

Disclaimer: I do not own the Harry Potter Series or their characters.

I also do not own the Midnight Series.

Summary: There are many "the Marauders read Harry Potter" out there. That got me thinking; what would their reactions be to one of the many fanfictions out there. So I chose the "Midnight Series", one of my favorite AUs that starts from "Prisoner of Azkaban" on. I did not skip any part of Midnight Guardian so if you haven't read that series and start reading from here you can. If you'd like to read that series the author's penname is Ksomm814 and is up to book 7. I have Ksomm814 authorization to do this.

Everything in bold letters belongs to Ksomm814. The chapter titles also belong to Ksomm814, I decided to use the same titles to be easier for those who already read the series.

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"The Marauders read Midnight Guardian"

Chapter 1

Four boys of around sixteen years old were seated inside one of the rooms of a Manor looking thoroughly bored. They were all lying down either on the bed, the couch or the floor looking gloomily outside where a storm had been going on since morning and apparently had no intention of stopping any time soon.

"Ouch," said one of the two black headed boys, that was on the bed, and the other three boys looked at him.

"Sirius?" asked the brown headed boy that was next to him.

"This fell on my head," Sirius said pointing at a stack of papers and rubbing his head.

"What's that?" James asked.

"Don't know," answered Remus who was examining the papers, "looks like muggle paper. Oh look, it's a story."

"A book?" Peter asked wearily, "Don't read Moony! My dad says there are dangerous books around."

"It's not a book, the papers are all lose," Sirius rolled his eyes, "How do you know the order?"

"Here see; there are chapter numbers and then on top of the page says Page 1 of 10," Remus pointed out.

"Why do you think that is?" James asked sitting on the bed for a better look, "Look here, says published date 09-11-04, do you think that's from 1904?"

"No can't be, down here on the page there's another date that says 10-20-2004. Hey this is from the future!" Sirius exclaimed.

"That's dangerous. You're not supposed to know the future," Peter said from his spot on the floor.

"Oh, let's read the future book," Sirius cried excitedly and James was nodding fervently.

"Ok, let's see what this Ksomm814 has to say," Remus said getting ready to read.

"Ks- what?" Sirius asked.

"That's the author's name," Remus replied.

"What kind of name is that?" James asked and Remus shrugged.

"You want to read or not?" Remus asked.

James and Sirius nodded, Peter looked uncertain.

"Let's begin,"

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Prisoner of Azkaban, which is not mine.

"So if it's not hers or his why are they writing?" Peter asked.

"I don't know, I've only read a phrase and got interrupted," Remus answered annoyed.

"Who do you think that Prisoner guy is?" Sirius asked.

"How am I supposed to know from ONE phrase?" Remus asked.

"Because you're Moony," James stated.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Remus asked.

"You know everything," James answered.

"No I don't."

"Sure act like you do," Sirius mumbled and was smacked on the head by Remus.

Chapter 1

Painful Summer

"But summer is never painful. Summer is sunny, and warm," James said.

"WILL YOU LET ME READ?" Remus shouted.

"Ok,ok. Someone's *touchy*."

For the third time this week a skinny, short black haired, bespectacled boy was weeding the garden of his Aunt, Petunia Dursley at Number Four, Privet Drive. Most people paid no attention to the nearly teenager who worked from sunrise to sunset regardless of any pain or exhaustion he may be feeling. All of them knew he was nothing more than a troublemaker.

How wrong they were.

Harry Potter wasn't like most children his age.

"Potter? Hey do you think he's my relative?" James asked.

"Don't know? Maybe," Sirius said.

"Hey, they are using him like a house elf. Stop that!" James shouted at the page.

"They can't hear you," Remus explained. James shrugged.

Besides the scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightening, Harry was a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A school that nearly all Muggles (non-magic folk) had never even heard of. None of them knew that he was a wizard in training or even the fact that witches and wizards exist which was why Harry's Aunt and Uncle lied to everyone about where Harry actually went to school.

"Why do they lie?" Peter asked.

"Muggles are not supposed to know about us. I think there is some sort of cover story that the Muggles say to explain Hogwarts. I'll ask Lily," Remus said.

"Why does she talk to you?" James asked.

"Because we're both prefects."

"Why doesn't she talk to me?" he asked.

"I think the phrase was, 'you make me sick Potter'," Sirius said shrugging sympathetically. James scowled.

Usually Harry was proud of his heritage but not this summer.

"Why not? Be proud of our heritage Harry, very proud!" James cried. Remus glared at him and he shut up.

One week into his summer vacation he had received a phone call from his friend, Ron Weasley. Unfortunately, his Uncle Vernon had answered the phone. After nearly an hour of yelling at how dare those 'freaks' call and prove their 'abnormality', Harry was punished...severely. He still had bruises from that *punishment*.

"That's, that's, -- CHILD ABUSE!" Sirius shouted and the other three looked horrified at the book.

The night after the phone call incident Harry had sent his owl, Hedwig, off to stay at Ron's. The last thing Harry needed was to anger his uncle more. Since then Harry had been given a strict chore list and was punished if he didn't complete it by dusk.

That was three weeks ago and the chore lists were only getting longer.

In addition to the heavy chore work, Harry also had homework which his aunt and uncle would *punish* severely if they caught him doing.

"Mum never punishes me for doing homework," James said shaking his head, "Wish she would forbid me to do homework and order me to only have fun."

"I don't think that is Harry's case," Remus said sadly.

That left the late hours of the night and early hours of the morning when everyone else was sleeping, times when Harry desperately needed to rest.

Harry let out an exhausted sigh as he wiped the sweat off of his forehead with his sleeve. Today, like every day for the past week had been scorching hot. His uncle was currently at work while his aunt and cousin, Dudley, were out doing whatever they usually did during the day. No one bothered keeping Harry informed and Harry really didn't care. Just as long as they weren't bothering him.

Finally finishing the garden, Harry sat down on the lawn, wincing in pain as he did so, and pulled out the list of chores from his pocket. It was late afternoon and he still needed to clean the garage and make dinner. *If the wizarding world could only see me now*, he thought bitterly.

Knowing he couldn't wait much longer, Harry put the list back in his pocket and slowly stood up. The garage was going to take at least a few hours, possibly longer considering how sore his ribs were today. It amazed Harry how quickly three people could mess things up. Cleaning the garage was a weekly chore.

Harry let out another sigh as he slowly limped to the garage, his right leg throbbing in pain. He was certain Uncle Vernon had broken a bone and since it had been 'Harry's fault', medical attention was out of the question.

"WHAT!!" the boys yelled

"Take him to a doctor!" Sirius cried.

"They can't or the authorities will know what they did and arrest them for child abuse," Remus explained, "Besides, I think they like knowing he's in pain."

"That's sick," James said.

Deep down Harry was starting to wonder if it was indeed his fault. His uncle had been strict and harsh before but never like this. How could one simple phone call push a man to the extreme?

"No you're not at fault Harry. You're Uncle is WRONG," James cried, "Someone has to save my relative. Where am I? I wouldn't let that happen."

"Maybe you don't know," Peter offered.

Entering the garage, Harry didn't notice a pair of blue eyes watching every painful move he made, wanting nothing more than to rush to the boy's side and tell him everything

"Then do that, whoever you are. What are you waiting for?" James said exasperated.

but knowing he needed to be patient. This boy was nothing more than a slave and sooner or later he would need help. That much was certain.

Just like every night, Harry served dinner for his 'family' then went outside to eat a sandwich he had made for himself. He knew better than to hope for any leftovers, especially with Dudley eating like he was. Despite his *diet*, Dudley was still as fat as ever and didn't look like he would be losing any weight soon.

Lying down on the lawn and looking up at the stars, Harry silently told himself that it could always get worse. He knew he was going to have a hard time explaining his injuries as it was. How many people would believe the 'I fell down the stairs' excuse?

"Then tell them Harry. Tell Dumbledore, he'll help." Remus said.

"Why are you allowed to make commentaries and we're not?" Sirius asked.

"Because I am reading."

Harry was about to take a bite out of his sandwich when he felt like he was being watched. Ignoring the pain and sore muscles, Harry sat up and looked around. He was about to hurry inside when the sound of an animal whining in the nearby bushes caught his attention.

Slowly and carefully, Harry approached the bushes and knelt down. His head was screaming at him to leave the possibly dangerous creature but something in his heart told him to help the animal. He needed to help this animal.

Pushing the bushes back, Harry looked down to see a large black dog laying down in the brush and was looking at him with sorrowful blue eyes.

"That's me!" Sirius said excitedly, "I came to save Harry."

"Thank you Padfoot. My family appreciates that," James said hugging Sirius.

"Wouldn't have done any different."

"You don't know that's actually you," Remus pointed out.

"Of course that's me."

Remus shrugged and continued reading.

The dog let out another whine but didn't move. *Odd behavior for a dog.*

"Er—hello," Harry said nervously. "Are you lost?" *Stupid question, Harry. Really stupid.* He really didn't know what to do or say to a stray dog. Moving to a more comfortable position, Harry ripped his sandwich in half and offered one portion to the dog. "It's chicken," he said softly. "Dog's like chicken, right?"

"I love chicken Harry, thank you very much," Sirius said. The others rolled their eyes.

The dog finally moved. Harry watched as the dog slowly took the offered food and ate it. Eating his own portion, Harry kept an eye on the dog whose gaze remained on Harry the entire time. Harry didn't know if the dog was trying to figure out something or debating whether to eat him or not.

"Hey, I don't eat people!"

"We don't know that's you Padfoot," Remus tried to placate him. Sirius scowled.

After his third bite Harry couldn't take it anymore. "You know this would be a lot easier if you weren't looking at me like that," he said truthfully. "I know you're hungry but this is all I'm going to have for dinner. I can try to bring out more for you after they've gone to bed but my uncle can't know about you. Deal?"

The dog crawled forward and rested his head on Harry's lap, looking up with the 'puppy dog eyes' that made Harry groan in frustration.

"Sorry to disagree with you but that's definitely Padfoot. Master of the puppy dog eyes," James said shaking his head, Sirius was beaming proud of himself.

He really didn't have the strength to fight a one sided battle with a dog tonight.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "But my uncle—I really don't know what's wrong with him. He's so angry this summer. I can take it but I'd hate to see him take his anger out on anyone else."

Without even realizing what he was doing Harry started to pet the dog. Even though he had just met the dog there was a strange familiarity that Harry couldn't ignore. He didn't know why he felt it now and not before but at the moment Harry could care less. He needed to talk to someone and right now this dog was the only thing that would listen.

"Some times I wonder if my life was cursed the night Voldemort failed to kill me,"

"What? Voldemort what?" James and Sirius yelled.

"Don't say the name!" Peter yelled flinching.

"I have to say the name, it's written here," Remus pointed at the page.

he said all of a sudden. "Every year it just gets harder and harder. I lived in a cupboard under the stairs for ten years,

"Child Abuse!" Sirius shouted.

found out that I'm—er—different, then go off to school where I end up fighting for my life every year. I mean, how many times can Voldemort try to come back?"

"What does he mean come back? Where did he go to?" James asked the other looked puzzled.

The dog looked up at Harry in surprise but Harry was too deep in thought to notice. "I guess it's my own fault," Harry continued. "/ went searching for the stone and / went into the Chamber on my own accord. I guess I felt like I had to be the one to stop him. He killed my parents. He's the reason I'm trapped here...with them."

"He's an orphan. Poor Harry," James said sadly.

"Well, I kind of guessed," Remus said "I mean, he lives with his Aunt and Uncle."

Harry let out a sigh and shook his head slowly. "This is just sad," he said mostly to himself than to the dog. "I shouldn't feel sorry for myself like this. It only makes everything seem worse. I'm just scared. How can I hide this from my friends? How can I hide it from Dumbledore? If they knew what it was really like here..."

"They'd help you. Trust me. I know what's like to keep a secret from your friends," Remus urged Harry.

"POTTER!"

The bellowing of his uncle's voice made Harry let out a frustrated groan. He quickly finished the rest of his sandwich then looked down at the dog. "Stay hidden," Harry said softly. "I'll bring out what I can when they've gone to bed."

To say Harry was surprised to see the dog hurry into the bushes and hide was an understatement. It was almost like the dog knew exactly what he was saying but that was impossible. Dogs couldn't understand human speech, at least entire sentences and reasoning.

"But that's me!"

Uncle Vernon's shouting voice brought Harry back to the present. Standing up, Harry was unable to suppress a wince as pain flared from his ribs. Not wanting to endure any more yelling or *punishment*, Harry hurried back into the house where he spent the next hour and a half cleaning the kitchen. He knew the routine by now. If the kitchen wasn't spotless, he was punished. Basically, if Harry did anything besides acting like an obedient house elf, he would be punished.

He had finally finished only to hear the Dursleys heading upstairs for the night. Letting out a sigh of relief, Harry made a few more sandwiches as quietly as possible. He really didn't know how much to feed a stray dog but as thin as the dog looked Harry figured the more the better.

"Why am I thin?" Sirius said looking at his body, "I am muscular."

"In your dreams Padfoot," James said patting Sirius' head.

Ignoring his own exhaustion, Harry snuck back outside and limped over to where the dog should be hiding. The dog must have noticed him approaching and slowly came out. It was strange that something so simple as a stray dog could make a teenage boy happy but this dog brought some sense of normalcy. To the dog, Harry wasn't a freak or the-boy-who-lived. Harry was just Harry.

"What's the boy-who-lived?" Sirius asked.

"Harry," Remus answered.

"Why?" Sirius asked.

"Because he lived," Remus answered and was rewarded with a pillow on his face.

They sat there in silence while the dog ate. It seemed rather odd for a dog to slowly eat when it appeared to be starving but Harry didn't voice his opinion. He was too afraid to lose his new friend.

Realizing that it was extremely late, Harry knew that if he didn't start his homework he wouldn't get anything done tonight. He still had Potions, History and Transfiguration to complete which were bound to be stressful and confusing. Professor McGonagall was strict and demanding for Transfiguration, Professor Snape

"What!!!!!" James and Sirius cried.

"Snivellus teaching?" Sirius made a repulsed face.

"Poor children," James' face mirrored Sirius'. Remus had to agree.

was unfair and mean

"Off course he is, he's Snivellus," James said.

for Potions and Professor Binns was annoyingly boring for History of Magic. Not too much incentive for Harry to jump in and complete his assignments.

The feeling of something wet brushing his hand brought Harry out of his thoughts. He quickly looked down and saw those big blue eyes staring at him worriedly. "You know, if you're going to stick around I should think of something to name you," Harry said with a grin. "What do you think of Midnight?"

"No the name's Padfoot. Pad-foot," Sirius finished slowly. The other three rolled their eyes.

The dog barked happily, forcing Harry to quickly look up at the bedroom windows. Thankfully no one had heard the noise. Rubbing the back of his sore neck, Harry returned his attention to

Midnight. "We need to be quiet," he said softly. "I don't want Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to see you. They'll probably punish me for just having you on their lawn."

Midnight let out a growl which made Harry laugh. "I don't like them very much either," he said candidly then turned serious. "It's kind of hard to like someone who treats you like dirt."

"Yes, it is," Sirius sympathized with Harry. The other three threw him sympathetic looks.

It's times like this when I wonder how my mum and aunt could be even remotely related. People tell me how kind and smart she was. I wish I could remember her. I wish I could remember both of them. At least then I would know for sure if anyone ever loved me."

"I am sure they did. We Potters are full of love Harry," James said. Remus and Sirius were starting to worry for his sanity.

Harry let out a sigh and shook his head. He really needed to stop thinking about his pitiful life. It was only making him feel worse and right now that was the last thing Harry needed. He needed to figure out how to last for another month without too many more punishments.

Staring off in the distance, Harry didn't notice the sorrowful look in Midnight's eyes. At that moment the dog knew his plans had changed. He had heard enough to know there were more pressing matters. He would do everything in his power to make sure that fool, Dumbledore, found out the truth of what was happening at Number Four, Privet Drive.

"Hey, Dumbledore isn't a fool," Remus said defensively, "Sirius, stop insulting Dumbledore."

"But you said we don't know that's me."

For the remainder of the week it was difficult to see Harry without his new companion, Midnight, while he worked on his chores during the day. Harry brought the dog food whenever he could and spent any free moment he had with the devoted animal. Every night Harry would vent his frustrations and even tell the dog about what he had been through. For some strange reason Midnight seemed to enjoy it.

It had only taken two days for Harry to give into the 'puppy dog eyes' and sneak Midnight into the house. From then on, Midnight slept on the foot of Harry's bed. Harry couldn't explain it but he just felt safer with the large black dog there although it was the dog's safety Harry worried about every moment of the day and night. He meant what he told Midnight. He could take the punishments but he couldn't stand to see anyone hurt because of him.

"Don't worry Harry. Padfoot knows how to take care of himself," Remus said and Sirius nodded.

"Why the long face?" Sirius asked James that was scowling.

"Well, why instead of getting cozy you don't SAVE HARRY?" James shouted and Sirius flinched.

"I don't know," Sirius mumbled.

"There must be a reason James, let's keep reading," Remus tried to placate James.

Harry's increasing chore lists didn't help matters either. It was becoming a habit for Harry to doze off at odd times only to be woken by Midnight licking his hand. His muscles were always sore, he felt weak and he was starting to have hot and cold flashes which were annoying to no end. Seeing his reflection every morning, Harry knew he was getting sick. The problem was Uncle Vernon didn't care. He still demanded the chore lists to be completed on time.

Deep in sleep Friday night, Harry didn't notice the bed shake as Midnight jumped off. He was too exhausted to notice anything. He was shivering from fever which caused him to wince as pain flared from his injured ribs. Harry bit his lower lip as he whimpered. Years of neglect and experience embedded in Harry's mind told him not to cry out. It would only anger Uncle Vernon more.

A gentle hand touched Harry's face like it had for the past few nights.

"Finally, you decided to act," James exclaimed. Sirius scowled.

It felt cool in contrast to his burning face. He leaned into the coolness as fingers ran through his hair. If Harry had been awake he probably would have been frightened to see a stranger in his room and he probably would have been even more frightened by the condition the stranger was in.

"What condition? What happened to me?"

Wearing a tattered black cloak over his ragged striped clothes,

"What? No, I have a very good fashion sense." Remus, Peter and James rolled their eyes.

the man stared at the battered teenager with guilt.

"You should feel guilty. Lying on your ass instead of acting," James mumbled.

He had been horrified to hear of how difficult the boy's life had been so far. Living with a family who hated him, knowing nearly nothing about his parents, facing Voldemort twice in as many years, and even killing a basilisk were things a child shouldn't be doing.

"Killing a what?" Sirius cried.

"Facing Voldemort?" James shouted.

"Twice?" Remus yelled.

"Stop saying the name!" Peter pleaded.

The man had desperately wanted to take the boy into hiding just to keep him safe but knew that could never happen. He couldn't kidnap the boy now despite how justified it was.

"Yes you can. Kidnap him. Save him. Come on," Sirius cried.

The boy had a broken leg and at least a few broken ribs on top of the countless bruises and sore muscles from the slave labor he was put through every day. He was surprised when he first saw the boy who was so small for his age but after a few 'stories' it was clear that the boy was indeed abused (physically, verbally and emotionally) as well as neglected. It angered the man to hear of someone acting this way towards a child, especially this child.

Harry Potter was a kind and compassionate boy who needed someone to love him. Why hadn't anyone seen this? Why hadn't anyone been by to check on the boy or his living conditions? Anyone who knew anything about Lily Potter's family would know that Petunia Dursley hated anything connected to magic. Why would anyone leave Harry Potter here of all places?

"Did he say Lily," James asked taking the page to read for himself, "My sweet, dear Lily?"

"You don't know that. Could be some other Lily," Peter stated.

"Actually, Lily does have a sister named Petunia," Remus said, "and from what Lily said she hates magic."

"That's my Lily. That's my son. Harry's my son! I married Lily! She's seen the error of her ways and realized I am irresistible!" James cried happily and hugged Sirius.

"Maybe, but we're not sure," Remus said. James ignored him.

"Don't worry kid," the man said quietly. "I'll take care of everything. I promise."

"Of course I will!" Sirius said.

Chapter 2

James was beside himself with happiness and Remus couldn't find the heart to remind him that if Harry was indeed his son that meant he was dead. He softly asked, "Shall I continue reading?"

"Yes," the other three shouted.

Midnight's Rescue

"Midnight is not the one that needs to be rescued," James said indignantly.

"I think he's the one that will be doing the rescuing," Remus explained slowly.

"Ah!"

"POTTER! GET UP NOW!"

"Don't shout to my son!"

Panic filled Harry as he jumped out of bed and ignored the screaming pain flooding his body and the dizziness filling his head. He had slept in! Looking around the room, Harry didn't see Midnight anywhere and let out a sigh of relief. At least the dog would be safe.

"Don't worry about me Harry, I am finding a way to get us out of there!" Sirius said and James hugged him.

"Thank you! You'll save my son!"

"Of course I will. Maybe I went to get Moony's help, you know. 'Cause he's the brains in our operation," Sirius winked at Remus who blushed.

He changed as quickly as possible then rushed out of the room, down the stairs and into the kitchen to start breakfast. He mumbled an apology to his Aunt who only nodded in response. Harry was too frantic to notice the gesture. He knew he only had fifteen minutes before Vernon would come down and demand his meal.

"Why don't you cook your own meal!" Peter cried. The others looked at him weirdly, "What? Only you guys can be outraged?"

Moving around as he was, Harry had to bite back a cry out with the pain flaring from his leg and ribs. He couldn't take any punishments today. His stomach was queasy, his head was swimming and it hurt to think let alone move. If he looked half as bad as he felt Uncle Vernon was bound to notice.

"I doubt that," Remus muttered.

Luckily, Harry managed to finish just as Vernon and Dudley entered the kitchen. Both of them were too engrossed in eating to notice their cook was on the verge of passing out. Knowing better than to disturb their meal Harry left the kitchen and sat down on the bottom step of the staircase.

"What should we have the boy do today, Petunia?" Uncle Vernon asked bitterly. "We can't afford any of his freakiness now. Keeping him busy has kept him out of trouble."

"Why don't you try to let him rest and be in peace? Didn't you know that abuse is a sure way to make a child do accidental magic," Remus reasoned.

"I don't think he knows that Moony. Or cares," Sirius pointed out.

Harry shook his head slowly. He should have known they would be talking about him the moment he left the room. It's not like he could do any magic and they knew that so what were they so worried about?

"Did you even look at him this morning?" asked Aunt Petunia. "He's ill, Vernon. I think we should give him a day's rest."

"Finally, they show some humanity," James sighed in relief.

I don't want *those* people here asking questions. It's bad enough we have to put up with *him*."

"Spoke too soon James," Remus shook his head in disgust.

Figuring he would be in trouble for listening, Harry slowly stood up and hobbled upstairs to his room. He needed to look like he was keeping busy. Slowly, Harry made his bed and started to clean up what little mess he had made. He was gasping for breath out of pain when he heard a knock on the door.

Turning around, Harry saw Aunt Petunia standing in the door way. "You have the day off," she said shortly. "Take advantage of it and don't make Vernon regret his generosity."

"Oh, how mighty generous of him. I think he should get the Noble peace prize," Peter said.

"The what?" Sirius asked.

"Muggle award, quite important." He answered.

Harry couldn't help but let out a relieved sigh. "Yes Aunt Petunia," he said obediently. He stood there until she left then retreated to his bed without even bothering to change back into pajamas. He was just too tired.

Covering up, Harry wanted nothing more than to fall asleep but his mind quickly drifted to Midnight. He had no idea where the dog was and couldn't chance looking for him without

arising suspicion. Harry had to admit that Midnight was certainly a smart dog but he doubted the dog would know to avoid Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia or Dudley.

"Believe me, I do"

Slowly drifting off, Harry didn't even notice his left arm falling off the bed until something wet touched it. Groggy and confused, he reached under his head and felt the furry face of Midnight. Harry let out a sigh of relief. Midnight hadn't left after all.

"Hey boy," Harry said in a soft and sleepy voice. "I'm sorry I didn't bring you up any food. Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you Harry. I know they are awful, awful people that won't even let *you* eat, never mind your dog. Don't worry rest, while I figure out a way to get us out of there," Sirius said patting the paper on Remus hand as if he was patting Harry.

"It's sure taking you a lot of time to figure that out," James mumbled annoyed, Sirius glared at him.

A wet tongue licked his hand making Harry laugh. "Thanks Midnight. I'm really tired. Please stay out of sight, okay?"

Midnight licking his hand was the last thing Harry felt before falling asleep.

"BOY! GET UP NOW!"

A flash of pain across his face shocked Harry awake. His eyes opened quickly to see a blurry version of his uncle seething with anger. He was soaked with sweat and his entire body ached. It took Harry a moment to realize he was on the floor. His room was barely lit meaning darkness had fallen. He had slept through the entire day!

"He's striking my son! Stop that!"

"James, you're chocking me," Sirius coughed and James released him.

"Sorry."

Midnight!

Harry couldn't believe he had slept so long. Slowly turning his head, Harry saw the large black dog still hiding under the bed and let out a sigh of relief. At least Midnight was still safe.

"WHAT THE HELL YOU'RE HIDING FOR? DO SOMETHING!" Remus yelled and the others looked cautiously at him. Remus never yells.

"Ok. Relax. I am sure I will do something," Sirius patted Remus arm softly.

Returning his attention to his uncle, Harry tried to sit up but his screaming ribs wouldn't let him. He grabbed his chest in pain and looked up at his Uncle nervously. What could he have done to make Vernon so upset? Aunt Petunia said he had the day off, Midnight was still in hiding and he had been in his room all day.

"Wh—what did I do?" Harry asked in confusion.

Wrong thing to ask.

WHACK!

"Stop that!" the boys cried.

Harry's face went numb with pain as his vision blurred more than usual. He tasted blood in his mouth and spit it out. It took Harry a moment to realize that was what was wrong. He hadn't done anything. Uncle Vernon was in one of his moods again and nothing he said or did would satisfy the whale of a man.

A large hand grabbed Harry by the neck and lifted him off the floor. "YOU PATHETIC LITTLE FREAK!" Vernon shouted as he shook the boy. "YOU SELFISH, UNGRATEFUL BRAT! I GAVE YOU THE DAY, *THE DAY*, OFF AND THIS IS HOW YOU THANK US! WHY YOU COULDN'T HAVE DIED WITH YOUR SAD EXCUSE OF PARENTS IS BEYOND ME!"

"Hey, don't insult my Lily and STOP HITTING MY SON!" James yelled.

The sound of a deep growl from underneath the bed distracted Uncle Vernon. Harry's head was swimming in dizziness and confusion. He wanted nothing more than to pass out so he couldn't feel the unbearable pain he was in anymore.

"He's going to die!" James yelled.

The next thing Harry knew he was flying backwards into the wall. Looking up, Harry saw a black blur attack the large blur that was Uncle Vernon.

"Finally!" the four boys sighed.

Harry wanted to shout at Midnight to stop but couldn't find the strength. His eyes closed as his head pounded. Thinking became too difficult and moving at all was certainly out of the question.

Had Harry been paying attention, he would have noticed the black blur of Midnight change shape into a man with long black hair. "Hello Dursley," the once dog said coldly. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a familiar looking wand. "From what I see this is well overdue."

Vernon stumbled backwards towards the door. "You—you're one of those freaks!" he stuttered fearfully. "How—how—"

"Very perceptive of you Dursley," Remus growled.

The man took a step forward and smiled evilly. "*Petrificus Totalus*," he said simply then watched as Vernon's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board. "I would kill you but I can't take the chance of Harry being blamed for it. Oh, one more thing, *Obliviate! Stupefy!*"

"We knew you'd save him," Peter said to Sirius. James was hugging Sirius and thanking him. Sirius was patting his back.

Pocketing the wand, the man hurried to Harry's side only to see the boy was knocked out. He counted his blessings then quickly packed up Harry's belongings into his trunk (making sure to gather everything under the loose floorboards Harry had showed him a few days ago). The only thing left out was Harry's invisibility cloak.

"He has my cloak. How did he get it?" James asked.

Once he had shrunk the trunk and pocketed it, the man moved over to the bruised and battered child. He really didn't want to chance injuring the boy more but he didn't really have much of a choice. Harry needed medical attention.

"Yes, he does. Take him to St. Mungo's, hurry" Remus urged the book.

As carefully as possible, he picked Harry up then covered the both of them with the invisibility cloak. He couldn't risk anyone seeing either of them. Holding the boy tightly, the man spared one last hateful glance at Vernon Dursley then left.

Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk tackling the never ending paperwork as he did every summer. Much was demanded of the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and this summer wasn't any different. His 'advice' was constantly needed by Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic'; especially since news of the incident at Azkaban Prison.

A prisoner escaping was indeed nerve wracking since it was believed to be impossible but

"Someone escaped Azkaban?" Peter asked fretfully.

what was more unsettling was who had escaped. Sirius Black,

Remus stopped reading and looked unbelieving at the book while the others yelled:

"What?"

"That's wrong! What would I be doing in Azkaban?"

"Hum, I think we better stop reading," Remus tried to solve the problem, "Who's up for a game of Gobstones?"

"I don't want Gobstones! I wanna know what Padfoot was doing in Azkaban?" James said angrily.

"It's not pretty," Remus winced.

"Read on," Sirius demanded.

a traitor and Death Eater,

"No, I am not! That book is lying. I'd never join Voldemort! I ran away from all that!"

had been locked up for twelve years in the dreaded prison and was believed to be insane.

"Well, he was never sane to begin with," Remus pointed out trying to lighten the mood with humor. By the look on Sirius face his attempt failed miserably.

Well, he was believed to be insane before entering the prison so Dumbledore could only imagine what he was like now.

The sound of a *pop* from his fireplace forced Dumbledore to quickly turn around and see the face of a worried Cornelius Fudge looking at him. Stealing a glance at the clock, Dumbledore couldn't help but be concerned. Four o'clock in the morning was certainly not a usual time for a chat.

"I chat at any time," James said.

"We know that," Remus rolled his eyes annoyed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" James asked.

"That sometimes we like to sleep," Sirius said slowly. He was rewarded with a pillow.

Positioning himself a little more comfortably in front of the fire, Dumbledore let out a sigh knowing he was about to receive some rather bad news. "Is there something on your mind, Cornelius?" he asked pleasantly.

"Sirius Black was sighted last night," Fudge said nervously. "I just received the notice from the Improper Use of Magic Office, Underage Section."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. He really didn't like where this conversation was going. "Meaning an underage witch or wizard spotted him,"

"No! Meaning I saved Harry's life and therefore cannot be a Death Eater!" Sirius snapped at the book.

he concluded. "Where, may I ask, was he spotted?"

Fudge was clearly fidgeting now. His eyes refused to look into Dumbledore's. "He was spotted at Privet Drive, Surrey," he said at last. "At Number Four, to be more precise."

Dumbledore leaned forward, concern obviously present on his face. "Is Harry alright?" he asked quickly. He knew the wards around the Dursley household were strong but he couldn't help worrying.

"No, he is not alright. And I saved him. If I was a big bad Death Eater I would have killed him not saved him!" Sirius shouted.

"He does have a point," James said and the others nodded in agreement.

The silence in the room was deafening. "Harry Potter's missing, Albus," Fudge said at last. "It appeared that Black attacked Vernon Dursley then took the boy. Potter's blood was found in his room. I have started to organize a search for both Potter and Black but I'm afraid I haven't a clue of where to look."

"Oh, now you're looking. Why didn't you look when my son was being abused?"

"How long ago did this happen?" Dumbledore asked gravely.

"Between five and six hours ago," Fudge answered. "I already have Aurors looking in the usual places but Black could be anywhere by now. From the investigation it was determined that Potter's wand had been used but Dursley claimed that it had been Black using it, not Potter."

"I can't imagine Harry willingly giving his wand to a stranger," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "What else did Mr. Dursley say?"

Fudge appeared to be extremely nervous again. "Dursley wasn't very forthcoming, especially to the Aurors who were there," he admitted. "After some—er—persuasion, Dursley admitted that he had been punishing the boy when Black attacked him. He was abusing Potter, Albus."

"Ha! Finally noticed did you. Too little too late now!" Remus mumbled.

Dumbledore closed his eyes as the realization of the Minister's words hit him. Harry was being abused and probably had been for some time. "Very well," he said at last as he opened his eyes and looked at Fudge's floating head in the fire. "I want Vernon Dursley arrested for child abuse. I also want to bring someone in to help us with this. He knows Sirius Black better than we do.

"Who?" Peter asked Remus shrugged.

I will also need a few Aurors at my disposal in the chance we uncover something and need to move quickly. I suggest Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks."

"Nymphadora Tonks? Did he say Nymphadora Tonks?" Sirius asked James who nodded. "That's Andy's baby. They want Andy's baby to arrest me?"

"Well, that certainly is a conflict of interest," Remus said.

Nymphadora Tonks hadn't finished her training yet but she was a relative of Black and right now Dumbledore needed every advantage he could get.

"Of course," Fudge said quickly. "Whatever you need. Harry Potter's safety is the utmost priority now. I trust you'll keep me informed on any developments?"

Dumbledore only nodded in response. He bid farewell to the Minister then immediately got to work, his paperwork forgotten. He contacted a few members of the 'old crowd' and filled them in on the dilemma, including his source to understand Sirius Black. Dumbledore could only pray that Harry wasn't hurt or worse.

"I would never hurt James' son. A puppy Marauder. Our Pronglet. You're all insane," Sirius said crossing his arms defensively.

Chapter 3

Unbelievable Revelations

The search for Harry Potter covered the front page of the 'Daily Prophet'. Harry's home life was fortunately left out but the declaration that he was taken by Sirius Black left the entire wizarding community in an uproar. Fudge had been forced to admit that Harry Potter knew nothing of Sirius Black or the convict's past which angered even more. Howlers were sent to every division in the Ministry. Everyone felt it was their place to voice their opinion in the upbringing of their savior.

"How is he their savior?" Peter asked.

"Don't know," Remus shrugged, "maybe this has to do with that boy-who-lived thing."

"And the basilisk," Sirius remembered.

"And Voldemort," James put in his two knuts. Peter flinched.

Now, unlike the summer holidays for the past twelve years, Hogwarts was a noisy place to be. It had been established as headquarters for Dumbledore's unit in the search for Harry Potter and Sirius Black but very few knew about it. Those involved consisted of the Hogwarts staff, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Alastor Moody (a retired Auror), Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks, as well as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus Lupin.

Sirius threw himself on Remus lap and pointed at the passage, "That's you Moony. You're a teacher. Professor Moony!"

"Yes Sirius, thank you very much. I can read for myself," Remus said pushing him away annoyed.

"Who in their right mind hires a Marauder as a teacher?" Peter asked.

"Dumbledore," three voices chorused.

"That explains it," Peter mumbled.

Not many people knew much about Lupin other than he supposedly knew Black

"Wait a minute. *Moony* is Dumbledore's *expert*?" James asked.

"Yes, he'll tell everyone they're wrong!" Sirius said excitedly. Remus looked uncertain.

before the convict joined Voldemort

"No, I didn't!"

and that Professor Severus Snape hated him.

"Well, who doesn't he hate?" Remus mumbled.

Everyone noticed the hateful glares and the snide comments but what amazed everyone was how calm and collected Lupin was. The man hadn't acted out once to the childish behavior where several wanted to on Lupin's behalf.

"Yes, because I am a better man than Snivellus," Remus said triumphantly.

"Calling him Snivellus argues against that," Peter pointed out and was rewarded by three glares.

Sitting through another meeting like they had for the past two days, the members of this unit couldn't help but be frustrated. Every possible hideout had been investigated and every contact had been questioned. It was almost like the missing convict and child had vanished off of the face of the earth.

"Where did you take my son Sirius?!" James demanded and Sirius looked lost.

Dumbledore was about to call the meeting to order when a light brown owl flew into the Main Hall and dropped a letter in a blue envelope in front of the old man. All conversation ceased as Dumbledore moved to open the letter but it moved on its own. A deep sarcastic voice filled the hall.

"So you all have finally noticed your precious savior is missing. Did it ever occur to you to check on this child that so many have placed the fate of the world on?"

"Apparently not," James mumbled.

I can assure you that if I hadn't interfered, Harry would probably be dead by now. What was going through your thick head when you placed him with the Dursleys? THEY HATE MAGIC!!!!

"A little bit of information that you have failed to notice: Harry is treated like a slave by those people! He is abused and neglected. HE HAS BEEN FOR YEARS! Did any of you even bother to notice the signs?!?"

"No!" four voices shouted.

"And by the way, I know all about Harry's confrontations with Voldemort. This boy is barely a teenager and he already believes it is his responsibility to save everyone from that vile creature. A troll? A possessed Defense teacher? An enchanted diary in the hands of a little girl? A BASILISK? ALBUS DUMBLEDORE ARE YOU EVEN TRYING TO PROTECT MY GODSON!?"

"No!" James, Remus and Peter answered and Sirius said elated:

"I am a godfather. I am Harry's godfather. Thank you James," he hugged his friend.

"Of course you are."

"A word to the wise, I will be watching. If any harm comes to my godson I won't hesitate in taking him away, this time permanently. Harry deserves a childhood, not to be stuck in an abusive household and fighting for his life every year. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!!!"

"You will find my godson at the Leaky Cauldron, Room 13. I suggest you bring Madam Pomfrey with you as well as someone who can protect Harry where you and the Ministry have failed. Dursley was able to break a few bones before I intervened."

"An angry godfather."

"Very, very angry!" Sirius exclaimed, "What?" he asked Peter who was gawking him.

"You sent Dumbledore a howler. You sent Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mumgump, most powerful wizard ever, a howler."

"My hero," James said putting a hand on his heart and pretending to fawn over Sirius who blushed and glared at a laughing Remus.

The letter folded up and slowly lowered until it rested on the table. Silence now filled the hall as everyone waited for Dumbledore's reaction and the Headmaster of Hogwarts didn't disappoint. Slowly, he stood up and looked at the group of people watching him. His face was stern; his body was stiff. Dumbledore was angry.

"Minerva, I need you to go to St. Mungo's and inform Poppy of the situation," Dumbledore said at last in a grave voice. "Meet us at the Leaky Cauldron. Kingsley, Nymphadora, Alastor, Arthur and Remus. I need you to come with me to the Leaky Cauldron. I don't know what condition Harry will be in so I need the rest of you to prepare the Hospital Wing for an injured teenager."

Professor Minerva McGonagall hurried out of the Main Hall followed by everyone who wasn't accompanying Dumbledore. The group involved in the rescue mission crowded around Dumbledore who picked up a goblet and turned it into a portkey. Everyone reached out, touched the goblet and after a moment felt a tug behind their navel taking them to their destination.

The landed hard in the Leaky Cauldron and immediately pulled out their wands. Alastor Moody, who had a magical eye which was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye – and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness, scanned the building. "He's there, Albus," Moody growled. "He's alone."

"How does he know?" Peter asked.

"I think the magical eye can see through things," Remus explained.

Dumbledore nodded. "Remus, Arthur, if you will," he said but both men knew it wasn't a request and followed. Quickly yet calmly,

"How can you be quick and calm?" Sirius asked.

"I can't", James answered.

"We know," Remus muttered, James glared at him.

Dumbledore walked up the stairs and continued on until reaching room thirteen. He quickly checked the door for defensive spells but found none.

After a soft *Alohamora*, Dumbledore slowly opened the door to find a dark room. The drapes were pulled, blocking any sunlight from entering. The scent of blood filled the air. Labored breathing filled their ears. At that moment the three men knew Sirius Black hadn't been exaggerating when he requested Madam Pomfrey's presence.

"He's dying. Help my son!"

"*Lumos*," Mr. Weasley said softly, allowing light from his wand to fill the room.

The sight before them forced all three men to gasp. Lying in bed underneath a mountain of blankets was a bruised, battered and extremely ill Harry Potter. Lupin and Mr. Weasley instantly rushed to the bedside and what they saw only made them cringe.

The entire left side of Harry's face was badly bruised and swollen. He was biting his lower lip to prevent his soft whimpers of pain from escaping his lips. His hair was soaked with sweat but he was shivering. Hesitantly, Mr. Weasley gently touched Harry's forehead and confirmed what he already suspected. Harry had a fever which was dangerously high.

"Take him to a hospital!" Remus urged.

"Ah, Moony, they already called Madam Pomfrey," Peter pointed out. Remus looked relieved.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked nervously as he touched the boy's arm.

The reaction was instant. Both men jumped back in shock as Harry flinched then cried out in pain before covering his head with his arms in an attempt to protect himself. "S—sorry!" Harry whimpered. "D—don't hurt Midnight! Please Uncle!"

"He's delusional," Sirius said.

"Arthur, Remus, hold him still," Dumbledore instructed as he quickly joined the two men at Harry's bedside. "He'll only injure himself further."

Lupin pulled down Harry's arms while Mr. Weasley held Harry's legs.

"Why do I get called by my last name and the Weasley guy gets a Mr.?" Remus asked.

"Don't know?" Peter answered.

"Because no one in their right mind would call a Marauder; Mr.," Sirius said.

"McGonagall does, she's always saying; Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, detention," James said imitating McGonagall. The other three boys cringed at the mention of She-Who-Must-Not-be-Named.

They made certain to hold the boy loosely so not to cause any additional pain. Dumbledore let out a sigh and pointed his wand at child. "*Ennervate*," he said softly.

Harry's eyes opened partially, not really focusing on anything. His mind was a clouded mess and hurt badly but Harry could feel hands holding his arms and legs still to know that he wasn't alone. A cold hand gently touched his forehead making him shiver. Slowly, Harry turned his head to see an overabundance of white and gasped which was a mistake. His ribs screamed in pain forcing Harry to cry out.

In an instant Harry's arms were free as his covers were slowly lowered. "Harry, you need to relax," Dumbledore said in a soothing voice. "Can you tell me the last thing you remember?"

Harry was still stuck on the fact that Professor Dumbledore was in his room. "P'fessor?" he asked groggily. "W—what are—you have to go. Please, if Uncle Vernon—"

"No, Harry. They're there to help. Tell them everything," Remus urged.

"Don't worry about your Uncle, Harry," Mr. Weasley interrupted in a caring voice. "You're safe now, away from him."

"What?" Harry asked. His brain seemed to be processing rather slowly to comprehend everything. He tried to look around but moving his head but that only made his headache worse. "Where..."

"That, that, *man* caused brain damage to my son!"

Another spark of pain from his ribs caused Harry to cry out again as tears escaped his eyes. He had never felt pain like this before. Every second felt like an eternity. At that moment Harry didn't care about his secret. He didn't care that Professor Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley now knew about the punishments. He just wanted the pain to stop.

"Make the pain stop!" The boys shouted.

Harry felt someone lifting up his shirt then touch his chest gently. "There are at least three broken ribs," an unfamiliar voice announced. "Any movement could damage an organ."

The sound of hurried footsteps alerted everyone. Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley moved towards the door, ready to protect Harry if necessary while Lupin sat down on the edge of Harry's bed and took hold of the boy's hand. It was clear that the boy was scared and had a good reason to be. He had absolutely no idea what was going on.

"Harry, I know you're in pain but you need to remain still and relaxed," Lupin said gently.
"How long have your ribs been hurting?"

"Er—three weeks, I think," Harry mumbled. "Um—who are you?"

"What do you mean who is he? He's Moony. Moony why doesn't my son know you?" Remus shrugged.

"My name is Remus Lupin, Harry," the man said softly. "I'm the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"And your Uncle Moony! Introduce yourself properly Moony!" James demanded.

The footsteps stopped at the doorway. Harry couldn't find the strength to turn his head. He could feel himself losing the battle to simply stay awake. Closing his eyes, Harry barely heard the familiar voices conversing before the visitors hurried back to his bedside. He could feel himself drifting in and out of consciousness, especially when pain was involved.

Slowly, those instances became fewer allowing Harry the peaceful darkness he hadn't experienced since he had returned to Privet Drive. He was oblivious to his surroundings despite whoever was making a ruckus. He missed the Minister's tantrum as well as several other Ministry employees who demanded Harry's statement to help in the search for Sirius Black.

It was difficult for many to even consider Black's actions being anything but insane. Why would someone go through all of the trouble to abduct a boy, the-boy-who-lived at that, only to simply let him go? It was obvious that Black had some other agenda and Harry Potter was in the middle of it.

"Because you're all wrong about me!" the others did have to agree that Sirius had saved Harry.

Disclaimer: I do not own the Harry Potter Series or their characters.

I also do not own the Midnight Series.

A/N: People have wondered why Sirius returned Harry. All will be revealed later.

"What's an A/N?" Peter asked.

"No idea?" James answered.

"Looks like a note from the author," Remus said.

"Why would the author leave a note?" Peter asked, he was ignored.

Chapter 4

Introductions

The sound of soft voices brought Harry out of his slumber. Opening his eyes, Harry was instantly blinded by brightness and had to close them again. He rolled over on his side and was shocked to find that he didn't feel any pain. Something wasn't right. Harry remembered his punishment. He remembered the pain. He remembered Midnight.

Harry's eyes opened again as he quickly sat up. Everything was a blur but he didn't care. Midnight was *his* dog no matter what anyone said. He needed to find Midnight and make sure the dog was all right.

"Don't worry Harry, I am sure I am fine."

Easier said than done. Harry was about to jump out of bed when those present in the room became aware of Harry's consciousness. He was still a little disoriented and not being able to see properly didn't help matters. Hands grabbed his upper arms, preventing him from leaving his bed while several others were saying words that didn't make any sense. It was as if they were speaking a completely different language to him.

"Speak English people!" Peter cried.

"Ah, Wormtail. I think they are, but Harry's nervous and isn't paying attention. That's just an expression," Remus explained.

"Oh."

Despite how illogical it appeared Harry kept fighting to break free of the strong hands holding him down until his body went limp and all of his will to fight left him. He suddenly felt exhausted but knew he couldn't fall asleep. He still needed to find Midnight.

"Harry?" a familiar voice called out through the haze of Harry's mind. It took the confused boy a long moment to figure out that it was Professor Dumbledore talking to him. "Harry, you need to stay calm. Do you understand?"

"Of course he does. Are you calling my son thick?" James said outraged.

"He's just trying to help," Remus said calmly.

"Why are you always defending Dumbledore Moony?" Peter asked, Remus just shrugged.

Slowly, Harry nodded as he tried to focus on the white blur that was Professor Dumbledore. He had so many questions but couldn't seem to gather enough strength to voice them. He wanted to know where they were but didn't really care as long as he was away from Privet Drive. He wanted to ask what had happened but had the strange feeling that he really didn't want to know.

There was, however, one thing Harry desperately wanted to know and could voice. "Where's Midnight?" he asked in a raspy voice.

A gently hand rested on the boy's forehead. "Who's Midnight, Harry?" Dumbledore asked softly but there was a definite edginess to the man's voice. It was almost like the old man feared whatever Harry's answer may be.

"Don't tell them Harry," Sirius cried.

"Why not?" James asked.

"Don't know," Sirius shrugged, "You should never tell teachers everything. Marauder rule number one."

The others nodded.

"My dog," Harry said nervously. He really didn't like where this was going. What if something had happened to Midnight, his one friend that he could tell anything? "Please...he was only trying to protect me from Uncle Vernon. D—did something happen to him?"

There was a brief silence which only increased Harry's anxiety. "Harry, we didn't take you away from your Aunt and Uncle,"

"No, I did. 'Cause if we waited for you incompetent fools to act Harry would be dead by now. Dead!" Sirius muttered angrily. The others stared at him. "What?"

"You just sounded like your future self's howler," James said and Peter and Remus nodded.

Dumbledore said carefully. "We will get to that later but first I was hoping you could explain why you needed a dog to protect you from your uncle."

"Because he was being abused, you morons!" James yelled.

"Dumbledore is not a moron!" Remus retorted, "and he's asking to make Harry talk about his problem not because he doesn't know." James nodded fearful of angry Remus.

Harry instantly looked away. How was he supposed to tell Dumbledore that he couldn't even stand up to his own Uncle when he had faced Voldemort multiple times? What if Dumbledore and everyone else agreed with the man who had declared Harry as nothing more than a worthless freak?

"No, he's not," Remus urged Harry, "Dumbledore will understand you."

"Remus, Arthur, you may release him," Dumbledore said softly then handed over Harry's glasses and waited as the boy put them on. "Harry, please understand that we are not here to judge you. Despite what your uncle may have told you it is *not* right for an adult to strike a child. What I don't understand is why you never said anything to anyone."

"Because he was scared of what other people would think," Remus explained.

"Is that why you didn't tell us about your furry problem?" James asked and Remus nodded. Sirius hugged Remus and said.

"Silly Moony. We would never think badly of you because of that!" Remus smiled and Sirius continued, "We do however think badly of you for being a bookworm." James nodded in agreement and both him and Sirius received pillows to their faces. Nevertheless Remus' smile did not falter.

Feeling ashamed more than anything else, Harry rolled over on his left side and pulled his knees to his chest. He buried his face into his knees and prayed that the three men would take the hint. He didn't want to talk about his uncle right now. He wanted to know if Midnight was all right. That was all that mattered right now.

"Dumbledore, if you don't mind, I would like a word with Harry," Lupin said softly. "There's plenty of time to question him when he's feeling a little stronger."

"Yes, Moony will make everything alright," Sirius said knowingly.

"Of course Remus," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "I trust you will inform us on when that time arrives?"

Lupin nodded then took a seat at Harry's bedside as Dumbledore left followed by Mr. Weasley. It was then that Harry finally looked around and realized where he was: the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Harry was somewhat relieved and somewhat uneasy at this. He was glad that he wouldn't have people trying to seek in to the 'the-boy-who-lived' but why was he here instead of a regular hospital?

Remembering that he wasn't alone, Harry instantly grew nervous. Cautiously looking at his visitor, Harry noticed that the man called Remus was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes that had been patched in several places. He looked ill and exhausted but his face was certainly friendly. Though quite young, his light brown hair was flecked with gray.

"Well, honestly, that's not my fault. You try being a werewolf most of your life!"

"He's just describing you Moony. They have too," James patted his friend.

"All right," Lupin said breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I'm not sure if you remember our meeting a few days ago. Your fever was quite high. My name is Remus Lupin. I'm the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." Lupin cleared his throat. "I also knew your parents."

"Yes, and now he'll take you away from the Dursleys and raise you like you deserve," James exclaimed.

"Remus looked uneasy, "James, I am not allowed."

"What do you mean? Of course you are. That's my son and I say I want you to raise him."

"Yes, but the law says I can't."

"Oh," James looked crestfallen.

Harry stared at Lupin, his eyes begging for more information as he sat up. "You knew my parents?" he asked. The look of hope on his face could make even Professor Severus Snape crumble.

"Nothing can make Severus Snape crumble," Sirius stated.

Lupin let out a laugh. "Quite well," he answered then turned serious. "I was friends with your father since our first year here. I also knew you when you were a baby. I realize I probably have no right but I was hoping you would let me get to know you again. I want to be your friend, Harry, if that's possible."

"Of course that is. He'll be your best friend, just like his father," James stated, Remus smiled.

Harry was certainly shocked to say the least. He had never really had someone say they wanted to know him and not the-boy-who-lived. "Er—okay," he said uncertainly. "You'll tell me about my parents, right?"

"He's so starved for information about me."

"Of course," Lupin said with a smile. "We can trade off asking questions of you like and if I ask something you don't feel comfortable answering just tell me along with when you need a break. You were very ill and with your other injuries you need to take it slow for the next few days."

It sounded too good to be true. "You mean you're not going to force me to talk about my uncle?" Harry asked skeptically.

"Not if you don't want to," Lupin said sincerely. "This is not an interrogation. I believe many questions people currently have can be answered if we know more of who *you* are. I'll even start, all right?"

Harry nodded hesitantly, unsure of how act around a man who seemed so open and sincere. It suddenly hit Harry that this was his chance to really know the people his parents had been. *You are the friends you keep.*

"And I keep good friends," James said proudly. The other three boys sat a little straighter at that with smiles on their faces.

"As I said my name is Remus," Lupin started off. "I'm the new Defense teacher here which really isn't saying much considering who you've had the past two years." Harry let out a small laugh at this. "Yes, I know about Quirrell and Lockhart. If you want I can show you what I have planned for the school year and let you make up your mind about my teaching abilities later. Now, where was I? Oh yes, I'm embarrassed to admit that I have a slight chocolate addiction, especially at my age."

"Excuse me, *Slight chocolate addiction* were you not there the day James ate the last chocolate frog?" Sirius asked and James grimaced at the memory.

"At least he accepts that he's old," James said.

"Hey, I am not old!" Remus cried offended.

"Actually, we don't know how old you are so you may be," Peter pointed out.

"Yes, we do," Remus said, "Before the author said **"Though quite young"**. See, I am young", he pointed the passage. Sirius looked and said:

"The author also says **" , his light brown hair was flecked with gray."** So you're old."

"No, many people get gray her on their thirties. That's not uncommon. And I have to go through a full moon every month. I bet that counts too. I bet I am like twenty something."

"You can't be twenty something Moony. Harry's thirteen. And we're the same age. And I don't intend on becoming a father before I graduate so you have to be at least thirty one. And that's old."

Remus looked shocked at the thought but then remembered, "Well, I am not old alone. Sirius is too, and he's a couple of months older than me."

Now Sirius was the one looking shocked.

Speaking of chocolate, how about something to eat?"

The change in topic caught Harry completely off guard. It even took Harry a moment to register what the man had even said. Uncertain of how to answer, Harry just shrugged his shoulders and avoided Lupin's gaze even though he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten something substantial like normal teenagers.

"Harry, you're allowed to be hungry, you know," Lupin said carefully. "I just remembered that you hadn't eaten anything for a while and thought you might be hungry. I know I would be."

"Why doesn't he say he's hungry?" Peter asked.

"Because he's afraid he'll be punished," Remus explained.

Slowly looking up at Lupin, Harry didn't see any sign of anger. Concern, yes, but no anger whatsoever and was certainly relieved. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. "Maybe I'm a little hungry," Harry said nervously then quickly added, "but I can wait. It's not really that important—"

"Nonsense," Lupin said offhandedly. He snapped his fingers and turned to the house elf that appeared with a *pop*. "Mindy, could we perhaps get some breakfast? Something simple is fine."

"Yes, Professor, sir," Mindy said then vanished with a *pop*. A few seconds later she reappeared with two trays full of food. Apparently she didn't understand what simple meant or chose to ignore it.

"They just don't know what simple means," Peter said with a dreamy expression, "Gotta love Hogwarts house-elves."

Harry bit his lower lip to keep himself from making any comment that could possibly offend Professor Lupin so found it best to remain silent. He knew there was no possible way he could even eat half of what was on the tray that floated over to him. He hadn't eaten that much...well, ever.

"Thank you Mindy," Lupin said kindly. "That'll be all for now." Mindy bowed then vanished again. "Eat as much as you comfortably can, Harry," Lupin added, noticing Harry's nervousness. "House elves always seem to give us more than we could possibly eat."

They both ate in silence. Well, Harry tried to eat but found himself full after eating a few pieces of toast. Sipping on his pumpkin juice, Harry tried to think of something to say to break the silence but couldn't think of anything to say.

Professor Lupin was certainly attempting to be friendly; more than any adult Harry could remember knowing as a matter of fact. There was, however, a problem with this. Uncle Vernon's words continuously echoed in Harry's head. What if Professor Lupin believed Harry was a freak?

"He won't. I mean I won't. This is confusing," Remus said holding his head.

What if Professor Lupin had something against Parselmouths?

"Why would that matter? Are we getting philosophical?" James asked. Remus looked at him uncertain. And then at the book, he bit his lip and kept reading, dreading James reaction.

What if he was disappointed?

"Harry?" Lupin asked gently. "Is something wrong?"

Pulled out of his thoughts, Harry looked at Lupin nervously. He really didn't know how to ask someone if they were biased. "Um—well—I was just wondering—um—do you think a person is dark if they have an ability that's considered dark?" he asked softly.

"NO!" four voices shouted.

"Moony less of all," Sirius said looking at Moony, "I mean 'cause you know right, because of, you know."

"Moony?" Remus supplied and Sirius nodded.

Lupin stared at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "That's an interesting question and a difficult one," he said thoughtfully. "Many people *do* discriminate out of fear. I don't agree with the general public. Yes, we all have darkness inside us but there's also goodness that can overpower the dark. I think I can understand more than anyone never to judge a book by its cover. May I inquire to why you asked such a question?"

Harry looked away apprehensively. Professor Lupin had given him the right answer but that didn't mean Harry was ready to trust the man with everything. "Well, you told me about yourself so I figured I needed to do the same," Harry said softly, still avoiding Lupin's gaze. "It's just that...I mean..."

Lupin put his tray down and moved so he was sitting at the foot of Harry's bed. "How about we start from the beginning and go from there?" he proposed. "Whatever you feel comfortable with."

With a nod, Harry gave Lupin an overview of what he had been through. He gave a very brief outline of his life before Hogwarts (omitting anything that could anger the man). He continued into his first year (again omitting the majority of the hardships he endured). Then, he concluded with his second year which included confessing that he could speak to snakes.

"He can WHAT?!" James yelled.

"I thought we agreed that a person is not dark because they have a dark ability?" Remus stated plainly giving James a stern look.

"Yes, I know. I was just shocked to find out my son is a parselmouth. I don't care." Remus looked skeptical.

Biting his lower lip, Harry braved a glance at the friend of his parents and was surprised to see sympathy on the man's face, not rejection.

"Of course I wouldn't reject you. You have to be a moron to think just because someone is a parselmouth they are dark," Remus stated pointedly glaring at James who had the dignity of looking properly shamed.

He was unable to take Professor Lupin's gaze for long and had to look away. He really didn't like anyone feeling sorry for him.

"Harry, I don't believe for a second that you could possibly be dark," Professor Lupin said gently. "I take it your classmates didn't take this revelation well."

Harry shook his head. "They thought I was the heir of Slytherin sending a basilisk on muggle-borns and petrifying them," he said softly. "It's not like I can control it. I just see a snake and it all sounds like English to me."

"So as long as you don't use it to hurt someone you have nothing to worry about,"

"Exactly," Remus exclaimed.

Lupin concluded. "It seems like you're having a hard time dealing with how *you* feel about this. How *do* you feel about being able to talk to snakes?"

Harry let out a sigh as his shoulders slumped forward. "I hate it," he admitted. "I hate that there's a part of Voldemort in me.

"Excuse me. What now? How did a part of Voldemort get into my son?" James asked worriedly. The others shrugged helplessly.

Why can't I just be normal? It's not like I asked to be a freak."

"You're not a freak!" James shouted, "I am going to kill those muggles."

Lupin moved a little closer to Harry, his body suddenly tense. "Who ever said you were a freak?" he asked protectively.

Realizing he had said too much, Harry instantly paled and covered his mouth. This was why he didn't want to tell anyone about what happened at Privet Drive. He didn't want to make anyone angry. Mentally cursing himself, Harry tried to quickly think of a believable lie so the matter would be dropped.

"Harry, I'm not mad at you," Lupin said softly. "I just don't understand why someone would even say something like that. You are *not* a freak. I give you my word as a wizard and friend to your parents."

Harry finally looked at Professor Lupin with unshed tears in his eyes. It sounded too good to be true. For as long as he could remember Harry wanted nothing more than to be normal and here there was finally someone telling him what he so desperately needed to hear.

"Because you are normal," Sirius cried.

Once again Lupin moved closer to Harry but was still far enough away for the boy to be comfortable. "I can understand if you don't want to talk about it but as much as you don't want to admit it their treatment towards you has affected who you are," he said gently. "No one wants to pressure you but if it was as bad as we think then we want to do everything in our power to make sure you never have to go back there."

"Yes!" the four boys chorused.

"See, I told you Moony would make everything alright," Sirius said triumphantly.

Professor Lupin's declaration caught Harry off guard at first but endless questions, questions he had asked himself every time the conditions were bad, entered his mind and kept him levelheaded. "But where would I go?" he asked. "I have no other family and everyone else has lives of their own."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Lupin said encouragingly. "No one deserves that sort of life. I don't care who they are."

"Yes, we'll find a way. I mean they," Remus said.

Harry didn't want to get his hopes up but he couldn't help it. The mere thought of never returning to the Dursleys and their hatred was one of the few wishes he had. There was only one problem with the situation. "But what about Midnight?" Harry asked uncertainly. "He must be so hungry and lost."

"Oh, he's worried about me. How sweet," Sirius said patting the paper, "Don't be. I'm Ok."

Lupin smiled, apparently amused by the boy's attachment to an animal. "How long have you had a dog?" he asked.

"Er—about a week," Harry answered. "I found him trying to sleep in the bushes in the backyard. He wasn't like most dogs I've met. He was nice to me." Seeing Professor Lupin's shocked face, Harry looked away, suddenly feeling ashamed of blindly trusting a strange animal so quickly. "He protected me," he added in a soft voice.

"Oh, no! Moony figured it out," Sirius said biting his lip.

"So this dog is a stray," Lupin said distantly. "What does he look like, Harry? Does he look like a grim?"

"Say no!" Sirius cried.

"He'd be lying then," James said.

"Who cares?" Sirius cried.

Harry looked Professor Lupin, obviously confused. "What's a grim?" he asked. It was times like these when Harry hated being so ignorant of the wizarding world but it wasn't like he had anyone to teach him.

Lupin bit his lower lip as he suddenly looked nervous. Harry really didn't like that look. He didn't understand what the big deal was. Midnight would never hurt him, Harry just knew it.

"Yes, I wouldn't hurt you."

"Is Midnight, as you call him, a very large black dog with blue eyes?" Professor Lupin asked cautiously.

"Oh, bugger," Sirius muttered.

Harry let out a disappointed sigh. He should have known having a companion like Midnight had been too good to last. "Oh, is he yours?" he asked as his gaze fell. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take him away from you. He was just the only company I had that didn't hate me. "

The boys winced at that.

Lupin winced at the comment, learning more about Harry's home life than even the boy realized. "He never did anything to you?" he asked gently. "He never hurt you in anyway?"

"Of course I didn't," Sirius said glaring at Remus.

Harry shook his head. "He just listened," he said softly. "I—I was frustrated. I didn't like having to work all hours of the day while the Dursleys did nothing. Midnight felt familiar like from a forgotten memory or something like that. I don't know any other way to explain it. He's my friend."

"Which was what you desperately needed," Lupin said in an understanding tone. "I'm not reprimanding you Harry. I'm just curious. Most people would not consider an overly large dog like that a friend. How did you manage to keep a dog like that without your aunt and uncle finding out?"

"Because I am smart and helped him, and love him and am not a crazy Death Eater like you people keep saying. And I thought my so called *friend* would know that," Sirius said angrily.

Remus looked apologetically, "We don't know what happened. Why I don't believe you. Let's just keep reading."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't hard," he said nonchalantly. "The Dursleys were gone all day leaving me home alone. Midnight stayed outside until after they went to bed then I snuck him into my room. Since I had to make breakfast every morning, I let him out before the Dursleys were awake."

Professor Lupin smiled as he stood up. "Very clever," he said. "You should probably get some rest. We can talk more later, including a few stories about your parents. I'll talk to Dumbledore about Midnight, all right?"

"You can't tell Dumbledore about me Moony. We promised remember? Our Marauders' secret."

"Apparently I am going too," Remus looked shocked at the thought.

Harry couldn't help but smile. He had to admit it felt good to have someone treating him with some sort of parental affection. Mrs. Weasley was great but she was *Ron's* mother. She had enough on her plate already to worry about an orphan boy. "Promise?" Harry asked hopefully.

Lupin gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I promise," he said.

Suddenly feeling tired, Harry laid down and turned on his side to be comfortable as Professor Lupin tucked him in. Being tucked in by a near stranger should have felt weird but not to Harry. He already felt closer to Professor Lupin than to nearly every adult he knew. There was just something about the man that Harry felt he could relate to.

Closing his eyes, Harry felt Lupin gently take off his glasses and brushed a few stray bangs out of the boy's eyes. The simple touch felt familiar but Harry couldn't remember from where.

"Of course you know Moony. He was there when you were born," James exclaimed.

"So nice of you to tuck him in Moony," Sirius said and Remus blushed.

Feeling too relaxed to worry about it, Harry allowed himself to slowly drift off into a peaceful sleep.

The moment Remus Lupin noticed Harry was indeed asleep, he rushed out of the hospital wing to Dumbledore's office. Harry had told him enough to know that the life of Harry Potter wasn't what everyone perceived. He certainly wasn't pampered and adored. He was a lonely and confused boy who needed someone to love him for who he was.

"Yes, and you'll be that person," James said.

"Me too," Sirius cried.

"Actually Sirius," Remus started.

"If anyone here mentions the lies this people are telling I am going to hit them," Sirius said through greeted teeth.

"Thus, proving their theory," Peter mumbled. He got a pillow to his face.

After quickly muttering the password, Remus continued up the stairs and entered Professor Dumbledore's office to see the Headmaster had company. Minerva McGonagall was sitting next to a distraught Molly Weasley while Arthur Weasley was softly conversing with Dumbledore. Remus didn't like this scene at all.

"Who is that woman and why is she distraught?" Peter asked.

"She's Ron's mother," Remus supplied.

"Who's this Ron they keep talking about?" Peter asked.

"He's the friend that made the phone call," James answered.

"Well then she should be distraught," Peter finished.

"Headmaster, has something happened?" Lupin asked curiously.

Dumbledore turned his attention to the young teacher. "Remus, please come in," he said pleasantly. "We were just discussing arrangements for Harry. Perhaps you could add your input. I trust the two of you had an interesting conversation."

"You have no idea", Remus mumbled

Lupin nodded. "You have no idea,"

"Moony, you agree with yourself," Sirius said the others looked at him worried for his IQ status.

he said as he sat down aside McGonagall. "It's disconcerting to meet a boy who's changed so drastically. The baby Harry I remember was a loved and happy boy.

"Yes, because I was a loving father. And I bet my sweet Lily was the best mother ever!"

This Harry is anything but. Were you aware of the verbal and emotional abuse the Dursleys had inflicted on him?"

"No!" Sirius said.

"Abuse?" Professor McGonagall asked in alarm as she sat up straight. "What are you talking about, Remus?"

Looking at each of the adults, Remus realized that none of them had any idea of Harry Potter's actual life. "Well I can't say I'm not surprised," he said matter-of-factly. "We were just talking and Harry let a few things slip. Apparently, Vernon Dursley has instilled on Harry that he's nothing more than a freak. He was afraid to admit that he's a Parselmouth because of the reaction he received from his classmates last year. The boy has no self confidence what-so-ever. He believes that he's a burden to everyone. I assume that is partially the reason why he has never said anything about the abuse."

"He is so different from his father who could use with a little less self confidence," Remus said and the other three nodded until James realized what he was nodding to and said, "Hey!"

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk, the twinkle absent from his eyes. Arthur Weasley sat down beside his wife and took her hand. Molly Weasley was clearly in tears but it was McGonagall who surprised Remus. The woman was staring at Dumbledore with a fury in her eyes that the young man had never seen before. It was almost scary.

"Uhh, Minnie is mad," Sirius said.

"I don't think she appreciates when you call her Minnie," Remus said calmly Sirius smiled sheepishly.

"Why do you think she's mad?" Peter asked the others shrugged.

"What else did Harry reveal?" Dumbledore asked gravely.

Returning his gaze to the old man, Remus could see regret and sadness in the man's eyes. *He blames himself for this.*

"Well he should, where was he when my son was being *abused*?"

"Harry was very reluctant to say anything about the Dursleys or anything else that could possibly anger me," he said truthfully. "I believe Dursley took his anger out on Harry making him believe that all adults will do the same. Actually, Harry only seemed to be at ease when we talked about Midnight."

"No, Moony don't tell him," Sirius begged.

"Ah, yes his mysterious dog," Dumbledore said clearly intrigued. "As far as I know the Dursleys never allowed pets. It has been quite difficult for them to accept Hedwig."

"The Dursleys didn't know about it," said Remus. "Midnight is a stray Harry found about a week ago. It seems that Harry was desperate to have someone 'who didn't hate him'. Harry needed nothing more than someone or something that would listen to him and treat him normally. Right now, I believe sending Harry to a family, even one like the Weasleys—no offense, would do more harm than good. Despite your efforts, Harry is not family and he knows it. He has spent his life as a third wheel thanks to the Dursleys. He needs time to become comfortable with who he is and learn that he has the right to be loved like a normal child."

"Yes, and Moony will love him," James said while Sirius was hugging Remus.

"Sirius, what are you doing?" Remus asked.

"You didn't tell," he said happily.

"But he is loved," Molly Weasley protested. "Our family loves him like our own. He needs us now especially with Black on the loose."

"Excuse me, what's that supposed to mean?" Sirius asked irritated.

"Harry needs those who care about them, Molly," Dumbledore said calmly. "However, Harry is unaware of what has transpired. He wasn't even aware that he had been kidnapped. Harry doesn't even know who Sirius Black is and what he's done."

"Oh, and you are going to run and tell him *Lies! Lies!*" Sirius cried.

"You do realize Harry will have to be told," Remus said with a raised eyebrow. "He needs to know...everything about Black."

"Moony! I have a name! You're talking about me like you don't know me!"

We can't afford to have Harry finding out through other means. We have to earn Harry's trust by being completely honest with him."

"No!" Mrs. Weasley cried out. "He's just a boy! If he were to find out—"

"He will be angry, true," Remus said, fighting hard to remain calm. "He has a right to be but if we gain his trust and teach him that there are people here he can turn to then he won't try to face Black alone. Isn't that what we want?"

"Well, there would be no problem if he faced me alone since I WON'T HURT HIM!"

"I agree," Arthur Weasley said earning a glare from his wife. "Sorry Molly but we can't simply allow Harry to show up September 1st with all of his classmates knowing more of what has occurred than he does. I know the Malfoy boy won't hesitate to torment Harry about it.

"Malfoy? Lucius Malfoy has procreated? What has the world come to?" James asked.

"And apparently, like father like son," Remus shook his head in disgust.

I know Ron won't be able to keep his mouth shut."

"Interesting perspectives," Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "You do have a point, Arthur. Although I would have preferred for Harry not to know about Black there is little we can do about it now. He will have to be told. The question is by whom?"

Remus knew by Dumbledore's tone who would be the one to break the news. He also knew that this was going to be the hardest thing that person would probably ever have to do.

"Who?" Peter asked.

"Me," Remus answered.

"Ah."

Chapter 5

The bitter truth

The sensation of someone gently touching his face broke into the haze of Harry's dreamless sleep. The gesture felt familiar but foreign at the same time. Not wanting to leave the peacefulness, Harry groaned in protest then turned his face away. He was still tired and wanted nothing more than to rest.

"Then let my baby rest", James growled, "Who's bothering my baby?"

The others looked at him apprehensively.

Suddenly it occurred to Harry that doing such an action would probably result in a punishment. His body immediately tensed as his eyes opened quickly. Unable to see clearly, Harry sat straight up and backed away from the blurry person at his bedside. They looked too thin to be his uncle and too tall to be his aunt. Confusion and fear filled him. What in the world was going on here?

"Harry?" a tender voice asked. "Harry, are you all right?"

The voice sounded friendly but Harry was too confused to register who could possibly be wondering whether he was all right or not. He continued to back away from the unknown person until hands grabbed his arms and prevented him from backing up any more. Memories of his uncle berating him flashed in his mind. "Sorry!" he cried out quickly. "I'm sorry Uncle! I didn't mean to sleep in! I swear!"

"No Harry, that's Moony. He's come to tell you a bunch of lies but not to hurt you," Sirius said, Remus glared at him.

"Harry, listen to my voice. I'm not your uncle. I won't hurt you, I promise. You're at Hogwarts, remember? You're safe here, away from him."

Harry stopped struggling but was still tense. Why did that voice sound so familiar? How did he know that voice? "Hogwarts?" he asked nervously. One of his arms was released. Harry stared at the blurry man who reached for something then slid it on Harry's face. Everything came into focus. Looking through his glasses, Harry saw Lupin's concerned face. "P—Professor?" he asked uncertainly.

Lupin released Harry's other arm then but kept his gaze firm. "I'm sorry I scared you, Harry," he said sincerely. "Do you need me to fetch Madam Pomfrey for you?"

"No! Please! She'll strap him to the bed and never let go!" James cried.

Sirius patted his head sympathetically, "Been there a lot?" James nodded miserably.

Harry shook his head. "I'm fine," he said as he cautiously looked around the room. "I just forgot where I was."

"I noticed," Lupin said softly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Subconsciously shivering, Harry quickly shook his head. He didn't want any more pity than what people already gave him. Deep down Harry knew Uncle Vernon was wrong to punish like he did but Harry remembered the pain clearly. He remembered his uncle's anger clearly. If he would have said anything, it only would have angered his uncle more.

Professor Lupin let out a disappointed sigh as he sat down at Harry's bedside. "I understand," he said softly. "Listen, Harry, there's something I have to tell you and I'm afraid of how you'll react so I need you to hear me out, all right?"

"No don't hear him! He's *lying! Lying!*" Sirius growled angrily.

Harry didn't know what to say to such a guarded statement. "Er—okay," he said nervously.

Lupin seemed to be taking his time gathering his thoughts which made Harry even more anxious. Whatever the man had to say, Harry knew it was going to be bad. He just prayed that nothing had happened to Hermione or the Weasleys. *Please let them be okay.*

"Years ago when your father and I were at Hogwarts, there were two others who were our friends," Professor Lupin began. "We called ourselves the Marauders. We were pranksters. James, your father, was probably the worst followed closely by our friend, Sirius Black. I was more of a supervisor and researcher while our other friend, Peter Pettigrew, just seemed to tag along for the ride. James and Sirius were inseparable. They both came from pureblood families but didn't have the traditional pureblood ideals. After graduation, the four of us joined Dumbledore in the fight against Voldemort..."

"See, I joined *against* Voldemort, I didn't join Voldemort," Sirius stated nodding.

Harry listened as Lupin continued on about his parents' wedding, the day he was born, Voldemort targeting members of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix and his parents going into hiding. Throughout the entire tale Sirius Black seemed to be a key participant in everything. He was best man at his parents' wedding, proclaimed Harry's godfather (Harry was still having a hard time with that revelation) and was the Secret Keeper for the Fidelius Charm that was placed on his parents. This struck Harry as strange. If Sirius Black was so important than why hadn't he heard of the man before?

"Because there's been a huge misunderstanding here!" Sirius cried desperately, "Tell him Moony." Remus just looked apologetically and continued reading.

"...The only way for someone to find those protected by the Fidelius Charm is for the Secret Keeper to reveal their location," Professor Lupin continued. He paused, looking at Harry with the utmost sympathy on his face. "Harry, Sirius betrayed your parents to Voldemort. He betrayed us all."

"I'd never do that! Stop lying Moony! Why are you lying?"

James looked between shocked and furious.

Harry stared at Lupin in shock. His godfather, his father's *best* friend joined Voldemort? He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. He couldn't even breathe. Sirius Black was the reason his parents had died that night. Sirius Black was the reason he was stuck with his aunt and uncle who hated him more than anything. Sirius Black was the reason he was the-boy-who-lived.

James was livid, he kept clenching and unclenching his fists and Sirius was begging him to believe him;

"No, that's a lie. There's something wrong. I'd never betray you Prongs. You're my brother," tears were falling down his face.

Lupin, however, avoided Harry's shocked gaze, determined to finish the story. "Peter found Sirius and confronted him," he continued in the same soft voice. "Not much is known about what happened. There was an explosion and after anything had cleared, thirteen muggles were dead and Peter, well, all they could find was a finger. Sirius was sent to Azkaban and remained there under the care of the Dementors."

"You killed me?" Peter cried looking terrified at Sirius. Sirius shook his head and kept mumbling "NO."

Harry suddenly found his hands extremely interesting to look at. He could feel his head spinning. It was just too much to process so he focused on the last statement. "What are Dementors?" he asked softly.

"Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk on the face of this earth," Lupin said transferring to teacher mode. "They infest the darkest places, they drain hope and happiness out of the air around them. Get too close to a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself — soul-less and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life."

Harry shivered. "I—I didn't know there were creatures like that," he admitted. "How can people survive that sort of torment?"

"Most can't, Harry," Professor Lupin said honestly. "Most of the prisoners in Azkaban go insane in a short matter of time but the Ministry believes it is the only way to control those who have committed heinous crimes. The problem is it doesn't always work. It seems that Sirius Black was unaffected by the Dementors. He's escaped."

"Because he's a soulless being that betrayed his best friend!" James yelled.

"No, I didn't, I wouldn't," Sirius was openly crying.

Peter was as far from Sirius as he could get and Remus was torn, if that was true, why did he help Harry? Something was wrong here.

Harry's head shot up as he stared at Lupin in shock. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. As if his life wasn't already complicated enough. Now he had to worry about one of

Voldemort's servants who happened to be his own godfather? "He escaped?" Harry asked fearfully. "But he wouldn't come after me, right? I mean, I haven't done anything."

Lupin shifted nervously in his seat. "He already has, Harry," he said gravely. "He supposedly saw your uncle hit you and took matters in his own hands. He attacked your uncle and took you. You were missing for two days, Harry. We began to fear the worst when Dumbledore received a letter from Black telling us where to find you. He left you at the Leaky Cauldron. We don't exactly understand why he did this. It will just have to be another one of the endless questions we have when we find him."

"See, why would I help Harry if I had betrayed you? That doesn't make sense."

Harry was visibly trembling. Sirius Black had kidnapped him? Professor Lupin knew the truth about his uncle? Did that mean Professor Dumbledore knew too? "Why didn't anyone tell me?" Harry asked sounding hurt, which he was. He hated it when people knew more about his own life than he did. He hated not knowing anything about his own parents.

"This wasn't done to hurt you, Harry," Professor Lupin answered, his tone still gentle. "It was painful for a lot of people and still is. How do you tell a child his parents were betrayed by their best friend? It's not something a thirteen-year-old should have to deal with."

"You don't tell him because I did nothing of the sort," Sirius yelled at the pages Remus was holding. Remus had managed to put himself between James and Sirius to avoid confrontations between the two black headed Marauders.

Harry could only nod in response. Now that he knew he really wished he didn't. It was so much easier to simply blame Voldemort for everything.

"Then do that. I am innocent. I swear!" Sirius was starting to get hysterical.

"Does everyone know?" he asked softly. "Is that why you're telling me everything now?"

"Unfortunately your abduction was published in the Daily Prophet," Lupin admitted. "We thought it would be better if you knew what was being said about you. As far as the wizarding world knows, you were kidnapped by Black then found by some Aurors. There was nothing said concerning your uncle's treatment of you. Dumbledore felt it best to keep that private for as long as possible."

Harry couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief. He could handle that. He just didn't want anyone to know anything about his home life. The problem was Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin clearly knew the truth or some form of it. "Er—what do you know about my uncle?" he asked, not really sure he wanted an answer.

Professor Lupin let out a sigh. "Your uncle confessed what was actually happening when Black took you," he said gently. "We know your injuries came from your uncle and not from Black. What we don't know is how long has this been going on. You told me that your ribs had been broken for three weeks when we found you. How in the world were you able to last three weeks with a broken leg and three broken ribs?"

Harry could only shrug his shoulders in response. He had hoped to get through his years at Hogwarts without anyone discovering how bad his relatives really were. Sure, Ron and Hermione knew the Dursleys hated him and didn't treat him well but that was the extent of their knowledge. No one else ever displayed any interest in the subject.

"I can understand you don't want to talk about this, Harry, but this sort of crime isn't a secret a child should have to keep," Lupin said patiently. "Do you realize you could have died if your uncle had gone an ounce further? I don't care what reason he gave you. There is no excuse for his actions."

"But it was my fault,"

"No that wasn't" James cried angrily, "That was all that good for nothing, poor excuse of a muggle..." and what followed does not bear repeating in civilized conversation.

Harry said at last, his voice barely above a whisper. "If I hadn't told Ron to call, none of this would have happened." Harry had to admit it was a relief to get the words out. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "He's never intentionally broken a bone before. He used to just lock me in my cupboard before Hogwarts—"

"Come again now. Cupboard?" James asked angrily.

"What do you mean cupboard?" Lupin interrupted.

"Er—well—before I knew about Hogwarts my bedroom was a cupboard under the stairs," Harry said uncomfortably. He kept his eyes transfixed on his hands, afraid of the look Professor Lupin was probably giving him. "After my first letter came, they gave me Dudley's second bedroom. I guess they got scared when they realized someone knew where I slept."

"What!? They made my son sleep where?" James shouted.

"He actually said that on the first chapter, James. Remember, when I said CHILD ABUSE?" Sirius pointed out

"Shut up traitor," James snapped.

"I am not a traitor," Sirius snapped back.

"Why don't we agree that we don't actually know yet what happened and everybody calm down," Remus said calmly.

Lupin was certainly confused. "What do you mean 'first letter'?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "They didn't want me to come," he answered still in the quiet voice that most people would have to strain to hear him. "They—um—destroyed all the letters that came before I could even look at them so Professor Dumbledore sent Hagrid to tell me the truth about...well...everything. That was my eleventh birthday."

Before Harry knew it he was pulled into an embrace, his face buried in soft robes. "I'm so sorry, Harry," Lupin's shaky voice whispered in his ear. "I should have been there for you. I never thought they would be so cruel."

"Yes you should!" James shouted and glared at Remus who shrugged apologetically.

Caught off guard, Harry didn't know what to do so he just sat there. It felt so wrong for Professor Lupin to be apologizing for something he didn't do. *Well, I've been doing that for most of my life.* Harry's body was stiff at first. He really couldn't remember the last time an adult willingly hugged him like this. Slowly, he relaxed against the young teacher,

"See here, *young teacher,*" Remus pointed out.

"Compared to Dumbledore even my great grandmother is young," James stated. Peter and Sirius tried to muffle their laughter.

wondering if this is what it felt like to have someone who cared.

Hours later Remus Lupin was having a difficult time staying awake. He had remained at Harry's bedside, afraid to leave the fragile boy especially with the bombshell he just dropped. Remus was well aware of the handful of people awaiting his return to Dumbledore's office but he could care less. He had made a silent promise to help Harry any way he could. He owed it to James, Lily and to Harry.

"Thank you Moony," James said.

Harry was sleeping peacefully once again. Remus glanced over at the boy who looked years younger than his thirteen years of age. It was amazing to think that only two days had passed since they had found him. That sight was permanently etched in Remus' mind. Harry had been in so much pain, he had been through so much and who had saved him? Sirius Black.

"Yes. Remember that. I saved him!"

Oh the irony. The more Remus thought about it the more he began to agree with the Azkaban escapee. Was anyone even trying to protect Harry Potter, a boy who had already given and lost so much?

"Obviously not!" Remus answered.

The sound of the door opening pulled Remus out of his thoughts. Looking over his shoulder, Remus let out a sigh when he saw Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape followed by Arthur and Molly Weasley. It seemed that they had become impatient in finding out how bad Harry had taken the news of Sirius Black.

"Well, he was shocked that so many people, especially *Moony*, keep lying to him and is expecting the full disclosure of the truth with a big apology to his beloved godfather," Sirius calmly said looking straight at the book. He therefore missed James narrowed glare.

"We were starting to worry, Remus," Dumbledore said softly as he reached Harry's bedside. "I trust you told him?"

Remus nodded as he returned his gaze to the sleeping teenager. "He's angry that this was hidden from him," he answered. "I didn't go into any details yet. It was hard enough to tell him about that night and Peter." He rubbed his tired eyes then looked directly at Dumbledore. "Were you aware that his bedroom for ten years was a cupboard under the stairs?"

"Better not have been!" James growled.

Did you know that Vernon Dursley beat Harry, breaking his leg and ribs, because he received a simple phone call?"

"I second James!" Sirius growled.

Mrs. Weasley gasped. "Oh dear," she said softly. "That was Ron. I should have suspected something when Hedwig came the next day with a letter from Harry asking if we could keep her for the summer. The poor boy has been going through hell and had no way to contact us."

"Yes you should. You should have gone and fetched him. And what did you do? You left him there. Alone! For three weeks!" James yelled.

"What was he thinking of sending his blasted owl away anyways?" Snape sneered.

"Shut up Snivellus!" Sirius yelled.

"Perhaps he wanted to keep the owl alive," McGonagall answered bitterly. "Honestly, Severus, you know children will do anything to protect their pets. Mr. Potter is no different. We all know he adores that owl."

"He,he, trust Minnie to put Snivellus in his place," Sirius laughed and the others laughed with him until James and Peter remembered they were angry at him and went back to glaring. Remus preferred to reserve judgment until he had *all* the facts.

The door opened followed by the familiar scolding tone that made everyone cringe. "What is going on here?" demanded Madam Pomfrey in a hushed voice. "All of you know Mr. Potter needs rest more than anything. He is still weak. Your questions will just have to wait."

The sound of distant voices brought Harry out of his slumber.

"See, now you woke my baby," James said. Remus raised an eyebrow to him.

He could vaguely make out Madam Pomfrey, Professor Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley whispering about something. Drowsiness overrode any curiosity as Harry buried his face deeper into his pillow. He really didn't want to talk to anyone right now, especially Mrs. Weasley. He didn't want any more people feeling sorry for him.

Feeling warm, Harry mindlessly tried to push away his covers but hands wrapped around his wrists before he had accomplished his task. Harry let out a small groan in protest. He hated being too warm. It reminded him too much of working out in the blazing sun for the Dursleys. It reminded Harry too much of Uncle Vernon's anger.

The sound of the door opening with a bang startled Harry out of his stubbornness. He sat up quickly, looking around the blurry room and quickly backed up until he backed into the headboard. Pulling his knees to his chest, Harry couldn't stop his body from shaking as the sound of hurried footsteps approaching his bed echoed in the now silent room.

"Who's the moron that scared my son?"

"Cornelius," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "This is unexpected. I believe I told you I would call when Harry was ready to make a statement regarding his abduction."

Harry wasn't paying attention. His mind was trapped in a flashback. Uncle Vernon always entered his room like that. That was the first sign pain was about to come. That was the first sign that Harry had somehow done something to anger the whale of a man.

"Someone calm Harry down!" Remus urged shaking the pages.

Sirius put a hand on his friends shaking arms, "Calm down Moony. Someone will."

Remus calmed down and James patting his head comfortably said, "Good boy." Remus glared at him.

"You know the pressure I'm under, Dumbledore," Fudge said impatiently. "We need to find Black soon. The public is still in an uproar."

Professor Lupin was the first to turn around and notice Harry's distress. "Harry, what's wrong?" he asked quietly. There was no answer prompting the man to reach out and gently touch Harry's arm. "Harry, please say something."

Harry slowly looked in the direction of Lupin's voice to see a familiar blur. "Professor?" he asked in a quivering voice. "He's not here?"

"No he's not, and if he was I wouldn't let him hurt you," Remus said.

Lupin let out a sigh and pulled Harry into an embrace, doing anything and everything he could think of to comfort the trembling child. "No, Harry," he said gently. "Your Uncle's not here. You're safe. I promise."

Everyone finally noticed that Harry was indeed awake and shaking in Lupin's arms. Mrs. Weasley quickly hurried to the boy's side but from the death grip Harry had on Lupin's robes, it was clear that he had no intention on moving soon. Mr. Weasley hurried to her side and put a hand on his wife's shoulder to keep her from pulling the boy away. From the looks of it what Harry needed right now was Remus Lupin.

"Yes, he needs Moony. 'Cause Moony is the best," Sirius said and Remus blushed.

"As you can see, Cornelius, Harry is still recovering," Professor Dumbledore said evenly. "When he is ready to talk—"

"Give him a calming draught then," Fudge interrupted. "Is Potter aware of the predicament we are currently in? His testimony could help us capture this madman! Do you expect the entire wizarding community to remain in danger because Potter wants to be coddled?"

"What an arrogant git. Someone please punch him!" James cried in outrage.

Mrs. Weasley was enraged. She immediately approached the man, putting herself between the Minister and Harry's bed. "Why you sorry excuse of a man!" she cried. "Harry has been through hell and you're worried about the public!"

"Uh oh, never anger women. Especially mothers. My mom gets scary when she's angry," James said with a shiver.

The Minister glared at Mr. Weasley. "Arthur, please control your wife," he spat.

Mr. Weasley enfolded his arms across his chest. "Unfortunately, *Minister*, I happen to agree with Molly," he said matter-of-factly. "Harry is like a member of our family and like any of my sons, I will do what's in his best interest."

The bickering adults didn't notice Madam Pomfrey hand over a vial of calming draught to Lupin to help Harry. Surprisingly, Professor Snape was by Lupin's side helping position the boy in order to take the potion.

"You sure he's not trying to poison Harry?" Peter asked.

Harry's eyes were open but it was almost like he was staring off in the distance. The potion went down his throat without resistance.

Almost instantly the tremors running through Harry's body stopped. His vision cleared as he looked directly at Professor Snape. "P'fessor?" he asked groggily. Nothing was making any sense. He could have sworn he had heard his uncle shouting a moment ago but it was too bright for it to be his room. Slowly his mind started to clear alerting Harry that someone was holding him protectively. Shifting his gaze, Harry realized that it was Professor Lupin holding him. "It wasn't real?" he asked Lupin.

Lupin let out a sigh of relief. "No Harry," he said softly. "I promise you *are* safe here from him."

"Trust Moony Harry," Sirius said, "He won't let anything bad happen to you. He's the one that explained to me how to run away if I needed."

"You did?" James asked. Remus shrugged.

"Well, Sirius had never used the Knight Bus. I just told him how to call it and told him to keep some money hidden from his parents."

"Saved my life, you did," Sirius said hugging Remus.

There was a pause, almost like Lupin was afraid to say anything else. "Listen Harry, the Minister is here with questions about your kidnapping," he said gently. "Do you think you could talk about what happened?"

Harry immediately tensed as he stared at Lupin fearfully. Was he ready to talk about what happened to the Minister of Magic? What would the man think if he found out their 'savior' couldn't protect himself against a mere muggle? What would the Weasleys think?

"Perhaps the questions should be limited to Black and Black only since the oaf has a problem keeping his large mouth shut," Snape proposed to Lupin in an annoyed tone.

"Oh, my. Snape being reasonable. The world is coming to an end," Remus said dramatically.

"Merlin forbid if Potter's precious reputation is ever tainted."

"Oh, there's the Snivellus we all know and love," Peter stated.

"That's enough, Severus," Lupin warned then returned his attention to Harry. "We'll be right here, all right? Just let us know when you want to stop."

"Moony, why are you calling Snivellus by his first name?" James asked.

"I guess because we work together," Remus answered.

Harry nodded reluctantly. He really didn't want to do this but he knew no one would leave him alone until he had. Closing his eyes, Harry desperately pushed away his fear and shame while Professor Lupin helped him sit up properly. He suppressed a wince as a spark of pain shot through his previously broken leg. *At least it's not as bad as before.*

"Minister, Harry has agreed to answer questions necessary to your search and only to the search," Lupin said protectively as he handed over Harry's glasses. It was clear that the young teacher was barely keeping himself calm.

"And that's never a good sign," Peter shivered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Remus asked indignantly.

"Well, that you're scary when you're angry," Sirius said, "especially when you give us *the look*."

"I do not have a *look*," Remus cried outraged.

"Yes you do, you have that look of sheer disappointment that you give us sometimes. Makes us feel crappie for days," James stated.

Cornelius Fudge walked around Mrs. Weasley so he was face to face with Harry. He pulled out an issue of the Daily Prophet and handed it over. "Mr. Potter, what do you remember about your abduction?" Fudge asked bluntly. "Don't leave out any details."

Harry looked down at front page and saw a picture of a sunken-faced man with long, matted hair blinking slowly. It seemed wrong that someone like this could possibly be his father's best friend. The man looked half dead.

"Well you spend twelve years in Azkaban and see what you look like," Sirius said defensively.

"This is what he looks like?" Harry asked softly, unable to tear his gaze away from the paper. "This is him?"

"Mr. Potter, how can you not know what Black looks like?" the Minister asked in annoyance.

"Because he was unconscious, duh!" Peter said hitting his head with his fist, "ouch"

"You're not supposed to hit hard" Remus explained.

Harry finally looked up at Fudge then looked away. Fudge really wasn't going to like this. "Er—I never saw him," Harry admitted. "I didn't know he took me until Professor Lupin told me."

Fudge took a stunned step back. "Wha—how could you possibly not know?" he asked. "He had you for two days! He must have said something—"

"—I was unconscious," Harry interrupted, sounding more confident than he felt. He bit his lower lip as he contemplated on whether to elaborate. *They won't believe me otherwise.* "The last thing I remember is being thrown into a wall by my uncle," he added softly.

Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall gasped in shock, Professor Lupin gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, reminding the teenager that he was there, while Mr. Weasley, Professor Snape and Professor Dumbledore seemed to be too stunned for words. Fudge, however, remained skeptic. "Why would your uncle throw you into a wall?" the Minister asked.

"Because he's a CHILD ABUSER!" the four boys yelled.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as his gaze fell. "Because I was there," he muttered. "Because I overslept and their dinner wasn't ready on time."

"Well, they could very well make their own dinner," James growled.

Fudge looked over at Professor Dumbledore nervously as if he was silently asking for help. "I see," he said uncomfortably. "Well, you're extremely fortunate Black didn't harm you further, Mr. Potter." It suddenly seemed that Fudge wanted nothing more than to leave the hospital wing. "I trust you have found another home for the boy, Albus?"

"Yes, he has. Moony is going to take care of Harry," James stated.

"James—" Remus started.

"I don't care about the law Moony!" James cried.

"That has been obvious for years," Sirius said nodding knowingly.

Dumbledore nodded. "Why yes, now that you mention it," he said pleasantly. "Harry will be spending the remainder of his holiday here at Hogwarts. The staff and I have agreed that it would be in Harry's best interest to train the boy to protect himself, especially with Sirius Black still at large. I trust you will keep me informed on any developments."

"Oh, Harry gets to do magic on the summer. I'm so jealous," Sirius said.

"Free access to the library," Remus said with a dreamy expression. The others looked at him in disgust.

"Y—yes of course," Fudge stuttered then met Harry's gaze. "For your information, Mr. Potter, your uncle is being charged in muggle court. He has been encouraged to plead guilty and is doing so. There will not be a trial so we don't have to worry about the press finding out. Good day."

"Good!" James nodded.

Harry sat there stunned as the Minister of Magic left. "W—what?" he asked in disbelief. Slowly, Harry looked around the room at all of the adults. Every single one of them (with the exception of Professor Snape who still simply looked annoyed) appeared to be nervous. "What was Mr. Fudge talking about?"

Professor Dumbledore approached the frightened teenager and put a gently hand on the boy's arm. "Your uncle accidentally admitted his actions against you to the investigating Aurors, Harry," he said tenderly. "He was the one who confirmed that Sirius Black had taken you and used your wand in the process."

Breathing became difficult. The man who betrayed his parents had his wand and used it? "No, that's impossible!" Harry cried. "I hid my wand the moment I returned home! I never told anyone where it was!"

Except Midnight.

"Oh, bugger, He figured that one out too," Sirius mumble unhappy.

The realization hit Harry like a bludger. Midnight always seemed smart...too smart. There was a reason Midnight always seemed to understand him. The dog actually *knew* what he had been saying because the dog wasn't actually dog. Midnight didn't actually exist. Midnight was Sirius Black. It was the only explanation.

He had been keeping a killer and betrayer in his own room without knowing it.

"No, I am innocent!"

Chapter 6

The Dementors

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Peter, James and Sirius screamed.

"What?" Remus asked.

"We don't want Dementors. They're nasty, foul creatures," Peter shuddered.

"Well, sorry but that's the chapter's title," Remus said.

"Why?" James asked desperately.

"I expect, because there is going to be a Dementor in this chapter," Remus explained slowly and waited:

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

And there it was.

There is a variety of emotions that come after you realize you have done something incredibly stupid.

"Yes there is, unfortunately James and Sirius seem to either be immune to those emotions or not feel them at all," Remus stated plainly. James and Sirius decided to ignore him.

First, there is shock followed closely by denial. Harry had been trapped with those emotions for what felt like an eternity. If Midnight was actually Black then why did the dog try to protect him from Uncle Vernon? Why did the dog seem to care and sympathize when everyone claims this man wants him dead?

"Because they're lying!" Sirius shouted.

Once the initial shock had passed, Harry was consumed with guilt. He had known that something wasn't right with Midnight. The proof had been there from the beginning. Midnight had definitely acted more human than canine. Why hadn't he simply opened his eyes to see the truth? How could he have been so stupid? He had told Sirius Black everything!

Anger added to the guilt. Anger at himself, Black and even Professor Dumbledore for keeping this from him. Remembering his conversation with Professor Lupin, Harry figured the man had known the truth about Midnight which instantly destroyed the trust and respect Harry had for the young teacher.

"No Harry, you can trust me. I couldn't tell. That was a Marauder secret," Remus pleaded.

Why did everyone always have to know more about his life than he did?

"Well, because you lived with your horrible relatives that lied and abused you and apparently you're famous because of something we don't know yet and you know how gossip works," James said, Sirius grimaced relating to the gossip problem.

Why couldn't anyone ever trust him with the truth? Was that too much to ask?

Apparently it was.

The anger and guilt ended up serving as a battery for Harry. Professor Dumbledore hadn't lied to Fudge when he had mentioned training. To say that everyone was shocked to find Harry's wand in his trunk was an understatement. Why would Black willingly give up a wand when he had none of his own? There was just so much of the entire abduction that didn't make sense.

"Because I am innocent and would not steal Pronglet's wand, OK?" Sirius stated angrily.

"Pronglet?" Remus asked raising his eyebrow.

"I think it's fitting," Sirius said putting his hand on Remus' face and trying to lower the eyebrow.

"What are you doing Sirius?" Remus asked swatting Sirius' hand away.

"A favor to society. I am trying to get rid of that dammed raised eyebrow of yours. It's as bad as *the look*," Sirius explained, James and Peter nodded their agreement, Remus glared.

Once Harry had been released from the hospital wing he was thrown into a mixture of lessons consisting of both muggle and magical defenses.

"Excuse me? Lessons? On his holiday? That's, that's," James seemed at a lost of words until he sputtered, "*Sacrilege!*"

Professor Lupin taught Harry how to physically defend himself while Professors Dumbledore, Flitwick, McGonagall and even Snape tutored him on different aspects of the magical side. Professor Flitwick, of course, instructed charms, Professor McGonagall instructed simple transfigurations that could be beneficial in a life or death situation (creating weapons and such), Professor Snape instructed on plants and herbs that could be helpful to heal basic injuries, and Professor Dumbledore took all of the aspects and brought them together.

Harry progressed quickly, determined not to make the same mistake again. He would never blindly trust anyone or anything because of his selfish desires again. He would never allow his emotions to get the better of him again. He would never be a victim again.

"No, Harry! You can trust people, just not, you know, the bad ones," James pleaded.

"How do you know which are the bad ones?" Peter asked.

James seemed lost, "How am I supposed to know?"

For two weeks Harry did nothing but train and study. The teachers and Weasleys had wanted to celebrate his birthday which had taken place while he had been recovering but Harry refused.

"HE WHAT!?" the four boys cried.

"You never refuse a birthday party!" Peter exclaimed, the others nodded.

He didn't want anything distracting him. He couldn't afford any distractions anymore.

This obsession hadn't gone unnoticed by the professors. Harry was currently staying in Professor Lupin's guest quarters but rarely spent any time there. Lupin had to search for Harry at meal times in order to ensure the boy would eat and had to nearly order him to sleep. Harry had eventually revealed to Professor Lupin that the physical abuse had only started after the phone call and the remaining details of his home life. It had been what everyone wanted to hear and it had gotten them off his back.

Harry hadn't told anyone about Midnight and Sirius Black being one in the same and other than Professor Lupin, no one let on that they knew the little tidbit. Although it probably wasn't the smartest move, Harry decided not to reveal his knowledge to Lupin. If the man wanted Harry to trust him, he would have to return the favor.

"Harry has a lot of trust issues," Remus stated grimacing.

"Yeah, and you lying to him is not helping," Sirius said in agreement. Remus nodded glumly.

No one knew what had actually forced the boy to grow up overnight and Harry was planning on keeping it that way. Harry didn't need everyone to confirm what was already true: he was a bloody idiot.

"No you're not. You will not talk about yourself that way Youngman!" James said angrily, then his eyes went wide and he put his hand on his mouth, "I just sounded like my dad!"

"Freaky!" Sirius shuddered.

Early one morning in mid-August, Harry awoke before everyone else, like he always did. Part of his muggle training with Professor Lupin required running every morning and evening.

"Now, that's just torture! Are you torturing yourself with Harry, Moony?" Sirius asked with narrowed eyes.

Remus offered a crooked grin, "Ah, the joys of teacherhood."

"That's not even a word Moony!" James laughed.

At first it had been difficult with his weakened state but Harry soon reached the point that he was running two kilometers twice a day without working up a sweat. It was a relaxing exercise that Harry usually did alone and gave him time to think about whatever was running through his head.

Spending the remainder of the holidays at Hogwarts seemed to be both a blessing and a curse for Harry. On the plus side, Harry didn't have to put up with the whispers and stares from his classmates or being called a freak by his relatives. He also received a lot of one on one attention which helped in understanding the theory behind his studies. On the negative side, Harry was in a sense alone and being watched every moment of the day. It always seemed that his instructors were watching and waiting for something to happen during his training sessions. Professor Snape even tried to start up a battle of insults by reminding Harry how arrogant and foolhardy he was.

"How mature of him," Peter scoffed.

"Why does he have to be mean to Harry?" James whined.

"Because he is Snivellus," Sirius exclaimed in "*the most obvious thing in the world*" tone.

Harry didn't react though. He had given up trying to convince people to see him for who he really was. If they wanted to believe some lie then let them. Professor Snape had made up his mind the moment Harry had entered the Main Hall two years ago and nothing was going to change it. *Just like everyone else in the wizarding world.*

As quietly as possible, Harry left Professor Lupin's quarters for his run. Although no one said anything, he knew Professor Lupin wasn't feeling well. He seemed to be paler and weaker these past few days

"Oh, Harry, that's normal, you don't have to worry," Remus said.

"But he doesn't know Moony," Sirius explained.

"Oh, yeah," Remus nodded.

"Why don't you tell him?" James asked.

"Well, because I must be afraid of his reaction," Remus stated.

"But he won't care. He told you about being a parselmouth," James reminded him.

"Well, yes. But this is different," Remus started.

"How so? Everyone thinks parselmouths are dark and Harry clearly isn't. Everyone thinks werewolves are dark and you obviously aren't," James stated in a no nonsense tone.

"This is different and end of story!" Remus exclaimed annoyed.

"Said the man with no arguments," Sirius muttered.

so Harry felt it was best to allow the man to sleep in especially considering everything Lupin had done for him, being his temporary guardian and all.

"See, I told you you'd be his guardian," James said excitedly. Remus eyed the paper curiously and mumbled:

"Maybe the law changed."

The cool morning air was refreshing and immediately extinguished any lingering drowsiness. The sun was just starting to rise over the lake, a sight that Harry never got tired of seeing. After stretching, Harry started to run his usual path Professor Lupin had marked out. Reaching the lake, Harry ran down the shoreline towards the front gates. If he kept up at this rate Harry figured he could read chapter in charms before breakfast.

Then it happened.

"What?" Peter, James and Sirius cried.

"If you let me read you'll know," Remus answered annoyed.

All of a sudden the temperature drastically dropped. His own breath seemed to be caught in his chest. He felt like he was drowning in cold as he fell to his knees. He couldn't move; he couldn't think.

"He's dying! Someone help!" James cried desperately.

His eyes rolled back in his head as a terrified scream filled his ears. It was a woman's scream that seemed to make his heart cry in pain. He needed to help her.

"Who's screaming?" Peter asked the other boys looked lost.

Someone help!

"Harry! Harry, wake up!"

Someone was holding him to their chest but Harry didn't have the energy to even bother moving to find out who it was. It was almost like something had drained all of the warmth out of his body. It took Harry a moment to realize he was shaking. He felt nauseous and knew that movement was certainly out of the question now.

The sound of voices brought Harry back to reality. "We can't do anything for him here, Lupin! He needs medical attention!"

"Yes, Moony came!" James flopped down in relief.

"I know, Severus," Lupin said frantically then repositioned his arms to make Harry more comfortable. Holding the teenager tightly, Lupin stood up then hurried back to the castle with Snape leading the way. Every thing else happening around them was a blur. Lupin could feel Harry's labored breathing and could only pray that they weren't too late.

"Too late for what? What happened?" Sirius asked shaking Remus.

"Sirius, for the last time: I DON'T KNOW!" Remus answered prying himself out of Sirius grip.

Entering the hospital wing, Lupin carefully put Harry down on the nearest bed and conjured a mug of hot chocolate while Snape was searching for Madam Pomfrey. Propping the boy up, Lupin slowly poured a little of the steamy liquid down Harry's throat. "Come on, Harry," Lupin muttered. "Please be okay. Please still be here."

"Hum, you know Moony, I know you like chocolate, but I don't think the occasion is appropriate for hot chocolate," Sirius said and Remus eyed him and then he said:

"Yes!"

"Moony, are you ok?" James asked worried.

"Dementors, the title, and the chocolate," Remus said and the other boys were clearly not following. Remus sighed, "A Dementor attacked, that's why I am giving him chocolate. That's why he felt cold."

"Ahhhhhh," the others exclaimed.

Harry let out a groan. He could vaguely feel warmth slowly spreading throughout his body, almost forcing the cold away. Something warm was being poured down his throat. With extreme effort, Harry opened his eyes and looked up to see Professor Lupin come into focus. The man looked so distraught, why?

"Well, because Dementors will do that to you," Peter stated.

More hot liquid was poured down Harry's throat but this time Harry was aware and started to gag which startled Lupin out of his thoughts. Lupin quickly put the hot chocolate down and gently helped the boy lay down comfortably. Without a word, Lupin quickly covered Harry up then let out a sigh of relief. "Do you know who I am, Harry?" Lupin asked softly almost fearfully.

"Of course he knows, are you calling my son stupid Moony?"

"No, I am assuring myself that he wasn't kissed," Remus answered annoyed.

"Ah, yes, right, sorry," James smiled apologetically.

Harry nodded weakly. His eyelids were becoming too heavy forcing Harry to slowly drift off to sleep. He could only hope that the woman he had heard was now safe.

"WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME WAS HE DOING OUT THERE ALONE!?" roared Mrs. Weasley. "HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SAFE HERE!"

"And I repeat never, *never*, anger a mother. Might just be the last thing you do in your life," James said shaking his head. The other boys grimaced their agreement.

It wasn't the most pleasant way to wake up. He still felt exhausted but knew better than to ignore Mrs. Weasley. Opening his eyes as he felt around for his glasses, Harry slowly sat up and forced his head to wake up. He quickly found them on the bedside table and put them on only to see a group of people congregating by the door. It seemed that all of the teachers and Mr. Weasley were desperately trying to calm Mrs. Weasley down for some reason. Why was she so upset?

"Well, this is just a guess, but maybe, because you just almost got your soul sucked by a Dementor," Peter pointed out.

"Harry always runs in the morning, Molly," Dumbledore said calmly but the normal pleasant tone wasn't there. "It is a part of the training I discussed with you. The Minister's arrival was unannounced. If we had known he was bringing Dementors we would have never allowed Harry out of the castle. I assure you Harry is safe here."

"Why did I know that that mentally challenged Minister had to have something to do with this?" Sirius said in disgust.

"Mentally challenged?" Remus asked with the raised eyebrow.

"I am *trying* to be polite here," Sirius said exasperated, "and quit with the eyebrow *Moony!*"

Harry instantly paled. That had been the Dementors? How could Sirius Black handle twelve years of that? How could anyone? The mere thought of experiencing that long term sent chills down Harry's spine. For a brief moment he felt sorry for the prisoners in Azkaban. Nothing in the muggle world was anywhere nearly that cruel.

"He does have a point," Remus mused.

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"Well, I'm just saying that inflicting Dementors in anyone for any amount of time is quite cruel," Remus answered.

"Yes, but some crimes deserve that," Sirius said.

"Some do. But not all. In our society if you steal a candy or if you mass murder you'll get Dementors for both crimes. Not for the same amount of time but you'll get them. I am just saying that maybe stealing a candy isn't such a big offence to deserve the reliving of your worst memories over and over," Remus finished. Sirius and James nodded with pensieve faces. Peter was too busy unwrapping a candy.

"Harry's fine, Molly," Mr. Weasley said gently. "Remember Harry doesn't react well to loud voices. Please try to calm down."

Mrs. Weasley let out a tired sigh. "I'm just so worried about him," she said in a wavering voice. "That poor boy has been through more this summer than anyone should ever have to endure."

It was then that Harry was noticed. "Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said in relief as she hurried over to his bedside. "Lie back down now." Harry did as he was told and allowed Madam Pomfrey to check him over. A cool hand rested on his forehead. Harry looked up to see Mrs. Weasley smiling down at him but it looked like she had been crying.

Slowly, Harry glanced at the crowd around his bed then let out a groan as he closed his eyes. "I'm grounded, aren't I?" he asked in a scratchy voice.

"Why? He did nothing wrong?" James cried.

"Because of the Dementors," Sirius reminded him. James mouth formed a silent ah.

Several chuckles filled the air. "You did nothing wrong, Harry," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "However, considering your reaction to the Dementors I must insist that we alter your training locations. I apologize for what happened this morning. Cornelius seems to believe that it is necessary to protect Hogwarts and the students from Sirius Black by allowing several Dementors to stand guard."

"WHAT!!!!!!!!!" four voices shouted.

"Dementors at the school? With children?" Sirius asked horrified.

A distant voice came from outside, "James?"

"Uh, oh, quick hide the book," James rushed Remus who put the book under the covers of James' bed. The door opened and brown haired woman entered.

"Is everything ok? I've been hearing yells from here all morning," she asked.

"Everything is just fine mum. We're just reading this book dad brought," And James grabbed one of the Muggle books his dad had bought him.

"Oh, are you enjoying the read?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Potter. This book is quite fascinating. Very enlightening," Sirius said.

"Enlightening?" She asked.

"Yes, you know, on muggles," Sirius continued.

"The Lord of the Rings?" she asked clearly confused. James looked at the book seeing the title for the first time. He was at a lost, but Moony came to the rescue.

"Yes, enlightening on how muggles view magic. They have quite an imagination."

Mrs. Potter smiled and the boys sighed in relief.

"Well, I just came here to tell you that you will be having company shortly," she said.

"What?" James asked shocked.

"Yes. There has been an attack on a muggle neighborhood where a muggleborn in your year lives and your dad decided to bring her here for the time being. He was one of the Aurors in charge," at the boys horrified looks she elaborated, "None of her family was hurt. They were out at the time. Her parents and sister are having their memories modified and there will be a team of Aurors patrolling the neighborhood."

"Then why is she coming?" James asked horrified.

"Because your father received orders to take any muggleborns witches or wizards away from the area for the time being. She is the only one and I *offered* for her to stay here and you four are going to treat her *very* politely and make her feel *very* welcome. Was I clear James Anthony Potter," Mrs. Potter ended in what her future grandson would call a Mrs. Weasley pose and tone. The four boys nodded and she left.

"She's going to ruin our reading," James whined.

"Probably," Remus agreed, "We better read all we can before she gets here then," he finished getting the book.

"We don't agree with it, Harry, but the Minister was extremely persistent," Lupin added. "He insists that it's for your safety especially since Black has already taken you once. Do you remember what I told you about the Dementors?"

Harry slowly nodded then looked away from the unnerving eyes that seemed to be waiting for something from him. He hated these looks that seemed to come more frequent than not. "How is something supposed to help me when it leaves me helpless?" Harry asked more to himself than anyone in the room.

"Exactly, that Dementor almost sucked my poor godson's soul out. Get rid of them!"

"Sirius, if you keep interrupting we won't be able to read enough before the spy gets here," James said annoyed.

"The spy?" Remus raised his famous eyebrow.

Professor Dumbledore sat down on the foot of the bed and looked at Harry compassionately. "I can understand your frustration, Harry," he said. "I'm afraid I must apologize for adding to it. Students in their third year and above are allowed to go to Hogsmeade Village on certain weekends throughout the school year as long as they have a permission slip signed by a guardian. Due to your circumstances, I must insist that you not participate."

"WHAT?" James, Sirius and Peter cried with horrified looks.

"Sacrilege," Sirius mumbled.

"Actually that is quite reasonable," Remus pointed out. At the incredulous looks he was getting he elaborated, "They think Sirius is after Harry so they might think that going to Hogsmead is an unnecessary risk."

"Going to Hogsmead is never unnecessary," James pointed out.

Harry slowly turned his head and looked directly at Professor Dumbledore for a moment before looking away again. Once again he had to be different from everyone else because he was the-boy-who-lived. Why couldn't he just be normal for once? "Is it because there's a mass murderer trying to kill me or because I don't actually have a guardian anymore?" Harry asked; his voice breaking.

"Yes, you have a guardian; Moony!" James said.

"Temporary, James, temporary," Remus reminded him.

"Guardian nonetheless," Sirius said nodding his head.

No one answered for what felt like a while. Harry could feel his eyes burning with tears but fought to keep them from showing like he had for so many years. Why did he have to always miss out on everything? He understood Professor Dumbledore was just trying to protect him but it still seemed so unfair.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Harry, Hogsmeade just isn't safe enough for you," Dumbledore said gently. "It has already been searched but there are plenty of hiding places that could be overlooked. The Dementors will be patrolling along with several Aurors to ensure the remainder of the student body is safe but as of yet, Sirius Black has only focused on you. He will most likely try to take you again now that you're healthy."

"No I won't. Now that he is safe and in Moony's care I will focus on proving you people WRONG!"

The matter was closed and everyone knew it. Harry had to admit that he was glad that Professor Dumbledore was finally being honest and had every intention on following the request...for now.

"That's my junior Marauder," James beamed proudly.

Chapter 7

Reunion of Friends

A knock came from the door. The boys grimaced. James stood up and went to the door mouthing "*the spy*". He opened the door and had the shock of his life, "My sweet Lily! You came to see me!"

"Don't flatter yourself Potter, I had no choice," she said with an annoyed look, entering the room she nodded to Sirius and Peter and waved to Remus, "Hello Remus, I still don't understand how a reasonable person like you goes around with the likes of these two," she said pointing at Sirius and James. She sat on the winged chair near the bed and James sat on the floor with a dreamy expression. "So what are you doing? Your mum said you're reading *Lord of the Rings*. I loved it."

The boys looked at each other uncertain and Remus took out the future book, "Well, we're not quite reading *Lord of the Rings* but the book we're reading is quite interesting too." They proceeded to explain how they got the book and what happened up until now. To say Lily was shocked was an understatement.

"I married *HIM!*" she said horrified.

"Yes you did," James said delighted.

"And who's the *moron* that left my son with *Petunia*?"

"From what we gathered; that would be Dumbledore," Sirius said.

"Shall I continue?" Remus asked and a chorus of "yes" came.

From that day, everything had seemed to change at Hogwarts. All of Harry's instructors went out of their way to put some fun into the lessons. Their intentions were in the right place but Harry could only feel like they were trying to overcompensate for the bombshell Professor Dumbledore had given him. True, Harry had been down for a few days but his obsession with Sirius Black wouldn't allow his thoughts to remain on the disappointment for long.

After being released from the hospital wing, Harry had been moved to Dumbledore's guest quarters for a few days. Apparently Professor Lupin had fallen ill but when Harry tried to find out more, all anyone would say was that it 'wasn't serious'.

"Oh, Remus. I am sorry you're sick. I hope that they're right and that you'll be okay," Lily said sympathetically.

Remus smiled and shared a look with the others, what if this book told them what he was? They had already had to disclose Sirius being an animagus. True, Lily believes that is something Sirius is going to become not already has achieved.

During that time, Professor Dumbledore had attempted on numerous occasions to get Harry to open up about this entire mess but Harry would only say that he was fine and needed to get back to studying.

After learning that there had been no woman, Harry started to wonder why he had heard screaming. According to Professor Lupin, Dementors forced people to relive their worst memories but Harry couldn't remember ever hearing a woman scream like that. Afraid that he was losing his mind, Harry didn't press the subject, hoping that it was a one time occurrence.

"Who do you think that woman was?" Peter asked.

"Probably Petunia doing something nasty to him," Lily said with disgust.

"But the woman needed help. Remember, here: **"a terrified scream filled his ears".**" Remus read.

"Well, doesn't take much to terrify Petunia," Lily said with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, Evans. Have you been notty?" Sirius asked proudly. She just smiled back.

Harry was indeed under house—er—castle arrest for the remainder of the holidays. His supplies for the upcoming school year had been delivered by owl post, Madam Malkin had come to measure Harry for new robes herself, and his once enjoyable runs were now dreaded mazes through the castle halls. It was amazing how much something as simple as not being allowed outdoors could change one's mentality. There had been times when teachers had found Harry sitting on a windowsill somewhere in the castle just staring out with a longing look on his face. It broke nearly everyone's heart (Snape was the exception) to see Harry so withdrawn and they could only hope everything would be fine once the students returned.

"Must be dreadfully boring to be cooped up in a space with only grown ups to talk to," Sirius sympathized.

"But he has free access to the library," Lily protested and Remus nodded his agreement. The other three looked at them horrified.

Since Harry had signed up for Care of Magical Creatures which was held outdoors, measures had been taken to keep classes away from the Forbidden Forest and in the courtyard. This hadn't settled well with Hagrid, who had been recently promoted to teacher status,

"Cool! Hagrid teaching," James beamed.

"Yes, but Care of Magical Creatures?" Lily asked.

"No one knows how to care for a magical creature better than Hagrid," Sirius said defensively.

"I am not doubting that, I am just wondering which type of creature he will be showing the students," Lily pointed out and the boys grimaced at the thought.

since he had planned on introducing several creatures that felt uncomfortable leaving the forest. The thought of ruining Hagrid's class made Harry feel incredibly guilty and didn't help his mood at all. He was starting to feel like a burden again despite what everyone else was saying.

Once September 1st arrived, Harry was so eager for fresh air that even taking the Hogwarts Express to Hogwarts felt like a vacation. In order to keep up with the charade that everything was fine and dandy at the Dursleys, Harry needed to arrive to Hogwarts with everyone else. However, that didn't prevent Professor Dumbledore from insisting on at least two adults riding on the train for protection. Professor Lupin was to ride in the train car with Harry while Professor Flitwick rode in the teacher's compartment.

"Oh, Moony gets to ride the train as an adult. I am so jealous," James pouted.

"You ride the train every year James," Peter pointed out.

"Not as an adult I don't."

The others just gave up understanding *James logic*.

They had arrived an hour before the train would be leaving by a strange way of traveling called a portkey. Harry really didn't like that way of travel but it was the quickest and the most discrete. They had left all of his belongings at Hogwarts except for the book on defensive charms that he was currently reading. With plenty of time to spare, Harry started to wonder what would happen when he saw Ron and Hermione. He had kept in touch with them but had left his letters extremely vague. He never told them anything about his abduction by giving the excuse 'I'll tell you when I see you'. Harry also had kept them in the dark concerning everything he had been doing and knew he would probably end up paying for it.

Although he hadn't grown much, he had grown due to eating the decent meals he had been given. His training was evident with his more defined muscles if anyone was to see him without his clothes but of course Harry had no intention of allowing that to happen. Already dressed in his robes, Harry's new physical statue was hidden well even though anyone could see he had put on a little weight.

Another change was his glasses. Professor McGonagall had spent nearly a week helping Harry learn how to transfigure objects into a pair of eyeglasses in case his were lost or damaged beyond repair. A part of those lessons involved changing the appearance of them (that was the fun part according to the Transfiguration teacher). Harry now wore a pair of glasses that were wire framed and complemented his face better; at least that was what Professor McGonagall told him.

"That's quite useful," Lily nodded. James looked at her weirdly and she snatched his glasses from his face. "Imagine that happening on the middle of a battle?" He nodded and took his glasses back.

Staring out the window at the still empty platform, Harry started to wonder if this had been a good idea. Yes, he missed his friends more than anything but was he really ready to be completely honest with them? *No, definitely not.* This wasn't about his training. Harry knew he couldn't tell them about that because they would probably be jealous. *That and Dumbledore told you not to.*

Harry had no intention on announcing to the world what happened at Privet Drive this summer but could he really keep it from Ron and Hermione?

"No! Tell them Harry. Friends help," Remus urged.

"You sound like you know," Lily said with a frown.

"That's just plain logic," Sirius jumped to help his friend.

"Still," she continued.

"My parents are nice people," Remus said defensively.

"Yes, I imagine that. Especially after Mrs. Potter asked me to tell you your mother floo called just before I arrived to remind you to use a nice warm jumper in this weather," she said with a wicked smile. Remus flushed furiously while the other boys snickered. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you before."

What if they noticed how close Harry now was with the majority of the teaching staff? Besides Professor Snape,

"Well who would be close to *him*?" James asked horrified.

"Not you," Lily said disapprovingly.

the entire teaching staff was on a first name basis with Harry. They were also extremely overprotective. It seemed that in a matter of weeks Harry had gone from having no parents to a strange version of a family. Professor Lupin was acting like a surrogate father,

"Yes, daddy Moony," Sirius said and Remus smiled. James tried to smile but that came more like a grimace. Lily patted his shoulder. James sported a dreamy look after that.

Madam Hooch and Professor Sprout acted like the fun aunts, Professor Flitwick acted like the fun uncle, Hagrid was of course the protective big brother, Professor McGonagall acted like a strict grandmother, and Professor Dumbledore was the patient and understanding grandfather. Mrs. Weasley had already taken the position of overbearing mother.

It was enough to make anyone's head spin.

"Harry?" Professor Lupin asked curiously. "Is something wrong?"

"Hum, Yes!" Sirius stated.

Snapping out of thoughts, Harry quickly looked over at Professor Lupin and shook his head. He really didn't trust himself to talk right now. What could he say? *I'm fine. I'm just worried what my best friends will think when they learn that I let my uncle beat me and the man who betrayed my parents take me from my home.*

"Lies, Harry! *Lies!*" Sirius cried.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

"I'm sure your friends are just worried about you, Harry," Lupin said gently. "You don't *have* to tell them anything if you're not ready to. If they are true friends they will respect your decision."

"You know Moony, I think you're a very smart bloke," Sirius said and Remus smiled, "That said, since when do friends *respect* friend decisions to not *tell* them things?" he asked raising his arms. Remus had to agree to that one from personal experience.

Harry's gaze fell. "But what if they find out about the Dursleys?" he asked softly. "I know I'm not ready to tell them but you don't know Ron and Hermione. If they think I'm hiding something they won't stop until they figure out what it is. What if I have another flashback?"

Lupin frowned. Apparently Harry hadn't progressed as much as they had thought. "You haven't had one in the past two weeks, Harry," Lupin said. "We talked about this. You know that if something happens or if you need to talk my office is always open. Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall have told you the same. Just because school is starting doesn't mean we're going to turn our back on you."

"Nope, they're still your family. Weird as they may be," James nodded. Remus glared at him and Lily smacked him on the head.

Harry's shoulders slumped. He knew it sounded childish but he just couldn't help himself. "I know," he said softly. "I'm sorry—"

"—you have nothing to apologize for," Lupin interrupted. "You've had a difficult and lonely summer. It may take some time to adjust to the noise and commotion of having a castle full of people." Noticing that Harry was still extremely nervous, Lupin decided to change the topic. "How would you like to hear how your father managed to propose to your mother?"

"Yes, please do tell," James begged.

"I find myself curious too. Was I drunk when I accepted?" Lily said leaning forward.

Harry looked up at Professor Lupin and nodded, his dread instantly forgotten. Lupin had already told Harry several stories about the Marauders' school days. They always seemed to have a calming affect better than any potion. Relaxing, Harry listened as Lupin told his story. He could even picture it happening in his mind. Harry liked these stories about his parents. It was like his parents were actual people now.

"He's not going to tell?" James asked disgruntled.

"Apparently, that's going to be one of those missing scenes moments, " Remus explained.

"Why, did they lose the scene? " Peter asked.

"No, it's one of those things that the author tells you that happened but doesn't elaborate or the book would never end, " Remus explained patiently.

"Still sucks, I wanted to know how I proposed," James mumbled.

Before Harry knew it people were arriving on the platform but he was too engrossed in Professor Lupin's story to worry about it. In fact, it wasn't until the compartment door opened that Harry realized how much time had passed. Both Harry and Lupin turned to see a tall, freckled face, red haired boy and a tan, bushy haired girl with a strange looking orange cat in her arms standing in the doorway. There was an uncomfortable silence while the two teenagers stared at Harry in shock.

"Who are they?" Sirius asked.

"Venturing a guess: Ron and Hermione," Lily said as if talking to a small child.

Finally, the girl moved first by putting the cat down then rushing to Harry and hugging him as hard as she could. "We were so worried!" she exclaimed. "I know you said you were fine but we just couldn't believe it. How could you be fine after being kidnapped by someone like Sirius Black?

"He can be perfectly fine because I took care of him and loved him very deeply," Sirius mumbled annoyed at the constants remarks about his supposed Death Eater's activities.

Both Ron and I tried to convince Dumbledore to let us visit but he wouldn't. He wouldn't tell us anything except that you were safe!"

Harry glanced over at Lupin who was desperately trying not to laugh. "Er—Hermione?" Harry asked uncomfortably. "I'm fine, really. But I would appreciate it if you would let me breathe."

Hermione instantly let go of Harry and sat down beside him. It was then that she finally noticed someone else was in the car. She looked at the unfamiliar face uncertainly. "Oh, pardon me," she said politely. "Are you a friend of Harry's? I'm Hermione Granger and this—" she pointed at Ron "—is Ronald Weasley."

Lupin bowed his head slightly and smiled. "Please to meet you," he said kindly. "I'm Remus Lupin, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Harry and I were just discussing the interesting tutelage you've had in that area in the past few years. One dead and another without a memory. Not exactly a positive track record."

"Excuse me, what?" Remus asked alarmed.

"Moony leave the job! It's dangerous!" Sirius said grabbing Remus as if at any moment he would disappear.

"I am sure he'll be okay. Something must have happened to those two," Lily said while taking that book from Remus' hand, who was still busy trying unsuccessfully to get out of Sirius death grip. She continued reading.

Ron entered and sat down across from Hermione. "Er—well people say the position is cursed," he said sounding slightly nervous. "You don't have You-Know-Who attached to the back of your head or steal other people's accomplishments, do you?"

"Ron!" Hermione shouted. "Don't be rude! He's a teacher!"

The door opened again revealing a red haired girl whose eyes went wide at the sight of Harry. Ginny Weasley, Ron's sister and the youngest of the Weasley children, immediately blushed and avoided his eyes. "I'm glad to see you're okay, Harry," she said shyly. "We've all been worried about you."

"Oh, how cute," Lily cooed, "Someone has a crush."

"Well, she does have the necessary traits to woo any son of mine," James said smiling.

"And what would that be?" Lily asked.

"You know," he said stroking her hair, "the gorgeous red hair."

She blushed, then remembered who she was talking too and swatted his hand huffing. The frown did not reach her eyes though.

Two more red heads that looked identical to each other poked their heads in. Harry could hear Hermione and Ron groan in annoyance. Fred and George Weasley, pranksters extraordinaire had arrived and planned on making their presence known. "Hey Harry!" said a cheerful Fred. "How've you been?"

"We missed you this summer," added George.

"Yes, we could have used another test subject," Fred said with an evil grin. "Tormenting Ickle Ronniekins lost its fun after awhile and Ginny was certainly off limits."

"Why do I think I am going to like these two?" Sirius asked and James nodded his agreement.

"Because you're nothing but a troublemaker Black," Lily pointed out.

"Too true, my dear Forge," said George. "Plus, we can always count on Harry to keep life interesting."

"I agree, Gred," said Fred.

Hermione rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh, Ron's face was red with embarrassment, Ginny and Professor Lupin were trying hard not to laugh, and Harry was just taking it all in. Leave it to the Weasley twins to be the ones who acted normal. "Is this a private conversation or can anyone join in?" Harry asked with a smile.

Both Fred and George looked shocked. "Harry, as honorary member of the Weasley family," Fred began. "You should know by now—"

"—that there is no such thing as privacy," George added.

"Have to agree with them," Remus mumbled eyeing his friend that smiled back innocently.

"So *brother*, we heard you had been moved to a safer location after the whole incident. Please, oh please tell us there was at least some delinquent behavior on your part."

"See, told you we'd like them," Sirius said beaming.

"Is this a conversation I want to be present for?" Professor Lupin asked curiously however it was obvious he was enjoying the banter between the twins. "Merlin forbid I hear of a plot to prank the school from the legendary Weasley twins."

"Legendary? I bet they are not as legendary as the Marauders," James stated.

"I am sure not," Lily dryly said, the boys smiled proudly, "The school wouldn't survive another ser of troublemakers like you." The boys smile just got bigger at that and Lily shook her head.

Fred and George smiled proudly. "Did you hear that?" asked Fred. "*Legendary!* And Mum thought we'd never amount to anything. HA!"

"Actually, my dear brother, that was Bighead Percy who said that," George corrected shaking his head slowly. "The shame of our older brother being Head Boy is something we shall never live down."

"That's not a shame, that's a big honor," Lily cried and James looked horrified.

"Why would anyone want to be Head Boy for? That would take the fun out of life."

"I agree," Fred added. He seemed deep in thought for a moment before turning to George with an eager look on his face. "Perhaps we should start deflating his big head."

"An excellent idea!" George exclaimed. "Well farewell our dear siblings, honorary siblings and *esteemed* professor. We have plenty of work to do. It may take months to instill enough damage to bring Percy back to a place we mere humans call earth."

"True, true," said Fred then followed his brother out of the compartment.

Once the compartment door closed, Harry looked over at Hermione who was petting the orange cat she had been holding earlier. Desperate to start some conversation that wasn't

centered on him, Harry figured to start with the obvious. "So Hermione, you got a new pet?" Harry asked.

Hermione beamed. "A birthday present from my parents," she said happily. "I was going to get an owl but when I saw Crookshanks I just couldn't say no. He's gorgeous, isn't he?"

Harry glanced over at Ron with a raised eyebrow. In his opinion the cat was anything but gorgeous. Its fur was thick and fluffy and its face looked strange; a bit grumpy and strangely squashed. Harry had to wonder if it had run face first into a brick wall. However the animal seemed to be content and was purring while Hermione stroked the creature.

"It's a bloody monster, that's what it is," Ron said in annoyance. "Just keep that—that—*thing* away from Scabbers!"

"Who's Scabbers?" Peter asked.

"Don't know, hasn't been mentioned yet," Sirius said.

There was a loud whistle distracting everyone. Harry looked out the window as the train started to move. He glanced over at Professor Lupin then returned to staring out the window. He really wasn't looking forward to returning back to all of the restrictions Professor Dumbledore had put on him. He really wasn't looking forward to returning to a Dementor guarded castle.

"Well honestly, who would?" James asked. The other boys shivered and Lily mumbled something in the neighborhood of '*stupid Minister*'.

"So, Professor," Hermione said breaking the silence. "If you don't mind my asking, why are you on the train? I mean, we've never had a teacher ride with us before and I was just curious..." She finally noticed that everyone was staring at her. "I'll be quiet now."

"Poor Hermione, she doesn't look like she knows when not to ask questions," Sirius remarked.

Professor Lupin looked at Harry who just shrugged before returning his eyes to Hermione. "Due to recent events Professor Dumbledore wanted a few teachers to be on the train as a precaution," he said casually. "I'm sure you're aware that Sirius Black hasn't been caught. Although it is unlikely that he would board the train, we would rather be safe than sorry."

"Yes because I am not stupid enough to board a train full of people that prefer to believe in *Lies* than on his *best* friend," Sirius growled.

"Not to belittle your indignation but if you are just talking about Remus you can't very well say "full of people", Lily pointed out. She just received a glare in return.

Harry let out a huff. "In other words Professor Lupin is my bodyguard until we get back to Hogwarts," he summarized; his annoyance coming to the surface. "I'm not allowed to do anything this year, including going to Hogsmeade."

"Sacrilege!" James shouted.

"James, we've been through this," Remus sighed.

"I still want to manifest my thoughts on the matter," James snapped.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry in shock. "B—but surely Black would never try to attack an entire village of people in broad daylight!" Hermione exclaimed. "No one is *that* thick!"

"Oh, thank you for your faith in me. It's not that you think I am innocent, you just don't think I can be that thick!"

"Well to be fair, she doesn't know you," Lily said shrugging.

She looked over at Ron for help but only received a shrug. "Honestly! That is so unfair! You have your permission slip signed, right?"

Harry winced. "Er—no," he said nervously. How in the world was he supposed to get out of this?

"Oh, no. Poor Harry. They are going to find out everything," Peter fretted.

"Hermione, I must advise for you to calm down," Professor Lupin said in his ever present casual tone.

"Yes, Moony to the rescue!" James cried delighted.

"If you remember, the school letters containing the permission slip were sent out after the whole mess with Black had happened. Also, Professor Dumbledore does have the final word on those who can or can *not* go to Hogsmeade. He has his reasons and we just have to accept that."

Hermione looked away, ashamed of her outburst. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to be disrespectful it's just this was supposed to be so much fun and now we can't go."

Harry had to think about what she said for a moment, certain that he had heard wrong. "What do you mean 'we'?" he asked. "I'm the only one who can't go. You two shouldn't have to stay behind because of me."

"Well but as good friends that they are they are going to keep you company," James told the book. Lily looked at him and cooed.

"Oh, that's so sweet!"

"Thank you," James said blushing.

"But you'll be stuck in the castle all alone," Ron objected. "We could never do that to you."

"He won't be alone," Lupin said with a smile. "Professor Dumbledore thought it would be wise to give Harry some advanced lessons in defense which is a good idea considering his history."

Hermione's eyes grew wide in shock. "E—extra lessons?" she stuttered then turned to Harry. "You're getting *extra* lessons? Oh! Can we join! We could really use the practice especially after the last two years. Please, oh please! The chance to learn how to defend ourselves *properly* is just too good to pass up!"

"Why would anyone want *extra* lessons?" Sirius asked horrified.

"Some people like to study," Lily answered. Sirius just kept staring at her in shock.

Harry and Ron groaned. They both knew Hermione would now stop at nothing to be a part of these *classes*. "You really shouldn't have said that, Professor," Harry said softly. "Hermione's favorite place is the library. She signed up for every elective there is."

Professor Lupin winced. "Sorry," he said sincerely.

It seemed that Hermione was in heaven as she and Professor Lupin discussed his plans for the upcoming year.

Remus sighed and everyone stopped to look at him. With a smile he said, "I just realized that I am a Hogwarts Professor."

"Moony, they said that in chapter three," Peter said cautiously.

"I know, but there was so much going on that the thought of *me* being a teacher just started to sink now," and he sighed in delight again.

Knowing better than to interrupt Hermione when she was in her element, Harry and Ron settled on the floor and played a game of chess while Ginny silently watched. In retrospect, Professor Lupin had done Harry a favor. Hermione was now so engrossed in school to question Harry about the summer. It was clear that Ron didn't know what to say and Ginny was too shy to ask.

Rain had started to fall around mid-afternoon. Hermione had finally given up her pestering and was now reading one of her many books, Ron and Ginny were telling Harry about their trip to Egypt, and Professor Lupin was going over his class notes. Harry had to laugh when he heard of Fred and George trying to trap Percy in a pyramid.

"That's not nice," Lily huffed while the boys burst out laughing.

He had nothing against the newly declared Head boy. Percy was just a little *too* strict. Of course with Fred and George as brothers Harry had to assume that someone needed to be their opposite.

The compartment door slid open quickly making Ginny and Hermione jump. Three boys stood in the doorway. The one standing in the middle and the leader was Draco Malfoy.

"What? Malfoy *reproduced*?" Lily asked in horror.

James patted her biting his lip, "Yes, we know. We were shocked too."

He was flanked by his cronies, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle who always seemed to share a brain. How the boys could pass their classes was still a mystery. All three were in Slytherin so naturally were rivals to the four Gryffindors in the compartment.

"Well, well," drawled Malfoy in his usual lazy voice. "If it isn't Potty, two Weasels and a Mudblood. What's the matter, Potter? So scared that you need a babysitter now?"

"Like father, like son," Lily huffed, "Can't they at least try some originality in their insults?"

"When did Malfoy insult you?" James asked enraged.

"A long time ago James. I was in first year," she calmed him.

"At least we don't have to stand the git anymore now," Sirius said disgusted, "I heard he got engaged to my cousin Narcissa. They deserve each other."

Harry rolled his eyes and bit back the urge to curse his rival. "Of you, Malfoy?" he asked in annoyance. "Not likely."

"Malfoy?" Lupin asked curiously then comprehension flooded his face. "Ah yes, Draco Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy's son. I see that your father has passed his *ideals* down to you. However, I suggest you refrain from using such language and respect people's privacy by returning to your own compartment."

"Oh, Moony. That doesn't work with a Malfoy. They need to get kicked out of the compartment," Sirius pointed out mimicking said kicking.

Malfoy sneered at the man. "And who are you to give *me* orders?" he asked.

"How rude," Lily mumbled.

Ron smiled. "Professor Lupin," he said proudly. "He's the new Defense teacher. Congratulations Malfoy. You've managed to set a bad impression even before the Welcoming Feast. Fred and George haven't even accomplished that yet."

"Ha! In your face Malfoy! Now Moony is going to give you detention or something," James cried in joy.

Malfoy's cheeks turned pink with embarrassment. Unable to think of a comeback, the only thing he could do was leave which he did followed by Crabbe and Goyle. As soon as the compartment door closed, Ron, Hermione and Ginny burst out laughing. Harry couldn't join them. He returned to staring out the window again. He had made up his mind. He wasn't going to tell anyone anything about this summer. He couldn't chance Malfoy finding out somehow and ridiculing him for it. Professor Snape was bad enough.

"I don't think his friends would tell anyone," Lily stated.

"He doesn't know that, and when you're afraid of something rationality flies off the window." Remus pointed out. Lily surveyed him with narrowed eyes and he fidgeted a bit on the bed. James cleared his throat and pointed to the book to save his friend from scrutiny.

The travel north continued but it was now a rather quiet journey. The rain fell stronger and the now dark skies made the entire atmosphere feel a bit on the creepy side. The wind picked up causing a strong howling that made everyone jumpy. It was clear that everyone was thinking the same thing: the sooner they got to Hogwarts the better.

However their eagerness died as the train started to slow and eventually stopped. Everyone turned to Professor Lupin who was slowly standing up and pulling his wand out. "You four stay put," he said softly then looked directly at Harry. "Don't let anyone or anything in here."

"What's going on? Why did they stop?" Peter asked scared.

"Don't worry Wormtail, Moony isn't going to let anything happen," James said reassuring his friend.

"But what if that's Sirius that came to kill everyone?" Peter stuttered.

"Hey, I did not and will not kill *anyone!*" Sirius shouted outraged. James tried to calm Peter while Remus tried to restrain Sirius to the bed.

Harry was about to nod when a familiar feeling of intense cold filled his entire body. He struggled to breathe as he grabbed his chest.

"NOOOOOOOOO!" four voices shouted.

"What? What's happening? Do you know?" Lily asked terrified. The boys shakily nodded.

No, oh please no! They can't be here! His body started to shake as Professor Lupin hurried to his side. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were staring in shock. They had never seen Harry act like this before.

Thinking quickly, Lupin pulled out a chocolate bar and put a piece in Harry's mouth. "Just let it melt, Harry," he said calmly. "Don't focus on the cold." Remembering that they weren't alone, Professor Lupin quickly handed out chocolate to the other three Gryffindors. "Eat it, you may need it."

"Why are you handing out chocolate when my son is clearly *sick*? Get him a *healer!*" Lily shouted.

James took a hold of her arms and tried to calm her down, "He is helping Lily. Dementors are coming, chocolate helps."

"Ah, sorry. Thank you," she said embarrassed.

The compartment door slowly slid open to reveal a tall cloaked figure. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Professor Lupin quickly stood up and pointed his wand at the creature. All of the warmth the chocolate had given Harry was now gone. He couldn't breathe again. A familiar voice filled his ears but this time it was saying something.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —"

"Who's talking? Whose voice is that?" Sirius asked horrified clinging to Remus.

A warm hand touched his forehead as another piece of chocolate was put in his mouth, pulling Harry out of the cold. Opening his eyes, Harry looked up to see Professor Lupin, Ron, Hermione and Ginny looking at him worriedly. A tear escaped his right eye as he looked away. He knew who the voice belonged to now. "Mum," he said softly.

"OH no, that's sad. That's horrible. He heard my last seconds. No Harry don't worry, mummy is here."

"Hum, Lily," Sirius said biting his lip, "You're not. I mean in the book, for Harry. You're dead." He wished he could take that back at the sorrowful look on her face.

Lupin gripped Harry's left shoulder. "What did you say?" he asked.

Harry looked up at the friend of his parents with unshed tears in his eyes. "I heard Mum," he said in a shaky voice. "She was begging for Voldemort to kill her instead of me."

"Of Course I was. I wasn't about to let him kill my baby!" Lily said with tears in her eyes. James, Sirius and Remus were discreetly wiping their eyes too. Peter didn't know how to react.

The whistle blew and the train started to move. Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat down across from Harry while Professor Lupin sat down beside the teenager and put an arm around his shoulders. Harry tensed at first like he always did before relaxing. His worst memory. He now knew that it was that Halloween night that Voldemort had murdered his parents.

The compartment door opened again followed by Professor Flitwick poking his head in. "Is everything all right?" he asked then noticed Harry and let out a sigh. "How close were they this time?"

Ron, Hermione and Ginny looked at Harry with their eyes wide but remained silent. Harry didn't even notice them. He was still shaking but not as badly as before. He could feel his body slowly warming up but his mind was still on hearing his mother's voice. She now had a voice.

"Well, why are they staring? What do they think? That my baby is just going to hear my sweet Lily die and then just stand up as if everything was fine and dandy?" James asked angry.

"They are just shocked James. They've never seen this happen and they are just thirteen. Did you know how to act on a situation like this at thirteen? Mind you, do you know how to act on a situation

like this now?" Remus asked, James mumbled something that no one understood and Lily kept reading forgetting to scold James for calling her *his sweet Lily*.

"It was right where you're standing," Professor Lupin answered. "Have you talked to the conductor yet?"

Flitwick nodded. "I've also been checking on the compartments," he said. "Several students are a bit shaken up but seem to be fine otherwise." He approached Harry and put a gentle hand on the boy's arm. "Don't focus on the memory, Harry. Try and think of something happy, something in the present."

"Well, we're almost there," Professor Lupin said to the three onlookers. "You should probably change into your robes."

Hermione was the first to stand but was hesitant to move any more than that. It was clear that she had questions but was afraid to ask them. "Professors, what was that thing?" she asked nervously.

"That was a Dementor," said Professor Flitwick. "They guard Azkaban prison and were searching the train for Sirius Black."

"And that was a useless piece of horror for everyone on the train since I am NOT STUPID to get on a train full of people who would hand me to the Dementors!"

Harry had finally stopped shaking but still felt weak. He noticed Professor Lupin offering another piece of chocolate and gratefully took it. The affects were instant the moment Harry put the piece in his mouth. He almost felt normal. Well, as close to normal as one could be after hearing your mother beg for your life.

Everyone grimaced.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny left to change followed by Professor Flitwick who needed to check the rest of the compartments. Both Harry and Professor Lupin sat in silence for the remainder of the trip. Neither knew what to say if there really was anything to say. How do you comfort someone in a situation like this? You can't. All you can do is be there for them when they need you.

"And Moony is. He always is," Sirius said hugging Remus who patted his back and attempted to hide his blush.

The moment they arrived at the station Harry noticed that there were wizards stationed all over the place. Harry had been told about this ahead of time and that it was just a safety precaution but it still was a little nerve-wracking to see. Professor Lupin remained by Harry's side as they departed the train with Ron, Hermione and Ginny following. Whispers broke out as the students finally got a look at the-boy-who-lived. It made Harry feel extremely self conscious to have so many people watching him despite how much he tried to ignore it.

"He's quite shy isn't he?" James asked.

"Nothing like his father," Lily mumbled.

Professor Flitwick caught up with the group as they reached at least one hundred horseless carriages. Now feeling extremely uncomfortable with the attention he was receiving, Harry let Professor Lupin direct him to the first carriage. He got in followed by Professors Lupin and Flitwick. Ron, Hermione and Ginny got in the next one, leaving Harry with the two teachers.

"I know Harry must be used by now but I'd be incredibly uncomfortable sitting alone with two teachers," Peter stated flatly.

"Professor Flitwick is a very nice person. I've had very interesting conversations with him after class," Lily remarked.

Sirius coughed something that sounded remarkably like "teacher's pet".

The distinct odor of mold and straw hit Harry's nose but he didn't pay much attention to it as the carriage started moving towards the school. As they reached the gates, Harry was hit with another wave of cold and slowly moved back and into Professor Lupin. He closed his eyes as he grabbed his chest never noticing Professor Lupin gently rubbing his back in a comforting manner. They moved on to the castle, the carriage picking up speed until it came to an abrupt halt.

Professor Flitwick was the first to get out. Professor Lupin moved to follow but noticed that Harry was still in the same position. It was almost like the boy was petrified. "Harry, it's okay," Lupin said gently. "You're safe, back at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, well, that's arguable. I mean, have you forgotten the Basilisk we know nothing about yet. Voldemort and let's not forget that his first encounter with a Dementor was on Hogwarts grounds," Sirius said annoyed.

Slowly Harry looked over at Lupin and nodded in understanding. He was really starting to hate the affect the Dementors had on him. He didn't want to be hearing his mother beg Voldemort. The fear in her voice sent chills down his spine. Following Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick, Harry tried to focus on the present like he had been told but was finding it difficult. He mindlessly walked up the steps and through the large oak front doors to the Entrance Hall.

"Potter! Granger!" a familiar voice yelled though the chatter of the students getting out of the carriages. When Harry finally looked up he noticed Professor McGonagall approaching. She quickly stole a glance from Professor Lupin then looked at Harry sympathetically. "Madam Pomfrey is waiting for you, Potter," she said quietly then turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, come with me please."

Harry was about to object and insist he was fine but Professor Lupin silenced him with a look. Frustrated, Harry let out a scoff as he reluctantly followed Lupin to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey had been ready for him. She quickly checked him over, not even listening to Harry's protests. Several potions were ingested and before Harry knew it darkness consumed him.

"Poor Harry, first day of school and already in the Hospital Wing," Remus sighed.

A/N: Thanks everyone for reviewing!

"Hey, I never reviewed!" James cried.

"Well you should have, since the author is thanking you," Lily scolded him. James gave her a sheepish smile.

A knock came from the door and all five of them jumped startled. The door opened and Mrs. Potter entered smiling, "Lunch is ready."

Chapter 8

After a very satisfying lunch the teens were back in James room. Lily was once again sitting on the wing chair with James by her side on the floor. Sirius and Remus were seated on the bed. Remus thought best to keep James and Sirius apart while they figured out what happened, even though James seemed to have forgotten what Sirius allegedly did. And Peter was once again on the floor as far as Sirius as possible. Lily started reading.

The Electives

Sunlight shining on Harry's face quickly brought him out of his peaceful slumber. He didn't even remember falling asleep but paid it no mind since he had dozed off many times without remembering it during his month at Hogwarts. Mindlessly reaching for the bedside table, Harry found his glasses, put them on and bit back the urge to cry out in frustration.

He was in the hospital wing. He had spent the entire night in the hospital wing.

Malfoy's going to have a field day with this.

"I am sorry to agree with you Harry, but, Yes!" Remus nodded resigned.

Angry at himself and Madam Pomfrey, Harry quickly dressed into the clothes he wore yesterday and left the wing before anyone could stop him, making sure to remember his book from yesterday and his wand. The halls were empty leading Harry to figure that it was still rather early. Since his house—castle arrest, Harry had grown to know the shortest paths to various destinations and the Gryffindor Tower wasn't any different.

He had been given the password a few days ago allowing him to enter without drawing attention. The Common Room was so silent it was eerie. Suppressing a shiver, Harry hurried up the stairs to his dorm room. He entered as quietly as possible, sneaking over to his trunk. Neville Longbottom's

"Oh, do you think he's Frank's relative?" Peter asked.

"Must be. Maybe he's Frank's son," Remus answered.

snores and deep breathing from Ron, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan served as a confirmation that everyone was still asleep. He stole a glance at Neville's alarm clock to see that it was only half past five. *No wonder no one's awake.*

Once he had changed, Harry grabbed his book and left before anyone knew he had ever been there. He figured he could read a few chapters before his first class and possibly think of something he could say to Ron and Hermione so they wouldn't look at him as if he were to break. Harry had received too many of those looks already by the majority of the teaching staff.

"That's just because they are worried Harry," Lily explained.

"Yeah, but that's dead annoying anyway," Remus countered.

Entering the Great Hall, Harry saw that it was indeed empty but paid it no mind as he went over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Plates and silverware were set but no food was out yet. Ignoring his growling stomach, Harry opened his book and began to read. It was amazing how many variations there were of defensive shields and mind-boggling that people could actually remember them all. There were so many different wand movements for one incantation which specified the properties of the shield.

Harry was so focused on his reading that he hadn't even noticed the food appear. The smell, however, was impossible to ignore. He could smell the eggs, sausages, bacon, and muffins all in the first intake. His stomach growled in hunger again. Harry groaned in annoyance and started to fill his plate with food. Propping his book up against a large bowl, Harry continued to read while he ate.

"Harry, eating is never annoying," Peter stated.

"You would know," James chuckled.

When he finally finished the chapter, Harry pushed his plate aside and mentally reviewed what he had read. Closing his eyes, Harry practiced the wand movements described with his wand hand. There were a few that he couldn't recall clearly but most of them he remembered which made him grin. He was finally getting this studying thing down.

"He must look pretty weird with his eyes closed grinning. If I was a teacher-" Sirius started

"Which thank God is never going to happen," Lily interrupted.

"As, I was *saying*, if I was a teacher I'd think he was up to something," finished Sirius shooting Lily an annoyed look.

Opening his eyes, Harry jumped back in surprise to see that he wasn't alone, nearly falling to the floor in the process.

"That would be graceful," Sirius sniggered.

Once he had regained his balance, Harry quickly closed his book and looked up at the worried face of Professor Dumbledore.

"See, told you. Dumbledore thinks he was up to something," Sirius said triumphantly.

"Er—good morning, sir," Harry said trying to break the silence. "I didn't hear you come in."

Professor Dumbledore smiled as he leaned closer to Harry. "That usually happens when you are deep in thought," he said pleasantly. "You are up rather early, Harry. Is there something on your mind you wish to discuss?"

"Yes, Professor. I was thinking in turning the corridor on the fifth floor of the east wing into a swamp. What would you say the best course of action to achieve my goal would be?"

"BLACK! My son was studying not planning a prank!" Lily scolded him.

"Dumbledore doesn't know that," Sirius cheekily answered her.

Harry shook his head. "No sir," he said honestly. This had been the common beginning to every conversation between them for the past few weeks. The problem was Harry didn't know if Professor Dumbledore was being serious or polite. The serious aspect would be 'I know something's wrong talk to me about it' while the polite aspect would be 'if you want to talk, I'm here'.

Dumbledore remained silent for a moment before straightening back up. "Very well," he said with a nod. "I know yesterday was difficult for you, Harry. Professor Lupin told me you heard your mother's voice on the train. If you wish to discuss this or have any questions, my office is always open."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said politely. Talking about it was the last thing he wanted to do but wasn't about to sound ungrateful by declining Professor Dumbledore's offer. How do you talk about something like that? Harry had to admit he still found this being open about your feelings weird. The Durleys never cared so why should anyone else?

"Well Harry, that's because the Dursleys, especially my *dear* sister, are a bunch of horrible, child abusing...." And what Lily said next made James exclaim:

"Lily! I didn't know you had it in you!"

Harry waited for Dumbledore to leave for the head table then returned to his book. He felt a little self conscious with someone else in the hall, especially with it being Professor Dumbledore. Harry didn't know why but he just didn't know how to act around the Headmaster anymore. Perhaps it had something to do with the new 'patient grandfather' role Professor Dumbledore had taken on. Harry wasn't sure. All he knew was he needed to make his 'family' proud.

"That's normal Harry. We all want to make our families proud. But they don't care if we make mistakes, so don't be self conscious. Be yourself," Remus explained and Sirius stared at him, "*What?*"

"That was very professorly of you, explaining things like that. I think this book is getting to your head." Sirius was rewarded by a smack in the head.

Professor McGonagall was the next to enter and although Harry kept his eyes on his book he couldn't help but notice his 'strict grandmother' alter her course. She walked over to the Gryffindor table then casually walked towards the head table, pausing briefly to place a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Harry looked over his shoulder at the Transfiguration teacher and gave her a soft smile. She smiled back then joined Dumbledore.

"Hey! That's unfair. McGonagall never smiles at me. She's always going. Mr. Potter, detention. Mr. Potter 20 points from Gryffindor."

"That's because you're always causing trouble. She is quite nice to me," Lily stated and James mumbled "teacher's pet". Lily glared at him.

Professor Snape entered next but he simply glared at Harry before taking his usual spot beside Professor McGonagall.

"You know, he's going to end up with an ulcer if he's always so tight up," Lily said.

"A what?" the boys asked in unison.

"You know, an ulcer," at the boys' lost looks, "It's when the acids on your stomachs start hurting your stomach and end up digging holes in it," she continued with no luck. "How can you have never heard of ulcers?"

"If you have holes on your stomach then why don't you just drink a regenerating potion?" Sirius asked perplexed as to why someone would go around with holes on their stomach.

Lily opened her mouth to retort then closed it and mumbled, "Forgot about potions."

A few minutes later students started to enter. Most of them didn't notice Harry but those who did weren't exactly discrete about it. After a while Harry started to wonder what was being said. Did everyone know how the Dementors affected him or were they just talking about Sirius Black kidnapping him?

Sometimes Harry wanted a normal life so badly it hurt.

Fred and George arrived with a swarm of Gryffindors and immediately sat down beside Harry, playfully nudging him over so they could sit by each other. They looked rather tired and certainly not remotely cheerful. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing the Weasley twins serious and this was extremely close to it.

"Those two sound a lot like another pair I know that I don't remember ever seeing serious either," Remus said dryly.

"Who?" Sirius asked and Remus just stared at him.

"You have to be kidding me!" Remus retorted.

"Er—did something happen?" Harry asked not sure he really wanted to know.

Both of the twins slowly looked at Harry, sympathy written all over their faces. Harry really hated that look. "Dumbledore told everyone last night about the Dementors 'guarding' the school," said George. "He also mentioned what they do to people, making them relive their worst memories and all."

"Ron—er—sort of let it slip that you heard your mum being murdered," Fred added.

"Great! Now the whole school is going to know and make fun of him!" James growled.

Lily winced, "I hate to say it but we can be mean when we want to."

"That's why private matters should stay that way, *private*," Remus stated.

Harry closed his eyes as he bowed his head. This wasn't the way he wanted to start his first day of classes. Now everyone was going to be staring and whispering. He didn't want the attention and he certainly didn't need it. Why couldn't people just treat him like everyone else? Was that too much to ask? "How many know?" Harry asked softly.

"Er—well—you know Ron," George said. "He doesn't always think before he speaks and was talking about it during dinner last night. So of course everyone sitting by them heard—"

"—and they told everyone around them," added Fred. "And so on—"

"Basically, the whole school," Peter stated. The others just nodded glumly.

"—and so on," George said. "So I would say that everyone knows," his face changed from sympathy to an evil grin, "but don't worry, Harry. We showed him the error of his ways last night."

"Oh, yes. Do tell, what did you do?" James said his eyes shinning in anticipation.

Harry instantly looked over at the twins with a raised eyebrow. He really didn't like the looks on their faces. They were definitely up to something. "What did you do?" he asked cautiously then thought better of it. "Or do I even want to know?"

Fred and George both winked at Harry then returned to their breakfasts. *Oh yeah, this is definitely not good.* Shaking his head, Harry returned to his forgotten breakfast and tried not to dwell on it. Judging by the looks the twins gave him, Harry would find out what they did soon enough. He could only hope they didn't change Scabbers into a large spider or something on that sort.

"Who's this Scabbers they keep mentioning?" Peter asked raising his hands annoyed.

"Must be Ron's pet," Lily frowned at the book.

"Yeah, but is Scabbers a cat, a toad an owl?" Sirius asked raising his eyebrows.

"Well, we know he's not a spider," James answered.

The rest of the teachers arrived (all giving Harry the same sympathetic look) so the Heads of the Houses could distribute the time tables. As Harry was handed his, he felt another reassuring squeeze and looked up at Professor McGonagall. She still had a stern look on her face but Harry could see her eyes were filled with compassion. She leaned closer to him so no

one could hear her. "Potter, please meet me in Entrance Hall in ten minutes," McGonagall whispered.

"Uhhh, is he in trouble? What did you do Harry? Did you turn the fifth floor corridor into a swamp?"

"BLACK! Enough with the swamp. My son is not a troublemaker!" Lily yelled at Sirius who gave her an innocent smile.

Partially confused and partially afraid, Harry could only nod in response. As far as he knew he hadn't done anything wrong so she wouldn't be reprimanding him, right?

Hermione storming into the Great Hall pulled Harry out of his thoughts. She looked completely outraged as she reached Fred and George. "What did you two do!?" she asked loudly, getting everyone's attention. "Ron refuses to leave the dorm room! How dare you turn his hair pink on the first day of classes? Do you know how important today is?"

The boys roared with laughter. Lily tried to look stern but her lips were twitching.

"Pink! That's just brilliant!" James said whipping tears of joy from his face.

Fred and George looked at each other then back at Hermione. "Whatever are you talking about?" they both asked innocently.

Harry took this opportunity to slip away unnoticed. His training with Professor Lupin had taught him how to move silently and blend into crowds.

"Yes, Remus would know how to teach you that," Lily said.

James narrowed his eyes and asked defensively, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I am just saying that Remus knows how to blend. I mean you hardly ever notice that he's there."

"So, Moony doesn't like attention. What's wrong with that?" Sirius spat back.

"Nothing, I am just mentioning a trait of his," Lily continued defensively. Remus took pity.

"That's ok. She is right. I like to blend," James and Sirius kept quiet but did not stop glaring at Lily.

He would certainly need it today. Staying close to the walls, Harry made his way to the Entrance Hall determined not to draw anyone's attention. Professor McGonagall hadn't arrived yet but Harry figured it was better this way. If Hermione had seen him go she probably would have followed, determined to find out what was going on.

It was only a few minutes later when Professor McGonagall entered. She must have noticed Harry's nervousness because her face immediately softened as she approached. "Don't worry,

Harry," she said gently. "You've done nothing wrong. I only wanted to talk to you about your first class today. I noticed you have Divination and I thought it would be best to warn you that Professor Trelawney

"Excuse me now! Professor who?" James asked horrified.

"Professor Trelawney," Lily repeated.

"Hey, wasn't she in your Divination class James?" Sirius asked.

"You took Divination?" Lily asked in disgust.

"Yeah," James shrugged, "You know, an easy subject."

Lily huffed showing exactly what she thought about James choosing a subject because it was *easy*.

has a habit of predicting the death of some poor student every year since she's been here. No one has died yet. Considering your recent history, I would advise you do not take anything she says too seriously."

Harry nodded then smiled. "Thanks for the warning, Professor," he said then thought about what Professor McGonagall said for a moment. "I don't remember meeting Professor Trelawney this summer."

Professor McGonagall let out a scoff. "That woman rarely leaves the sanctuary of her crystal ball and tea leaves," she said then put her hand under Harry's chin and tilted his head up so their eyes met. "If she gives you any trouble at all, come and see me. Sybill is usually too focused on Seeing the future to even notice the present and past."

"Oh, that's her alright," James grunted, "always trying to see my future. Saying I am going to die a horrible death."

"Well, hum, James," Peter started unsure, "she was kind of right then. I mean, Voldemort killed you in that book." James looked horrified.

Harry nodded again. "I will," he said then wrapped his arms around Professor McGonagall and hugged her. "Thank you," he said sincerely. It still felt strange to have so many people looking out for him but in times like this Harry liked it. He was glad Professor McGonagall warned him because he probably would have taken it seriously.

After a moment McGonagall returned the embrace. "You are most welcome, Harry," she said softly. "Now, I believe you can be of assistance to Mr. Weasley. Although he was wrong to announce what happened, he doesn't deserve to attend the first day of classes with pink hair."

"Do you think if I hug Minnie she's going to hug me back?" Sirius asked.

"Not if you keep calling her Minnie," Remus answered.

Harry agreed and bid farewell to his Head of House before hurrying to the Gryffindor Tower. Hurrying up to his dorm room, Harry ignored the stares and whispers his housemates were giving him. Opening the door, Harry's eyes went wide at the sight of Ron who was sitting on his bed with tears in his eyes. His hair wasn't just pink, it was flashing neon pink.

Roars of laughter could be heard.

No wonder Ron refused to leave the dorm room. Harry doubted he would want anyone to see him in that state either.

"Ron?" Harry asked hesitantly, unsure of really what to say. "Er—are you all right?"

Ron looked up at Harry then looked away. "I can't believe my brothers did this," he said in a shaky voice. "I didn't mean to say anything, it just slipped out. I'm really sorry Harry. Hermione and I were just so confused. We didn't understand why you heard your mum's voice. When Dumbledore told us about the Dementors...I guess...I mean..."

"I understand, Ron," Harry said as he entered the room. "I know you didn't mean it but you have to see it from my side. I don't want people treating me like they are right now. I hate being the latest gossip. I heard about how the 'Daily Prophet' dragged on the kidnapping and what they were saying. I don't need or want everyone knowing about my personal life. Can you imagine what Malfoy is going to do now that he knows? I just want to be left alone, like everyone else."

"Oh, Malfoy is going to use every opportunity to make fun of him," Lily sighed.

"You bet, he will!" James nodded in disgust. He was a prankster and let's face it, a bully, but even he had his limits. And making fun of people's dead mother was definitely a limit.

Ron's shoulders slumped forward as he stared at his hands in shame. "That's basically what Hermione said last night," he muttered. "I know I messed up. I know I'm a bloody prat. How many times can I say I'm sorry?"

Harry walked over to his things and grabbed his wand. Turning around, Harry pointed his wand at Ron who looked up in surprise. "Don't move," Harry said evenly. With a flick followed by a swish, he muttered the incantation then watched as Ron's hair faded to the blinding pink to its normal red. Satisfied, Harry pocketed his wand then moved to collect the books he would need for his morning classes. "Go have a look," he said.

Fearful that Harry had only added to the damage, Ron rushed out of the room only to return a minute later and pull Harry into a bone crushing hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Ron exclaimed then realized what he was doing and backed away. "Hermione couldn't even figure out how to remove it! How did you do it?"

"Well, that's because my son is a genius," James said proudly. Lily beamed with him. The others just stared at him and Remus said:

"Very modest about your son you two."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I've been bored for the past month so I did a lot of reading," he said. It wasn't exactly a lie. He *had* done a lot of reading. The problem was he really couldn't trust Ron to keep his mouth shut about anything. So when all else fails, change the subject. "Come on, we've got Divination first and it at the top of the North Tower."

Ron quickly grabbed his things then followed Harry to the North Tower where they met up with Hermione. The look of surprise on Hermione's face made Ron burst out laughing. They entered a strange looking classroom that looked more like a tea shop than a place to learn. Shrugging it off, Harry moved over to a vacant round table and sat down with Ron and Hermione.

They were about to pull out their books when a soft voice came out of the shadows. "Welcome to Divination," it said. "I am Professor Trelawney."

After a look at the woman, Harry could understand why Professor McGonagall had warned him. She didn't exactly seem all entirely there and for some reason reminded Harry of a large insect. Perhaps it was her very large glasses that made her eyes appear too large for any human. Harry wasn't sure. All he knew was to remember Professor McGonagall's words and not take anything she said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. That's her alright," James mumbled miserably.

"Divination is one of the most difficult magical arts," Trelawney continued. "This subject can not necessarily be taught through books. Only those who have the Sight will progress while the remainder of you will understand the delicate art this is."

"And you definitely *do not* have the Sight," James continued his mumbling.

Hermione let out a huff while Harry and Ron held back a laugh. This was one class that Hermione would probably struggle in along with them.

Professor Trelawney went on talking about the Inner Eye and the art of Sight. She also seemed to scare a few students by asking extremely vague questions about 'loved ones'. The problem was everyone was buying it hook, line and sinker. She continued on explaining what would be covered in class before instructing everyone on how to read tea leaves.

Harry and Ron exchanged cups and after a few minutes of trying to figure out what the tea leaves were saying, Harry could only conclude that Ron would experience pain and suffering but be happy which didn't make any sense what-so-ever.

"Oh, that's precious!" Sirius barked laughing, "I think Harry needs to get his Inner Eye checked out."

Ron had even more trouble with Harry's cup forcing Professor Trelawney to take a look. After a few moments everyone jumped as Trelawney screamed then collapsed in an armchair.

A long silence filled the room. Finally, Professor Trelawney seemed to regain her composure. "I'm so sorry my dear boy," she said dramatically as she looked at Harry with the utmost compassion in her eyes. "You—you have the Grim in your cup."

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow. He remembered Professor Lupin asking if that was what Midnight had looked like. He had completely forgotten to look into it with everything else that was going on. "Excuse me?" he asked in confusion.

Professor Trelawney looked shocked. "The Grim, the giant black dog that is an omen...a terrible omen of death!" she cried.

"Oh, please," James said annoyed, "according to her I would have had to drop dead at least fifty times last year alone."

And there it is, Harry thought sarcastically. Instead of showing fear, Harry put a smile on his face. "Really?" he asked in anticipation. "That must be Midnight, a dog I met over the summer. I was told he looked like a Grim. Maybe this means he'll be coming back!"

Everyone roared with laughter. Whipping tears off his face Sirius mumbled "Perfect."

Everyone was looking at the conversation in shock. "My boy, please don't joke about the Grim!" exclaimed Trelawney. "Everyone who has seen the Grim has died!"

Harry sat back in mock confusion. He appeared to be deep in thought but that was actually far from the truth. *Professor McGonagall, you owe me.* "Then how do you know?" he asked innocently. "If everyone who's seen the Grim has died then how do you know if they've actually seen it? It doesn't make any sense."

"That's Divination for you!" Lily huffed, "A very wooly subject if you ask me."

"Not all have died immediately," Professor Trelawney clarified. "You claim to actually have seen the Grim?"

Harry shook his head. "No, Midnight was a stray, a friendly stray," he said simply as he took back his cup and looked at the tea leaves again. "This does sort of look like him. What does it mean when you see a pet Hermione?" Looking over at his friend who was staring at Harry in amazement, Harry quickly winked to signal he was having fun.

"I don't think using logic with Trelawney is going to work," Remus said calmly.

Hermione hid a smile and looked in his book. "If the leaves resemble a pet that is lost the pet either recently died or will be seen again," she read from the book. She then looked up at Harry with a shrug. "I guess we can only hope for the best."

"Yeah, I'll be coming back and scaring the crap out of Trelawney. Lurking in the corridors and jumping in front of her when she's least expecting," Sirius said conspiratorially.

"Then you'll prove her right Padfoot," Remus said, "Because she's going to die of a heart attack the first time she sees you."

Trelawney was flabbergasted. "I—I think we should end class for today," she said quickly. "Until we meet again."

Everyone packed away their things and left the classroom. Everyone was in a stunned silence as they set off for Transfiguration except for Harry and Hermione who were having a hard time to keep from laughing. Entering the classroom, Harry looked directly at Professor McGonagall and nodded. He noticed she let out a sigh then winked at her. Seeing her confused look was a signal for him to tell her what happened later which he had every intention of doing.

Once class began, Professor McGonagall started lecturing about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals) then to prove her lecture turned into a tabby cat earning a scattered applause.

"I love when she does that. That's what gave me the idea of becoming one," Sirius commented.

"Do you know when you are going to start? You have to be of age to start the Animagus training right?" Lily asked, the boys stared at her and then Sirius said:

"Of course! I'll wait till I'm of age." Lily went back to reading and missed the look the four boys exchanged.

Transforming back, Professor McGonagall looked around the classroom and noticed almost half of the class was watching Harry. Rolling her eyes in annoyance, McGonagall assigned the homework then dismissed the class.

Packing up slowly, Harry insisted he would catch up with Ron and Hermione for lunch. He waited until everyone left the room then approached the teacher's desk. "Thanks again for the warning, Professor," he said with a smile. "You were right. Professor Trelawney is certainly eccentric."

"That's being *polite*," James mumbled.

Professor McGonagall tried to hold back a smile and failed. "May I ask what happened, Harry?" she said.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "She claimed to see the Grim in my tea cup," he said simply. "I tried to use logic and—er—well, she didn't agree with me. I told her she was seeing Midnight instead."

McGonagall let out a laugh that startled Harry. "Oh, Mr. Potter," she said happily. "I must say that is the worst thing you could have done to her. She takes her 'predictions' and 'omens'

very seriously. Five points to Gryffindor for your quick thinking. Now, you best hurry off to lunch."

"Did Minnie just award Harry points for making fun of a teacher?" Sirius asked. Peter, Remus and James nodded. "She would never do that to me!" he whined. Lily rolled her eyes

Harry didn't need to be told twice and hurried off to the Great Hall. By the time he arrived, Harry noticed that Ron and Hermione were glaring at each other. He shook his head slowly as he sat down beside Ron. Some things just never change. The only thing that changed was the topic of the argument. It amazed Harry how many different topics Ron and Hermione could find to argue on.

After an extremely quiet lunch, Harry headed towards Care of Magical Creatures with Ron and Hermione. With Dumbledore's new regulations, they only needed to go to the courtyard but at least it was out of the castle. The only sign of yesterday's rain was the slopping wet lawn they had to walk on. Arriving early, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat down on a bench and waited. Ron sat on Harry's left while Hermione sat on Harry's right. It was clear that they weren't about to resolve their differences any time soon.

"Would either of you care to tell me why you're not speaking to each other?" Harry asked at last in aggravation.

Neither of them said anything at first. They both looked away which made Harry groan in annoyance. Finally, Hermione broke the silence. "Ron believes in this whole Grim causes your death farce," she said quickly. "Divination seems to be nothing but guesswork. It's all interpretation. You thought it was a sheep in Harry's cup, Ron. Honestly."

"You think it's just a coincidence?" Ron asked quickly. "Sirius Black is out there! I'm not saying I necessarily believe it all but..." He seemed to be at a loss for words as he finally looked at Harry and bit his lower lip. "I don't want you to die, Harry. You have no idea what it was like when you were missing. We thought we'd never see you again."

"She's being a little harsh. Ron is just worried," Remus said.

"Well, that's nice of him, but she does have a point, that Grim business is just superstition," Lily pointed out.

"You say that because you are muggleborn," Sirius said and glaring at him Lily spat back.

"So?"

"So, you didn't grow up hearing the stories that we, and Ron, grew up hearing. It's easier for a muggleborn to dismiss all of that as silly. I mean, I agree with you, it's silly, but I did believe it when I was small. I only stopped because- OW." Sirius glared at Remus that had just thrown himself on him.

"Sorry, lost my balance," Remus said giving Sirius a pointed look.

"Because?" Lily asked.

"Because we convinced him that divination was rubbish," James said exchanging looks with Remus. Honestly, sometimes Sirius just *did not think* before he opened his mouth.

Harry's gaze fell. He knew this was something they needed to talk about but why did it have to be now? Rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses, Harry could only let out a sigh. What could he tell them to assure them nothing was going to happen when he didn't even believe it? "Ron, I doubt Sirius Black can reach me here," he said at last. "I'm being watched all the time. I'm not even allowed outside the castle except for this class and Quidditch. There are also Dementors patrolling the grounds."

All of them shivered.

The sound of people coming signaled that this conversation should be continued later. There seemed to be a temporary truce formed between Ron and Hermione. It was like they agreed to disagree until they could find something else to disagree on.

"They remind me of another couple I know," Sirius said tapping a finger on his chin with a pensieve expression. Remus and Peter gave James and Lily pointed look which they chose to ignore.

Hagrid soon arrived with some rather strange creatures. The back half of their bodies looked like a horse while the front half (including wings) resembled an eagle. They had large orange eyes and beaks the color of steel. There were only two of them but they were still intimidating. Hagrid introduced the creatures which he referred to as hippogriffs and lectured on their personalities and traits. He allowed the students to pet them only if they were respectful since hippogriffs were very proud creatures.

"Well, I guess that's ok. Hippogriffs are extremely interesting creatures and not dangerous if you are respectful," Lily nodded approvingly.

"Yeah, but knowing Hagrid, that's going to be an exception in his class," Peter stated dryly.

Only a few students (Harry, Ron and Hermione included) found the courage to pet the creatures. Malfoy had tried but started blabbering insults which resulted in five points being taken away from Slytherin and detention with Madam Pomfrey. Hagrid had told them insulting a hippogriff could be the last thing you do and he wanted to get his point across.

"Well, who doesn't Malfoy insult," Remus said.

Once class was over, Harry, Ron and Hermione stayed behind and congratulated a relieved Hagrid for the success of his first class. They wanted to help Hagrid with the hippogriffs but being the 'big brother' he was, Hagrid insisted they return to the castle as quickly as possible. Understanding his reasoning, Harry, Ron and Hermione obeyed.

That night after dinner, Harry finally managed to get some time away from Ron and Hermione (who rarely let his side now). It was nearly curfew but Harry had his mind set. He needed to

talk to the only person who could help him with the turmoil running through his mind, the only person who could relate to what he was going through.

"Who?" Remus asked. The other four stared at him.

"And you're supposed to be *smart!*" James exclaimed.

As quietly as possible, Harry knocked on Professor Lupin's door but heard no response. He took a chance and knocked a little louder but still nothing happened. Assuming the teacher was busy Harry decided to leave when the door finally opened. He took a cautious step back then relaxed when he saw Lupin's concerned face.

"Harry?" Professor Lupin asked as he opened the door completely and stepped aside. "Please, come in. I'm sorry I took so long I was preparing for your class on Thursday."

"Oh, what are you going to teach them Moony?" Sirius asked.

"Dunno," Remus shrugged, "I hope they like my class."

"Of course they will, you're a great teacher," Lily said with conviction. James and Sirius beamed and Remus blushed.

"How do you know?" Peter asked.

"Because he tutored me in Defense last year. I was having trouble."

Harry hesitated. There was an awkward silence between them. Harry didn't know why but now that school was in session he didn't know how to act around his temporary guardian. "Well, I don't want to interrupt," he said nervously. "It's not really that important anyways."

"What do you mean you don't know how to act? Act normally Harry. I'm still me, even if I am a teacher."

Professor Lupin stepped out of his office and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Nonsense," he said with a smile. "I could use the distraction. Come in and tell me what's on your mind." He then ushered Harry in and motioned for him to sit down. "So how was your first day of classes?"

"See, told you," Remus stated happily.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't sure on how to answer. If Ron or Hermione had asked he probably would have complained about everyone staring but he didn't want to burden Professor Lupin with things he had no control over. The problem was Lupin was sincere. He actually wanted to know what happened today. "I had Divination today," Harry said as if it explained everything.

Professor Lupin bit back a smile but didn't say anything at first. He simply shook his head slowly as if he were thinking of a pleasant memory. "Ah yes, Sybil Trelawney," he said at last.

"Excuse me! Moony, are you nutters? Sybil Trelawney is not a pleasant memory," James said horrified.

"I never had the—um—honor of being in her class but from what your father told me she is a rather *unique* person." Seeing Harry's eyes widen in surprise, Lupin decided to elaborate. "Yes, your father took Divination. He believed it was one of the easier electives which gave him plenty of time to devise pranks."

Lily glared at James and huffed. James gave her a cheeky smile in return.

Harry gave Professor Lupin a forced smile but it faded quickly. His gaze fell to the ground. Although he enjoyed hearing about his father, now it just felt like a poor attempt at a distraction. "I suppose you know Ron let it slip that I heard my mum when the Dementor came on the train," he said softly.

Lupin instantly pulled up a chair and sat down beside Harry. "Yes, I did," he said honestly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry shrugged again then immediately gave in. "It's just—well—she has a voice now but that's not how I want to remember her," he said in a wavering voice. "She sounded so terrified. I can hear her in my head, begging Voldemort to kill her instead of me. I wish she would have let him kill me."

"NO!" Lily yelled, "I would *never* do that. I would never let anyone hurt my baby. Do you understand me? Stop thinking that Harry James Potter!"

"James?" James asked smiling.

"In my family it's a tradition that the first born's middle name be the name of the father or mother, depending on the sex, of course," she said simply. Nonetheless James did not stop smiling.

Professor Lupin pulled Harry into an embrace and held him tightly. "Don't say that, Harry," he said softly. "I know it's hard but you have to remember that your mother loved you more than life itself. Remember your mother as a brave and loving woman who stood her ground against Voldemort. How many witches or wizards can even claim to have done that?"

With his face buried in Lupin's robes all Harry could do was shrug his shoulders. Remembering what he originally came for Harry pulled out of the embrace and looked up at Professor Lupin. Harry could feel his eyes starting to burn and fought to hold back tears. "I need to know how to fight them," he said sounding more confident than he actually felt. "There is a way, isn't there?"

"Yes, there is. There is the Patronus Charm. The Patronus is a po—" Remus was interrupted by Sirius hand in his mouth.

"Moony, we know that. Leave the teaching for the book."

"There are defenses one can learn," Professor Lupin said cautiously. "They are difficult but not impossible."

Harry couldn't help but feel hopeful. He really didn't want to collapse every time a Dementor came near. He didn't want to be helpless especially with Sirius Black still on the loose.

"You wouldn't have to worry about that because I will protect you from the Dementors, not hurt you like these *Liars* keep saying!" Sirius yelled. Remus and James held him down trying to calm him. James went back to his spot next to Lily and she continued.

"Can you teach me?" Harry asked quickly. He noticed Professor Lupin was hesitant. "I promise it won't be to sneak off to Hogsmeade," he clarified. "I won't go against Professor Dumbledore's rules. I just need to do this." His shoulders slumped as his gaze fell. "I can't be a victim again," Harry said softly.

Lupin let out a sigh and grabbed Harry's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "I understand, Harry," he said. "I can't promise anything but I'll do what I can. This is a very difficult Charm, even for adults to manage." He stood up and walked over to his desk. Grabbing a piece of parchment and quill, Lupin wrote something quickly then handed it over to Harry. "This is the name of a book on advanced charms in the Library. Check it out and read about the Patronus Charm. Once you've done this, come and see me."

Harry looked up at Lupin and smiled. "Thank you, Professor," he said gratefully.

Professor Lupin returned the smile. "Don't thank me yet," he said candidly as he glanced at his watch. "This is going to take a lot of work and patience, Harry. Now, it's nearly curfew so I suggest you hurry. Oh, and it would be wise not to tell your friend, Hermione, about this. I'm willing to teach you because you *need* it."

"And she would want in if she heard," Peter said.

Harry nodded, thanked the Professor again then hurried to the Gryffindor Tower. He couldn't help smiling at the thought of being able to ward off the Dementors. He didn't care if it was a lot of work. After this summer, he was used to it.

A/N: Thanks so much for the positive reviews!

"The author keeps thanking us. I feel bad for not leaving a review," James said.

"But how do we leave one?" Sirius asked.

"Well, here at the end of the page it's written 'Submit Review' and there's a little button drawn that says go," Lily showed them. They touched the button but nothing happened.

"Maybe we could right on the back of the pages when we finish," Remus said and the others nodded their agreement.

Chapter 9

Riddikulus

After the dreaded first day Harry had been relieved to find that everything had somewhat returned to normal. People were still whispering about him from time to time but it was nothing like before. Harry had retrieved the book Professor Lupin suggested from the library and was reading about the Patronus Charm whenever he could. True to his word, Harry hadn't told anyone about his new defense lessons. No one had even seen the advanced charms book since Harry only read it in the confines of his four poster bed.

Sitting down with Ron and Hermione hadn't been easy. They had wanted to know everything and didn't take it well when Harry had been evasive. He told them the truth about being unconscious throughout his kidnapping but other than that he revealed barely anything else. Eventually Harry had to resort to using a card he really didn't want to use: the trust card. He had to tell his best friends that Professor Dumbledore had wanted to keep the details of what happened a secret.

"Well, yes. Friends do not take easily to one keeping secrets," Remus mumbled.

"You would know," Peter stated and James shot him a warning look.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"Because Moony likes to study in secret. Yeah! He doesn't like us calling him a bookworm," was Sirius attempt at a lame excuse. Lily did not seem convinced.

To say Ron and Hermione had been hurt would be an understatement but Harry knew it was for the best. Perhaps he would tell them the truth someday. Today, however, the fewer people that knew the less likely of a chance of someone revealing it.

Harry's next encounter with Draco Malfoy wasn't until Thursday morning in Potions. Malfoy was still in a bad mood from being scolded in Care of Magical Creatures and made no effort in being discrete about his dislike for the newly appointed teacher. Harry's determination to make his Shrinking Solution correctly was the only thing preventing him from lashing out and from the looks of it, several other Gryffindors wanted to do the same thing.

Seeing that his taunting was going nowhere, Malfoy decided to take another approach. "What's the matter, Potter?" he drawled. "Too busy hearing your dead mother?"

"That's, that's, *Mean*," Lily said horrified.

"Well, what would you expect from Malfoy?" James pointed out.

Caught off guard, Harry dropped his knife and grabbed the table as his breathing quickened. He had done everything in his power not to think about her voice which was now coming back

in full force. "Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —" Closing his eyes, Harry shook his head, trying to clear it. Not now. I'm sorry Mum but not now.

"That's ok. I understand. You have to go kick Malfoy in—"

"Lily! I'm impressed! Usually you're such a pacifist," Sirius exclaimed proudly.

Harry hadn't been the only one who heard. Ron was about to attack when Professor Snape grabbed the charging student by his shirt collar. "Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," hissed Professor Snape. "Mr. Malfoy, my office, now!"

"Oh, yes! Please tell me Snivellus is going to give Malfoy a gruesome detention," Sirius said happily clapping his hands.

"I highly doubt that," Remus said grimacing, "Snape has always been pals with Lucius Malfoy even though he was older than us. He won't be doing anything much with his kid."

Malfoy's face drained of color. The entire classroom was silent as Malfoy followed the teacher into his office. The moment the door closed, Ron and Hermione were at Harry's side. Hermione helped Harry sit down then knelt down so she could see his face. Regaining control, Harry opened his eyes to see nearly the entire class watching him.

"Are you okay Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. "I'm fine," he said as he stood up. "Malfoy just startled me, that's all. Thanks guys."

The door to Snape's office opened and everyone hurried back to work. No one looked up to see a furious Malfoy storming back to his cauldron. Surprisingly, Professor Snape refrained from tormenting anyone more than usual for the remainder of the class. Everyone took it as a blessing and hurried out of the classroom the moment class was over.

"You know. I don't approve of how you treat him but I do have to agree that when a praise to him is saying that he did not tormenting people *more* than usual, that says a lot about his character," Lily said glumly.

"Snivellus was born in a bad mood," James stated.

Lunch was a quite affair for the third year Gryffindors at least until Seamus Finnigan came running in with the 'Daily Prophet' in his hands. "He's been sighted!" Seamus shouted. "Sirius Black's been sighted!"

All of the conversation in the Great Hall ceased. Seamus rushed to Harry and handed the paper over. Briefly looking over the article, Harry let out a sigh as his shoulders slumped. According to the article Sirius Black wasn't far from Hogwarts. Was he coming to finish what Voldemort failed to do all those years ago?

"No, I'm coming to explain to all of you that I AM INNOCENT!"

"Ok, Padfoot, Ok, calm down. Good boy," Remus said patting Sirius who was huffing.

"What does it say, Harry?" Ron asked eagerly.

Harry looked up at Ron, his face void of any emotion. "He was spotted by muggles not far from here," he said evenly then handed over the paper. "Of course by the time the Ministry had been notified he was long gone so no one can actually confirm it was him."

Ron and Hermione looked over the article then looked at Harry worriedly. Harry knew they were expecting some sort of outburst but he wasn't about to do that especially in the Great Hall. "Er—well at least he's not here," Hermione said, breaking the silence. "Don't worry, Harry. With the Dementors on the grounds I'm sure you have nothing to worry about."

"I beg to differ," James stated dryly, "the Dementors are the cause of the worry."

Defense Against the Dark Arts was their first class of the afternoon.

Sirius and James clapped in anticipation.

Harry had been partially looking forward to this class and partially dreading it. After a month of one on one classes, Harry wasn't sure how to act with Professor Lupin. Yes, he had one on one classes with the other teachers but they had maintained a teacher-student structure. Professor Lupin's lessons had been more personal since both of them somewhat understood what the other was going through.

Another problem was Professor Lupin's temporary guardian role. None of the teachers had a problem with Lupin teaching Harry but Harry knew several students (the Slytherins) would. They would most likely accuse the young teacher of favoritism even if he treated everyone equally. The thought made Harry extremely nervous. Professor Lupin had already done so much for him and all he was doing was causing problems.

"No, you're not. Stop worrying about me. I can handle any stupid student that thinks I am playing favorites with you."

Harry knew he was probably overacting but to him everything had just seemed to get so out of control. Everything had been simple before school started. He didn't have to worry about what other people thought or knew since all of the teachers already knew the truth. Now he was trapped in a web of lies for his own protection.

The students entered an empty classroom and were about to sit down when Professor Lupin came in. He placed his worn briefcase on his desk then turned and faced the class. "Today is a practical lesson so you'll need your wands," he said. "Now, if you'll all follow me."

"Oh, what are you going to do Moony?" James asked in eager anticipation.

"Keep reading, I wanna see Moony's first class," Sirius urged Lily.

Whispers broke out as the class followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom and down a deserted hallway. They continued around the corner, down another hallway and stopped right

outside the staffroom door. Professor Lupin opened the door and motioned for the class to enter. Harry was following Ron and Hermione passed Lupin when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking at the teacher, Harry saw a look that was all too familiar. It was the 'I have to tell you something' look.

"What?" James asked.

"If you let me *read* you'll know," Lily growled.

"*Touchy*," James mouthed.

As soon as the last person entered, Professor Lupin pulled Harry out of everyone's line of sight. "Listen Harry, today we will be confronting a Boggart," he said softly. "Boggarts change into what we fear the most and with your—er—history I don't think it would be wise for you to participate. Is that all right with you?"

"Why?" Peter asked.

"Because his Boggart probably would turn into Voldemort," Remus answered and Peter flinched.

"And that's why," Sirius said pointing at Peter.

Harry nodded. "I understand, sir," he said. "I'll just stay in the back."

Professor Lupin gave Harry a reassuring smile then entered the room with Harry following him. As he entered, Harry noticed Professor Snape was packing up his things. "I'd rather not witness whatever *adventure* you have planned, Lupin," Snape said coolly. "With Longbottom and Potter in the same class, chances are the room will be destroyed in no time."

"How can someone be so nasty all the time," Lily said disgusted.

"It's not enough he picks on Harry in his class now he's ruining Moony's class too," James grunted.

"And why is he picking on Neville? LEAVE NEVILLE ALONE SNIVELLUS!" Sirius yelled.

Neville's face turned bright red while Harry's shoulders slumped forward, his eyes staring at the floor. He knew Snape was only being Snape but he didn't think his wizarding skills were *that* bad. For a moment Harry's mind traveled back to his Uncle yelling at how worthless he was. It was scary at how alike the two men who loathed him were.

Professor Lupin seemed to notice the reaction of both students and smiled at the potions teacher in the innocent way that made Professor Snape look at his coworker skeptically.

"Uh, oh, Moony's up to something," James said eagerly.

"He's just smiling," Lily said

"When Moony gives you an innocent smile: BEWARE," Sirius alerted her. Lily looked skeptically at him and Remus just smiled.

"Now, now, Severus," he said. "We both know that a student's performance is a reflection of the teacher. I have confidence that all of my students will perform remarkably in this task."

They all laughed hard.

"Yes, I knew Moony wouldn't disappoint us," James said through his laughter.

Fuming with anger, Professor Snape stormed out of the room, shutting the door forcefully behind him.

Free of distractions, Professor Lupin started lecturing about Boggarts, shape-shifters that like dark, enclosed spaces. He beckoned the class to an old wardrobe that suddenly gave a wobble and banged against the wall. Many students in the class appeared to be nervous but Lupin paid them no mind. He explained how laughter was needed to finish a Boggart and the incantation of '*Riddikulus*'

Professor Lupin then started calling people to demonstrate and Neville was first. Neville was shaking nearly more than the wardrobe as he stepped forward. All of the color was now gone from the frightened boy's face. He looked like he was about to pass out from fright.

"Moony, you shouldn't have put Neville on the spot like that," Peter complained.

"I am sure he has a plan. He's not Snape, he doesn't want to embarrass Neville. He probably wants to make him look good. The kid clearly looks like he needs a confidence bust," Lily explained.

Professor Lupin picked up on Neville's distress and was immediately at the boy's side. "Neville, there's no reason to be afraid" he said gently. "Giving into your fear means the Boggart has already won. Now, what frightens you the most? What shape will your Boggart take?"

Neville looked nervously at Professor Lupin and muttered, "Professor Snape."

"Frightens all doesn't he?" Remus said.

"Poor Neville," Lily said sadly, "that's exactly what Snape wants," she finished shaking her head.

Professor Lupin smiled while the class laughed. "Professor Snape...let's see...how do we make him appear less frightening?" he asked thoughtfully as he tapped his chin. After a moment of silence, Professor Lupin turned to Neville and whispered so quietly that only Neville could hear.

Neville still appeared to be nervous but everyone could see a small smile appear on his face.

"Oh, Moony. What did you do?" Sirius asked, his hand on his hips and a cheeky grin on his face. Remus just smiled back.

Whatever Professor Lupin was saying seemed to help in erasing the boy's fears. Still standing in the back, Harry started to wonder what scared him the most. Uncle Vernon? No, Uncle Vernon was in jail. Voldemort? Possibly but he had stood up to Voldemort.

Then it hit him. The slithering, floating black cloak...the never ending cold that brought the terror filled voice of his mother before she died...the helplessness of being able to do nothing but listen...the Dementors.

Everyone shivered.

Professor Lupin's voice broke into Harry's troubled thoughts. "Right, are you ready Neville?" he asked as he approached the still shaking wardrobe. After Neville nodded reluctantly, Lupin continued. "When the Boggart comes out, it will no doubt take the form of Professor Snape. Raise your wand, Neville and recite the incantation which is what?"

"*Riddikulus*," Neville answered.

"Very good," Professor Lupin said encouragingly. "Then concentrate on what we talked about Neville. That's very important. I'm sure your classmates would love to see it.

"See what? What Moony?" Sirius asked eagerly.

"You're gonna have to wait and see," Remus teased.

Once Neville succeeds, the Boggart will most likely move on to someone else. Please take a moment to think of how to transform your worst fear into something comical.

Harry subconsciously took a step backwards. How can you make a Dementor comical? They feed on happiness!

"All right," Professor Lupin said. "Neville, on the count of three." Lupin pointed his wand at the wardrobe handle and counted off before sparks shot out from his wand and hit the doorknob making the wardrobe burst open.

Remus and Sirius were on the edge of the bed and Peter and James were kneeling on the floor holding their breaths.

Neville took a step back as Professor Snape emerged, looking as intimidating as always. Quickly, Neville pulled out his wand and pointed it at Snape. "R—riddikulus," he stuttered.

A sound like that of a whip cracking filled the air as Snape stopped and stumbled. Now he was wearing a long dress trimmed with lace and a hat with a vulture on the top.

All of them roared with laughter. James and Sirius jumped on Remus hugging him and patting him on the back in congratulations. Yells of "Brilliant" and "Well done" were heard for at least five minutes.

The class roared in laughter as the Boggart paused for a moment then changed course. It approached Parvati Patil then Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Ron before it changed course again to Professor Lupin.

Instead of a scary creature there was a silvery-white orb just hanging in the air in front of Lupin. Professor Lupin wasn't fazed by the object and said the incantation lazily.

"Are you scared of crystal balls Remus?" Lily asked suspiciously. Remus looked at his friend and answered:

"Er- I guess. You know. Scared of what the future brings and all." Lily did not look satisfied with the answer.

The Boggart approached Neville again who transformed Professor Snape's black clothes into the dress again without hesitation. There was another *crack* and the Boggart exploded into countless wisps of smoke. It was gone.

Professor Lupin awarded points to all of those who faced the Boggart, assigned the homework then dismissed the class. Once again Harry stayed behind, insisting to his friends he would catch up with them later. Having already seen the interaction between Professor Lupin and Harry on the train, Ron and Hermione didn't argue and left.

"What's on your mind, Harry?" Professor Lupin asked as he approached.

Harry looked at Professor Lupin and smiled softly. "Thank you for warning me," he said. "I couldn't really think of a way to make a Dementor less frightening." His smile vanished though as he stole a look at the now still wardrobe. "Professor Snape isn't going to like this. He'll probably think it's my fault."

"Why?" Lily asked indignantly.

"Because he's Snivellus. He doesn't need an excuse to be nasty and mean but he will gladly use any excuse he can find," James explained grimly.

"Why would he do that, Harry?" Professor Lupin asked curiously. "The entire class saw that I orchestrated it."

Harry shrugged. "He blames me for everything," he said offhandedly then looked back at Professor Lupin. "Do you know why he hates me so much?" Harry immediately berated himself for sounding like such a child. "I'm not complaining," he added quickly. "It's just that he seemed to hate me from the moment he saw me."

Professor Lupin looked uncomfortable. "Er—well, remember what I told you about the Marauders?" he asked. Harry nodded in response. "Well, the majority of the pranks your father pulled were generated towards Severus and the Slytherin House. Some of the pranks were taken a little too far but the majority of them were all in good fun. The problem was Severus never really had a sense of humor and I think he was jealous of your father."

"That's understating it," Sirius said, "Snape wouldn't recognize a joke if it hit him on the face."

"And you made sure many did," Lily remarked disapprovingly.

Harry stared at Professor Lupin biting back the anger rising in him. "So because my dad was a bully that gives Snape the right to take it out on me?"

"Sorry," James winced.

he asked. "I'm not my dad! I can't remember a thing about my dad so how could I be like him!"

Professor Lupin let out a sigh and pulled Harry into an embrace. "I know that," he said sincerely. "Severus shouldn't be taking his bitterness out on you, you're right. Your father wasn't perfect, no one is. His relationship with Severus was similar to yours with Draco Malfoy. Like you, your father was popular and a very good Quidditch player. I know you're not James, Harry. Sooner or later Severus will realize it too."

"Not very likely," Peter said and the others grimly agreed.

For some reason Harry doubted that Professor Snape ever would.

A/N: Thanks everyone so much for the reviews!

"Don't worry, we will review," Sirius said patting the paper. Lily swatted his hand away and he went back to the bed.

One of the lines wasn't mine. It was from the "Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban" movie which of course does not belong to me.

Chapter 10

The Patronus Charm

Defense Against the Dark Arts soon became a favored class with the majority of the students. Professor Lupin kept classes entertaining and insisted on class participation.

"See, every one loves Moony," Sirius said smiling.

There were quite a few class periods when students would ask questions or voice their opinions which resulted in spending class time debating different views. Professor Lupin often played the mediator, occasionally putting in his two knuts when the discussions got out of hand.

Professor Snape, on the other hand, was more short-tempered than ever. Word had spread about Neville's Boggart and while three of the four houses found it hilarious, Snape and the Slytherins did not.

"That's because, as already explained, Snape does not possess a sense of humor," James said.

True to Professor Lupin's words, Professor Snape didn't have a sense of humor and took the embarrassment of Boggart-Snape in a dress out on the Gryffindor house any chance he could.

Well, everyone but Harry.

"Why, I thought he hated Harry?" Peter asked, the others shrugged.

It seemed to surprise everyone that other than some snide comments here and there, Professor Snape seemed to ignore Harry completely. Harry didn't complain but was having difficulty in explaining Snape's behavior to his housemates. He could only assume that the Potions teacher pitied him because of his home life but that would mean Professor Snape had a heart.

"And we all know that's not the case," Remus mumbled.

"Maybe the grumpy, slimy git exterior is just an act and deep inside he is really a nice bloke that loves everyone," Lily said.

"Lily, did you inhale too many potions' fumes?" James asked touching her forehead. She swatted his hand away.

Draco Malfoy had openly complained to everyone who heard about being pulled into Snape's office for something as trivial as a warning.

"What a git!" Sirius complained.

"Told you Snape wouldn't do anything," Remus said.

As it turned out, Professor Snape hadn't reprimanded Malfoy at all. The Potions Master had simply advised the student to refrain from making those sort of comments in his class.

Divination class was probably Harry's least favorite which was saying a lot. Professor Trelawney was going out of her way to prove that death was coming for Harry Potter. At first Harry could ignore it but now it was just irritating. He hated being singled out especially in matters involving life and death. Ron and Hermione were getting fed up with it too and were finding it difficult not to hex the woman into unconsciousness. How stupid can you be to tell a teenager they're going to die when there's a mass murderer on the loose wanting nothing more than to kill them?

"Not that I don't agree with them about Trelawney being stupid but: I AM NOT A MASS MURDERER!"

Care of Magical Creatures was interesting but safe. Hagrid had revealed that he had wanted students to ride the Hippogriffs during the first class but Professor Dumbledore had ruled against it.

"Wise decision," Lily nodded.

"WISE? Lily! Imagine riding a Hippogriff!" James said excitedly.

"Cool!" Sirius agreed. Remus just shook his head.

Harry was surprised to hear that Hagrid had to have each class approved by Dumbledore. No one was allowed to leave the courtyard during class unless it was with a teacher and the class couldn't be left unattended. Harry felt a little guilty since most of the restrictions had been enforced to protect him but knew it was pointless to say anything.

Harry had completed his reading on the Patronus Charm and had approached Professor Lupin who decided that they would begin at the end of October during the time the majority of the school would be at Hogsmeade. The thought of waiting that long bothered Harry but he didn't say anything. Professor Lupin was right. They had to do this discretely.

On top of classes, Quidditch began in October and of course Oliver Wood, Captain and seventh year student, was as obsessed on winning the Quidditch Cup as ever. They practiced long and hard under the supervision of Madam Hooch. Everyone wanted the Quidditch Cup that should have been theirs for the past two years but extenuating circumstances had prevented that from happening.

"What? What extenuating circumstances? Tell me people? This is important!" James said trying to grab the papers from Lily who kept avoiding James hands and trying to push him away.

"James! Stop that!"

"But this is Quidditch they are talking about. I need to know" James said desperately.

"How come now he is James and not Potter anymore?" Sirius asked. James stopped and stared at him. Then he stared back at Lily with a grin. She blushed and continued reading putting the papers in front of her face.

Returning to the Gryffindor Common Room late one night, Harry wanted nothing more than to go directly to bed. His entire body was sore and his mind was on overload but upon entering, Harry took in the scene before his eyes and knew he wouldn't be going to bed any time soon. Ron and Hermione were glaring at each other while everyone else was watching with wide eyes.

Harry let out a groan as he pulled off his Quidditch robes. "Now what are you two arguing about?" he asked.

Ron and Hermione didn't move. It almost looked like a staring contest which knowing Ron and Hermione it could very well be. "That bloody monster tried to kill Scabbers AGAIN!" Ron shouted in frustration. "I told you to keep that...that *thing* away!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Crookshanks doesn't understand Scabbers is a pet!" she said. "It's in a cat's nature to chase rats!"

"Oh, so Scabbers is a rat! Finally we know," Sirius said raising his arms and flopping down on the bed.

From the sound of it this had been going on for quite a while and would probably go on all night unless someone stopped it. "Where is Scabbers now?" asked Harry. Ron pointed to his pocket where there was a quivering lump. Harry approached his friends and put his hand out gesturing for Ron to hand the frightened animal over. Once Ron did so, Harry turned back to Hermione. "You are right, Hermione," Harry said calmly. "It is in a cat's nature to chase rats but it is in a dog's nature to chase cats. Dogs can be trained not to chase cats so why can't the same be said for cats?" He turned to face Ron. "You know Crookshanks has it in for Scabbers. So, for now, until Crookshanks has his instincts under control, Scabbers needs to stay in our dorm room. The door needs to be closed at all times."

"Bossy little thing isn't him," Peter remarked.

"He's just trying to help," Lily defended her son.

Before either of them could object, Harry headed towards the staircase. "I'll put Scabbers on your bed, Ron," he said tiredly. "Please work this out." With Scabbers in one hand and his Quidditch robe in the other, Harry went up to his dorm room. He entered the empty room, tossed his robe on his bed then walked over to Ron's and turned Scabbers around so they were face to face.

Looking at the rat, Harry was hit with a sudden feeling of familiarity but quickly shook it off. He's known Scabbers for years. "Ron really cares about you, you know," said Harry. "I just hope you appreciate it." He put the rat down on the bed and was about to back away when he noticed Scabbers' front left paw. He was missing a toe. *Strange*, Harry thought. *I've never noticed that before.*

Remus bit his lip frowning and looked at Peter in thought. He shook his head and thought that he was jumping to conclusions.

Ron and Hermione insisted that they had resolved matters but anyone could see that there was still tension between the two of them. Not really wanting to play mediator again, Harry just let them be. He didn't know why they were at each other's throats so much this year. It was almost like they fought just to fight.

As the end of the month approached, everyone was excited about the upcoming Hogsmeade which was on Halloween. Even Ron and Hermione took a brake out of their fighting to talk about all of the stores they were going to visit. Not wanting anyone's pity, Harry just remained silent. The only good thing out of this was that he would be starting his extra lessons with Professor Lupin. It wasn't much but it was all he could do.

"Poor Harry, he should sneak out to Hogsmead anyway."

"BLACK! Do not give my son ideas," Lily scolded him.

When Halloween morning arrived, Harry ate breakfast with Ron and Hermione then bid them farewell with the orders to bring back store catalogs if they were available. Both Ron and Hermione looked at Harry strangely but Harry didn't elaborate. He wasn't about to tell them that this was his only way to purchase Christmas presents.

Sitting alone at the Gryffindor table, Harry could only wonder what it would be like to visit Hogsmeade. From what he had heard Zonko's Joke Shop and Honeydukes were unbelievable. Closing his eyes, Harry tried not to dwell on it. Professor Dumbledore had made his decision and there was no way around it. Plus, after all the teachers had done for him Harry wasn't about to disobey them by sneaking out of the castle and into the hands of the Dementors.

With hours to burn before his lesson with Lupin, Harry figured it would be best to tackle any remaining homework he had. He retreated to the Gryffindor Common Room, grabbed his homework then picked a corner in the Common Room and started on his dreaded Potions essay. He ignored the ruckus made by the first and second year students. None of them noticed him which was his intention. From Potions he moved on to Transfiguration and then on to Herbology.

Desperately needing a break, Harry left the Common Room and mindlessly roamed the hallways. Before he knew it Harry found himself standing in front of the Defense classroom. Hoping that Professor Lupin wouldn't mind, Harry entered and quietly approached the teacher's chambers. He bit his lower lip nervously as he moved to knock on the door. Would Professor Lupin consider him a pest? Was he being a pest?

"Of course not Harry! You can come see me any time you want."

Too afraid to find out, Harry turned to leave when the door slowly opened. He jumped back, startled, then tensed when he was Professor Lupin come out. Professor Lupin was evidently

just as startled but hid it well. "Harry," he said with a smile. "This is a surprise. Why don't you come in? I trust the castle is a little boring today."

"Just a little," Harry admitted. "Er—if you're busy I can just come back later."

"Nonsense," Lupin said and motioned for Harry to follow. "So, tell me what's on your mind?"

"Well I was wondering how to turn the fifth floor—"

"BLACK!" Lily scolded him.

Entering the room, Harry shrugged as he looked around. He couldn't help but notice the steaming cauldron which was a strange item to have in a Defense office. Looking at Professor Lupin, Harry finally noticed how ill he looked.

"Oh, you're sick again Remus. I hope it's nothing serious," Lily said looking at him.

"I am sure I'll be okay," he smiled hoping she'd drop the subject.

"You do get sick an awful lot. It's not genetic is it?"

"What, why?"

"Well, you're always going home to see your sick mother, and usually you look pale and sick around that time too," she said suspiciously.

"That's stress. Wouldn't you be stressed if your mother was sick," James snapped at her and grabbing the pages from her hand he continued reading.

Worry and fear overrode any other thoughts Harry previously had. "Professor, is something wrong?" Harry asked nervously.

Professor Lupin noticed the cauldron and let out a sigh. "I haven't been feeling well lately, Harry," he said as he moved over to his desk, "but it's nothing you need to worry about. I promise."

Harry wasn't convinced. "Maybe you should see Madam Pomfrey just to be sure," he said quickly. "Better safe than sorry."

"He's worried about you. How cute," Lily cooed.

Lupin raised an eyebrow at Harry's persistence. It was rare for Harry to ever second guess him. "What is it, Harry?" he asked patiently. "What's really bothering you?"

Looking away, Harry shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "It's just...I don't want anything to happen to you," he said softly. "Maybe we should cancel the lesson today so you can rest. I don't mind, really."

Professor Lupin sat down behind his desk, never taking his eyes off of the nervous teenager. "Harry, I assure you I'm not going anywhere," he said confidently. "I gave you my word this summer that I would be here whenever you needed me and I plan on living up to that promise. I also plan on annoying and embarrassing you every chance I get for years to come. It's certainly what your father would have wanted."

"Yes I would. Thank you Moony!"

Harry hid a smile. He had hated when the Dursleys had embarrassed him but this was different. Professor Lupin didn't think Harry was a freak and announce it to the world. To Professor Lupin, Harry was just Harry which was something Harry had always wanted.

"I appreciate your concern, Harry," Professor Lupin said with a smile. "I really do but this is really nothing to worry about. I'll be fine." Noticing that Harry was still hesitant, he changed the topic. "So, why don't we start your lesson? Now, as I'm sure you've read, a Patronus acts as a guardian, if you will, that acts as a shield. It is a positive force to counter the negative given off by the Dementors. It is a projection of all of the positive emotions Dementors feed on but since it isn't human Dementors can't hurt it."

"And it's unique- mmmphm-" Remus was once again stopped by Sirius hand in his mouth.

Harry nodded. "It's unique to the person who conjures it," he recited, "and only works by the conjuror focusing on a happy memory."

Professor Lupin smiled. "Very good, Harry," he said as he pulled his wand out and motioned for Harry to do the same. "Remember, you need to focus on your happy memory while saying the incantation *Expecto patronum*. Close your eyes, Harry, and find that happy memory."

"Think about flying, the joy, the freedom, the rush that fills your body from the moment you take off," James said dreamily.

"Honestly James, I am sure Harry can find a better memory than *flying*," Lily said crossed.

"There's *nothing* better than flying," James said appalled.

Harry did as he was told and closed his eyes. Thinking hard, he tried to think of a memory, any memory that was happy. He ignored anything connected to the Dursleys immediately and ran through his years at Hogwarts. He didn't have to think long. He knew what to use. He remembered the joy he felt, the freedom, the rush that filled his body from the moment he took off.

"Like father like son," Peter stated.

Lupin noticed the peaceful look on Harry's face and smiled. "That's it, Harry," he said softly. "Now hold on to that memory, raise your wand and recite the incantation."

Raising his wand, Harry pictured that first flying lesson in his mind. "*Expecto patronum*," he said firmly. He was so immersed in the memory to notice anything around him. "*Expecto*

patronum," Harry repeated. He remembered Malfoy taunting and the look on Malfoy's face when he had actually caught the Rememberall. "*Expecto patronum!*"

Out of nowhere Harry felt something slam into him and send him flying backwards into the wall. He heard Lupin shout his name as he fell to the floor in a daze. Forcing his eyes open, Harry saw noticed a strange silver mist engulfing the room like a dense fog. He blinked a few times and looked to his right to see Professor Lupin on his knees with a worried expression on his face.

"What happened? Is he hurt? Why did that happen?" James and Lily said together. The others at first stared strangely at them. Remus was the first to recover.

"Let's keep reading and we'll know."

Lupin reached up and touched Harry's forehead then moved the boy forward so he could check his back. Lifting Harry's shirt, the young teacher let out a wince when he saw bruises already forming. "Are you in a lot of pain, Harry?" he asked quickly.

"Of course he is! He just got slammed into a wall! Let's slam you into a wall and see how you feel!" Lily snapped irritably.

"Calm down Lily, he's just trying to find out what happened," James soothed her.

"I know, but I hate when that happens. Like when you slam your foot on the corner of the bed and start jumping up and down in pain and some idiot keeps asking if you're in pain while you're actually trying to stop the pain and instead have to stop to answer," she huffed.

It took Harry a moment to process the words coming out of Professor Lupin's mouth. His mind was a little clouded. Once he figured out what was being said, Harry slowly shook his head. He really didn't feel much of anything. His entire body felt numb for some reason. "W—what happened?" he asked in confusion.

Professor Lupin conjured several cushions and positioned them appropriately. "Lay down on your stomach, Harry," he instructed and assisted Harry in doing so on the cushions to make the boy more comfortable. "Somehow, you overcharged the spell. You sent too much power through your wand. Lie still. I need to get something for your back."

"How did he do that?" Peter asked looking at Remus, everyone turned to Remus too.

"Why do you always think I have the answers?" Remus asked irritated.

"Because you're Professor Moony!" Sirius exclaimed and the others nodded. Remus just glared at them.

As quickly as possible, Lupin hurried to the fireplace and threw a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames. "Dumbledore!" Lupin said urgently.

"You're needed!" As a large shape appeared in the fire, Professor Lupin hurried to his desk, opened the bottom left-hand drawer and pulled out a jar of cream. He turned back to the fire to see Dumbledore stepping out and brushing the ash off of his robes.

Professor Dumbledore straightened up, glanced around then looked at Lupin with twinkle in his eyes. "The results of a failed prank?" he asked pleasantly.

"Dumbledore always expects the best," Sirius said pleasantly, "Very positive person."

"Yeah, but that's always a good way to get very disappointed," Remus retorted.

"I think that's better than going around expecting the worse. It's kind of sad," Lily said.

"Yeah, besides, that's what Snivellus does, and you don't want to be like Snivellus," James shivered.

"Nothing like that," Professor Lupin said quickly then hurried over to Harry's side. "We had a little accident. I need you to perform a quick health scan while I heal his bruises."

Harry appeared to be half asleep, his wand still clutched tightly in his hand. While Lupin lifted the back of Harry's shirt, Professor Dumbledore knelt down, reaching for the wand but the moment his fingers touched the wood Dumbledore quickly pulled them away and looked up at Professor Lupin. "What happened here, Remus?" he asked curiously.

Professor Lupin glanced up at Professor Dumbledore then continued rubbing the salve on Harry's back. "We started the Patronus Charm today," he said. "*Something* happened, obviously. I instructed him on finding a happy memory but when he started the incantation, something went wrong. It was like he was in a place deep in his mind. I told him to stop but he didn't seem to hear me."

"His power is growing," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "We should have expected this with the training we put him through." The Headmaster waved his wand over Harry then let out a sigh. "Other than the bruises on his back he's just exhausted. This may only be the beginning, Remus. I agree with Harry learning to defend himself against the Dementors but I wish to be present for the next lesson. I will also need to inform the staff."

"No, why? You're treating my godson like he's a menace or something! Stop that!"

"Sirius, Dumbledore has to think of the security of all the students, not just Harry," Remus pointed out and Sirius anger deflated.

Lupin was stunned. "Don't you think that is a bit premature?" he asked cautiously as he pulled the back of Harry's shirt back down. The bruises were already beginning to fade. "For all we know this could have been a one time occurrence."

"I like old Moony's logic better," Sirius mumbled.

"I am *not old!*" Remus cried outraged.

"Possibly," said Professor Dumbledore as he stood. "He is your charge, Remus, so I shall leave the decision up to you. No one said you would have to handle this alone. If Harry's magic is starting to mature, the staff will need to help him control it, especially in Charms and Transfiguration. I need to consider the safety of all my students, not just Harry. He could be a danger if he can't control himself."

Remus looked at Sirius with a superior look which Sirius ignored whistling.

Remus bowed his head and nodded. "I know," he said softly. "I'm just worried how Harry's going to take this. He so desperately wants to be normal and this is just one more thing that will separate him from everyone else."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Who said *everyone* needs to know about it?" he asked pleasantly then left the same way he came.

"Yes!" everyone shouted.

"Gotta love Dumbledore!" James exclaimed beaming.

It had been a few hours before Harry came around. Professor Lupin had explained what had happened...to an extent. They had talked about overcharging spells and the consequences which made Harry a little frightened to try the charm again. Yes, he wanted to defend himself against Dementors but what good was it if he ended up passing out anyways?

Harry had confessed that he had been so immersed in the memory that he had not been aware of what was actually happening. This seemed to put Professor Lupin at ease as he insisted that with time and practice Harry could find a happy medium. Harry couldn't deny his relief in the revelation. There was still hope.

Once Lupin had been satisfied with Harry's recovery, he bid farewell but not before scheduling their next lesson for two weeks since next weekend was the Quidditch match against Slytherin and Professor Dumbledore would be there to help. This surprised Harry but he chose not to say anything. He wasn't even aware that Dumbledore knew of these lessons.

As he left, Harry couldn't help but notice how ill Professor Lupin appeared to be. It was even worse than just a few hours ago. He didn't want to offend the man so Harry simply bit his tongue and left for the Gryffindor Tower.

"I wouldn't get offended because you're worried Harry. But you don't have to worry."

"How do you know? Maybe you have some terminal illness," Lily said with a raised eyebrow.

"Lily! Moony does not have a terminal illness!" James snapped and kept reading.

He was nearly there when he ran into to worried teenagers, literally. Ron and Hermione nearly fell backwards while Harry did fall backwards and land on the floor hard.

"That's not nice," Lily huffed while the boys laughed at the scene.

"Harry!" Hermione cried as she helped him up. "Are you all right? We've been looking all over for you. Where've you been? Ginny told us she hasn't seen you all day."

Harry looked at Hermione with a raised eyebrow. "Er—hi," he said a bit taken aback by Hermione's perkiness. "I'm fine and I was with Professor Lupin. When did you two get back?"

Ron shrugged. "Not long ago," he said then took a step towards Harry. "Listen, we were sort of wondering what's going on with you and Professor Lupin."

"Excuse me?" James asked indignant, "Is he implying that Harry and Moony...?"

"Of course not James, take your mind off the gutter," Lily said annoyed.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked not liking where this was going one bit.

Hermione seemed to pick up on Harry's tone. "It's just that you two seem really close, Harry," she said. "The way he acts with you...it's almost parental...not like that's a bad thing but it's just odd for a new teacher to act that way about a student he just met."

"See, I told you. Honestly!" Lily huffed.

"Oh," Harry said then looked around nervously. Not seeing anyone around, he motioned for Ron and Hermione to come a little closer. "You see, Professor Lupin knew me when I was a baby."

Hermione's eyes widened. "So he knew your parents?" she asked in a hushed voice.

Harry nodded. "They were very close since their days at school here," he said with a smile. "He's really helped me with this whole Sirius Black mess and he's even told me about my parents. I actually know what they were like now. They're actual people with real strengths and weaknesses. I can't explain what it feels like—"

"—we understand," Hermione said returning a smile. "I'm so happy for you, Harry, but why didn't you tell us?"

"Yeah, here we are thinking you've been ignoring us when you've just been finding out about your mum and dad," Ron added looking relieved. "So, what were they like?"

Harry's smile widened. "I guess my mum was like you, Hermione,

James stopped reading and looked at Lily, "You know, he is quite right."

and my dad was like the twins," he said. "I guess he was a famous prankster or something. So far Professor Lupin hasn't gone into much detail about the pranks pulled."

Both Ron and Hermione stared at Harry in shock. "No way!" Hermione said. "They were complete opposites! How in the world did they get together?"

"God only knows," Lily stated. James smiled at her.

"Your dad was like *them*?" Ron asked then grinned. "Brilliant!"

Relieved that Ron and Hermione were satisfied, Harry decided to change the topic of conversation. "So, what was Hogsmeade like?" he asked curiously. He then spent what little time remained before dinner listening to Ron and Hermione explain their trip to the wizarding village. They reassured Harry that they had brought back catalogs for him but Harry didn't miss the look of pity they both gave him.

Dinner that night was like the previous Halloweens at Hogwarts, incredible decorations and delicious food. It seemed that everyone was enjoying themselves. Ron and Hermione were deep in a debate on which was the better store: Zonko's or Honeydukes and everyone else seemed to be in their own conversations.

Glancing up at the head table, Harry was surprised to see both Professor Lupin and Professor Dumbledore watching him. He immediately felt self conscious and returned his attention to his plate. Why were they watching? Did it have something to do with his lesson? Did he do something wrong and not know it?

"Harry doubts himself a lot," Remus pondered.

"Yeah, just like someone I know," Sirius said pointing at Remus. Remus glared back but the pointing did not stop.

The thought of people watching him extinguished his appetite. The feast was suddenly the last place Harry wanted to be. Giving the excuse of a headache, Harry told Ron and Hermione he'd see them later in the Common Room. They appeared to be skeptical about the excuse but let him go.

Strolling through the empty halls to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry couldn't help but wonder why the two professors had been watching him. Had something happened with the search for Sirius Black? Had he done something without knowing it? Did someone find out about this summer before the kidnapping?

The thought of that happening sent chills down Harry's back. He had worked hard on putting that mess behind him. He didn't need it being brought back now. *Uncle Vernon's in jail*, Harry reminded himself. *He can't hurt me anymore. Professor Lupin and Professor Dumbledore wouldn't that happen.*

Reaching the portrait of the Fat Lady, Harry looked up at her to say the password when he noticed something strange about her. She looked afraid, fearful even. Harry was about to ask what was wrong when he noticed her eyes dart from him to something behind him. His entire body tensed as he slowly reached into his robes for his wand. He nearly had it when someone grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him against the wall. It wasn't a hard but the action still wasn't a welcomed one.

"Hey! Let him go whoever you are!" Sirius shouted.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Harry," a scratchy, male voice said softly. "I need to get into the Tower. He's here, at Hogwarts. I can't let him hurt you. You have to let me in."

"Who's in the tower?" Peter asked. The others shrugged.

Harry wasn't listening. He tried to break free but was unsuccessful. Even though he couldn't see the man's face Harry knew who it was: Sirius Black.

"Guess that's you Padfoot," James said icily.

"Sorry," Sirius mumbled looking down then his head snapped back up and he said, "but I just said. I don't want to hurt him. See, I am not there to hurt him." James read back the line and brightened up at that.

Panic quickly set in. He was supposed to be safe here! The Dementors were here to keep him safe! How did Black get passed them? "Let me go!" he shouted. "Lady! Get help! Hurry!"

He heard the Fat Lady leave her portrait a he continued to struggle against Black's hold. Why did he have to leave the feast early? Why didn't he just stay with everyone else?

A soft voice broke into his thoughts. "Harry, calm down," he said. "I promise I won't hurt you. You have to believe me. He's here, at Hogwarts." His voice suddenly turned urgent. "Never let your guard down and never go anywhere without your wand. Be careful, Harry."

"See! See! They're wrong. I am innocent. I told you I wouldn't hurt our Pronglet!"

Before Harry could do or say anything something hit him on the back of the head. Everything went black.

"What do you call that?" James snapped at Sirius.

"Dunno," Sirius mumbled miserably.

"Maybe he didn't want anyone thinking Harry helped him in," Remus tried to rationalize and bring back the peace between James and Sirius. James kept glaring.

Professor Dumbledore was about to send everyone to bed when the house ghosts quickly entered the Great Hall and rushed to the head table. All conversations ceased at this strange sight. The four house ghosts were rarely seen together like this. Whatever they had to say, everyone knew it was important.

"Headmaster Dumbledore!" Nearly Headless Nick said urgently. "Sirius Black is in the castle! The Fat Lady informed us that he has Harry Potter!"

"Well, they could have been a little more *discreet*," Lily said rolling her eyes.

The entire staff table quickly rose to their feet. "Students, please remain here," Dumbledore said calmly but firmly. "You are to obey the Head Boy and Girl until we return." Without another word, the staff followed the ghosts out of the hall, locking the doors behind them to ensure the students remained in the Great Hall.

The entire staff hurried after the ghosts, Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Lupin leading the way. They followed the floating entities up the staircases and into the hallway leading to the Gryffindor Tower. The moment the Fat Lady's portrait came into view, everyone stopped in their tracks at the sight that they saw.

The Fat Lady was back in her portrait and on her knees in tears with her face buried in her hands. Lying face down on the floor in front of her was Harry Potter. Faint bruises covered the back of his neck in the shape of a hand. He wasn't moving.

"He's dead! You killed him!" Lily cried.

"No, no, he's just unconscious," Sirius said desperately, "I wouldn't hurt him."

Professor Lupin was the first to move and hurried to the teenager, his charge, the son of his friend. He quickly but carefully rolled the boy over felt for a pulse with his shaking hands. He instantly let out a sigh of relief and pulled Harry to his chest, determined never to let go the boy again. "He's alive," he said to his co-workers.

Professor Dumbledore turned to the rest of the staff and the house ghosts. "Search the castle," he said firmly then turned to McGonagall. "Minerva, return to the Great Hall and ensure that no one is panicking. You may tell Harry's friends that he has been found." He then turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Harry will be moved to my guest quarters until we are certain it is safe for him. Gather your supplies and meet us there."

Not needing to hear any more, the staff and ghosts left. Letting out a sigh, Dumbledore turned to the young teacher who was holding the injured boy tightly, his face buried in the boy's messy hair. The Headmaster crouched down and put a gentle hand on Lupin's shoulder. "Remus, we need to have Madam Pomfrey check Harry for injuries," he said softly. "I know you care for Harry deeply but he needs you to be strong now."

"Yes, please Moony. Don't have a nervous break down *now!*" James pleaded.

"He's scared. He cares about Harry," Lily tried to calm James.

Professor Lupin nodded and repositioned Harry in his arms before standing up, still holding the boy tightly. His eyes met Dumbledore's with a look that clearly said 'try to take him from me and die'. Professor Dumbledore let out another sigh then walked with Lupin to his chambers to find Madam Pomfrey already waiting for them.

They walked up the stairs in silence. When they entered Dumbledore watched Remus and Poppy take Harry to the guest quarters. It was clear that Professor Remus J. Lupin was hopelessly attached to his charge. Professor Dumbledore couldn't ignore the worry rising in him. If anything happened to Harry Potter, Remus would be devastated.

"Of course I would. Do you think that I would just go off singing, all happy and all if something happened to my cub?"

"Your cub?" Lily asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No, I mean. Your son. A puppy Marauder. Our Pronglet," Remus awkwardly tried to correct himself.

"Relax, I am glad you care so deeply about Harry," Lily said smiling.

He would need to do something to make certain that never happened.

"Good!" they all exclaimed.

Chapter 11

Gryffindor vs Slytherin

"Yes! Quidditch!"

"Don't you think of anything else James," Lily said annoyed.

"Of course I do. I also think of you." Lily blushed.

Harry felt warm but comfortable in the soft bed with a mountain of blankets and pillows. He could hear muffled voices in the distance and buried his face deeper in the pillow in an attempt to drown out the little noise that he could make out. He was comfortable and had no intention of leaving it any time soon. He liked it here. He was safe here.

"I hate when that happens," Sirius mumbled.

"What?" Peter asked.

"When you kind of wake up, but you wanted to keep sleeping, but the noise around wakes you up completely."

Safe.

He wanted nothing more than to drift back off into oblivion but something was stopping him. Something was touching his hair.

"Let him sleep!" Sirius cried outraged.

James patted him, "Ok, Padfoot. We promise not to wake you up anymore when you want to sleep." Sirius just huffed.

The motion felt familiar but foreign at the same time. Confusion entered his mind causing Harry to groan in annoyance. He wanted nothing more than to sleep. Mindlessly, he tried to swat the irritation away but his arms were asleep.

"I think he's coming around."

"Of course he is. You *woke* him up!" Sirius said annoyed.

Coming around? Why were people waiting for him to wake up? Harry was now even more confused. Thinking as hard as his cloudy mind would let him, Harry tried to piece together

last night. Come to think of it, he didn't remember even going to bed. He didn't even remember entering the Gryffindor Tower.

SIRIUS BLACK!

He remembered. He remembered Black holding him against the wall, demanding entrance into the Gryffindor Tower. He remembered trying to break free and failing. He remembered something hitting the back of his head.

James eyes narrowed toward Sirius. Sirius inched closer to Remus.

Harry quickly rolled on his back and sat up, panic making it difficult to breathe. He ignored the dizziness that flooded his head. Blurred people hurried to his bedside while two sets of hands tried to gently push him back down. Harry fought the hands as much as he could. He wouldn't give in. Sirius Black would never get anything from him.

"Calm down Harry," urged a familiar voice. "We're not going to hurt you. Black isn't here. You're safe now."

Harry stopped fighting but his body was still tense, still resisting the hands that were trying to make him lie back down. He was still breathing heavily as he looked nervously around. "Safe?" he asked softly. "He's gone?"

His glasses were gently slid on his face, bringing the room into focus. Harry saw Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin were the ones trying to push him down. Behind them were Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape.

"Why must the git always be there?" James asked irritated.

"He's a teacher James," Lily retorted rolling her eyes.

"So is Professor Flitwick and I don't see him there," James spat back.

Slowly, Harry returned his attention to Professor Lupin then looked away as his eyes had started to burn with tears.

"Are you all right Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry nodded. "H—he wanted to get in the Gryffindor Tower," he said in a wavering voice. "H—he kept saying that 'he was here at Hogwarts'. He was worried. He thought someone was in the Gryffindor Tower that would hurt me. I—I—"

"See, I was worried. Worried. I was looking for someone," Sirius desperately pleaded with James and Lily.

"Who?" she asked.

Sirius shrugged but Remus eyed Peter suspiciously.

"Its okay, Harry," said Professor Lupin. "Are you sure Black didn't try to hurt you?"

Harry nodded again as he stared at his hands. He suddenly felt like a child who had been caught playing in the street after being told not to. He felt like he had disappointed his 'family'. Harry didn't like that feeling at all. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I—I didn't think he would be in the castle. I never should have left the feast."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said sincerely. "This is not your fault. However, the fact of the matter is you are not as safe here as we had originally believed. Sirius Black may have been trying to gain your trust but until he is caught, I must insist that you not venture anywhere alone."

"Excuse me! I am not some conniving Slytherin that would try to gain Harry's trust to hurt him later! You have me confused with Snivellus!" Sirius cried outraged.

Harry could only nod as tears fell. He didn't like the feeling that he was being punished for something that Dumbledore had just said wasn't his fault. It wasn't fair. "Does everyone know?" he asked in the same shaky voice.

"Well, with the way those ghosts delivered the message; Yes," Lily stated irritated.

There was a brief silence. "The ghosts informed us just as we were finishing dinner," Professor Lupin said carefully. "I know you don't want the attention, Harry, but there's nothing we can do about it now. Your classmates need to know the threat is real because we can't be with you all the time. Do you understand?"

"It will calm down after a few days, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly. "Get some rest. It's still quite early in the morning."

The adults slowly filtered out of the room but when Professor Lupin stood up, Harry instinctively grabbed his sleeve and looked at him, silently pleading him to stay. Harry couldn't explain it but he just really didn't want to be alone right now. Lupin seemed to take the hint and sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"Thanks Moony," James said, Lily nodding beside her.

"Wasn't gonna leave him alone," Remus mumbled fidgeting with his robes.

Lying back down, Harry only now felt the dizziness swarming his head again. He had plenty of practice on blocking pain so it was almost second nature now.

There were severe displeased grunts at this and Lily was shredding a tissue she had gotten earlier.

Lupin gave Harry a soft smile as he covered the boy up. Harry's eyes were already starting to droop so he removed the glasses and watched as Harry slowly drifted off to sleep. "Don't worry, cub," Lupin said softly. "We'll get through this."

"Ow, how cute you calling him cub," Lily cooed. The boys rolled their eyes at the girly display.

It had certainly been a long Sunday and an even longer week. Everyone wanted to know all the details about what was now classified as an attempted kidnapping but what Harry refused to say was told by the Fat Lady portrait (at least the portion that she had seen). By Sunday evening, everyone had their own version of what really happened and how Sirius Black had gotten in the castle.

"Honestly, if someone knows how to get into Hogwarts it's a Marauder," James said.

"That's why Dumbledore hired another one," Lily pointed out. James opened and closed his mouths a few times but had no retort.

Professor Lupin had been right about the students taking the threat seriously. The entire Gryffindor Tower had taken it upon themselves to serve as bodyguards whenever they could which ended up being a good thing more often than not. With the Quidditch game coming up, the atmosphere between the Slytherin and Gryffindor house was certainly tense. Several fights had broken out and it had become a daily challenge for the Slytherins to do anything and everything to scare Harry Potter. Some had tried to convince Harry that they had seen Sirius Black in the castle again while others conversed about how the Quidditch Pitch would be an easy place to kill someone just as Harry happened to be walking by.

"What a low blow. Is their team so bad at Quidditch that they need the opponent to forfeit the game?" James asked.

"I don't know. But I bet Slytherin would rather win by forfeit than risk playing and loosing," Remus said calmly.

Professor McGonagall had joined Madam Hooch in supervising the Quidditch practices which were longer and more grueling than ever before. Oliver Wood was pushing his team harder than ever but no one dared to complain. Every member of the Quidditch team wanted to beat Slytherin as much as Oliver. No one cared how bad the weather was getting or that they came in every night soaked to the bone.

The day before the match the weather was so bad that lanterns were needed in the hallways. Entering the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Harry was starting to get a bad feeling about the game. He really wasn't looking forward to playing in this weather. How would he even be able to see the snitch? Would he be able to see the Snitch?

Harry took his usual seat in the front with Ron to his right and Hermione to his left while the remainder of the class slowly filled in. They pulled out their supplies as the door slammed closed making everyone jump. Turning around, Harry's eyes widened as he saw Professor Snape walking towards the teacher's desk, his robe billowing behind him.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS HE DOING IN MOONY'S CLASS?" Sirius bellowed.

"GET YOUR FAT ARSE AWAY FROM THE TEACHER'S DESK SNIVELLUS!" James yelled.

"BLACK! POTTER! LANGUAGE!" Lily reprimanded them.

Professor Lupin must be really sick.

"This is not happening," Ron muttered. "Please tell me this isn't happening."

Harry didn't risk answering as he watched Professor Snape flip through the textbook to the very last pages. "Turn to page 394," he said coldly. "Today we will be discussing werewolves."

"WHAT?" the four boys yelled and Lily was taken aback.

"You Sniveling bastard. I am going to kill you!" Sirius shouted lunging for the pages but James averted his hands.

"Calm down. He's just trying to undermine Remus, continue James," Lily said. But they knew better. James looked at Remus who nodded resigned for him to continue. If they stopped Lily would get suspicious and figure this out. If they continued, the book would tell her.

Not wanting to be the subject of Snape's wrath, Harry obediently opened his book to the correct page. He could feel Professor Snape's stern gaze as the Potion's Master watched and waited for someone to defy him. This was a test, plan and simple. Harry was determined not to be that person that Snape made an example of.

Unfortunately, Hermione was unable to restrain herself. "But sir," she objected. "We're not supposed to do werewolves until of next term. We're supposed to start Hinkypunks today."

"No, no, no, Hermione, he just wants an excuse to make you miserable and you're giving it to him," Remus said shaking his head.

Professor Snape glared at her as he slowly approached. "Ten points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn, Miss Granger," he hissed. "Now, can anyone tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?" He ignored Hermione's arm in the air. "Anyone? Pity. It appears that the favored Professor Lupin is slacking in his classes."

"STOP CRITISING MOONY!" Sirius shouted.

This time it was Dean who spoke up. "He's the best Defense teacher we've ever had," he said boldly. Several people nodded in agreement but no one was brave enough to voice their opinion.

"YES! SEE! Everyone loves Moony," James cried. Remus blushed.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Thomas," said Snape. "If you all continue this Gryffindor will have no points left to give, not that I'm complaining. Now can *anyone* answer my question?"

Hermione still had her hand in the air. "Please, sir," she said. "The snout of a werewolf is shorter—"

Professor Snape slammed his hands down on Hermione's desk and glared at her. "Speak out of turn again and you will have detention for the remainder of the term," he snapped. "Ten more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all."

Hermione put her hand down as her gaze fell. It had to hurt deeply to hear such a thing from a teacher regardless of the fact that everyone called her that at least once a week. Harry could see that Hermione was near tears. He bit his lip to keep himself from saying anything in front of Professor Snape. Retuning his attention to his text book, Harry could see Ron out of the corner of his eye. The redhead was seething with anger and was about to defend Hermione so Harry did the only thing he could think of...he stomped on Ron's foot.

Ron instantly turned to Harry, his eyes flashing, demanding an explanation.

"He was just saving you from losing points or a detention, honestly, Remus was right. Snape only wants an excuse," Lily said annoyed at Ron's behavior.

Harry gave Ron a pleading look, hoping that his friend would understand or at least take the hint. After a moment, Ron rolled his eyes and returned his attention to Professor Snape.

For the rest of the class, no one said anything and they didn't do anything besides taking notes about werewolves out of their textbooks. As Harry took his notes, he was surprised to find many

James voice wavered but he kept reading after a signal from Remus to go on.

similarities to Professor Lupin. Werewolves had a hard time keeping weight on due to the transformations and appeared ill up to two weeks before the transformation. Professor Lupin was incredibly thin and had been ill but that didn't make him a werewolf.

Right?

The more Harry learned, the more unnerved he became and the more realistic his fear was becoming. There were just too many similarities to ignore.

James stopped reading and the boys stared at Lily who said dryly, "Well, took him long enough."

"What?" Remus asked.

"Oh, honestly. Do you think I am that daft? I've known for ages. I even gave you tons of chances to come clean today by asking stupid questions. But did you? Oh, no you didn't. You just kept giving me one moronic answer after the other. If I were Harry I'd be highly offended about being blatantly lied like that."

"How did you figure that out?" Sirius asked.

"The same way Harry did," at Remus nervous look she added, "don't worry. I only noticed because I keep close tabs on you troublemakers. No one else bothered to realize that you always go missing around the full moon."

Remus fiddled with his robes, "So you've known for a long time?" She nodded. "Ok, I understand if you-"

"If I what? If you think I am going to go running the other way yelling: "Werewolf", then I am doubly offended because you think so poorly of me," she finished crossing her arms. Remus smiled and mouthed *thank you*. James was staring in delight until she said: "And don't think I haven't figured out that you already are an Animagus Black," Sirius jumped horrified and she narrowed her eyes, "and since Black doesn't go into mischief alone, what animals are you two?"

James smiled, "Wouldn't you like to know" he kept reading.

But if he was a werewolf, why didn't he tell me? He's supposed to be my guardian!

"Yes why? Or don't you trust my son? He told you about being a Parselmouth," Lily asked Remus angrily.

"To be fair, everyone already knew that," James said she narrowed her eyes at him and then went back at glaring at Remus.

"I am sure I had a good reason," he said apologetically.

Harry instantly paled. What if that was why Professor Lupin didn't say anything? What if no one was supposed to know?

At the end of class, Professor Snape assigned two rolls of parchment on the ways to recognize and kill werewolves. The entire class was outraged at the assignment. There was a Quidditch game this weekend! Gryffindor vs. Slytherin no less! The moment Snape dismissed them, everyone hurried out of the classroom. Everyone but Harry.

Cautiously, Harry approached the teacher's desk where Professor Snape was packing up his things. "Professor?" he asked softly. Professor Snape quickly turned around forcing Harry to take a frightened step back. "I don't mean to disturb you but I was wondering," Harry said uncomfortably as he avoided looking at Snape in the eyes. "I read that it is against the law for werewolves to have children." Slowly, Harry looked up at Snape, his eyes pleading for reassurance. "What about adoption?"

"Oh, no! Don't tell him! No, I am sure I am trying to find away around that," Remus begged the book.

"What do you mean?" Lily asked worried.

"Werewolves aren't aloud to adopt," James explained sadly.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard! Why not?" she asked indignantly.

"People are stupid," James shrugged back.

Professor Snape looked at Harry for a moment then grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill. After dipping the quill in ink, Snape quickly wrote down something then turned back to face Harry. "I don't know every law there is, Potter," he said with a hint of annoyance in his voice as he handed over the piece of parchment. "That book should tell you what you need to know but sometimes it's better to ask *someone* who would know."

Harry's gaze fell as he pocketed the note. He didn't even know if it was true so he wasn't going to accuse Professor Lupin of something like this. "I wish I could," he muttered. "Thanks Professor."

"Yes, you can Harry. Come ask me and I'll explain everything, even why I lied," Remus begged.

He left without even looking up at Professor Snape. His entire world had been turned upside down. Professor Dumbledore had warned him this had been a temporary arrangement but Harry had hoped that would end up being permanent. Harry felt that Professor Lupin knew and understood him better than anyone else. The thought of losing that was more than Harry could take.

"No, no, no, you're not going to loose me, we'll find a way," Remus pleaded.

"Yes, you could get someone to sign things, like Dumbledore, but you would be the guardian," Sirius said excitedly.

"What?" the others asked.

"You do know, Sirius, that we do not live in your head," Peter asked slowly, "if you want to say something, you have to express it in coherent phrases."

"What I mean is; Dumbledore or someone else can be the official guardian for the Ministry, but Remus would be the actual one," Sirius explained.

"That might work," James said.

Lily looked doubtful, "Harry seems to be pretty important to the Wizarding World. Wouldn't they check up on his situation?"

"They haven't before. Why would they now?" James said.

"Because now they know about their mistake," Remus agreed with Lily grimly.

Harry didn't sleep well that night, if he slept at all. His mind was too preoccupied and the thundering storm outside didn't help. Flashes of lightning lit up the room and the harsh winds pounded against the castle. *This is going to be a great game*, Harry thought sarcastically. He finally gave up the thought of sleep in the early morning hours and retreated to the Common

Room with his Charms book. If this weather was going to continue, he would certainly need some help.

It took him a little less than an hour to find a charm to make his glasses repel water which was essential. This way he would be able to see...well...as much as someone could possibly see in this weather.

"Yes, that one is very handy," James agreed.

He didn't want to risk casting any other charms, fearing the Slytherins may accuse him of cheating. At least now he and Malfoy were on even ground, so to speak.

With really nothing else to do, Harry ended up starting his werewolf essay. He still wasn't allowed to go anywhere alone which was starting to get annoying. During his month alone at Hogwarts, Harry had grown accustomed to roaming the halls whenever he needed to think. During the two months after school began Harry had also grown accustomed to venturing to Professor Lupin's office whenever he needed to talk.

He couldn't do that now for a variety of reasons.

"Yes you can. I mean, I probably won't be there. I'll be in the Shack and all, but when it's not the full moon you can."

Harry had checked a calendar and discovered that Lupin's *illnesses* had coincided with the lunar cycle. It was like the pieces kept falling into place in spite of how much Harry wanted them not to. He had to assume all of the teachers knew since they had participated in convincing Harry during the summer. *If he told them why couldn't he tell me?*

"I am sure I had a good reason. Please don't feel betrayed," Remus pleaded.

Sirius winced, "I think it's a little too late for that. He already does. Sorry."

As Harry's luck would have it the storm remained at full force. The entire school was huddled under umbrellas that appeared to be one gust of wind away from being torn apart. Dressed in their scarlet robes, the team fought against the fierce wind as they made their way out onto the field. Rain seemed to be coming from every direction but amazingly he could see clearly. The charm was working remarkably.

The Slytherin team appeared on the opposite side of the field in their green robes.

"BUUHHHH!" the four boys cried.

"They can't hear you," Lily rolled her eyes.

It seemed...wrong to see the team without their smirks but it was clear that the Slytherins were just as worried about playing in this weather as the Gryffindors. The Captains approached the middle of the field and shook hands then returned to their teams. Harry could see Madam Hooch's lips move saying something that resembled "Mount your brooms" and

quickly, yet discreetly cast a heating charm so he wouldn't freeze to the bone before swinging his right foot over his Nimbus and took off the moment he heard the distant whistle.

"Clever," Remus beamed.

Rising fast, Harry kept a firm grip on his broom, ignoring the swerving it did as a result of the wind. It only took minutes for Harry to be completely soaked but thanks to the heating charm he didn't feel the cold. Blurred red and green shapes flew all over the place but Harry paid them little attention. He was completely focused on finding the Snitch.

James was practically jumping on the spot as he read.

The storm grew worse. It was becoming difficult for anyone to keep their broom straight. Harry had two close calls with the Bludgers before the sound of the Madam Hooch's whistle pulled him out of his concentration. Looking around, Harry saw his team lowering to the ground and followed suit. They landed, ignoring the mud splashing up on their robes, and hurried under a large umbrella for cover.

"What's the score?" Harry shouted over the wind.

"We're losing by ten!" Oliver shouted back. "We need you to catch the Snitch soon or we're all going to freeze to death!"

"Hey, the seekers job is the hardest! Give my son a break!" James bellowed.

"You're usually even more fanatical than Wood with the team James," Peter pointed out.

"Well, they're not my son," James said defensively.

Looking around, Harry noticed that everyone but him was shivering. Without another thought, Harry quickly pulled out his wand and cast several heating charms. Everyone stopped shivering and looked at Harry, making him feel incredibly uncomfortable. "What?" he asked nervously. "It's just a simple heating charm."

The girls on the team looked like they wanted to kiss him. "Brilliant Harry!" Oliver shouted. "Let's go team!"

Everyone was still completely soaked but at least they weren't freezing anymore. That didn't stop Harry's determination to catch the Snitch as soon as possible. He didn't want to be out in this storm any longer than he had to. There was another rumble of thunder followed by a quick flash of lightning but it was enough. Harry saw the small golden Snitch heading for the teacher's box and immediately took off.

Harry was almost there when all of a sudden all of the noise around him vanished. The wind was still there but there was no roar. The crowd wasn't making a sound. It was almost like someone had muted all sound but that was impossible. Wasn't it?

"What's going on?" Sirius cried grabbing Remus' robes in fright.

Forget it! Catch the Snitch!

Harry reached out for the small flying ball when a familiar feeling of intense cold filled his body, like the heating charm had suddenly been removed and he was trapped in subzero temperatures. *Ignore it!* His vision started to fade as it became difficult to breathe.

"Oh, No, no! They can't be on the pitch!" James said desperately.

Harry knew what was happening when a familiar scream filled his ears. He felt the Snitch in his hand and immediately wrapped his fingers around it. The cold was too much. He couldn't ignore it anymore.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now..."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —"

Sirius and Remus were griping each other's robes, Lily was crying, Peter was shivering and James was trembling while he kept reading.

He slumped forward as his grip loosened. Before Harry knew it, he was falling; falling into the darkness; into the bitter coldness that was waiting for him. There was nothing he could do.

"Not Harry! Please...have mercy...have mercy..."

A high pitched laugh filled his ears. It was familiar, hauntingly familiar. Another scream and darkness consumed him.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!" five cries came.

"He died, my son died," Lily was sobbing on James' shoulder on the floor.

"No, Lily. Let me keep reading. He didn't die," he said rubbing circles on her back. She let him but the others noticed that she did not go back to her chair; instead she just sat next to James on the floor.

Distant voices filled his ears. Harry wanted nothing more for them to stop so he could go back to sleep. He was exhausted and extremely sore. Every inch of his body hurt. Moving was out of the question. A distinct aroma was in the air. Harry let out a groan as he tried to place it. It didn't take Harry long to figure out that he was in the hospital wing. *Wait a minute...what am I doing here?*

"I can't believe this."

"I can't believe he still caught the Snitch with them there."

"Well, of course he did. He's a Potter!" James exclaimed.

"So?" Lily asked.

"We're great Quidditch players," he said grinning. She rolled her eyes.

"I've never been so terrified in my life."

Terrified? Why would anyone be terrified? Catch the Snitch? What were these people talking about? Slowly, Harry's head started to clear and the memories came back. He remembered the Quidditch game, his mother pleading and Voldemort's voice. Harry's eyes snapped open to see blurry faces gathered around his bed.

"Harry!" Fred cried out. "How're you doing?"

Harry turned his face towards Fred's voice only to hiss in pain. Someone grabbed his right hand and held it tightly while someone else slid his glasses on his face. The faces suddenly came into focus. The entire Gryffindor Quidditch Team, (still caked with mud and completely soaked) Ron and Hermione surrounded him. From the worried looks on their faces Harry figured he had to be in rough shape.

"What happened?" Harry asked at last in a rough voice. He had a general idea what happened but for some reason Harry needed confirmation. He needed to know if the nightmare had been a reality.

"Er—well—you fell, Harry," Oliver said nervously. "It had to have been at least fifty feet; right after you caught the Snitch. There were so many Dementors..."

"No!" Lily started sobbing again and James comforted her.

"But he's ok now Lily," Remus pointed out. She gave a little nod of her head.

"Dumbledore was furious, Harry," Hermione said as she squeezed Harry's hand. "All of the teachers ran onto the field and tried to slow your fall and shot some silver stuff at the Dementors, sending them away. They weren't supposed to come anywhere near the pitch."

"You still hit the ground hard though," added Ron. "We thought you were dead. Then there is the matter of your broom."

"WHAT? What's the matter with his broom? What happened?" James asked horrified.

Lily looked at him strangely. But Remus and Sirius came closer and started patting his arm soothingly.

"Calm down James, I am sure nothing serious happened," Remus said softly while carefully prying away the papers from James vice grip. They went back to their spots when James looked calmer and Sirius started reading taking the papers from Remus.

There was just something about the tone of Ron's voice that made Harry's stomach tighten. Harry closed his eyes but couldn't do much else. "What happened to my broom?" he asked.

"It was blown into the Whomping Willow, Harry," Hermione said nervously. "I'm so sorry."

Remus, Lily, Sirius and Peter winced. James was murmuring *no* and shaking his head while grabbing his collar. Now Lily was the one rubbing circles on his back.

Harry felt like he was going to be sick.

"I know! I do too!" James said in a dejected voice.

He had plenty of experience with the Whomping Willow to know the sort of beating that tree could give.

"Excuse me now!" James seemed to come off his trance saying angrily, "When did my son get *experience* with the Whomping Willow?" The other boys just shrugged. Lily looked as peeved as James.

His broom, his Nimbus Two Thousand, stood no chance. "It's destroyed," he said as he opened his eyes and looked at Ron. "Isn't it?"

Hands touched his limbs and gave reassuring squeezes. Ron looked at Hermione who picked up a bag off the floor and set it on the edge of Harry's bed. "Professor Flitwick just brought it back," Hermione said sympathetically. "I'm sorry Harry. There's nothing that anyone can do to repair it. Professor Dumbledore already tried."

Harry could only stare at the bag that now contained the splintered pieces of his faithful broomstick. He had never known how much he had actually cherished it until now. It was his second gift ever. Now, it was nothing more than firewood.

"No," James went back to his mumbling.

A/N: Thanks everyone! You're encouraging words have helped me a lot!

Coming up! The Marauder's Map. What will Harry do?

"Did the author say what I just read?" Sirius asked eagerly. James nodded excitedly.

"What?" Lily asked but all she got was four mischievous smiles.

Chapter 12

The Marauder's Map

"Yes!" four cries were heard.

The remainder of the weekend had been a long one. Once Madam Pomfrey had healed Harry completely, she had insisted that he remain in the hospital wing until Monday morning. Harry didn't resist or complain. He really didn't say much of anything. He was too distraught over the loss of his broom and the memory of his mother's terrified voice again. He hadn't told anyone about hearing her or Voldemort but he knew they suspected something. After all, you can only sit on a windowsill and stare out at the courtyard for so long until people start to worry.

There had been visitors nonstop but Harry only gave one word answers to their questions if he answered at all. The teachers even tried to lift Harry's spirits with no success. Many thought Harry had fallen into some sort of depression but those who knew Harry knew the pained look in his eyes that wasn't the case. Ron, Hermione and Ginny had seen that look on the train to Hogwarts after the Dementor.

The problem was, unlike last time, Harry had no one to talk to. He didn't want to burden Ron and Hermione with this or any of the teachers. What could they do about it anyways? Professor Lupin had known what to say but Harry was still feeling hurt to even think about approaching him.

"You can. Approach me Harry! *Please!*" Remus pleaded.

"I don't think he feels like he can," James said wincing, "Harry doesn't seem to trust easily, but I think that when he trusts he expects trust in return and you didn't. So, now he feels like he can't trust you anymore"

"But he can!" Remus cried. Sirius patted his friend trying to soothe him.

Harry had grown to trust the man again after finding out Lupin had known Midnight was actually Sirius Black only to find that the trust only went one way. Professor Lupin never trusted him so why should he trust Professor Lupin? Why should he trust anyone?

Remus winced.

"Well, hum, it's understandable why Harry would feel betrayed. But not trusting anyone is taking it a little too far," Lily said.

"Yeah, but would you when you keep finding out that people are lying to you all the time. I mean," and while saying this Sirius looked apologetically at Remus, "he had already forgiven Moony for not coming clean with him once. Now he finds out another lie. Sorry," he winced but Remus nodded grimly his agreement. He would be hurt too.

"Yeah, and Harry grew up with muggles. He doesn't know about the prejudices in our world," James continued, "When we found out, we knew why Remus would have lied. I mean we are all from Wizarding families. Even if we don't have that prejudice, we knew about it. But Harry doesn't. So, for him it's just a lie with no reason."

Sleeping at night was impossible. Every time Harry closed his eyes he was pulled back to his mother's pleads, Voldemort's insane laughter and the intense cold of the Dementors. Madam Pomfrey had noticed Harry's reluctance to sleep and ended up resorting to using Dreamless Sleeping Potion. Harry was grateful but knew this was only a temporary fix. He knew this was troubling him so much because he couldn't do anything but listen. He was helpless once again.

The return of classes on Monday brought at least some distraction and a change of scenery. Since Gryffindor won the game Malfoy had to resort to taunting Harry about the Dementors and falling off his broom.

"Git" Sirius grumbled.

The only problem was not many were laughing with him. Harry appeared to be exhausted and still looked dejected. With everyone knowing the affects of the Dementors, they gathered this time had been worse than the last.

Ron and Hermione had given up trying to pry information out of Harry and had resorted to staying by his side at all times in case he wanted to talk. Harry knew it was wrong to pull away from everyone like he was but he couldn't help it. It just seemed like something he needed to do. Everyone lied to him. Midnight—er—Sirius Black had lied about being a dog. Professor Dumbledore had lied about how his parents had been murdered. Professor Lupin had lied...well, more like refrained from telling the truth but it was the same thing.

At least to Harry it was.

"See," Sirius said sadly, "that's what I mean. He feels betrayed by all the people he trusted. I am *sorry* for lying Harry!"

"Me too!" Remus cried.

Reaching the Defense classroom, Harry was about to enter when he was pulled back by Ron. "I don't think I can handle Snape teaching another class," said Ron. "Don't you agree, Harry?"

Harry only shrugged in reply then entered the classroom to see that Professor Snape wasn't the teacher. Professor Lupin was back. Harry didn't exactly know how he felt about that. Yes, Snape was a bitter and biased git but seeing Lupin only served as a reminder of the hurt Harry was so desperately trying to keep inside.

Professor Lupin still looked ill and apparently had lost some weight. There were now too many coincidences to ignore. Professor Snape had introduced the topic of werewolves for one reason and one reason only: to make the students aware of Professor Lupin's condition.

"Yeah, because he is a bitter git that can't let go of school grudges," James mumbled annoyed.

The class, however were too busy in complaining about what they had to endure under Professor Snape's tutelage. Professor Lupin smiled at the outrage until he glanced at Harry and noticed that his charge was avoiding eye contact. *This is not good.*

"You *think*?" Remus asked his older self exasperated.

After another round of complaints, Professor Lupin regained control of the class and ensured that the assignment wouldn't have to be completed. The entire class was relieved except for Hermione who looked disappointed since she had already finished it.

"Oh, bugger," Remus sighed, "she figured it out too." The others nodded grimly.

They covered Hinkypunks, Gryffindor earning back all of the points they had lost from Defense with Snape. When the bell rang, everyone headed for the door. Harry knew he had to get out of here before he exploded but unfortunately Professor Lupin wouldn't let him off so easily.

"Harry, could I have a word?" Professor Lupin called.

Harry let out a sigh and remained where he was while everyone else left. He slowly turned around and finally met Lupin's tired gaze. He really didn't want to do this right now. He didn't want to talk about this weekend. He just wanted to be left alone.

"I'm sorry about your broomstick, Harry," Professor Lupin said as he piled books into his briefcase. "Professor Dumbledore told me about the Dementors. I trust you had the same reaction as you did on the train?"

Harry looked away. "I don't want to talk about it, Professor," he said tensely.

Professor Lupin was taken aback by Harry's tone. "Harry, is something wrong?" he asked as he slowly approached. "You know you can tell me anything, anything at all."

"He doesn't think so," Lily pointed out.

"Come clean Moony. Explain everything. He'll understand and forgive you," James pleaded.

Harry slowly shook his head. He wanted to scream but held back the urge. He wanted to understand why everyone always lied to him. "Not anymore," Harry muttered then looked up at Lupin. "It's been a long weekend, Professor, so if there isn't anything else..."

Professor Lupin reached out to touch Harry's shoulder but Harry quickly took a step back and remained out of reach. "Have I done something wrong, Harry?" he asked cautiously. "I'm sorry if I couldn't visit you this weekend but I was rather ill."

"Oh, no! You didn't understand me, I said; come clean. Lying will only upset him more," James finished biting his lips.

Lies! Unable to hold it in anymore, Harry reached into his school bag and pulled out his werewolf essay. He then slammed the two rolls of parchment down on the desk to his right. "My essay, Professor," Harry said heatedly. "Please be sure Professor Snape gets it. I know he would hate to find out that no one figured out the *real* reason he brought up the topic of werewolves."

Everyone winced.

Lupin's eyes widened in surprise as his face paled. "Harry...I..."

Harry didn't give him a chance. "You lied to me!" he cried, unaware of the objects in the room starting to shake. "I trusted you with everything and you lied! Everyone lies to me! I thought you were different!"

Several glass pieces exploded. Lupin instinctively covered his head to shield it from the glass.

"Ok, now. Harry dear, I know you are upset but you have to calm down. You are doing way too much accidental magic," Lily pleaded.

Feeling nothing hit, he looked up and saw tears running down Harry's face. "Harry, listen to me," he said carefully. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was afraid. I thought that if you knew you would be afraid of me. I didn't want to lose you. You are all I have."

"See! It's the same reason I didn't tell you guys. I wasn't lying for lying," Remus pleaded.

"We know Moony, but Harry doesn't," James tried to comfort his friend.

Harry fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands. It was all too much. Everything was so out of control: Sirius Black, the Dementors, the Dursleys, his mother's screams, Voldemort's high pitched voice...that inhuman voice, and finding out the truth about Professor Lupin. Why did everything have to be so difficult? It just wasn't fair!

Professor Lupin hurried to his side and pulled the teenager to his chest. "It's okay, Harry," he said softly. "It will be okay. Just let it out."

It was only when Harry had passed out due to exhaustion that Professor Lupin moved. He had to admit that he was angry, no furious.

"And you *do not* want a furious Remus Lupin in your hands," Sirius said knowingly.

Severus Snape had no right to do what he did. The question now was how to fix this mess and how to make Harry trust him again.

"That's going to take a lot of explaining," Lily said grimly, "But Harry already forgave you once, and he's a good boy. He'll understand."

Knowing Harry needed rest more than anything else, Lupin took Harry back to his quarters and put the boy to bed. He removed Harry's glasses and shoes before tucking him in. Once he

was certain Harry was comfortable, Remus went to send two fire calls: one to Albus Dumbledore and one to Severus Snape.

"I am almost feeling Sorry for Snape," James said, "*Almost.*"

"YOU HAD NO RIGHT!"

"Oh, boy! Moony's shouting," Sirius said fearfully.

"So? I would too," Lily said.

James looked at her and said with wide eyes, "Moony *never* shouts. When he does, run for your life."

Lily looked skeptically at Remus who was calmly sitting on the bed waiting for what was coming next.

"Nooooo! He's too sweet," she said.

"You wait and see," James said.

The loud voice quickly pulled Harry out of his slumber. He didn't need to open his eyes to know where he was. The soft bed and scent of the room was all Harry needed to know he was in Professor Lupin's guest quarters; the room Harry had slept in for nearly a month in during the summer. The last thing Harry wanted to do was get up. His head was pounding and he was exhausted still. Why was he so tired?

"Because you did very *serious* accidental magic," Lily explained, "so go back to sleep."

"It wasn't my fault you were incapacitated," Snape said coldly. **"You class was behind. Any other teacher would have done the same."**

"No! They wouldn't!" Everyone cried at once.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that it was Professor Lupin and Professor Snape arguing in the next room considering what had happened in the Defense classroom. Harry wanted to get up and tell the two teachers to shut up but the thought of moving was too much for Harry's increasing headache. Why did his head hurt so much? It didn't make any sense.

"No, they wouldn't!" Professor Lupin said loudly. **"Don't you dare try to get out of this! You brought up werewolves for the sole purpose of someone figuring it out! Harry figured it out!"**

"Harry knows?" asked Professor Dumbledore.

"Yes! Dumbledore's there and he'll put Snivellus in his place," James said triumphantly.

"Severus, I thought I made myself clear. Harry is in a fragile state right now. He needs someone to trust. It was up for Remus to decide when to tell Harry about his condition."

Harry groaned in pain as he forced himself to sit up. He ignored the insistent pounding and kept his eyes closed as he staggered towards the door. He needed them to stop. He needed this headache to stop.

"Oh yes, let's all coddle Potter as much as possible," Snape sneered.

"Oh, shut up Snivellus!" Lily said annoyed. The boys looked at her with wide eyes.

"Lily!" James breathed.

"What? He's starting to get even on my nerves," she said defensively.

"That's enough, Severus," Dumbledore warned. "Go to my office. I'll deal with you shortly."

"Yes!" Sirius cried, "Can teachers get detention?"

"I surely hope so," Remus said.

There was silence. Harry could only assume Snape had left through the fireplace because if he had left through the door it would have slammed so loud to startle everyone in the castle. Reaching the wall, Harry felt for the doorknob then hesitated as a wave of dizziness hit him.

"How is Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked in a concerned tone.

"Well, let's see: Furious, feeling betrayed, annoyed that you woke him up and with an enormous headache," Sirius ticked off the items from his fingers.

"Angry," Lupin answered bluntly. "He doesn't trust me anymore. I knew this was a bad idea. I never should have agreed to this position. I can't take Harry hating me, Dumbledore. His trust is so hard to earn. I have no idea how I'm going to repair this."

"Be honest with him," Dumbledore advised. "Harry was raised by Muggles so he doesn't understand what you've had to face for so many years."

"See, that's what I said," James nodded his agreement, "Great minds think alike."

"Are you comparing yourself with the greatest wizard of our time?" Lily said with a raised eyebrow. James just beamed.

Is there anyone else who may have figured it out?"

"Hermione!" all five said at once.

"Possibly Hermione," Lupin said. "She was the only other one to complete the assignment Severus gave them."

Unable to focus anymore, Harry collapsed with a thud. He heard the door open followed by two people helping him back to bed. Harry could only assume that it was Lupin and Dumbledore. After opening his eyes partially and looking at the blurry figures, Harry saw that it was indeed so.

"I'll send for Poppy," Dumbledore said softly. "Keep him calm, Remus."

Lupin kept his attention on Harry as the Headmaster left the room. He could see the teenager fighting to stay awake with a look on pain on his face. Tentatively, Professor Lupin touched Harry's forehead but felt no sign of a fever. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Harry," he said softly. "I never meant for you to find out like this. I was only trying to protect you. I thought if you found out about *my* darkness you would be afraid."

"No he wouldn't. Didn't he tell you about being a Parselmouth? He doesn't think like those bigoted jerks you're obviously used to," Lily said.

Harry couldn't gather the strength to answer. He slowly blinked, continuing to stare at the blur that was Professor Lupin. Why should the man be afraid? It didn't make any sense. He knew werewolves were considered dark creatures but parseltounge was considered a dark ability. If Lupin didn't believe Harry was dark then why should Harry believe Lupin was dark?

"See, told you," Lily said. Remus smiled.

There was a knock on the door. Professor Lupin looked over his shoulder to see Madam Pomfrey hurry in followed by Dumbledore. He moved out of the way as Pomfrey waved her wand over Harry and gasped in alarm. "Good heavens, Potter!" she exclaimed. "How in the world are you still conscious?"

"What why? What's wrong?" James asked worried.

"What's wrong?" Professor Lupin asked urgently.

Madam Pomfrey reached in her supply bag and pulled out a potion vial. "A headache, Professor," she said as she uncorked the vial. "A severe one, but nothing life threatening." She gently moved his head so Harry was looking at the ceiling and tilted it back. "Open your mouth, Potter."

Harry did as he was told and cringed as a horrible tasting potion went down his throat. The pain started to decrease as Harry succumbed to darkness.

The next time Harry came to Professor Lupin had been at his bedside. Once Harry had eaten, Lupin had explained everything about how werewolves were treated in the wizarding world. After hearing about the discrimination and old fashioned beliefs, Harry wasn't surprised that Professor Lupin had hid the truth.

"See, I told you, all you had to do was explain everything to him," James said smiling. Remus looked very relieved.

As it ended up, both Harry and Professor Lupin discovered that they were more alike than either of them originally believed. They were both seen and judged for something they had no control over (Harry being the boy-who-lived and Lupin being a werewolf). No one bothered to know who they were beyond their title. And both of them were alone.

"It's a very sad and true thing," Lily sighed, "Everyone just jumps to conclusion."

"Including you?" James asked.

"What do you mean?" she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Well, because you just see me as a bully and a show off. And I admit I am a little," at her snort, "ok, a lot of those two things. But if I was just that, Moony wouldn't be my friend. He doesn't like when I pick on others and makes me feel like the dirt under Snape's shoes when I do."

Lily looked approvingly at Remus, "Maybe you're right. I mean, I never understood why Remus is your friend. There must be a *reason!*" James smiled widely.

Once Harry had heard everything from Professor Lupin's point of view he had apologized repeatedly for his outburst. Lupin waved it off, not blaming Harry in the slightest. They talked into the early morning hours before calling it a night. Harry had told Professor Lupin about hearing his mother and Voldemort during the Quidditch game and Lupin had revealed how he had been bitten when he was a child. Things weren't back to where they were but they were quickly on the mend.

The weekend arrived quickly. Using the excuse that Professor Lupin and Harry would be discussing his parents was enough for Ron and Hermione to let Harry leave with Professor Lupin once lunch was over. Professor Dumbledore arrived a short time later and for three hours they worked on the Patronus Charm until Harry once again overcharged the spell, although not as much as before. Harry was making progress. The silver mist coming out of his wand was more defined but it hadn't taken shape yet. Professor Lupin was right. Mastering the Patronus Charm was hard work.

The end of November brought about the next Quidditch match in which Ravenclaw slaughtered Hufflepuff putting Ravenclaw in the lead for the Quidditch Cup. This pushed Oliver into creating a whole new strategy to ensure the Quidditch Cup would be Gryffindor's. Practices were exhausting and hard in the freezing rain that seemed to never end even into December. The entire team had followed Harry's example and made a habit of using heating charms to prevent themselves from freezing to death.

Harry had indeed done all of his Christmas shopping via catalog with Professor Lupin's help. His list had certainly been longer this year with his new family. It was hard to find something but Harry felt that he needed to find some way to thank those who had done so much for him. He had to do this part of his Christmas shopping in secret since none of the students would understand.

As the holidays drew near, Harry discovered that both Ron and Hermione were staying but nearly everyone else in the entire castle was going home. He tried to convince his friends that he would be fine but they insisted. Ron claimed he couldn't stand Percy at the Burrow for two weeks while Hermione said she was a little behind in her homework and needed to catch up. Relieved that he would be spending the holidays with people his own age, Harry didn't question their reasoning. He just accepted it.

"I like Ron and Hermione!" James beamed.

There was another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term that happened to coincide with another Patronus lesson so Harry wasn't too upset. His Patronus was slowly becoming more defined although no one could make out a distinct shape yet. His overcharging was now few and far between which was a relief for everyone in the room.

"What shape do you think his Patronus will take?" Lily asked eagerly.

"Don't know. A Patronus comes from something positive in your life. The shape usually represents something you feel like a protection," Remus explained.

On the morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid farewell to his friends as he looked through *Which Broomstick* that he had borrowed from Oliver in an attempt to find a replacement broom. He had been using a school broom which was old and slow. He couldn't possibly use one of those in the next game or they would lose for sure.

It was still early so it was a surprise when the Weasley twins sat down across the table from him, dressed and ready for the journey to Hogsmeade. "Hey Harry," said Fred. "We've decided to give you an early Christmas present."

"What are they up to? I hope they don't get Harry in trouble," Lily huffed. The boys didn't listen to her and had hungry looks.

Harry looked at them skeptically. "Er—I don't know," he said. "I remember the last *present* you gave Ron clearly."

Fred and George smiled proudly. "A bit amateurish but we were on a time crunch," George said. "This is nothing like that. Believe me, you'll love it." He pulled out a very large and worn piece of parchment from his cloak and handed it over to Harry.

"NO!" Remus cried delighted.

"YES!" Sirius said equally delighted.

"What are you on about?" Lily asked.

"How do you think they got it?" Peter asked.

"Well if someone would, that would be the twins," James said approvingly.

Harry stared at it for a minute before looking up at them. "I'm afraid I don't get it," he said.

"Me neither," Lily mumbled.

"That, Harry, is the secret to our success," Fred said. "We've used it proudly for many years—"

"—but we've agreed that your need is much greater than ours," George continued for his brother. "You see, back in our first year when we were so innocent and naïve—"

Lily snorted.

"—shocking, we know," added Fred. "We were in quite a spot with Filch and found this little object in the filing cabinet marked Confiscated and Highly Dangerous. Well, you can guess what we did."

"It's so nice to know that Filch appreciates that we are dangerous," Sirius said proudly. The other boys beamed at him. Lily was starting to consider calling St. Mungo's mental ward.

"Now, here's the most important lesson you will ever have at Hogwarts," George said with a grin then he took out his wand and touched the parchment lightly. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Thin lines of ink spread from where George's wand had touched. They joined together and crisscrossed. Words formed across the top, proclaiming:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

"YES!" the four boys cried.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. The Marauders? His father had made this? But who were Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs?

"The best friends in the whole world!" James announced. The other boys blushed.

They had to be nicknames so who was who? Harry instantly thought of asking Professor Lupin but quickly discarded that idea. How could he explain knowing the names of the Marauders?

Taking a closer look at the parchment, Harry realized that it was a detailed map of Hogwarts. There were tiny dots moving around, labeled with a name. He could see that Professor Dumbledore was pacing in his study and that Professor Lupin was entering his office.

"You made a map of Hogwarts?" Lily asked impressed.

"Yes," James beamed.

"I still don't know why Moony's name had to come first," Sirius pouted.

"Because he was the one that found out all the charms and spells we had to use," James explained and from the tone Lily had the impression that wasn't the first time.

"Still," Sirius pouted.

"Now, there are seven passages to Hogsmeade," Fred said as he started tracing them with his finger. "These four Filch knows about—" he pointed the passageways out— "but we're the only ones who know about these. Don't use this one because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance and don't use the one behind the mirror of the fourth floor. It's caved in. This one leads into the cellar of Honeydukes. We recommend that one. The entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crone's hump."

"You will do no such thing Harry James Potter!" Lily said sternly.

"Aw, Lily," James whined.

"Right," George said as he glanced around to make sure no one could hear them. "Don't forget to clear it after you're done using it—"

"—or it can be read by anyone," Fred added as he pulled out his wand and touched the map. "Just tap it again and say—"

"—Mischief managed!" they said together.

Harry watched as the map reverted to a blank piece of parchment once again. Countless thoughts ran through his head. This map could be instrumental in finding Sirius Black. Should he turn it in to Professor Lupin?

"Yes!" Lily cried at the same time that the boys cried "No!"

James and Lily glared at each other.

Should he use it himself? Harry just didn't know.

"See you there," said George, winking then left with his brother.

Harry was stuck with a dilemma: to turn it in or not to turn it in. He knew if he did he would never see it again.

"Exactly!" James said, "And that map is for students. Students!"

Professor Lupin had been one of the Marauders so he must have played a part in creating the map and therefore would know how it worked.

"The most crucial one. Without him there would be no map," Sirius exclaimed and Remus blushed.

Lupin would take it away and give it to Professor Dumbledore to find out if Sirius Black. But this map had been his father's like the invisibility cloak. There was so little Harry had that belonged to his parents that he wasn't too keen on giving it up.

Lily and James shared a sad look.

Early that afternoon, Harry met up with Professor Lupin and Professor Dumbledore for another Patronus lesson, the Marauder's map safely in his trunk. In the end his heart overruled his head. He couldn't give up the map his father had helped create. He wouldn't use it in the way Fred and George intended for him to use it though. He was too afraid to.

Professor Lupin had found a Boggart for practice, making the lesson extremely difficult. Harry was so focused on shutting out the voices he was hearing to even attempt to overcharge the charm. He managed to cast the charm a few times before passing out during each attempt but what came out of his wand was nowhere near what he had accomplished before today.

Both Professor Lupin and Professor Dumbledore tried to reassure Harry that he was still accomplishing more than what they had expected but it was still frustrating. He was doing everything he was being told so why wasn't it working? He knew it was supposed to be hard but this was ridiculous.

"No, Harry, it takes time. I know you feel frustrated because you are doing everything you were told to. But these things take practice. I know I got frustrated with the Animagus transformation," James explained.

"You haven't told me your form yet," Lily said.

"What are you willing to do to know?" James asked cheekily. She smacked the top of his head.

More drained from the lesson than he would ever admit, Harry retreated to his four poster bed before Ron and Hermione returned from Hogsmeade. He didn't know how long he had laid there, lost in thought. Ron and Hermione had come back and checked on him repeatedly, asking softly if he was awake but Harry remained completely still, pretending to sleep. He had no idea what to say to them anyways. He hated keeping so much from them. It was like he didn't even know them anymore.

I'll set things right with them. Just as soon as I figure out how.

"Don't worry. They are your friends, they'll understand. Just like you understood me," Remus said confidently.

Chapter 13

Old Wounds New Worries

The sound of trunks being slammed shut startled Harry out of his slumber. Muffled voices were whispering, preventing Harry from falling back to sleep.

"Not again!" Sirius cried, "Why must people always wake others up. Why can't they respect the sanctity of sleep?"

"Relax, Padfoot, we already promised to let you sleep," Remus said soothingly. Sirius still seemed distressed.

Why was everyone up so early anyways? Too tired to ask, Harry simply pulled his pillow over his head to shut out the noise. He was succeeding when someone opened the curtains, allowing the sunlight to warm the Harry's uncovered back. Harry instantly wanted to curse the person disturbing him. All he wanted was to sleep. Was that too much to ask?

"No, it's not. It's a perfectly reasonable request that people don't seem to respect!" Sirius said outraged.

"Harry?" Ron asked tentatively. "Er—everyone's leaving for the train." There was no response. "Um...you can just come down when you're ready. Hermione and I will be in the Common Room."

The curtains were pulled closed again but Harry knew he wouldn't be able to sleep now. He couldn't just leave Ron and Hermione to wait for him. Letting out a groan, Harry reluctantly pulled himself out of bed and changed into a simple pair of jeans and a long sleeved shirt. Rubbing the remaining tiredness out of his eyes, Harry put his glasses on and left the room.

Reaching the end of the stairs, Harry saw that Ron was sitting in front of the fire, eating some candy while Hermione already had her homework spread out over multiple tables. He muttered a good morning before collapsing on the sofa in front of the fire. The simple action was enough to pull both Ron and Hermione away from what they were doing.

"Harry, are you feeling all right?" Hermione asked in a concerned tone. "You don't look well. Perhaps you should see Madam Pomfrey."

"Of course he doesn't look well, YOU WOKE HIM UP!" Sirius cried.

"I'm fine," Harry said mindlessly. *Think of something quickly!* "It's just been a long few months."

Hermione joined Harry on the sofa while Ron moved to a nearby chair. "You know you can tell us anything, right Harry?" she asked gently. "We want to help you but you've been so secretive this term. Maybe it would help to talk about whatever is bothering you. It's not healthy to keep everything inside."

Harry reflexively pulled his knees to his chest, wanting desperately to hide. He wasn't ready for this. He wasn't for them to know. He wasn't ready to take the risk and trust them with something he had so desperately tried to bury. "I can't," he said softly. "It would change everything. So much has changed already...I...I can't...I just can't..."

"Yes, you can. You'll see. It'll help. You think you can't but you can and then you'll feel much better," Remus said knowingly.

"Did you feel better after we pried everything out of you?" Sirius asked and Remus nodded.

"Good," James said smiling.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other wide-eyed before returning their attention to Harry. A reaction like this only confirmed that something was really wrong with Harry. "What happened to you, mate?" Ron asked. "Is this about Sirius Black on Halloween? Professor McGonagall said you weren't hurt. She wasn't lying was she?"

Harry didn't know what to do. He didn't want to tell them but he needed to tell them. He needed their help but he was still afraid of what they would think. He was tired of all the lies. He missed the closeness he used to have with his best friends. It used to be the only thing he could depend on.

A hand gently touched his right arm and gave it a small squeeze. "Nothing will change, Harry," Hermione said patiently. "You're our friend, our *best* friend. Whatever it is I'm sure we can work through it. We always do."

"Because that's what friends are for!" James agreed with Hermione.

"They'll catch Black soon, Harry,"

"I surely hope not," Sirius said scared.

Ron added. "We can talk to Dumbledore so you don't have to go into hiding again but even if you do at least it's better than the Dursleys, right?"

Harry looked away and let out a tired sigh. There was no backing out now. "I won't be going back to the Dursleys," he said tonelessly.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry in surprise. They both knew Harry had no other family and no other place to stay than with the Dursleys. "What?" Hermione asked. "Why? Is it because Black found you there?"

"No, it's because they are a bunch of CHILD ABUSERS! CHILD ABUSERS!" James cried.

"I know my sister's husband went to jail, and that's good. But I think she should have gone too. I mean, even if she wasn't the one doing the beating she wasn't stopping Vernon either," Lily said crossed.

Harry shook his head as he bit his lower lip. "I—er—can't go back there," he said so quietly Ron and Hermione had to strain to hear him. "Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin won't let me."

"I certainly won't, even if I have to take a leaf out of Padfoot's book and kidnap Harry!" Remus said angry.

"Thanks Moony," James said sincerely.

Hermione moved so she was kneeling on the floor in front of Harry. Carefully, she touched Harry's cheeks and turned his face so their eyes met. The pained look in Harry's eyes made it difficult for Hermione to speak. "Harry," she said at last, "what happened this summer? What did they do to you? Did they hurt you?"

"YES!" five outraged cries sounded.

A tear escaped as Harry tried to pull away but Hermione wouldn't let him. Harry could see that she had figured it out. "Uncle Vernon was angry...a lot," Harry said at last. "He—he thought that if he punished me enough I wouldn't do any magic. He—he was angry about...certain things that reminded him of what I was."

"Do you think he's going to tell them about the phone call?" Peter asked.

"Nah, Harry won't want Ron to feel guilty," Remus answered.

"Punished?" Ron asked in confusion then it struck him what Harry wasn't saying. "You mean he hit you...repeatedly?"

Tears were falling down Hermione's face. In one motion she had Harry in a tight hug with no sign of letting go any time soon. "Harry, this changes nothing," she said firmly. "We are still your friends.

"Harry has good friends!" James remarked with a sad smile.

That will never change. Has your uncle ever hit you before this summer?"

Harry shook his head. He had to admit he was relieved but he was still nervous of them (especially Ron) finding out what started it. He knew Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had found out and felt guilty about the whole event so Harry wasn't about to do the same to Ron. After all it didn't matter what started it. Harry had the feeling that Uncle Vernon would have found something as an excuse no matter what happened.

Everyone nodded grimly.

Ron leaned forward buried his face in his hands. "That's what they were talking about," he said mostly to himself. "I thought Mum and Dad were talking about Black. I never thought it was your uncle they were talking about, Harry." His head popped up as he stared at Harry in

disbelief. "Wait a minute, if your uncle was the one who hurt you then that means Black *rescued* you."

"Yes! Which, as I have been saying *repeatedly*, proves my innocence. If I was Voldemort's number one like you're saying, I would have helped Vernon, not Harry!"

Hermione pulled back and looked at Ron. "Honestly Ron," she said matter of factly. "Sirius Black probably didn't know—"

"—he did," Harry interrupted. "Dumbledore said Black saw my uncle—er—punishing me. He attacked my uncle and took me. He then left me at the Leaky Cauldron and told Dumbledore where to find me. He wants me dead so why is he helping me? Why did he warn me on Halloween? It just doesn't make any sense."

"Because I don't want you dead!" Sirius cried.

Lily was biting her lips, "As much as I don't want anything to happen to Harry, I do have to agree with Sirius. There's something wrong here."

"Well everyone says he's insane," Hermione offered.

Harry just shook his head. "But he sounded sane one Halloween," he countered. "He sounded almost...fearful. It was almost like he wanted to protect me from someone or something in the Gryffindor Tower but everyone was at dinner. He could have taken me. He could have killed me but he didn't. Instead he warns me to be careful."

"There are different degrees of insanity, Harry," Hermione said gently. "You said it yourself: no one was in the Tower that night. It's quite possible Black's perspective of reality is a little—er—distorted. Maybe he doesn't remember—well you know but that doesn't mean he's not dangerous. He got into Hogwarts, Harry. He got passed the Dementors."

"I agree with you Hermione. I am dangerous," everyone looked shocked at Sirius and he calmly continued, "to those who hurt the people I care for. I also have many ways of getting into the castle without passing through the Dementors. I did help with the map. But I must insist: I AM NOT A DEATH EATER NOR WOULD I EVER BETRAY MY FRIENDS!"

"I know," Harry said tiredly. He didn't know why he was starting to wonder about Sirius Black's motives but there was just so much of this that didn't make sense. Black had nearly a week of chances when he was posing as Midnight yet all the *dog* did was listen and help whenever he could. It almost seemed like Black actually cared but that was impossible. Why would the man who betrayed his parents care for him?

Christmas morning arrived quickly. That morning Harry was woken up by two individuals plopping on his bed. Letting out a groan, Harry grabbed his glasses and shoved them on to see the beaming faces of Ron and Hermione. Not caring what morning it was, Harry rolled over and put his pillow over his head. He didn't know why he had been so tired the last few days. Getting up early was impossible and he was usually the first of the three to bed.

Ron and Hermione had noticed this so decided to proceed with caution. "Harry, it's Christmas," Hermione said gently. "Don't you want to open your presents? There are certainly a lot here."

"No," Harry mumbled from underneath the pillow. "Let me sleep. Too tired."

Everyone was looking at Sirius expecting his rant about sleep.

"What? Christmas morning is the only day I don't mind getting up early."

"You're always tired, Harry," Hermione said with a laugh. "I think this past term has worn you down too much. Come on. Open presents then you can relax in the Common Room until lunch. Deal?"

Harry reluctantly agreed and sat up. Ron hurried over to his bed and quickly started opening his presents while Harry started on his. He received a scarlet sweater from Mrs. Weasley with a Gryffindor lion knitted on the front along with a dozen mince pies, Christmas cake and a box of nut brittle. He got a wand wrist holster from Professor Lupin which Harry had to try on immediately. It felt awkward at first but Harry quickly adjusted to drawing his wand with a flick of the wrist.

Hermione looked envious but she understood why Harry had received a present. Harry had told his friends about Professor Lupin being his temporary guardian and they were actually happy for him. Lupin wasn't exactly family but he was the closest thing Harry had.

"EXCUSE ME! Moony is family yes sir!" James cried outraged.

Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout and Madam Hooch had gotten Harry a rare set of Defense Against the Dark Arts books which was a surprise. Hermione instantly started glancing through them, looking like a child in a candy store. Harry didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Hermione already knew more spells than Ron and him combined.

The next present Harry saw was a long and thin. Opening the parcel, Harry's eyes widened beyond belief at the lustrous broomstick. His breath was caught in his throat. He had never seen such broomstick before. Hesitantly, Harry picked it up and could feel it vibrating in his hands. He let it go and was surprised to see it hanging in midair as if it were saying 'mount me'.

James lunched himself on Sirius lap and was drooling over the papers. Remus pulled him away from a shocked Sirius.

"MERLIN!" Ron shouted as he hurried over to Harry's bed for a closer look. "A Firebolt! An actual Firebolt! The latest state of the art racing broom! It's supposed to have an acceleration of 150 miles and hour in ten seconds. It's an international standard broom!"

"I want one!" James cried.

"James, if it's the latest on Harry's time it has not been invented yet," Remus tried to explain to his friend but he was having none of it.

"I want one," he kept saying.

He turned his attention to Harry, his eyes still wide in amazement. "Who sent it to you?"

"Good question," Lily stated.

Hermione now was at Harry's side and checked the wrappings. "There's no card," she said with a shrug. "We saw these at Diagon Alley. I believe the card said 'price available on request'."

"Er—okay," Harry said uncomfortably. "So it was expensive. So who would spend that much on me?" It wasn't like he knew a lot of people let alone anyone with a lot of money to spend on a broomstick. "Well it has to be someone who knew my Nimbus was destroyed so that leaves us to anyone at Hogwarts."

"Not really," Hermione corrected. "Any student could have owed their parents and told them what happened. Their parents could have then told anyone. But I don't think anyone would spend that much on you unless they actually knew you."

"How about Dumbledore," Ron proposed. "Maybe he feels bad about everything that's happened because it was the Dementors' fault."

"And he cares about Harry," Peter piped in.

"No, Dumbledore couldn't show that much favoritism for a student, no matter how much he cared about him," Remus said shaking his head.

"He wouldn't spend *that* much on a student, Ron," Hermione argued as she glanced at Harry silently urging him to agree with her. "He couldn't show favoritism like that. Maybe we should tell Professor Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall about this. It's a bit odd though. Anyone willing to spend this much would at least send a card."

Harry bit his lower lip and looked back at the broom. He knew that tone by now to know that Hermione was in her investigative mode. She didn't think this gift was a gift at all. "You think it's jinxed, don't you," he stated more than asked. "You think whoever sent this to me wanted to hurt me."

"Who in their right mind would jinx a broom?" James asked outraged.

"Someone that isn't in their right mind," Lily said nodding towards Sirius.

"Oh, so now, I'm not only a Death Eater but a broom jinxer too!" Sirius said defensively.

Hermione let out a sigh. "Who would suspect it?" she asked. "I just think with everything that's happened this year we should have it checked out before you ride it, Harry. Don't you agree?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Ron asked in disbelief. "Who in their right mind would jinx an expensive broom like a Firebolt?"

Hermione glared at Ron. "Oh, I don't know," she said sarcastically. "Someone who wasn't in their right mind like say Sirius Black perhaps?"

"See, Hermione agrees with me," Lily said glaring at Sirius.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh please," he said. "Do you really think Sirius Black could just stroll into Quality Quidditch Supplies and purchase a broom? Everyone knows what he looks like and *everyone* is looking for him. Besides, where would he get the money? He's *on the run from the Ministry!*"

"Well, I just had to buy from a catalogue like Harry and have them discount the money from my vault. It's not like the goblins care if you are on the run from the ministry or not," Sirius pointed out, "*But I wouldn't have jinxed the broom!*" he finished defensively.

Harry fell back on his bed, his head hitting the pillow. He knew they would argue for hours if he didn't break it up. The problem was he agreed with both of them. It was odd that there wasn't a card but who would spend that much on something that could easily be done on a less expensive broom? Why purchase the most expensive model available?

Perhaps so the temptation was too good to resist.

Harry followed Ron and Hermione down to the Great Hall for lunch. Once again Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to each other and Harry was put in the middle. Both wanted Harry to prove the other wrong pushing Harry to simply leave the room. He hated taking sides because someone was always hurt. They both had points why couldn't they accept that?

"Because of the sexual tension in the air Harry," Sirius explained.

"What?" Lily asked.

"You know, like with you and James," he answered. James grinned widely.

"There is no sexual tension between me and James," she answered angrily.

"And yet he is James now," Remus said nodding wisely. Peter and Sirius tried to muffle their laughter while Lily glared at them.

Entering the Great Hall, Harry noticed that all of the House tables were against the walls and a single table stood in the middle, set for twelve. Already seated were Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout and Flitwick, along with Filch, the caretaker, two nervous first year students and a fifth year Slytherin. There were three empty seats at the end of the table which Harry, Ron and Hermione took. Harry was of course between his stubborn friends.

"I would feel weird sitting with the teachers," Peter said.

"Yeah, but Harry is used to that," James said.

Harry kept his gaze on his plate, his shoulders slumped forward. He had no idea what to do. If he turned in the Firebolt he may never see it again but if he didn't he took the risk of possibly being injured or killed when he rode it. *This just isn't fair!* He knew what he *had* to do but that didn't mean it was what he wanted. Far from it.

"Dig in everyone!" Professor Dumbledore said enthusiastically.

As everyone was helping themselves, the doors opened to reveal Professor Trelawney strolling towards them.

James groaned.

Harry suppressed a groan. Just when he thought the day couldn't get any worse.

"Sibyll," Dumbledore said standing up. "Please join us. This is quite a surprise." With a flick of his wand, Dumbledore made a chair appear out of thin air and fell between Professors Snape and McGonagall.

"Oh, yeah. They are going to *so* be happy with the company," Sirius suppressed his laughter.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and Snape will kill her," James said hopefully.

"James! What a horrible thing to say," Lily chastised him but her lips were twitching.

Professor Trelawney remained where she was. "I'm afraid I must not, Headmaster," she said almost fearfully. "Thirteen people dinning together is most unlucky! The first to rise shall be the first to die!"

"Oh, puleesee!" James rolled his eyes.

Professor McGonagall let out a huff in annoyance. "I think we can risk it, Sibyll," she said. "Please sit down before the food is too cold."

Trelawney sat down, her eyes shut tightly as if she were saying a silent prayer. When she opened her eyes again she looked around and said, "But where is Professor Lupin?"

Ron and Hermione glanced at Harry who finally raised his head and looked directly at the Divination teacher. His frustration towards Professor Trelawney and protective nature towards Professor Lupin made it impossible to remain silent. "Don't you know?" Harry asked curiously. "I thought you would have *seen* it."

Roars of laughter were heard.

Professor McGonagall let out a cough to cover a laugh earning a pat on the back by Professor Dumbledore. Professors Flitwick and Sprout were failing at hiding smiles and Professor

Snape's glare was a little less intimidating than it normally was. Hermione quickly put a hand over her mouth and turned away while Ron coughed on the large amount of potatoes that went down the wrong tube.

Professor Trelawney looked directly at Harry. "Of course I knew, Mr. Potter," she said firmly. "I must pose as though I am without the sight so others are not uneasy in my presence."

Harry slowly nodded as if he understood and started making a mountain of his potatoes. "How very Slytherin of you," he muttered.

James was now slapping his legs while he laughed. The others weren't fairing any better.

Ron spit out his drink and started coughing. Professor McGonagall didn't hold back her laughter this time along with Professors Sprout and Flitwick. Professor Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at the banter between the teacher and the student. The two first years and the Slytherin were staring at Harry in shock. They had never heard a student talk this way to a teacher and get away with it.

Professor Trelawney, however, was not amused as she stood up. "I don't appreciate your tone, Mr. Potter," she said. "You of all people should understand what it is like to be different."

The laughter stopped. Sirius, Remus, James and Lily narrowed their eyes dangerously and Peter just trembled at their looks.

"How dare she say that to Harry? Unlike her, Harry doesn't parade any supposed special ability," James said angrily.

Harry put down his fork and sat back in his chair and met Trelawney's angered gaze. "My, my," he said in a concerned tone. "The first to rise shall be the first to die. Isn't that what you said, Professor?" A smile appeared on his face. "Welcome to my world."

They went back to roaring with laughter.

Trelawney stared at Harry in shock, her face completely white. Without another word she hurried out of the room sending nearly the entire table into a fit of laughter.

"Serves her right," James said whipping away tears.

The only three people who weren't laughing were Professor Snape, Filch and Harry whose smile had vanished the moment Professor Trelawney left. He simply returned to making his mountain of potatoes.

Once the laughter ended, everyone finally noticed Harry's subdued attitude. Professors glanced worriedly at each other, Ron and Hermione finally looking at each other then bowing their heads in shame. They finally realized what their fighting had done to Harry. It was his choice to make and they hadn't made it any easier.

"Harry, Ron, Hermione, did something happen that we should know about?" Professor Dumbledore asked curiously.

Ron and Hermione glanced at Harry nervously, neither knowing what to say. His shoulders slumping forward in defeat, Harry finally looked up at Professor Dumbledore. "I—um—got a Christmas present this morning," he said uncomfortably. "There was no card."

"No Harry, They're going to take your Firebolt away," James cried.

"But if it's jinxed the teachers have to check it," Lily said.

"I DID NOT JINX THAT BROOM!" Sirius cried outraged.

All of the teachers turned to Harry, immediately concerned. "What happened, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore asked in a firm voice.

Harry fidgeted in his seat. "Er—nothing...yet," he said. "It's just that I don't know anyone who would spend that much on me and not tell me who they were so we were wondering if there was a way to find out who sent it."

Dumbledore glanced at McGonagall before returning his gaze to Harry. "Harry, what did you get?" he asked curiously.

"A Firebolt, sir," Harry said softly.

All of the teachers and the three non-Gryffindor students stared at Harry in a stunned silence. Not liking the attention, Harry started fidgeting in his chair again and avoided looking at anyone in eye. He suddenly wanted to hide and started looking from left to right for a quick exit. Why didn't anyone say anything? Why did he have to say something? Why did he listen to Hermione?

Professor McGonagall slowly stood up. "Mr. Potter," she said firmly. "Please come with me."

"See, I told you," James said sadly.

Reluctantly, Harry followed Professor McGonagall out of the Great Hall. He knew that the broom would probably be taken away now leaving him once again without a broom for Quidditch. The moment the doors closed she waited for him to be at her side then continued walking. Neither of them said anything until they reached the Fat Lady portrait and even there it was just the password.

Professor McGonagall followed Harry through the Common Room, up the stairs and into his dorm room. Harry then walked over to his bed and pulled open the curtains to reveal shiny broomstick. It tore his heart apart to do this. He closed his eyes and bit back everything in his body that was telling him not to let this remarkable broomstick out of his sight. He feared that he would never see it again.

With shaky hands, Harry picked up the broom, ignoring the vibrating he was feeling from the magical instrument. Deep down Harry knew it wasn't jinxed but who would believe him? No one. After all what proof did he have? None. Pulling himself out of his thoughts, Harry carried it over to McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a sympathetic look as she took the broom from him. "I will have Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch look at this immediately, Harry," she said gently. "It may be a few weeks but as soon as we are certain there are no jinxes, you will have it back. You understand why I must do this?"

Harry nodded but couldn't meet her gaze. "Yes ma'am," he said automatically. "Um, if it's not problem...I'm not really hungry anymore."

McGonagall set the broom down and pulled Harry into an embrace. "I know this is hard, Harry," she said softly. "If this was a ploy to hurt you it is certainly a cruel one. Just know that I am proud of you for coming forward about this. Not many students would have done the same."

"I am proud of you too Harry," Lily said while comforting James who looked desolated as if it had been his broom that got taken away.

Harry stood there as Professor McGonagall left with the Firebolt held protectively in her hands. The moment the door closed everything Harry had been forcing himself not to feel broke the surface. This was another instance where Harry hated being Harry Potter, the-boy-who-lived. Nothing was ever easy for Harry Potter, at least the right thing never was.

A/N: Okay, I'm sorry but I really don't like Trelawney. I thought it was time for a little payback.

"You're not the only one," Sirius murmured.

Chapter 14

Bitter Realities

The remainder of the holiday was unnaturally quiet. Ron and Hermione hadn't fought once which was...wrong. It almost seemed like the two were going out of their way to avoid conflict so not to upset Harry in any way possible. They had gone from one extreme to the other which made Harry want to pull his hair out at times. Why couldn't they just find a happy medium?

"Well, because it's hard for them. They are too used to fighting, so not fighting isn't natural and when you are not being yourself it looks wrong," Remus explained.

"Uau, Moony! That was deep," Sirius mocked. He got a pillow to his face. Were Remus kept finding those pillows Sirius had no idea.

Once everyone had returned after the New Year, Harry was cornered by Oliver who was rather anxious about the fact that the team's Seeker didn't have a broom. Oliver's jaw had nearly hit the floor when Harry revealed his mysterious Christmas present and pushed off any concern about it being jinxed. Harry also had been forced to reveal that Professor Lupin was helping him with the Dementor problem which seemed to relieve Oliver of a lot of his worries.

Classes starting provided a necessary distraction for Harry. This way he wasn't worried about his new broom every waking moment, only every moment he wasn't in class. Care of Magical Creatures was spent in front of a bonfire that was full of flame-loving salamanders that ran up and down the white-hot logs. Professor Trelawney returned with a vengeance in Divination. They were now learning palmistry and Trelawney wasted no time in reading Harry's palm and confirming that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

James made a growling sound.

Professor Lupin still looked ill even though the full moon had been over a week ago. Harry had to bite back his concerns but he couldn't help worrying.

"You don't have to worry," Remus reassured him.

How could Lupin go through this every month?

"I am used it by now," Remus said nonchalantly.

"Yeah, but we worry the same," James said serious and Sirius nodded. Remus smiled at his friends concern.

Additional worries returned with a vengeance. Harry remembered that werewolves weren't allowed to have children but he still didn't know about adoption. With everything happening he had never followed up on it.

Searching through his book bag, Harry found the now wrinkled parchment Professor Snape had given him and made a silent vow to find out if his temporary guardian could become his permanent guardian. Right now that was the only thing Harry had to look forward to. It was also another needed distraction.

"Oh, no don't do that Harry!" Remus pleaded.

"Maybe the law changed" Lily said hopefully. Remus looked skeptical.

"You know, I wonder if there's something really wrong with Professor Lupin," Ron said as they walked to dinner after class. "Has he told you anything, Harry? Have you asked?"

Harry looked uncomfortable, something Hermione noticed. He needed to do some quick thinking. Ron certainly wouldn't accept an 'I don't know' for an answer. That much was clear. "Er—well—he said it wasn't life threatening," said Harry. "I—er—just let it go because it seemed that he didn't want to talk about it."

"Oh," Ron said satisfied with Harry's answer. "Well, I guess that's good then."

"Good thing that Ron isn't the suspicious type," James remarked.

Ron walked ahead and Harry let out a visible sigh of relief. He moved to catch up but was held back by Hermione. From the look on her face, Harry knew there was no way she would take the same evasion that Ron had. "You did the essay, didn't you?" she more stated than asked.

Harry's gaze fell to the floor as he nodded. That was all of the confirmation Hermione needed and they walked silently to dinner. Both knew that the other was aware of Professor Lupin's secret and for now, they had made a silent vow to keep it to themselves.

Everyone groaned. Remus hid his face on a pillow he was holding. Sirius pulled his head up.

"No need to suffocate yourself Moony," he said softly.

After dinner Harry managed to sneak away with the aid of his invisibility cloak. Knowing that he didn't have much time before someone noticed his absence, Harry hurried to the Library and searched for the book he needed. He knew he was taking a risk but he needed to know how *temporary* this arrangement was.

It didn't take long to find it allowing Harry to quickly flip through the pages until he found the section on werewolves. Using his wand as a source for light in the large dark room, Harry skimmed through all of the laws and bylaws until he reached the section on children. Harry hadn't realized that he had stopped breathing in anticipation. This was the moment of truth. There was no turning back now.

Individuals infected have been proven to be unpredictable concerning their mental and emotion state at any time, not just during the diagnosed period. It is therefore illegal for any

infected individual to care for a minor or individual unable to care for themselves. For the safety of the child, all infected individuals are required to have a third party present whenever they are in the presence of a minor. Any infected individual violating this shall be arrested and charged for reckless endangerment to a minor.

"What a load of rubbish!" Lily cried outraged. James and Sirius nodded fervently their agreement. Remus looked resigned but had a small smile because of his friends' outrage.

There it was. Harry couldn't believe it. Not only couldn't Professor Lupin have his own children, he couldn't be left alone with *any* children. He wouldn't be able to stay with Professor Lupin. He would have to go back to the Dursleys. He would have to go back to Aunt Petunia and Dudley with them knowing Vernon was in jail because of him.

"First of all: Vernon isn't in jail because of you but because of his own actions. Second: I am not letting you go back there no matter what some medieval law says. We are family were it counts," Remus exclaimed angry.

Dropping his wand and the book, Harry slowly stepped away until he backed into the wall. He couldn't think as he slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor. Instinctively, Harry pulled his knees to his chest and sat there, unable to process it all. How could anyone think Professor Lupin was dangerous? The teacher had only raised his voice once and that was to Professor Snape.

"Because their bigoted, stupid people Harry," James said angry.

Harry hadn't even realized he was shaking. It was almost like his entire world had come crashing down. He didn't know how much time had passed and therefore wasn't aware that his disappearance had been noticed. He sat there in a shocked silence praying that his world wasn't going to be turned upside down again. He had wanted a family more than anything and he had gotten it in the form of Professor Lupin. He had finally gotten what he had always wanted only to learn that it was a lie. Everything this year had been a lie.

"No! It's not a lie Harry! Don't think that!" Remus pleaded.

The door opened followed by a bright light but Harry didn't move. Footsteps echoed as someone strolled through the aisles, coming closer and closer to where Harry was still seated on the floor. Eventually the footsteps came to an abrupt halt as the bright light finally lit up where Harry was. There was a gasp followed by the sound of hurried footsteps as the light brightened.

"Harry!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed as she knelt down beside him. "Harry Potter what do you think you are doing here!" Harry didn't move. There was no sign that he had even heard her. "Mr. Potter!" she said forcefully as she gently shook his shoulder but there was still no reaction.

"He's in shock!" Lily said tearfully. "Why can't people just leave him and Moony be happy already."

James stared at her.

"What?"

"You called Moony Moony," he said.

"So? Only you are allowed? I am his friend too," and turning to Remus she asked, "I am allowed to call you Moony too right?"

Remus nodded, "sure."

Starting to panic, Professor McGonagall looked around and noticed an opened book on the floor. She took a closer look at opened page and instantly paled. Grabbing the book, McGonagall hurried out of the Library to find her co-workers. She didn't have to go far before nearly running into Professor Dumbledore. As quickly as possible, Professor McGonagall summarized what she found and handed over the book.

Dumbledore immediately called off the search and called for Professor Lupin to join them in the Library. Entering the Library, Professor Dumbledore waved his hand and the lights ignited. Professor Lupin hurried in and hastily followed Professor McGonagall until he saw Harry sitting on the floor, shaking. Without another thought, Lupin hurried to Harry's side and pulled him into an embrace.

"Remus, it appears that Harry found out about our custody problem," Professor Dumbledore said gravely.

Professor Lupin looked at Dumbledore in alarm before returning his attention to Harry. Moving around so he was facing the teenager, Lupin raised the boy's head so their eyes met. "Harry, listen to me," Professor Lupin said patiently. "We will find some way around this. I don't care what some medieval law says. You are *my* cub and always will be, no matter what some piece or parchment says. We *are* family where it counts and that's all that matters."

"That's freaky. It's exactly what you said before," Peter said.

"Good to know I agree with myself," Remus said crossing his arms, "Harry is going nowhere."

James and Lily smiled thankfully.

Harry seemed to snap out of his shock and shook his head slowly. "I can't go back there," he said in a wavering voice. "You promised me."

Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall joined Lupin in kneeling down in front of Harry. "Remus is right, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "We are trying to find a way around the law. I can understand this is all quite a shock but you have to trust us. You have to be patient. Can you do that, Harry?"

Harry glanced over at Dumbledore before returning his attention to Lupin. He wanted to believe them but every time he did he seemed to find out about another secret being kept

from him. Professor Dumbledore had hid Sirius Black's existence for years, Professor Lupin had hid being a werewolf, and now Harry had learned that there was actually a custody problem. Why did he always have to find out like this? Why couldn't anyone just be upfront with him?

"That's because adults are like that. They don't think we can *handle* things," James said annoyed, "it's not because they want to lie."

The next few days were tense between Harry and the majority of the teaching staff. Harry didn't know what to think about everything and had said as much. He knew that his *family* would do everything they could to keep him away from the Dursleys but the fact was Harry couldn't legally be a part of the only family he knew.

There was also the fact that the Ministry would never allow the-boy-who-lived to live with a werewolf.

Thursday night was another Patronus lesson and it was probably the most uncomfortable lesson Harry had ever been through. Neither Harry nor Professor Lupin really knew what to say to each other and Professor Dumbledore was absent because of a meeting at the Ministry. Harry was actually glad that Dumbledore wasn't there. He really wasn't up for those twinkling eyes tonight.

Preparing for the Boggart Lupin was about to release, Harry was finding it difficult to concentrate on a happy memory. How could he concentrate with all of the madness going on in his life? Why couldn't everything be simple like it used to be when everyone hated him and he was nothing more than a freak? Sure, that life had been horrible but at least it hadn't been as complicated as his life now.

"Ready, go!" said Lupin as he pulled off the lid of the trunk containing the Boggart.

The room instantly went cold. Darkness clouded Harry's vision but he could make out the Dementor gliding towards him, a rotting hand reaching for him. He couldn't breathe. "Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto Pat—"

It was too much. Blurry shapes were moving in front of him. A man's voice filled his ears, sounding panicked. "*Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off—*"

"Who' that?" Peter asked.

"James, who else was there," Remus said in a broken voice.

Lily was crying and holding James, "You tried to save us."

"Of course I would," James said hoarsely.

Sounds replaced the voice. Someone was desperately trying to leave a room. A door burst open. The familiar high-pitched laughter that made Harry's skin crawl.

"Harry! Harry, wake up!"

It took Harry a moment to realize someone was holding him. His head was resting against someone's chest as his mouth was pried open and a piece of chocolate was forced in. Warmth slowly spread throughout his body as Harry slowly opened his eyes and looked up at Professor Lupin's concerned face. Unable to hold it in anymore, Harry buried his face in Lupin's chest to hide the appearance of tears.

Professor Lupin held the boy tightly and patiently waited for him to calm down. Once he felt Harry relax, Lupin loosened his hold. "It's okay, Harry," he said gently. "Just try and focus on something else."

Harry shook his head and pulled away. He didn't want to forget his father's brave voice.

"He thinks I am brave," James whispered sadly.

"I—I heard my dad," he said softly. "He was going to hold Voldemort off." He buried his face in his hands. "Why did they die? Why did Voldemort want to kill me? I was only a baby! How could a baby be that much of a threat?!"

"What? Voldemort wanted to kill Harry?" Sirius asked. The others looked shocked, "I mean, I just thought Harry had got caught in the crossfire. He was a baby crying out loud! Why would someone want to kill a baby?"

Lupin rested a hand on Harry's left shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "But you were, Harry," he said softly. "I believe your scar is all the proof you need to know that. I know this is difficult but try to remember that your parents loved you. Focus on that love, Harry. Focus on the good and not the bad."

"Yes, we do. We love you Harry don't forget," Lily said in tears. James hugged her and she once again let him.

Letting out a tired sigh, Harry nodded but couldn't bring himself to look at Lupin. The problem was that it was so hard for him *not* to get caught up in the bad. He knew that now. It was a defense mechanism. If he didn't get his hopes up, he couldn't be disappointed. Perhaps that was the real problem. For the first time in a long time, Harry had gotten his hopes up on the concept of a loving family. He had gotten what he wanted and never considered what had to happen for his dream to become a reality.

"We rarely do," Sirius said wisely. Remus looked impressed.

Finally looking at up Lupin, Harry also realized that it wasn't only his hopes and dreams that were on the line. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just so hard. I thought I could find something that could make us a family but then I find out that you're not supposed to even see me without someone else there...it was just too much. I—I didn't know..."

"And if it wasn't for Snivellus you would keep on going in blissful ignorance," James grunted.

Professor Lupin pulled Harry into another embrace. "Its okay, Harry," he said. "I understand. With everything going on we didn't want you to worry about something you had no control over. I wanted to protect you from the way the Ministry handled my kind. I guess I can thank Severus for you finding out about that too."

Groans were heard.

"I can't believe you keep calling him Severus after what he did," Sirius said annoyed.

"I may be angry with Snape but I have to set a good example for Harry," Remus explained. Lily looked at him approvingly.

Harry instantly tensed as he backed away. "Please don't be angry," he said quickly. "I asked about adoption laws—"

"—which you wouldn't have even thought of asking about if Severus hadn't decided to take his payback out on my class," Lupin interrupted. "Harry, you need to understand that Severus will always have a bit of resentment towards me and towards your father. He really isn't a person to forgive past mistakes which I find rather hypocritical."

"Why? What did Snape do?" James asked curious.

"Why?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin winced. "Er—never mind, Harry," he said quickly. "Forget I said anything. Now, do you feel up for trying again or should we leave the Boggart for another time?"

"What are you hiding about Snape?" Sirius asked Remus with narrowed eyes. Remus just shrugged.

Harry knew a diversion when he heard one but figured it was something personal he wasn't supposed to know about and let it go. "I'll try again," he said and stood up, grabbing his wand off the floor as he did so. He turned around to face the trunk as he closed his eyes and concentrated. Perhaps he was doing this wrong. Perhaps he didn't need a precise memory. Perhaps he just needed the feeling the memory gave. He remembered the feeling he had when Professor Lupin had called him his 'cub' the other night. Harry had to smile. He *had* actually felt like family.

Remus smiled shyly at this.

"Aw, Moony is becoming so important to Harry," Lily cooed.

"You know Lily, you can call me Prongs if you want to."

"In your dreams Potter."

Professor Lupin slowly stood and moved over to the trunk. "Good Harry," he said encouragingly. "Here we go." He pulled off the lid of the trunk again and a Dementor floated out.

Cold filled the room as Harry opened his eyes and came face to face with the Dementor. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he shouted. The screaming he heard was faint, almost non-existent. A large silver shadow erupted out of the end of his wand and remained between him and the Dementor. Slowly, it started pushing the Dementor away, back to the trunk. Harry couldn't explain it but for the first time since he had started training with the Boggart, he didn't feel weak. It was almost like a powering warmth had spread throughout his body, shielding him, protecting him.

Everyone clapped at Harry's achievement. James and Sirius inserted some whistles in the middle.

"Well done! That's my boy!" James said proudly.

"Riddikulus!" Lupin shouted at last.

A loud crack filled the air as the Dementor vanished followed shortly by the misty Patronus. Lowering his wand, Harry slowly backed away until he hit the wall and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. He barely registered Professor Lupin who was forcing the now silvery orb Boggart back into the trunk. What had just happened?

Professor Lupin turned around to see Harry and hurried over to him. "That was excellent, Harry!" he said happily but his smile quickly faded when he took a good look at Harry's face. "Harry, are you okay?"

Harry looked at Lupin nervously. "What happened?" he asked. "H—how...I—I didn't..."

Lupin seemed to pick up on what Harry was trying to say. "You're wondering why you didn't feel the affects of the Dementor as badly as normal," he said as he sat down on the floor. "Listen Harry, this is nothing to be frightened of. Your magic is simply maturing. Right now it comes in spurts like when you overcharged the spells in prior lessons."

Harry's fearful gaze turned into a confused one. If this was so normal than why hadn't he heard anything about it before? "So this sort of thing happens to everyone?" asked Harry.

"I never heard of that happening," James said.

"Well, what you never heard of could fill Libraries Potter," Lily said dryly. James glared at her and the other three tried to muffle their laughter.

"In a way," Professor Lupin said carefully. "For most, the maturing of magic happens gradually over time. It seems that the training you endured over the summer has sped up your magical growth a little bit. It's not unheard of to happen this way, just unusual. For now, we just have to be a little cautious so you don't overcharge spells in class."

Harry looked down at his wand still in his right hand. So that was why he was having so many problems with the Patronus Charm. It *had* struck Harry as odd that one moment he couldn't make anything appear and the next he was being slammed into a wall. One thing was for certain Harry would certainly follow Professor Lupin's advice and be more careful.

The following weekend was the Slytherin and Ravenclaw Quidditch match in which Slytherin won but just barely.

"Aaww," the boys whined.

This was extremely good news for the Gryffindor team.

"Oh, then I take back my Aw," James stated. Lily rolled her eyes and muttered something that sounded like *boys*.

If they won against Ravenclaw they would take first place for the Quidditch Cup. To ensure a victory for Gryffindor, Oliver Wood increased the practices to five a week. With Hermione flooded with homework, Harry was resorted to spending half of his Patronus lessons working on homework. Professor Lupin helped whenever he could which most of the time was simply giving hints.

"Cheating here Moony," Sirius said cheekily.

"I don't have to give him the answers to help," Remus said defensively.

Both Harry and Ron had learned to stay away from Hermione while she was in a homework crunch which was more often than not. She was always using multiple tables for all of her subjects, snapping at anyone who interrupted her.

"I think someone bit off more than she could chew," Lily said and the boys agreed.

After a while, Ron just couldn't take it anymore and started voicing his curiosity to Harry.

"I just don't get it," Ron whispered so Hermione wouldn't overhear them. "How does she get to her classes? Arithmancy is the same time as Care of Magical Creatures and Muggle Studies is the same time as Divination! It's just not possible!"

"How does she?" Peter asked.

"Maybe she doesn't go to all the classes. Maybe one day she goes to Muggle Studies and the next time she goes to Divination," James said.

"Nah, then Harry would have noticed," Remus said shaking his head.

Harry could only shrug in response. He had learned the hard way to respect a person's secrets. He had kept plenty from Ron and Hermione this year. If Hermione felt she needed to keep the little mystery from them then there must be a reason for it.

In addition to everything else, Harry was still without a broom. It had become a pattern for Harry to glance at Professor McGonagall every morning at breakfast in hope that nothing wrong was found but he only received a discrete shake of the head. He never outright asked her the status although several members of the Quidditch Team had. Oliver was the most persistent followed closely by the Weasley twins. They all knew having a Seeker with a Firebolt would almost guarantee a win.

James had started to drool again.

As February arrived, Harry was beginning to think he would never see the broom again. He was slowly making progress in his Patronus lessons but neither Professor Lupin nor Professor Dumbledore could make out a definite shape. Frustrated and exhausted, Harry was starting to think that he would never have a distinct shape.

Noticing Harry's sour mood, Professor Lupin decided to end the lesson and introduce Harry to a Hogsmeade treat: Butterbeer.

"Butterbeer," Peter said dreamily.

Professor Dumbledore had left, knowing by now that Harry really only talked openly to Lupin and silently urged the young teacher to speak with his charge. Looking over at the boy, Lupin noticed that Harry appeared to be deep in thought as he took small sips of his drink.

They continued slowly taking sips until Harry broke the silence. "What's under a Dementor's hood?" he asked softly.

"You don't want to know," James shivered.

"Do you?" Lily asked curiously.

"No and those who know are in no shape to tell," he said darkly.

Professor Lupin let out a sigh as he set his bottle down. "That is a difficult question, Harry," he said thoughtfully. "A Dementor only lowers his hood to administer what is called a Dementor's Kiss. It's considered a fate worse than death." He looked at Harry directly in the eyes with a look of sympathy on his face. "When a person receives a kiss their soul is sucked out leaving the person as an empty shell. That is what awaits Sirius Black."

"NOOOOOOO!" Sirius yelled horrified. He was shaking all over. James and Remus held him in a three way embrace trying to comfort him. A long time passed until Sirius stopped mumbling that he was innocent and Lily took the papers to read.

Harry stared at Professor Lupin in utter shock. He had thought the Dementors themselves were bad but the kiss sounded horrible. The thought of Midnight, the caring and patient dog he had known without a soul was too much to even consider. He knew Sirius Black was a murderer. He knew Sirius Black was Midnight but for some reason he couldn't find himself to hate the dog that had helped him so much at Number 4, Privet Drive. He didn't know when he

started feeling this way. All he knew was he needed to know why, why Black betrayed his parents and why Black had helped him.

"I didn't betray them," Sirius mumbled shaking his head, still in shock.

"What if they're—er—found innocent afterwards?" Harry asked nervously. "Can they get it back?"

Lupin visibly stiffened. "Harry, why would you ask something like that?" he asked protectively. "You haven't seen Black since Halloween, have you?"

Harry shook his head as he stared at his Butterbeer label. "I was just curious," he said softly. "In the Muggle world people are found guilty but are then found innocent later from time to time. People make mistakes some times."

"Yes! People make mistakes. This is a MISTAKE! I am INNOCENT!"

Professor Lupin looked away and cleared his throat. "That's true but we have ways to find out the truth from a person," he said uncomfortably. "There's a potion called Veritaserum which is a truth potion. It only takes three drops for the person taking it to answer any question asked truthfully."

James eyed Sirius, "He's right! They must have given you Veritaserum on your trial."

"No! Something happened. I swear I'd *never* betray you. I'd *never* join Voldemort!" Sirius begged James to believe him.

"Oh," Harry said softly. He could tell that Professor Lupin was uneasy with how this conversation was going. It was obvious that anything pertaining to Sirius Black was a painful subject for Lupin. "Sorry," he said in the same quiet voice. "I guess I'm still trying to understand how everything works."

"That's completely understandable," Professor Lupin said with a smile. "I'm actually impressed, Harry. Not many question how criminals are handled in the wizarding world. Most believe it isn't their problem so don't bother in worrying about it. It's rather sad that there are so many people willing to criticize something yet do nothing to change it."

Harry nodded. He knew Professor Lupin was talking about more than just the criminals. He was also talking about the injustice towards werewolves. It pained Harry to see Professor Lupin so hurt and powerless. It was then that Harry decided to do whatever he could to make sure Professor Lupin would never be alone again. His guardian was right. They were a family in every way that mattered.

"Thank you, Harry," Remus said with a smile.

Chapter 15

Midnight Returns

It was early in the week when Professor McGonagall handed back the Firebolt proclaiming it fit to fly.

"YES!" James jumped up and down in joy.

The entire Gryffindor House was ecstatic at the appearance of the rumored broom. Ron was boasting that he had been right all along while Hermione was reiterating that it was better to be safe than sorry. Feeling another fight coming on, Harry hastily called it a night and headed up to his dorm room.

"Smart move," Peter nodded.

Reaching the door, Harry had to chase away Crookshanks before entering. He knew Hermione had been trying to keep the cat away from Scabbers but it was almost like Crookshanks had an obsession with the old rodent. He had never seen a cat continuously seek out a particular prey like Crookshanks did.

"Well, cats hunt rats," Lily stated.

"Yeah, but he has an obsession with poor Scabbers," Peter said annoyed.

"It's just because he knows Scabbers is there," she answered in a 'this is so obvious tone'.

"I am not all that sure," Remus mumbled.

Every one of Harry's roommates had done their part to ensure the door to their dorm room door remained closed at all times for Scabbers' safety. Everyone knew that although Ron complained about Scabbers, he did care about the rat, no matter how ill the rodent looked. The once plump rat now was thin and appeared to be losing its fur. It seemed that it was only a matter of time before Ron no longer had a pet.

"Poor Ron," Sirius said sadly. James, Lily and Peter nodded but Remus was eyeing Peter once again.

Harry really dreaded that day.

Madam Hooch and Professor McGonagall were still overseeing practices for Harry's safety but tended to spend most of the time talking to each other than paying attention to the practices, not that the team was complaining. They had plenty of surprises in store for the upcoming match and planned on keeping it that way.

"Not like McGonagall was going to tell anyone. She's even more obsessed with Quidditch than I am," James stated.

"I don't think that's possible James," Sirius chuckled.

Harry had been warned about the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang, repeatedly but the moment he mounted and kicked off everyone's concerns seemed to cease to exist. The broom obeyed his lightest touch. Its speed was so incredible that Harry couldn't even make out the stadium from one blur to another. Testing the limits, Harry went into a sharp dive and seemed to fall like a meteor before pulling out just before he struck the ground, nearly giving his entire team a heart attack.

Lily was now holding a handkerchief to James chin. His eyes were glazed over.

When Oliver finally let the Snitch out, Harry caught it easily within ten seconds. He let it go again and after giving it a decent head start, took off after it, catching it moments later. He continued this for nearly an hour while giving the Snitch a longer and longer time frame to—in other words—get lost but always saw it and caught it quickly.

James clapped happily, "A true Potter!" Lily just couldn't help herself, she had to roll her eyes.

The rest of the team practiced hard, performing their best moves perfectly. Oliver could hardly hold back his glee as he called practice to an end. He really couldn't find a single complaint with his team. According to Fred and George this was the first time that had happened. This nearly sent the twins into shock but only nearly.

The rest of the practices that week went just the same and by Friday, the entire team felt that they were more than ready to face Ravenclaw. Calling it an early night, Harry followed his teammates and teachers back to the castle with his Firebolt over his shoulder. He was halfway there when he looked to his left and saw a familiar pair of blue eyes staring at him. His breath caught in his throat as he stopped in his tracks.

"That's me! I am here to explain my innocence," Sirius said gripping the edge of the bed.

Out of the darkness a large black dog appeared. Harry could see in his eyes that the dog meant no harm but memories and stories of Sirius Black quickly threw all logic out of the window. Taking a step backwards, Harry quickly looked around to see his team was nearly at the castle, unaware of what was happening. He returned his attention to the dog to see that it was slowly approaching. *I can't out-run him*, Harry realized. *How am I going to get out of this?*

"I am not going to hurt you Harry!"

"You better not," James growled.

Taking another step backwards, Harry tried to force his brain to work. He was torn between wanting to welcome the dog who had given him so much and the man who had caused him so much pain. How in the world could they be one in the same? "Midnight?" he asked nervously. "Wh—what are you doing here?"

"Well, see, I am here to clarify some misunderstandings. *People* have been telling you lies," at this Sirius shot a dirty look at Remus who shrugged apologetically, "so I have to explain those lies."

The dog let out a whine and sat down, staring at Harry with his pleading eyes like he had so many times at Privet Drive. Harry bit his lower lip as he slowly set his broom on the ground, never once taking his eyes off of the dog.

"Bad idea, bad idea," Peter mumbled frightened.

Black didn't know that he knew the truth! He could use that. He just needed to figure out how.

"Harry!"

"Oh, thank God! Help!" James sighed. Sirius looked outraged.

Harry quickly looked towards the castle to see Professor Lupin hurrying towards him, his wand already out.

"Oh, no! He's going to recognize Padfoot," James fretted.

"James this is an alleged murderer you are talking about," Lily said.

"Exactly, *alleged*. I don't want Sirius getting kissed until we know for sure he is guilty," she nodded.

"I'm not!" Sirius cried.

Panicking, Harry looked back at the large dog that was already starting to back away slowly. "Hide in the forest," Harry said in a hushed voice. "Prove to me that I *can* trust you, Midnight. Don't come looking for me. I'll find you."

"Harry James Potter! You will do no such thing!" Lily scolded.

The dog let out another whine before running off. Harry watched him go before picking up his broom and turning to face Professor Lupin. How in the world was he going to explain this?

"Harry," Lupin said urgently as he reached the teenager. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Harry shook his head. He really didn't want to lie to Professor Lupin but he couldn't risk Black receiving the kiss just yet. He needed answers. He needed to know *why*. "No, I—I thought I saw something—"

"—*what*?" Professor Lupin interrupted as he quickly looked around but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Pulling Harry close to him, Lupin let out the breath he didn't realize he had been holding. "Let's get back to the castle then you can explain why you're out here all by yourself."

Harry was about to protest but Professor Lupin ushered him forward. He didn't know if Lupin was angry, worried or both. *Probably both.* They were nearly at the castle when Harry couldn't take the silence anymore. "Look, I'm sorry," he said in aggravation. "I know I should have stayed with the team but I thought I saw something and stopped—"

Lupin looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "So you weren't out here flying by yourself?" he asked curiously.

"Jumping to conclusions Moony?" Sirius asked.

"Probably because he knows Harry's father," Lily said. James blew her a kiss.

Harry couldn't help but feel offended. "Professor, you know me better than that," he said. "I have followed every single rule you and Dumbledore have given. I have become a prisoner here and have I complained? *No.* What was the point of that month of training if I wasn't supposed to use it? It felt like someone was watching me so I looked and you come running accusing me of doing something foolish! I haven't been allowed to be a child for years so stop treating me like one!"

James growled and Lily started shredding another tissue at the thought of the Dursleys.

Professor Lupin stood there in shock for a brief moment before resting his hands on Harry's shoulders. "Harry, I never meant to accuse you but after everything that has happened can you blame me for being a little overprotective?"

"Not really, no," Lily said.

he asked calmly. "It's not every day a thirteen-year-old receives a Firebolt as a gift. I know how you love to fly. It's probably the only time I've seen you truly happy. Anyone would want to sneak away for a little release in the air."

James sighed dreamily looking at the window and the heavy storm outside.

Well when you put it that way... Harry really couldn't think of anything to say. Once again he had overacted and had taken his anger out on the one person who was doing so much for him.

"That's normal. We all take our anger out on the people close to us because they are the ones around. I understand," Remus said calmly.

"Yeah, you don't want to be around your father when he's in a bad mood, Harry," Sirius said shivering. James glared at him.

Looking away, Harry tried to ignore the guilt he was feeling because he had talked back to Lupin and was now hiding out a convicted killer (once again). He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to cause Professor Lupin any more pain but that seemed to be all he was managing to do.

"No that's not true. I like having you around. Honestly this kid needs a self esteem injection urgently" Remus exclaimed raising his arms.

There was an uncomfortable silence until Professor Lupin ruffled Harry's already messy hair. "It's all right to be angry with me, you know," Lupin said with a grin. "I know this year has been difficult for you. I honestly expected you to rebel in some fashion." Receiving no answer, Professor Lupin once again grabbed Harry's shoulder. "Don't be in such a hurry to grow up, Harry," he said sincerely, "because once you do, there is no turning back."

"That's why I nurture my inner child," Sirius said happily.

"The problem is Padfoot that you never nurture your inner adult," Remus said patting Sirius head. Sirius was unfazed.

The following morning was the majority of the school's first look at the rumored Firebolt. Students stared in awe while members of the house Quidditch Teams appeared to be flabbergasted. Harry Potter, the youngest Seeker in a century,

"Did you hear that: *the youngest Seeker in a century*. My son!" James beamed proudly.

on a Firebolt? It seemed that Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had chosen a liaison that happened to be an acquaintance of Harry's to examine the broom closely. All of them ended up hurrying back to their designated table to confirm the authenticity of the broom.

Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory (the Hufflepuff Seeker) both ended up slamming their heads on against the table. Both of them were now dreading their matches against Gryffindor.

The boys had evil looks and smiles on their faces. James was rubbing his hands together.

The day was amazingly clear but a little on the cool side. Perfect Quidditch conditions. Changing into his Quidditch robes, Harry couldn't help but feel a little nervous as he double checked his wand holster still attached to his wrist. Everyone had said that the Dementors would stay far from the Quidditch pitch but it was better to be safe than sorry. Harry couldn't afford to be taken by surprise today.

Stepping onto the field, Harry ignored the thunderous applause. He knew that his team was depending on him and had no intention of letting them down. He approached the middle of the field where the Ravenclaw team was already waiting for them. He glanced at Cho Chang who was the only girl on the team. She noticed his gaze and smiled. Harry ignored the slight twist of his stomach and nodded back at her, causing her smile to widen.

"Aw, he's developing a crush," Lily cooed. The boys rolled their eyes.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch said and waited for them to do so. "Mount your brooms. Now, three...two...one..."

The moment the whistle sounded Harry kicked off into the air, soaring higher than any other broom. He immediately fell into the game, watching and waiting for any sign of the Snitch. He ignored whatever Lee Jordan, the commentator, was saying. He noticed a flash of gold and took off, Cho Chang following him. As he drew closer he noticed it wasn't the Snitch and stopped abruptly, causing Cho to fly past him.

Looking around again, Harry actually saw the Snitch flying close to the ground, near the barrier in front of the Slytherin students. With a quick turn, he was off in a sharp dive before pulling out, his feet nearly touching the ground. He sped towards it, reaching for it...

James was on his knees, reaching out to catch an imaginary snitch.

"HARRY LOOK OUT!"

"What?" James turned to look.

"James, it's on the book, not here," Remus laughed. James scowled.

His instincts taking over, Harry quickly turned and pulled up, barely avoiding a Bludger from hitting him in the back. He let out a disappointed sigh then started looking for the Snitch again. It was only a matter of minutes before he saw it, circling the Gryffindor goal posts. Without another thought Harry took off, catching Cho and everyone else by surprise. He was just about there when the Snitch flew upwards and back over the pitch...towards Cho!

"Oh, no!" James cried grabbing his face. Remus and Sirius were gripping the edge of the bed and Peter was on his knees on the floor.

Changing direction, Harry pushed his broom, determined to catch the Snitch before Cho. The Snitch changed course again, dropping into a dive. Harry and Cho followed. Cho tried to elbow Harry in the ribs but he blocked the move, his eyes never leaving the Snitch. He knew what she was doing and wasn't going to fall for it.

He reached out just as Cho suddenly stopped and screamed. Looking to his left, Harry saw three Dementors hurrying towards him.

"NOOOOOOOO!" five voices cried.

Instinct taking control, Harry flicked his right wrist and felt his wand in his hand. Pointing it at the Dementors, Harry shouted, "*Expecto patronum!*" Something erupted out of his wand towards the Dementors as Harry reached out and grabbed the Snitch with his left.

"YES!" James punched the air and flopped relieved on the floor.

Re-holstering his wand, Harry quickly pulled out of the dive just before he crashed into the ground. He heard Madam Hooch's whistle sound signaling the end of the game. Out of nowhere Harry was tackled by six scarlet blurs. When he finally broke free from the team, Harry looked around and could finally hear the roars of the crowd, well the Gryffindor crowd at least.

His Gryffindor classmates arrived on the field first and quickly pulled Harry into large group hug in which Harry was in the middle. Once everyone let Harry go, a gentle hand rested on Harry's shoulder. "That was a remarkable Patronus," Professor Lupin said.

"Yes, my son produced a corporeal Patronus at thirteen. He's a genius," James beamed proudly.

Turning around, Harry looked at his guardian who appeared to be a little shaken but extremely proud. "Did it have a form?" Harry asked instantly. He hadn't paid attention to it at the time to notice. "I didn't feel the Dementors so—"

Lupin smiled and leaned closer to Harry, understanding the boy's excitement and concern. "You didn't overcharge, Harry," he said so only Harry could hear. "You didn't feel the affects because they weren't Dementors. Follow me."

"What were they then?" Peter asked. The others shrugged.

He led Harry away from the crowd to the edge of the field. "I believe you gave a few of your classmates quite a fright."

Harry couldn't believe it. Lying on top of each other were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and the Slytherin team Captain, Marcus Flint.

"BOOOOOOOO!" James and Sirius shouted.

"CHEATERS!" were the cries of the other three.

They were all trying to stand as Professor McGonagall arrived. She looked completely outraged. "In all my life I have never seen such a pathetic attempt at sabotage!" she shouted. "Detention! Fifty points from Slytherin! Professor Dumbledore will know of this!"

Although it was great to see Malfoy get what was coming to him, Harry couldn't help but be a little disappointed. Compared to the Dementors, Draco Malfoy was a walk in the park. He had wanted to conquer his fear once and for all. He had wanted to prove it to himself and his classmates.

"Even without the Dementors a corporeal Patronus is quite an achievement," Remus said, "You should be proud Harry."

"Harry!" George shouted. "Party in the Gryffindor Common Room!"

Harry wasn't exactly in the partying mood anymore. He had gotten his hopes up only to be disappointed. Looking up at Lupin, Harry could see that the teacher understood. "I meet you there," Harry called back to George then returned his complete attention to Professor Lupin. "Did it have a form?" he asked again.

Professor Lupin smiled. "Let's get away from the crowd," he said softly. They walked out of the Quidditch pitch and towards the lake, far away from anyone who could possibly overhear them. After glancing around, Lupin turned Harry so they were face to face. "Harry, I'm not certain what this means but you didn't have a form," he said carefully.

"No! But I thought he produced a corporeal Patronus, didn't you?" James asked around. All the others nodded confused.

Harry's gaze fell to the ground. "Oh," he said softly, unable to hide his disappointment. "I guess I didn't concentrate enough."

Professor Lupin let out a laugh. "That wasn't what I meant, Harry," he said. "There wasn't a form. There were *two*."

At this Lily stopped reading and eyed James triumphantly.

"What?"

"Nothing, just found out something," and she kept reading.

I saw a stag and a wolf charge down those—er—students.

"Prongs and Moony! Those are Harry's protectors," Sirius said excitedly.

Lily nodded happily. James and Remus had the biggest smiles ever. They felt like they could float from how happy they were.

"I never heard of anyone having two forms," Peter said, "I thought everyone had just one."

I've never heard of anyone having two forms before. I don't think anyone has. I have no doubt Dumbledore will be calling you to his office tomorrow to ask you about it. I just wish I knew what it meant."

Harry had to smile. He couldn't believe Professor Lupin hadn't figured at least the wolf part of it out. "Well, the book did say the Patronus is a positive force so they probably represent something positive in my life," he concluded. "The wolf is clearly you." His smile faltered as he thought about the other form. "I'm not sure about the stag though," he said in confusion.

This time Professor Lupin smiled. "Well, this may come as a shock, Harry, but your father was an Animagus," he said. "*His* form was a stag. He became an Animagus to help me with my transformations. It just surprised me to see Prongs after so many years."

Lily stopped reading and put her nose very close to James with a knowingly expression.

"Are you going to kiss me?" he asked cheekily.

"No you prat, it's just that now I know what animal you turn into."

That caught Harry's attention. "Prongs?" he asked curiously.

"It was your father's nickname," Professor Lupin clarified. He face suddenly changed to a look of worry as he let out a sigh. "I'll explain everything later when there's more time. It's a rather long story and some of the details may be a little unsettling.

"Yes, like that you've known who Midnight is all along," Lily said.

"What do you think you are going to say to explain why you didn't tell him?" Sirius asked.

"I better have a good explanation. Harry doesn't take kindly to being lied to," Remus said worried.

I believe you are currently missing a party in your Common Room. I'll walk you there."

Harry wanted to protest but Lupin had already started walking towards the castle. Shouldering his broomstick, Harry let out a sigh and followed. Well, he now knew one of the names on the Marauder's Map. Now he just had to figure out the other three. It actually surprised Harry how quickly Professor Lupin wanted to change the topic. What was the big secret?

"That we are illegal Animagi! That's huge!" James stated.

They walked to the Gryffindor Tower in silence, neither really knowing what to say. Once Harry said the password, Lupin bid farewell leaving Harry to enter the Tower. The party was already in full swing. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves except for Hermione who amazingly was trying to read. Careful not to bump into anyone, Harry made his way across the room and sat down beside her.

"How can you concentrate with all of this noise?" asked Harry.

Hermione shrugged. "I just really need to get this done," she said. "I have over four hundred pages to read by Monday."

Harry's eyes widened. How in the world was she going to accomplish that? "Er—Hermione?" he asked tentatively. "Maybe you should think about dropping a class or two. You look a little stressed out."

"A little!" Peter said.

That, of course, was an understatement. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing Hermione looking so exhausted. She actually looked how Harry felt at the end of last term. "I can handle it, Harry," Hermione said but it wasn't as confident as she normally was.

It was extremely late before people started heading up the stairs to their dorm rooms and some even needed to be ordered by Professor McGonagall. Harry had been one of the first to bed but he quickly found that sleep was eluding him. Thinking about it, he figured out that revealing his father was Prongs meant revealing Sirius Black was Midnight. That had to be why Professor Lupin was so evasive. He was still reluctant to tell the truth!

Deep in thought, Harry found another question entering plaguing his mind. If all of the Marauders were an Animagus (except Professor Lupin) then that mean Peter Pettigrew was one also. If James Potter was a stag, Sirius Black was a large dog and Professor Lupin was a wolf, Harry had to wonder what sort of animal Pettigrew had been. He also had to wonder how in the world the Marauders had pulled it off.

"You know," Lily said slowly, "I wonder too." And she looked at the boys who all were whistling or looking the other way. She huffed and kept reading.

Realizing that he wouldn't be falling asleep any time soon, Harry pulled himself out of bed, grabbed his glasses and opened his trunk. It didn't take him long to find the leather-bound photo album he had been given two years ago by Hagrid. Inside this book contained the past of his parents that he had created in his mind before learning who they really were. He had assumed many things about the lives of his parents and their friends. Never in a million years would he have guessed that one of their best friends would betray them. It just goes to show that dreams and reality never really coincide.

"I DIDN'T"

"We know Padfoot, we know," Remus said patting his arm.

"You, do? 'Cause in the book you don't seem to," Sirius said desperately.

As quietly as possible, Harry left his dorm room (making certain that the door was indeed closed to protect Scabbers from Crookshanks) and ventured down to the Common Room. He sat down in front of the barely burning fire and opened the album, turning the pages until he found pictures containing people in addition to his parents.

He didn't have to look long. It was the picture of his parents' wedding day. His father was waving happily, his mother looked radiant and standing next to James Potter was Sirius Black but not the man that Harry had seen in the papers. This Sirius Black was young, handsome even as he laughed endlessly. It was hard to believe that this Sirius Black and the one who had betrayed his parents were one in the same. It was hard to believe that the happiness he saw on the faces of his parents would only be for a short time.

It's amazing how quickly life can change from one extreme to another.

Lily was sobbing and James was once again comforting her. He took the book from her and kept reading.

Flipping the page, Harry saw a picture of his mother in a bed, looking exhausted but happy. She was holding a small bundle as she looked up at his father then down at the bundle. Harry watched as his father smiled back at his mother then kissed the top of her head affectionately. Standing aside his father was once again Sirius Black who was smiling happily as he reached out and gently touched the bundle. Next to Black was Professor Lupin who, while still thin, looked happy and a lot younger than he did now. The man looked so relaxed and comfortable with his friends, nothing close to the guarded person he was now. The final

member of the group was short and plump young man that Harry had never seen before. He was shifting his weight from left to right, looking like he felt out of place.

"That's you Peter," Remus pointed out. Peter gave a nervous smile.

Harry shook his head slowly as he closed his book. So those were the Marauders before the madness of the war destroyed their lives. Two had died because of one's betrayal leaving the final member alone. Harry couldn't help but fell sorry for Professor Lupin. He didn't know what he would do if he had lost all of his close friends in the frame of twenty-four hours.

Remus looked terrified at the prospect. He was shaking his head. Sirius was the one comforting him now.

Standing up, Harry figured some sleep was better than no sleep and retreated back to bed. He really didn't know what to think about everything anymore. Why was he giving Black a chance? Why couldn't he just believe what everyone had told him? Harry didn't know why he needed some sort of confirmation from Black or why he was even contemplating on taking the word of a mass murderer. All he knew was that it was something he had to do.

"Because deep down you know I am innocent!"

Chapter 16

Midnight Confessions

The week passed quickly and uneventfully. The only real problems were that Harry found it impossible to break away from the constant monitoring of the Hogwarts staff.

"There are always ways for mischief young Harry," James said in a serious voice.

"James, don't encourage him!" Lily scolded.

"But Lily! He is a Junior Marauder!" James argued.

Evidently Professor Lupin had said something about Harry 'seeing something' reminding everyone how unsafe Hogwarts really was for Harry Potter. This drove Harry positively out of his mind. Professor McGonagall was the worst followed closely by Professor Dumbledore who had indeed called Harry to his office to 'talk' about the Patronus. Dumbledore really didn't have much to say other than he was looking into it.

"That's nice of him and all but not informative at all," Remus frowned.

"That's just going to be one of those mysteries of life," Sirius said trying to sound deep, "Like why the sun rises every morning-"

"Because the earth does a 360 degree rotation on its axis," Remus explained calmly.

"Or why it rains," Sirius tried to continue.

"Because the condensed water accumulated forming clouds," Remus explained with twitching lips.

"MOONY! I am trying to sound DEEP!" Sirius cried. The others roared in laughter.

Typical.

Professor Lupin's mentioning of rebellion made Harry wonder if that was what he was doing. He hadn't exactly acted out but he also hadn't exactly followed the rules completely either. He withheld information, ventured out alone late at night (it was only once but still), kept the Marauder's Map instead of turning it in, and was now helping the very reason all of these restrictions were placed on him. The more Harry thought about it the more he believed he was completely out of his mind. Who would help the person who betrayed their parents?

"Someone that realizes that there is something wrong here!" Sirius said.

Harry knew he wasn't exactly helping Black but he wasn't exactly *not* helping him either. He could have easily turned him over to Professor Lupin or even told a teacher about the encounter any time this entire week. The problem was Harry's desire to understand how a Midnight and Sirius Black could be one in the same was overruling any other possible

decision. Sirius Black had been given plenty of times to finish what Voldemort had started all those years ago yet he didn't.

"Exactly!"

What if Hermione was right?

"Exactly!"

What if he really was mad to some degree that he didn't know about his betrayal?

"Exa- Hey! No!" Sirius cried. The others tried to muffle their laughter.

The opportunity to find answers arrived in the form of a Hogsmeade weekend. Professor Lupin had canceled their Patronus lesson, claiming that he wasn't feeling well but Harry knew better. Professor Lupin seemed to be hesitant to spend a significant amount of time alone with his charge ever since Harry found out about Prongs. Knowing better than to pry, Harry decided to give the man the time he needed. When that time came, however, Harry knew he would also have to reveal that he had known about the Midnight-Black connection.

"Typical Moony," James shook his head, "Remember how we kept throwing hints we knew and he just ignored and found reasons to isolate himself in the library until we cornered him?"

Sirius nodded fondly.

Harry waited patiently for everyone to leave for the wizarding village. Ron and Hermione promised to bring back some sweets from Honeydukes while the twins grinned. Harry didn't have the strength to tell Fred and George the truth fearing they would want the map back. He also knew if they found out who the Marauders really were the questions would never end, for Harry and Professor Lupin.

"They'd interrogate Moony non stop to know all our secrets," Sirius said with twinkling eyes. Remus on the other hand was grimacing.

Once those traveling to Hogsmeade had left, Harry casually returned to the Gryffindor Tower to put on a jumper and cover himself with his invisibility cloak. His wand was in his holster as it always was, just in case. *Never go anywhere without your wand*, Black had told him. Harry was prepared to use that little piece of advice.

He followed a group of first years out of the Gryffindor Tower then strayed to the main entrance, making certain he didn't bump into anyone on the way. Stepping out into the courtyard, Harry couldn't believe how nervous and thrilled he felt at the same time. He was now actively disobeying the rules and had to admit he liked it. It felt freeing.

"I know what you mean!" James smiled reminiscently.

He wasn't being coddled or protected like a child. He was taking matters into his own hands.

The grounds were empty for which Harry was grateful for. The temperature was pleasant and the faint breeze helped keep him alert. He now moved quickly yet quietly so not to disturb any of the creatures he could only hear. His pace turned to a crawl as he passed Hagrid's Hut. He knew this was his last chance to turn back but paid it no mind. He needed to do this for himself and for his parents.

"No you don't! Harry James Potter, go back to the castle where it's safe!" Lily said sternly.

"Hum, Lily, from everything we read the castle is not all that safe," Peter said, "Basilisks, You-Know-Who, and Sirius getting in whenever he wants." She glared at Peter.

Harry entered the forest cautiously, the noises surrounding him like his cloak. He knew the dangers of the forest were still there for him even though he couldn't be seen and took every precaution to ensure his safety. With his past experiences,

"Past experiences? When has my son been inside the Forbidden Forest?" Lily asked horrified. The others shrugged.

"It's not that bad. We've been inside the forest loads of times," James tried to calm her.

"Because you do stupid things Potter doesn't mean my son should!"

Harry figured it was best to enter only far enough so he couldn't be seen by Hagrid or anyone else in the castle. It wouldn't be smart just to go roaming around with unfriendly creatures waiting to make you their dinner.

It didn't take long for Harry to find a clearing with a tree stump to sit down on. There was no point in roaming the forest until darkness arrived so Harry figured it would be best to simply wait. Midnight would come sooner or later. Harry just prayed that his patience held out until then. Well, that and no one in the school noticed his absence.

It was two hours later when Harry finally pulled off his invisibility cloak, bunched it up and put it under his head as he stretched out on a patch of dry ground. There had been no sign of Midnight and thankfully any other species who would be less than friendly. Glancing at his watch, Harry knew he only had a few more hours to waste before everyone returned from Hogsmeade. As much as he wanted to wait all night, Harry knew he couldn't. He wasn't stupid, well, that was really still up for debate.

"Don't be so harsh on yourself Harry. You are just trying to give an innocent man a chance to explain himself," Sirius said.

The sound of a twig breaking snapped Harry out of his thoughts as he sat up quickly. Looking in the direction of the sound, Harry's chest tightened, making it difficult to breathe. *Please don't be something that will kill me*, he silently pleaded. He remained completely still as another twig broke, this one closer.

Everyone was completely still, holding their breaths. The only sound heard was James voice reading.

The light squishes of someone walking in mud followed by the rustling of the nearby brush seemed to silence the rest of the sounds. Harry subconsciously twisted his right wrist, reminding himself of the wand hidden underneath his sleeve. He wasn't helpless.

Slowly, a large black dog came out of the brush, looking at Harry with his pleading blue eyes. The dog let out a soft whine as it started to slowly approach, showing that he meant no harm. Harry knew he would have to act quickly. He slowly stood, never taking his eyes off of the canine. "Midnight?" he asked hesitantly. "Is it really you?"

"Yes," Sirius said in a whisper. The others looked at him strangely. Remus put a hand to his forehead.

The dog let out a happy bark as a confirmation. *This is it*, Harry realized. The dog didn't even notice Harry flick his wrist, allowing his wand to appear in his hand. In one brisk moment, Harry pointed his wand at the dog and shouted, "*Stupefy!*" There was no time to react. The dog fell to the ground, unconscious.

"Hey, your son just stunned me!" Sirius cried indignantly.

"Well he wasn't about to let a murderer have his way," James said defensively.

"I am INNOCENT!" Sirius shouted.

"HARRY DOESN'T KNOW THAT!" James shouted back.

"OK! CALM DOWN YOU TWO!" Remus shouted at both. He glared at them until both were seated back on their places.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Harry knew that he was far from finished. Picking up a rock, Harry placed it in the center of the clearing and transfigured it into a cage. He was glad that his extensive reading this summer had finally done some good. Pointing his wand over at Midnight, Harry muttered, "*Wingardium Leviosa*," and levitated the dog into the cell. He quickly locked it closed before sitting back down on the tree stump. Pointing his wand to the dog one more time, Harry muttered, "*Ennervate*," and saw the dog starting to stir.

Harry watched as Midnight opened his eyes and looked around, noticing his current predicament. The dog looked at Harry and let out a whine as if to ask 'why are you doing this?' His patience and time running thin, Harry made the first move. "I know who you are," he said bluntly. "Sirius Black."

The dog bowed his head in shame then transformed with a *pop* into a human. He looked more like the photo in the 'Daily Prophet' than those in the photo album except for his hair was shorter, cut just above his shoulders, and his face wasn't so sick looking. "I'm sorry," he said in a scratchy voice. "I saw you that day and I thought I would scare you like this. I didn't know how much people had told you."

"See! I had a good reason for lying to him! I didn't want to scare him!"

Harry could only roll his eyes in annoyance. "I didn't know anything about you until Professor Lupin told me the wonderful story," he said through his teeth. "You betrayed my parents! Why would you think I would want anything to do with you!"

"Harry, please listen," Black begged. "I didn't betray your parents. I would never do that! James was like a brother to me.

"Yes! See! That's what I've been trying to tell you all this time!" Sirius said pleadingly looking at James. James looked like all he wanted was to believe in Sirius.

I knew Voldemort would assume I was the Secret Keeper so I figured a decoy would be the perfect ruse. No one knew it was actually Peter. I never thought he would betray us. I never thought he would have been a spy."

James turned to Peter, pure fury in his eyes.

"You, you, you can't believe him. He's a murderer he killed me. Of course he's lying," Peter stammered out.

Harry stared at Black with a raised eyebrow. This wasn't exactly what he had expected. "Peter?" he asked. "You mean Pettigrew? The man you killed along with thirteen muggles?"

"See, even Harry knows that's a lie," Peter said frightened. James kept reading and at the same time keeping an eye on Peter.

Black buried his face in his hands, clearly frustrated. "Pettigrew's not dead!" he exclaimed. "He's an Animagus! He can transform into a rat! He's been living with the Weasley family for years!"

"Scabbers," Remus murmured sadly. He had been right. James and Sirius got up and were lunging themselves at a trembling Peter.

"You traitorous rat!" Sirius yelled.

"How could you?" James cried. Lily tried to restrain James while Remus held Sirius.

"We gave Sirius a chance we have to give Peter one too," she said.

"She's right. Let's just read on," Remus continued.

James was fuming but they were right, they had given Sirius a chance. But somehow, deep down, he'd always known Sirius was innocent. Believing Peter's guilt was a lot easier. Sirius having betrayed them didn't make sense. Sirius was fiercely loyal and protective of those he loved. Peter, well Peter, never did much anything. He was just a tag along. James had not forgotten that Peter had been all for deserting Remus when they found out about him and only didn't because of the thorough dressing down he received from James and Sirius. He was with them because they could protect him. Apparently they weren't enough of a protection against Voldemort for Peter.

James nodded and sat down. Remus had a little more difficulty subduing Sirius but after a while he sat down too. Peter was trembling. James knew why. Remus wouldn't have had any difficulty holding Sirius, if Sirius was almost managing to escape it was because Remus wasn't trying very hard to hold him.

Harry fell off the tree stump in shock. "B—but that's not possible," he stammered. "It can't be. Scabbers is not Peter Pettigrew! Scabbers is just a rat! He's not a follower of Voldemort! He hasn't done anything to me! He's had plenty of chances."

"See, I've been with Harry for years and haven't touched a hair of his head," Peter stuttered.

Their eyes met. "Harry, listen to me," Black said, suddenly protective. "Peter won't do anything until he's sure someone is out there who can protect him. I know you don't trust me. I've given you no reason to. All I ask is for a chance to prove that Peter is indeed alive. He betrayed us and framed me. I've spent twelve years in Azkaban for something I did not do! It was Peter who killed those muggles! Peter cut off his own finger then transformed to escape the explosion he had caused!"

James was gripping the papers so hard that his knuckles were becoming white. Remus never let go of Sirius and both were glaring furiously at a trembling Peter. Lily wasn't fairing any better. She kept a hand on James to restrain him but you could see that he would have the impressions of her nails on his arms for a while afterwards.

Harry let out a sigh and slowly lowered his wand. This was not happening. He was supposed to hear how Voldemort had promised power in return for the Potters. He was supposed to hate Sirius Black. "S—Scabbers is missing a toe," he said softly. It was too much to comprehend. Could this convict really be telling the truth? Could the entire wizarding world be wrong? "Didn't you mention any of this at your trial?" he asked in confusion.

"Yes, Didn't he? They would have used Veritaserum. Why didn't he say anything then, huh? Because he is lying," Peter said a little more boldly now that he thought he had an edge.

Black snorted in disgust. "I never got a trial," he said bitterly. "I'm sure you've heard how bad it was back then. Everyone *knew* I was the Secret Keeper. I was the only one who *survived* that explosion. That was all the proof they needed. Who cares about the law when everyone's celebrating Voldemort's downfall?"

"I guess we'll have to read on to know what happened then Peter," Remus said in an icy tone that sent shivers down Peter's spine.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. His anger and hatred towards Black had changed towards frustration at the wizarding world. How could they lock someone up in a place like Azkaban without a trial? "I'm not saying I believe you," Harry said in a choked voice. "I don't blindly trust anyone anymore. I'm giving you a chance to prove yourself. If you are lying, I will personally hand you over to the Dementors."

Black stared at Harry in amazement. "You bargain like your mother," he said.

"What's that suppose to mean?" Lily said defensively.

"That you're a tough negotiator," James said, "I would know. Been trying to get you on a date for years."

Harry glanced at Black before standing up and looking away. "I guess I'll have to take your word on that since I don't remember her or my dad," he said making Sirius wince.

The others, except for Peter that was trembling, winced with him.

Rubbing his eyes underneath his glasses, Harry tried to think of some way to explain all of this madness. Black's confessions sounded sincere but Harry couldn't ignore everything Professor Lupin had told him. He couldn't ignore the pain in his guardian's eyes every time the name Sirius Black entered the conversation. It was almost like he was being torn in two. He wanted to believe his godfather was a good man and not the killer he was made out to be but doing so would force him to turn against Professor Lupin.

"So that was why you wanted to get into the Gryffindor Tower on Halloween?" Harry asked curiously. "You were after Scabbers?"

Black nodded, never taking his eyes off of Harry. "I'm sorry if I hurt you," he said sincerely. "It was the only thing I could think of at the time. I didn't want anyone thinking you were helping me."

"See! I told you I wouldn't hurt Harry. I was trying to protect him."

Harry started pacing back and forth. Help him? Wasn't that what he was doing now? *Professor Lupin's going to be so angry when he finds out.* "I can't do this," Harry said suddenly. "I can't betray Professor Lupin. He's my guardian. He's done so much for me. I—I have to tell him."

"Yes, you can tell me and we'll find a way to get to the bottom of this," Remus said nodding and narrowing his eyes at Peter.

"He's your *what?*" Black asked in shock. "Harry, how much do you know about Remus Lupin?"

"Oh, not you too! Snape telling Harry was bad enough!" Remus exclaimed annoyed.

"Maybe I just want to make sure no one can take him away from you and want to let Harry know they have to find a way around the law," Sirius said wincing.

Glancing over at Black, Harry was surprised to see concern on the convict's face. "I know he's a werewolf and I know about the adoption law," he said evenly. "Professor Lupin is my 'temporary' guardian. Dumbledore's trying to find some way around the law so I won't be sent to an orphanage or back to the Dursleys." Harry sat back down on the tree stump and buried his face in his hands. "Professor Lupin is my family. He's in so much pain. I can't add to it. I won't add to it."

Black was up on his knees in an instant. "What's wrong with Remus?" he asked quickly. "He looked fine last week."

"Aw, Padfoot. How cute, you're worried about me," Remus said playfully nudging Sirius who blushed.

Harry slowly looked over at Black, trying to force back the burning sensation in his eyes. "I'm his entire life," he said bluntly. "After my dad, Pettigrew and you were gone he had no one. He's been alone for twelve years. He's so afraid. He knows about you being Midnight but he's afraid to tell me. Please tell me you telling the truth, that you are innocent because he needs a friend. He needs it more than anything."

"Harry is always thinking of others. Instead of saying "Please be innocent so you can be my guardian" he says "please be innocent so Remus can have a friend back", Lily said approvingly.

"Just like his mother," James said and Lily blushed.

"Harry, I swear to you that I didn't betray your parents or murder those people," Black said firmly. "Remus has always been quiet and reclusive. If there was a way to convince him I was innocent I would have done it the moment after I took you from that fat lard of a man you call an uncle. I don't know if anyone told you but I'm your godfather which makes you my number one priority."

"Number one priority?" Harry asked in disbelief. "Was that what I was when my parents were murdered? If I was such a priority then why was I left with the Dursleys? Why didn't you take me?"

"Good question," James said crossing his arm and narrowing his eyes at Sirius who looked lost.

Black let out a sigh as his gaze fell. "I tried," he admitted, his voice shaking. "I was ready to take you and raise you like James and Lily wanted but Hagrid was already there with you in his arms. I pleaded and begged for him to hand you over but he refused. He said Dumbledore had it planned out. It was after I lost you that I went after Peter. I figured if I couldn't have you then at least I could have revenge for what happened to your parents." He ran his fingers through his hair as he shook his head. "That ended up to be one of the worst things I have ever done," Black said softly. "Not only did Peter get away but I ended up in the one place where I could never see you. I wasn't thinking Harry. I know that now. I can't even begin to ask for your forgiveness. I don't deserve it."

"Well, to be honest, no offense Padfoot, but thinking before you act isn't your forte," Remus said wincing. Sirius had to agree.

Harry really didn't know how to react. Someone had actually wanted him? All of the pain and ridicule the Dursleys had caused could have been avoided? Rubbing his temples, Harry tried to push back the headache that was slowly coming. "What am I supposed to do?" Harry asked distantly. "You're asking me to choose between you and the one person I can trust. I don't know you. All I know is that you're supposed to be the reason I don't have parents yet you

rescued me from *them*. It was so much easier to think of you and Midnight as two and not as one."

"I know this must be hard for you, Harry," Black said compassionately, "and I'm sorry. I never meant to make your life so difficult. I won't ask for you to turn your back on Remus to help me. I won't even ask you to help me other than releasing me from this cage. I'll capture Peter myself so I can commit the crime I was imprisoned for."

"WHAT?" James said angrily.

Sirius jumped back and stuttered, "Dunno, I mean, revenge?"

"How can you be that selfish?" Lily glared at him, "You should be trying to prove your innocence so you can be with Harry and Remus not justify your stay in Azkaban!" Remus was nodding and glaring at Sirius at the same time.

Harry quickly rose to his feet, staring at Black coldly. "There you go again!" he said angrily. "It's all about you! What *you* want! What about what *I* want! What about what *Remus* wants! Have you even thought about us!"

"NO!" James growled. Sirius winced.

Black was taken aback by the outburst. "What do you want, Harry?" he asked trying to calm the boy down.

Harry let out a scoff. "I thought it would be obvious," he said through his teeth. "I want a family who doesn't think I'm a freak. I want a home where I'm welcomed, not an inconvenience. I want to know there are people who do care about me for being just me. Is that too much to ask?"

"No!" Sirius, James, Lily and Remus said at the same time. Peter was doing his best to become invisible.

"So if you agree with us why are you trying only to get revenge?" Remus asked.

"You know, I am perturbed after twelve yeas with the Dementors, and all," Sirius tried to defend his older self's actions.

There was a long silence where neither of them moved. Finally, Black let out a sigh and sat down, his back resting against a corner of the cell. "I can't promise I won't kill him, Harry," he said softly. "I've never really been one to be exactly logical in the heat of the moment.

Remus snorted.

I will do what I can to prove my innocence for you and for Remus but you have to let me out of here to do that. I give you my word that I won't hurt you."

Harry was caught between a rock and a hard place. "You realize I'm taking an awful lot on faith here?" he asked softly then looked directly into Black's blue eyes. "If you betray my trust, I swear you will pray for the Dementors when I'm through with you."

Black looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "Really?" he said. "Harry, no offense, but that's a little hard to believe."

"Yeah," James shrugged miserably.

"I grew up with my uncle, didn't I?" Harry said coldly. "You be amazed how much pain one can inflict on another before they pass out."

Black stared at Harry sympathetically for a long moment before grinning. "You're bluffing," he said simply.

Harry's shoulders slumped forward as his gaze fell. He had to admit it was a little hard to appear intimidating to someone who's survived the Dementors for twelve years. "Yeah, I am," he admitted then looked back at Black. "But I know people who wouldn't hesitate...like Hagrid."

"Nothing like having the right friends," James beamed.

Black put his hands up to signal surrender. "Point taken," he said.

Knowing his time was running out, Harry unlocked the cell and let Black out. He quickly turned the cell back into a rock before grabbing his invisibility cloak. He spared one final look at Black before disappearing under the cloak and hurrying back to the castle. He could only pray that he hadn't just made the biggest mistake of his life.

"No you didn't," Sirius said and eying James, Remus and Lily he added for good measure, "And I will be very patient so we can prove my innocence and be happy ever after with you and Moony."

They nodded pleased, Peter on the other hand was not pleased at all at the prospect.

Chapter 17

Suspicious Confirmed

"That title isn't sounding too good for you Wormtail," Remus warned. Peter was making himself as small as possible.

Harry had no idea how he made it through the remainder of the weekend without someone suspecting something was up. He rarely spent any time in the Gryffindor Tower anymore and sleeping was extremely difficult. Every time Harry closed his eyes he imagined Scabbers attacking him. Harry set up a few protection spells around his bed but it still didn't alleviate his worries. He knew he was being paranoid but he couldn't help it. How many rats are missing only one toe like Peter Pettigrew would be missing only one finger?

"I bet many," Peter squeaked, "I bet Scabbers got in a fight or something and he has nothing to do with me."

"And Scabbers would be missing exactly the same toe?" Lily asked suspiciously.

"Maybe Sirius saw Scabbers and made up all that to gain Harry's trust," he tried to defend himself.

"Maybe," Sirius said calmly, "Unlikely, though. I'd have to have seen Scabbers to do that, and he is always in the dorm isn't him." He finished with a raised eyebrow that made Peter shiver.

As the week progressed, everyone had learned to stay far away from one Hermione Granger. It seemed that her overabundance of classes was finally getting to her making her incredibly short tempered. Draco Malfoy had become a victim of that. He had made the mistake of badmouthing Hagrid when Hermione was in a particularly bad mood, earning a punch in the face.

"Oh! I so would have wanted to see that!" James said between laughs.

She had earned a detention from Hagrid but she had become a hero in the Gryffindor Tower.

To serve as proof that Hermione was over stressed, she had even missed a Charms class that very day only for Harry and Ron to find her sleeping in the Common Room. Hermione's day went from bad to worse when she snapped at Professor Trelawney for once again predicting Harry's death and stormed out of class. All in all, both Harry and Ron felt that Hermione had completely lost her mind.

"Well, Harry and Ron shouldn't be so harsh. It's quite easy to feel compelled to snap at Trelawney," James said.

"Been there James?" Remus asked.

"Oh, so many times!" James said.

Late that night, Harry was once again having troubles sleeping. With his curiosity getting the better of him, Harry snuck over to his trunk and quietly pulled out the Marauder's Map. It's supposed to show everyone, right? So why wouldn't it show if Scabbers was really Pettigrew? It was worth a shot and Harry really couldn't think of anything better at the moment.

"The moment of truth Peter," Remus said in a calm way that would send anyone who knew him running for their life.

Grabbing his wand, Harry crept out of the dorm room while double checking to make sure Crookshanks wasn't around (which he wasn't). Slowly, Harry made his way down to the Common Room where the only light was from the slowly dying fire. He moved over towards the source of light as he tapped his wand on the map and murmured "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

Once again a map of Hogwarts appeared on the old piece of parchment. Tilting it towards the fire, Harry looked closely to see that Professor Dumbledore was awake and roaming the third floor hallways, Filch was walking around on the first floor with his annoying cat, Mrs. Norris, and Peter Pettigrew was walking right towards them.

"I guess that settles it doesn't it?" James asked furiously turning to Peter, "You faked your death." He was rising from his spot and making his way to a trembling Peter.

"No, there has to be an explanation. Please James. You let Sirius get his explanation, please wait for mine," Peter squeaked.

"Why would you hide as a pet for twelve years Peter?" Remus said with narrowed eyes standing next to James. Sirius had joined them too.

"I don't know, maybe I was scared Sirius would want to finish the job," he pleaded.

"Sirius was in Azkaban. You want us to believe you *knew* he was going to escape," Lily spat from her place in the floor. Normally she would have gotten up and let Peter get all her temper, but now she thought James, Sirius and Remus had dibs on him.

"Please, lets keep reading, I am sure there's an explanation," he begged.

"Ok," James said calmly. He handed the papers over to Lily and sat down on the floor facing Peter. Sirius and Remus followed his lead, "Let's keep reading," he finished with a threatening gleam in his eyes.

WHAT?!?

Looking closer, Harry saw that the dot did indeed say Peter Pettigrew. The dot was moving slowly and was swerving back and forth as if he had too much to drink. How was this possible? Pettigrew was alive? Black had been telling the truth? The entire wizarding world was hunting the wrong man? Was it possible?

No...the map is lying. It has to be.

"Yes," Peter mumbled.

"The map never lies," Sirius said through gritted teeth.

Needing to confirm his fears, Harry tapped his wand on the map, muttering "mischief managed," then hurried up to his dorm room. He tossed the map on his bed before hurrying over to Ron's four poster bed. He tore open the curtains and said, "Lumos," lighting up the entire dorm room. The sight that awaited Harry was certainly not what he expected.

Blood was on the sheets as Ron slept; not a lot but certainly enough to be noticed. Panicking, Harry dropped his wand and grabbed Ron's shoulders. "Ron!" he shouted. "Ron, wake up!"

"Did you hurt Ron too Peter?" James asked icily.

Peter was shaking his head nervously.

Ron's eyes flew open as he quickly sat up, startled by the wakeup call. He looked at Harry in confusion, slowly registering the alarmed look on Harry's face. His head cleared instantly the moment he looked down and saw blood on his sheets. Ron let out a scream as he jumped out of bed, waking their roommates.

Neville, Dean and Seamus were instantly out of bed, hurrying over to Ron and Harry. The room quickly lit up allowing everyone to see the blood on Ron's clothes and sheets. Neville and Dean ran out of the room to fetch Professor McGonagall while Ron quickly checked himself over for injury. Finding nothing, Ron let out a sigh of relief while Harry checked through the sheets.

"Er—Harry?" Ron asked in confusion. "What are you doing?"

Not finding anything, Harry turned to face Ron as he prepared himself for the outburst that was guaranteed to come. *I can't tell him the truth. I can't tell anyone.* "Scabbers isn't here," Harry said hesitantly. "This has to be his blood."

Ron paled as he sat down in shock. "Scabbers?" he asked. Slowly, Ron's distress turned to anger. "It's that bloody cat! I told her to keep that beast under control but would she listen?! NO!"

"Faking your death again Peter?" Remus remarked calmly, "The trick worked once so you tried again?"

Now the shaking of Peter's head was almost mechanical.

"Mr. Weasley!" Professor McGonagall scolded from the doorway. She entered and noticed the blood on the sheets. "What is going on here?"

Ron glanced over at Harry curiously before turning his full attention to Professor McGonagall. "Harry woke me up and I saw the blood," he said as he buried his face in his hands. "Scabbers is gone!"

Professor McGonagall let out an obvious sigh of relief as she made her way over to the distraught student and put a hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Weasley, are you certain you are not injured?" she asked. When Ron nodded, she glanced over at Harry who looked away immediately. "Mr. Longbottom, please take Mr. Weasley to see Madam Pomfrey, just to be certain. Mr. Thomas, Mr. Finnegan, please search for Mr. Weasley's rat. Mr. Potter, please come with me."

"Why is she taking Harry? He didn't do anything," Sirius protested.

Harry held back a frustrated groan as he followed Professor McGonagall out of the dorm room and out of the Gryffindor Tower. He knew what was coming and needed to quickly think of a reason for checking on Ron. *Well, I was looking at the Marauder's Map and saw Peter Pettigrew who I found out was alive and posing as my best friend's pet rat from my conversation with Sirius Black in the forest. Right, that would go over real well. Why don't I just tell the entire school Sirius Black is innocent?*

"I don't think they'd believe you," Lily said.

"Nope, they would probably have someone with Harry around the clock to make sure he didn't try talking to Sirius again," Remus remarked.

They entered Professor McGonagall's office, neither of them saying a word the entire way there. Harry was trying desperately not to appear nervous. How in the world was he going to get out of this?

Professor McGonagall closed the door and hurried to Harry's side. "Are you all right Harry?" Professor McGonagall asked gently. "You do know that this very likely had nothing to do with Sirius Black, don't you?"

"How wrong you are Minnie. This has everything to do with me."

"Sirius, I've said this once and I am saying it again, McGonagall doesn't appreciate you calling her Minnie!" Remus said raising his hands in exasperation.

Harry had to bite back a retort as he nodded, looking anywhere but Professor McGonagall's face. This had everything to do with Sirius Black but not in the way Professor McGonagall

believed. In a way, Harry was touched at McGonagall's concern but he couldn't help but think her sentiments should be focused more on Ron who had just lost a beloved pet.

"Harry?" Professor McGonagall asked gently and waited for Harry to finally look at her. "Sirius Black *will* be found. I give you my word."

"I sure hope not," James said, his eyes never leaving Peter who trembled even more at this declaration that James believed Sirius story.

Biting his lower lip, Harry found himself hoping that would happen after Black was found innocent or had a chance to do whatever he was supposedly doing. It was strange that in the process of a few days Harry had gone from hating Sirius Black to silently praying for him. *No, don't do this! Harry scolded himself. Don't get your hopes up! It could still be a trick!*

"Yes," Peter squeaked, "a trick."

"I'm finding that very hard to believe," Remus said.

Professor McGonagall reached out and touched Harry's shoulder. "Harry would you like for me to call Professor Lupin?" she asked gently. "You really shouldn't keep everything in."

Harry shook his head. He needed to figure out what he was going to say to Professor Lupin first. Scabbers vanishing changed everything. Black needed to know that the rat was no longer in the Gryffindor Tower and Professor Lupin needed to know what Harry had seen on the map. *He's going to be so angry with me.*

"Probably. You did risk your life going to talk to Sirius," Lily scolded the pages, "What?" she asked Sirius who was smiling.

"You called me Sirius, not Black. Twice already. We're growing on you."

"Hardly," she huffed but her mouth was finding it very hard to contain a faint smile.

"I—I'm fine," Harry said softly. "I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping well..."

Professor McGonagall nodded. "If you are sure," she said sounding a little skeptical but didn't push the matter when Harry nodded. "Very well. I'll walk you back to the Gryffindor Tower but I do hope you talk to someone about what you're feeling."

Harry remained silent as he followed Professor McGonagall back to the Gryffindor Tower. He would talk to someone as soon as he figured out how. Upon entering, Harry saw Hermione sitting in the Common Room with tears in her eyes. *Looks like Ron beat me back.* He bid Professor McGonagall goodnight then hurried over to her.

Hermione immediately launched herself in his arms and sobbed. "I—I swear it wasn't Crookshanks!" she said. "He was in my dorm room all night! I—I don't know what happened to Scabbers! I swear!"

Harry couldn't do anything but hold her until she calmed down. Glancing around, he noticed that they were alone and held Hermione at arm's length. If there was anyone he could trust it would be her. "Hermione, I believe you," he said softly. "Listen, I think Scabbers is still alive. I think he did this and no one else."

"Yes, tell Hermione. She's smart. She'll know what to do," James urged his son.

Hermione stared at Harry completely confused. "But...that's not possible," she said. "Harry, I think you're thinking too highly of Scabbers. Rats don't think like we do. They don't 'fake' their deaths."

Remus snorted, "Depends on the rat."

"I think Harry needs to explain a little more to Hermione. She does have a point," Lily scolded Remus. James and Sirius were holding chuckles.

"What?" Remus asked annoyed.

"Oh, Moony. You just joined the club," Sirius patted his friend, "Nice to know Lily scolds you too." Remus glared at him.

Looking into her eyes, Harry nodded. "You're right," he said. "But Scabbers isn't a rat. Think about it, Hermione. How long has Scabbers been with the Weasleys? Longer than any *normal*

rat is supposed to live. Why do you think Crookshanks doesn't like Scabbers? He knows something isn't right. There are too many questions for it to be ignored."

Hermione stared at Harry curiously. "Who are you and where is Harry?" she asked. "The Harry I know would never put all this together."

James, Sirius, Lily and Remus chuckled.

Harry just shrugged. "What can I say?" he said with a grin. "I've had a lot of time on my hands. I don't have really any proof yet. Do you think I'm just grasping at straws here?"

"A little," Hermione said honestly. "But you do have a point. I remember Ron mentioning how ill Scabbers looked when we were at Diagon Alley. The clerk at Magical Menagerie said that normal rats only lived three years. Scabbers is definitely older than that. The problem is what can we do about it now? Scabbers is gone."

Harry thought for a moment before letting out a sigh. "We can't go to Dumbledore or McGonagall with this," he said. "I'll talk to Professor Lupin. He and I are overdue for another *discussion* anyways."

"Oh, yeah! Moony's going to get it!" Sirius said and Remus winced.

It took Harry and Hermione nearly the entire next day to convince Ron that Crookshanks had nothing to do with Scabbers *death*. Ron was still upset though which forced Harry and Hermione to keep Harry's suspicions from Ron. Hermione confirmed from her research that there wasn't an Animagus registered as a rat but after looking at the list Harry noticed that there weren't any stags or large black dogs registered either. Of course Harry kept that part to himself. He wasn't about to admit to Hermione that he had talked one on one with Sirius Black.

"Why not? She could help him," Sirius said.

"Yes, and she would also kill him for putting himself on a risky situation," James said in a *'you know I'm right'* tone.

After Defense class at the end of the week, Harry glanced over at Hermione and nodded. She took the hint and nodded back before ushering Ron out of the classroom leaving Harry alone with Professor Lupin. Taking in a deep breath, Harry approached the young teacher who was packing up, oblivious that he wasn't alone.

There was still the chance to back out which Harry was seriously considering. He knew this was going to upset the man. He was prepared for Professor Lupin to call him a liar but he needed to know. This was the only thing Harry could think of to either confirm or deny Black's accusations. Professor Lupin had helped in creating the Marauder's Map so who better to ask about it than one of the creators?

"Yeah, and since Moony was the one to research all the spells and charms, he'll know better than anyone that the map can't lie," Sirius said glaring at Peter.

"Er—Professor?" Harry asked softly, causing Professor Lupin to turn around quickly. "Can we talk?"

Professor Lupin looked at Harry for a minute before leaning back against the desk. "Yes, I suppose this is long overdue," he said and pulled out his wand. With a flick of the wrist, the door closed and locked. "You better take a seat, Harry."

"Confession time," Sirius said.

"For who? Moony or Harry?" James asked.

"Both," Lily answered.

Harry complied as Professor Lupin pulled up a chair so they were sitting across from each other. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Harry knew what he *had* to say but finding a way to say it had become suddenly difficult. There was so much to say Harry didn't know where to start.

In his best imitation of Albus Dumbledore James said, "The beginning is always a good place to start young Harry."

Remus looked at Lily and asked, "Lily, may we take action against your future husband?"

"Be my guest," she answered.

Sirius and Remus cuffed the back of James head simultaneously.

"OW"

"Harry, what I'm going to tell you may be difficult but please hear me out," Lupin said breaking the silence. He enfolded his hands as he leaned closer, never taking his eyes off of Harry. "I told you your father became an Animagus to help me with my condition which was the truth but he wasn't alone. Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew also went through the process. Peter turned into a rat and Black...well...Black transformed into a black dog that resembles the Grim." Lupin reached out and touched Harry's hand. "Harry, I have reason to believe that Black and Midnight are one in the same."

"What else is new?" Sirius said rolling his eyes.

"Sirius! Remus doesn't know Harry knows," Lily scolded him.

"You know, you can call me Padfoot too." She rolled her eyes.

There was another silence. If Professor Lupin was waiting for an outburst he was going to be disappointed. "I know," Harry said softly.

Professor Lupin's eyes widened. "What?" he asked in surprise. "You know? H—how? We never told anyone."

Harry let out a sigh as his gaze fell. "Midnight was the only one who knew where I hid my wand," he admitted. "When Professor Dumbledore said Black had used my wand...it was the only way. No one—not even the Dursleys—knew about my hiding place. Midnight had been in my room when I pulled out my homework one night and saw...everything in there. I figured because he was a dog it wouldn't matter. I never thought..."

Lupin held his head in his hands as he stared at the table. "Why didn't you say something?" he asked softly.

"Why didn't you?" James asked.

"Why didn't you?" Harry retorted.

"Great minds think alike," James said pleased.

"James! Don't insult my son. He's way smarter than you!" Lily scolded.

Professor Lupin looked at Harry, overwhelmed. "The way you talked about Midnight," he said. "I could see how much you cared for the dog. I wasn't about to destroy that by telling you the truth. You were already going through so much that I wanted to protect you from any more heartache. If I had known you knew I would have tried to help you deal with it."

"See, I wasn't just lying for the sake of it. I was trying to protect Harry," Remus pointed at the paragraph on Lily's hand.

Harry looked away. Honestly, it would have been easier if he hadn't known the truth about Midnight. "I know," he said softly, "but I was embarrassed. I trusted a stray dog with my life without a second thought. For that week I forgot that in this world people can change into animals. Midnight didn't see me like everyone else. He didn't see me as the-boy-who-lived or a freak. To him, I was normal."

"Harry, I can't begin to explain why Black did what he did,"

"Harry can," Sirius said, "Why don't you let him."

Professor Lupin said gently. "I don't know why he was there for you and tried to protect you from your Uncle. Even his behavior on Halloween is peculiar. I wish I had all the answers but I don't. Even Dumbledore doesn't understand Black's actions. It's not like him to just sit and wait."

"Definitely not," James remarked, "Sirius is really bad at the waiting part."

Biting his lower lip, Harry prepared himself for a yelling that was about to come. It was then that it hit Harry what could possibly happen. What if Professor Lupin became too angry? What if Lupin didn't want to be his guardian anymore?

"That would never happen Harry! No matter what you did," Remus tried to soothe Harry by patting the pages.

"He can't hear you," Sirius said. Remus smacked Sirius' head.

Pushing away the thought, Harry closed his eyes and prayed that wouldn't happen. "What if there was someone else?" he asked nervously.

Lupin looked at Harry suspiciously. "Like who?" he said slowly.

Slowly, Harry reached in his bag and pulled out the blank parchment that hid the Marauder's Map. With a flick of the wrist, Harry had his wand in his hand and tapped it on the parchment as he set it on the table. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he said softly and watched as the Marauder's Map appeared. "You helped make this, right? You were one of them...like my dad."

Professor Lupin rubbed his forehead as he sat back in his chair. "Where did you get that, Harry?" he asked. "I seem to remember Filch confiscating that quite a few years ago."

"Fred and George," Harry said nervously. "They thought I could use it to sneak out to Hogsmeade...which I haven't done. I—I couldn't use it like that. It was my dad's and I was too afraid of the Dementors."

Lupin nodded. "I understand," he said calmly, "and I believe you. So I can assume you've had it for a while. Why are you bringing it to me now?"

Harry let out a breath before continuing. So far Professor Lupin was taking this better than he had expected. "I—I need to know everything about it," he said quickly. "Are the people on the

map really there or can it be fooled? You said the Marauders were pranksters so I didn't know if it was a joke to have people appear who weren't there."

"The map never *lies!*" Sirius said, "We made it to let us know who was where when we wanted to know. We couldn't have it lie to us."

"The map never lies, Harry," Lupin said carefully. "Why are you questioning it? Who did you see?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

"And Professor Lupin fainted in shock," James narrated.

"James I did not faint!" Remus cried.

"I bet you a galleon you did," Sirius said cheekily.

"You'll lose that bet," Remus said angrily.

Professor Lupin stared at Harry before letting out a sigh and burying his face in his hands.

Remus extended his hand to Sirius who grabbed a Galleon from his pocket and handed it to Remus scowling.

It was clear that Lupin was desperately trying to keep his emotions under control which made Harry feel even more uncomfortable. He would rather have Professor Lupin yell at him so he knew what his guardian was thinking. He didn't know if Lupin was angry, disappointed, or just in shock.

"Are you sure?" Lupin asked in a calm and quiet voice. "Are you completely sure you saw Peter on the map?"

Harry nodded. "It was the night Scabbers—er—vanished," he said uncomfortably as he looked away. "He's Ron's rat. When you told me about my dad being an Animagus and since Black was an Animagus...well...I—I don't know what to think anymore. There's something else...but I—I can't tell you. You'll be mad. You'll hate me."

Lupin moved over so he was kneeling beside Harry and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Harry, listen to me," he said gently. "I could never hate you. I promise whatever it is, we can work through it but you need to tell me. I can help you, Cub. That is what families do. They help each other. I know I have kept things from you but I was only trying to protect you. I promise whatever you say will stay between us."

Shaking his head slowly, Harry ignored the tears that started to fall. He didn't want to make Professor Lupin angry but he just couldn't keep it in anymore. It was just too hard. He needed someone to tell him he was doing the right thing. "I—I left the castle," Harry admitted. "Last weekend, when you canceled our lesson. I—I went into the forest."

"All right," Professor Lupin said patiently. "Why would you go there? From what I've heard you know more than anyone the dangers of the forest."

"I hate that," James mumbled.

"What?" Lily asked.

"Moony!" he exclaimed, "Instead of yelling, he keeps making you tell him what you did and makes you nervous because you don't know what he is going to do, and of course your over active imagination comes back with a million gruesome theories."

Remus smiled innocently, Lily looked at him approvingly.

Harry closed his eyes as more tears fell. There was no turning back now. "I—I went there b—because that's where M—Midnight was waiting for me," he said in a shaky voice. "I—I saw him that night after practice and told him to go there. I had to know why, why he betrayed my parents and why he helped me. It didn't make any sense. Why would someone who wanted me dead rescue me from my uncle?"

"So Black willingly went to the forest and just waited for you?" Lupin asked in disbelief. "Harry, do you realize the danger you put yourself in?"

"MOONY! Harry was never in danger! I would never hurt him!" Sirius cried in a hurt tone.

"My older self doesn't know that yet, Sirius!"

Harry nodded. "He didn't know I knew he was Black," he continued. "When I saw Midnight in the forest, I stunned him and transfigured a rock into a cage and put him in. I knew Midnight wouldn't hurt me but I didn't know about Black. I revived him and...we talked."

Professor Lupin ran a hand through his hair as he stood up. "What did he say?" he asked reluctantly.

"He said he wasn't the Secret Keeper," Harry answered softly, his head bowed. "He said it was Peter. Black was supposed to be the decoy." Harry's shoulders slumped forward as he rubbed the back of his neck. "He told me Pettigrew was a rat Animagus. He told me Peter was really Ron's rat, Scabbers. He said it was Scabbers he was after on Halloween. That was why he warned me."

Leaning against the desk, Lupin enfolded his arms across his chest as he looked at the distraught teenager.

Sirius was shaking Remus by the collar, "You have to believe him Moony! Please!"

Peter was mumbling 'no'. Remus disentangled himself from Sirius and Lily continued.

"Harry, I don't know if I should be extremely angry at you taking such a risk or extremely proud that you pulled it off," he said. "What were you thinking going out there alone? What if the Dementors had come? He told you Ron's rat was really Pettigrew?"

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I know I broke the rules but I swear I'm not helping him. I couldn't do that to you. I couldn't betray the only family I've ever known."

"Aw, Harry, I know that," Remus said happily.

Professor Lupin let out a sigh as he rested a hand on Harry's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "I wish you would have told me before you recklessly risked your life," he said, "but I can't criticize you for keeping things from me because I have done the same to you. From now on,

let's both be honest with each other. We'll figure out how to deal with Sirius Black...together."

Relieved beyond measure, Harry wrapped his arms around Lupin's waist and felt his guardian return the embrace. Professor Lupin didn't hate him. Harry knew it would take work to get used to being completely honest with an adult but he was ready to make the effort. They would help each other find out the truth about what really happened. Both of them knew they couldn't move on until the past was put completely behind them, a past that consisted of Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew.

"Did you believe me?" Sirius asked.

"I think I believed Harry. Not necessarily you," Remus said frowning.

"That's good enough for me," Sirius nodded. From the look of horror in Peter's face he didn't think that was good for him.

Chapter 18

The Truth Shall Set You Free

"The question is: who will be set free by the truth?" Lily said grimly. Either way the Marauders were losing a member and she was quite sure of which member would be leaving them.

True to his word Professor Lupin had kept Harry's little excursion to himself. Harry had revealed that Scabbers was missing a toe and everything else he knew about the rat. He had also told Lupin Hermione knew of his *suspicions* but didn't know anything about Pettigrew and Black. Lupin was relieved to hear this. They really couldn't afford to have anyone else know a person who was supposed to be dead was roaming Hogwarts grounds.

"But wouldn't Hermione help? She is quite smart," Sirius said.

"Yes, but she is still *thirteen* and I bet Remus is thinking that the fewer people know about this, less are the chances of this reaching the Auror and you getting the Dementor's kiss," Lily explained. The Dementor's kiss threat was enough for Sirius to agree with any plan they came up with.

Harry had told Hermione that Professor Lupin was looking into the matter as a favor to Harry. That seemed to dampen Hermione's suspicions since she knew nothing about the Marauder's Map that was now in Professor Lupin's possession. It had been with great reluctance that Harry had given it up but Lupin had assured him he would get it back.

"I hope you use the map only to track Peter and not to check students' whereabouts," James told Remus.

"I wouldn't do that! That's, that's... SACRILEGE!" Remus said horrified.

Easter had come and gone with no sign of Black or of Scabbers, not that Harry really had time to think about it with all of the homework they had been given. Everyone knew by now to stay clear of Hermione since she looked close to a nervous breakdown. Harry and Ron did their best to finish their own homework and help Neville who also looked extremely overstressed. The thought of end of the year exams being anything like this made Harry cringe.

"Oh, Harry! That's nothing compared to O.W.L.s," James said.

"I am sure glad those are over," Sirius said relieved.

"Don't get too relaxed Padfoot. We only have one year before we have to start worrying about N.E.W.T.s," Remus said.

"MOONY! Did you have to remind me?" Sirius cried.

In addition to the overabundance of homework, Harry also had Quidditch practice every day along with the team meetings on strategy. The Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match was the following Saturday and everyone in the Gryffindor Tower was feeling the excitement. Gryffindor hadn't won the Cup since Ron's brother, Charlie, had been a Seeker making it long overdue.

"How long was that?" James asked nervous, "What do you mean we haven't won the Cup? GRYFFINDOR CAN'T LOOSE!"

"Calm down James. Gryffindor can't win all the Cups," Lily tried to soothe him but that was definitely the wrong thing to say since he was now hyperventilating.

After a long while Remus and Sirius managed to calm down the hysterical James.

A win against Hufflepuff would clinch the Cup which would mean the burden of the honor fell mostly on Harry since catching the Snitch was worth so many points.

The atmosphere for this match was certainly different than Harry had ever experienced. There was tension between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff houses but nothing as severe as it usually was between Gryffindor and Slytherin. The Ravenclaw house seemed to be torn between choosing sides. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were usually close and a win against Gryffindor (more like Harry Potter and his Firebolt) would be a great boost to Hufflepuff's moral but a Hufflepuff win would mean a Gryffindor loss which would result in the possibility of the Quidditch Cup going to the Slytherin house. That was something that just couldn't happen.

"Being a Slytherin must be difficult," Lily mused.

"Yes, so tough having to do all that threatening of little children, all that name calling and then have daddy bailing them out," James mocked.

"What I meant was; the whole school is always against Slytherin. Even the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws," she said annoyed.

"She does have a point. Everyone assumes Slytherins equals evil. Just like they assume Werewolves and Parselmouths are evil," Sirius said.

Lily looked impressed, "I expected something deep like that from Remus not you."

"I am a Black. I've lived with the assumption that because I am a Black I must be Dark all my life. Besides, Uncle Alphard was a Slytherin, and he's one of the few people in my family that are decent."

The morning of the match, Harry woke up insanely early. The sun had barely broken the horizon but Harry knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. His nerves were already twisting his stomach in knots. Looking out at the grounds, Harry saw that there was no breeze disturbing the trees of the forest or the Whomping Willow. No wind was a good thing.

Continuing to look over the grounds, Harry saw a small orange animal prowling across the lawn. Harry recognized that tail and knew it could only be Crookshanks. He watched as the cat approached the forest as something came out to meet him. Harry's eyes widened to see it was the large shaggy black dog that he was quite familiar with. It was Midnight.

Midnight knows Crookshanks?

Harry continued to watch as they walked side my side as if they were old friends talking about anything and everything. It then hit Harry. What if Crookshanks' obsession with Scabbers had been because of Black? Hermione did give Crookshanks a lot of freedom so no one would notice if he had gone missing for a few hours to meet with Black who had been hiding out. That meant Black now knew Scabbers was missing. Harry could only hope that didn't push Black to do something stupid.

"That would only work if Sirius could talk to cats and he can't," Remus said.

"I don't know, Crookshanks is quite smart for a cat, maybe he understood what Sirius wanted. But I have to agree. For him to be able to let Sirius know Peter faked his death is stretching it a bit." Lily said pensively.

When the time for the match finally arrived, everyone on the team was so jittery they couldn't think straight. They changed into their Quidditch robes in silence. Oliver was having a difficult

time finding words to excite his team and could only manage "you know what to do so let's go win the Cup."

The moment they stepped out on the field they were almost blown over by the noise. It seemed that everyone on the Gryffindor side had somehow found a way to increase the volume of their voices. The Hufflepuff team emerged from their locker room and approached causing the Chasers, Angeline, Alicia and Katie, to start giggling. Harry looked over at them in confusion and was tapped on the shoulder by Fred.

"They fancy the Seeker, Diggory," said Fred. "He doesn't say much so don't try to start a conversation with him during the match."

"FRED! The match is for looking for the snitch not starting conversations!" James cried.

"Calm down James, we promise Harry will be very professional and only look for the snitch," Remus said patting his friend. James was chewing his nails nervously.

Harry nodded and returned to his attention to Madam Hooch who was having the team captains, Oliver and Diggory, shake hands. He tightened his grip on his Firebolt and he mounted, waiting for the whistle to signal the beginning of the game. Diggory was older and larger than Harry which wouldn't help him in a day like today. According to Oliver, Diggory was quite good so Harry would have to use every advantage he had.

"Yeah, but Harry is lighter and has a better broom," James said.

With the sound of the whistle, Harry took off, once again rising higher and faster than everyone else. The Snitch was released along with the Bludgers. Harry tried to follow the small golden Snitch but it quickly blended in with the crowd, vanishing out of sight. With another whistle blow, The Quaffle was thrown up and the game began.

It didn't take long to discover Hufflepuff's strategy for the game. It seemed that the Beaters had one mission which was to take Harry out of the game. It was difficult for Harry to keep an eye out for the Snitch when he was continuously dodging Bludgers but thankfully Diggory hadn't seen it either.

"Hey, that's persecution!" Lily cried.

"Nope, that's Quidditch," James stated, "Harry has better odds than Diggory so the Hufflepuff team has to knock him off his broom."

"That's barbaric," Lily huffed.

Fred and George quickly picked up on the dilemma and tried their best to help the young Seeker but that left the Gryffindor Chasers unguarded, something the Hufflepuff Beaters took advantage of.

It was by pure luck that Harry noticed a flash of gold fluttering near the Hufflepuff goal. Without a warning, Harry took off as fast as possible, taking both teams by surprise. He startled several members of the Hufflepuff team as he flew past them so close that they nearly fell off their brooms. He was nearly there when a high pitched whistling noise filled his ears. Knowing that noise by now, Harry quickly altered his course allowing the Bludger to fly by right where he had been only seconds ago.

He hadn't heard the second Bludger though.

"Oh, no!" Sirius winced, "That's going to hurt."

A force unlike any Harry had felt before slammed into his stomach, sending him flying backwards and off of his broom. He was certain he had heard a few cracks as pain flared throughout his body. The crowd went silent as Harry started to fall. All of the players on the field appeared to be unable to move. Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

"He's going to die!" Lily cried.

The pain was unbearable. Harry wanted to cry out in pain but he couldn't seem to find his voice. Closing his eyes, Harry forced his brain to work. *There is no pain. There is no pain.* With a flick of the wrist, Harry had his wand in his hand and pointed it at his broom. "*Accio Firebolt!*" he croaked, remembering one of the spells he had been taught from the summer. His broom flew towards him as Harry arched his back so he was falling head first, ignoring

the sparks of pain the simple action caused. He re-holstered his wand and reached out with both hands, grabbing the Firebolt as it flew past.

James, Lily, Remus and Sirius let out a sigh of relief.

The quick change of direction seemed to send another jolt of pain on top of the agony Harry was already feeling. His legs continued to fall which gave Harry an idea. Using all of the momentum that he possibly could, Harry swung his body so that his legs went over the broom, allowing him to remount and fly off again towards the Snitch. Miraculously, it was still by the Hufflepuff goal. His body was screaming at him not to move but Harry didn't listen. He couldn't. The game and the Cup were on his shoulders.

"James son through and through, nothing stops him when Quidditch is involved," Remus said shaking his head.

It seemed like only a fraction of a second later that he had the Snitch in his hand, holding it up for everyone to see for one brief second before the arm quickly wrapped around his stomach. His pain suddenly had somehow multiplied a tenfold making it impossible for Harry to even concentrate on anything other than the pain.

"CALL AN AMBULANCE!" Lily cried.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"She meant a healer," Remus explained then cried, "CALL A HEALER!"

A loud whistle filled the air. "Gryffindor wins!" Madam Hooch shouted.

James was too worried about Harry to remember to cheer. Such an unusual display from James showed how serious the situation was.

The crowd broke out in cheers. The Gryffindor team quickly flew over to Harry to help. Fred and George were there first and helped him land. The moment they touched the ground, the entire team helped Harry lie down as Harry started to cough. A bitter liquid filled his mouth.

Harry turned his head to the side and spat it out, earning several gasps. His head seemed to be trapped in a storm of dizziness forcing Harry to close his eyes.

"Mr. Wood, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley, please move out of the way!" Professor McGonagall scolded.

"Yes, help!" James said relieved.

A gentle hand touched his forehead with a familiarity that could only be Professor Lupin. Harry groaned as he turned his head in Lupin's direction. Suddenly he felt like he was being lifted off the ground and placed on something firm. The movement shot another spark of pain but Harry was too out of it to register anything. He was too trapped in his current pain to recognize the presence of any more.

The sight of Harry Potter being hurried to the hospital wing by Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Lupin with Ron and Hermione following them was a sight that no one would forget. No one felt like celebrating.

"Don't worry. Madam Pomfrey will patch him up in a jiffy," James said with the confidence that only came from someone that was very familiar with Madam Pomfrey's abilities.

The warm sunlight on his face slowly brought Harry out of his dreamless sleep. His entire body felt sore and something was wrapped tightly around his chest. He opened his eyes but was overwhelmed by the brightness of the room forcing him to close them again. A distinct aroma filled the air alerting Harry that he was in the hospital wing. *Great. Just great.*

They all chuckled.

"Just like James, I swear," Sirius said, "You can be all bloodied and broken that you refuse to go to the Hospital Wing."

Slowly, Harry opened his eyes again and blinked a few times until his eyes adjusted to the vast sunlight. The events of the Quidditch game replayed in his mind reminding Harry why he was even here. *That stupid Bludger!* Harry let out a groan as he realized what it must have

looked like to have him passing out of the field...again. Somehow it seemed that he was always the one that was hurt.

A gentle hand touched his forehead, brushing his bangs out of his eyes. Looking up, Harry saw the blurry figure of Professor Lupin standing over him. "Good morning, cub," Lupin said softly as he slid Harry's glasses into place. "You gave us quite a scare. Do you always play that dangerously?"

Professor Lupin came into focus allowing Harry to see how exhausted he looked. "You look tired," he said in a scratchy voice.

"Harry James Potter! Don't be rude," Lily scolded.

Lupin smiled. "Why thank you, Harry," he said candidly. "Perhaps you should take a look in the mirror. That Bludger broke two ribs that pierced your left lung causing it to fill with blood. That was two days ago. You should hear the rumors going around the school. It's quite entertaining. I don't think your father ever had quite a following after a match, no matter how hard he tried."

"And he does try!" Lily said.

"I do my best to please my fans," James said happily. Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry scowled. "I didn't do it on purpose," he said as he tried to sit up and was immediately pushed back down by Lupin. "I didn't hear it coming and it hit me, simple as that."

Professor Lupin sat down on the edge of the bed. "Harry, do you even remember what happened after you fell off your broom?" he asked. "I have never seen a stunt like that even attempted much less pulled off successfully. Your father certainly would have been proud.

"You bet I am!" James said beaming.

Your mother, on the other hand, would probably take your broom away for scaring her half to death."

"Good idea. Do that!" Lily said sternly.

"And you?" Harry asked with a grin.

Lupin smiled back. **"Well, I reserve judgment for later," he said then lost his smile. "You really did scare me when you started coughing up blood though. I don't know how you managed to catch the Snitch with such a serious injury."**

Harry closed his eyes and let out a sigh. **"Defense mechanism," he said softly. Not wanting to elaborate, Harry figured it was best to change the subject. "So when can I get out of here?"**

"If Madam Pomfrey gets her way; *never*," James said rolling his eyes.

"One too many encounters with her James," Sirius said with a sympathetic smile.

"Not for at least another day," Professor Lupin said. "Madam Pomfrey wants to be certain you're completely healed before leaving. There can be a lot of complications with punctured lungs. Plus I have a feeling you aren't too enthusiastic about meeting the adoring public yet."

Harry groaned in annoyance. **Just what he needed was more people staring at him than usual. "It's not my fault the Beaters decided to use me as target practice," he said. "I'd like to see any of them deal with the pressure Oliver puts on me."**

"Yes, that was persecution," James stated annoyed.

"James! You said before that any team would have done that if the other team's seeker had a better broom," Lily exclaimed.

"I don't care what I said. They hurt my baby!" he cried.

Professor Lupin couldn't hold back his grin. "Don't take it too personally, Harry," he said. "It'll die down in a few days." He reached up and ruffled Harry's messy hair as he stood up. "Get some sleep. I have a feeling that Ron and Hermione will be by in a few hours to check on you. They've only left your side for meals and classes. Do they normally fight so much?"

"Yes!" four voices chorused.

Harry smiled and nodded as he closed his eyes. "Sometimes it's better to just get as far away as possible," he said.

Lupin pulled off Harry's glasses and set them on the bedside table. He brought up the covers over Harry's chest and gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I'll take that under advisement," he said softly. "Take it easy, cub. You've certainly earned it."

"I like when Moony tucks me in," Sirius said smiling.

"When did that happen?" Lily asked with a raised eyebrow.

"When I get sick. Moony is the designated healer of our dorm," Sirius answered.

"Do you really mean sick or hung-over?" Lily asked suspiciously.

"You wound me Lily", Sirius said in a mock offended tone.

Professor Lupin had been right about admirers. It seemed that everyone wanted to congratulate Harry for winning the game and winning the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor. Oliver was practically jumping with joy which had a tendency to scare many of the Gryffindors. None of them could remember ever seeing the seventh year student so happy.

Cedric Diggory and the rest of his teammates had apologized repeatedly for the injuries Harry had sustained which Harry found silly. Everyone who played Quidditch knew of the risks. Harry had experienced many of the risks first hand. It was a game. It wasn't like the Hufflepuff Beaters were intentionally trying to kill him or anything.

"Nope, those would be the Slytherin beaters," Sirius muttered.

"It's very nice of them to apologize," Lily said. James just growled.

The Gryffindor Quidditch team wasn't so forgiving. Most of them (especially the Weasley twins) saw Harry as a younger brother and therefore someone they had to protect. For nearly a week the Hufflepuff Quidditch team found themselves victims to various pranks. It was nothing mean or incredibly embarrassing, just harmless fun to prove if you mess with Harry Potter, you mess with the entire team.

"Good," James said pleased.

"James!" Lily cried, "You make no sense whatsoever," she said raising her hands.

The craziness soon died down and everyone went back to focusing on the overabundance of homework they were being given. June approached quickly along with the awareness of exams that were right around the corner. There had been no sign of Midnight since the morning of the Quidditch final making Harry wonder if Black had left, not that he would have blamed him. The person he was searching for was gone now.

Deep in thought about the entire mess, Harry sat during dinner mindlessly playing with his food. Hermione was once again unbearable to be around with all of the stress from her classes and Ron was once again questioning Hermione's impossible schedule. *Some things never change*. Honestly, Harry was curious how Hermione was handling it but he wasn't going to start prying...especially now. After all, he was the last person to criticize about keeping secrets.

The sound of the doors opening pulled Harry out of his train of thought. Looking up, Harry saw Hagrid entering with a smile on his face which had been a common sight this year. Although Professor Dumbledore had kept an eye on Hagrid's classes there was no denying that the giant of a man loved teaching his subject. Unlike Divination, Harry had actually enjoyed Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid certainly brought a unique perspective into the 'classroom'.

"Well, any class is better than Trelawney's," James said making a face.

"Nah, I think I'd rather have Trelawney than Snape," Sirius said and James eyes bugged. He bit his lip but was unable to decide which was worse.

Hagrid stopped as he reached them and smiled down at the trio. "Hey Ron, Harry, Hermione," he said happily. "I got somethin' fer yeh, Ron." He reached into his large pocket and carefully pulled out a small quivering ball of fur. "Found 'im near me hut, hiding. Yeh should take better care of yer pets."

"Truth time!" James looked evilly at Peter. Peter's trembling that had subsided with the lighter tone the story had taken came back full force.

Harry's eyes widened in shock as Ron happily reached out and took his pet in his hands, thanking Hagrid over and over again. Glancing over at Hermione, Harry saw her biting her lower lip in worry as she stared at him. She was waiting for him to make the first move. *Don't worry. I will.* With a flick of the wrist, Harry had his wand in hand. He knew he needed to act quickly before Scabbers noticed what he was doing. If Scabbers—er—Pettigrew knew, they would never see the *rat* again.

As quickly as possible, Harry pointed his wand at the rat. "*Stupefy!*" he shouted as he stood up. The rat went limp, allowing Harry to get a good look at the infamous missing toe. It was indeed Scabbers.

"Harry sure likes to stun animals," Sirius pointed out.

"Harry!" Ron shouted. "What did you do?"

"Well, he prevented a back stabbing traitor from fleeing once again," Sirius growled.

Harry ignored him as he looked up at the head table at Professor Lupin and nodded. Lupin jumped to his feet and hurried over to Professor Dumbledore and quickly whispered what was most likely a very brief overview of the situation. Professor Dumbledore stared at Professor Lupin for a moment before he looked over at Harry as if he were silently asking for confirmation. Harry met the Headmaster's gaze for a moment before turning to Hermione. "We need Crookshanks, Hermione," he said quietly. "Please?"

"What does he need Crookshanks for?" Sirius asked.

"No idea," Remus answered.

Hermione only nodded before hurrying out of the silent Great Hall. Everyone was watching the scene in confusion. Professor Dumbledore noticed this and rose to his feet. "Harry, Ron, I

believe we need to discuss some things in my office," he said pleasantly. "Please bring your pet."

Harry pulled Ron, who was now clutching Scabbers to his chest, to his feet and pulled him out of the Great Hall. The moment the doors closed, Harry reached into his bag and quickly pulled out a piece of parchment, quill and ink. Kneeling down, Harry dipped his quill in his ink and started writing on the parchment.

Midnight,

We found Scabbers. Come to the castle as quickly as possible as Midnight. We're outside the Great Hall.

Harry

"Harry, *what* is going on?" Ron demanded. "What did you do to Scabbers? Why does Dumbledore want to see us?"

"Poor Ron, he's going to get the shock of his life," Lily said.

"Peter better start paying that he doesn't," Remus said coldly and Peter whimpered a little.

Corking his ink, Harry looked up at Ron to see confusion and anger. *It's only going to get worse, you know.* "Ron, I promise to explain but I only want to explain it once," he said as he put his ink and quill back in his bag. "I only stunned Scabbers. I didn't want him to run away again."

The sound of running footsteps echoed through the hallway. Harry turned towards the sound to see Hermione approaching quickly with Crookshanks in her arms. Ron tightened his grip on Scabbers and took a step back. "No!" he shouted. "Just keep the beast away!"

Harry rolled his eyes as he folded up the piece of parchment. "It's not what you think, Ron," he said then looked at Hermione. "Put him down. I need a favor from him." He ignored Hermione's curious look as he looked directly at the cat. "Crookshanks, I need you to take this to your friend as quickly as possible. Do you understand?"

"Ahhhhhhh!" Sirius said in understanding.

"Because you are friends," Lily nodded.

Crookshanks let out a purr as he took the folded parchment out of Harry's hand and hurried out of the castle, disappearing into the darkness. As Harry stood, he knew soon he would have to reveal his secrets to his friends. He just hoped they would understand why he had kept them in the dark all year and forgave him.

"I hope they forgive him too but I understand why they'll be angry. Especially Ron," Remus said.

"But Harry couldn't tell," Sirius protested.

"Yes, but Ron will think he had the right to know since Scabbers was his pet," Remus answered.

They waited in silence for not even five minutes before two figures emerged from the darkness. One was Crookshanks and the other was the large, shaggy black dog Midnight. Harry couldn't help but smile in relief. Midnight hadn't left after all.

"Harry!" Ron shouted as he backed away in fright. "It's the Grim!"

"Oh, please. It's just Sirius," Lily scoffed.

"He doesn't know that," James pointed out.

Harry rolled his eyes as he walked over to the dog and knelt down. "Professor Lupin knows about you, Midnight, but no one else," he said. "This is the only way I can think of to do what is right. Please stay like this until I explain everything, all right?" Midnight nodded. "Good," Harry said as he stood up. "Let's go. Dumbledore's waiting."

"Harry's friend must be doubting his sanity, talking to a dog and all," Remus said.

Midnight stayed at Harry's side as they walked to Professor Dumbledore's office where Professor Lupin was waiting for them. Hermione was now carrying Crookshanks and Ron was still clutching Scabbers as if his life depended on it. Lupin glanced down at Midnight and nodded, receiving a nod from the dog in return.

"Are you ready for this, Harry?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry let out a sigh. "Ready as I'll ever be," he admitted.

Professor Lupin gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before muttering the password. The statue slowly moved, revealing a staircase. Lupin led the way, followed by the teenagers and their pets. He opened the door to Dumbledore's office then stepped out of the way so the three teenagers could enter before him.

Professor Dumbledore was there along with Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape.

"Oh, no! What's the git doing there?" James whined.

"Go home Snivellus!" Sirius cried.

"Hum, Sirius, Snape lives in the castle," Lily said.

Sirius glared at her.

Harry held back a groan. He just knew Professor Snape was going to find some way to make this difficult. Revealing his actions was going to be difficult as it was even without Snape's snide comments about how he was an arrogant rule breaker like his father.

"I see you brought a few guests, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly.

Harry nodded. "This is Midnight," he said as he glanced down at the dog. "Er—you all might want to sit down."

Midnight was the first to sit, earning smiles from Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall.

"So cute," said James patting Sirius' head. His hand was promptly swatted away.

Professor Lupin pulled up enough chairs for everyone but didn't sit down himself. He moved to Harry and stood at his side. Harry glanced over at Ron before lowering his gaze to the floor. *This is going to destroy him.*

"All right, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said patiently. "Remus informed us that you believe Scabbers isn't what he appears to be."

Harry nodded again. "First off I need to apologize for not being entirely truthful," he said then looked over at Ron and Hermione before returning his eyes to the floor, "to all of you. I blamed myself for my—er—family problems and my disappearance. For a week, Midnight was my only friend. I told him everything. I trusted him completely. When he was there, I felt safe."

"And you were," Sirius said.

"Not exactly, his uncle did almost kill him," Remus winced.

"But I protected him. I kept him safe!" Sirius protested.

"We know you did," Lily said with a smile. Only Remus heard the soft whimper from the corner.

"That is understandable, Harry," Professor McGonagall said. "You were in an impossible situation but you shouldn't blame yourself. Your uncle had no right to take his anger out on you."

"I know that," Harry said softly. "I know it was wrong for him to work me harder than a house elf with the—er—condition I was in. I know that now but then Midnight was the only one who truly listened and treated me like a normal person. I wasn't the-boy-who-lived or a freak to him so I quickly gave him my trust. He was the only one to see where I hid my homework and my wand. He was the only one there when Uncle Vernon was attacked."

Professor Dumbledore eyed the dog curiously. "I see," he said calmly. "When did you figure this out, Harry?"

"There goes Dumbledore using Moony's technique," James mumbled.

"What?" Lily asked.

"You know, being all calm and polite and making you confess your worst crimes," he answered.

"How do you know this isn't Dumbledore's technique that I just happened to copy," Remus said with raised eyebrows.

A hand rested on his shoulder from behind and squeezed, reminding Harry that he wasn't alone. "Er—after you told me Black had used my wand," he said softly. "It was the only explanation I could think of. After that, I believed every thing everyone said about Black. That's why I worked so hard. I felt betrayed by someone who was supposed to be my friend. It wasn't until Christmas when I told Ron and Hermione about my home life that I started to become suspicious. I didn't understand how the man who betrayed my parents would rescue me from my uncle and then warn me at Halloween. I needed to know why he betrayed my parents."

Hermione gasped. "Harry, what did you do?" she asked fearfully.

"Uh,oh!" Sirius whispered.

Harry glanced down at Midnight who was looking up at him with those 'puppy dog eyes'. "One night after Quidditch practice I saw Midnight," he said nervously. "I—I didn't know what to do. Since he didn't know I had learned the truth about him, I sent him into the forest to wait for me. The next Hogsmeade visit I snuck out of the castle and met him."

"You did WHAT!?!!" Hermione exclaimed as she jumped to her feet. "Harry, how could you? How could you do something so stupid?!?"

The boys winced.

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall scolded. "Please control yourself!"

"That's precious," James chuckled, "If Hermione hadn't scolded Harry, McGonagall would instead she had to scold Hermione."

Harry let out a breath in an attempt to keep himself calm. This was harder than he ever thought it would be. "I know it was risky and stupid," Harry said, his voice quivering. "But it

was something I needed to do. I entered the forest and when I saw him, I—er—stunned him and—er—sort of restrained him. When I revived him, I demanded answers. What he told me was the last thing I expected.”

James glared at Peter.

“I can imagine,” Professor Dumbledore said curiously then looked at Midnight. “Sirius, I believe it’s time you revealed yourself.”

“That’s going to go overly well with the people there,” Remus said sarcastically.

With a *pop*, a man was now where Midnight had once been. He slowly stood up, never taking his eyes off of Dumbledore. Professors McGonagall and Snape instantly took out his wand while Ron and Hermione cried out in alarm.

“Overreacting much aren’t we?” Sirius scoffed.

Black looked a little more ragged than when Harry had last seen him but Harry didn’t dare say anything about that.

“You go live in the forest and see how you look,” Sirius said offended.

“Don’t blame him, Dumbledore,” Black said coolly. “What was he supposed to do when *everyone* hid the truth from him? I told him the truth all of you were too blind to see twelve years ago. How could you possibly believe I would ever betray James and Lily? You know Harry was my entire life before you stripped him away from me.”

“YES! HOW COULD YOU!”

“Calm down Sirius,” Remus said while pulling Sirius, that had gotten up to yell, back down.

Professor Dumbledore let out a sigh. “You have to admit, Sirius, no one ever thought you would use Peter,” he said calmly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

"I wanted to protect them," Black answered. "We had no idea who the spy was. You may not realize it but you have this way of looking at people that gives you away. When we had meetings, you would always look at me for a moment longer than anyone else. Think about it, Dumbledore. You know how much I detest my family. I would never join them in supporting Voldemort. You should have at least pushed for a trial."

"YES! YOU SHOULD!" Sirius yelled.

"I have to agree with him: Innocent *until* proven guilty." Lily scolded.

"Sirius," Professor Lupin warned. "Not now. Explain the rest of the story. You can vent your anger on us later."

"Always the voice of reason Moony," James said fondly.

Black nodded. "As you see I'm an Animagus," he said. "So was James and so is Peter. James was a stag and Peter—" he looked over at Ron, "—is a rat. I didn't kill him. He framed me for the murders of those Muggles and escaped by transforming but not before cutting off his own finger."

"He's lying," Peter kept mumbling. James shot him a warning look and he decided that the best policy was to be quiet again.

Ron stared wide-eyed at Black. "No!" he shouted. "Scabbers has been in my family for—"

"—twelve years," Black interrupted. "That's quite a long life for an ordinary rat. He's also missing a toe, isn't he? Peter needed to find a wizarding family to take him in so he could stay up on all of the news pertaining to his master. No one knew he was a rat so he had the perfect cover until the time was right."

"Makes perfect sense until now, and I have yet to hear your explanation Peter. How are you going to explain hiding as a rat for so long?" James asked icily.

Professor Dumbledore slowly rose to his feet and shifted his gaze to Professor Lupin. "You knew about this, Remus?" he asked curiously.

"Oh no, Dumbledore thinks I was helping Sirius!" Remus cried distressed.

"Calm down Moony," Sirius tried to soothe him.

"And he knows I led you all in becoming illegal Animagi even after he gave me a chance to attend Hogwarts," he continued without noticing Sirius' attempts.

"No Moony, we did that because we wanted to," James tried to help Sirius, "Remember, you tried to talk us out of becoming Animagi." But Remus was working himself up into hysterics. It took them a good ten minutes to calm him down enough.

Professor Lupin pulled Harry close and wrapped an arm around the teenager. "Harry confided in me about the forest," he said. "When we were in school, we created a map of Hogwarts to help us with our pranks. Harry got his hands on it and saw Peter in the castle on it the night Scabbers disappeared. The map never lies. The only way Harry could have seen Peter was if he were alive."

Dumbledore pulled out his wand. "Remus, Sirius, please back away with Harry and Hermione," he instructed. "Ron, please put the rat down on the ground and join your friends."

Ron reluctantly did as he was told and stood by Hermione which was as far as he could be from Black. Professor Lupin still had arm and around Harry while Black had put a hand on Lupin's shoulder. For all three of them, this was the moment of truth. Their entire futures depended on this.

James, Sirius and Remus were now on their knees, holding their breaths as Lily read Peter was trembling all over letting out little squeaks every now and then.

A flash of blue-white light shot out of Professor Dumbledore's wand and hit Scabbers. There was another flash of light then all of them watched as the rat changed shape. The rat was slowly transforming into a short man who had thin, messy hair with a large bald patch on the top of his head. He didn't look really anything like the picture Harry had in his photo album, except for his face. That face was unmistakably Peter Pettigrew's.

James looked murderously at Peter. Remus put a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Let's hear what he has to say for himself."

"Good heavens!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "It's true!"

"It appears so," Professor Dumbledore said with a note of regret in his voice. "I think it is time we hear what Peter has to say." He pointed his wand to his door, locking it securely before pointing it back at Pettigrew. "Ennervate."

Pettigrew stirred as he slowly opened his eyes. He quickly sat up and looked around to come face to face with Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape who were standing in front of Professor Lupin, Sirius Black and three overwhelmed teenagers. "Welcome back, Mr. Pettigrew," Professor Dumbledore said. There was no pleasantness in his voice. It was clear that Dumbledore was angry.

Pettigrew must have recognized the tone as he quivered in fear.

His past counterpart wasn't faring much better.

Chapter 19

Prongs, Moony and Midnight

"It's Prongs, Moony and Padfoot," James said.

"I kind of like it," Sirius said happy, "It's Harry's special name for me."

Professor Dumbledore glanced over his shoulder at Black who stared back. If Black hadn't been so angry he most likely would have started shouting 'I told you so' over and over again.

"I should. He deserves it!" Sirius said annoyed.

It seemed so wrong that the only person who had believed Black was innocent was the very person everyone believed he so desperately wanted to kill.

"Quite ironic, yes!" Remus said.

Dumbledore knew it was going to take an awful lot to fix things and it was going to start here.

"We have just heard a very interesting story, Peter," Professor Dumbledore said firmly as he returned his gaze to the shaking man. "Care to explain why you betrayed your friends to Voldemort?"

"Yes, please do Peter," Remus said icily narrowing his eyes at Peter.

"I—I didn't...I don't know..." Pettigrew stuttered.

"What do you mean 'you don't know'? How can you not know why you handed an innocent family to a psychotic murderer?" Lily spat and Peter just repeated his future self's stuttering.

"Don't even bother lying Peter," Black hissed as he took a step forward, his hands in tight fists as he tried to keep his anger in check. "You were their Secret Keeper! You handed James and Lily over to Voldemort! You handed *my godson* over to Voldemort!"

Professor Lupin quickly put a hand on Black's shoulder, stopping him from doing anything foolish. "How could you, Peter?" Lupin asked in disgust. "How could you betray us like that? How could you betray James and Lily after everything they did for you? How could you do this to Harry? He was just a baby."

"Yes! How could you?" James hissed through gritted teeth.

Professor Snape finally spoke up. "I must admit, Pettigrew," he said coolly, "it doesn't do you any credit quivering on the floor like a baby. It's not like we're going to kill you...yet."

"That's the first time I am glad to hear Snivellus' opinion," Sirius growled at the shaking lump on the floor.

"Severus," Professor Dumbledore warned but did not correct Snape's comments. "We're waiting for an explanation, Peter."

Pettigrew cowered as he burst into tears. "What could I do?" he asked. "The Dark Lord forced me! I was scared! I'm not brave! I never meant for it to happen! He...he has weapons...you don't understand...he was taking over...he would have killed me! I couldn't refuse him!"

James, Sirius and Remus lunged themselves at Peter. They had him pinned on the floor.

"You backstabbing traitor!" James growled.

"Please, James no. What would you have done? If Voldemort was threatening you you'd join him too," Peter said in tears.

"No I wouldn't. I would have died for you Peter and this is how you repay my loyalty?"

"I am not brave. All I want is to survive," he begged.

"There are some things not worth surviving Peter," Remus sneered, "You'll pay for th-

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. They barely had time to scramble off Peter before Mrs. Potter opened the door.

"What's going on? I heard fighting," she said.

"No fighting mum. We were just acting bits of the book."

"Oh, well. Peter your mother just flooded. She wants you back for dinner."

"Ok" and Peter got up and ran off before the others could stop him.

"Mum! You let him go!"

"Of course I did. What did you expect? For me to tie the poor boy up?"

"Good idea," Sirius mumbled.

"What's that Sirius?"

"Nothing Mrs. Potter."

"Well, dinner will be served in about an hour. I'll call you then. You are staying the night right Remus?" he nodded and she left.

"She let him go," James whined.

"Well, what did you expect? It's not like she knew he was going to sell her son out!" Lily cried with a scowl, "You should have punched him faster!" James just stared at her surprised. She grabbed the pages and continued reading.

Tears filled Harry's eyes as he stood there in disbelief. Once again the explanation hadn't been what he had thought it would be. That was it? That was Pettigrew's entire defense for destroying five lives? He betrayed his parents because he was weak? He didn't hate them. They didn't do anything for him to turn against them.

"Well you should have died!" Black hissed. "You should have died for your friends like we would have for you!"

Professor Dumbledore looked over at the spectators and noticed Harry. "Severus, please find some way to restrain Peter," he said calmly. "Minerva, if you would alert the Ministry, I believe there is a correction needed to be made that is long overdue." Dumbledore turned to

face Ron and Hermione as Professor McGonagall went over to the fireplace. "You two are free to leave but I must insist that you don't speak of this to anyone. Until matters are sorted out, no one can know of Sirius' presence and Peter's return from the dead."

"Er—no offense Professor but how are we supposed to do that?" Hermione asked. "Everyone saw Harry stun—er—Pettigrew in the Great Hall. What sort of explanation can we give them?"

"And believe me, they'll want one," Remus said grimly.

"I'm not leaving," Ron spat, never taking his eyes off of Pettigrew. "That...that *thing* spent three years with me. I want to see the Ministry take him away. If Harry's staying, I'm staying too."

"Ron's right," Sirius said angry, "Peter betrayed his trust too. Apparently that's something he likes to do."

Professor Dumbledore nodded at the two then approached Harry, Professor Lupin and Black. "You do know there will be a lot of questions for you three," he said softly. "We know the truth. The question is what do we want to tell the Ministry?" He looked directly at the shaken teenager for some sign that he was paying attention to the conversation. "Harry, are you all right?"

"Of course he isn't!" James cried, "After all that who would be?"

"It's like Harry said, it's even harder because Peter didn't give a reason to have betrayed us," Remus said disgusted, "He didn't hate us and we never did anything against him. He was just weak. If he had hated us at least there would be a reason. This way all those years of suffering just seem pointless."

Professor Lupin and Black quickly looked at Harry to see tears falling down his face as he stared at Professor Snape binding Pettigrew to a chair. When Harry didn't answer, Lupin pulled Harry into an embrace. "It's okay, Harry," he said softly as he looked over at Black and smiled. "It's over. It's finally over. No more secrets."

"I don't care what we say to the Ministry, Dumbledore, but I want Harry and Remus left out of it," said Black. "Harry's been through enough this year without having to deal with Fudge accusing him of helping me. Harry never did anything of the sort. He told me flat out that he wouldn't betray all of you like that."

"He also said he'd have Hagrid break every bone on your body if you were lying," James said.

"He did not say that," Lily scolded.

"He implied it," he said back.

"As true as that may be Harry did keep valuable information from us and the Ministry, Sirius," Dumbledore countered. **"To anyone not familiar with Harry, it would appear that he had been helping you the moment he figured out you were an Animagus. I agree that Harry's been through more than his fair share this year. I'll do everything in my power to keep him out of this, you have my word."**

Black nodded then returned his attention to Harry and Professor Lupin. "Do you think you could ever forgive me for thinking you were the spy, Moony?" he asked softly.

"You thought I was the spy? Why?" Remus asked.

"Dunno, but hazarding a guess: Exclusion. You must have been the only choice left, because if I knew there was a spy I'd never think of Peter. He's too much of a coward. I should have noticed that that was what made him dangerous," Sirius said sadly.

Lupin looked up at Black and smiled. "Only if you could forgive me for thinking the same, Padfoot," he replied. "I should have known better than to believe what everyone else was saying."

Professor McGonagall rejoined the group. "The Minister is on his way with a handful of Aurors," she informed Dumbledore. "I didn't tell them about Pettigrew. I doubt he would believe me anyways."

Professor Dumbledore nodded. "You do have a point," he said the looked at Professor Lupin. "Remus, I think it would be wise to hide Harry, Ron and Hermione in my guest quarters until we have explained a few things to Cornelius—" Harry and Ron moved to object, "—and only until then. I know both of you need closure so I won't deny it. This is to protect Sirius as well as you. If Aurors see you here, Harry, they will assume that Sirius is using you as a hostage. We need them to listen to reason."

"Yes, they tend to curse first ask questions later," James said, "By the time anyone could get a word in Sirius would be toast."

"James, there's no need to be so crude," Lily scolded.

"It's ugly but it's the truth," Sirius said grimly.

Harry reluctantly nodded and followed Professor Lupin to Dumbledore's guest quarters. As they left the room, Harry glanced back at Black who nodded for Harry to go. Sighing in defeat, Harry entered the guest quarters with Ron and Hermione, sitting down on the bed as Professor Lupin closed the door. Harry stared at the floor. He didn't to see whatever looks his friends were giving him.

"How long have you known, Harry?" Ron asked suddenly and angrily. "How long have you known Scabbers was really a person without telling me?"

"Uh, oh, he's angry," Sirius said.

"Wouldn't you be?" Lily asked.

"Probably," he sighed.

"I didn't *know*, Ron," Harry admitted, keeping his eyes on the floor. "All I had was Black's confession which didn't count for much considering. You took his—er—death so badly I wasn't going to add to it. I'm sorry I kept it from you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Midnight. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about meeting Black. I didn't know what to think of everything so how was I even going to begin to explain it?"

Hermione sat down beside Harry on the bed. "We understand Harry, don't we, Ron?" she stated more than asked and waited for him to nod. "I don't know what I would do if I had been in your place but you didn't have to go this alone. We've always been a team in everything. I guess I'm a little hurt. I know I haven't been the greatest of friends to both of you this year with the overload of classes I took but I am your friend first and foremost. I would have helped you if you needed me."

"Same here, Harry," Ron added. "I probably wouldn't have believed the whole Scabbers being Pettigrew but I would have helped you with Black." He then smiled at Hermione. "I told you Black rescued him, Hermione. For once, I was right and you were wrong."

They all laughed.

"He's never going to let her forget that," Remus chuckled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly Ron," she said in annoyance. "Is that all you can think about after everything that's happened? Sirius Black is an innocent man! Do you know what that means?"

"That I am innocent?" Sirius asked confused.

"Er—he's innocent?" Ron said uncertainly.

"No," Hermione shot back. "He's Harry's godfather!" She turned to Harry and smiled. "Don't you see, Harry? You could have a *legal* guardian other than the Dursleys! The Ministry would have no say in the matter!"

"YES! I forgot about that!" Sirius cried delighted.

"Now, you can all live together. You, Moony and Harry," James said ecstatic.

Harry let out a sigh and shook his head. He wasn't going to start thinking about the summer or the future yet. "I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself, Hermione," he said. "Black isn't even a free man yet and he's been in Azkaban for twelve years. Do you really think the Ministry is going to grant him custody of a teenager?"

"Don't worry Harry," Ron said confidently. "Dumbledore will make it happen."

"Yeah and if he doesn't we'll use our Marauder ways," Sirius said mischievously.

"I don't think your Marauder ways will work with the Ministry," Lily said.

"You'd be surprised with what we can get with our Marauder ways Lily," Remus said innocently.

Silence filled the room. Wanting to change the subject, Harry turned to Hermione. "So now that we're sharing our secrets," he said with a grin. "Care to explain how you managed to get to all of your classes, especially the ones that meet at the same time?"

"I for one want to know that too," Lily said curiously.

Hermione bit back a smile as she reached into her robes, pulling out a very long and fine gold chain that was around her neck. There was a small and shiny hourglass hanging from it. "This is called a Time-Turner," she said. "Professor McGonagall gave it to me back in September to get to all my lessons only if I never told anyone about it and didn't use it for anything other than getting to classes. Basically, I go back in time to attend the classes I have at the same time. Professor McGonagall had to get special permission for the Ministry for me so I wasn't about to betray her trust."

"Cool," James breathed.

"Wicked," Ron said with a grin. "So that's why you looked so stressed out. You had longer days than the rest of us."

Hermione nodded as she tucked the Time-Turner back in her robes. "Just don't say anything, okay?" she asked hopefully. "I still have to get through my exams which would be near impossible without it."

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS!"

"What? What's happening? Who's doing what?" Sirius yelled.

Harry quickly jumped to his feet. "That was Professor Lupin," he said nervously. "He's never mad." *Unless you count that time he was yelling at Professor Snape.* Harry suddenly got a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Before Ron or Hermione could stop him he hurried out of the room and ran to Dumbledore's office. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin were standing there staring angrily at the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, while Professor

McGonagall appeared to be in shock and Professor Snape looked...well...normal. Black and Pettigrew were gone. "What happened?" Harry asked quickly.

Fudge jumped at Harry's sudden appearance but neither Dumbledore nor Lupin moved. "He doesn't believe us, Harry," Lupin spat. "They're taking Sirius to the Dementors."

"NOOOOOOOOO!" four voices cried.

Harry paled. This could not be happening. "NO!" he shouted. "He's innocent! What about Pettigrew?!? Didn't you see him?!? Didn't you talk to him?!? Pettigrew betrayed my parents! Pettigrew killed those people! Not Sirius!"

"We have no proof that man was Peter Pettigrew," Fudge said stubbornly.

"What do you mean no proof, you moron? He was right there! Use Veritaserum!" James yelled.

"So you're going to basically execute Sirius Black without even looking into it, without even listening?" Harry asked in disbelief. "You can't do that!" Before anyone could say anything, Harry marched up to Fudge and, with a flick of his wrist, had his wand in hand. "You are making probably the worst mistake of your career." Without another word, Harry walked around Fudge to the door.

"Harry, where are you going?" Hermione called out.

Harry didn't even look back as he opened the door. "I'm going to save my godfather," he said and left, the door closing and locking behind him.

"WHAT? No Harry, go back! Didn't you hear? They are taking me to the Dementors! I am ordering you to go back this instant!"

As quickly as possible, Harry ran down the stairs, nearly running into the entrance statue. The moment it was opened far enough for him to squeeze through, he hurried towards the Main Entrance. The halls were dark but Harry had memorized the way during his month long stay here in August.

"I don't think he heard you Padfoot," Remus said shakily.

As soon as Harry reached the courtyard he closed his eyes and listened. He needed to calm down and utilize his training. It was the only thing that was going to help Black—Sirius—Midnight—whatever. The sound of scuffling footsteps to his far right filled Harry's ears. He quickly opened his eyes and took off in the direction of the noise. He could vaguely hear muffled voices ahead and behind him but didn't pay attention to it. It didn't matter now.

He reached the end of the courtyard and saw three wizards forcing Black towards the lake. They weren't far but they weren't exactly close either. Breaking into a run, Harry pushed his body as fast as it could go, praying that he reached them before they reached the Dementors. He didn't want to face them but he would if he had to. He wasn't going to let Black lose his soul because Fudge was an idiot.

"And I don't want you to lose your soul Harry! Go back!" Sirius cried.

Black was putting up such a fight that no one noticed Harry coming from behind.

"What did you expect? For him to go willingly to the Dementors?" James said angry.

Pointing his wand at the wizard walking behind Black, Harry whispered, "*Stupefy*," and watched as the man collapsed to the ground, unconscious. *One down, two to go*. Harry continued running as the two remaining wizards quickly stopped and turned around to see their fallen comrade. Harry quickly dropped to the ground and remained still. He couldn't give himself away yet.

"What's going on?" asked the one to the left.

"What's going on is you are doing something *extremely* stupid and Harry is trying to prevent that by risking his soul and if something happens to my baby or Sirius I'll be coming back from the beyond to hex you into your next generation," Lily hissed all in one breath.

"We'll get him later," said the one to the right. "Let's go Black. You have a date with the Dementors for a kiss."

"That's what I call extreme loyalty to their fellow Auror," Remus spat disgusted.

"They are so eager to see my soul being sucked out that they don't care," Sirius growled.

The men turned back around and continued towards the lake, roughly pulling Black with them. Harry slowly stood up and continued following. As he passed the unconscious wizard, Harry grabbed the man's wand and pocketed it. *Never leave your opponent armed.*

"NEVER!" James yelled.

Professor Lupin had repeated that rule over and over again along with countless others. Harry had every intention of following them now.

Picking up the pace, Harry tried to catch up with them. *Know what you're facing.* He could hear them talking back and forth, badgering Black. They were actually enjoying this. Harry thought he was going to be sick. How could people be joking about something as horrible as the Dementor's Kiss? What sort of people were working at the Ministry?

"Apparently, horrible people," Lily said disgusted.

Keep your focus on the matter at hand.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry realized they were nearly at the lake. Pushing his body even harder, Harry forced himself to catch up. He was not going to lose his godfather now that he knew the truth. Professor Lupin was not going to lose the last remaining good friend he had. Both of them had lost too much already.

His muscles were screaming as the trio of wizards came closer and closer. Once they were close enough, Harry attacked. He tackled the one on the left from behind, sending all of his weight into him. It wasn't much but he did manage to push the wizard down, face first into the cool, damp grass. Rolling out of the way, Harry quickly faced the other man, pointed his wand to him and stunned him. The Auror, taken by surprise fell to the ground unconscious. Harry quickly rolled over again to face the remaining obstacle. The man hurried to his feet and Harry did the same, their wands pointing at each other.

"Doesn't say much about our Auror squad when three of them are overturned by a skinny teenager," Sirius said pleased.

"You're...you're Harry Potter," the wizard said in shock. "What are you doing here? Do you even know who this man is?"

"YES! AND HE'S INNOCENT!" Remus yelled.

"Sirius Black," Harry answered. "My godfather and innocent of the crimes he's been charged with. How can you let this happen? We gave you Peter Pettigrew. We gave you the person who really betrayed my parents."

"Harry, you need to get out of here," Black said quickly. "The Dementors—"

"Yes, get out of there," Sirius begged.

Before Black could say anything else an intense cold swept over them. Harry's breath caught in his throat as his vision started to cloud over. Turning around, Harry saw the source of the feelings. A swarm of Dementors were floating towards them, over them and around them.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" they all cried.

Distant screaming filled his ears. Harry knew he had run out of time. Quickly, Harry handed over the wand he had picked up over to Black. "I'm not going anywhere," Harry said firmly. "If they're going to kiss you, they're going to kiss me too."

"No, no, no, no one is going to be kissed!" James commanded as if that statement could change what was happening.

The Auror stared at Harry in shock. "You're out of your mind, kid," he said as he stepped in front of Harry. "Get out of here!"

Black pulled Harry close as if to try to shield him from the Dementors. "Listen Harry, I know you want to help me but you need to get out of here," he said urgently. "Please Harry. Don't do this to Remus."

"Yes, don't do this to Moony. He needs you," Sirius said in tears. James was holding Lily while she read, also in tears.

Closing his eyes, Harry tried to ignore the screaming and focus on something happy as the Dementors drew closer. He remembered his week with Midnight and his talks with Professor Lupin. "You could have a legal guardian," Hermione had said. Turning around, Harry pulled out of Black's arms and took a step towards the approaching Dementors.

"*Expecto patronum!*" the Auror shouted but only managed a silver mist. "*Expecto patronum!*"

"No," Black moaned suddenly. "Please...no...."

Harry looked over his shoulder to see Black fall to his knees. "Sirius transform!" he said quickly. "Transform into Midnight!" The coldness became too great to ignore forcing Harry to shiver. Closing his eyes again, Harry forced himself to concentrate on his family, to reach down and find the strength to protect what he so desperately wanted. Raising his wand, felt the screaming drift away as he found a powerful calmness deep inside his mind. There was no pain whatsoever, only peace.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" Harry bellowed as he opened his eyes. Blinding silver light erupted out of his wand, creating three distinct forms. One was a large silver stag, Prongs, the second was of a fierce silver wolf, Moony, and the third was a large silver shaggy dog, Midnight. The three animals took their places around the four wizards (three conscious, one not), shielding them from the Dementors. Silver light flowed around them as the Dementors were slowly pushed backwards. Harry tried to keep his focus but could feel himself weakening. He fell to his knees but still kept his wand pointed outward, pushing more and more of himself into the

phoenix core. The screaming was gone but the coldness remained. He could almost swear he heard someone calling his name but for once it wasn't his mother's fearful voice.

"He did it! He pushed them away," Lily sobbed.

"Harry! Harry, look at me!"

"Yes, please Harry look at whoever is calling," James pleaded, "Be alright."

His arm fell to his side as he slumped forward into something firm but not hard. Arms wrapped around him and held him tightly as muffled words were whispered into his ear. It took Harry a moment to figure out someone was holding him against their chest like Professor Lupin had done but the voice he was hearing wasn't Professor Lupin's. They were rocking back and forth as the voice started to clear.

"Come on, Harry. Please be all right. Please wake up."

"What in Merlin's name happened?!?" the voice of the Minister shouted. "What was that?"

"That was my son correcting your stupidity!" James cried.

"James 'stupidness' isn't a word," Remus tried to scold but he was too worried to put the right emphasis on the scolding.

"Should be, there has to be a word to define Fudge!" James said angry.

"It was Potter, Minister," said the only Auror still conscious as he revived his coworker. "That was his Patronus. I've never seen anything like it. I've never seen anyone having three forms. He pushed all of the Dementors away, saving all of us from the Kiss."

"Shouldn't have saved *you*," James muttered.

"By sacrificing himself in the process," spat Professor Lupin as he hurried over to the teen. "How is he, Sirius?"

"How do you think he is? He overcharged his spell once again," Remus explained annoyed.

"He must be one powerful kid to have three forms," James said.

"I am his form too," Sirius said happy.

It was then that Harry realized he was in Black's arms. It was Black's voice he had been hearing. "I—I don't know," Black said nervously. "He—he's not responding. Why isn't he responding?"

Professor Lupin let out a sigh. "He probably overcharged the spell again," he said reassuringly as he reached in his pocket, pulled out a bar of chocolate and removed the wrapper. "He'll be fine in a bit. Open his mouth Sirius." Black did as he was told and watched as Lupin broke off a piece of chocolate and put it in Harry's mouth. Lupin looked over his shoulder at the onlookers and nodded, signaling that Harry would be fine.

"Cornelius, I'm afraid I must interfere," Professor Dumbledore said firmly. "Sirius Black is now under my protection until you have a chance to properly question Peter Pettigrew and confirm Sirius' allegations. I give you my word he won't be going anywhere."

Harry groaned as he slowly opened his eyes and saw Professor Lupin and Black looking down at him. He could feel a headache coming and couldn't seem to move his limbs without extreme effort. He could taste the chocolate still melting in his mouth as his muddled mind was slowly clearing. To say he was tired would certainly be an understatement but Harry knew he couldn't sleep. This wasn't over yet.

"Don't start meddling with Ministry matters, Dumbledore," Mr. Fudge said heatedly. "Black has caused enough trouble! He's a murderer and a kidnapper! He's finally going to get what he deserves!"

"How can someone be so THICK?" Lily asked exasperated.

"No," Harry croaked out as he tried to sit up properly. He couldn't let this happen. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to shake the confusion out of his head and focus on the Minister. Professor Lupin and Black helped Harry sit up by basically holding him in place. "You can't do this. Stop trying to cover up your mistakes by making more."

Fudge took a step towards Harry, his eyes narrowing. "Do not mess with matters you couldn't possibly understand, Potter," he spat. "You already interfered with Ministry affairs once. You should consider yourself lucky you are not arrested and expelled. "

"He can't do that! Harry just saved everyone," James said outraged.

Harry glared at Fudge as he gathered all of his strength and slowly stood up. Cornelius Fudge had no idea how much Harry actually knew about wizarding law. He had spent hours researching it in the library to find out what he could do to stay away from the Dursleys. "I, Harry Potter, godson and heir to Sirius Black, charge the Ministry of Magic with the wrongful imprisonment and conspiracy against one Sirius Black," Harry stated firmly, his gaze and voice never wavering despite how much he felt like collapsing. "I also charge the Ministry of Magic with indirectly contributing to the pain and suffering I, Harry Potter, had to endure for twelve years at the abuse delivered to me by my Uncle, Vernon Dursley, by denying me placement with my godfather, Sirius Black, my rightful guardian."

"Brilliant!" James said.

"What's that going to help with?" Lily asked.

"He just made an accusation in front of Ministry officials. Now Sirius can't be given the Dementor's kiss until investigations and trials are over," James explained.

"Do you think he could charge the Minister with 'stupidness'?" Sirius asked.

"Unfortunately that isn't a crime," Remus answered.

Fudge stared at Harry, his eyes wide then quickly regained his composure. "You have no proof for any of your accusations," he hissed.

Harry stood his ground, regardless of the dizziness that was starting to invade his head and his vision. "And you had no proof that Sirius had anything to do with the death of my parents but that didn't stop you from throwing him in Azkaban without a trial that would have proven him innocent!" he shouted. "I will formally file my charges if necessary for the truth to be known! It will be in every wizarding paper of how the Ministry carelessly helped a Death Eater and murderer roam free for twelve years!"

Fudge paled at the mention of the papers and quickly turned to Dumbledore for help. "Albus, he is your student!" he said angrily. "Control him!"

Professor Dumbledore glanced at Harry with an amused look on his face before returning his attention to the Minister. "Yes, Harry is my student," he said pleasantly, "who I am extremely proud of. Harry does have a point, Cornelius. He could charge the Ministry and sue them for retribution. I would hate to see what a jury would award the-boy-who-lived after hearing Sirius' testimony under Veritaserum and the truth of Harry's home life. It could run into the thousands of Galleons."

"They'd be ruined," Remus said pleased.

It was then that Harry glanced around and saw that all three Aurors were conscious and were standing beside Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape. One of the Aurors stepped forward and whispered something in Fudge's ear. Fudge's face instantly turned red in anger as he stared at the Auror. Harry knew why. Since Harry had made a charge in front of Ministry witnesses, claiming that he was going to file a formal complaint, all of those involved with that charge couldn't be harmed in anyway. In short, Harry had just given Sirius Black a temporary stay of execution.

Unable to do anything about it, Fudge left Hogwarts with three Aurors who were desperately trying to hide their smiles. They obviously found it amusing that the Minister of Magic had been outsmarted by a thirteen-year-old.

"Not that hard to do," Lily huffed.

Sirius was to remain at Hogwarts, far away from the student body. Harry watched the Ministry employees leave, still trying to hide any sign of weakness. The moment they were out of sight, Harry was instantly pulled into a hug by Black and Lupin. That was the last thing Harry remembered before darkness took him.

"Only one chapter left," Lily said.

"Then read my good lady," James said in a mock bow.

Chapter 20

Passing of the Torch

Distant voices slowly brought Harry out of his slumber. He felt sore and had a headache. As his senses started to return, Harry realized that he was tucked in a bed tightly with something on his chest. He groaned as he lifted his arm to move it and felt a familiar fur run through his fingers, Midnight's fur. Resting a hand on the dog's neck, Harry relaxed as he started to drift back off to sleep. Midnight was safe and that was all that mattered.

"Aw, how cute," Lily cooed.

The sound of a door opening was quickly followed by a wave of chatter filling the room. There were too many voices to understand what any of them could possibly be saying. The door closed again quickly, dampening the voices much to Harry's relief so they were back to distant murmurs. He didn't want to see anyone. He just wanted to sleep.

"I see Sirius has found a comfortable spot,"

Remus and James sniggered while Sirius glared at them.

"You're just jealous," he huffed.

said the pleasant voice of Professor Dumbledore. "Both of them have earned some peace after all these years. I just wish it could last."

"Excuse me now! Why wouldn't it last?" Sirius asked worried.

"I guess because they still have to go through the trial," Lily said.

"But they have Peter!" Sirius exclaimed.

"Yeah, but you didn't forget that Fudge was all ready to hand you to the Dementors last chapter," James said bitterly.

"He'll be doing everything he can to cover up his mistakes," Remus grimaced, "Really, what could we expect from someone named Fudge?"

Harry felt a gentle hand touch his forehead. "Well, Sirius wants to talk to Harry first," said the quite voice of Professor Lupin. "I think he's worried about Harry getting his hopes up. How long do we have before the Ministry takes him into custody?"

Professor Dumbledore let out a sigh. "It's difficult to say," he answered truthfully. "Harry's threat will give us at least a few days to arrange a trial and a defense for Sirius." There was a moment of silence. "That was a remarkable Patronus if I do say so myself. Did you happen to notice the third form that appeared resembling a lost pet?"

"YES!" Sirius cried happy.

"Should we be worried that he is happy at being called a pet?" Lily asked.

"No, Sirius is just weird that way," James said calmly.

"I am happy because Harry sees me as a positive force in his life," Sirius said indignantly.

"And a pet," Remus chuckled. Sirius huffed.

"I can't explain what I saw," admitted Professor Lupin.

"That's a first," James chuckled.

"Yes, how come you can't explain?" Sirius asked mockingly, "Professor Moony knows everything!" Remus tried his best to ignore them.

"How do I being to explain it to Harry? *No one* has two forms much less three. What does this mean for him? Dumbledore please be honest. I need to know what to tell my cub when he has questions which he's bound to have. I need to know what to tell him when he wants to know how something like this mess with the Ministry could happen."

Harry groaned as he shifted, testing how sore his muscles really were. He inhaled sharply as he turned his head causing pain to shoot through his spine. So far a sore neck was all he could find. His movements alerted Midnight who quickly woke and jumped off the bed, transforming with a *pop*. Harry groaned again at Midnight's departure from the bed as he partially opened his eyes to see three blurry faces.

"Why did you leave Padfoot? Now my baby is groaning," James said crossed.

Professor Lupin gently slid Harry's glasses on his face, allowing the teen to see them clearly. "How are you feeling, cub?" he asked. "We were starting to get worried. It's been two days since your standoff with Fudge."

"TWO DAYS! He slept for two days!" Sirius exclaimed.

"Well, he did a very impressive bit of magic. It's understandable," Lily said.

It took a moment for Harry to process what was being said. He had been sleeping for two days? How? It felt like it had all happened just moments ago. "Sorry," Harry said weakly. He figured he needed to explain what he did but think he had the strength to do it. "I—I didn't know what else to do. I—I couldn't let them—"

"Hey slow down, Pronglet," Black said as he sat down on the side of the bed, resting a hand on Harry's arm.

"I called him Pronglet! Just like I said before," Sirius said happily.

"Yes Sirius, we're all very happy that you agree with yourself," Remus said rolling his eyes.

He looked a little healthier and happier than when Harry had last seen him but there was a pain in his eyes that looked like it would never go away. "We're not going to yell at you. You saved my life and for that I will be forever grateful...no matter what happens."

Harry looked at Black in confusion. "What?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Yeah, good question. What's this "no matter what happens" rubbish? Where are you going Padfoot?" James demanded. Sirius just shrugged.

Black glanced over at Professor Lupin before returning his gaze to Harry. "Nothing worth worrying about, kiddo," he said with a soft smile. "You've done more than your fair share already. Now it's up to us to make things right." Black smiled as he ran a hand through Harry's messy hair. "I'm so proud of you, Harry. I know your parents would be too."

"We are very proud of you Harry," Lily said beaming, "Right James!"

"Yeah, yes! Humongously proud," James said happily.

"Is that even a word?" Remus asked.

Harry didn't know why but he had the feeling Sirius Black was hiding something. It was almost like he was saying goodbye but why? He was getting a trial now and would be found innocent. It didn't make any sense. Glancing over at Professors Dumbledore and Lupin, Harry saw that they both had guarded looks on their faces. What weren't they telling him? Had he made matters worse? Was Black in even more trouble now? Were Professor Dumbledore and Professor Lupin?

"What's going on?" Harry repeated as he looked back at Black. "Why are you saying goodbye?"

James crossed his arms and glared at Sirius.

Black looked taken aback. "Goodbye?" he asked as he touched the side of Harry's face. "I'm not going anywhere."

"See! I am not going anywhere, you can stop that James," Sirius said trying to cover James glare with his hands.

I still have to sit through a trial but the important fact is that you know and believe the truth. That is more than I could ever hope for. I now have something to look forward to when this entire mess is over." Black glanced over at Lupin and smiled slyly. "That is if your *guardian* will allow it of course."

Remus sized Sirius. Taped his chin and said, "Hum, I don't know. You're not what one would call a very good influence on children." James and Lily doubled in laughter Sirius scowled at Remus.

Professor Lupin grinned back. "We shall see, Padfoot," he said. "I have to do what's in Harry's best interests you know."

Black faked a hurt expression towards the Defense teacher. "Best interests?" he asked playfully. "Denying him access to his godfather is in his best interests? You wound me, Moony. You wound me deeply."

Harry just listened as his eyes closed. It was a welcomed change to hear Professor Lupin sound so relaxed and actually joking around. It was something that Harry had always wanted for Lupin. This made it all worth it, seeing Black and Professor Lupin like they most likely had been before his parents had been killed. Harry could only hope that it would stay this way.

"Us too Harry, us too," James said.

It was another two days before Harry was allowed to leave his sanctuary which was the same day notice of Black's 'capture' and trial date was announced in the 'Daily Prophet'. The entire article was extremely vague about Black's capture, current location and the reason for a trial being issued when he was supposed to be receiving the Kiss. The trial was scheduled for early next week and was to be held in a closed courtroom meaning the press wouldn't be allowed in. Unfortunately Fudge had also pushed for no observers which meant Harry and Professor Lupin couldn't attend either.

"Yeah, like Fudge would want anyone to witness his mistakes," Remus said bitterly.

"Still, I think you and Harry had the right to be there," James stated.

Professor Lupin certainly wasn't happy about that. He wanted to be there to support his friend like he should have years ago. Professor Dumbledore had pointed out that neither Harry nor Professor Lupin would be able to attend anyways since the trial was during final exams but that didn't matter to Harry or Lupin. They were more than willing to miss them to support the third member of their family.

"You know Remus. Harry could miss the exams and take them later, but you, as a teacher, shouldn't," Lily said. Remus just shrugged.

During Harry's recovery in Professor Lupin's guest quarters, Sirius Black never left Harry's side. They had talked about anything that came to mind, most of it was about those full moon nights when the Marauders strolled the forest and grounds as their animal forms. Professor Lupin hadn't been much help since he had a hard time recollecting what actually happened those nights with the wolf taking over his mind as well as his body. Black had also explained

to Harry about Professor Lupin's transformations making Harry aware that they weren't a walk in the park. They were extremely painful and agonizing to witness.

Remus glared at Sirius, "What?" Sirius asked.

"There was no need for Harry to know that Sirius!" he said angry.

"I think he should know. He cares about you," Sirius said defensively.

Professor Lupin hadn't been too pleased about that talk. He had obviously wanted to keep his pain to himself.

The entire atmosphere at Hogwarts had changed dramatically since Black's 'capture'. Everyone seemed to be more relaxed since they all assumed that Black was far from Hogwarts.

"How wrong they are," James stated.

"Imagine their reactions if Sirius went for a stroll in the castle?" Lily asked grinning.

"Oh, that would be priceless," Remus said laughing. Sirius was wriggling his fingers in anticipation.

The twenty-four hour patrol around Harry had ended giving Harry some room to breathe and the chance to sneak away to meet up with his guardian and godfather. Ron and Hermione had been told everything but were the only students who knew Black was still at Hogwarts. They had even met with Black and Lupin, wanting to know more about the two most important people in Harry's life.

At this Remus and Sirius were bursting in joy but refrained from commenting in respect to James and Lily.

With everything going on Harry found it difficult to study for exams but Black had jumped into the role as tutor since Hermione was overwhelmed with her own class load.

"Oh, no! Poor Harry," Lily said, "Imagine what he would teach him."

Sirius threw her a cheeky grin.

The lessons in August had helped Harry in Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology and Defense Against the Dark Arts which left Potions, Astronomy, History of Magic, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination for Harry to worry about. Black had been a great help with History of Magic, Care of Magical Creatures and Astronomy but admitted that he wasn't the greatest at Potions or Divination, leaving those two for Harry to handle on his own.

Harry had been there with Professor Lupin when Professor Dumbledore and Black—no Sirius—had left for the Ministry of Magic through the floo network Monday morning. They had been warned that the trial would probably last more than a day which meant Sirius would be put in a holding cell at the Ministry overnight. Both Harry and Lupin had asked about visiting but had been denied the right. Once the trial started the only person Sirius could see was Dumbledore who was overseeing the trial.

With the thought of the trial taking up the majority of his thoughts, Harry found it difficult to focus on his exams. He was basically going through the motions. Transfiguration was first followed by Charms that afternoon. Once they were over, Harry hurried to Professor Lupin's office for news but there was none. Harry's preoccupied state ended up being a plus in his Potions final the following afternoon since he was too busy worrying about Sirius to even realize that Professor Snape was hovering over his shoulder most of the time he was brewing his Confusing Concoction. As a result, his potion had almost turned out as well as Hermione's.

"Snape must have *loved* that," Remus snorted.

After Potions, Harry had run out of the classroom so fast no one could try to stop him. Once again he met up with Professor Lupin for an update only to receive none forcing him to once again go through the motions during his Astronomy exam at midnight, History of Magic the following morning (Sirius' help had proved to be a life saver),

"HA!" Sirius said to Lily.

"Miracles can happen," she said back.

and Herbology that afternoon. Entering the castle from the greenhouses, Harry saw Professor Lupin walking towards his office and knew from the nervous look on his face that there had been no news. He had to admit that he was starting to get worried too. How long did it take to have Sirius tell the truth?

"The problem isn't Sirius telling the truth. The problem is people believing and most importantly: FUDGE!" James explained.

Thursday morning brought the Defense Against the Dark Arts exam. Professor Lupin had created an obstacle course containing a Grinylow, Red Caps, a Hinkypunk and a Boggart. Harry had completed it and thankfully hadn't overcharged his Patronus when the Dementor/Boggart appeared. Ever since that night near the lake Harry had been extremely careful with casting spells. He couldn't risk something like that happening again.

Harry's final exam was Divination which was that afternoon. As he reached the classroom with Ron, Harry could only groan when Neville had warned them the exam would be looking into a crystal ball. He hadn't been able to see anything during class and knew he most likely wouldn't this time. This meant Harry would be resulted to do what he had done for most of the year in Divination: make things up.

Ron went before Harry and after twenty minutes came back out and could only wish Harry good luck before Harry's name was called. Entering the extremely warm room, Harry made his way through the empty chairs to where Professor Trelawney was sitting before a large crystal ball, waiting for him to take his seat. The strange scent of the room made Harry cough and his eyes sting.

"Good afternoon," Trelawney said softly. "Now, gaze into the Orb and tell me what you see. Please feel free to take you time.

"He's going to need his time to make up a good tragic story so he gets a good grade," James said.

"Normally I wouldn't condone such behavior but in Trelawney's case I'll make an exception," Lily said scowling at the book.

Harry did what he was told and looked into the crystal ball. The swirling white fog seemed to be moving around quickly, making him dizzy. After a few moments, Harry was forced to sit back, close his eyes and shake his head. *That* had never happened before but Harry just pushed it off to exhaustion. It had been a stressful week.

"What is it, dear?" Trelawney prompted. "Did you see something?"

Harry opened his eyes and looked at her before returning his gaze to the crystal ball. The swirling had returned to normal but there was something almost resembling a dark cloud

within the fog. It was faint but there was a distinct shape to it. "Er—there's something that almost looks like a rat," he said uncomfortably. "It looks like it's frozen while it had been running away from something."

"A rat running? I don't like that," James said.

"It's just a coincidence James," Lily said but the boys seemed worried nonetheless.

Professor Trelawney instantly started scribbling on her parchment. "Interesting," she whispered. "Is there anything else around it? Another animal? A person maybe?"

Harry shook his head. "It's all alone," he said then sat back in the chair while still staring at the crystal ball. Why was he seeing a rat? Pettigrew was locked away and that was the only rat he knew. *Remember it's all fake*, Harry reminded himself. *None of this is real.*

"Yes, Harry. Relax, it's just your imagination," Lily said.

Professor Trelawney nodded. "Very well," she said. "We can leave it there. Just remember sometimes what we see is more symbolic than actual."

Harry nodded and picked up his bag and he turned to leave. He wanted to get as far from this classroom as possible. The crystal ball was really making him nervous. Harry knew that he needed to talk to Professor Lupin as fast as possible. Something about a rat running just settled wrong with him. He needed to make certain that Pettigrew was still in the custody of the Ministry.

A loud, harsh voice broke into his thoughts. "IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

"WHAT?" Sirius asked nervously.

Harry turned around quickly to see Professor Trelawney sitting stiffly in her armchair with unclear eyes and a sagging mouth. It was almost like she was in some sort of trance. "Professor?" Harry asked nervously.

Professor Trelawney's eyes started to roll before she spoke again in the same strange voice that was far from her own. "THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT,

BEFORE MIDNIGHT...THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANT'S AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT...BEFORE MIDNIGHT...THE SERVANT...WILL SET OUT...TO REJOIN...HIS MASTER..."

"Do you think that's an actual prediction?" Sirius asked. Lily snorted.

"Honestly, who cares," she said.

"Well, I care. I don't want Voldemort back," James said.

"Actual predictions are very rare," Lily said evenly, "and Trelawney is a fraud."

The others looked skeptical.

Harry slowly backed away in shock. Voldemort? Coming back? No, it wasn't possible. It just couldn't be possible. Not now. Not after everything he had been through to get to this point. Not after he had found Professor Lupin and Sirius. Staring at the teacher, Harry watched as Trelawney's head fell forward before it snapped up again, her eyes normal and staring at him like they usually did.

"I must have drifted off," Trelawney said softly. "I'm so sorry. You are excused, Mr. Potter."

Harry didn't need to be told twice and hurried out of the room as fast as he could. He definitely needed to see Professor Lupin now. Lupin would know what to do.

"See, even Harry knows that Moony knows everything," Sirius said as if proving a complicated theory. James nodded solemnly and Lily and Remus could just roll their eyes.

Harry didn't stop until he reached Professor Lupin's quarters only to find them empty. Not wanting to forget anything Professor Trelawney said, Harry quickly pulled out a piece of parchment, his quill and ink then sat down at Professor Lupin's desk and wrote everything he could remember. He knew this had to be some sort of sick joke but there was just something about her voice that really freaked Harry out. It was almost like it wasn't really her speaking, like she was possessed or something.

He had nearly finished when he heard the door open and looked up to see Professor Lupin enter followed by Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. All three of them had a

seriousness about them that made Harry extremely nervous. Professor Lupin looked up, saw Harry sitting there and stopped in his tracks. The moment their eyes met Harry knew something bad happened.

Professor Lupin hurried to Harry's side, knelt down and turned the teenager so they were facing each other. "Harry...listen...there's something we need to tell you," he said gently. "The trial is over—it finished earlier today but something happened, something we couldn't prevent—"

"Oh, no. I AM INNOCENT!" Sirius yelled.

"They can't have convicted him, right? I mean, use Veritaserum people!" James yelled.

Harry shook his head slowly as his eyes filled with tears. "No!" he cried in a shaky voice. "He's innocent! They can't do this!" He looked over at Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall hoping for them to tell him it wasn't true. Tears began to fall when they said nothing. It wasn't possible. How could the Ministry take him away? It wasn't fair! None of this was fair!

Professor Lupin gently turned Harry's head so they were looking at each other again. "Harry, listen to me," he said calmly. "Sirius was found innocent of serving Voldemort and betraying your parents

"Oh! Thank God!" Lily said relieved. James, Sirius and Remus were jumping and yelling. They all hugged and congratulated Sirius. To his surprise he even got a hug from Lily.

but we weren't so lucky on the kidnapping charge. The prosecution was desperate to convict Sirius on something and so was the Minister. There was nothing we could do, cub. We had to reveal the real reason Sirius took you from your Aunt and Uncle's. We had to admit that you were being abused."

"Poor Harry. Now everyone will know," James said sadly.

"Innocent?" Harry asked as he closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief as the tears continued to fall. He had stopped listening after the second sentence, his mind unable to process any more. "He's innocent," Harry repeated to himself. "He's innocent."

Lupin pulled Harry into an embrace and held him tightly before glancing over at the other teachers in the room. All three of them finally realized how attached Harry was to his godfather. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall each conjured a chair and sat down, waiting patiently for Harry to deal with everything Professor Lupin had said and had yet to say.

The door opened and closed quietly everyone heard it anyways. Looking up, Harry's eyes went wide when he saw who had entered. Standing behind Professor Dumbledore, wearing a navy blue robe was Sirius Black. He had cleaned up making him look more like the Sirius Black in the pictures Harry had. His hair was even cut short which made him look a lot younger, even a little more respectable.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Lily snorted.

"Sirius!" Harry shouted as he pulled away from Lupin and hurried over to his godfather.

Sirius knelt down and pulled Harry into a fierce hug, holding him tightly while looking directly at Professor Lupin. Lupin stood up, catching a glance at the piece of parchment on the desk. Picking it up, Lupin read the lines written and paled. "Harry," Lupin said carefully. "What is this?"

"Oh, not you too Remus!" Lily cried.

"Lily, we know you don't believe in this stuff but better safe than sorry," James said and she relented.

Harry pulled out of the embrace and turned around. "Oh, that," he said nervously. "Um...Professor Trelawney acted strange during my exam and started saying that. I was going to ask you about it being true or not but..."

Professor Lupin handed the piece of parchment over to Professor Dumbledore who read it with Sirius looking over his shoulder. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Sirius looking down at him before looking over at Lupin. There seemed to be a silent exchange of words between the two as Professor Dumbledore stood up and nodded at Professor McGonagall to do the same.

"I know you three have quite a bit to talk about," Professor Dumbledore said pleasantly then looked directly at Harry. "I will look into this, Harry. It may be a real prediction. It wouldn't be Sybill's first."

"What? She made another one? Who knew?" James said between impressed and disbelieving.

Harry looked at Dumbledore with a raised eyebrow as the Headmaster left followed by Professor McGonagall. Professor Trelawney has made an actual prediction before? Who knew?

"Like father like son," Sirius said muffling laughter.

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts as Sirius led him by the shoulder to one of the recently vacated chairs and urged him to sit down. Looking up at Black then over at Lupin, Harry realized that something else was going on.

Professor Lupin walked around his desk so he was standing beside Sirius. Both of them looked a little nervous. "Harry, did you hear me when I told you about the kidnapping charges?" he asked gently.

Harry thought for a moment then recalled the second half of Professor Lupin's statement. His eyes widened in alarm as the entire matter hit him. Sirius had to admit what he had seen at Privet Drive. "Everyone's going to know now, aren't they?" he asked nervously as his gaze fell to the ground. "They're going to know that I couldn't even stand up to my Muggle Uncle."

"Hey! He had no right to hit you!" James cried, "It's not your fault!"

Sirius knelt down, put a finger under Harry's chin and lifted it so their eyes met. "I'm afraid the fact that your uncle was mistreating you will be in the 'Daily Prophet' tomorrow," he said gently. "I didn't want to tell, Pronglet, but I was under the influence of Vertiserium. I had no choice. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course he does," Lily said, "Harry is a very reasonable person!"

Harry nodded. Professor Lupin had told him about Vertiserium so Harry knew Sirius didn't have a choice but he was still uneasy about his home life being brought public. What would

everyone think? Ron and Hermione already knew but they were different. They had been through a lot over the past few years. They also had known how horrible the Dursleys were before this summer. No one else (other than the rest of the Weasley siblings) had any idea what Harry's childhood had been like.

"Listen Harry, I know this is a lot to handle but please remember that we will be here for you," Professor Lupin said tenderly. "You're not alone anymore. You're stuck with us for as long as you want."

"Forever!" Sirius cried happily.

"Really?" Harry asked hopefully. "We—we can be a family?"

Both Sirius and Professor Lupin smiled. "Of course," Sirius said as he ruffled Harry's hair. Looking up at Lupin, Sirius received a nod then returned his attention back to Harry. "Pronglet, I want you to know that I'm not trying to mess up what you have with Moony here but there are certain restrictions that prevent someone like Moony from doing what he has wanted to do for the past twelve years: to adopt you.

"Stupid, bigoted laws," James muttered angrily.

I had the opportunity to do the next best thing for both of you so after my trial I was allowed to make a few requests. *One* of them was to be given custody of you with Moony as your secondary guardian. It took quite a bit of persuasion on Dumbledore's end but it was granted."

"YES!" four voices yelled.

Harry's eyes widened beyond belief as he looked back and forth between Sirius and Professor Lupin almost daring them to counter what he had thought he heard. "Y—you mean I really never have to go back to the Dursleys?" he asked happily. "I get to stay with both of you from now on?"

"If that is what you want, Harry," Professor Lupin said with a nod. "We don't want to force you into anything. There are other families with more experience that would be willing to take you in—"

"Oh, Moony, don't be daft! Of course he wants *you two!*" Lily said.

"—no, I want to stay with both of you," Harry interrupted. "Other families are other families. You two are my family." He smiled to himself and jumped out of his chair and wrapped his arms around Sirius who returned the embrace. "My family," he repeated as he looked up at Professor Lupin with a huge grin on his face. Professor Lupin knelt down beside Sirius and Harry repositioned himself so he was embracing both of the Marauders feeling truly happy for the first time he could remember.

"Awwwwwwww!" the four cooed simultaneously.

The next morning was probably the most chaotic Hogwarts had seen in a long time. The Black trial was on the front page of the 'Daily Prophet' alerting everyone that Sirius Black was not only innocent of all charges but was the new guardian of Harry Potter. To Harry's relief, the paper only said that he had been mistreated by his uncle, not going into any detail that Sirius had most likely revealed during the trial. Most of the school overlooked the mistreatment and focused on Sirius Black being found innocent.

"That's good," Lily said.

"Yes, but you can bet Malfoy paid attention and is going to use that against Harry," Sirius said darkly.

Groups of students tried to find out more about Sirius from Harry but Ron and Hermione stuck to Harry like glue, chasing as many people away as they could.

The weekend after exams was a Hogsmeade weekend and the first one Harry was allowed to attend, with Professor Lupin and Midnight serving as his supervisors. Having Midnight at his side ended up being more of a laugh than everything. Half of the people that saw the large black dog believed that Midnight was the Grim and ran the other way. Midnight was certainly enjoying himself in playing fetch in with Ron and Hermione while Professor Lupin seemed to be trying to hold back his amusement. Sometimes Sirius could be a bigger kid than anyone.

"So true," James laughed.

Their enjoyable day hadn't lasted. It was early afternoon when Professor Lupin received an Owl from Professor Dumbledore then insisted that they return to the castle. The moment they entered the Entrance Hall, they were alarmed to see the Minister there flanked by two Aurors. Harry, Sirius and Professor Lupin were immediately taken to Dumbledore's office. Sirius and Professor Lupin were questioned about their whereabouts for the past few days. After nearly thirty minutes, Sirius had lost his patience and demanded to know what this was all about.

"Thirty minutes Sirius! I am impressed! Who knew you'd become a patient man. Right now you'd lose your patience after thirty seconds," Remus said with a cheeky smile. Sirius scowled.

That was when Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, revealed that Peter Pettigrew had vanished from his holding cell.

"WHAT? The morons lost Peter?" Remus asked outraged.

Sirius immediately started scolding the Minister for his incompetence but stopped when Professor Lupin reminded him of Harry. His outrage forgotten immediately, Sirius was instantly at Harry's side to comfort his godson. Harry couldn't believe it. How could Pettigrew escape? This was supposed to be over. Pettigrew was supposed to be tried and found guilty of his crimes.

"Do you think this has anything to do with Trelawney's prediction?" Sirius asked.

"I sure hope not," James answered.

Sirius and Lupin didn't say another word and took Harry to Professor Lupin's quarters where they spent the remainder of the day trying to deal with this new revelation. It wasn't just the matter of Pettigrew escaping that bothered them. There was also the possible prediction Professor Trelawney had made that weighted heavily on their minds. What if it was true?

All they could do now was hope it wasn't.

The following morning the entire school was in an uproar. It seemed that one of the Aurors who had been with Fudge had commented about allowing 'that werewolf Lupin' to teach children.

"BIGGOTED MORON! Sue him Moony!" James cried.

"For what? Telling the truth," Remus asked resigned.

"OK! So you can't sue him but I can punch him," Sirius said a menacing gleam in his eyes.

Professor Lupin's secret was out. Fortunately, no one but the Slytherins seemed to mind since Lupin was such a popular teacher.

"See! No one cares," Lily pointed out happy.

"The parents will care," Remus said sadly.

The only benefit was that no one could really do anything about it now since the school year was over.

That morning was the day everyone left Hogwarts for their summer holidays...everyone but Harry, Professor Lupin and Sirius that is. The three of them were spending the entire summer at Hogwarts as a favor to Professor Dumbledore. Harry didn't know all of the details but he did know that his guardians were helping the Hogwarts staff with something for next term.

"Oh, my! I dread to imagine what can come from Sirius helping them," Lily said, "What is McGonagall thinking?"

Standing outside the Entrance Hall, Harry watched as the horseless carriages left for the train station. It was strange. One year ago Harry dreaded the summer holidays and now he was actually looking forward to them. It was amazing how much could change in a year. He knew this summer would be difficult and exhausting. Remus and Sirius had already warned him. He was looking forward to the challenge.

Sirius.

"Me," Sirius said dreamy.

"We know Padfoot," James snickered.

The thought of his godfather made Harry smile. Instead of an Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin who despised him, Harry now had a godfather who risked everything to protect him and an 'Uncle' who would do anything for him. Remus (or Moony as Harry now called him) had resigned from his teaching position which had disappointed Harry greatly.

"WHAT?" James cried.

"NO!" Sirius yelled.

"Just makes sense," Remus said calmly, "If I stayed the parents will start complaining to Dumbledore"

"So, let them complain," Lily said annoyed, "They don't complain about having Snape there and he is horrible."

"Yes, but Snape doesn't pose a danger to the students," Remus tried to reason.

"Neither do you," James said angry, "You've been attending school for five years and nothing happened." Remus tried to argue again but was silenced by three glares.

He never gave a real reason for the decision but Harry knew it was partially out of fear. No one wanted a werewolf teaching their children and now that Moony's secret was out there was little anyone could do. There was also the small factor of his best friend coming back into his life. The two Marauders had a lot of catching up to do.

"Sure have, so many pranks, so little time," Sirius said. Lily rolled her eyes.

Harry continued to watch as the last carriage vanished from sight. His thoughts drifted back to two weeks ago when he had challenged the Minister of Magic for the freedom of Sirius Black. Everyone thought he had been out of his mind. Even Sirius questioned his sanity but it had worked and now Sirius was free. That was all that mattered.

A familiar hand touched his right shoulder making Harry look to see Sirius standing to his right, grinning. "Are you ready for a true Marauder Summer?" he asked happily.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "Ready as I'll ever be, Midnight," he said.

Everyone cheered.

It was now a joke between them. Sirius insisted on being called Padfoot instead of Midnight but it just felt wrong. To Harry, Sirius Black, his legal guardian would always be Midnight, the one who saved him from his Uncle Vernon and the one who saved him from the lies the wizarding world had believed for twelve years. Midnight had also been the one to deliver him to Moony who had rescued his soul that had been damaged by the Dursleys. Harry didn't know where he would be if it hadn't been for Moony and Midnight. Right now, Harry couldn't think of any other place he would rather be.

The end

"Uau!" James said.

"I know," Lily said.

"Should we review?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Sirius said grabbing a quill. They all wrote their reviews and when they were called for dinner James put the stack of papers on his bedside table. When they came back the papers were gone.

Chapter 21- A Marauder Review

The Marauders' Reviews:

Dear Ksomm814,

I would like to say that your story, *Midnight Guardian*, was very enticing and interesting. I thought you are a very good writer. That said, I do have to express my disappointment at being called things like murderer, Death Eater and traitor so many times. I am happy that you set the record straight at the end but I am still waiting for my full apology.

I also would like to give little writing tips. You depict your characters very well but I think I may help with some adjectives to describe a certain Potions Masters: slimy git, curtain of grease, Professor Snivellus. You can also remind him of his lack in underpants hygiene.

Thank you for giving my godson back to me and Moony!

Yours,

Not a murderer.

Not a Death Eater.

Not a traitor.

Sirius Black

Dear Ksomm814,

You write very well. I was always captivated by your story. But I think my son could have done without the beating and Dementors.... and Snape. On that matter I want to second my friend Sirius and add some other adjectives such as Big Nose and bat of the dungeons.

Thank you very much for letting me know my son since, well, you know, I am dead and all.

Yours sincerely,

James Potter

Dear Ksomm814,

You are very eloquent and catching writer. I enjoyed the experience of reading your novel. But I must say; it's not my fault I am a werewolf! That puts a lot of stress on my body so please lay off on saying I have grey hair!

Sincerely,

Remus Lupin

Dear Ksomm814,

I first ask you to please disregard any 'advice' given by Black and Potter.

Did you have to make my baby suffer so much? He needs his mummy.

I look forward to seeing Petunia getting punished and also thank you for letting me know my baby.

Lily Evans

PS: And how in the world did I end up marrying Potter?

The end

Thank you all for reading and reviewing.