

Remus Lupin once read that a werewolf was one of the most efficient sentient machines ever to exist. For something which could read, philosophise, consider its own soul and use spoken language, it was also disease resistant, with a metabolism that didn't quit and an enviable capacity for healing. Werewolves could go without air for three days before their brains shut down, survive ten without water and indefinitely without food, though of course there came a point where weakness set in and they died of thirst or inability to operate their own lungs. They felt cold, but did not die from it until their blood froze solid -- and their blood had a lower freezing point than humans'.

Still, they were susceptible to certain things -- for one, self-mutilation in wolf-shape. There was also Lycanthropic Degenerative Neuropathy, the great fear of a werewolf's life, in which blindness and hallucination led to incurable neurological decay and madness. No one bothered to study it. One less werewolf, after all. The general cure was a pistol and a chambered silver bullet.

There were also certain forms of diseases, specifically magical influenzas, that affected them -- maladies called the three-hour-bug in humans because they were there and gone so fast, but which, because of their own speedy metabolisms, kept up with a werewolf for days.

A few months after Sirius fell through the veil and shortly after Harry's arrival -- sullen, angry, and apathetic -- at Grimmauld Place, Remus fell ill, which was something of a relief to him, as it meant he wouldn't be asked to comfort Harry. He was the logical choice; he had known Sirius the longest, and Molly felt comforting Harry would help him struggle through his own mourning. Harry hated him, though, and Remus was glad of any excuse to be out of the boy's furious presence. He, after all, had held Harry back; had not protected Sirius as a friend ought; had failed to be the great Defence Against the Dark Arts master which Harry remembered from two years before.

He drifted, mostly, conscious enough to know where he was, fevered just enough for his perceptions to be slightly distorted. Molly brought him meals and a soothing potion that made it possible to sleep; he felt he could taste the bitterness with which Severus must have brewed it. He

still took it though, at least at night, and it kept him from kicking the covers away and wandering the house, unable to be still.

It was late afternoon, though, and he was slipping in and out of sleep, and the dreams that came with it...

He woke with a start to find himself standing in an unfamiliar room, brightly lit by the afternoon sun. He rubbed his eyes blearily, but he felt alert and awake -- perhaps he'd been walking in his sleep when the fever broke.

This didn't look like Grimmauld Place, though. There were bookshelves along the walls, filled with texts and odd knickknacks, broken by the presence of two dressers, with the usual spare-change-and-cologne detritus on them. Drawings hung on the walls where the bookshelves weren't, some by a childish hand, some clearly purchased prints.

The bed was large, simply made, and covered with a green-patterned quilt which was ruffled beneath a sleeping body --

"Sirius," he breathed softly. God, he'd died. He'd died and there was an afterlife and Sirius was here waiting for him. He knew that broad back, the smooth black hair the way Sirius used to wear it, cropped short --

Sirius was holding someone in his arms, and Remus felt the usual twinge of disappointment. Not me, not ever me, the litany went in his head, replacing the usual chorus lately, he's dead, he's gone now.

He circled the bed, wondering if Sirius was awake, but he was struck instead by something else...

He's holding me.

Himself, a little less careworn by years, less grey in his hair, fewer lines on his face and a different pattern of scars, but undoubtedly him. Shivering, eyes closed, face flushed. Feverish.

He crouched at the edge of the bed until he was on eye-level with the other Remus, and put out a tentative hand.

Brown eyes snapped open, and regarded him warily, pupils slightly more dilated than they ought to be.

"You," the bed-Remus croaked hoarsely. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Moony," Sirius mumbled against his neck. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm sorry, I don't know how I got here," Remus said, softly, to his other-self on the bed. Sirius didn't appear to hear him.

"You're me," bed-Remus mumbled.

"Hush, you're delirious," Sirius said.

"Somehow," Remus agreed.

"I'm ill. Dreaming."

"That's right, Moony. It's okay, I'm here."

Remus' heart seized up, when he saw Sirius plant a kiss on the side of the other Remus' neck, wrap his arm around his waist more tightly, fingers spread intimately over his belly.

"Boggart -- spirit -- incubus -- " the fevered Remus continued. "You're not real."

"I am real," Sirius protested affectionately. "You're just a bit sick, that's all. Try to sleep."

"Why're you here?" Bed-Remus demanded of him. Remus shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, at the same time Sirius said "Because I love you."

The other Remus closed his eyes and seemed to melt back into the warmth of the man holding him. Remus watched in a certain amount of agony -- his Sirius was dead, his Sirius had never said that, his Sirius couldn't hold him through his illness.

"Where's Harry?" Bed-Remus asked after a moment, and Sirius murmured reassuringly to him. Remus moved away, around the bed and towards the door, wondering if Harry was here in this strange place -- and if that meant Harry was dead also.

He turned in the hallway towards a faint sound and found another door; putting his ear to it he could hear childish humming, and every horror film he'd seen as a boy (his Muggle mother had adored the cinema) came back to him. Haunting, ghostly humming --

He turned the knob, however, and opened the door; on the other side was a brightly decorated child's room, lined with bookshelves as the other had been, though there appeared to be more books in piles on the floor, bedside table, desk, bed --

At the desk under the window was a small, thin boy, nine or ten at the most, doing sums out of a textbook. He was humming to himself as he did them and a snake, coiled nearby, was idly swaying in time to the wordless noise. The boy turned when the door opened, and Remus stared at him in shock.

It was Harry, but not Harry as he'd ever seen him -- too young to be even thirteen, though the bright green eyes and the dark scar on his forehead were the same. James' face. Lily's eyes. He

had never even seen James when James was this young, but who else could it be?

"Hi Remus," Harry said nonchalantly, and turned back to mark his place in the book. He held out his hand to the snake, which slithered up under his shirt-sleeve and wrapped itself around his neck. "Are you better?"

"Hi...hello Harry," Remus said uncertainly. "I...I'm not sure."

Harry shrugged. "I'm almost done with my maths homework, will you read it when I'm finished?"

"Er...yes, if you like," Remus answered. "Harry -- "

"Do you want lunch? Sirius forgot breakfast," Harry said, slipping off the chair. "I made some eggs but they tasted funny, so I threw them out."

"Wise boy," Remus murmured bewilderedly, as Harry brushed past him into the hallway. He followed the boy into a kitchen near the front of the house, slightly messy but fairly well-organised, with a pan -- clearly from Harry's failed eggs -- soaking in the sink.

"You want cheese toasties?" Harry asked, standing on his toes to reach a loaf of bread in a cupboard. Remus reached past him and took it down, setting it on the counter. Harry took out eight slices -- "We'll make one for Sirius, he didn't eat at all since yesterday," -- and began to butter them placidly, handing a block of cheese from the Muggle fridge to Remus, who found a knife in one of the drawers and cut enough slices for four sandwiches. Apparently Harry ate two.

Harry lifted the lid on a contraption Remus recognised as a waffle iron, with the irons inverted to make a griddle, and placed the sandwiches on it carefully, closing the lid and plugging it in.

"I'm glad you're better," he said, resting his hands on the counter and his chin on his hands to watch the toasties cook, through the narrow gap between the two griddle-irons. "Sirius said if you weren't better by tomorrow, charm or not he was going to leave me with Bethany and go fetch a Healer from St. Mungo's."

"Bethany?" Remus asked. Harry gave him a grin, but did not explain.

"She says next time I come to see her we're going to make peanut-butter cookies," he said. "Last time she told me she thinks you and Sirius are Pagans and she always has to watch me on the full moon because you go out to do sacred-arcane-rites-of-power at Rhos Y Beddau. She says that's why Sirius is always running off the kids who go up there to smoke and stuff."

Remus murmured something neutral, and Harry lifted the lid of the iron, wrinkling his nose. "Few more minutes. Are we Pagans, Remus?"

Remus shook his head. "No, I...I doubt it..."

"When I get to be a wizard, can I do sacred-arcane-rites-of-power?"

Harry turned his face up, questioningly, and Remus looked down at him, still confused but very pleased to see Harry so talkative, so cheerful.

"I imagine you could," he muttered.

"Can you get the plates?" Harry said, gesturing to a cupboard, and Remus took down three plates. Harry left the counter and went to the fridge, pouring two glasses of milk and one of orange juice into tumblers procured from another cupboard. He checked the food again and deftly tweaked the toasties, now a golden brown, onto the plates. He took the milk-glasses and tucked them into the crook of one arm along with two of the plates. Remus was automatically reaching for the orange juice and the third plate, when Sirius appeared in the doorway.

Remus felt himself stumble a little against the counter, but there was a peculiar sensation that he was leaving his body for a moment --

"Harry, who are you talking to in here?" Sirius asked, as Remus gasped for breath, feeling like he was dissolving.

"Remus," Harry answered, with a nod of his head -- and then stared at where Remus had been standing, but was now slowly drifting away.

In the sunlit kitchen, Sirius looked at Harry, concerned for a moment. "What do you mean, Harry? Remus is in bed."

"He was just here," Harry said. "He got the plates down for me."

He held out one of the sandwiches, which Sirius took absently, and set the tumblers back on the table. "He came and got me in my room."

"Harry, tell me honestly, no pretending."

"I'm not pretending," Harry said indignantly. "I'm almost ten, you know, I'm not a child."

"I know, Harry, but this is serious. If you saw a ghost, or some kind of spirit -- "

"He wasn't a ghost. He sliced the cheese for me and everything. I'm not making it up!" Harry insisted. Sirius took a thoughtful bite of his sandwich.

"Did he say anything to you?" he asked.

"I guess. He said hi, and that he'd look at my homework when it was done. When you came in he

just disappeared."

"He left?"

"No. He disappeared. Like dissolving in the air."

Sirius reached up into one of the high cupboards and fumbled for a moment before bringing down a velvet-wrapped object. He unrolled it slowly, revealing his and Remus' wands -- charmed not to function unless they were in danger. He gave his an experimental flick. Nothing happened.

"I think you'd better spend the rest of the day with us," Sirius said, gathering up the juice and the other sandwich. "Come on, you can do your homework in our room. I'm sure Remus would like some orange juice."

Harry shrugged and helped carry the food into the bedroom his godfather and Remus shared. Remus was asleep, breath rattling a little in his throat; Harry climbed up on the edge of the bed and carefully balanced his milk against his knee, eating neatly.

"We'll let him sleep," Sirius said softly, setting the juice on the bedside table. He put a broad, capable hand over Remus' forehead for a moment and then gave Harry a smile. "I think the fever's going down."

He settled onto the bed and kept dark, watchful eyes on Harry and Remus, but when Remus woke that evening the fever had gone, and Harry and Sirius agreed not to tell him about the stranger in their house.

Harry spent most of his time in 'his' room these days, the room in the old Black townhouse which Molly had fixed with bright Quidditch posters and a desk and chair for him. He did a lot of his summer homework, because he didn't want to do much else. Lately he'd taken to sleeping twelve and fourteen hours a day.

He was curled up on the bed, reading a boring text on advanced Charms, when there was a brief knock on the door.

"Go away," he called, but the knob turned, and he rolled to glare at whoever had interrupted his sulking.

Remus stood in the doorway, hand still on the doorknob, wearing a threadbare white shirt over equally worn green pyjama bottoms. Harry hadn't bothered to see him while he was sick, and he looked rather ghastly, skin tight over his cheekbones, eyes sunken more than usual and a little too bright.

"What do you want," Harry asked, sullenly. He knew Remus had been avoiding him because the

older man hated him, wished he had gone through the Veil instead of Sirius, because everyone knew Remus loved Sirius and Harry was just a stupid boy Sirius had been defending. Harry had merely been waiting for Remus to say even a word to him, to open his mouth and confirm it.

He had thought Remus had favoured him just a little, at school, but clearly he was just another reminder of his dead parents, whom Remus had loved much more than he loved Harry.

"Stand up," Remus said, voice soft but clear, tones steady. Harry scowled but obeyed, defiantly looking him in the eye, daring him to say it. Remus moved forward slowly and slightly unsteadily, as if he was unsure of his feet.

"Are you still sick?" Harry said, because it looked as if the man was going to fall over if he did much more.

"The fever's broken," Remus answered calmly, now standing in front of him, sweeping Harry with his eyes. Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"Do you need something?" Harry asked angrily.

To his shock, Remus reached out and pulled him into a hug, wrapping his arms around Harry's shoulders, one hand on his neck, firmly holding him in the embrace. After a confused second, Harry leaned into the sudden warmth, resting his palms flat on Remus' chest, burying his face in the collar of his shirt. He felt Remus stroke the back of his head, and something broke; he sobbed, convulsively, and Remus made a soft shushing noise as tears poured out of him, getting both their shirts wet.

Remus murmured words, but Harry couldn't hear them over his own ragged breathing; he suspected they were more a comforting background noise in any case, and let the tension drain out of his chest and shoulders in tears, for minutes on end.

"I'm sorry," he heard Remus say, when his sobs had subsided a little. "I'm sorry I didn't come for you sooner, Harry. I'm sorry I didn't take you away from them the minute you showed magic, even before -- " the other man's voice cracked, but when Harry looked up, Remus' eyes were dry. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

Harry burrowed into the soft white shirt again, until his breathing had steadied. Remus spoke in a low monotone, but the words were soothing.

"I loved your father as much as it is possible to love," he said, rubbing small circles on Harry's back. "And your mother too. She was the most wonderful woman, you know, more forgiving than James had any right to deserve, and she loved us more than we deserved, too, once we stopped being idiots. By god how she loved you, Harry. She made up songs for you, bought you more toys than you knew what to do with, sat and held you for hours -- the rest of us could barely get a look at you. James was no better. All he did was brag about what a bright, handsome little boy you were, and he was right."

Harry felt the arms around his shoulders loosen, and moved back a little, wiping embarrassedly at his eyes.

"Sirius had no idea how to be a parent, Harry, but he loved you just as much as James and Lily did," Remus said. "It all went wrong, I know that, but he did love you, and so do I."

Harry glanced up sharply. Remus gave him a small smile.

"I've neglected you because I thought there were others who could better help you find your way, Harry, but it hurts to see you so lost." He drew a deep breath. "I won't leave you alone anymore."

Harry felt tears threaten again, so he sat on the edge of the bed, wiping his nose with his hand. "I thought you hated me," he muttered.

"I know. I didn't. I was scared of you. Scared that you hated me," Remus added, dry irony seeping into his tone. "And it's a big job, you know. It's easy to take responsibility for teaching a few hundred children how to hex a Hinkypunk. It's a little more difficult to take on just one."

"You needn't, then -- " Harry began, defiant once more, but Remus held up a hand.

"That's why I'm here," he said. "It's my job now. So," he added, sitting on the bed next to Harry. "The rest of the summer, I am at your disposal. What do you need?"

Harry considered this for a minute, but he suddenly wanted to be out of this room, somewhere warm and safe, and there was only one place like that in Grimmauld Place.

"We could have lunch," he said hopefully, and Remus grinned at him.

"Lunch sounds fine," he answered, and followed Harry out of his room, down into the heated comfort of the kitchen.

Tales from the River House

Bullfinch's Mythology

BULLFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY

Severus Snape would never admit in a thousand years that he enjoyed visiting the Tonkses.

Perhaps he didn't even believe it himself, at times; it was always difficult to convince himself to go, and he usually tarried until the last possible minute. It was uncharacteristic of him, really. He'd always been the sort, even as a child, to rip the sticking-plaster off his cuts all at once or jump into freezing water without hesitation.

Even with his reluctance, however, he was always prompt; so much so that on the first few occasions he surprised Andromeda -- who was used to the disorganisation of the Tonks side of the family and, as a child, the imperious Black assertion that whenever they arrived was the proper time. Being on time was something that did not happen to Andromeda, except by accident.

Of course, she joked, he was probably making up for the first few times she'd invited him to dinner, when he hadn't arrived at all. Severus, after pointing out to her that he had declined her invitations in writing and well ahead of time, gave up. It was little use arguing with Andromeda, even about such ridiculous things as dinner invitations.

Andromeda's tenacity was why he had begun visiting the Tonkses for dinner in the first place, after the mess with Peter Pettigrew and Harry's flight to Wales. He knew of the Tonkses better than he actually knew them; they'd both been years ahead of him in school, and his friendship with Regulus had not extended to the rest of the family. Even as little as he knew them, he was aware Andromeda and Ted must have discussed him; Andromeda as much as told him so, when she came to visit him in his quarters one day, after he'd declined her fourth invitation.

"I know we aren't friends," she'd said, accepting tea from him politely -- never let it be said he was a bad host -- "But you've been good to Harry and Sirius, and of course we know you helped Dora pull through her NEWTs."

"There is nothing owed on either account," he'd replied stiffly. "I am paid to ensure that students manage to retain something between their ears, and assisting Harry was -- "

He stopped, suddenly; he had almost been about to confess what a pleasure it was to spend time with the young, inquisitive child he knew more by the name Parvus than by his real name.

Andromeda smiled and filled the silence smoothly. "Nevertheless, though I've always found terms like 'debt' to be distasteful, my husband and I find ourselves in that position. We also wonder if you aren't slightly at a loss, having had to give up Harry so quickly. It must be quite...isolated, here at Hogwarts."

He'd snorted derisively. Isolated wasn't the word for it; after the initial settling-in of the new school year, teaching became somewhat tedious, and he'd never got the hang of befriending the rest of the staff. Now, self-conscious about the peculiar scars that crossed his right temple and without the thought of a trip to Diagon Alley with Harry to look forward to, things did seem...emptier than they ever had before.

Lonely. That was the word for it.

Not that he'd ever have admitted that, either. But he knew that on some level, Andromeda saw it anyway.

"I understand your schedule and responsibilities don't permit much free time away from the school, but we would like to have you to dinner. I'm sure you'd be interested in Dora's progress in the Aurors' Academy, and you've yet to properly meet Neville," Andromeda continued. "I'm afraid our hospitality may leave something to be desired, as we're in the middle of knocking down walls and laying carpet and the like, but there's always Sosi Alley -- or we could meet you in Hogsmeade!" she said brightly.

Her requests in writing he could easily reject; it was much harder to do so when he faced her, and he'd found his much-prided sarcasm had left him.

"Hogsmeade, perhaps," he allowed.

"Oh, excellent. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself, Severus. Shall we say Friday at eight?"

"I'm not -- "

"I'll make sure Dora's free, and we can take Neville up for the afternoon, then meet you for dinner," she'd said brightly. "What a splendid idea, Severus. I'm sure visiting Hogsmeade will be good for him. You do have a way with children, don't you? Then again, I'd expect nothing less of a Hogwarts professor."

And that, it had appeared, was that.

He'd loathed the idea of dinner, in public, with near-total strangers except for Nymphadora, who'd been his student -- and not a particularly stellar one, or one he had been very lenient with. And a

nine-year-old child along too, no doubt a troublesome, noisy brat. He didn't often make conversation and didn't particularly care to try. He disliked arranging to meet people, as he found they were rarely on time; he had no inclination to be nice to Ted and Andromeda Tonks. Andromeda had a habit of guessing what he was thinking and feeling that had nothing to do with Legilimency and everything to do with watching him more closely than he liked.

And yet...the long walk to Hogsmeade in the late-summer evening had been soothing, and he found the restaurant Andromeda had directed him to nearly empty. Nymphadora was quiet and respectful, even if she did knock over the gravy boat and tread on his toes, and the Longbottom child was as well-behaved as one could expect from a nine year old. He was a roundish, harmless-looking boy, though he seemed drawn and pale, and his dark eyes watched Ted almost continually.

Somehow, though Severus never really discovered their methods, Ted and Andromeda kept the conversation light and continuous. Now they asked questions about his classes, now they spoke to Nymphadora about her training, now Andromeda urged Neville to tell, in slightly halting, shy sentences, about their visit to Honeydukes that afternoon. When he knew the Tonkses better, Severus studied how they did it, but he simply didn't have the knack. He was grateful that they did. Otherwise the meals they took together might well have been intolerable.

The third week of classes, Ted sent him an invitation to dine with him and Neville at their new home; Andromeda was in Ireland looking at textiles for the shop, and Nymphadora was doing a weekend training intensive. He didn't bother to decline this time, mostly out of a vague fear that Ted might take it into his head to visit Hogwarts also, in order to convince him face-to-face.

There was a Hallowe'en party in the gutted ground floor of Grimmauld Place that October, made all the more eerie by the sheets hanging from the walls and the occasional bit of bared lumber. In November a Muggle festival at a brewery, where Severus found himself fascinated by the pure chemical nature of the brewing process, and came away with several books on the subject. In December there were dinners and rambles through Hogsmeade, with the ground covered in frost and snow. Sometimes the entire family appeared, sometimes just Ted, or Andromeda and some of her friends. He liked it less when she or Ted brought people along; he withdrew to the edge of the group and kept mostly silent, unsure how to interact with people who were neither student, nor colleague, nor (and this was the third classification he was only beginning to build) a Tonks.

He was not entirely as isolated as the Tonkses might have believed; he had contacts throughout Europe and America, other potions specialists or subscribers to journals he read or was published in. Some were friendly enough that they sent Christmas cards, and he set them on his mantel, which was essentially what mantels were for, he decided. He didn't expect much more than that; Dumbledore always gave his faculty some small gift or other, and usually Professor McGonagall sent him some fruit or a small basket of sweets, but he neither expected nor wanted anything else.

Certainly he did not expect, on that first Christmas since Harry's exile to Betwys Beddau, that he would be woken by a childish voice shouting, "Happy Christmas, Professor Snape!"

For a split second he thought it must be Harry, but it was slightly off, a little too high and with the wrong accent. He pushed himself out of the bed and pulled his robes on over his pyjamas, peering into his sitting-room. Standing on his hearthstone was Neville Longbottom, carrying a large parcel. He'd sent small gifts to the Tonkses, of course, it was only polite, but he hadn't expected they'd send him a Longbottom in return.

"Shove over, Neville!" someone said, and Neville was poked in the back until he complied, to reveal Nymphadora Tonks and her parents, stumbling out of the floo hookup that he'd thought (curse Dumbledore, they must have put him up to this) was secure.

"What on earth...?" he asked, bewilderedly, as the Tonks family, en masse, beamed merrily at him.

"Christmas!" Neville said, and offered him the parcel.

"We thought we'd surprise you," Ted added, as Severus accepted the parcel, still at a loss, and turned it over in his hands. "Go on then, open it up."

"Not there," Andromeda ordered, unwrapping an enormous red muffler from around her neck, while the rest of her family began shedding coats and gloves they'd clearly worn for the cold walk to the Leaky Cauldron -- the nearest floo point -- from Grimmauld Place. "Put it on the table first."

"We fetched it from Diagon Alley this morning," Neville said. Severus decided that, while he'd definitely improved over the months, this was the most talkative the boy had ever been. "Before the sun rose, even!"

"Is it up now?" Severus asked, slightly acidly.

"Sorry, but we wanted it to be fresh," Andromeda said. With an odd excitement he wasn't sure was quite proper in a fully-grown adult, let alone a Hogwarts professor, Severus picked the knots on the ribbon that bound the parcel, and then pulled back rustling red and green paper.

Now he understood why he'd been instructed to place it on the long worktable; out sprang five place settings and an elegant white tablecloth. The smell of sausage and bacon, eggs, buttered toast and fresh fruit, coffee and tea washed over him.

"We brought you breakfast," Ted said with a grin, as the platters of food expanded from their charmed place inside the parcel. Charmed serving forks and spoons began to fill the plates.

Severus felt rather like Scrooge in the old Muggle faerie tale when he finally got the giant roast turkey at the end. Except he wasn't having with any heel-clicking nonsense.

Still, he decided he could allow himself a genuine smile, as he turned towards their expectant faces.

"Well," he said, "sit down then."

It was somewhere during breakfast that Severus -- who had long ago decided family, especially his family, was more trouble than it was worth -- realised he had acquired another one. He rather felt this family was an improvement on the other, even if Andromeda scolded him for not finishing his egg, and Neville, in what was quite a daring feat for the boy, stole his toast.

It wasn't as if the egg or toast were really that important anyway, compared to being brought breakfast by four smiling faces on Christmas morning.

In the weeks following Christmas, he never even considered turning down an invitation from the Tonkses unless his school duties absolutely prevented him from joining them. He could quite happily sit on one of the Hogwarts porticos with a book while Nymphadora studied nearby and the rest of the family indulged in snowball fights; he listened, with more interest than he showed, when they plotted a spring planting party for the first fine spring weekend, since Grimmauld Place had a fair-sized garden that had gone to ruin in the years it stood empty.

The first week in February found Severus in Diagon Alley, picking up potions supplies for his NEWTs class and a few odds and ends for some of the other professors. He was supposed to have dinner with the Tonkses, which would be a welcome respite from wandering around Diagon Alley in the bitter chill. He felt himself begin to warm up almost as soon as he entered the old house on Grimmauld Place through the portkey-doorway near the top of the alley, and by the time he'd passed through the shop, ignored by the attendants who knew him by sight, he was shedding his muffler and overcoat, bundling them over one arm as he tucked his packages under the other. The upstairs door was open, and he knocked on the doorframe as he entered.

"Professor Snape!" Dora called, from the kitchen. "Is that you?"

"Nymphadora," he answered, hanging his coat on the hook and settling his things on the table in the foyer. "I was unaware I was early -- "

"You're not," she replied, appearing in the kitchen doorway. "Mum ran out for some wine and Dad went to get some fresh potatoes for the mash -- apparently what we had wasn't up to standard -- and Neville's having a sleepover with Madam Malkin's little boy -- have you met Russel?"

"I haven't had the...pleasure," he said drily.

"He's a sweet kid. Not very bright, but friendly enough. I was just watching the roast," she added, stepping back into the kitchen and stumbling a little on the hem of her robe. "You can come in here if you like, or wait in the living room."

He followed her into the kitchen, where she took up her seat at the little breakfast table near the

window, and rearranged a few books laid out on it.

"Academy classes," she said, looking sardonically at the spread before her. "I have a preliminary exam next week. Defensive Magical History."

"Not your favourite subject, I take it," he said, for want of something else to talk about. She glanced up at him, as if confused for a moment, then shrugged.

"It's all right. I'm learning things. I'm just not sure how they're going to help me as an Auror. Some of the reading is great, though."

He picked up one of the books, examining the spine. "Bullfinch's Mythology? Muggle books?"

"They're not actually Muggle, really," she protested. "Well, they publish them in Muggle, but that's the assignment. We have to read the book and sort out what's Muggles making things up from real events in Magical History. You'd be surprised how normal Muggles used to think this kind of thing was."

She held up a book entitled *Bullfinch: A Magical Concordance*. "It's all explained in here. Bullfinch got most of his myths from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which was written by an Animagus back in ancient Rome. It's all about transformation," she said, with a wide grin. "I mean do you realise that almost all of the stories we have of ancient Greece and Rome, mythological or otherwise, are concerned with...well, people turning into other things? It's all down to change."

Severus studied her for a moment before replying. "You must feel very at home with these stories."

"Well -- " she paused. "Yes, I -- I suppose I do. But I think anyone would, I mean...who doesn't have change in their lives?"

He considered it in silence while she rose to check on the roast in the oven -- Ted enjoying old-fashioned Muggle cookery as a hobby -- and sat down, cleaning up the mess of papers and books a little before proceeding.

Change didn't come easily to Severus Snape. Change meant upset, which in his young world had meant punishments and people shouting; to change one's mind in Slytherin was to back down, to show weakness, and to become a target.

You could forget about it in the Death Eaters. Regulus -- who was a friend, despite his older brother's moronic posturing -- had been murdered in front of his eyes for wanting to escape. And then, after all the upset and turmoil, finally, he'd been taken in by Hogwarts, where some things hadn't changed in a thousand years, and where a man could pass a decade of his life -- nearing a decade -- in quiet, comforting routine.

The slam of a door brought him back to himself, as Ted arrived home with the potatoes, his wife

just behind him with a bottle of wine and a basket of fresh rolls from the bakery down the street.

"Good evening, one and all," Ted said, mock-gravely, as he shook Severus' hand in greeting and set the potatoes in the sink, peeling and scrubbing them with a flick of his wand. They leapt to the cutting board and a knife began to dice them as Andromeda set the basket on the table, and Severus grudgingly allowed her a greeting kiss on his cheek. Dora carefully lifted a handful of plates and walked very slowly into the dining room with them.

"Just about finished, I'd say," Ted announced, removing the roast from the oven. "The thing about Muggle cooking, which I always say," he added, addressing himself to Severus, "Is that the fullness of time is almost an ingredient. I could cook the roast in about two minutes with magic, but you wouldn't have the lovely smell of it all afternoon, and the anticipation and such."

"On the other hand, after a twelve-hour day downstairs in the shop, I'm just as grateful that I don't have to wait half an hour for my spaghetti," Andromeda replied. "You're NOT going to Muggle the potatoes, are you, sweetheart?"

"No, the roast is too close to done," Ted said, piling the heap of cold, uncooked potatoes on a plate.

Oh, Severus, would you...?" Andromeda gestured at the bottle of wine, and he accepted it from her hand, casting a quick *accio* on the cork to remove it while Ted hexed the potatoes into a steaming mash and carefully whisked some gravy from the roast on the stovetop.

"The plates are out," Nymphadora called as she ducked back into the kitchen for some silverware. Severus collected the wineglasses in one hand and brought the wine to the table in the other, pouring while Dora laid out the silverware. He gave her a questioning look, bottle hovering over the lip of her wineglass, and she nodded, holding up thumb and forefinger to indicate just a little. He set the wine down and quickly pulled her back from the doorway before she could run into Ted, who was carrying the roast out. Andromeda followed with the rest of the food, bread and potatoes, gravy, the vegetables that had been cooking with the roast, and a pitcher of water, some of them floating around her head until she plucked them out of the air and set them down.

"Did you know," Ted said, as he began to serve out slices of the roast, "Dora's been taking a course in Muggle socialisation at the academy, Severus?"

"She was telling me about some magical history..."

"Well, that too -- a regular scholar, is our Dora, and you should see her hexes. She's got them honed," Ted said proudly.

"She was telling us about how some Muggles pray before meals," Andromeda said. "We had Ted demonstrate."

"Helpful having a Muggle-born for a dad, once in a while," Ted said, with a wink at Dora.

"They're training her to do special undercover work, of course, so she has to learn how to blend in with Muggles, just in case."

"How are things up at the school, Severus?" Andromeda inquired. "All going well, I hope?"

"The snow keeps them from running away too fast," Severus muttered, and Ted snickered.

He was quiet throughout the rest of the dinner while Ted and Andromeda talked about politics, both local to the shopkeepers of Diagon Alley and on the grander scale of the Ministry. Dora's comments about change sat uneasily with him; perhaps it was unnatural not to want change. The vast majority of magic was, after all, about turning things into other things. Minerva McGonagall, who could speak for hours on the subtleties of transfigurative categorisation, would have his head for thinking so simply, but in the end, it was true. And he had stood still for a long time.

Eventually he realised he ought to be going, and prepared himself again for the icy wind and cold drizzle outside. Andromeda adjusted his muffler for him, and Ted provided a waterproofing charm for the packages, promising to owl him in a few days about having dinner in Hogsmeade.

He was halfway through the shop, where they were closing up for the evening, when he heard Dora call "Professor Snape!" and turned in time to catch her as she tripped. She straightened herself, dusted down her robes, and held out a black, broad-brimmed hat.

"To keep the rain away," she said, breathlessly. "Mum sent it down."

He accepted the hat gravely. "Tell her thank you."

He was turning away when she called his name again, and he sighed. "What is it?"

"I -- listen, I didn't mean to upset you," she said. It was unusually perceptive of her, and he examined her face as she spoke. "I was just talking about school stuff. I'm always saying the wrong thing, I know, but...I'm writing a whole paper on the important part, and you didn't even hear it."

"And I suppose you'd like me to approve your thesis?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Everyone in the stories changes but no one changes alone," she blurted. He stared at her. "It's all because they're in love, or because they're being comforted about love, or because they've been good people or bad people, but they're never alone. Well, except Narcissus," she said, because even though she wasn't a terribly brilliant scholar, he would admit she'd always been a thorough one. "But his was sort of the point of being alone, and I just thought you ought to know."

He looked at her, considered, and decided he could allow himself a small smile.

"Thank you for the hat," he said. "It seems to be a sound thesis."

She beamed at him as he turned and left the shop, donning the hat against the drizzle, and making his way towards the Leaky Cauldron and the floo portal that would take him back to Hogsmeade.

Tales from the River House
The Birds, the Bees and the Snakes

THE BIRDS, THE BEES, AND THE SNAKES

Bethany Vaughan had a lot of theories about the two men living on the outskirts of Betwys Beddau, where she had been born and raised. It was a small town, and bred a large number of gossips, but Bethany was an oddity -- she didn't gossip, she didn't want to marry a farmer, and she'd already decided she was going to University. So, despite both subtle and unsubtle needling on the topic of the two men by the older people of the town who had nothing better to do, she kept her thoughts on Remus Lupin and Sirius Black to herself. It wasn't easy; she was the closest to them of anyone in town, because she was Harry Potter's babysitter.

Harry was universally adored by the adults of Betwys Beddau; somehow, probably through hints Mr. Black had dropped, they'd gathered the information that he was an orphan, that his godfather had only recently been able to get custody of him, and that he'd been brought out here to have a healthy upbringing away from the big cities, along with help from Mr. Black's cousin Mr. Lupin. Bethany had her own ideas about the reason two thirtysomething bachelors would be raising an adopted child together, but what consenting adults did on their own time -- and while they paid her to watch their child -- was really no business of hers. Besides, she liked them; Mr. Black was a smiling, easygoing man, and Mr. Lupin always asked after her mum when they met in town, and often slipped her a discount on the music magazines she bought.

She liked Harry too; he was a well-behaved child, when he came to stay -- Mr. Black insisted that he stay the night with her rather than she come to their house, which she'd never seen, but he paid double and Harry was never very difficult, so she didn't mind. So, when she saw possible problems arising, she decided for Harry's own good to have a word with Mr. Black, when he came to pick Harry up that morning.

"Thank you, Bethany," he said, as Harry gathered up his backpack and clung to his arm, beaming up at Bethany. "No trouble, I hope?"

"None at all. We made collages," Bethany said, indicating the rolled-up bit of paper clenched in one of Harry's hands. "Could I have a quick word with you, Mr. Black?"

Mr. Black frowned, but nodded, and gave Harry a gentle push. "Run out to the bikes, Harry, and get your helmet on," he said, and Harry dashed out the door. "Is there a problem, Bethany?"

She twisted her fingers together. She'd rehearsed this speech, but it was much harder with Mr. Black standing there, handsome and imposing and somehow a little larger than life.

"I'm a bit worried about Harry, sir," she said. "He, er...he's been telling me things..."

"Things?" the man asked, suddenly alert, like a hound on a scent.

"Yes, he...I know all boys have a bit of an active imagination, but he's been...telling me that snakes are telling him things," she said worriedly. "His pet snake, you know, that goes with him everywhere."

Relief washed over her when Mr. Black broke into a broad grin.

"Well, all boys do have imaginary friends and that," he said reassuringly. "He doesn't always get on with lads his own age, you know how it is with precocious youngsters. Probably imagines his little snake talks. Quite the fantasy life, eh?"

"It's more the way he said it," Bethany pressed on, not quite convinced. "As if it was something he didn't mean to tell me, as if it were a secret."

"Perhaps the snake told him not to tell," Mr. Black said, and the amusement in his voice cleared away the last of her concerns. Of course that was it; children were secretive sometimes. Well, that solved one problem anyhow, and the other one was something she'd had to broach to quite a few parents, so the words came easier.

"He also, er, he's been asking about sex," she said, and Mr. Black snorted. "I mean, I'm fairly certain he knows some basics, you know how children pick these things up, but we saw a picture of a sheep with a little lamb, and he was sort of asking about how the lambs...get there, and all."

"I see," said Mr. Black, gravely -- taking it much better than many parents of her acquaintance. "What did you tell him?"

"I changed the subject."

"Ha! Well done, Bethany. Not really in your job profile, is it?" Mr. Black said amiably. "Thank you for telling me -- I'll handle it. Had to come up sooner or later," he added.

"Thank you, Mr. Black," she said. "Most people are a lot less understanding."

"I imagine so," he said, counting out her payment and adding a few extra pound coins with a wink. "Thanks, Bethany."

She watched from the window as he helped his godson up onto the bicycle, then climbed on his own. They rode off at a sedate pace, Harry still wobbling a little, Mr. Black riding behind him to watch in case he fell.

Such a nice man, Mr. Black, so even-tempered and normal.

Remus was settled in a corner of the big, deep living-room sofa when they returned, curled up under a blanket and nursing a cup of hot tea. Since coming to Betwys Beddau, where Harry could safely be left under another's supervision one night a month, his recoveries from the full moon had been faster; there was a large open space just the other side of the river, where Moony and Padfoot could run wild. Harry was happy to have Remus up and about sooner, and Sirius doubly glad that Remus didn't wake torn and bleeding anymore.

"Hallo Harry," he said softly, and Harry climbed up onto the arm of the sofa, a little too old now to join Remus in an undignified snuggle as he used to. "How was Bethany's house?"

"Fine," Harry said, unrolling his collage to show it off. Remus looked suitably impressed, while Sirius shucked his jacket, and hung up Harry's bicycle helmet. "Did Bethany want to talk to you about me mentioning Snake?" he turned to ask Sirius, who was unlacing his boots. "I didn't mean to tell her he talks to me, but Snake said something really funny," he said to Remus.

"I told her it was just your active imagination," Sirius said. "You have to be careful about that, Harry."

"I am!" Harry said, injured. "It was just the once."

"All right, well, there's no harm done," Sirius grinned as he moved into the kitchen. "Remus, how's your tea?"

"Still hot," Remus called, sipping it and winking at Harry. "So, what're your plans for this lovely Sunday?" he asked Harry.

"Reading to you," Harry said promptly.

"You're a good lad, Harry, but it's a nice cool day out -- sure you don't want to go fishing with Padfoot?"

Harry shook his head, and went to one of the bookshelves on the opposite wall. "Then what would you do?" he asked.

"Oh, sleep and read," Remus replied. "Honestly, Harry, if you want to go out -- "

"No, s'okay, I think it's going to rain," Harry said, scanning the books. "I like reading to you. You

explain the hard parts. Do you want Kipling or something gothic?"

"Knows your tastes," Sirius murmured, carrying a mug of tea into the living room and settling into the other corner of the couch. "Something gothic, I think, Harry. Somewhere in the red bookshelf in our room there's a copy of *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, we'll see if it's to your liking."

Harry nodded and left the room, accepting Sirius' hair-ruffling as he went.

"I do worry that he spends too much time with books sometimes," Remus murmured.

"Worry about me instead," Sirius said urgently. "Bethany said Harry's been asking about -- sex and things."

Remus grinned at him. "Well, you said when it was time you'd be the one to give the birds and bees to him, in case he got ideas from me."

"I'm surprised he hasn't got ideas from both of us already," Sirius answered.

"Not to mention your choice in reading materials."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oscar Wilde, Sirius?"

Sirius opened his mouth to reply, but Harry arrived back, flopping onto the couch between them. "What's this about then?" he asked, regarding the cover curiously.

"It's about a Muggle with a magic painting," Sirius answered, because Remus had closed his eyes and was looking slightly exhausted. "Maybe we should read it later..."

"No, it's all right," Remus said, eyes still closed. "It's about a Muggle who never gets old, Harry; everything that happens to him shows in the portrait instead of on his face."

Sirius thought he understood the sudden fatigue, at his summary of the book. It was a tradition among the noble houses of the Wizarding world to have such a portrait done; it wasn't quite as effective as *Dorian Grey's*, but they did slow the aging process considerably. And Remus, though still young, was already showing grey in his hair and fine lines in his face.

After a minute of silence, Remus smiled and opened his eyes. "I'm all right, Sirius. You won't mind if I sleep a bit while you read, will you, Harry?"

"I never do," Harry answered, paging to the beginning. "Do you want me to read the preface too?"

"That's the best part," Remus answered, and Harry settled himself crosslegged, book open on his

lap, to read.

"The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things..."

Remus dozed off around halfway through the first chapter, and Sirius reached over to gently close the book, once he was sure the other man was asleep. Harry set the book aside and looked up at him, thoughtfully.

"There's something you have to tell me, huh?" he said, and Sirius grinned.

"Perceptive kid, you are," he said. "It's nothing bad or serious, just something we have to talk about."

"Okay," Harry said, turning on the couch to face him, and Sirius turned likewise, crossing his legs, a larger, blue-eyed version of Harry, facing him. Harry laughed a little.

"Bethany says you were asking her where lambs come from," Sirius said.

"Sort of," Harry agreed. "I know a bit of it."

"Oh?"

"Well, some of the boys at school talk about it," Harry said, suddenly blushing furiously. Sirius, just as embarrassed, nodded. "And I just thought Bethany might know."

"You think I don't?" Sirius asked, surprised.

"No, but..." Harry squirmed a bit. "You're my dad...I mean, just as good as."

Sirius nodded. "Remus too?"

"I thought maybe I shouldn't be asking about it. The teachers at school looked upset when I talked about snakes laying eggs..."

Sirius touseled his hair. "You can ask us anything, Harry, I promise we'll never be angry."

"Oh, okay." Harry nodded. "So are you going to tell me about it?"

"Yes I am," Sirius said, then paused. "Er. This may take a while."

"That's fine," Harry said encouragingly. Haltingly, Sirius began to sketch out quite a lot about sex

-- at least, the biological side -- at least, the heterosexual biological side...

This had been much easier when he was a child. Though of course walking in on Narcissa and Walden McNair in the greenhouse is not the ideal way to discover how things were done.

Nor was a rambling forty-minute monologue on the sins of the flesh from his father, when he was caught at age fourteen studying certain woodcuts in some of the older, naughtier books in the library.

He finished outlining the reproductive process, in a somewhat stammered fashion, and added a few sentences on respecting young women and how one ought to wait until one felt one was ready. He found this somewhat ironic, given his own checkered past, but Harry took it all in with those intelligent green eyes, and when he was finished, Sirius breathed a sigh of relief.

"Er...do you have any questions?" he said, watching as Harry almost visibly digested the information. "Was anything unclear?"

"No..." Harry said slowly. "I knew a bunch of that from the snakes."

"You did?"

"Yeah, but I thought maybe humans did it differently. Cos...when a man and a woman get married he doesn't dig a big hole for her in the back garden."

Sirius fought slightly hysterical laughter.

"No, that's very true," he agreed.

"And girls don't lay eggs?"

"No. Well....no." Sirius decided that he would buy Harry a biology textbook that might explain the particulars better.

"Okay." Harry rested his elbows on his knees, and propped his chin in them. "So what about you and Remus?"

Sirius froze.

"What about us?" he asked.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what, Harry?"

"What a man and a woman do," Harry said. "You aren't a man and a woman but you sleep together

and stuff, right? He kisses you sometimes."

Sirius felt the blush returning. He thought they'd been cautious enough that Harry wouldn't be curious; clearly he was wrong.

"And you take care of him when he's sick," Harry said, jerking his head at where Remus slept on, behind him. "And he looks after you when you're sick."

"Yes, but -- "

"And he'd be mad if you kissed a girl, right? You yelled at him when that girl was making eyes at him in the bookshop."

"Well, all right..."

"And you do sex stuff, right?" Harry asked.

"You haven't seen that, have you?" Sirius said, voice cracking.

"No, but it makes sense," Harry answered. Sirius glanced at Remus, willing him to wake up and intervene. "So how do you do it with all boy parts?"

Sirius could hear Remus' sly murmur in his head. Any number of enjoyable ways...

"Er..." Sirius said, stalling for time. "There's more to understand about it than just how it happens, really. The biology I mean. It's got to do with...well, how you choose who you love, or...or how it chooses you...we'll get you a book about it, how's that?"

"Okay," Harry said agreeably. "I don't think the library has books about that, though. Jamie Meredith would have found it by now. He's found most of the books with naked pictures in them."

"You might want to keep your distance from Jamie Meredith," Sirius said slowly.

"Yeah, he's not really interested in real books," Harry agreed. "Sirius?"

"Yes?"

"Remus loves you, right?"

Sirius grinned. Here, he was on firm ground. "Yeah, he does."

"He told you so and all?"

"Yes."

"And you love him?"

"Yes I do, Harry."

"And you told him?"

Sirius bit his lip and wondered if, in all the time they'd spent together, he ever had actually said it. Just for no reason, just because it was true.

"Yes he has," Remus said quietly, from behind Harry. Both of them turned to look at him, but he had already shifted his shoulders and rolled a bit, curling deeper into the blanket, and seemed to be asleep again.

"Good," Harry said decidedly. "Can I have a sandwich now? It's nearly lunchtime."

Sirius laughed, and followed him into the kitchen to make sandwiches, fingers lingering on Remus' shoulder as they passed, affectionately.

END

Author's Endnote: The idea of Dorian Grey-style portraits being done in the Wizarding World is actually Heidi's, used with permission; you can find a discussion of the concept in the Portrait Of Mrs. Black thread at Fiction Alley.

Tales from the River House

A Lesson in Hiding

A LESSON IN HIDING

It would be a fallacy to say that the Malfoy ancestral home was obsessively clean; in the upstairs levels of the mansion, dust covered the white sheets, which covered all the furniture. The kitchen and the small suite of rooms occupied by Narcissa and her son, however, were cleaned on a daily basis by the house-elves, giving them an almost sterile, scrubbed appearance.

Draco privately thought that the cleaning had driven a number of them nuts, since one could only polish freshly-polished silver so many times, but they were on the whole a good sort; they never narked on him without being told to by his mum -- and at that point, as she was the mistress of the house, it was unavoidable that they should tell the truth, so he never blamed them. They often brought him sweets or biscuits on the sly to make up for it; an entire black market trade in marzipan went on in the Malfoy household, as it was Draco's favourite, and there was a complicated chain of communication used to bring it into his hands.

Despite the house-elves' best efforts, Draco was a small, thin child, which in his mind was a good thing: it meant he could squeeze himself into the shadows of the hallway pilaster-columns, behind flowerpots, through small holes in the garden hedges. Smallness was essential to Draco's existence, because the smaller you were, the better you could hide from Narcissa.

Considered objectively -- and Draco did a lot of objective considering -- Narcissa was not a bad mother. She kept him reasonably well-fed, clean, and neatly dressed. He had two excellent if somewhat dull tutors. But he knew she wasn't like other mums. Other mums didn't scream in the hallways when something wasn't precisely as they wanted it. Other mums had people to tea. Other mums didn't curse their husband's name on a regular basis. Other mums took their own sons out to Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade or to museums and libraries. He knew they did. He'd read books.

Draco never went out unless his tutors took him. He knew Narcissa did go out, because he saw her leaving and returning, but she never acknowledged him unless she could help it, or unless he'd done something wrong, so taking him on trips or to go shopping was utterly out of the question.

When he was younger, Draco occasionally did something wrong simply to make sure she still

knew he existed. Usually he realised the foolhardiness of this about three minutes after he'd done it. It was one of the many reasons Draco had identified and prepared several hiding places in every room of the house, for when Narcissa began screaming.

He also had places into which he couldn't fit -- or, after a growth spurt in his ninth year, could no longer fit -- and he used those to hide his belongings. They were things he didn't want Narcissa to see, or anything she might take away from him. There was an envelope of newspaper clippings, about nothing in particular, just interesting stories he'd saved; a funny-shaped bottle he'd nicked from the kitchen; a picture of his father he'd found while exploring the upper rooms one day, when he'd cajoled one of the house-elves into unlocking the door at the top of the stairs, which led to the rest of the house.

The problem was the photograph, he thought, as he gazed down at Narcissa, tearing the kitchen apart. If she'd found any of the other things, she would have been furious that he was bringing filthy rubbish into the house, but finding a photograph of Lucius had put her into a screaming rage.

Draco kept carefully out of view, not just of his mother but of the house-elves, so that they couldn't tell on him if she demanded to know where he was. He'd discovered the high cross-beams in the shadowy ceiling a while ago, and knew he couldn't be seen if he kept to the south end of the room.

Clearly this called for some fast thinking. She was going to ask the house-elves, and then she was going to find all the places he kept stuff. He couldn't let that happen. This wasn't childish caprice; this was defending his territory.

He slipped off the upper-beams and down onto the lower ones; from there he dangled by his fingers, until he got a toe-hold on the edge of the hatch that passed between the kitchen and the dining room. He slipped through it, landing lightly, and made for the hallway, arriving there a split second before Narcissa did. She shrieked when she saw him, and the full wrath of his mother descended on his head.

"Keeping this in our house!" she screamed, shaking him by his arm. "How dare you defy me! This for your deceit!" she added, ripping the photograph in half. Draco felt something inside him crumble, but if he was to save himself and his sanity, he knew he couldn't show it. There would be other photographs, and he had memorised every line and shadow of his father's face in that one, every expression and movement the magical photo showed.

"Sorry, mum," he whispered, when she released him. She shook the pieces of the torn image in his face.

"Disobedient, wicked boy!" she shouted. "The house-elves say you've hidden things all over! In every room!"

"Dobby cannot disobey the mistress, Master Draco!" Dobby wailed, in the background.

"A conspiracy! Under my nose! Well, this stops now." Narcissa fixed him with a hateful glare. "Either you can tell me yourself and save a whipping, or I'll ask the house-elves. And you know they won't lie for you, Draco."

Draco studied his shoes. "I'll tell you," he said softly. She jerked him into the dining room.

"Under the table," he murmured, and she found a packet of sweets underneath the table, attached with tape. "Behind the planter." A book he'd particularly liked, stashed where he himself could still fit, in case he got bored while hiding. "That's all here."

Narcissa shot a swift glance at the house-elves, which were now following them around like peculiar chicks after a hen. "Is he lying?" she demanded. They shook their heads woefully.

They continued on through every room in the house: kitchen, den, bathroom, schoolroom, bedroom, even Narcissa's work-room, where she kept her correspondences and files he wasn't allowed to see, though he never hid anything there. He showed her the trick cabinet in the kitchen, the loose floorboard in his bedroom, the hidden ledge on the inside of the schoolroom closet, the cranny in the candelabra that you couldn't see except from below. She didn't bother with the sheet-covered rooms, except the library, since as far as she knew they were all under lock and key the house-elf Mendy kept in the pocket of her tea-towel dress.

When they finally returned to the corridor, Draco was trembling, and Narcissa had left behind a trail of destroyed treasures that the house-elves had quietly and efficiently cleaned up as they went, terror and pity in their eyes.

"That's every room," she said, and Draco suppressed a small breath of relief. "You are a wicked, deceitful child, and you will be punished, Draco. Go to your room. You," she said, turning to the house-elves, "assisted him in this trickery. All of you are to boil your hands."

"Don't -- it's not their fault," Draco said, but Narcissa gripped him by the arm and thrust him into his bedroom, slamming the door after her. Draco stared at the door, wondering if he could even try to help the house-elves, but he knew it was hopeless.

There wasn't a trace of any of his hiding places. The loose floorboard had been fixed permanently to its fellows with a flick of Narcissa's wand, and the draperies on the bed removed. The bed itself had been lowered to the floor, so that there was no space underneath it. And that wasn't even his punishment. His punishment was still to come.

Draco knelt and slid his hand across the formerly-loose floorboard. He felt like crying, but he was too tired to bother. Instead, he slumped back against the footboard of the bed and closed his eyes.

The ruse had worked.

Complete honesty had its place, after all.

Well. Complete honesty after a fashion.

Draco knew that he looked at the world differently than other people did; it had earned him strange looks from his mother and her rare visitors, in the past, and his tutors were constantly trying to understand how he came up with some of the ideas he did. He'd finally stopped voicing them, because clearly they only caused trouble. He had been writing them down, and had kept them where they would be safe -- Narcissa had not found his private book, not yet.

Every room in the house, she'd said, but she hadn't even asked him about the hallway.

Nobody ever thought about hallways properly, really.

And in fact the hiding places in the hallway were not all that difficult to discern. Behind a curtain that hid an old ancestral painting that nobody ever looked at, there were a few books he loved dearly; and then, near the stairs that led up to the locked door --

He was sure his mum must know about the cupboard under the stairs; there were strange trunks stored in it, and someone had to have put them there. True, the door was disguised as a panel, but it wasn't all that well hidden. That was why he'd chosen it. And tucked just inside the door, between a trunk reading HOGWARTS - L. A. MALFOY on it and the wall, he kept his private book, and three little toy soldiers he'd found, which he thought might have been his father's. Certainly Narcissa didn't approve of such things.

If they think you've given them everything, he thought, if they think they've crushed you, they won't ask you for the one thing you've kept back.

He'd creep out of his bedroom tonight, unless Narcissa locked him in, and remember to write that in his private book.