

Prisoners

by scaranda

Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. Richard Lovelace.

One of One

Chapter 1 of 1

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SIRIUS

I'd been in Azkaban for about a year the first time he came.

I had made the mistake of thinking that the first few months would be the worst and that after that I would lose myself, lose my howling rage at what had happened to bring me here to do penance for what I had not done, but that hadn't happened. What I had thought was the depth of despair was still able to plunge to a blacker place than I would have believed possible, until I was nothing but a withered husk of fury.

During my first couple of weeks I'd scratched the days of my incarceration on the wall. I started at the very top left-hand corner so I would have room, room for the rest of my life ... but I'd given that up now. After a night of rape so brutal that I'd been unable to scratch, to even stand to reach the wall, forgotten the next day and couldn't remember that I'd forgotten ... and now it didn't matter ... just days and nights rolling into one another as my awareness of my self diminished, and all that was left me was pain. The pain of knowing I was innocent ... and guilty. And the waste, the wretched waste of it all. I wept sometimes, when I had the presence of mind and the energy: for James and Lily and little Harry ... for Remus and for love lost ... for the betrayal ... for myself. I cocooned myself in guilt and longed for the physical pain to wash away the other.

After a while the rape stopped. I suppose I was no longer the fresh meat they hunted, the lower ranks who guarded Azkaban in those days. I wasn't even meat for the Dementors; I had no happiness for them to feed off, no sense of worth. Peter Pettigrew had done a better job on me than any Dementor could. Sometimes I wished I could remember who I was and sometimes I wished I could forget. I had no visitors that first year and expected none. I was a pariah, the traitor of good in the eyes of the world, and in a way I was. My stupidity and my pride had brought me to this.

I was always wet and cold. Left to lie in a pool of my own piss for hours on end, only to be washed down, still clothed in the rags I wore, with a hastily thrown bucket of cold dirty water when the stench became too much for the warders who brought my food. Better death than this. But I would not let them steal any more from me ... my life, alone, was mine.

I had been hurt beyond pain, loathed beyond hate, humiliated beyond shame ... all that was left me was myself. I mourned the losses, the ones who could never return, Lily, James ... and the ones who would never return ... Remus. Remus ... you thought me capable of this? And Harry, would he grow up believing I had been what I was charged of? I longed for another beating, to wash away the pain.

'We would have tidied him up a bit if we'd known you were coming,' the voice outside my door muttered.

I smiled to myself. Some poor sod had a visitor, and the miserable scraps of humanity who were the warders here had been caught with their pants down. I had assumed I

was alone in this part of the jail, now it seemed not. I remember clawing myself away from the door as I heard the key grate in the iron lock, heard the muttered spell as the ward was broken. Someone had made a mistake ... unless ...

'Wait a bit, sir, and I'll chain him up for you. He's a bad 'un.'

'That will not be necessary,' my visitor replied.

I tried to place the voice; it sounded like someone I knew, someone who was disguising his voice. I threw my arm across my eyes as the dim light flooded my perpetually dark cell, and cowered in the corner, in my shame, my indignity. Had someone come to bear witness to the world of my humiliation? Not Remus ... I was glad at least of that, glad and saddened. In that moment I allowed myself to recognise how disappointed I had been these last months that he had not come ... and had not come now.

When I lowered my arm the man stood alone in my cell. A tall straight man, as I had been, dimly lit by what I supposed was wand light, heavily cowed and hooded. I did not ask who he was, and he made no attempt to identify himself. He removed his wand from his cloak for what must have been the second time and spelled the vermin from the rough pallet on which I slept, before sitting down. There was a grace about his movements that seemed familiar.

'Stand up.'

My retort of, "Fuck you", which would have been my response a year ago, became the obedience of my new habits, and I pulled myself to my bare feet, straightening as much as I could under his covert scrutiny. Who was this man?

He seemed to sigh as he raised his wand again, and I could feel the absence of the lice where I had only been vaguely aware of their presence. I had to stifle a laugh. These were my lice; I didn't have much but these were mine. I felt the cleansing spell and wondered what the warders would think, but not for long.

'The warders will not notice. Outwardly you appear the same. Perhaps you will have a few days of respite though.'

I had not spoken and didn't know what to say. Two words were all I could think of. Who? and Why?

'I have no power to get you out of here just now. I have no one who believes in your innocence ...' He trailed off.

'Why are you here?' My voice was a rasp, a horrible croak.

'Because I, alone, know you did not do it.'

He handed me a small bottle of fresh water from his cloak, cautioning me to sip slowly as the nectar slid down my greedy throat. It would be exaggeration to say I felt gratified, but I felt something. I recognise it now as a mad exaltation in the knowledge that someone out there, just one person, even if it were this man, for I now knew who he was ... someone was on my side.

'Who knows you are here?'

'No one.'

'How do you expect to keep this visit a secret?'

'I have the means at my disposal.'

The arrogant fuck hadn't changed at all, and for that I was more grateful than anything else. He offered neither pity nor false comfort; he had come and that was enough.

'Why are you here?' I repeated my opening question, my voice stronger now.

'Because I believe in right.' He stood as he said it. 'I must go; the charms I have cast will not last long. I cannot be seen here.' He made his way to the door.

'Severus ... wait.'

He turned slowly and pulled back his hood. 'You knew?' He let that sneer of his curl his lip as his eyebrow rose in question.

'About immediately,' I lied. I know I looked away at that point, wanting to hide the desperation that would show in my eyes. 'Will you come again?'

'If I can.' He hesitated. 'I cannot get you out of here, Black ... not just now. Use your other form though, when ... when it gets too much. That may help you. I also suspect that the Dementors will tend to ignore you if you are in that form.' He handed me a small parcel from his cloak and refilled the water bottle. 'I know you have nowhere here to conceal things, but this may help you for a while. Take it with caution.'

'I don't suppose you've any cigs?' I asked; not for the nicotine, or the pleasure of smoking, but just to keep him there, even for a few moments more.

'You would get one lit for seconds before they smelt it,' he said in that quiet way he had about him, the one I had always thought of as hostile. 'And I suspect the price would be too much to pay.'

Then he did something I would never have thought possible ... and I shall never forget until my dying day. He embraced me like a brother ... and it was all I could do to stop the howl that rose in my throat.

SEVERUS

I had done everything I could without courting the overt hostility that his name brought every time it was mentioned, but it was not enough. Surely I was not the only one with doubts? Or perhaps the others had been too close, too hurt and confused by what had happened to see ... or too willing to grasp onto any straw of blame for all of their inadequacies. Or perhaps I had the inside knowledge which no other would use to lay the blame elsewhere. I knew he wasn't on the Dark Lord's side, and I knew Pettigrew was. But without Pettigrew, I had no case ... he had no case: no trial, no jury, no second chance for this man. Perhaps that was what kept me at it, kept me from turning my back as others had so easily done; he had no second chance ... as I had been given.

I decided not to tell Dumbledore where I was going, but I suspect he knew. I suspect he was leaving it to me to get Black out: keeping a respectable distance, waiting until my case could be proven. Merlin knows, my hands had been soiled enough in the past dallying with the Dark Forces; a little bit more wouldn't matter ... after a while the dirt doesn't show any more.

I had no excuses to make, no one to account to for my time ... just myself.

He'd been rotting there for a year before I went, a year of what I could only imagine, or more likely couldn't. A whole year before I could gather the courage to go. I knew he would not be pleased to see me; of all people it would be a disappointment that I was the one to visit. But I had to; I could not let this go on ... I could not let him go on believing that nobody cared. And I did care, not in the way in he would think, not some righteous crusade of right against wrong, which I would let him believe. I cared ... I cared because I'd been in love with Sirius Black since I was sixteen years old. And now, now he was the one who was the outcast: hated ... traitorous ... an affront, and some twisted logic within me thought that he would be mine alone in there. No one else's, not James's, nor Lupin's nor anyone else's. Maybe in some way I would get what I had spent the miserable existence I call my life, longing for.

I had tried to prepare myself for what I would encounter, but the physical assaulted me, the cold terror that only Azkaban can dredge up from the floor of hell: the sneers of the Warders as I charmed my way past them, suggesting my presence was expected, suggesting the papers I carried were valid; the smell of piss and worse as we climbed the steep stone steps; and the seeping hopelessness, crawling out of the very rock that the fortress was carved into, to batter into the senses of the unwary.

As they closed the door behind me the light dimmed to almost dark ... not quickly enough, not quickly enough for me to miss the pitiful wreck of humanity cowering in the corner with an arm thrown across his eyes. I stifled a retch at the stench of the cell and took quick stock of my surroundings: no better than I had hoped for ... no worse than I had expected. It was the man who concerned me; all else was irrelevance, so much wallpaper. I cleared the lice and fleas from the bedding and sat down, unsure where to start. Perhaps I shouldn't bother; perhaps I should just be here for a while ... perhaps next time. I realised he was watching me.

I found my voice, or the one I had prepared myself to use, and asked him to stand, taken aback a bit that he hadn't told me to "fuck off" as he no doubt would have done a year ago. He said nothing for a while and I cannot really recall what I said, something, nothing; I had not gone there to offer him false hope. When he spoke I realised I still clutched the bottle of fresh drinking water that I had brought with me. Why I hadn't brought more, I do not know, next time I would. I watched him drink, tentatively at first and then in gulps. He did not know who I was. I knew he hoped I was Lupin; perhaps I could pretend I was.

I could not stay long, not this time. Maybe next time I would be better prepared; next time I would cast what charms I would know I would need without the constant fretting of being discovered. Now I knew they did not care; they did not expect anyone to attempt to reach this man exiled from the world. But I cared ... I cared so much I had to go because I could not stand it any longer. Next time I would be better prepared. I stood to leave and pulled my cloak tighter to me; for now it was enough. I froze as I turned towards the door... just two words ... "Severus ... wait". He knew who I was.

He asked me if I would come back, as I refilled the water bottle and handed him the small parcel of drugs which would help him for a while. At least I hoped so, even as I hoped that the horrors would not inflict themselves upon him tenfold just because of their absence for a short time.

I do not know what came over me ... pity ... love ... remorse. Whatever it was I found myself holding him, feeling him clutch me. If I ever could have wept it would have been then ... for what we had become. Not just him ... all of us.
