

Destruction Where You Stand

by auberus

31 October 1981. Instead of going to Azkaban, Sirius Black goes on the run, determined to catch the traitorous Peter Pettigrew even as post-war violence tears through the wizarding world. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin and a handful of others work desperately to clear Sirius' name, and to find him.

After all, they are not the only ones seeking Sirius Black. The Ministry of Magic has set the Dementors on his trail, and they have been given permission to administer the Kiss the instant he is caught. The remnants of the Death Eaters are pursuing him as well, in hopes that he will lead them to Pettigrew -- whom they blame for Voldemort's defeat.

Prologue: Your Brother's Hand

Chapter 1 of 16

31 October 1981. Instead of going to Azkaban, Sirius Black goes on the run, determined to catch the traitorous Peter Pettigrew even as post-war violence tears through the wizarding world. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin and a handful of others work desperately to clear Sirius' name, and to find him.

After all, they are not the only ones seeking Sirius Black. The Ministry of Magic has set the Dementors on his trail, and they have been given permission to administer the Kiss the instant he is caught. The remnants of the Death Eaters are pursuing him as well, in hopes that he will lead them to Pettigrew -- whom they blame for Voldemort's defeat.

Prologue: Your Brother's Hand

"You shall achieve destruction where you stand,

In intimate conflict at your brother's hand."

-Edna St. Vincent Millay

"Lily and James!" Peter shouts. "Sirius, how *could* you?"

It is the note of actual reproach in his voice that stops Sirius dead in his tracks. The curses he's been waiting fifty miles to use die unspoken on his tongue from shock alone, and in that instant of immobility, Peter moves with a speed and a purpose that Sirius finds as unfamiliar as the sneering, triumphant expression on Peter's face. Before Sirius can recover himself, there is a roar of noise and sound, and he staggers as the ground rocks beneath his feet.

Dust and flame obscure his vision. Someone is screaming, voicing the disbelieving howl of loss and pain that has been stuck in Sirius' throat since he saw the ruin of Godric's Hollow. Through the smoke, Sirius catches a glimpse of Peter, form twisting and shrinking, but the Animagus transformation is nearly instantaneous, and before he

can raise his wand again, Peter is gone, and Sirius is standing alone in a broken street full of dying Muggles.

For long moments, he cannot move. The sound of sirens rises in the distance, a screaming electronic counterpoint to the sobs and shrieks of the injured and bereaved. Sirius can barely hear it over the voices ringing in his memory: James, saying goodbye just before going under *Fidelius*; Peter, swearing so earnestly to keep the faith, and his own disbelieving shout of denial when the words Godric's Hollow dropped cold and leaden into his skull as James died and the Fidelius Charm was broken.

He wants to scream; he wants to cry, but something bright and jagged catches in his chest, and he realizes that he's laughing instead, laughing like his heart will break, and he doesn't think he will be able to stop.

It is Peter's finger that finally breaks through to him. His eyes catch on it and cling, even though at first he doesn't realize what he's looking at. But Peter broke that finger in third year, playing chicken with the Whomping Willow, and he never went to Madam Pomfrey so the tip was always a little crooked, and Sirius hadn't known it until now, but he'd recognize that finger anywhere.

He stops laughing as the knowledge of exactly what Peter has planned for him penetrates the fog of grief and rage clouding his mind. He'd said it himself.

No one will ever believe that Peter Pettigrew was the Potter's Secret Keeper.

He snatches up Pettigrew's finger with a grim smile, and as he Apparates, hears the crack of the first arriving Auror.

It takes nearly half an hour to empty his vault at Gringotts, and Sirius spends the entire time listening for the shout that will mean he is caught. It is impossible to Apparate to or from Gringotts, and if they do find him here, he's finished. He's not certain they will think to look for him here, but he doesn't want to take any chances. It's lunacy to stop off at Gringotts, but Sirius is sure that it would be madder not to. He won't get very far without money, even as Padfoot. Remus will certainly tell the Ministry that Sirius is an Animagus. Sirius pushes thoughts of Remus aside and concentrates on making his fortune pocket-sized.

No one glances in his direction as he crosses the lobby of Gringotts, but some instinct makes him pull out his wand as he pushes open the door. He gets less than five feet from the steps before that same instinct tells him to duck. He turns as he does so, and the curse misses his left ear by less than two inches.

"Black!" his assailant shouts, in tones of such fury that Sirius barely recognizes the voice as belonging to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt sends another curse at him, and Sirius deflects it without thinking. He tries to Apparate even as he hurls Petrificus Totalus at the Auror and finds that he can't.

"You're surrounded, Black!" He is. Sirius can see three other Aurors and knows there will be more coming.

"*Omnis Obliviatas! Omnis Petrificas! Omnis Stupefactas!*" He knows as he shouts that there will be no coming back. The Omnis alteration of spells to affect groups of people has been forbidden for centuries, and using it on a group of Aurors is enough to earn him time in Azkaban. That he has used it at all will be seen as proof of his allegiance to Voldemort.

So he runs.

While the Aurors are still reeling from the triplicate of curses, he takes to his heels; turns the first corner he comes to, then the second, and has changed from man to dog in the space of time it takes to glance behind him. When the Aurors pass him, he is curled up on the porch of Madam Malkin's, and because he and Padfoot have the same eyes, he has to lie still and listen to them pass, while both canine and human instincts scream at him to keep running.

As soon as they are gone, he slips off the porch and into the nearest alley. He shifts back to his own form and Disapparates an instant later.

*a/n: title borrowed from the incomparable edna st. vincent millay. my thanks to **konishi_zen** for beta services.*

Chapter One: This Clearing In The Trees

Chapter 2 of 16

Sirius takes refuge at one of his family's estates, and tells his story to a portrait of Phineas Nigellus, his great-great-grandfather. Convinced of Sirius' innocence, Phineas Nigellus leaves for his frame in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts - to share Sirius' story with Dumbledore.

Chapter One: This Clearing In The Trees

"Where did he weep? Where did he sit him down

And sorrow, with his head between his knees?

Where said the Race of Man, "Here let me drown"?

"Here let me die of hunger"? ... "let me freeze"?

By nightfall he has built another town:

This boiling pot, this clearing in the trees."

-Edna St. Vincent Millay

Sirius' mother's house in Cologne is Unplottable, and he's fairly certain that the Ministry has no idea it exists. It belonged to his grandfather Pollux, and as far as Sirius knows, none of the family has used it since his death. It looks abandoned enough; the dust is nearly an inch thick, and no hint of sunlight intrudes through the drawn curtains.

The house is six and a half centuries old, warded in the old way, and Sirius can feel the blood magic tracing over his skin and through his veins, poised like a thousand little knives to slice their way through his body. He has a few tense moments in which to hope that the wards have not gone feral, as blood-wards sometimes do if left to their own devices; then the knives turn to silk, and he feels the caress of welcome beneath his skin as the house acknowledges his right to be there, and the wards re-weave themselves around his presence.

Lights spring up in the sconces along the wall, pale flames hovering over the empty containers, and there is a rush of heat and light as a fireplace in the far wall begins to burn. From the walls, portraits of witches and wizards stare curiously down at him with eyes as gray as his own, and he hears a soft, murmuring whisper go up. Ignoring the paintings, he flings himself down on the sofa nearest to the fireplace and closes his eyes.

He will be safe here indefinitely, should he choose to stay. The wards that welcomed him so readily will tear anyone but a pureblooded Black into a thousand messy pieces, and are easily altered to exclude even his family. Avoiding them has become a matter of urgency, rather than preference. Once the wards are changed, it will take hours for anyone to get through them, and he will have plenty of time to get away. He isn't planning on staying here indefinitely, but if he has to come back in a hurry, he doesn't want to be followed and he doesn't want to be trapped.

He's under no illusions that he will eventually be proven innocent. He knows that no one will try. It's Pettigrew he's after now, with the hot, mad taste of fury and regret dark in his throat. There are a thousand curses he should have thrown, a thousand ways he could have stopped Pettigrew's flight, his transformation. He should have known it was Peter all along. He should have let Dumbledore be Secret Keeper. He should never have trusted anyone else with James' life.

Sirius wipes angrily at his face, standing up and pushing away looming memories along with his tears. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his robes and encounters both the still fairly large sack containing his shrunken fortune and what he realizes after a blank, surprised moment is Pettigrew's finger. He barely remembers picking it up, though he remembers now why he did it.

Bone, blood, and flesh. It is a line from one of the few nursery rhymes Sirius remembers learning as a child. *Spirit, heart, and body.* There are other things that Sirius learned from his mother that are less innocuous. Pettigrew's own finger will point Sirius directly to him, and his blood and bone will put Sirius' fist around his heart.

He puts the finger back in his pocket for the moment, wrapping it in a handkerchief and casting a Preservus Charm first. Fresh blood is far more magically potent than dried, and he's not about to lose his only link to Pettigrew through carelessness. The snarl of reproach in the back of his head *the way you lost James and Lily?* sounds a great deal like Remus, but Sirius ignores it, just as he ignores the clutching pull of loss and misery. He has always been better at vengeance than at grief, and he turns his attention to the wards with the strictly enforced numbness that is the only mourning he will allow himself. He will take the sharp, tearing sorrow in his chest and turn it loose on Pettigrew instead.

Let Remus bury James and Lily; let Remus have Harry to fill the aching James-shaped empty spaces; let them mourn and cling to each other and heal. Let Remus forgive himself.

The words fill Sirius' head as he works, over and over, fervent and desperate. This is how he imagines it must feel to pray.

Altering the wards to his satisfaction proves fairly easy, and after a final check, Sirius heals his bleeding arm and cleans up the mess. He doesn't think anyone will be able to get past the wards, but there's no sense in leaving behind anything that can be used against him. He removes the layers of dust from everything next, resetting the charm to trigger once a month, because Moody can do things with a man's footprint that Sirius wouldn't have believed if he hadn't seen them himself. After that he finds himself looking for blankets, and that ends with him rummaging through the house for anything and everything that might prove even remotely useful. The pale flames are already burning in their holders as he moves through the house, and he pauses to alter the charm so that they go out when he leaves the room, and to lower the flames themselves. This house lacks the visual protection charms of the Grimmauld Place residence, and, despite the heavy curtains, Sirius has no wish to chance a report of lights blazing where there should be none.

His search turns up surprisingly little, given the rumors he grew up hearing about his maternal grandfather, just a few potions ingredients and some protective amulets. His uncle Cygnus or his mother must have stripped the place of all the truly Dark artifacts after his grandfather's death. Still, the real treasure is the library, which is untouched and contains thousands of volumes, their leather bindings emanating the faint chill of darkest magic. Most, if not all, of the books that he will need to find Pettigrew are here in this room. He fetches all of his things up from the sitting room, including everything he's salvaged from the house, and deposits them on the large oak table at the center of the room.

Sirius can see the traceries of more wards overlaying the bookshelves, layers of protective spells woven into and over one another. He runs a hand just over the surface of the wards, checking their restrictions and penalties as they flare slightly in response to his proximity. There are several to keep anyone but wizards from touching the books, followed by a series to keep away anyone but purebloods; after that are spells that limit access to the books to family members alone, and finally one directed at anyone under seventeen. There are none that will deny him access to these shelves, which is fortunate, because the layers were added years apart and have since interwoven, making them nearly impossible to untangle, and the results of violating them would be incredibly nasty. As there is no other way to be sure, he selects a book at random, and when his blood fails to boil in his veins, or his hand to wither and fall off, he knows he was right.

"Who the devil are you?"

Sirius spins around, wand in his hand before he finishes turning, but it's only a portrait, Phineas Nigellus, glaring fiercely at him from across the room. He's never gotten on well with old Phineas, even before his Sorting, and he pities any one unlucky enough to have been at Hogwarts under him.

"You look like family," Phineas says.

"I'm Sirius," he answers. "Orion's son." Phineas' eyes narrow shrewdly.

"I thought you'd been disinherited," he says.

"That's the least of my worries at the moment," Sirius tells him.

"You are in trouble, aren't you, boy?" Phineas asks sharply. "What's gone wrong?" Sirius hesitates. Still, it's not as though the portrait can betray his location to anyone, and he so desperately wants to tell the story to someone who will believe it.

By the time he's finished talking, his voice is hoarse and his eyes are red, and Phineas Nigellus is looking at him intently.

"You mastered the Animagus transformation at fifteen?" he asks. Sirius stares at him.

"That's your question?" he asks, incredulous. "I tell you I'm wanted for the murders of my two best friends, and stand a good chance of spending my life in Azkaban for something I didn't do, and that's your bloody question?"

"Your story is self-explanatory," Phineas says, voice as dry as dust. "Though I am intensely curious as to why you didn't tell anyone when you decided to switch Secret Keepers. Surely you could have trusted Dumbledore not to run to the Dark Lord with your friends' location?"

A steady flush is mounting on Sirius' face. Despite his grief and fury, Phineas has managed to make him feel like a chastised schoolboy, and he isn't certain whether he resents the man for it or is grateful for the distraction.

"The Animagus transformation, however," Phineas continues, "is difficult enough that I have trouble believing a fifteen year old boy could manage it, much less three of them." A thousand retorts fly through Sirius' mind, but the best one is the simplest, and he transforms into Padfoot and back again with the fluid ease that has always been

inherent to his transformations.

The gleam of satisfaction on Phineas' face makes Sirius uneasy. His heritage has made him better than most Gryffindors at seeing hidden undercurrents, but he is still a Gryffindor and cannot help feeling slightly out of his depth when confronted with Phineas, to whom plots and subterfuge come as naturally as breathing once did. There's no way that the portrait can be planning anything, but Sirius cannot shake the irrational certainty that there is more going on beneath Phineas' oil-paint surface than there should be. He glares at his great-great-grandfather.

"I think," Phineas Nigellus says, thoughtfully, "that you should work on catching that rat of yours."

Sirius doesn't shout at him. He already knows it will do no good. Instead, he turns on his heel and begins perusing the bookshelves, ignoring Phineas' critical stare. He finds the section he is looking for quickly enough, but there are nearly a hundred books that could contain pertinent information. The enormity of his self-assigned task suddenly rises up to confront him. Sirius knows the theories behind blood-magic and enough of the practice to do simple spells, such as adjusting the wards, without putting himself at risk, but what he is proposing to do now goes far beyond anything he's ever done.

Blood is one of the oldest spell components known to man, and one of the most powerful, with far-reaching applications in both light and dark magic. It is also severely unstable, and the side-effects of blood-magic gone wrong can be devastating to not only the caster, but anyone in the immediate vicinity. Pettigrew is a pureblood, which means his blood will be more potent and more unstable than a half-blood's or a Muggle's. He is also an enemy, which adds a further element of danger into his undertaking. Enemy's blood is notoriously unreliable, eager to twist any spell it is used in, sometimes turning on the caster, and Pettigrew's traitorous nature will make his blood doubly so.

The first chapter of the first book he draws from the shelf makes it clear that this will call for darker magic than he has ever practiced. It also makes it clear that Sirius will have to go out, because the list of components needed for even the most basic spells in this discipline is one of the most detailed and complex that he has ever seen. Unless his grandfather Pollux has a hidden compartment somewhere in his house that was missed at his death, doubtful Sirius is going to have to risk being seen in public.

"Old Pollux didn't keep a hidden store of supplies for this sort of magic, I suppose?" he asks Phineas, without raising his head from the open book on the table in front of him. There is no answer. Sirius glances up, but the portrait is empty. He shrugs, and goes back to his reading. No doubt the old boy has gone to gossip with one of the many other portraits scattered about the house. The house has been shut up for nearly ten years, and Sirius has no doubt that it's been dreadfully boring for a wizard of Phineas' formidable intelligence. Sirius is fairly sure that he'd go stark raving mad if he were locked up in a place like this for any prolonged amount of time.

"I've found him," Phineas says, stepping into his frame in the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore is sitting alone at his desk, staring at his hands, but he looks up as Phineas speaks. There is a deep, abiding sorrow in his face that almost make Phineas feel sorry for the man, but as he is a portrait and has no glands, the near-emotion is fleeting. Still, Dumbledore pushes the distress from his features and sits up straight when Phineas speaks, his eyes suddenly cold and alert in a way that few people ever see.

"Where?" he demands, but Phineas shakes his head. He's never liked Sirius. The boy is too headstrong, too impetuous, too Gryffindor, but he himself was convinced of Sirius' innocence within three sentences, and more importantly, the boy is family, tapestry or no. He's the last of the family. Not that Phineas is about to tell Dumbledore all of that. Now that Phineas is dead, he handles Dumbledore better than he ever did while alive which irks him no end but that twinkling blue gaze still manages to make him feel as though there are vital sub-plots going on that he is unable to figure out, and manages to win confidences from him that he had managed to take with him to the grave.

Those blue eyes are not twinkling now. Still, as frightening as Dumbledore can be when he chooses, Phineas prefers this version. Sheathed power is always more ominous than power bared, and at least this Dumbledore doesn't seem about to absent-mindedly offer him some sort of Muggle treat.

"There are only so many places your portrait is hung."

"And most of them are Unplottable, and warded in such *unpleasant* ways against intruders," Phineas drawls.

"I can force you to tell me," Dumbledore reminds him evenly. "You are bound to serve the Headmaster, if you recall."

Phineas, who dislikes being bound to serve anyone, glares at him.

"If I thought you were in possession of all the facts, I might consider telling you where the last of my House is. As for forcing me," He raises his chin imperiously. "We both know you can. We both also know that I will fight you, and what, exactly, that will force you to do."

If Phineas were still alive, he would be sweating. Dumbledore can, indeed, force him to reveal Sirius' location, but not without causing him the sort of pain that a living wizard experiences only while in the grips of the Cruciatus curse. Phineas has no doubt that Dumbledore has the stomach to torture him. He is betting the continued existence of his House, however, that the man's conscience will stay his hand.

After a long moment, he is proven right. Glad that he has no lungs to betray him with a sigh of relief, Phineas watches as Dumbledore closes his eyes, the sorrow reasserting itself on his face for a moment.

"What did you mean by 'all of the facts'?" he asks, opening his eyes.

"Simply, that my great-grandson was not the Secret Keeper for his blood traitor friend. Due, I presume, to the sort of monumental stupidity that only Gryffindors are capable of, he persuaded Potter to choose another, without informing anyone of the switch, thereby ensuring that he would not only be actively pursued, but totally unable to bargain if caught."

Phineas snorts in disgust. If he does manage to get Sirius out of this alive, the ungrateful brat had better have children, and they'd better be Slytherins.

"The idiot also neglected," he continues, "to consider what would happen should the new Secret Keeper prove loyal to the Dark Lord, as indeed he did."

"Whom did Sirius switch with?" Dumbledore asks, his eyes intent.

"One of that group of Muggle-lovers he was always hanging about with in school. Not the werewolf; the other one. The blond, fat one."

"Peter Pettigrew?" Dumbledore asks incredulously. "I'm not certain what lies he told you, Phineas, but your great-great-grandson killed Peter Pettigrew, and a dozen Muggle witnesses as well. They're calling it the worst massacre of the war, and Voldemort wasn't involved. There was nothing left of Pettigrew but some torn robes."

"And a finger," Phineas says. "Sirius has it in his pocket. Apparently, the little rat meant to leave it behind as evidence, but Sirius got to it first."

"A finger?"

"Sirius says that Pettigrew cut it off just before he transformed." At Dumbledore's stunned expression, Phineas arches one perfectly painted eyebrow. "Oh, did I neglect to mention that? Pettigrew's an Animagus. A rat Animagus."

"He's not registered," Dumbledore says, his eyes the carefully neutral blue that indicates true surprise on his part.

"Neither was James Potter," Phineas tells him. Sirius' Animagus form could prove the difference between capture and freedom, so he refrains from mentioning his great-great-grandson. "Both of them managed it in their fifth year. Some typically Gryffindor idiocy having to do with that werewolf friend of theirs and keeping him company during the full moon." He hides a smirk. It's not easy to rattle Albus Dumbledore as thoroughly as Phineas has just managed to do.

"If this is true," Dumbledore says softly, almost to himself, "if this is true, then an innocent man is in grave danger." He looks up at Phineas, his eyes troubled. "Crouch has authorized the Dementors to perform the Kiss on sight."

a/n: title borrowed from edna st. vincent millay. thank you to ***konishi_zen*** for beta services.

Chapter Two: That Cannot Sink or Cease

Chapter 3 of 16

While Sirius mourns James and Lily, Phineas Nigellus and Dumbledore recruit another ally to his cause.

Chapter Two: That Cannot Sink or Cease

"On almost the incendiary eve

Of several near deaths,

When one at the great least of your best loved

And always known must leave

Lions and fires of his flying breath,

Of your immortal friends."

-Dylan Thomas, Deaths and Entrances

Sirius wakes with a start, his face pressed into the open pages of the book in front of him. He jerks upright, scrubbing furtively at the pages with a sleeve, then stops dead when he realizes that he is not in the library at Hogwarts, or even in Order headquarters, and that there will be no James to laugh at him for drooling in his sleep. Ever. His chest aches, washed hollow by the sudden, shuddering wave of furious grief that accompanies this knowledge, and it takes him a minute or two to unclench his hands from the edges of the book.

The pale flames are still shining in their sconces, though Sirius can see sunlight shining through the edges of the heavy velvet curtains. It's Sunday, he thinks, and gets quickly to his feet before he can remember that he has spent every Sunday morning of the past year at James' house. At some point last night, he managed to finish his shopping list, and he clutches it like a talisman as he makes his unsteady way down the hall to the bathroom, muscles protesting at a night spent in a chair. There are towels in the linen closet that need only a quick *Scourgify* to be usable, and the heating charms on the water tanks should be operating, as all of the charm-work that makes the house livable is tied directly to the wards.

He puts his list, the sack containing his worldly fortune, and the handkerchief containing Pettigrew's finger on the marble counter next to the sink, feeling slightly foolish. There is no one else in the house. Nothing, living or dead, can get in without triggering the wards; he is safer than he would be in a vault at Gringotts. Still, the habits of a lifetime are hard to break. Sirius has never lived alone before, and he doesn't trust the ringing emptiness of the rooms and corridors. He turns on the water, which heats almost immediately, and steps into the shower.

When he looks down, the water is grey with the ash of a Muggle street and the ruins of Godric's Hollow.

"I don't have time for this, Dumbledore," Moody growls, stepping out of the Floo. "The whole Ministry's in an uproar. Half the wizarding world seems to have gone mad with relief, while the other half are off gnawing their livers in private, that or plotting revenge. Even the Muggles have started to notice that something's going on, and now Crouch has decided to throw Dementors into the mix. Only a complete lack wit would do that now, with emotions running as high as they are. We've pulled three of the bloody things off of civilians already, and one of them attacked a group of Muggles, if you can believe that." He shakes his head in disgust. "If the damn Prophet hadn't whipped everyone into a frenzy of terror over Black, we'd have pulled them all back to Azkaban after the first incident. As it is, I'm willing to bet that we'll be stuck with them until they catch Black which will only happen if they are very lucky, or he is very stupid."

"Oh? Why is that?" Dumbledore asks. Phineas' respect for Moody rises when he sees the skeptical look the Auror aims in the Headmaster's direction.

"Come on, Dumbledore," Moody says impatiently. "You know why as well as I do. If Black is anywhere near as smart as I think he is, he'll be holed up in one of his family's estates. One of the Unplottable ones, with the sort of wards that instantly eviscerate intruders and seal up tight enough to keep out even the Dementors. There's also the fact that all of the Black ancestral homes are connected by private Floo, and I'd lay Galleons to Gobstones that Malfoy Manor was added to the network after Lucius married Cygnus' youngest girl. If he really does intend on taking Voldemort's place in the Death Eaters, as Crouch is so rabidly insisting, he'll be admirably set up to do it from one of the old Black homes, not to mention he'd be practically untouchable."

Phineas narrows his eyes. Moody is quite obviously too clever by half, and has a mind like a corkscrew with razor-sharp edges. If Dumbledore fails to convince him of the possibility of Sirius' innocence, Moody will most likely become the greatest obstacle in Phineas' path, and as Phineas isn't entirely certain that Dumbledore is convinced, he doesn't entirely trust him to convince Moody.

He is prompted into speaking by concern for the last of his House, and not out of any concern for Sirius himself.

"Good show, Alastor," he drawls, using tones carefully calculated to irritate. "You've managed to be both completely right and completely wrong at the same time which is not something one sees often." The look Moody gives him in return should by rights set his frame on fire.

"Can't you put a *Silencio* on that bloody painting?" Moody demands, transferring his glare to Dumbledore.

"Really, Phineas," Dumbledore murmurs. "Considering the circumstances, you might at least try not to antagonize him."

"He's a Black," Moody grunts. "They antagonize everybody."

"Alastor," Dumbledore says.

"Right," Phineas sneers, rising. "I'm done here, Dumbledore. He's obviously too prejudiced to give anyone with my surname a fair hearing, officer of the law or no. If you manage to come up with someone who can suppress their biases, you know how to contact me."

"*Just a minute!*" Moody roars. He, too, is on his feet now. "I'll have you know that I'd have given Voldemort himself a fair trial, if the bastard could have been trusted to sit through one! I serve the law, not my own prejudices, and your damned grandson is no different, you supercilious, creeping snake! What's more, I am most likely the only one who will make sure he gets fair treatment, and if you know where he is, you'd best tell me. The Dementors won't give him the chance to scream, let alone to defend himself in court."

Phineas ruthlessly suppresses the urge to smile. "I'm hardly about to trust the last of my House to your word alone," he snaps. "Especially when he's innocent." The stunned expression on Moody's face is everything he could have hoped for, and he forces himself to be silent, to wait for Moody to ask the next question and to avoid ruining his advantage by pushing too hard. He doesn't have to wait long.

"Innocent?" the man demands, turning to Dumbledore for confirmation. "Is he telling the truth?"

"I believe he is," Dumbledore says gravely, but Phineas notes with displeasure that the blasted twinkle is back in his eyes. "Or, rather, I believe that he is convinced of Sirius' innocence, and that there is the distinct possibility that he is correct in his assumptions."

"How?" Moody demands, his eyes intent on Dumbledore's. Phineas remembers hearing that Moody had taken to mentoring Sirius during his Auror training, and a closer study of the man's face reveals tell-tale traces of suppressed hope that seem to confirm these rumors. This time, as no one is looking at him, he allows himself to smile.

"It seems that Sirius may not have been the Potters' Secret-Keeper after all," Dumbledore says. "From what Phineas tells me, he and Peter Pettigrew switched at the last minute, without informing anyone but the Potters as to their plans."

"And the incident in Swindon?"

"Pettigrew is an Animagus a rat Animagus. As, I suspect, is Sirius, though Phineas has not confirmed it. James Potter was one as well. Pettigrew blew up that street in Swindon himself, and disappeared in the aftermath."

"Three unregistered Animagi?" Moody shakes his head. "That's difficult to believe, although it might explain how Black avoided us so easily in Diagon Alley."

"When one considers just how talented Sirius and James were at school, and takes into account the affliction suffered by Remus Lupin, it is somewhat easier to accept," Dumbledore says. Moody nods slowly, understanding dawning on his face. Phineas is pleased to see that his eyes have gone distant with planning.

"I'll need to talk to Lupin," he says. "I can confirm that much of the story through him, at least. The rest of it well, it's hard to swallow, Dumbledore, as much as I might want to."

"Nevertheless," Dumbledore says smoothly, "we can at least agree on the importance of finding Sirius before the Dementors do."

"I'll give you that," Moody says. "It'll do Crouch one in the eye, and no mistake, if we can bring Black in where he's failed. And if he does turn out to be innocent - " Moody gives a nasty little chuckle that stirs an answering smile in Phineas' painted heart. "Let's just say it won't be one of old Barty's better days." His expression turns grave. "We'll have to find Pettigrew as well, if Black is innocent. Crouch or no, the Ministry won't accept a word of this story without Pettigrew standing in front of them. If he has gone rat, he'll be nearly impossible to find."

"I believe that Sirius, wherever he is, has definite plans to find Mr. Pettigrew," Dumbledore says.

"Impetuous," Moody growls. "With Black's temper, he's likely to kill the little rat and be forced to spend the rest of his life on the run."

"I don't believe that matters much to him at the moment," Phineas says. "In fact, I very much doubt that he plans to make any effort to clear his name."

"Then what are you doing here?" Moody growls.

"I," Phineas answers, with all of the cold dignity he can muster, "am here because Sirius is half out of his mind with grief, and even if he weren't, the reputation and survival of the Black family would still fail to interest him. His own survival barely interests him at the moment. He certainly doesn't know that I've come."

"That's the only reason?" Moody asks sharply.

"Of course," Phineas says repressively, ignoring any memories he might have of a child too stubborn to give up. Moody snorts, but Dumbledore damn him gives Phineas a gentle, amused twinkle from blue eyes.

Phineas sneers at him.

*a/n: title borrowed without permission from Dylan Thomas' Deaths and Entrances. as always, my thanks to **konishi_zen** for beta services.*

Chapter Three: Auguries of Innocence

Chapter 4 of 16

Sirius goes to Paris to pick up the components he will need for the spells to find and kill Peter Pettigrew. Alastor Moody goes to the Potters' funeral to talk to Remus Lupin.

Note - Translation of the French used in this chapter can be found at the bottom of the page.

Chapter Three: Auguries of Innocence

"For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,

Seem here no painful inch to gain,

Far back, through creeks and inlets making,

Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only

When daylight comes, comes in the light;

In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,

But westward, look, the land is bright!

-Arthur Hugh Clough

La Ruelle Volante is, for all intents and purposes, the Parisian equivalent of Knockturn Alley. Most of the witches and wizards who shop there are no better than they should be, and it is more than a little stupid to wander there after dark without a thorough grounding in defensive magic. Two days after Voldemort's defeat, it is one of the few places lacking the wildly celebratory air ringing through the rest of wizarding Europe. Nevertheless, Sirius takes the precaution of altering his features with a simple *Oris Abeus* Charm, though not too greatly, for if the spell is cast too strongly it will trigger some wards and alarms. Fortunately, his French is as flawless as a native's. Foreigners attract attention on *la Ruelle Volante*.

Despite his precautions, Sirius is almost unbearably nervous as he makes his way down the unevenly cobbled street. He receives only the briefest of glances from passers-by, and no one looks at him twice; still, his own face is scowling at him from every newsstand he passes, and from newly-tacked up posters on the walls and lamp-posts, the caption underneath reading **"MAGICIEN FORTEMENT DANGEREUX NE PAS APPROCHER!!!"** in emphatic capitals. Sirius recognizes the photograph as the one from his Auror badge, and with recognition comes a fresh torrent of grief at the memory of having that picture taken. He had been trying so hard to keep a straight face, and James had been standing behind the photographer the entire time pulling faces as though they'd been first years sitting for House portraits.

He's been down *la Ruelle* before, of course. He'd been twice with his mother, and he and James had been once during their sixth year, mainly for the sake of telling Remus and Peter that they had, in fact, been. James had drunk some dodgy beer at an even dodgier tavern, and had been violently ill immediately upon their Portkey'd return to Hogwarts. Sirius, who'd known better than to drink anything in a tavern called *Le Fois Malheureux*, had ended with vomit on his boots and a horrible smell in his hair from one of the herb shops that had taken days to wash out.

That day, the street had seemed dark with the promise of adventures in nasty places rather than with the double threat of memory and the Aurors, both lying in wait to grab him by the throat and render him useless for vengeance. In a sudden stalling tactic, Sirius picks up a paper from the nearest newsstand, frowning back at himself as he hands over the galleon it costs to buy the *Prophet* in Paris.

By the time he finishes reading, his hands are shaking, and his face is so white that he is certain he will betray himself *Oris Abeus* or no.

They've loosed the Dementors after him. They've loosed the Dementors with permission to Kiss him, and Dementors are creatures that cannot be fooled by charms or potions, or even by the Darker concealment spells. The French Minister has not yet given them permission to cross the Channel, but after one sighting of Sirius Black he will no doubt change his mind.

In that eventuality well, the wards on Sirius' house in Cologne will keep out even Dementors, though not forever not even for as long as they will hold off a group of Aurors and the Dementors can track a fugitive better than even Alastor Moody. Padfoot may confuse them, but that is far from certain. They will catch him they will Kiss him and Pettigrew will go unpunished, and James and Lily will go unavenged, and Harry will grow up with at least one enemy able to get to his side unknown and unnoticed.

Sirius realizes that he is crumpling the *Prophet* into so much wastepaper, and flings it angrily into the gutter. His photograph scowls reproachfully up at him as he steps over it.

The preponderance of frowns and furrowed brows down *la Rue* is not surprising, though Sirius is surprised to see one or two knots of people whispering together with expressions of excitement rather than disappointed rage. They are all looking rather sharply over their shoulders, but Sirius manages to overhear a few snatches of conversation as he passes.

"...a trahi son meilleur ami..."

"...il a défait le seigneur foncé..."

"...treize mort..."

"...seulement un bébé..."

"...personne ne sait il l'a fait..."

He rather suspects that the other conversations taking place around him sound much the same, no matter whose side the speakers had been on yesterday. Voldemort had not yet been active in France, but he had definitely been the subject of heated debates between the same sorts of factions that had taken active part in the conflict in England, and several of the old French wizarding families had donated heavily to his cause. There won't be many other topics of conversation in the wizarding world today.

Sirius pauses outside the door of *L'Apothicaire d'Arnaud*. He can, when he wishes, remember the way his father used to stand, to move, every line of his body filled with the arrogance and power of his bloodline. Sirius lets those memories suffuse him, lets his father's sneer creep over his own altered features, and when he strides into *L'Apothicaire*, he, too, moves full with the supremacy of the blood in his veins. It is not, perhaps, the best way to avoid notice, but Sirius is incapable of the sneaking, deferential behavior that he associates with lower-level Dark wizards.

The arrogance he can summon all too easily, and while it will attract attention, it will not attract the wrong sort of attention. His altered features are similar enough to his own that he will most likely be assumed a Black by-blow, several generations removed. There are dozens of bastard Blacks all over Europe, and most of them are distinguishable from the legitimate family only by last name. The dark hair, the grey eyes, the arrogance and predisposition to the Dark Arts these seem to be dominant traits in most members of his bloodline, and since the camouflage is available, Sirius sees every reason to use it. He enters the shop like he owns it, giving its contents a scornful once-over and the owner a stiff, chilly nod. When the man's face slumps into the familiar lines of servile resentment, Sirius knows he's got it right.

"J'ai besoin de cette liste remplie" he says, the French coming easily back to him, though he hasn't spoken it in nearly three months. *"Immédiatement."*

"Oui, monsieur," the man says, picking up the list. He glances over it, then swallows once, his Adam's apple bobbing hard in his throat. *"Monsieur,"* he says softly, "some of the items on this list are strictly controlled."

Sirius knows damn well that Arnaud has every last item on the list in stock. He wants to hex the conniving bastard into oblivion and manages to rein in his temper with no small amount of difficulty. Instead, he narrows his eyes, letting some of his lingering fury show there, and looks coldly down his nose at the shopkeeper with every ounce of the disdain he wants so badly to pour into the hexes running through his mind.

"Do you think that concerns me?" he asks, keeping his voice low and even. "I know very well that you carry these things, André, and I think that if you do not allow me to purchase what I wish, the Ministry, too, will know that you carry them. After all, I very much doubt that your license is up to date." It is a smooth, vicious bit of blackmail worthy of Lucius Malfoy, or of Sirius' own father, and he feels both elated and sickened with himself as the man's face changes to reluctant assent.

"*Oui, monsieur*," Arnaud says grudgingly. He fills Sirius' order quickly enough, though, and with none of the disgruntled muttering for which he is slightly infamous for employing in full hearing of his customers.

A brief memory surfaces, of Sirius' father at some dinner party, telling a group of listeners that he'd never had any trouble of that sort out of the man, and Sirius represses it brutally. He makes certain to thank the man as he pays, and the curt, semi-polite tones he'd heard from his father's mouth all his life seem almost to scald his tongue.

Sirius stuffs the package deep into the pocket of his robes as he leaves the shop, where its bulk will be slightly less noticeable. He wishes that he could shrink it, as he had his money, but he's not certain what direct magic will do to the delicate spell components. He has one more stop to make before he can leave, because some things cannot be purchased even at *L'Apothicaire*.

The last shop is not really a shop at all as a building cannot be packed up on a moment's notice and removed before the authorities arrive. It is instead a small, dark tent that has most emphatically not been enchanted to provide the users more space, and the interior of it reeks of the inevitable sickly-sweet herbs. The underlay of old blood to the scent is more than slightly nauseating.

Sirius has never been here before; his knowledge of the place comes from Auror reports and witness testimony, most of the latter given unwillingly, and it is enough to increase the nervous tension in his stomach. Still, the squat, huddled figure behind the makeshift counter makes no threatening gestures, and Sirius approaches it with one eyebrow raised, playing the supercilious aristocrat for all he is worth. None of the reports he'd read had mentioned much about the owner, but Sirius can feel the frisson of power coming off of what is for all appearances a bundle of rags with a pair of gleaming eyes, even if the lack of information alone had not been warning enough against relaxing his guard.

"*J'ai besoin du sang d'un innocent*," he says quietly, with none of the abrasive superiority he'd used with Arnaud. Instead, he keeps his tone respectful, one equal to another.

"*Une demande foncée, appropriée pendant ces périodes soudainement préoccupées*" the figure says, its tones muffled and indeterminate. "Still, all things are possible, where there is gold to smooth the path."

"There is gold in plenty, once you deliver what I have asked of you," Sirius tells it, letting the edge of cold warning show in his voice.

"I have it here, impatient one." A surprisingly clean hand emerges from the pile of rags, and dips briefly into what Sirius had taken for an actual pile of rags but is apparently a bag of some sort. The hand emerges holding a crystal vial that gleams darkly crimson in the candlelit tent.

Sirius puts the sack of Galleons on the table; the vial is pressed firmly into his hand. He cannot completely prevent the shudder that ripples through him; he imagines that he can almost feel the taint of the spells used to draw the blood in his hand, to give it the magical potency he needs if he is to find Pettigrew.

Sirius puts the vial even deeper in his pocket than he had the package from Arnaud, not entirely ready to contemplate the nature of what he is about to undertake. Reading about it is one thing. Walking through a Parisian street with what is most likely the blood of a child in his pocket is entirely another, and his skin crawls as he pushes his way through the tent flaps and back into the street, which seems suddenly brighter than it had before. He walks the length of *la Ruelle* and around the corner before he Apparates, trying to shake the growing feeling of unease that now seems to be emanating from the left pocket of his robes.

The Potters' funeral reception is probably not the most tactful place to approach Remus Lupin, but Alastor has never been tactful, and he is counting on the presence of others to keep Lupin's reaction in check. It will do none of them any good if the man breaks down, less if he refuses to listen and takes what he knows about Black's Animagus form to the Ministry. He is, with the exceptions of Pettigrew who can't tell anyone and Phineas who won't tell anyone, even Dumbledore the only one who knows what shape Black takes when he transforms. If Alastor is going to get to Black first, he will have to get to Lupin, as well.

Lupin's expression, when Alastor pulls him aside, is for an instant a vivid reminder that he is confronting a grieving werewolf. There is a savagery to Lupin's despair that is entirely at odds with the calm, even-tempered young man he usually seems to be, but that Alastor has seen sometimes in his spellwork when tensions are high.

"They didn't bring Harry," are the first words out of his mouth, his eyes scanning the crowd restlessly. "Lily's sister and that *bloody* husband of hers, they didn't bring Harry."

"There's a chance that Black is innocent," Alastor tells him flatly and watches as the raging sorrow drains from Lupin's eyes, leaving them flat and unreadable and focused on Alastor's face with a desperate, hard-edged intensity that leaves no room for anything else.

"If this is some sort of trick..." he says quietly. He doesn't need to finish his sentence. The promise in his voice is unmistakable.

"No trick," Alastor says, just as quietly. "You and I need to have a chat, lad, and not here. Too many people watching, and both of us are known to have been close to him."

"Give me ten minutes," Lupin tells him. "There's a gazebo at the far end of the cemetery."

"Don't be late," Alastor growls.

Lupin nods wordlessly and walks off, making his way through the crowd like a man running a gauntlet, shoulders bracing with every sympathetic pair of eyes he encounters.

Alastor gives him five minutes and makes his way down to the gazebo. Lupin joins him a minute later, and though he's made an effort to compose his features, his eyes are still dangerously intense.

"Explain," he says, that one word loaded with impatience and the sort of half-buried threat that would ordinarily make Alastor damned uneasy. Given what the lad's been through in the past two days, he lets it slide.

"That bloody portrait of Dumbledore's old Phineas Nigellus, you know the one?" Lupin nods. "He's got free range of Hogwarts, as well as most of the Black ancestral homes, and apparently he ran across our fugitive in one of the latter." Alastor pushes on, ignoring Lupin's sudden intake of breath. "He came to Dumbledore the day before yesterday, with some story about Black and Pettigrew switching as Secret Keeper at the last minute and without telling anyone. He says that Pettigrew escaped the massacre in Swindon, and that Black wherever he's hiding is hot on his tail." Alastor emphasizes the last word, but gets no reaction from Lupin. The man is still looking at him, but all of that frightening intensity is directed not inward, but... elsewhere. After a long moment, he shakes himself slightly, eyes sharpening again.

"You believe this?" he demands.

"No," Alastor says bluntly, "but I don't disbelieve it, either." He will not admit to Lupin just how badly he wants Black to be innocent. Aside from the damage it will do his career to have mentored a traitor, he genuinely likes Black. "It doesn't matter one way or the other, though. You know what Crouch has planned for him."

"We have to find him first," Lupin says. "If there's the slightest chance he might be innocent, we have to find him first."

"Why do you think I tracked you down? A little light conversation?" Alastor shakes his head. "I thought you had more brains than that, Lupin. Think. We're sneaking about for a reason. I need your help."

"Mine?" Lupin's voice is startled, and Alastor remembers that the lad's spent the past three months under suspicion as a traitor.

"You're the only one who knows what Black's Animagus form is," Alastor says, and this time the barb strikes home. Lupin's eyes widen.

"Who " he starts to ask, then presses his lips together, face pale in the weak fall sunlight.

"Phineas Nigellus," Alastor answers him anyway. "Though the old bugger won't tell us what form Black takes. Doesn't entirely trust us with the last of his precious House. I understand that Pettigrew is a rat."

"He's a dog," Lupin says, closing his eyes briefly. "A big black dog."

Translations from the French:

- 'the flying alley'

- 'the unhappy (miserable) liver'

- 'very dangerous wizard do not approach'

- 'he betrayed his best friend'

- 'he defeated the dark lord'

- 'thirteen dead'

- 'only a baby'

- 'no one knows how he did it'

- 'i need this list filled. immediately.'

- 'i require the blood of an innocent.'

- 'a dark request, suitable for these suddenly troubled times.'

a/n: title borrowed without permission from William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience.

*My thanks to **konishi_zen** for beta services.*

Chapter Four: Of Storms Too Hot For Keeping

Chapter 5 of 16

Bellatrix Lestrange arrives at Malfoy Manor in an attempt to get Lucius to help her find Pettigrew. The next day, in the aftermath of the Lestranges' attack on the Longbottoms, Remus and Moody take further steps to prove Sirius' innocence.

Chapter Four: Of Storms Too Hot For Keeping

"Better to walk forth in the frozen air

And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing;

Because my heart would throb less painful there,

Being caked with cold, and past the smart of feeling.

And where I walked, the murderous winter blast

Would have this body bowed, these eyeballs streaming,

And though I think this heart's blood froze not fast

It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming."

-John Crowe Ransom, Winter Remembered

"Damn him!" Lucius exclaims. Behind him several bottles shatter on their shelves, and a sudden high-pitched wailing announces that he's woken his son and heir. The noise itself is not enough to have roused the child, and Lucius' annoyance is curbed briefly by the fact that Draco was most likely disturbed by the magical vibrations as Lucius' fury had peaked into wandless magic. It is an excellent sign, even from a child with blood as pure as Draco's.

His son's precociousness is not enough to stem his anger for long, however, and this time it finds its release in a series of well-aimed hexes that destroy the better part of

the group of china figurines that his mother had brought back from Belgium after her tenth anniversary. The remaining figurines wail in grief and terror, and hide behind the Ming vase. Lucius aims his wand at the vase, but the dragon on it rears up in warning, hissing painted fire along the curve of the vessel, and Lucius turns his wand instead on the cringing house-elf sweeping up shards of china from the floor. The vase, after all, is priceless.

"*Perfero!*" he hisses, unwilling to expend the energy required for *Cruciatus* on the creature. The milder version of the incantation is just as effective on such vermin, and not actually... mild at all. Lucius has broken Aurors before using nothing but the *Perfero* curse. He considers the writhing house-elf almost lazily, the worst of his anger spent, and renews the curse with a casual flick of his wand.

"Lucius!" Narcissa's voice interrupts his thoughts, and he lifts the curse as he turns to her, one eyebrow lifting at the note of exasperation in her voice. "I realize that things are difficult at the moment, but must you terrorize the help? They're becoming skittish and passing the mood on to Draco. It took nearly half an hour to put him to down for his nap, and now--" both of them wince at a particularly vocal wail from upstairs "--who knows how long it will take Linny to get him to sleep again?"

"We could always use *Somnis* on the little brat," Lucius suggests, more for the pleasure of seeing her eyes narrow with irritation than in actual seriousness. "Honestly, darling, I'm sorry. I just received some bad news, but I shouldn't have woken Draco." He takes her hand in his and kisses the back of it gently. "Forgive me?" Her eyes soften, and her lips curve into a smile that he greets with a kiss of its own.

"Just this once, perhaps," she says playfully, then sobers. "What was the bad news?"

"Rodolphus. He and your sister, my love, are becoming an inconvenience. He was here a few minutes ago as though the Aurors aren't watching every connection they can attach a spell to talking all sorts of wild nonsense about going in search of the Dark Lord." He realizes that Narcissa is watching him carefully, grey eyes intent through the casual sweep of her pale eyelashes.

"What did you tell him?" she asks, voice as emotionless as her eyes fail to be.

"That the man is dead," he says, watching her as carefully as she is watching him. "I'm not entirely certain that it's true," he allows, "but he is certainly powerless, so long as no one seeks him out."

"What about us? The Ministry is going to be seeking some form of retribution."

"I can cover my actions by claiming *Imperius*, or some other form of *Dominatum* spell. The Malfoy name still counts for something." The flicker of relief in her eyes is the emotion that he is looking for.

"Then why this anger over what Rodolphus and Bellatrix choose to do with themselves?" she asks.

"Because Rodolphus, in his infinitesimal wisdom, has decided that the best way to start his search for our vanished leader is by locating the Potters' Secret Keeper. He's planning on going after your errant cousin."

"Sirius?" Narcissa's surprise is palpable. "He wasn't the Secret Keeper."

"We know that, darling, as do Black, the Dark Lord, and the now-deceased Potters. The question then becomes, at least to Rodolphus' increasingly diseased mind who was the Secret Keeper?" Lucius shrugs elegantly. "The most logical choice is Pettigrew. He's the only one of our number who was close enough to Potter to be a logical alternate. And who was the last person to see Pettigrew alive?"

"Sirius," Narcissa says, understanding.

"Precisely. Your cousin didn't risk a stop at Gringott's with the Aurors hard on his heels for no reason. He may be a Gryffindor, but he's not an idiot, and Rodolphus - or more likely Bellatrix - is clever enough to see that he has some sort of plan in mind. Unfortunately, they seem to be overlooking the fact that the Dementors are actively in search of Black. They have also underestimated the man's capability for trickery and backhanded dealing. You'd think that Bellatrix at least would know better," he muses. "She did spend three years at school with Black and Potter."

"Juvenile pranks--" Narcissa begins dismissively.

"Underlain by a streak of vicious inventiveness that the Dark Lord wanted very badly to turn to his service at one point. No," he says, "the Ministry is more than ready to retire and lick their wounds. By lying low, we can avoid being one of the loose ends they decide they need to tie up, especially as Crouch has finally reined in that lunatic, Moody. If Bellatrix and Rodolphus go looking for Black, they'll only stir things up, and I haven't got the influence to exculpate them as well as myself. It would be dangerous even to try."

Narcissa brushes a strand of hair back from his face. "That's no reason to tie yourself in knots, darling."

"She's your sister, Narcissa, and Rodolphus is my first cousin. They're family." He doesn't mention that Narcissa has already lost one sister; that he cannot bear to let her lose another.

"No," Narcissa says, "You are family. Draco is family. Bella is a grown woman, Lucius, and my world," she gestures with one elegant hand, "my world is here." She leans in close to his ear, and her next words are a breathy whisper that shivers down his spine. "It's you."

For a moment, Lucius is nearly helpless in the face of his love for his wife and speechless at the luck that made her pure-blooded enough to marry.

"I am the most fortunate of men," he says, the words losing themselves in her soft hair. "I will always," he kisses her, "be grateful," another kiss, "to my father." A third kiss, and her laughter is an echo of their courtship. Lucius gestures imperiously at the house-elf, and the creature vanishes. A quick, soundless charm closes the doors, and when she looks up, startled, he gives her the sharp, lazy smile that never fails to draw an answering one from her. When he casts a Silencing Charm on the room, her face turns bright with half-hidden joy.

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon," she says, tone one of playful protest. "Really, Lucius."

"I can't resist you, my love," he says, then kisses her deeply. They spend several minutes lost in each other, and Lucius is about to transfer things to the sofa when a deep, bell-like sound tolls through the library and the fire flares green and bright.

"Now who is it?" he mutters, though he's fairly certain he already knows. Tearing his mouth away from his wife's with reluctance, he says curtly: "*Faceo licet*." The flames blaze up again, and a figure steps out of the fireplace.

"You're getting a bit careless, Lucius," the newcomer draws. "What if I'd been Alastor Moody?"

"You know very well that only family can Floo into the library, Bellatrix," he says coldly. Her heavy-lidded eyes rake over him, then over her sister, catching their mutual dishevelment.

"Oh, did I interrupt something?" she asks, the nauseating sweetness in her voice clearly feigned. Lucius turns his head, lip curling slightly in disgust. "I'm dreadfully sorry."

"What do you want, Bella?" Narcissa asks calmly. She hasn't bothered to rise from the sofa, and Lucius feels a warm glow of pride at her icy control.

"I need to borrow your precious husband," Bellatrix replies. Lucius is on the verge of telling her sharply what she can do with her needs in general the Dark Lord is gone, and she is no longer anyone's favorite but Narcissa pre-empts him, still perfectly calm.

"I'm afraid we have plans for the day," she says.

"Does your wife dictate your schedule now, Lucius?" Bellatrix's tone is a goad, her eyes sparkling at the promise of confrontation. The strain of madness that runs through the Black family has always been evident in her character, but in recent months it has become increasingly pronounced. She gleams with malice, and Lucius has to be careful to avoid showing her just how unnerving he finds her.

"You were speaking to my wife," he drawls. "Manners alone would seem to dictate that she give you your answer."

Bellatrix's eyes narrow, and she steps close to him, pushing her way into his personal space. "Don't play lord of the manor with me, Malfoy," she says threateningly.

"Sister, dear," he says, smoothly threatening, "I am the lord of the Manor."

She bares her teeth at him, and for an instant it appears that she might attack him anyway. He'd meant his words as a subtle reminder of the dangers of attacking the head of the Malfoy family in his own home, but something in her eyes tells him that she's taken them as a challenge instead. He draws deeply on the blood-magic of the wards, preparing one or two nasty surprises that he doesn't need a wand to employ. Perhaps she feels the gathering power; perhaps his eyes warn her off, but Bellatrix steps back, her grimace turning into the charming smile that stopped fooling him years ago.

"Very well. I can see that the lures of hearth and home have captured you entirely, dear brother. Enjoy your domestic pleasures, then." The pleasant mask falls away, leaving malevolence coiled in every line of her face. "This won't be forgotten, Lucius. Or forgiven." She steps into the fire and away before Lucius can reply.

"Bitch," he says feelingly, as the flames return to their normal levels. His dark mood of earlier has returned in force.

"Don't let her get to you," Narcissa says.

Lucius starts to snarl an answer when he realizes that she's using the same carefully calm tones with him that she'd used with her sister. He returns to the sofa and sits down next to her, taking her hand.

"I'm sorry, love," he says. She is the only person he has voluntarily apologized to in his entire life. Every apology forced from him first by his father, then by the Dark Lord has seemed to stick in his throat, but he will humble himself before his wife without a second's hesitation or resentment.

"You let her provoke you," Narcissa tells him, but she squeezes his hand gently as she speaks. "She does it deliberately, you know."

"I know," Lucius says. "That makes it worse."

"What do you suppose she wanted you for?" Narcissa asks.

"It could have been anything," he says. "Rodolphus was yapping about Frank Longbottom earlier the man's leading the search for your cousin, apparently but as both Rodolphus and your sister become less predictable by the day, that's only a guess. Either way, I'm glad to be out of it."

"You're not angry with me for...what was it? 'Dictating your schedule'?" she asks. Her voice is perfectly sincere, but the left corner of her mouth is quivering faintly, which means that she is trying very hard not to smile.

"Darling," he says, raising an offended eyebrow, "you know that I'm your willing slave."

"You say that so dispassionately," she observes.

"Would you prefer that I throw myself at your feet?" he asks. "I can, you know."

"I can think of better things for you to do," she says, reaching for him.

"It's too much," Remus says. Frank was just a year ahead of him in school, Alice a year behind, and their son Neville is within a month of Harry. It's James and Lily all over again, without time for the first wound to heal. "It's over. It's supposed to be over."

"You know better than that," Moody says, but his voice is a gentler version of his usual growl, and Remus can hear the grief heavy in every syllable.

"Do--" He has to stop for a second, overwhelmed by the sensation of everything falling apart around him.

"They're still alive," Moody says, but that's no blessing at all. It's the day after full moon, and Remus had been on his way out when they brought Frank in, silent-eyed and screaming as though he could not bear not doing so, even if he was no longer sure why.

There had been nothing left in that slack, empty face of the boy that Remus had known at school; nothing of the man he'd come to respect while working for the Order, just a twitching, terrified thing, living like a ghost along Frank's abandoned nerve endings. The mediwizards had worn the solemn, hushed faces that Remus has seen on survivors for the past five years. He left quickly after hearing that Alice was on the next stretcher, and had been sicker in an alley next to St. Mungo's than he'd been since he'd heard that Sirius had betrayed James and Lily.

Moody had found him pale and shaking on his knees behind a trash can with one hand pressed firmly over his mouth, and Remus will always be grateful to the man for not asking if he is all right. Instead Moody is frowning at him, the expression on his face suggesting that Remus will be in for a right kicking if he doesn't pull himself together.

"What happened?" Remus manages at last.

"It was the Lestranges," Moody tells him. "They're after Black." Remus suddenly understands the urgency in his face and voice. Moody, like everyone else, has always had a soft spot for Sirius.

"Why?" Remus demands, nausea vanishing under a fresh torrent of concern. He's been nearly frantic with terror for Sirius since the funeral. This news and the look on Moody's face threaten to send him to new heights of fear. He can't imagine a reason for Bellatrix to be after Sirius if he is innocent.

"I don't know yet," Moody says gruffly, "but the Lestranges have always been two of Voldemort's most dedicated followers. We're fairly certain that they were behind the Cornwall murders, as well as the incident in Surrey last year, though we've never been able to prove it. We got lucky this time, though," he says, and Remus is suddenly furious that Moody can consider anything about this situation to be lucky, though the anger doesn't last long. Both he and Moody are far too used to salvaging anything they can from disaster. It isn't fair of him to be angry with Moody for being better at it.

"Lucky?" he asks, and if his voice sounds ragged and pained, at least Moody says nothing about it.

"We have a witness." A bitter near-smile twists Moody's features even further, and a part of Remus' mind can't help but wonder how they must look, one scarred old man and one scarred young man, deep in conversation behind a dustbin.

"A living witness?" Remus asks in surprise.

"I was as shocked as you are. From what the Residual Magic people have managed to piece together, the Lestranges came sideways through the wards and somehow left all the protections still in place. They were apparently counting on privacy. The only problem was that Frank and Alice have Muggle neighbors, and they'd altered the wards

to let them through unharmed. Whichever one of the Lestranges was maintaining the Silencing Charm let it slip. The couple next door heard the screams, and the husband went over on the double to check it out."

"A living Muggle witness?"

"Oh, this is the best part." Moody's thin smile is full of grim enjoyment. "The man supports his family by knocking over banks and armored cars. The Healers have him now, but the initial reports are that he put two bullets into Rodolphus and one in Bellatrix before she hexed him unconscious." He laughs, a short, sharp sound full of dark amusement. "Shot by a Muggle. I wish I could have seen their faces. At any rate, it looks like he and his wife kept Frank and Alice from dying outright, though I'm not sure how much of a mercy that will turn out to be. The wife was on the telephone with their police before he went out the door, of course, so we've got yet another mess for the Obliviators to sort out."

"What about the Lestranges?"

"Made it to the street and Apparated before our people could get there. We've got three Muggle policemen in St. Mungo's with hex damages apparently they got in the way of Bellatrix's wand. She must have been feeling pretty bad, though. It looks like they're all going to live. The witness is still fairly incoherent, but Shacklebolt's supposed to debrief him as soon as the Healers have finished. I'm going to try and sit in on it, provided Crouch is still tied up with the press. The bastard is still blocking me from access to anything remotely connected to Black." Moody grins. "It's a good thing I trained his entire staff. Shacklebolt will tell me what we want to know, even if Crouch does manage to keep me out."

"That's fortunate," Remus murmurs. He is stunned, reeling, trying desperately to find solid ground. This is chaos on the same level as anything Voldemort ever caused, and despite the fact that he should have seen it coming, it has left him blindsided and uncertain. "Is there anything I can do?" It is evidently the right question, because Moody nods decisively, some invisible layer of tension draining from his shoulders.

"Good lad," he says. "I want someone I can trust to talk to the wife the one who called the police. Shacklebolt says that she's lowest priority at the moment, mainly because she's the only one who didn't get hexed. Even so, they will get to her eventually, and I doubt that anyone will bother to find out what she knows before wiping her memory. It probably won't be important to anyone but us, anyway."

"All right," Remus agrees. It is a relief to have anything to do, any way to channel the restless energy that has filled him since the funeral and hasn't subsided, even in the aftermath of the worst full moon he's had since fourth year. Moody nods once and limps back towards the hospital entrance, and Remus spares a moment to be grateful to the man for the subtlety of his kindness.

*a/n: title borrowed without permission from John Crowe Ransom's Dead Boy. My thanks to **konishi_zen** for beta help.*

Chapter Five: Down the Gray Sky

Chapter 6 of 16

As Remus interviews a witness to the Lestranges' attack, Sirius makes his first foray into Dark magic in an attempt to locate Pettigrew.

Chapter Five: Down the Gray Sky

"S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse

A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,

Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.

Ma per cio che giammai di questo fondo

Non torno vivo alcun, s'i' odo il vero,

Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo."

-Dante, Inferno

Remus has been to the Longbottoms' before, of course. There had been Order meetings there in better days, and a first-birthday party for Neville four months earlier during which Sirius had charmed the candles to keep re-lighting in honor of some Muggle novelty product he'd come across a week earlier; but he's never paid much attention to the houses next to it. Now the whole street is blocked off, and Remus can recognize the Ministry-faked police uniform on the wizard guarding the barricades.

Suddenly, the Accipio Charm he's successfully used to avoid notice in sticky situations since sixth year seems less of a protection. If he is caught poking around this particular crime scene, not even Dumbledore will be able to get him out of Ministry hands.

This is not, he realizes belatedly, simple make-work designed to keep him occupied and out of the way. He should have known it would be something real. After all, Moody is not one to waste an offer of help from someone that he can trust and that had certainly been a surprise, a declaration of trust from Alastor bloody Moody. Remus has never been particularly close to the man, and they have only been in the field together twice, but he's always gotten the distinct impression that Moody makes the most severe paranoid seem friendly and open by comparison. Still, he won't deny that he's grateful for it. He's spent the past three months being treated as a traitor by everyone he knows, and to have Moody acknowledge that he is trusted is balm to an unhealed wound.

It also makes it a dead certainty that he will try his damndest to do what Moody has asked of him. Remus is cynical enough to wonder if that is the reason Moody said it in the first place, but he decides that he doesn't care. Manipulation or no, he recognizes truth when he hears it.

The Accipio Charm is a Marauder specialty, like the Map, and a dozen or so other spells that one of them invented and only the four of them ever knew. Accipio is one of Peter's, a variation of the Confundus Charm that makes the gaze of even the most alert watcher slide right over the caster, who seems unimportant and as though he belongs wherever he happens to be. The spell has its weaknesses, and it works best in crowds, but both the Great Hall and the Slytherin common room had become a great deal more interesting once James and Sirius had worked out their difficulties with the spell. Sirius had been particularly frustrated by it, especially once Remus had

mastered it nearly as quickly as Peter had done.

Pushing down memories, Remus casts the charm on himself and walks towards the barrier. It works, of course. The Auror even gives him a slight nod of acknowledgment as he passes through the barricade. Close up, his uniform is even more obviously faked, though any Muggle looking at it will see it as authentic. The spell is very similar to the one Remus is using on his person. He makes his way down the street the Aurors have blocked off the entire thing slipping around cars and random officials from both the Ministry and the local police department. The sense of confusion in the air is nearly palpable. He slips behind two empty ambulances, which are presumably waiting in vain for patients already sent on to St. Mungo's, and makes his way up the sidewalk.

Despite the winter-grey light slowly making its way into the morning, every window in the house nearest the Longbottoms' shows the reflected blaze of rooms that have every lamp inside of them turned on. The woman who answers the door is seven or eight years his senior, but the fresh wounds of terror in her eyes make her look older. Fortunately, Remus has been pretending to be harmless for most of his life now and has gotten so good at it that he even believes himself most of the time. Not long after he knocks at the door, he is being ushered into the brightly-lit parlour and taking a seat on an overstuffed armchair patterned jarringly in red and gold. For a moment he stares blankly at the colours, the familiar combination stripping him of everything but grief. When she speaks, he nearly jumps out of his skin.

"You're one of them," she says flatly. She isn't screaming in terror, though, so Remus supposes it's better than nothing. He can, however, imagine Shackbolt's expression at being termed 'one of them' in such tones and knows that he's stumbled on another of Moody's reasons for sending him rather than anyone else. Remus is used to being 'one of them.' He's used to being all sorts of 'them.'

"I suppose so," he agrees, and extends a hand. "Remus Lupin."

She considers his hand for a moment, then takes it as hesitantly as if she expects to be transformed into something nasty.

"Marjorie Bingham."

"Your husband's going to be all right." Remus can't help himself, though it's not his place to tell her. He knows the worry in her eyes far too intimately, and the subtle easing of the brittle lines of her mouth and neck is proof enough that he's made the right choice by doing so. Witnesses are more reliable when they are not terrified.

"What did they do to him?" she asks.

"I don't know," he admits. "I'm not an official representative of anything." Suspicion colours her face and voice.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I came to say thank you." He doesn't plan the words. They fall almost unintentionally from his mouth, but he realizes as he says them how very much he means them. "Frank and Alice are friends of mine." The present tense feels forced on his tongue, after having seen what is left of Frank with his own eyes. "It was very brave of your husband," he continues, then stops, because it feels like a platitude, and it isn't. The idea of going up against Bellatrix is deeply frightening, even with a wand. Remus has been terrified of her since his first year at Hogwarts. The thought of a Muggle going after her is almost impossible to quantify. "It was very brave," he says again.

"We couldn't just listen to it," she says. "They were screaming." Remus has never seen Cruciatius used on a human being, but the horror in Marjorie Bingham's eyes is eloquent enough to make up for his lack of experience.

"Was that the only thing you could hear?" he asks, refusing to let himself linger on the sheer awfulness of the entire thing.

"At first," she said. "After Mark went over there, and I'd called the police, I followed him." She gives a dry, choking kind of sob. "It was awful. Mark must have gone round the side, because he wasn't there yet. That woman she kept asking them questions, over and over again, but they couldn't answer, and she kept asking." She's looking at Remus, but he can tell that she's not really seeing him. "She just kept asking," she says again, almost to herself.

"What was she asking them?" She starts at his voice, seeming to come back to herself.

"What? Oh. She wanted to know where she could find her cousin a something Black. And someone named Pettigrew. Wanted to know what the Errors? had found out; what leads they had." Her mouth curves in a grim half smile that reminds Remus of Moody's expression outside of St. Mungo's. "Then Mark came. He shot them both, the man twice, but the woman still managed to hurt him badly." The distress is evident in her features, sharp and fine, memory coming back to claim her. "They ran after that. I heard some noise outside, but I couldn't leave him."

"What happened then?" Remus asks, trying to keep the growing excitement out of his voice. Bellatrix was asking about Peter, and the only reason for her to have done so is that Moody was right. Sirius is innocent, and Remus no longer needs to hold the careful distance between himself and hope that he has maintained for the past three days.

"There were all sorts of people there, very suddenly," she says. "Your sort of people. They were all over Frank and Alice, and then one of them noticed Mark lying there, and me sitting next to him. He told one of the others to take care of Mark, and then he took me home. He said someone would be along soon to tell me what was going on. I thought, when you showed up--"

"The one who took you home," Remus asks, "what did he look like?" When she describes Kingsley Shackbolt, Remus has to suppress a smile. Moody certainly has his hooks deep in the M.L.E. despite Crouch's increasing efforts to push him out.

The rest of Marjorie's story is a simple one. Remus expects that he will read something very similar in the *Prophet* tomorrow with suitable embellishment, of course. Marjorie doesn't know wizarding terminology, but Remus can read between the lines well enough to know that the Aurors are bloody lucky that they showed up late to the party. From the sound of things, Bellatrix hadn't reacted well to being shot, and the Muggle policemen unfortunate enough to get in her way had wound up in even worse shape than Mark Bingham. Remus hears her out anyway, because if he misses a detail that might help Sirius, he will never forgive himself. When she's finished, he reassures her again that her husband will be fine and casts a slight Cheering Charm on her before walking calmly out the front door.

The scene outside is still pure chaos. Remus mingles with the Aurors and Obliviators for a few minutes, listening to conversations without taking part in any of them, but no one says anything that Marjorie Bingham hadn't mentioned. No one says anything about Peter, and Remus can't help but wonder what will happen when the Aurors finally do get to her. His best guess is that she will be Obliviated and forgotten. Crouch isn't interested in alternate theories on anything; it's one of the reasons he and Moody have had such problems. Remus could try and prevent them from Obliviating her another variant of Accipio, perhaps, to keep them from noticing her in the first place but that puts him at risk of getting caught, and Pensieve memories will be just as effective as her actual testimony, once Peter and Sirius are found.

If they are found.

The Vitae Invenire is an incredibly complex spell. There are elements of both potions-making and charm-work to it, in addition to blood-magic that Sirius remembers only the most basic elements of, and he experiences a moment of sheer panic when he realizes that neither James nor Remus will be there to help him with it. One or both of them has been present for every serious bit of magic he has attempted since he was eleven years old, and for all of his self-sufficiency, Sirius is not used to doing things alone.

For a moment, as he stares down at spell books and components, he can imagine that they are both there after all: that he will look up and Remus will be in the chair across from him, absorbed in the dustiest, most obscure book in the library while Prongs leans over Remus' shoulder and makes up chapters and characters and dialogue that get more ridiculous by the page. It is a habit that he begun in their first year and never lost, though as they'd grown older, the stories had gotten decidedly obscene.

When Sirius' mind tries to add Peter to the picture, though, he forces it back to the present with one long look around the empty library. Even Phineas Nigellus has gone off

somewhere. Sirius hasn't seen him since his first night in the house. He tells himself firmly that he's glad of the solitude, that he can't afford any distractions, but a spasm of loneliness grips his chest for long moments despite himself, and he turns to his work with a grim determination that he hopes will leave no room for grief.

Fortunately, Sirius has plenty of his main ingredient. Vitae Invenire, like most blood-based locator spells, is designed to work with a minimum of actual blood. The liquid then acts as both the anchor for the search and as a catalyst, sparking the magical reaction between the spell's other components, which in turn draw greater power from the amount of blood used than would otherwise be possible. One of the spell's strong points is that there will be enough of Pettigrew's finger left for repeated tries. Sirius will cut the rest of what he needs from Peter's body when he catches the traitorous bastard.

With a knife.

The true beauty of Vitae Invenire, however, is that if the spell's target is an enemy, the blood serves a third purpose as well. If the spell is properly cast and the intent behind it dark enough, the inactive link between the target and his blood will be reactivated, and the spell will cease drawing its power from the caster and begin to pull it from the target instead.

Sirius is looking forward to trapping and tracking little Peter with his own power, his own blood. It is a suitable punishment for a betrayal of this magnitude: to make Peter's magic, his body, betray him in turn, and he can feel the grim smile curving his lips as he works.

Vitae Invenire works along lines somewhat similar to the Marauder's Map. In fact, part of the final tracking spell that had gone into the Map had been based on some of the principles that operate Vitae Invenire, though Sirius had kept that particular source of inspiration strictly to himself. For this spell, Sirius is using his grandfather's collection of leather-bound atlases. They are spread out open across the floor, and Sirius winces at the thought of what Moony will say about putting books like this on the floor, then clenches his jaw on the next thought, which is that Remus will no longer have anything to say to him on that subject or any other. If they ever see each other again, Remus will most likely do his best to hex Sirius into oblivion, and his treatment of a few old books will have nothing to do with it.

Luckily, whichever of Sirius' relatives stripped the house after his grandfather's death neglected to take any of the potions equipment. It hadn't taken him long to dig up the brazier and silver bowl required to brew the ink for the spell. He pulls the bowl to him and taps it twice with his wand.

"*Nolo Conflare*," he mutters, before putting the bowl on top of the brazier. He clears his mind, breathing falling into the automatic patterns learned in class after class at Hogwarts. Blood magic responds to emotion, particularly to strong, negative emotion, and letting grief or anger rule him could easily cause the spell to fail. When he does reach for the first of the components, his hands are steady, and his mouth is set in a grim line.

Sirius had always been good at Potions while at Hogwarts, despite his distaste for Slughorn; still, the first three ingredients to go into the bowl are fennel oil, essence of Murtlap, and Lobalug venom. The latter two create an unstable reaction that is only slightly controlled by the fennel oil, and within seconds Sirius can sense the gradually expanding magical fumes that waver unsteadily upwards from the mouth of the bowl. The next two components are Clabbert's pus and Re'em blood; as Sirius adds them, the magical fumes surrounding the bowl expand and strengthen.

There is a faint smile on Sirius' lips as he reaches for the next ingredient. Three drops of Peter's blood are required for the Vitae Invenire, placed in the bowl at different intervals. The potion turns a gleaming silver as the blood hits it, the surface of the liquid nearly matching the bowl that contains it, and Sirius' smile becomes more distinct at the colour change.

The next ingredient is the yolk of a Snidget egg, which shines as gold as the potion does silver. As he cracks the egg over the cauldron, Sirius begins the incantation that will bind his intent into the spell. From this moment on, concentration is critical. A misplaced syllable could collapse the increasingly strong magical field in front of him with devastating results; a loss of concentration may prove just as dangerous.

"*Vindictus pro plagatus pectus pectoris nostrum*," he begins, "*Vindictus pro saevio meus*."

He adds Shrike spines and Jobberknoll feathers, and the potion's colour changes to the dark, rusty brown of dried blood.

"*Gratia trado infestus obviam meus hostilis*"

The second drop of Peter's blood turns the potion jet-black.

"*Accerso super patientia quod poena vacuus subsisto, et exstinguo meus moeror per suus vita cruo*" Hair of Demiguise, hair of Niffler, four drops of Quintaped blood, and the magical fumes around the bowl are shimmering like heat waves over pavement. Sirius does his best to keep his face out of them and pushes on.

"*Pro odium meus, quod saevio meus, rabies meus quod meus moeror*." He adds the final drop of Peter's blood, and the potion takes on the unmistakable crimson shade of fresh blood, Gryffindor red. Sirius' voice trembles on the last few words of the incantation.

"*Supremus totus, pro meus votum pro ultionis, parumper cruentus mendicis nex in proditor mors capitis! Peracto!*" The wavering magical field surrounding the potion hardens suddenly to knife-blade sharpness, then contracts inwards with vicious swiftness. There is a cracking sound, and a flash of light over the surface of the bowl. Suddenly all of that wavering, blood-tinged magic is emanating from the potion itself, which has become the ink he needs to complete the Vitae Invenire.

Sirius lets out a nearly inaudible sigh of relief and reaches with the tongs to take the bowl off of the glowing brazier. He places it on the marble-topped side-table that he'd brought in from the parlour for just this purpose, and sinks, trembling, into the hard-backed oak chair beside it. He can still feel the faint residue of dark magic in his veins and on his hands, and the ink next to him gives off a psychic stench as it cools.

"That was surprisingly acceptable work," draws a voice from behind him, "given your total lack of formal background in the field. Frankly, I'm amazed that you didn't blow yourself and the house to smithereens. Congratulations."

Sirius is on his feet before the third word hits his ears, wand in hand, his eyes flickering wildly, before he recognizes Phineas Nigellus' dry, sarcastic tones.

"The next time you sneak up on me like that," he snarls, "I'll bloody well set you on fire."

"Such gratitude," Phineas murmurs. "Would you have preferred me to interrupt you mid-incantation? Or perhaps while you were transferring your ink to the table? A fine mess that would have been, had you dropped it in surprise."

There's nothing Sirius can really say to that, so he settles for glaring furiously at the portrait and dropping heavily back into his chair.

"I've no need to ask why you've resorted to dark magic," Phineas' drawl continues, "though I will admit to being surprised at your effectiveness. I wasn't aware that you'd kept your hand in. The level of intent in that incantation was almost impressive."

"What do you want?" Sirius asks wearily. Phineas' voice is grating along his nerves like nails on a chalkboard. Lily had been fond of that particular trick and Sirius wants nothing more than to catch an hour's rest while the ink cools.

"I can't simply be checking up on the last of my House?"

"You could always go visit my mother," Sirius suggests, in the same tones that he would use to say 'go to hell.'

"Your mother," Phineas says, "is not being hunted by both the Dementors and your cousin Bellatrix."

"What?!" Sirius sits bolt upright in his chair.

"Oh, yes," Phineas continues. "They've set the Dementors on your trail."

"Not that," Sirius says, "I knew that already. What's this about Bellatrix?"

"She and that idiot husband of hers are looking for you. They spent last night torturing a couple of Aurors into insanity trying to get information." Phineas' curled lip speaks volumes.

"Why is she after me?" Sirius demands.

"Because, dear boy, you are after Pettigrew, and she wants him. She blames him for the fall of her Lord." The portrait sneers. "She gets her servile streak from the Rosiers, of course. Still, one can almost feel sorry for Pettigrew. You and Bellatrix despite your deficiencies are the most formidable Blacks in two generations. He can't be comfortable with both of you after him."

"I'm nothing like Bellatrix," Sirius growls.

"No?" Phineas asks, one eyebrow raised. "You're both headstrong, impetuous, arrogant young fools, and you're both rushing headlong towards your own destruction because neither of you will stop to think. You're both Blacks. Getting blasted off the tapestry doesn't alter the blood in your veins, no matter how much you might think it never belonged there in the first place. Besides," the portrait says with a thin smile, "you two seem to be the only ones to have figured out on your own that Pettigrew is still alive. It certainly wasn't her moronic husband that set them on his trail."

"I have to get to him first," Sirius says.

"No," Phineas says, "what you have to do is think. There's no trial waiting for you in England, boy, just the Dementor's Kiss. If Bellatrix finds Pettigrew first, her revenge is almost certain to be public. It might prove public enough to make the Ministry reconsider"

"I don't give a damn what's waiting for me in England," Sirius says furiously, pushing away any stray thoughts of Remus. "I'm not about to let Bellatrix kill him instead. I want to do it myself."

"Do you really think that anything you could do to him will be worse than what Bellatrix will do?" Phineas snaps. "She drove two Aurors permanently insane with Cruciatus less than twenty-four hours ago, not to mention the fact that she has spent her entire life learning creative and interesting ways to wreak vengeance on traitors."

"Pettigrew is mine," Sirius snaps back. "I'm certain I'll figure out how to punish him. I am a Black, remember?"

"One who's spent the past ten years turning his back on his heritage. You came running back to family ground when you were pursued, and you've turned to family ways to take your revenge as you damned well should have but that doesn't make you Bellatrix's equal in the Dark Arts!"

"Then I'll have to start practicing, won't I?" Sirius snarls. He glares fiercely at Phineas, barely registering that Phineas is glaring too, both of them having abandoned hauteur in favour of fury.

"The Dementors "

"I'm not about to cower here while Bellatrix takes my vengeance for me! Not for fear of Dementors or anything else!"

"Gryffindors," Phineas says in tones of deep disgust, his eyes gleaming with anger. "An elegant solution falls into your lap, but instead you prefer to dash about risking life and limb because it's brave." He sneers, some of his composure returning. "By all means, Sirius. Run out into the night and get your soul eaten. That will certainly avenge your friends, and care for their son." He turns on his heel and stalks out of the frame, flickering briefly in the portrait of Sirius' great-aunt Dorea before vanishing altogether.

"You certainly put his back up," Dorea says.

"Shut up," Sirius tells her, then remembers that she's James' cousin as well and apologizes. She sniffs, mollified.

Sirius leans back into his chair, tilts his head back and closes his eyes. Just before he drifts off, he realizes that he'd forgotten to ask where Phineas Nigellus had gotten his information or which Aurors Bellatrix had gone after.

(Very Rough) Translations from the Latin:

-For the vengeance of our injured hearts

-For my anger/rage

-In order to attack/injure my enemy

-To empty my fury on his person

-And slake my grief with his life's blood

-For my anger, for my fury, for my rage, for my grief

-Above all, to hunt down my enemy and cause his (screaming?) death.

*a/n: Title borrowed without permission from Yusef Komunyakaa's 'Believing In Iron.' Again, my gratitude to **konishi_zen** for beta services. Any remaining mistakes are my own.*

*Reasons behind the ingredients used in the **Vitae Invenire** spell provided upon request.*

My Latin is very, very bad. Anyone who can help and is willing to do so will receive my undying gratitude.

Chapter Six: And All Their Sorrows in Your Face

Bellatrix and Rodolphus arrive at Malfoy Manor seeking sanctuary, with half a dozen Aurors only seconds behind them. Lucius Malfoy, furious with them for endangering his family, not only lets the Aurors take them, but assists in their capture as well. Moody interviews them briefly while they are in Auror custody - and then Barty Crouch shows up, Dementors in tow.

Chapter Six: And All Their Sorrows in Your Face

"Pos de chantar m'es prez talentz

Farai un vers don sui dolenz:

Mais non serai obedienz

En Peitau ni en Lemozi.

Qu'era m'en irai en eisil

En gran paor, en grand peril,

En guerra laissarai mon fil

E faran li mal siei vezi"

-Guillaume IX, Duke of Aquitaine

The shriek of the Manor's alarms tearing along his nerves wakes Lucius from a sound sleep. There is no moment of disorientation. Ten years as Malfoy of Malfoy Manor have accustomed him well enough to the wards that he is able to pinpoint the location of the disturbance in the few seconds it takes him to grab his wand and shake Narcissa awake.

"What is it?" she murmurs, the sleepy look vanishing from her eyes as she notices the tension in his face and body.

"Someone's trying to force the front gate," he says. "Take Draco and go to your Aunt Walburga's. If I don't contact you within the hour, go to the Riviera property and *stay there* until you hear from me."

Narcissa nods and slips out of bed. She pauses only to grab her wand and slide her feet into a pair of shoes.

Lucius waits until she has returned to the bedroom with a surprisingly silent Draco and both of them have Flooed to Grimmauld Place before pulling on shirt and shoes and Apparating to the gates.

Lucius is more than half-expecting to be met with a contingent of Aurors intent on bringing him to Azkaban. If that is the case, he plans to kill as many of them as he can before dying himself. He cannot protect Draco and Narcissa from Azkaban, but if he dies at his own front gates and takes half a squadron of Aurors with him, his widow and his son will be still be provided for, and the power of the Malfoy name will survive in the circles that it must survive in.

Even as he finishes Apparating, he is readying curses and drawing as deeply as he can on the wards themselves, preparing the Manor's final and most brutal defences for a sudden attack.

He casts Lumos silently as he arrives, and the scene that meets his eyes nearly causes him to lose his grip on the wards.

Bellatrix is doing her best to force the front gates of Malfoy Manor, while behind her Rodolphus is fighting a losing battle with the forces that the Manor calls up on its own. Streaks of magic flare wildly through the air, deflecting off of the shield that Rodolphus is barely maintaining. Both of them are covered in blood; both seem to be in some pain.

When she sees him, the relief on Bellatrix's face is nearly palpable, and Lucius fights back the sudden rage that grips him at her audacity. She is clearly in trouble, and she has just as clearly brought that trouble down on him and his.

"Lucius," she calls urgently, "hurry! They're right behind us." Lucius' hand tightens furiously around his wand.

"Who is right behind you?" he asks coldly, resisting the urge to blast her with the defensive magic that is coiled tightly around him.

"Shacklebolt," Rodolphus pants, "and about half a dozen others. They caught up with us in Sussex; we barely made it here."

"Much good it will do you," Lucius says, voice gone soft and deadly with anger. Something of the look in his eyes seems to penetrate Rodolphus' thick skull, and the man shrinks back slightly, but Bellatrix is too far gone in rage and fear to notice.

"Open the damned gates!" she demands.

"I think not," Lucius says. "You've brought the *Aurors* down on me, Bellatrix, to the house where my wife and my sons *sleep*. By rights, I should let the Manor annihilate you where you stand."

The first of the Aurors appears behind her.

"Throw down your wands!" Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice is unmistakable. "Do it now! You're surrounded! Malfoy, don't move!"

"Let us in, Lucius!" Bellatrix demands.

"Don't you do it, Malfoy!"

For a long moment, everything seems frozen, the seconds defined for Lucius by Bellatrix's harsh breathing, by the hiss and crackle of magic against Rodolphus' shield, by the witch-light reflecting from the faces of the gathered Aurors and the feel of his wand against his palm and fingers. He is safe from curses as long as the gates remain locked. The Manor does not allow stray magic onto its grounds, and unless the Aurors make a concerted attempt to break through the wards, they will not get in either. He has no plans to give them a reason to do so.

"*Lucius*," Bellatrix shrieks again, "*open the gates!*"

"*Don't move, Malfoy!*"

Lucius smiles.

"Auror Shacklebolt," he drawls, putting on his most casual expression, "I'm glad you're here."

"Oh, really?" Shacklebolt's face is a mask of scepticism.

Rodolphus is still fighting his losing war against the Manor's defences. Bellatrix is watching Lucius and Shacklebolt intently. The expression on her face makes Lucius glad to be behind the wards.

"Indeed," he says, ignoring both Bellatrix's stare and Rodolphus' increasingly desperate struggles. "I wish to lodge a complaint against these two for attempted burglary."

"Burglary?" Shacklebolt's eyebrows shoot skywards.

"You *traitor*," Bellatrix gasps.

"Goodbye, *dear* sister," he says quietly. She glares furiously at him before turning to face the half-dozen Aurors now surrounding her.

"Throw down your wands!" Shacklebolt orders again. "Now, damn you!"

Bellatrix curses him shrilly and defiantly. Rodolphus takes a firmer grip on his wand. Lucius raises one eyebrow.

In the moment before either side can start hurling curses, he strikes.

Bellatrix and Rodolphus reel under the sudden onslaught of defensive magic. Rodolphus' shield flares briefly as Bellatrix adds her power to it; the next instant, it crumbles inward with a violent explosion of light.

Lucius uses the least aggressive of the Manor's defences against his in-laws, mainly because killing them in front of the Aurors will do him as much harm as letting them through the gates would have. Even so, fresh wounds open on Bellatrix's face, and Rodolphus cries out in agony, neither of them able to summon enough concentration for spell-casting.

Shacklebolt, after one last, uncertain glance at Lucius, hurls *Silencio*, *Stupefy* and *Petrificus Totalis* at Bellatrix in quick succession, while beside him the other Aurors hasten to restrain Rodolphus. Spells fly through the air, bouncing and rebounding off of the Manor's wards.

Between the Manor's defences and Shacklebolt's Aurors, it is only a few seconds before Bellatrix and Rodolphus are lying bound on the ground side by side. The quiet look of triumph that Shacklebolt directs at the captured pair does not bode well for their future.

Lucius waits. Better to alleviate any remaining suspicion now than to be called upon later by a second team of Aurors. After a long, narrow-eyed stare in his direction, Shacklebolt approaches the gate.

"Burglary?" he asks again, in tones of deep contempt. "It looks to me as if they were seeking refuge."

"They were trying to force my front gate," Lucius snaps, not bothering to keep the anger out of his voice, "and seeking is not finding. My wife and my heir are upstairs sleeping. Do you really think that I would let two wanted fugitives take shelter under the same roof?"

The look the Auror slants at him is both suspicious and considering.

Lucius rolls his eyes.

"Merlin's beard, man! I had more than enough time before your arrival to have let them in if I'd been planning on doing so."

A long second passes; then two. Lucius is beginning to feel uncomfortable, despite the wards between himself and the Auror. Then Shacklebolt nods once, curtly.

"Come on, then," he says to his waiting team. "Let's get these two back to Headquarters."

A few of the Aurors cast furious glances at Lucius before Disapparating, but it is the look on Bellatrix's face that sends a shiver of fear down his spine.

He shakes it off, but does not turn his back until the road in front of the gate is empty once more.

"It's hopeless," Shacklebolt says. He looks grimmer than Moody has ever seen anyone look, with the exception of his own reflection. Shacklebolt and Frank Longbottom had been friends and Quidditch team-mates at Hogwarts less than six years earlier and had also gone through Auror training and the entire war as partners.

"They're sure?" Moody asks.

Shacklebolt nods. "I spoke to the Chief Healer this morning. He says that their chances of recovery are nonexistent; that the Lestranges used *Crucio* on Frank and Alice until their minds disintegrated. There's not enough cohesion left along the neural pathways for any sort of magical repair; there's nowhere for the Healers to start. They'll be made as *comfortable* as possible, of course." He makes the word 'comfortable' sound like a curse.

"Of course," Moody echoes. He'd taken on seven trainees from that particular Hogwarts class. Now one is dead; a second is on the run, framed for the murder of the first. Two more have been tortured into insanity. The three still living are nearly as battle-weary as Moody himself. He can't help but feel a moment of sharp, bitter grief at the inevitability of war and death and the unceasing appetite that both of those entities have for the young.

"What about the Lestranges?" he asks, forcing the grief back to its habitual dull ache. "Have you gotten anything out of them?" Feud with Crouch or no, he is still Chief Auror; this is his investigation, even if he has been forbidden to act as primary on it.

"Nothing worth repeating," Shacklebolt says, "but that Muggle who shot them is awake." He pauses, and a glint of weary humour resurfaces in his eyes. "I don't suppose there's any way we could award him the Order of Merlin for that? First Class?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you can make him Minister of Magic. Couldn't be any worse than the incompetent cow we have now, or the mad bastard certain to come after her." He grins like a jackal at Shacklebolt's startled expression. "You've got to learn to control your reactions better than that, lad," he notes. "What did he have to say, then?"

"The Lestranges were definitely after Black," Shacklebolt says. "Bingham that's the Muggle says that Bellatrix kept asking about her 'traitor cousin'." He frowns. "It seems she was asking about Pettigrew, too. For some reason she apparently seems to be under the impression that he's still alive."

Long years of practice keep Moody from reacting. Still, he wants to smile. Bellatrix Lestranger would have no reason to ask after Pettigrew were the man innocent.

"Has she said anything to you about Pettigrew?"

"The only things she's been saying to me," Shacklebolt says dryly, "are unprintable. I've put an order in for Veritaserum and hopefully it will get here soon. The din in the

interrogation room is deafening." He rolls his eyes. "I thought the Blacks were supposed to be well-bred. She's in there screeching and cursing like a fishwife, and while we were at school, Sirius--" He stops.

"At any rate," he continues, the pause barely noticeable, "I'm not certain how long it will take for the Veritaserum to arrive, but in the meantime, Crouch and the Minister are on their way up."

"What do they want?" Moody asks suspiciously.

The Lestranges have all sorts of valuable information that will help take down the rest of the Death Eaters. If Bellatrix says what Moody suspects she will, he might be able to exonerate Sirius Black with her testimony alone. At the very least he will be able to get the Dementors pulled back to Azkaban post-haste.

The Lestranges are quite possibly the most important capture of the war in terms of information. Unfortunately, their publicity value is nearly as great, and Moody doesn't trust either Crouch or Bagnold to consider the former after realizing the latter.

"No idea," Shacklebolt admits, which takes Moody's suspicions up a notch or two. "Crouch owed fifteen minutes ago, but the only thing his message said was that he and the Minister would be by shortly."

"Of course they will," Moody says, irritated. "Did they say how long they'd be?"

"Half an hour."

"Good," Moody says. "I need to speak to Bellatrix before Crouch and the Minister arrive, and I need you to warn me when they do."

Shacklebolt slides an eyebrow upwards.

"Might I ask why? Sir?" The title is deliberate; a reminder to Moody that he has both responsibilities and restrictions on his shoulders. Neither changes the fact that the Dementors are after a man who might be innocent, though; or the fact that Moody is sworn to uphold the law, not to do whatever is politically convenient for his superiors.

"You can *ask*," Moody growls.

Shacklebolt stares narrow-eyed at him for long moments. Finally, he nods.

"They're in room four."

"I need privacy," Moody warns him and watches the hesitation come sweeping back over the man's face. He can't help but smile. Shacklebolt has learned his lessons well: no one is above suspicion.

"I'll keep everyone else out," he says finally, "but I'll have to be watching, sir."

"Fine," Moody says. "Don't get in my way."

It takes Shacklebolt less than thirty seconds to clear the interrogation room of everyone but the Lestranges. Moody, waiting in the hall, is fairly certain that the pair of Aurors standing guard inside are glad to escape the din. He can hear Bellatrix swearing as the door opens, her voice raised to a pitch and profanity that he hadn't ever thought to hear a woman achieve. Thirty seconds after that, Shacklebolt lets him into the room and slips into the corresponding observation post, which is actually a closet with *Video Omnes* cast on it.

Both Lestranges look up as Moody comes in. Rodolphus settles back into his seat as though he had been contemplating physical attack despite the chains securing him magically to the chair. He looks uncomfortable; his face is as white as parchment.

Bellatrix, upon seeing Moody, stops hurling threats and insults. She lounges back into her chains as if holding court, her face relaxing into bored, sneering lines that almost conceal the glitter of fear and rage in her heavy-lidded gray eyes. The arrogance raises Moody's hackles, but at least she's no longer shrieking.

Moody sits down in the chair opposite them, and gives Bellatrix a hard look.

She laughs, a throaty, smouldering sound. "Come to scare me, Alastor?" she asks. "To tell me that I'm a naughty girl and ought to mend my ways?"

"I won't waste my time," he says. "Crouch is on his way to see you two; who knows what sort of shape you'll be in after he's done."

"*Dear Barty*," Bellatrix says. "I've heard so much about him. I simply can't wait to meet him." There is a dreadfully eager look on her face for an instant, strong enough to cover even the lurking fear in her eyes, but she is wandless and chained down, and the room is warded against any form of magic to be doubly certain.

"You'll get your chance soon enough," Moody promises her. "Right now, though, you have to deal with me and I want to know about Peter Pettigrew."

"So, even the great Auror is curious about the little rat," Bellatrix laughs softly. "My blood-traitor cousin would give almost anything to lay his hands on Pettigrew, you know. Will you beat him to the punch, Auror?"

"Pettigrew's alive, then?" Moody asks, careful to keep any hint of interest out of his voice. "Lucky for him. Black was a dangerous opponent even before Voldemort took him on as an apprentice."

The last sentence has precisely the effect he'd hoped it would.

"The Dark Lord never apprenticed that Muggle-loving blood-traitor," she hisses, sudden fury contorting her face into ugliness. "Precious, brilliant Sirius. You can't even think him a traitor without making him someone's favourite. The Dark Lord apprenticed *me*, Auror, not my apologist cousin."

"Did he apprentice Pettigrew?"

Bellatrix's laugh is sharp and scornful.

"That fat, useless, *cringing* little worm? You must be joking. Pettigrew is a tool."

"One that turns in your hand when you try to use it?" Moody asks casually.

He doesn't miss the flash of surprise before she narrows her eyes at him and tilts her head, her anger vanishing as quickly as he'd raised it. The mercurial streak that runs through the Black family seems to have rendered her very nearly mad, but she's no less effective and far more dangerous because of it.

"What do you know, Auror?" she asks. "What little bird has been whispering secrets in your ear? Or *Secret Keepers*?"

Moody draws a sharp breath, but his next question is cut off by three sharp raps on the door. Shacklebolt's signal for Crouch's approach. He fixes Bellatrix with a warning glare.

"I'll be back," he tells her, "and *wewill* finish this conversation." Bellatrix sneers at him as he slips out the door.

Shacklebolt intercepts before he can get five feet, face intent.

"What's going on, sir?" he asks. "Why all the questions about Pettigrew?"

"Never you mind," Moody says gruffly. "You've got enough on your plate right now, lad."

"Pardon me, sir, but it sounds like this is supposed to be on my plate, too."

The sudden chill slicing through the corridors stops Moody's reply in his throat. He is suddenly battling an upswell of memory: dead faces, dead friends, murdered children; the Dark Mark, green and malevolent over house after house after house...

Shacklebolt's eyes are wide and white in his dark face.

"*Dementors*," he hisses.

With an effort, Moody forces down the rising tide of memory.

"What *are they* doing here?" he growls, just as Crouch and Bagnold come around the corner, flanked by a pair of the creatures. Bagnold looks distinctly uneasy, though Crouch's face could easily have been carved from stone. They both nod curtly at Moody before turning to Shacklebolt.

"Excellent work," Crouch tells him. "Which room are they in, then?"

"Four, sir," Shacklebolt says. "Sir, might I ask-"

Crouch and Bagnold sweep past them. The Dementors neither turn nor pause in their advance as they pass. Something about that fact Moody struggles to push past the Dementor-fog in his mind.

"What are they *doing* here?" he asks himself softly, even as the door to room four closes behind the Dementors. "What are they-"

The sudden scream that echoes through the corridors is like nothing he has ever heard before. It is high-pitched and frenzied, pleading and writhing with an unbearable agony that resonates and throbs through wordless, begging syllables: a desperate, keening wail that fades as suddenly as it begins, as though the screamer has been yanked away to an unimaginable distance.

"*No!*" Moody shouts. He turns back to the interrogation rooms in a fury, pulling his wand even as the second gibbering, horrified scream rises and fades again. He blasts the door open without a thought, tearing through the wards as though they were paper and ignoring the Dementors still hovering over the two limp bodies at the table. Crouch and Bagnold turn at his entrance, startled.

"What the hell was that?" he demands, fury overcoming sense and caution in a burning red wave. "*What did you just do?!?*"

Bagnold takes two startled steps back. Even Crouch flinches away a little in the face of Moody's rage, though he rallies almost instantly.

"The Dementor's Kiss--" he begins, but Moody cuts him off.

"Without a *trial*?! We hadn't even finished the damned interrogation! Do you have any idea how useful they could have been? How many Death Eaters they might have given up?"

"They would never have said anything-"

"*They certainly won't now!!*" Moody roars. "They'll never say anything! You and your pet monsters have had no luck finding Sirius Black, so to appease both them and the public, you what? Sacrifice his cousin instead, with her husband as a bonus?"

"They were *Death Eaters*," Crouch insists. "This was justice." His face has gone red with suppressed temper.

"We never proved it!" Moody shouts. "Not in court, with witnesses, where it matters! That's what *separates* us from the Death Eaters, remember?"

"That's enough," Crouch snaps. "Do you hear me, Moody? *Enough!*"

"To hell with you!" Moody says furiously. "This was *murder*."

"You're relieved of your duties," Crouch says. His lips are white with rage.

"Then I won't have to wear the badge while you tarnish it," Moody snarls. He pulls it out of his pocket and drops it to the floor where it lands with a heavy thunk, then turns and walks away. He can feel the awful silence of that room follow him down the hallway.

a/n: first, a big thank you to everyone who has read/reviewed thus far. feedback makes my day.

*as always, my thanks to **konishi_zen** for beta services. thanks are also due to **phoenix** for that crash course in html i was in such dire need of.*

title borrowed without permission from wilfred owen's Six O'Clock in Princes Street

Chapter Seven: Between the Dawn and the Day

Chapter 8 of 16

A meeting in Dumbledore's office leads to several crucial decisions in the struggle to clear Sirius' name, and an offer of

assistance comes from an unlikely source.

Chapter Seven: Between the Dawn and the Day

"I remember the gleams and glooms that dart

Across the school-boy's brain;

The song and the silence in the heart,

That in part are prophecies, and in part

Are longings wild and vain.

And the voice of that fitful song

Sings on, and is never still:

"A boy's will is the wind's will,

And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.""

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *My Lost Youth*

Remus still takes the *Prophet*, though he's considered giving it up more than once. He has spent the war watching the faces of friends and acquaintances move over its pages and then move on to death, to Azkaban, to Voldemort's side, the entire world passing away while headlines scream destruction and smear black ink onto his fingertips. The ink turns up later, smudged from his fingers onto lightswitches and china and the edges of pages, tragedy transferred like bruises from surface to surface, while Remus tries not to wonder whose death-notices live on in the various blurs scattered darkly around his flat.

Today the headline reads, '*Justice Served*,' in two-inch type, and Remus' breath catches in his throat with a nauseated gravity that feels familiarly like terror, especially when he sees the words, '*Dementor's Kiss*,' immediately below the headline. The idea that Sirius, too, is about to vanish into columns of newsprint and one last photograph is almost too much to bear, but he forces himself to open the paper anyway and ignores the tremors in his hands.

His relief at seeing the name Lestrangle --*not Sirius, it's not Sirius*-- is profound enough to weaken his knees, and he sits down hard on one of the kitchen chairs, closing his eyes against a shudder of delayed reaction.

After a minute he opens them again and picks the paper back up. "*Dementor's Kiss Administered to Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrangle*," he reads.

Below the headlines, Bellatrix looks expressionlessly back at him, Rodolphus blank and docile beside her. Both of them look faded, wiped slate-clean, and sit so still that Remus might have thought the photograph taken with a Muggle camera if Barty Crouch were not sitting sharp and smug in the foreground, throwing occasional looks of triumph over his shoulder at the pair of them. The gloating expression on his face is almost worse than the emptiness on his prisoners'.

Bellatrix's heavy-lidded eyes look rain-washed, empty and strangely colourless, with all of their sparkling malevolence gone. Remus finds this vacant, no-longer-Bellatrix more unsettling than the woman he remembers from either Hogwarts or the long years of the war. It is too easy to see Sirius' face in hers now that she is no longer behind it: to note the similarities of high cheekbones and full-lipped mouths, of delicate eyesockets and glossy black hair, to imagine Sirius' vacated gray eyes staring sightlessly at him from undeniable newsprint lines, and he puts the paper on the table unread before rising and crossing his flat to the bedroom.

He dresses quickly and is about to slip quietly out his front door when a tapping at the window stops him. He pushes aside the curtains. Instead of the usual owl, though, it is Fawkes waiting on the other side of the glass, a brilliant splash of colour in the grey morning. He opens the window and lets the phoenix in, and Fawkes waits patiently as Remus unties the message from his leg, bumping his plumed head once against Remus' wrist before flying off.

The message is, of course, from Dumbledore, and Remus wastes no time in Flooing to the Headmaster's office as requested. Moody is already there when Remus arrives, his scarred face dark with anger and frustration. Dumbledore looks up with a smile as Remus picks himself up off the carpet and brushes soot out of his clothing.

"Remus," he says, "thank you for coming. Would you like a biscuit?"

Remus would like Dumbledore to stop offering him sweets as if he were still a child, though he can't help feeling a little petty about it, especially after Dumbledore gives him a knowing smile and says:

"Alastor's had two already."

"Oh, give it a rest, Dumbledore," an unfamiliar voice says sharply. "Time and place, *please*."

"There is always time for biscuits, Phineas," Dumbledore says serenely, and Remus realizes that the Headmaster is addressing the portrait directly across from his desk.

When the portrait sees Remus looking, he lifts one dark eyebrow in sardonic greeting. Remus nods at him politely.

Phineas Nigellus has the same colouring and aristocratic bone structure as the rest of his family, and Remus winces internally at the sight of yet another face that is not quite Sirius'. It strikes him suddenly that this portrait of a man nearly sixty years in his grave is now more alive than Bellatrix is, more alive than Sirius will be if the Dementors catch him, and he shudders in renewed horror at the memory of the empty faces in the *Prophet* that morning.

"All right, lad?" Moody asks gruffly.

"I'm fine," Remus says. "What's happening? Is there news of Sirius?"

"Only in the sense that there isn't any news of Sirius," Moody answers. "We've got another problem at the moment. I turned my badge in last night."

"What!?" Remus demands, trying hard to keep the incredulous dismay out of his voice. From the quick, hard look that Moody directs at him, he's not doing a very good job of it.

"Crouch would have taken it either way," Moody growls. He is furious, and he isn't bothering to hide the fact. "Damn it, the man brought Dementors into my interrogation room! He let them Kiss my prisoners! What else was I supposed to do?"

Remus bites back the instant retort on his tongue. He would have stayed through anything for Sirius' sake, but it isn't fair of him to ask the same sacrifice of Moody.

"What sort of hearing were they given?" he asks instead.

"Hearing?" Moody asks scornfully, "I had fifteen minutes in an interrogation room with the two of them does that count? Crouch could have asked for any sentence he wanted, Kiss included, and gotten it but you know how he is. He acts as though he's on some holy crusade to end the practice of Dark magic once and for all. Once he makes up his mind as to what's right, he acts before anyone else has a chance to and steamrolls anyone who might be in his way. Bagnold certainly wouldn't have authorized the Kiss like that without Crouch egging her on." He snorts in disgust. "Bellatrix was the Dark Lord's favourite. Merlin only knows the sort of information we could have gotten out of her. Unfortunately, using Veritaserum on prisoners doesn't play as well in the press as sentencing two Death Eaters to the Dementor's Kiss does."

"No," Remus murmurs. He knows that the Ministry is publicity driven; after nearly twenty years of encounters with the Werewolf Support Unit, he knows it better than most wizards ever do, and he thinks that Moody is probably more surprised by this latest incident than he is.

"None of this addresses the main problem at hand," Phineas Nigellus says, his voice a slightly altered echo of Sirius' at his most impatient. "We've got no inside link to the Aurors, which means that we've got no way to hold off the Dementors, even if we've got Pettigrew with us in chains, and Sirius is growing more hot-headed and impetuous by the day."

"You're in contact with him?" Remus asks. For some reason, that idea hadn't occurred to him. Phineas Nigellus rolls his eyes.

"I thought you were supposed to be the smart one, Lupin," he says dryly. "Of course I'm in contact with him though, if he goes running off in a fit of impatience, that's likely to change."

"How is he?" Remus asks, for once not caring if his voice reveals too much. Phineas gives him a sharp look, but answers civilly enough.

"Worried. Angry. Grieving. He's going after Pettigrew with no regard for his own safety, and no matter how much everyone else is blaming him for your friends' deaths, he's blaming himself more."

"Does he know that we're trying to help him?" Remus asks.

The look on Phineas' face is answer enough, and Remus pushes down the upswell of anger that rises in him suddenly. The full moon is still a week away, but he's been angry and scared for too long, and he's feeling its pull already.

"Tell him," Remus says shortly. He can hear the anger vibrating in his voice, and doesn't trust himself enough for long words. "Tonight. As soon as you see him, tell him."

Phineas gives him a considering look through narrowed gray eyes, his expression intense enough that Remus finds himself wondering whether or not portraits can practice Legilimency, even though he knows for a fact that they can not.

"I can do one better," he says, after a long moment, "if you don't mind the risk." His voice suggests that he already knows the answer.

"What?" Remus demands.

"The house itself is Unplottable, but I can probably persuade Sirius to go and fetch you, if you wait somewhere in town."

"And the risk?" Moody asks.

"Being hunted down by the Dementors," Phineas answers. The 'obviously' remains unspoken. "If Lupin disappears, how long do you think it will take Crouch to figure out where he's gone?"

"Not long," Moody grunts. "He's more paranoid than I am these days." He turns to Remus. "Black could use the help, I'm sure not to mention someone to keep an eye on him but if we don't catch Pettigrew, you'll most likely end up as much of a fugitive as he is."

"I don't care," Remus says. He knows Sirius well enough that he'd heard what Phineas hadn't said. Sirius is reckless when he's angry, and with no one there as a tempering influence he might very well get himself caught and Kissed.

Remus can almost picture him shoving aside his emotions, burying them in spellcasting while the need to act builds up inside of him. Sirius has been grieving James and Lily alone, without even Moody's gruff words of comfort, and Remus finds that the thought of him trapped and mourning inside one of the ancestral tombs his family considers a home is almost physically painful.

Remus doesn't mind the idea of becoming a fugitive, as long as he's with Sirius: besides, there's only so much he can do if he remains in the public eye, due mainly to Ministry restrictions on werewolves and his own lack of contacts with anyone of importance. Even without his badge, Moody has favours he can call in, and Dumbledore's influence is as far-reaching as it is subtle. Remus will be more help at Sirius' side than he will be here, and the relief he feels at the idea of getting out of his too-empty flat is so deep as to be nearly profound.

"Remus," Dumbledore says, "are you certain that this is what you want to do?" There is a dizzy moment in which Remus wonders just how long the three of them had been sitting there before he arrived, and how much of the conversation had been planned in advance. Then, he decides that it doesn't matter whether or not he's being manipulated as long as he gets to Sirius.

"I'm certain," he tells Dumbledore, and the glance that the three older wizards exchange confirms his suspicions. "You could have asked me the minute I walked in," he says. Dumbledore beams at him, Moody looks vaguely embarrassed, and Phineas Nigellus gives him a sharply approving look that Remus nearly misses. "When do I leave?" he asks Phineas.

"As soon as we've finished here," the portrait answers.

"What more is there to discuss?" Moody growls. "Lupin's going to join Black, and I'm going to--"

"You're going to do nothing," Phineas says curtly. "If Crouch finds out what we're up to, it will make our task nearly impossible, particularly if he knows that you're involved."

"That still doesn't give us an ear inside the Ministry!" Moody protests. "There are still Aurors that will tell me what we need to know, and not making use of them is stupid. Shacklebolt--"

"Kingsley Shacklebolt," Dumbledore says calmly, "has been listening outside the door for the past fifteen minutes." He gestures, and the door swings open to reveal a shame-faced Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Remus reaches surreptitiously for his wand. He likes Kingsley, but he'll hex a dozen Aurors to keep them from catching Sirius.

"I really must change my password system," Dumbledore muses.

"Shacklebolt," Moody roars, starting to his feet, "what are you doing here?" Kingsley squares his shoulders and looks, half-apologetically, half-sterly, at his former superior.

"I am in charge of the Black investigation, sir," he says, "and if you recall, I did try to ask you about Pettigrew last night."

"So you follow me, and listen in on a private meeting," Moody scowls. "That's good initiative, lad. Do you mind if I ask what you're planning on doing now?" Remus takes a tighter grip on his wand.

"Asking for clarification," Kingsley says coolly, turning to Dumbledore. "Peter Pettigrew is alive am I right?"

"You are," Dumbledore says.

"And Black? Was he or was he not the Potters' Secret Keeper?"

"He was not. Peter Pettigrew performed that function."

"And Pettigrew was behind the Swindon massacre as well?"

"He was," Dumbledore confirms, and the tension drains from Kingsley like a long exhalation of breath.

"Sirius is innocent, then," he says, and the quiet relief in his eyes finally convinces Remus to put his wand away. Kingsley shakes his head. "And Crouch has the Dementors after him? I'm in."

"Excuse me?" Moody asks.

"I'm in," Kingsley repeats. "Sirius is a friend, and I don't have so many left that I'm willing to stand by and watch him get killed when there's something I can do to prevent it."

"Thank you," Remus says, and Kingsley gives him a look full of understanding. Surprisingly, it doesn't rankle.

"Marjorie Bingham said you were a very nice young man, Lupin," he says. "That was what originally set me on your trail," he explains, turning to Moody. "Bellatrix's asking questions about Pettigrew was curious, but not conclusive. When Mrs. Bingham said that she'd spoken to someone matching Lupin's description, though, I knew that something else was going on and that it most likely involved Black. Your interview with Bellatrix was the final touch. When I followed you today well, I had to be certain. The only thing I want to know now is how?"

*Author's Notes: As always, my eternal gratitude to my three incredible betas: **konishi_zen**, **phoenix**, and **drgalleon**. You guys keep this fic going, I swear. Many thanks also to everyone who has read/reviewed thus far. Feedback=happy writer, so please continue to comment!*

Title borrowed without permission from Rudyard Kipling's The Ballad of East and West, which has been one of my favorite poems for many years.

Chapter Eight: Whose Part Was to be Gladness

Chapter 9 of 16

In which Remus joins Sirius in Cologne.

Chapter Eight: Whose Part Was to be Gladness

"And as its going often at love's breaking,

The ghost of first days came again to us,

The silver willow through window then stretched in

The silver beauty of her gentle branches.

The bird began to sing the song of light and pleasure

To us, who fear to lift looks from the earth,

Who are so lofty, bitter and intense,

About days when we were saved together."

-Anna Akhmatova, And As Its Going

As Dumbledore and Moody fill Shackbolt in on the details of Pettigrew's betrayal, Phineas takes advantage of their distraction to beckon Remus Lupin over. He doesn't distrust anyone in the room, but habit dictates that he keep his cards as close to the vest as possible, and Sirius' location is his ace in the hole. He hadn't even intended to tell Lupin, but the intense, desperate look on the boy's face had been unmistakable. Phineas might not approve of his reasons, but the fact remains that Lupin would die before betraying Sirius, and that is a valuable enough commodity that he cannot afford to be fastidious.

"Sirius is in Cologne," he says softly, as soon as Lupin is close enough that they won't be overheard. "Go to the cathedral there, and I'll send him to fetch you."

Lupin nods, eyes grave. He doesn't say anything, for which Phineas is profoundly grateful. He's already had a full dose of Albus Dumbledore this morning: the last thing he needs is now is a fool Gryffindor asking stupid questions.

There is always time for biscuits, Phineas. It wouldn't have been quite as irritating if he hadn't suspected that he was being very gently wound up. Phineas will never cease to wonder that Dumbledore was not placed in Slytherin.

He waits impatiently as Lupin makes his goodbyes and gets his last instructions from Dumbledore; contact instructions mainly, to which Phineas listens with half an ear.

Moody glowers at him, and although Phineas half-expects some sort of threat from the man; some crudity along the lines of 'watch after Lupin or I'll set your frame on fire', Moody seems to feel that a visual remonstrance is sufficient. Phineas, who has always felt that an unspoken threat is generally more effective, nods once at him before stepping into the gray space between Hogwarts and Cologne.

Sirius is not in the library when Phineas arrives. He experiences a brief moment of apprehension as he moves from frame to frame through the shadowed house, ignoring

the disgruntled mutterings of the portraits he disturbs on the way. His relief at finding the lad coming out of the master bath freshly showered and shaved vents itself in sarcasm.

"I see you haven't blown yourself up yet," he says. "It's rather fortunate, seeing as your cousin got herself Kissed last night."

"Bellatrix?" Sirius asks. There is something terribly bright in his eyes.

"Who else?" Phineas asks dryly. "How did the rest of your spell go?"

The near-eagerness in Sirius' eyes flashes into anger.

"I don't want to talk about it," he grinds out, and stalks off down the hall.

Phineas keeps pace with him through the frames lining the wall, the flames flaring and dying in the braziers as they pass. When he'd been alive, the sconces had burned with pale fire at all hours of the day and night.

"That bad?" he asks dryly. "Perhaps it's a good thing I got you some help, then."

Sirius comes to a dead stop, and turns to face Phineas. The total absence of emotion on his face is something he can only have learned at Walburga's hands.

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"This isn't the only place my portrait hangs," Phineas points out. He refrains from mentioning that Sirius really ought to have figured this out already, but from Sirius' darkening expression, he doesn't need to. "In addition to the Black ancestral properties, I also have access to the Ministry and to Hogwarts. Albus Dumbledore has known you were innocent since your first night here."

Phineas could almost resent the profound relief that suddenly floods Sirius' eyes. He has never understood the all-encompassing trust that Dumbledore's students have always had in the man's ability to fix anything, particularly after it has been proven so often recently that he can't. Still, the fact remains that Sirius looks as though half the world has come off of his shoulders in the past three seconds.

"Thank you," Sirius says. Phineas scowls.

"Don't thank me. Dumbledore's moving mountains for you. He called in Alastor Moody and talked him around. Moody recruited that werewolf of yours, and the pair of them got themselves spotted by young Shackbolt, who instead of turning them in is also determined to prove you innocent." Phineas shakes his head in half-feigned amazement. "You've got friends, boy. Good friends. Since you're most likely the first Black in about two centuries to have done so, I suggest that you be grateful for them. Lupin is waiting for you at the cathedral as we speak."

"Here?"

"It wouldn't do much good if he were anywhere else," Phineas says. He hadn't been expecting the sudden anger that kindles in Sirius' face; the cold rage that, from a Black, is far more dangerous than any amount of shouting.

"What in Nimue's name were you thinking?" he demands, his voice low and hard with fury. "I didn't want Remus within a hundred miles of me! He's a ~~werewolf~~. They won't stop to ask questions if they find him in my company! He'll get the Dementor's Kiss as quickly as I will, and *bloody* Crouch will brag about it afterwards! Remus was supposed to *survive*."

"With any luck," Phineas says sharply, "you'll both survive. And don't be so melodramatic. It's unbecoming."

Sirius blinks at him, then deflates almost visibly. Phineas congratulates himself on his undiminished ability to take the wind out of a bout of adolescent nonsense in ten seconds flat.

"Now," he says, "you can either stand here arguing with me or you can go and fetch your werewolf, at which point you might stand a chance of catching Pettigrew. I realize that you've been planning on going out in a blaze of anguished glory and that Lupin's presence might put a damper on those plans. Nevertheless, you might consider the fact that it's cold outside, and that Lupin, from his expression, is more than likely to wait for you until he's frozen solid. It's entirely up to you."

In the end Sirius goes as Padfoot, transforming as soon as he's finished Apparating. *Oris Abeus* would work well enough if he trusted himself to speak, which he does not. Or if he weren't terrified of what Moony will say to him, which he is. Padfoot doesn't have to bother with nonsense like speech, which means that Sirius is free to say everything that he knows he'll never find the words for. Forgiveness, apology all of it is easier while canine, most likely because he can't open his mouth and cock things up further.

Transformed, he can smell Moony before he can see him clearly. For a few seconds canine instincts take over, and he runs gladly towards him, toward ~~back~~ *alpha/safety*, even forgetting himself enough to let out a welcoming bark. Moony looks up sharply, and the gesture is enough to shock Sirius back into human sensibilities; to remind him that he can neither give nor expect a dog's easy forgiveness, however much he might want to.

He comes to a stop a few feet from Remus and cannot make himself look the man in the eyes. Sirius hangs his head, his shoulders hunched in the classic posture of canine guilt and misery. He is a much better liar when in human form.

"Pads?" Remus asks, an odd hesitancy in his voice, given that he knows Sirius' Animagus form as well as he does Sirius' own. Better, even, as Padfoot has always been able to ask for physical affection, which is something that Sirius has not entirely trusted himself to ask for from Remus since the summer after their third year at Hogwarts for fear of betraying himself.

Padfoot's tail waves involuntarily at the sound of Remus' voice, but he still cannot make himself meet Remus' eyes. Three months of polite, icy silence have apparently formed a wall that not even he can break through. Suppressing the whine in his throat, he turns and slinks back to the alley into which he'd Apparated earlier. He looks over his shoulder once. When he sees that Remus is following him, he does not look again.

Sirius has to shift back to human form to Disapparate, and Remus can't quite hold back a gasp of dismay at his appearance. Without Padfoot's fur as camouflage, the stress of the past week is written plain on Sirius' face. He's visibly thinner than he was two weeks ago, and Remus knows he hasn't been sleeping, because he's ghostly pale beneath the last remnants of his summer tan. There are deep circles beneath his eyes that give them a bruised look and remind Remus of the newsprint smudges on his china. He has never seen Sirius look so brittle before, not even during their first three weeks at Hogwarts.

"Pads," he says again, then wants to bite his tongue in chagrin at the combination of worry and longing he'd heard in his own voice.

"You'll have to come Side-Along," Sirius says with a smile that doesn't go anywhere near his eyes, "and I'll have to take down part of the wards before we go inside." The hand he holds out to Remus is trembling slightly.

Sirius Apparates as soon as their hands meet and breaks the grip almost before the whirl of the spell has subsided. He seems to have acquired a fondness for back alleys,

Remus notes. The one they are currently standing in is bordered on one side by a row house and on the other by a blank brick wall.

Sirius reaches out a hand and presses one of the bricks. When he pulls it back, Remus notices a smear of blood on his palm. Still, Sirius has his eyes closed and is murmuring an incantation under his breath, Remus says nothing. He knows enough about Sirius' family to know that whatever wards Sirius is currently working with are deadly dangerous. Distracting him now could prove fatal to both of them.

He waits while Sirius takes down the wards, while he spells the door open, and during the entire walk along the long, dimly-lit hallway.

When Sirius opens the door to a bedroom without a word, Remus has had enough. There are three long months between them, months during which Sirius has been excruciatingly polite and Remus has said next to nothing. Now they know that neither of them is the traitor, and this is beyond ridiculous.

"It's good to see you, Sirius," he says calmly. "You look like shit. Have you been living off of dog food again?"

Sirius blinks and meets his eyes for the first time. Remus presses the advantage while he still has it. An off-balance Sirius is a rarity, and not something to waste.

"Oh, well," he says, still using the even tones that he knows have secretly driven Sirius insane since fourth year, "I suppose it's better than if you'd been eating rats. They're not sanitary." He gives Sirius a considering look. "You haven't been eating *rats*, have you Pads? You look a little pale--"

"I haven't been eating much of *anything*," Sirius snaps. Remus watches the warning signs creep over Sirius' face: the lowered brows, the changed line of his jaw as he sets his teeth in preparation for a fight. The cold, dangerous look in his eyes is starting to warm into anger, and Remus decides to push a little further. If he can get Sirius to cross the line into shouting, furious rage, it will be all right.

"I think we should deal with that first, then," Remus says, with what he believes to be a credible impression of Dumbledore's most irritating calm. "I'm fairly hungry myself. What would you like? I've gotten fairly good at conjuring lately."

"I'm *not* hungry," Sirius says through gritted teeth.

Remus debates the wisdom of pointing out how childish that sounds, then decides against it. It won't do any good for both of them to start shouting, and they will if he goes that route.

"Tea?" he offers. That does the trick.

"*I don't want any bloody tea!*" Sirius roars. He slams the bedroom door closed. The long hallway suddenly feels much more claustrophobic. "*I want to know what you think you're playing at!* It's not going to take the Aurors long to figure out where you've gone! Who's going to take care of Harry after the Dementors have Kissed us both?! You were supposed to live, you bastard! You were supposed to *survive!*"

"Harry's with Lily's sister," Remus snaps, forgetting for an instant that he'd intended to keep his temper. "The Ministry would put him in an orphanage before they let a *werewolf* have him! Don't tell me that blast of Peter's injured your brain. I won't believe it."

Sirius flushes angrily and opens his mouth to respond, but Remus cuts him off.

"What was I supposed to do, Sirius? While you went off and got yourself killed avenging James, *what was I supposed to do?* Spend the rest of my life alone, hating your memory and mourning *Peter's?*!"

"I was trying to protect you!"

"What gives you the right to make that decision for me?"

"Because it's my fault! *It's my fucking fault!*" Sirius is breathing in great, shuddering gasps, his eyes gleaming with fury and with unshed tears. "I killed James, all right? *killed James.* I couldn't not you, too. Not you."

Author's Notes: As always, my thanks to my brilliant betas. Title borrowed from In Warsaw by Czeslaw Milosz. Feedback makes me very, very happy.

Chapter Nine: The Wounded Air Roared In

Chapter 10 of 16

Remus and Sirius in Cologne. Phineas Nigellus has news.

Chapter Nine: The Wounded Air Roared In

"...walking in the dark and the wind over broken earth

halfmade foundations and unfinished

drainage trenches and the spaced out

circles of glaring light

marking streets that were to be

walking with you but so far from you..."

-Denise Levertov, From the Roof

For a moment, all Remus can do is look helplessly at Sirius.

The smothering guilt in his face is too close to the depths that Remus himself has been drowning in recently, and he isn't sure if the ache in his chest is caused by Sirius's pain or by his own. It would be far too easy for them to both get lost in sorrow and fury. Remus understands Sirius's apparent desire to die for the sake of vengeance. He understands it a bit too well for his own comfort. Both he and Sirius tend towards despair, though Remus has always been more controlled out of sheer necessity.

Now, there is no James to animate Cockroach Clusters and throw them at Sirius until he breaks down and starts fighting back. There is no Peter to quietly offer some sly piece of humour aptly timed to break a dark mood. There is no balance left. There are only Remus and Sirius and the combined weight of their guilt and grief, which will drag them both under if they let it.

Remus is tired of everything crumbling apart around him. He is resolved to salvage what he can from the ashes of everything they used to be. The quiet rage that seems to have settled into his bones since James's and Lily's deaths have drawn him down to a fine, sharp focus that clarifies thought and action. His next words are chosen deliberately.

"Don't be stupid, Sirius," he says sharply.

Sirius's head comes up as though he had been slapped. His eyes are hot with wounded resentment.

"Are you a Death Eater, Sirius? Did you betray Lily and James to Voldemort?" Remus keeps his voice hard and demanding.

"No!"

"Did you know that Peter was a Death Eater?" Remus asks implacably.

"I should have "

"Answer the question."

"No," Sirius says, almost sullenly. He seems to have become suddenly fascinated by his shoes.

"Why did you switch Secret Keepers?" Remus pushes.

"*I was trying to protect them*," Sirius tells his shoes.

"What?" Remus asks pleasantly. Sirius, he knows, can hear the steel in his voice. "I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you."

"I was trying to protect them!" Sirius half-shouts, glaring furiously at Remus. He closes his eyes, despair washing back over his face like a breaking wave.

"I was trying to *protect* them," he says again, "and it's my fault, Moony, it's all my fault!"

He's crying now, fighting the tears back even as they start to fall, repressed sobs wrenching at his shoulders as his hands come up to cover his face. Remus has seen Sirius cry once before, from sheer, frustrated rage that had nothing in common with these tears. Sirius is curved around himself as though he is afraid that he will shatter, back bent with the weight of his misery, and Remus feels helpless in the face of it.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says, "I'm so sorry."

Remus reaches for him, because he cannot do anything else. Sirius folds into his arms, his hands wrapping themselves in Remus's shirt and clinging desperately, his body shuddering finally into the tears he has been fighting off for too long.

"It's all right," Remus murmurs uselessly into his hair. "It's all right, Pads."

It isn't long before the comfort becomes unbearable.

"Sorry," Sirius mutters dully, pulling away. Remus's arms tighten around him so briefly that Sirius is certain he imagined it; then he lets go, and Sirius straightens, wiping at his face.

"Your shirt will never be the same again," Sirius says, trying for some semblance of normalcy.

"It'll wash," Remus says.

Sirius hopes that he doesn't look as broken as he feels. He wants nothing more than to curl back up in Remus's arms and hide until everything is somehow miraculously better again. He wants someone to *fix everything*, and no one will ever fix anything for him ever again.

Remus is looking at him, wearing the same calm, unshakeable expression that Sirius has been clinging to like a lifeline all afternoon.

"It will be all right, Sirius," Remus says. "It will never be the *same*, but it will be all right."

In the pale light from the sconces, his eyes have taken on the peculiar amber tint that always makes Sirius think of trapped secrets. His face is solemn; he looks both old and young at the same time and terribly knowing.

Remus probably knows better than anyone the secrets of making things be all right or at least tolerable even after they have been broken beyond repair. He can probably tell Sirius all sorts of ways to lighten the crushing grief that rides along his neck and shoulders, to ease the guilt. Still, for a long moment, the only thing Sirius can think of is how very much he would like to kiss Remus until neither of them needs that knowledge any longer.

"We'll catch Peter," Remus continues. The guilt comes crashing down on Sirius all over again with the force of a house collapsing. "He can't hide forever, not from us, and then we'll turn him over to Shackbolt and clear your name."

"I don't *care* about my name," Sirius says.

"What about mine?" Remus asks sharply, the anger resurfacing in his face. "You said yourself that the Aurors will be after me, too. The only way they won't hunt me down is if we prove you innocent."

"You could go home right now," Sirius counters, though he knows Remus will never agree to go. He himself is torn between blind fury at being outmanoeuvred and a near-overwhelming sense of relief that he is no longer alone.

"And do what? Sit on my hands in my flat while you get yourself killed? Never happen, Pads," Remus says, each syllable as hard as his eyes. The look on his face is a warning, but Sirius has never been any good at being warned.

"It's better than having you die right along with me!"

"Why are you so determined to self-immolate?" Remus demands savagely. "If you feel so fucking guilty, Sirius, *try living with the consequences.*"

Sirius opens his mouth to speak, but Remus rolls right over him, his rage nearly palpable in the still air between them.

"Have you thought about anything at all but your own misery?" Remus demands. "You have responsibilities. Have you thought about Harry? He's living with Lily's cow of a sister! Do you really think that's what Lily and James would have wanted for their son? Is that what you want for your godson?"

"I killed his parents! I don't get to decide what happens to him!"

"*Voldemort killed them!*" Remus snarls. "You self-centred, arrogant *bastard!* This isn't your personal tragedy!"

Sirius has never seen him this angry. It is more than a little frightening. The wards are flaring wildly along Sirius's nerves, screaming *warning, warning, warning*, and it requires an almost physical effort to keep the house's defences from activating.

In the sudden silence that descends, he can hear his own ragged breathing keeping time with Remus's.

"All right," Sirius says, looking away. "All right. You can stay. I'm sorry, all right?" He forces himself to look up again, to meet Remus's furious, injured gaze.

"I'm sorry," he says again. It occurs to him that he has apologised more frequently in the past hour than he has in the past five years. "It's just I thought it was you, Remus. I thought I'd lost you, I thought you were the traitor, and it nearly killed me. And then you weren't, but James was dead and Peter was gone, and you were the only thing I hadn't ruined. I can't lose you, too. I can't. I'd rather you hate me than have you die."

"I'm not going anywhere," Remus says forcefully. His eyes are still angry, but the wards have calmed. "I'm not going to die, I'm not going back to London, and I certainly don't hate you. You are an absolute idiot, Padfoot. I'm more than capable of making my own decisions, and I have as much right to vengeance as you do."

"Well, thank Merlin that at least one of you has something approaching a brain."

The drawing, sarcastic voice nearly makes Remus jump out of his skin, one hand reaching for his wand with war-trained reflexes. Sirius, who is becoming accustomed to Phineas Nigellus' sarcastic entrances, fights back the urge to answer the portrait with a well-aimed *Incendio*.

Instead, he gives his painted ancestor the best sneer he can muster.

"What do you want?" he asks, knowing that he sounds ungracious, but unable to bring himself to care. He's more than a little glad to have someone that he can snap at without consequence. Remus frowns slightly at him in reproach.

Phineas Nigellus returns his sneer with interest.

"I see that manners are yet another thing that your mother failed to teach you," he says

"I'm as well-mannered as anyone else in this cursed family," Sirius growls. "I just have differing ideas as to who deserves civility."

"A Black through and through," Phineas says. Sirius isn't certain which is worse; the man's sarcasm or the hint of approval in his voice. As for the reason I'm here Bagnold is in talks with *le Ministre*. She's trying to get him to let the Dementors cross the Channel."

"Into France?" Remus asks. Sirius can hear the dismay in his voice. "Why?"

"Because of you," Phineas tells him bluntly. "That lovely Registry tattoo of yours was charmed to set off all sorts of alarms in the Ministry as soon as you crossed the border. Crouch apparently added a Tracking Charm as well, so you'll need to deal with that before you go anywhere."

"Wait," Sirius interrupts. "If they have a Tracking Charm on Remus, why are they talking to the French Minister? He went off the map here, in Cologne."

"This house is still registered in Pollux's name," Phineas says impatiently. "Walburga let it slide, most likely to avoid paying taxes on it. It's not on the Ministry's master list of Black Family property. The house in Alsace-Lorraine is. Crouch has got Bagnold convinced that Lupin here slipped over the border to meet you, and she is currently convincing Ministre Girard in turn.

"It gives you some time, but not much. Once they think to check the property list at Gringotts, they'll know where you are -- and they'll be coming for you."

Author's Notes: As always, a big thank you to my wonderful beta readers -- particularly **konishi_zen**, who saved this chapter on no less than two separate occasions. Title borrowed without permission from Czeslaw Milosz's *Child of Europe*.

Feedback is love.

Chapter Ten: Or Their Stretched Purpose Slacken

Chapter 11 of 16

An evening with the Weasleys. Peter's location. Remus and Sirius prepare to flee Cologne.

Chapter Ten: Or Their Stretched Purpose Slacken

"Who murdered all these?

These living dead, that root in his nerves and his blood...

Is he the archive of their accusations?

Or their ghostly purpose, their pining vengeance...

...their unforgiven prisoner?"

-Ted Hughes, Crow's Nerve Fails

Molly has a routine. She doesn't quite think of it that way, but it is a routine nonetheless; a set of private rituals she completes in the quiet between the children's bedtime and Arthur's return home, which rarely occurs before ten. The house seems to echo with silence in those hours, a creeping absence of sound and laughter that reminds her of the lonely year she spent waiting to join her brothers at Hogwarts and stirs up a grief that threatens to overwhelm her if she sits idle for too long.

Hence the routine.

There are dozens of chores to catch up with. Most are tasks she cannot accomplish with four boys underfoot and usually take up a good portion of her time. Laundry is folded or rather, re-folded as the earlier attempt had been foiled by the over-enthusiastic help of Fred and George sticky fingerprints are cleaned from the walls, toys are put carefully away.

She attends to the kitchen last of all, submerging herself in the familiar rhythms of household magic one charm for dishes, one to sweep the floor, a third to clean the counters, and so on. She leaves the wireless on to keep the silence at bay, and when Celestina Warbeck sings, Molly can almost forget the fears and losses of the past year. She can focus on reclaiming her house gradually from the chaos of the day and remaking it into a bright, clean place where the boys can play in safety.

Molly can remember her mother's hands moving through the air, her wand tracing the same patterns that Molly herself now uses. These are old spells, family spells, and using them is comforting. They remind her of the sanctuary that her mother's house always was; that her grandmother's house was. The memories give her hope that her own children will remember the sanctuary she has managed to build for them in turn, rather than the terror that rules the world outside.

After the kitchen has been cleaned, she makes herself a cup of tea. Molly always forces herself to finish it before she allows herself to go into the living room and look at the clock, reassuring herself that Bill is at Hogwarts, that Arthur is at work, and that the rest of her children are safely at home.

Once she has done so, she goes quietly upstairs. She has spells in place to tell her if one of the boys leaves their room, but magical knowledge does not provide the same comfort that checking on them herself does. This way she can softly open each door, can see for herself that her boys are curled safe and sound and asleep under their blankets. Sometimes she sits with them for a while, spending ten minutes or so beside each bed just watching them breathe.

Charlie and Percy both sleep deeply, rarely moving at all, while Fred and George are restless even in slumber, small hands moving constantly against blankets and pillows. Ron still sleeps the deep, snuffling sleep of the very young. Molly pauses for a moment longer over his crib than she does the beds of the other boys, aware as she does so of a sharp pang of grief for the Potters and for the Longbottoms. She hopes that Harry and Neville are sleeping as soundly as Ron does tonight. She hopes that they are as well-loved. When she turns away from Ron's crib, she is aware of the slight sting of tears in her eyes.

Molly goes quietly down the stairs again, and back into the living room. Arthur is still at work. A quick check of the time tells her that it is half-past ten, and she forces herself not to pace. Instead, she starts the needles on a pair of socks for Ron before picking up her copy of Enchantment in Baking. The book keeps her occupied for nearly half an hour, although she loses count of the times she glances up at the clock.

Finally, at nearly eleven fifteen, Arthur's hand whirs briefly to 'Travelling' before coming to rest on 'Home.' Molly puts her book aside with mingled irritation and relief, but the look on Arthur's face when he comes through the door wipes all thought of speech from her mind. Her gentle, kind-hearted husband has rarely looked so grim.

"It's Lupin," he says, before she can ask. "He took off after Black sometime this afternoon. Half of the M.L.E. is convinced that he's going to try and kill Black himself, but Crouch is treating it as a full-fledged defection. He's convinced that Lupin has joined Black, and that the two of them are planning to rally what's left of the Death Eaters."

"No," Molly says. "Not again." Gideon and Fabian are not even three months in the ground, and the thought that Sirius Black is about to render their sacrifice meaningless is enough to tighten her stomach in rage and fear.

"The Dementors crossed into France late this evening," Arthur continues. "Crouch is running the operation himself, though he's put Shackbolt in nominal charge. Dawlish told me that they were concentrating on Alsace-Lorraine at first, but that about an hour ago they switched their focus to Cologne. When I left, Bagnold was on the Floo with the German Minister, trying to get him to let the Dementors across the border."

"Do you think he will?" Molly asks. She is torn between wanting Black and Lupin caught and her innate dislike of Dementors.

"Doubtful." Arthur shakes his head. "The Germans are still too sensitive about the way they used the Dementors during the Grindelwald war. It's a serious crime to bring or allow one into the country. He'll probably insist on the Aurors instead, and I don't blame him one bit. The Dementors are getting increasingly frustrated at not having found Black, and as a result they're becoming increasingly difficult to control. The Aurors had to pull three of them out of Newgate Prison this morning, and I don't think it will be long before one of them Kisses someone. Someone not Sirius Black."

"Merlin forbid," Molly says. "Have you eaten yet, Arthur?" The change of subject is deliberate. There is no immediate threat to the safety of her house and family, and she is determined that her home will be free of fear even if she herself is not.

When Arthur gives her a tired smile and shakes his head 'no', she rolls her eyes in fond exasperation then goes to the kitchen to fetch the plate she has been saving for him.

In the shadow of the stairs, the rat called Scabbers holds very still. He is trying to order man-sized thoughts in a rat-sized brain, and the process is not easy. He is not willing to resume his own form, not after the spell he felt brushing at him two days earlier. He'd been able to feel it questing after him, trying to make firmer contact even as he'd buried his mind in the instincts of his body.

Peter shudders at the memory of the closeness of Dark magic along his skin of Black magic, intent and hungry for him. He'd been able to *feel* Sirius behind the spell, and the furious rage that is driving him. Sirius will be after revenge first and freedom second, and he will use Dark magic to do it, every spell he knows, and some that he probably doesn't yet, and now Remus has joined him and they will *catch him catch him catch him*.

Peter realises dimly that he is panicking, but is unable to stop the tremors that rack his small body.

"How long do you think we have?" Sirius asks.

"A few hours, if your luck holds," Phineas answers. "This house is Unplottable, which should throw off the Tracking Charm as long as they're trying to map Lupin. They won't be able to pinpoint your location until they get to the city and start using their wands instead."

"The wards will hold them," Sirius says. "Not forever, though, and if they're outside, they'll be close enough to track us when we Apparate."

"Do you even know where you're going?" Phineas asks sharply.

"I have a few ideas," Sirius says. "In the meantime, why don't you go on back to the Ministry and keep an eye on things? Bagnold'll have to ask permission before anyone or anything crosses into Germany let us know when that happens, will you?"

He mentally awards himself ten points for the expression on Phineas's face. After a moment, though, the portrait gives him an almost civil nod before stepping out of his frame.

"Right," Sirius says, mentally dismissing him. He turns to Remus. "First things first. Let's get rid of that bloody Tracking Charm. Then, maybe, we can flee this ancestral monstrosity for someplace without a portrait of Phineas." The last is more sarcasm than it is seriously meant. As much as it pains Sirius to admit it, the old bugger has been surprisingly helpful.

"Sirius," Remus says. Sirius can hear the apology about to begin, and the guilt in Remus's eyes says quite clearly that if Sirius still wants to drive him away, this is the lever to use. He knows which words to use. The syllables have already formed, weapon-like, in his head. The idea is tempting for a moment, but the memory of James's face rises up in front of him, still and empty. The wound is too fresh for him to deliberately injure another of his friends.

Sirius chooses his next words very deliberately.

"Don't be thick, Remus," he says, his tone carefully off-hand. "There's no way you could have known that those prejudiced arseholes would be tracking you."

"I should have "

"Should have, could have you sound like me," Sirius says, catching his gaze and holding it.

Remus looks back, his eyes wide and startled, his mouth partly open in surprise. Sirius takes a sharp breath.

"I need you, Moony," he says. "I didn't realise it until you got here, but I can't do this alone." He's certain that everything he's been so carefully not saying is written clearly on his face, and looks away quickly.

"I led them straight to you," Remus says.

"They'd have found me eventually," Sirius says. "I'm glad you came." He is, too. The dreadful, lost feeling that has dogged him since Hallowe'en is not gone, exactly, but in abeyance. Remus's presence helps to fill the empty spaces he has been carrying with him like shadows.

"Promise?" Remus asks.

It's an echo of earlier times, and for a moment the tide of memory sweeps Sirius up. *I don't care if you're a werewolf*, he'd said, and Remus had said, *promise?* in the same half-afraid-and-hiding-it tone that he's using now. Twelve years as the heir to House Black had left Sirius unable to comprehend how anyone could think so badly of themselves, let alone how Remus serious, clever Remus could do so. Ten years later, that hesitant, self-deprecating note in Remus's voice still raises Sirius's hackles and his protective instincts. I promise, he'd answered, and at twelve years old, he'd never meant anything more fervently.

"I promise," he says now, looking up to meet Remus's eyes. "Now can we get that bloody Tracking Charm off of you?"

Author's Notes: As always, my thanks to my wonderful betas. Title borrowed from Ted Hughes's Relic.

Thanks also to everyone who has taken the time to read/review. Your comments feed my plot-bunnies.

Chapter Eleven: That a Ghost May Him Haunt

Chapter 12 of 16

Remus and Sirius attempt to remove the Tracking Charm. Things evolve.

Chapter Eleven: That a Ghost May Him Haunt

"Yesterday is history

And tomorrow is a mystery

But baby, right now,

It's just about you and me.

You can run, you can hide

Just like Bonnie and Clyde.

Reach for the sky,

Ain't never gonna die.

And I thank the Lord for the love that I have found

And hold you tight cause tomorrow may never come;

Reach for the sky cause tomorrow may never come."

- Social Distortion, Reach for the Sky

The library is enough to stop Remus in his tracks.

"Sirius," he asks after a moment, "how many books are in here?"

"No idea," Sirius says, smiling faintly at him. "All of the shelves along the back wall were magically expanded years ago. There's no telling what's been shoved in there since."

Remus raises both eyebrows.

"That's bloody dangerous," he says. "There's a reason we weren't allowed to do magic in the Restricted Section at school."

Grimoires are volatile enough on their own. There's no telling what the effects of storing them in a magically expanded space might be especially these sorts of grimoires. The library practically reeks of Dark magic.

Sirius shrugs.

"It's been like this for ages," he says. "The wards on the shelves keep the books fairly quiescent."

Remus tries not to think about the sorts of magic that would, from necessity, have been involved in keeping thousands of books on Dark magic 'fairly quiescent.' Such books take on a life of their own after a while, especially under circumstances like these, and suppressing them is not easily or lightly done.

"If you say so," he murmurs.

"It's fine, Moony," Sirius says, with a flash of his old confidence. "Er don't touch anything, though," he adds. "It's not really safe for anyone who isn't family." He is already crossing the room to the first of the shelves, extending a hand to run a finger over the leather spines.

"Can I at least sit down?" Remus asks, trying to keep some of the sarcasm out of his voice. The library has gone rapidly from 'interesting' to 'irritating and vaguely creepy.' It wouldn't surprise him to find volumes on these shelves that are bound in human skin.

"Go ahead." Sirius gestures vaguely at one of the chairs. They are all heavy, ornately-carved mahogany, and look hideously uncomfortable.

They are hideously uncomfortable, Remus decides a moment later; then forgets his discomfort in favour of watching Sirius, who is scanning the bookshelves with a glare so fierce that a stranger would most likely think him furious.

Remus recognises the expression as one of intense concentration.

"Removal," Sirius mutters to himself. "Magical tattoos, magical markings, magical bugger. Charm work, that might help..."

Remus listens to him with half an ear. Sirius retreats into his own world when he's thinking hard about something, verbalising mental connections even as he makes them. Both he and James have always been able to make great intuitive leaps, crossing all boundaries of logic. Remus, who thinks his way methodically through nearly everything, has always been slightly awed by the process. The sheer, focused concentration that Sirius is capable of at times like this is both fascinating and intimidating, a fact that Remus has been aware of since second year.

I don't care if you're a werewolf, Sirius had said. You're Remus.

With Sirius's eyes glittering grey at him from the shadows of the Gryffindor common room, Remus had, for the first time, run out of denials. The only word he'd had left was promise?

Sirius had looked at him then, face calm and certain, perhaps even a little bit hurt.

I promise, he'd said.

In the next second's gasp of relief, Remus had fallen irretrievably. Ten years later and several countries away, he can't take his eyes off of the man.

Sirius is going through the shelves in front of him with what looks like carelessness but is actually meticulous attention to detail. The sleepless, pale cast to his features gives them an added intensity, and his dark hair, grown just a little too long, reminds Remus of one of the Romantic poets Byron, perhaps, with all of the inherent danger that implies.

"Bugger this," Sirius exclaims.

Remus starts, his attention pulled suddenly away from his study of Sirius's features.

"Give me your arm, Moony," Sirius says. "The one with the tattoo on." He goes to his knees on the carpet as Remus obediently extends his left arm.

"Idea, Pads?" he asks.

"Not certain yet," Sirius answers absently, pulling his wand from his pocket. He places the tip precisely in the centre of Remus's tattoo and closes his eyes.

"I want to see how it's connected to you," he explains. "I need to know how deeply..." His voice trails off.

Remus can feel the magic tracing through him, along his tendons, bones, muscles, a touch that would go far beyond invasive if not for his recognition of the hand behind it, his knowledge that this is Sirius's power stroking gently along nerve and sinew.

"The magic is interwoven with the spells on this bloody tattoo," Sirius says suddenly. Remus almost jumps at the abruptness of it. "And those are practically a part of the ink!" Sirius continues, unaware that Remus is practically shaking to pieces in front of him. "It's going to take days to untangle this, not hours, and we're running out of time."

Remus is aware of a fresh stab of guilt, but it buries itself in his near-intoxication at Sirius's nearness, at the feel of Sirius's hands on his arm, of Sirius's magic running along his veins like the transformation diluted and turned harmless.

"We'll have to leave it," Sirius continues. "I can't untangle all of this right now, and it's warded against your doing it yourself." He taps his wand thoughtfully against his lower lip.

"You'll hex your lips off," Remus warns, aghast at the breathless sound of his own voice. "Think what Moody would say."

"Moody's in England," Sirius says. Then, "Wait. England. A separate country."

"Earth to Sirius," Remus says gently.

"No, no, no," Sirius says. "We can use this, Remus. I just have to...that's it!"

"That's what?" Remus asks, nearly distracted from Sirius's nearness by the possibilities gleaming in his eyes.

"I can't remove the spell," Sirius says, "but maybe I can separate it from you cut it off from your magic."

"The tattoo will still be on my arm," Remus objects. "What's to keep the Tracking Charm from simply reporting the location of the tattoo?"

"That's the genius part," Sirius says, bending back over the tattoo. For a moment, they could be back at Hogwarts, planning their way around school restrictions.

"They've set it up so that your magic is powering the spell as well as grounding the Tracking Charm," Sirius explains. "Separating it should act like pulling the magnet out of a compass. It will still be there, but it won't have any way to track. The Ministry will think that their spell has gone haywire." Sirius's head is bent over Remus's arm, his dark hair falling forwards into his eyes.

"This entire tattoo is just barely skirting the edges of Dark magic," he mutters. "Using someone else's power without their knowledge or consent... at least Voldemort asks before putting the Dark Mark on people. As for this bloody Tracking Charm...!" He makes a strangled, frustrated noise, and the magic vibrating through Remus changes, intensifies in frequency before settling down again into a background hum.

"If I turn it back on itself..." he mutters, "wrap each attachment..." He goes silent again, his lips moving noiselessly. Remus can feel bits of power flaring and subsiding again beneath the skin of his arm and along the tattoo itself.

He never ceases to be impressed by Sirius's seemingly instinctive ability to manipulate spells and charms to suit his own devices. James could do it too. Remus has wondered since sometime in their fifth year if this apparently inborn grace is what the old families mean when they talk about pureblood superiority; if this is why they refuse to allow the Decree For Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery to be enforced in their homes, if this is why they create houses like this, lined every which way with magic.

Sirius grew up in a place like this, with magic humming around him every moment of his life. Disillusionment Charms, protection spells, anti-Muggle spells—all of these were basic components of his environment, a state of affairs that had continued all through Hogwarts and then onto the series of heavily charmed and warded flats he'd inhabited in London up until last week. It might not be blood at all that makes the crucial difference, Remus thinks, and puts the idea away for a research paper after they've sorted everything out. If they sort everything out.

"There," Sirius says, as one last spell ignites and fades under the surface of Remus's skin. "I've done it!" he says. "That should fix them!" His eyes are practically glowing with triumph, and he looks more like the boy Remus remembers from school than he has in years.

"It's done?" he manages.

"I'm certain of it," Sirius answers, and the gleaming, satisfied shine of his eyes, the curve at his mouth where he's trying to hold back a grin are all suddenly too much for Remus. He can always claim it was a side-effect of the spell, he thinks vaguely, and then he stops thinking altogether. Instead he leans forward and closes the short distance between his mouth and Sirius's.

Author's Notes: First, a big thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed so far. I apologize for the length of time between the last update and this one. Ch. 12 is already halfway written, so the next wait will not be nearly as long. Thanks also to my beta readers, marisol and drgalleon.

The title is borrowed from 'Nell Flaherty's Drake'.

Chapter Twelve: After a Thousand Reversals

Chapter 13 of 16

Sirius and Remus in Cologne. Flight, and new plans.

Chapter Twelve: After a Thousand Reversals

"Much like a force of planets and stars and black holes: this is love.

I can remember the days of love's first, unruly birth,

moving inside of me, some gravitational ocean,

some unnamed power."

-Lamont Palmer, Love, And The Analysis of a Love

For one awful, heart-stopping instant, Sirius is motionless, awkward against him. Remus starts to back away, apologies and embarrassment already boiling over in his chest, but Sirius grabs him by the collar and pulls him in hard. Their second kiss will leave bruises, Remus thinks, and then he can't think at all, because Sirius is kissing him with a ferocity that leaves him gasping, or would, if he were capable of doing anything but kissing Sirius; Sirius, whose thumb is splayed against Remus' cheekbone and whose other hand is tangled in Remus' collar like he never means to let go. Even as Remus tells himself that he's going to be disappointed, even as he tries to set walls between them, Sirius breaks the kiss and looks at him, and if he was glowing with the triumph of disabling the Tracking Charm, he is now incandescent.

"You —" Sirius says, "did you? Because I never — I mean, I always — Merlin, I'm pathetic —" and he shuts himself up by kissing Remus again, careful, clever Remus, who is looking at him like their world is about to end and the only thing Sirius can think is more thank you please more. Because Remus tastes like Sirius has always imagined that he would, because Remus is holding onto him with the same desperate ache that Sirius has burned with for years, because he feels at home in a way that he hasn't since James's parents died.

"Sirius?" Remus asks. The cautious note that Sirius has always deplored is back in his voice, but Sirius is too giddy, too caught up in his own pounding heartbeat to let Remus start *thinking* about this. Sirius feels sixteen again, young in a way that he hasn't since the war swallowed them up, and he answers the caution in Remus's face with a dazzling grin and another kiss.

The combination seems to work fairly well as a distraction, and Sirius makes a vague note of the fact before losing himself in the feel of Remus's mouth on his, of Remus's hands threading through his hair and down his back, pulling him closer. He kisses the corner of Remus's jaw, then leaves a trail of rough kisses down Remus's neck.

Further exploration is hampered by Remus's jumper, but Sirius solves the problem by sliding his hands underneath both the jumper and the shirt below it, pressing Remus back into his chair, feeling the muscles slide under his skin, learning by touch the body he memorized the sight of years ago. He recognizes unseen scars as his fingertips pass over them, notes by feel that curve of Remus's rib that is always visible no matter how much he eats; runs a thumb over one nipple and hears Remus gasp with what sounds almost like astonishment.

Remus's eyes are dark, shadowed and glowing. Sirius rises, presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth as he does so, and is about to make up for lost time and then some when Phineas Nigellus's voice slices through the air like a knife.

"What in the name of Morgana le Fay are the two of you doing?"

Sirius jerks back. He lets go of Remus and is reaching for his wand without thought before he realises that it's only Phineas. Once he does, he glares furiously at the portrait, which returns his expression with interest.

"It's none of your damned business what we're doing," he says, his voice as sharp as Phineas' had been.

"This is not going to catch Pettigrew," Phineas says tightly. He's obviously refraining from reading Sirius the riot act. He may be only a painting, but the Black temper is hovering in the lines of his mouth and the gleam in his eyes. "It's also not going to get you out of here," he says. "Crouch bullied Minstre Heffenstein into letting the Aurors across the border. You've got about fifteen minutes before you're surrounded. At least tell me you managed to disable the tracking charm before you began molesting one another?"

"I did," Sirius says sullenly.

"At some point you'll have to tell me how you managed it," Phineas says. "That must have been a tricky piece of magic."

The unexpected compliment flusters Sirius more than a little and softens the edge of his anger. Which is probably what Phineas intended all along. It's a Slytherin sort of thing to do.

"Right," Phineas says decisively, taking advantage of Sirius' momentary hesitation. "Where are you headed?"

"I hadn't decided yet," Sirius says. "I thought we had more time." He looks at Remus, who has pulled himself back together and is piling up the books that are already on the table.

He looks up as Sirius glances at him, colour still staining his cheekbones, for all of his outer composure. Sirius spares a moment to smile at him, quick but genuine. Remus looks startled, then smiles back.

"Oh, for the love of Circe!" Phineas snaps. "Stop staring at one another and figure out where you're going!"

Sirius scrubs both hands over his face, trying to banish both fatigue and adrenaline so that he can think clearly. Western Europe is closed to them, if only because Crouch will have alerted every Ministry this side of the Iron Curtain that they might be coming. That leaves America, which is too far away from Harry and from Wormtail, and Eastern Europe, which has dangers all of its own--

"We'll go back to England," Remus says.

"That's the stupidest thing I've heard you say yet," Phineas says flatly. "You'll be caught in a day."

"They won't be expecting it," Remus says calmly. "We'll feint east through Berlin, make some noise crossing the border, then slip quietly back into France. Shackbolt will have enough sense to keep the investigation pointed into East Germany, or possibly even Poland – which will have the added benefit of tying the Aurors up in red tape for ages. Meanwhile, we'll have a free hand in England, so long as we keep a low profile."

"It's brilliant," Sirius says. It occurs to him that he just might owe Phineas one, for bringing him Remus. The thought is a slightly distasteful one.

"Thank you," Remus answers.

"It's actually quite a good plan," Phineas says, sounding startled. He quickly recovers. "I knew bringing you here was the right idea."

"Dumbledore's a smart man," Remus says.

Phineas glares at him.

"Just get out of here, will you?"

"Sirius," Remus asks, "do we need anything from here?"

"Peter's finger," Sirius says, "and my money. I shrunk it last night; it's all in my pocket. The books on the table. I can get whatever else we might need, now that we're going home." He pauses. "Moony? Where in England are we going?"

"In the long term, I'm not sure. For now?" Remus smiles brilliantly. "Hogwarts."

Author's Notes: First, I apologize for the delay between updates. Real life intruded, as it so often does. Also, I apologize for the short chapter. The next bit is already quite long, and I wanted to at least get something out there while I fought with Chapter Thirteen.

As always, a huge thank you to my beta readers. You know who you are. I couldn't do this without you.

Feedback? Is love.

Chapter Thirteen: Through the Bones of the Living

An attack on the Dursleys leaves the Ministry in an uproar and places Lucius Malfoy in a precarious position. Remus and Sirius arrive at Hogwarts

Chapter Thirteen: Through the Bones of the Living

The first sorrow of autumn

Is the slow goodbye

Of the garden who stands so long in the evening -

A brown poppy head,

The stalk of a lily,

And still cannot go.

The second sorrow

Is the empty feet

Of a pheasant who hangs from a hook with his brothers.

The woodland of gold

Is folded in feathers

With its head in a bag."

-Ted Hughes, The Seven Sorrows

Petunia pays close attention to the plate she's scrubbing, doing her best not to think past the monotony of the task at hand. Does she have enough soap on the brush? Is the water hot enough? She's careful to remove every speck of food, to rinse off every trace of soap. Every time Lily's name or face or voice surfaces in her mind, she shoves the burgeoning thought down hard, refusing to so much as acknowledge it. She hasn't cried yet, and she isn't about to. Lily made her own choices, and now Petunia's got Harry to deal with on top of everything else, on top of going through Lily's things, which appeared inside the back door sometime last night, everything tidily boxed.

It'll be best to just donate everything to charity. That way she won't have to deal with Lily's clothes, or her makeup, or the thousand little things that might make her suddenly real again; suddenly dead, in a way that the funeral failed to. There's more left of Lily in those neat cardboard boxes than there was in her coffin, and Petunia doesn't want to unpack a sister she might then have to mourn. She doesn't want to find her little sister in the possessions of the stranger she grew into, and be taken unaware by grief.

Petunia realizes what she's thinking, and pushes it out of her mind, turning her attention back to the washing-up. A glance out the window shows her that that bloody cat is still sitting motionless on the driveway, as intent as if it were sitting in front of a mousehole. She shudders, and twitches the curtain shut.

"Vernon," she calls, "Vernon, that cat is still there."

"Well, throw a boot at it, then," Vernon suggests. "My programme is on."

She sniffs. "It's been sitting out there on and off since yesterday."

"What do you expect me to do about it, then?" Vernon asks, irritation surfacing in his voice. Petunia doesn't answer. There's nothing he can do about it; there's nothing that either of them can do about it. She glares at the closed curtains and slams the clean plate into the rack hard enough to make the dishes rattle.

The washing-up doesn't take long, and she joins Vernon on the couch. He's watching the news and making self-satisfied noises into his moustache. He approves of Margaret Thatcher's new domestic policies. Petunia doesn't care much either way, but she enjoys sitting with Vernon, enjoys the calm normalcy of their lives. The news-anchor chatters away, and when the commercials cut in, Petunia gets up and fetches them both a cup of tea. Vernon drinks his right-handed, and she shifts her cup to her left hand so that she can hold his free hand.

He looks over at her, a hint of surprise in his face, but doesn't say anything, which is good. She can pretend she just wants to hold his hand and doesn't have to admit even to herself that she's seeking comfort. He rarely pushes with her, and she is grateful for that.

"Did you have a good day?" he asks after a while.

"Yes," she says brightly. It's half true, anyway, and she is starting to tell him about Dudley's latest exploits when there is a sharp knock at the door.

She looks up at the clock, which is reading 11.43, and panic spikes briefly in her chest, bright and dizzying. Vernon is looking at his watch, impatience written across his features.

"Who could it be at this hour?" he asks rhetorically, already heaving himself to his feet.

"Don't," Petunia says. "Don't answer it, Vernon." There had been more in Dumbledore's letter than 'here's your orphaned nephew', and the warnings those pages contained suddenly feel like more than vague threats aimed at forcing her to care for Harry.

Vernon looks at her in puzzled annoyance. "Why not?"

The words 'it doesn't feel right' die unspoken at the back of her throat. She can't say that to Vernon of all people.

"It's late," she says instead. "Let them come back at a decent hour."

"Oh, come on, Petunia. It could be some poor bugger's broken down outside."

"Then let him try another house!" She hears the shrill note in her own voice. Vernon rolls his eyes and gets to his feet. She's quicker, though, and manages to get to the hall before he does.

"Petunia," he starts, exasperated, then throws up his hands. "Fine. You answer it, then."

She doesn't want to, and the feeling of dread increases as whoever it is knocks again, hard and peremptory, just as her hand touches the door knob. She turns the handle with her eyes closed, only opening them as the door swings past her face.

"Mrs. Dursley?" the man on her doorstep asks. He's tall and slender, with long white-blond hair and a sneering expression. His clothes are the sort of robes that Lily's friends always wore, only more expensive and somehow more threatening than ridiculous.

"Yes," Petunia manages to say, despite the hard knot of fright in her throat and the feel of her heart pounding in her chest. The man's smile is one of the most frightening things she's ever seen. He raises one hand lazily, his wand centering on her chest.

She doesn't quite understand what he says, but a jet of white light shoots from the end of his wand at her. Half a second later, it bounces off of some invisible barrier at the door's threshold and rebounds directly at him.

"*Protego*," he snaps, and the light deflects harmlessly once more. Petunia is shaking, frozen in place. Closing the door will do nothing but block the sight of him, and he'll still be out there hurling curses; he'll get in, and kill them just like...

The cat is no longer on the driveway, she notes absently, then sees the tall, grim woman in black rising up from a shadow on the ground, wand out and raised even as she emerges from the dark.

"*Expelliarmus!*" the woman shouts. "*Stupefy!*"

The man twists just in time, avoiding the spells by a hair's breadth. He snarls and raises his wand, aiming at the woman.

"*Crucio!*" he shouts. She screams in pain and falls to the ground. Petunia doesn't want to watch, but she can't look away.

"Malfoy!" someone shouts. The man looks up, fury contorting his features, then vanishes with a loud crack. The front yard is suddenly full of people either tending to the fallen woman or rushing about casting lights into every shadow.

"Petunia?" Vernon calls from the living room, "Petunia, who is it?"

Sirius's addition to the plan provides the noise they need to make the Ministry think they've gone across the Wall, though it's not terribly elegant and involves Stunning their way through a Muggle checkpoint on Friedrichstrasse.

It turns out to be surprisingly easy, despite Remus's initial worries that they will both be shot, and they quickly Apparate north to Copenhagen. Remus is half-dead with fatigue by the time they get there, and the look on Sirius's face says that he feels much the same, though he certainly won't admit it. The last jump, to the Shrieking Shack, is almost more than Remus can handle, and he arrives feeling halfway to splinched and thoroughly nauseous. Sirius is grey with exhaustion and he staggers slightly as they arrive.

"I'm all right," he says, when Remus asks. "Haven't slept well, that's all."

"You're sure?" Remus asks, putting a hand on his arm. Sirius brushes his other hand briefly over it and smiles wearily.

"I'm fine, Moony."

"Still," Remus says, and conjures a bar of chocolate. He gives half to Sirius and eats the rest himself. It's not as good as Honeydukes', but manages to take the worst edge off of their fatigue.

"What now?" Sirius asks when they've finished. "D'you want to sleep here, or go on through the tunnel?"

"Through the tunnel," Remus says. "I want Hogwarts' protections around us tonight. Besides, it'll be easier to avoid notice if the students are in bed. We'll only have to look out for the staff."

Sirius grins at him. "I told you all those pranks would serve us well someday." Then he sobers. Remus supposes that he, too, is remembering James.

"Come on," Remus says. "Let's go."

"It wasn't Malfoy," Crouch says grimly. The chaos that is overwhelming the rest of the M.L.E. is held at bay by his office door. Amelia Bones feels as if she's sitting in an oasis of silence, or perhaps in the eye of the storm.

"No?" she asks, because Crouch's silence demands a response.

"He was hosting a dinner at the Manor the entire time. There are thirty witnesses who will swear that he never left the room, eleven of whom are Ministry officials." He sounds disgusted by the whole situation. "We can't even be certain that it was Polyjuice the attacker used. It was all over too quickly."

"And Sirius Black?"

"Gone. Shackbolt's team spent three hours trying to get through the wards on that bloody house. They still haven't gotten in, but I had to send Kingsley on; Black and Lupin were spotted in Berlin. They blasted their way through a Muggle checkpoint and got across the Wall into East Germany, causing an international incident in the process. We're so tied up in bureaucratic nonsense over there that it'll be a week before we make any headway and that's if the cursed Soviets let us cross their borders!" His voice rises, sharp with frustration. "Shackbolt's got his people trying to get into the Cologne house, but the property is apparently blood-warded, as if the Blacks haven't proven appalling enough already."

Amelia agrees with him on the latter point. Blood-wards demand blood sacrifice human sacrifice and the thought makes her feel vaguely ill. Crouch pounds his fist on the desk.

"I won't have it, d'you hear me? I want these situations resolved! You-Know-Who is dead, and I won't be made a mockery of by the pathetic rabble that he left behind! Shackbolt's handling the Black affair; you get out there and figure out who attacked Harry Potter's family."

"Yes, sir," Amelia says, rising.

"I want results," he snaps, and looks down at his papers to signal the end of the interview.

"This is becoming intolerable," Lucius snarls. MacNair gives him a sullen look from under lowered brows, but says nothing. Lucius half-wishes that the man would give him an excuse to vent his fury, but MacNair is apparently intimidated into silence by the Malfoy name and temper.

"The next time I am involved against my will in one of these little schemes," Lucius continues, modifying his tone to one of calm threat, "I will find out who is behind it. Then, I shall have the offender fed to the plants in Greenhouse Three without bothering to kill him first. The Dark Lord is gone, and I am tired of these repeated threats to the security of my name and of my family."

"When the Dark Lord returns " MacNair says.

Lucius laughs at him, resisting the impulse to go for his wand and make the man scream for his stupidity.

"If the Dark Lord returns," he says, "then it will be to his benefit to have followers with some sort of social standing. A penniless fugitive is of no help to our cause."

"Is that why you betrayed Bellatrix and Rodolphus? Because they were useless?"

"No," Lucius says coldly. "They brought the Aurors down on my sleeping family. You've been warned, MacNair. Tell the others."

The kitchens seem a lot further from Gryffindor Tower at night than they do in daylight. The school is spookier, too; it's easy to imagine students getting lost in echoing corridors, never to be seen again. Bill feels like an adventurer, exploring lost tunnels in search of fame and treasure. The house-elves are the guardians of the treasure, dispensing it only to the worthy... Lost in thought, he almost doesn't hear the voices until it's too late.

"...to Dumbledore's office? At this hour?" It's a man's voice, an unfamiliar one most likely one of the professors he doesn't have. Bill presses back into the nearest alcove, ducking behind a suit of armor. It turns to look at him, then shakes its head and resumes its earlier position.

"...better idea?" a second voice is saying. "I don't fancy running around the school without his knowing about it."

"We used to do it all the time." Bill is listening intently now. Whatever this is, it isn't a conversation between two professors. He's dreadfully curious and a little afraid. The men are talking about going to Dumbledore, so they can't be that bad, but Bill is old enough to understand a little of what worries his mum so badly that she doesn't sleep some nights.

"Things are different now, Pads," the second voice says wearily. "We're adults, for one thing; for a second, we're being hunted by every magical law enforcement agency in Europe. He has a right to know we're here."

"He's probably asleep."

"Then we'll wake him up." The tired voice sighs. "Come on, Sirius. Stop being difficult."

Bill freezes, caught between terror and a fierce surge of protectiveness. That's Sirius Black out there, in Hogwarts, and no one but Bill knows that he's here. If he makes a stand, if he's loud enough... Bill is stepping out from behind the suit of armour before he's finished the thought, and he reaches the middle of the corridor just as Sirius Black and his friend come around the corner.

"Don't move!" Bill says, pointing his wand at them. A corner of his mind is embarrassed by the shrill, frightened sound of his own voice. The rest of him is frightened almost senseless.

The two men freeze, twin looks of surprise and dismay crossing their faces. It would be funny, Bill thinks distantly, if he weren't so terrified: two grown wizards startled into obedience by an eleven-year-old boy.

"Bugger," says the dark-haired man Sirius Black, Bill thinks. "Moony, why didn't we think of this?"

"Because we forgot what devils we were at that age?" the other man says. He looks at Bill. "We're not going to hurt you, lad."

Sirius Black looks at him curiously. "You're a Weasley, aren't you? Arthur's eldest?"

"Yes," Bill says. His voice is still stupidly high-pitched, and he isn't sure why he's not shouting the roof down. They were talking about going to Dumbledore, says the small, unpanicked corner of his brain.

"You're in Gryffindor, right?" Black is still talking, using the calm, even tones that grown-ups use when something is wrong and they're trying to hide it. "Remus and I were in Gryffindor, too. Really, we won't hurt you." He moves forward and Bill jumps back, raising his wand higher.

"I'll scream," he threatens.

"Don't do that!" the other man Remus protests. "Look, what if we let you take us to Dumbledore? We won't reach for our wands, or anything like that."

Bill puts his head to one side, considering this. He's bound to get loads of house points for capturing Sirius Black, even if he does wind up in trouble for being out after hours. If they go first, he should be able to keep an eye on them both.

"Fine," he says, gesturing with his wand. "But you walk in front of me."

"We wouldn't have it any other way," Remus says reassuringly.

Author's Notes: As always, thanks ever so much to anyone who's taken the time to read/review. Thanks also to my beta, the lovely Marauderswolf, without whom there would be no more story.

Feedback is love. Tell me what you think!

Chapter Fourteen: And the Dark Street Winds and Bends

Chapter 15 of 16

Cold War politics in Wizarding Europe. Kingsley attempts to deal with a lot of red tape.

Chapter Fourteen: And the Dark Street Winds and Bends

"Among the red guns,

In the hearts of soldiers

Running free blood

In the long, long, campaign:

Dreams go on.

Among the leather saddles,

In the heads of soldiers

Heavy in the wracks and kills

Of all straight fighting

Dreams go on...

Dreams,

Dreams go on,

Out of the dead on their backs,

Broken and no use any more:

Dreams of the way and the end go on."

-Carl Sandburg, Among the Red Guns

Berlin offices of the Volksmagiepolizei, Democratic Republic of Wizarding Germany

"To be honest," Kingsley says, sipping at his tea, "I was expecting that your lot would be more upset than this." The tea is the sort of too-strong, lukewarm brew that he associates with every law-enforcement office he's ever been in, magical or Muggle. He knows from experience that adding milk and sugar will only partially disguise its bitterness. Beside him, Dawlish grimaces at the taste. Kingsley, oddly enough, has grown to appreciate it.

"The complaints are being dealt with on another level," the older of the two German officers, Major Kurt Weber, says in mildly accented English. He's stocky and grey-haired, with a round, good-natured face and tired blue eyes, and his robes are wrinkled and fraying at the cuffs. "We personally are interested only in making certain that Sirius Black is apprehended and returned to England."

"Returned to England *for trial*," the other officer adds. Captain Johannes Abendroth is Kingsley's age and height but slender, with dark brown hair and sharp, elegant features. His robes are immaculate and his hands have the bony elegance that Kingsley associates with the old pure-blooded families, though his fingers are ink-stained. His eyes are dark and piercing, and they flicker restlessly from Kingsley to Dawlish and back again even as he speaks.

"The summary executions that your Ministry performed upon Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange make it highly unlikely that we will simply hand you Sirius Black, should we be fortunate enough to apprehend him." Abendroth's English is flawless. His accent owes more to Oxford than it does to Bavaria, and the elegant sarcasm of his manner couldn't be more guaranteed to irritate Dawlish if the man had planned his personality with that direct end in mind.

"The internal workings of the British Ministry of Magic are not subject to review by the Democratic Republic of Wizarding Germany," Dawlish snaps.

"Usually, we would be more than glad to agree," Abendroth says, with a faint curl of his lip. "However, our friends in Federal Republic of Magical Germany are not the only ones who learned from the tragedies of the Grindelwald Conflict. As much as we would like to cooperate, we simply will not hand anyone over for summary execution. As the intended method of execution has been stated as the Dementor's Kiss, it is entirely possible that the President will not allow him to be handed over at all, trial or no."

"That's presuming it's your chaps who catch him," Dawlish says smugly, his initial flash of anger presumably forgotten. Abendroth sneers at him.

"Do you for one moment believe that we will simply permit a group of British agents to run about within our borders unsupervised? Especially as your Mr. Crouch allowed Dementors into the FRMG despite having been especially told by Ministre Heffenstein that such a thing was expressley forbidden."

"One Dementor," Kingsley says, "and that only over all of our strenuous objections." Dawlish, who hadn't objected to the Dementor's presence in the slightest, throws Kingsley a suspicious look, but remains silent.

"The fact remains that the Dementor was allowed in," Abendroth says dryly.

"Which is, no doubt, an incident to be handled on another level," Kingsley says smoothly. Weber gives him a look of faint approval; Abendroth's expression is one of surprised re-evaluation, though he masks it quickly.

"None of this changes our main objection to releasing Sirius Black to you," Weber says after a moment. "We simply will not hand over to your country a man who will most certainly be given the Dementor's Kiss after we have done so, particularly when it seems unlikely that your government will grant him even the courtesy of a trial."

"We have," Abendroth says, "learned the difference between justice and cruelty." The unspoken 'in our country' is nevertheless audible. Dawlish reddens with fury. Kingsley ignores both Dawlish's anger and Abendroth's baiting, though he cannot help feeling a little stung.

"Even that issue is premature," he says, "and again, I'm sure that those negotiations will be handled on another level. Our concern is simply the retrieval of Sirius Black, and how we will go about it."

"As has already been stated," Weber answers, "we will find Mr. Black. You will go back to England and wait until you are contacted."

"Not acceptable," Kingsley says calmly, kicking Dawlish under the table to keep him quiet. "I'll agree that your people will lead any investigation within your own borders; however, you will have one of my people with you during said investigation."

Weber looks Dawlish up and down, then does the same to Kingsley.

"One liason from the Auror's office might be acceptable," he says grudgingly. "You can stay, Shackbolt."

Kingsley tries not to let his dismay show on his face. He's almost certain that Sirius is nowhere near East Germany, and he has no wish to be tied up in a multi-national

investigation halfway across the continent, especially as it means he will miss important goings-on at home. He's the only Auror who knows that Sirius is innocent. He needs to be where the action is.

"I had planned on leaving you Dawlish," Kingsley says calmly. Weber raises both eyebrows without speaking, and Abendroth gives Dawlish a look of such undisguised loathing that Kingsley is hard-pressed not to laugh.

"No, thank you," Weber says politely.

"I also have a number of Aurors on my team who speak German. You're welcome to one of those," Kingsley offers instead.

"You don't speak German?" Abendroth asks.

"I speak it very badly, but that's beside the point. I have an investigation to cover, and I need to be at home for that."

"Certainly you can be kept up to date from here," Weber says. "Your embassy has spell-secure fire-lines that link directly to your Ministry."

"There's no need to fear that the *Ministerium fur Zaubereiit Staatssicherheit* will be listening in on those," Abendroth adds, then smiles for the first time. "Not, you understand, for lack of trying."

"In that case," Kingsley says, "you must excuse me for the moment. I need to contact the Ministry for further instructions."

"Of course," Weber says with a smile. Abendroth has already gone back to looking idly around the room.

Kingsley is about to collect Dawlish and leave before the man can open his mouth and turn a surprisingly amicable situation into a disastrous one when the office door opens forcefully, striking Abendroth's desk with a bang. Several sheets of paper float gently to the ground.

The intruder is a tall, blond man in a well-cut suit. As he's got a wand in his right hand, Kingsley decides it's safe to assume that he's not a stray Muggle, especially as both Weber and Abendroth seem to recognise him. Weber plasters on a clearly false smile, while Abendroth gives the stranger a sneer worthy of Lucius Malfoy at his most arrogant.

"Caldwell," Weber says. "Do you have permission from Colonel Braun to be here?"

"Would I be here if I didn't?" Caldwell responds. His accent is unmistakably American, and he looks at everyone in the room with undisguised hostility.

"That's not an answer," Abendroth says.

"In that case, Captain, I do have permission. Your Brit fugitives stunned two of our citizens during their flight to your Socialist utopia." The last two words practically drip sarcastic disdain.

"I was told that the two stunned Americans were Muggles," Abendroth says, with a curl of his lip.

"Muggles or not, they're still American, and that makes them our responsibility," Caldwell says. His tone rings with false sincerity and sets Kingsley's teeth on edge.

"That's not what you said when that pair of idiot tourists smuggled themselves over the Wall last year," Abendroth says. Caldwell ignores him grandly.

"The fact remains that Sirius Black and Remus Lupin gained entry to the Democratic Republic of Wizarding Germany through our checkpoint. That makes it our affair."

"Who, exactly, are you?" Dawlish asks. For once, Kingsley is grateful for his colleague's habit of automatic abrasiveness.

"David Caldwell. Central Magical Intelligence Agency of the United States." Caldwell flips open some sort of badge.

"What can we do for you, Caldwell?" Weber asks, with patently feigned politeness. Abendroth just rolls his eyes.

"I need to talk to them," Caldwell points at Kingsley and Dawlish, "as well as anyone else on their team. Alone."

"Sirius Black is a British affair, not an American one," Dawlish says.

"Since he's in our country, I think he's become a German affair," Abendroth observes.

Kingsley exchanges a glance with Weber and sees a mirror image of his own resigned annoyance. There's enough personality in the room to toxify the air.

"Whether the re-capture of Sirius Black is a British affair or a German one," he says, trying for calm, "it is certainly not an American one. There have," he says to Caldwell, "been repeated statements made to the effect that the issue of He Who Must Not Be Named is a strictly internal problem, and that your government has no wish to get involved. Does this signify a policy change, then, on behalf of the United Magical States of America? Are you lot willing to get involved now that the main part of the danger is over?" Kingsley's palms are sweating; his heart is racing. This sort of cut-and-thrust wordplay is not his area of expertise.

Caldwell ignores the last two questions and laughs instead. "He Who Must Not Be Named? You guys were really afraid of that nutjob, weren't you?"

"I'll get you a list of the people who've disappeared or were outright murdered by him and his followers in the past six months. Read it over, then say that again," Dawlish says heatedly.

Kingsley is willing to let it stand at that, but Weber and Abendroth are both looking at him expectantly, apparently waiting for further explanation.

"We don't know the extent of his powers," Kingsley says. "It's entirely possible that he can hear his name if it's spoken, or that speaking his name lends him additional power. There have been wizards in Britain's past who were capable of both."

"I thought he was dead," Abendroth says quietly, but there's a liquid gleam of true interest in his dark eyes that has been missing since the beginning of the interview.

"We've found no body," Kingsley says, "and though his followers are in disarray and he himself is apparently destroyed, that's no reason to start being careless."

"Hence the importance of pursuing the hunt for Sirius Black with all due haste," Caldwell says. "If Voldemort all right," he says impatiently, as Kingsley and Dawlish wince, "if He Who Must Not Be Named isn't really dead, the last thing anyone wants is to have his strongest follower rejoin him."

Kingsley stifles the urge to protest Sirius' innocence, though it's not as difficult as it was in the first few hours after he'd found out the truth. Everyone else sees a murderer trying to escape justice. Kingsley remembers a schoolmate and thinks of an innocent man currently fleeing for his life and soul.

"Actually," Abendroth drawls, "the last thing any of us want is for you to stick your nose in where it doesn't belong. Go back to your side of the Wall, American."

"Not gonna happen," Caldwell says stubbornly. "As long as you Brits kept the problem internal, we were happy to mind our own business but Black and Lupin are now wanted for attacking American military personnel, and we're not going to allow that to slide."

"They're also wanted for the murder of 15 British citizens," Dawlish exclaims, his face reddening with anger. "Not to mention engaging in the practice of the Dark Arts. Mr.

Lupin is wanted for several violations of the Werewolf Code of Conduct, and Mr. Black is wanted for high treason! You'll forgive us, I hope, if some Stunned Muggles are not high on our list of priorities."

"It's perfectly understandable," Caldwell says, in a reasonable voice that Kingsley doesn't trust in the slightest. "That's why I'm here to make sure that my countrymen aren't overlooked."

"Of course," Weber says. "It is a perfectly commendable desire." His smile is not at all weary and looks totally genuine. "We will be more than happy to inform the American Magical Consulate as to any developments in the case, and you can be assured that we will add two counts of breaking the International Statute of Magical Secrecy to both Black's and Lupin's list of charges, as well as two charges of assault on a non-magical authority figure."

"That's not good enough," Caldwell says, smiling right back at him.

"If I might have a word?" Kingsley says dryly.

"You'd be Kingsley Shacklebolt, then?" Caldwell asks. "You're in charge?"

"Yes," Kingsley says, just as Abendroth says, "No."

"He's not in charge," Abendroth says. Caldwell rolls his eyes.

"You know damn well what I meant. Stop being difficult." He turns back to Kingsley, ignoring the irritated expressions of both German officers. "Go ahead, Auror Shacklebolt."

"You can de-brief Dawlish," Kingsley says, which gets him protests from both Dawlish and Caldwell. He holds up a hand for silence and is surprised when both of them obey.

"There's no way that I'm going to give up the manpower it would take to comply with your request. No matter how many of my team stay in East Germany, I will not change my mind." He does not add 'unless ordered to do so', as there is no need to give Caldwell ideas. "The situation at home is quite simply too desperate for me to justify that much wasted time. If they are not allowed to be here, they will be needed elsewhere as am I. To be quite frank, I can't spare Dawlish either but he's my second, so he gets all the crap jobs I don't have time for myself."

Author's Notes: This was originally intended as a two-part chapter; sadly, my laptop committed hari-kiri, and this is all I can get to at the moment.

For those of you who are not Cold War history buffs, I include the following:

Volkspolizei: Domestic police in East Germany. Dealt with non-political crimes. (Volksmagiepolizei)

Democratic Republic of Germany: Official name for East Germany. (Democratic Republic of Wizarding Germany)

Federal Republic of Germany: Official name for West Germany. (Federal Republic of Magical Germany)

Ministerium für Staatssicherheit: East German secret police. Dealt with political crimes. Also known as the Stasi; think East German KGB. (Ministerium für Zauberei Staatssicherheit)

As always, my gratitude to my wonderful beta readers - marauderswolf and molsymo. There would be no story without you guys.

Thanks also to everyone who has taken the time to read/review so far.

Feedback? Is love. Tell me what you think!

Chapter Fifteen: Only the Dead Were Smiling

Chapter 16 of 16

A meeting in Dumbledore's office. An unlikely ally.

Chapter Fifteen: Only the Dead Were Smiling

"And the stone word fell

On my still-living breast.

Never mind. I was ready.

I will manage somehow.

Today I have so much to do.

I must turn my soul to stone;

I must learn to live again."

-Anna Akhmatova, The Sentence

The walk to Dumbledore's office seems to take twice as long as it ever has, and Remus more than half-expects to feel Professor McGonagall's hand fall without warning

upon his shoulder. Fortunately for his nerves, though, the halls remain empty. He spots the familiar gargoyle with a sense of deep relief that lasts until he has thrown three passwords at the thing without success. The longer they stand about in the hallway, the more likely they are to get caught, and if Dumbledore has indeed changed his password system, they are in deep trouble.

"Chocolate Frog," he tries again. "Sugar Quill?" The gargoyle doesn't so much as twitch.

"Try 'blood-flavoured lollipop'," Sirius suggests, and the statue swings into motion. Bill Weasley looks disgusted. Remus, who has known since first year that Sirius' taste in candy is beyond appalling, rolls his eyes.

"You and Dumbledore," he says, "are both *completely insane*." He starts up the stairs and can tell from Bill's quickly-stifled giggle that Sirius is pulling a face behind his back.

Remus knocks softly on the door to Dumbledore's office and isn't surprised at all when it swings open to reveal the man himself, sitting behind his desk. He looks tired, and a little sad, but his fatigue vanishes beneath the weight of true shock for the briefest of moments when he sets eyes on Remus and Sirius; only for a moment, and then he smiles.

"My dear boys," he begins, then catches sight of Bill, whose wand is still aimed squarely at Sirius' back. Dumbledore raises one shaggy eyebrow.

"Mr. Weasley," he says dryly. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

Bill goes red beneath his freckles. "It's Sirius Black, Headmaster," he says. "I caught him!"

"Really," Dumbledore murmurs. His eyes are sparkling with humour. "I see. Well, in that case, I will refrain from asking what you were doing out of your dormitory after hours. Fifty points to Gryffindor for bravery, and take another twenty-five for having the common sense to bring this quietly to me."

"Thank you, sir!" Bill gasps, lowering his wand for the first time.

"Now go to bed," Dumbledore says. "Oh, and Mr. Weasley?"

"Sir?"

"If you are stopped on your way back, you were on a kitchen raid. I shall replace any points you may lose tomorrow, but you are to say nothing of what has happened here tonight. Neither Remus nor Sirius is a danger to anyone in this castle, but I will not have it known that they are here. Is that understood?"

"I won't say anything," Bill promises. He starts to leave, then turns in the doorway. "I knew they weren't evil! Not if you were glad to see them."

"Good *night*, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore says gently. As the door closes behind Bill, the fatigue slips back into Dumbledore's expression; still, he is smiling. "Children possess such extraordinary faith," he says, then shakes his head slightly and turns that weary smile back on Sirius and Remus.

"It is so very good to see you both," he tells them. "Please, sit down."

Remus sinks gratefully into the nearest chair. Sirius flops down in the other one, his customary grace seemingly conquered by fatigue.

"I am exceedingly glad to see that you made it out of Cologne without injury." Dumbledore pours tea for all three of them as he speaks, despite the lateness of the hour. "I will admit," he continues, "that I did not expect to see you here; still, I hope that Hogwarts will always remain a sanctuary for all of its students, past and present." He hands each of them a cup and saucer. "May I ask where you left the Aurors?"

"They hadn't arrived when we left," Sirius answers. "It'll take them days to get through the wards on the house -- unless they bring Dementors with them. We also laid a nice bit of false trail down for them, into East Germany. The red tape ought to keep them occupied for a while."

"Especially with Kingsley in charge," Remus adds.

"Well done," Dumbledore murmurs.

"It was all Remus' idea," Sirius answers with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Both of you have done extremely well," Dumbledore tells them. "Might I ask what you plan to do next?"

"Oh, Merlin," Sirius says ruefully. "To be honest, I hadn't thought much beyond a decent night's sleep. Remus?" His expression is bland and far too innocent. Remus tries desperately not to blush.

"Er -- right," he says. "Sleep. We're both pretty tired."

"Of course."

Sometimes Remus despises the knowing twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes.

"I wish that I could offer you beds in Gryffindor Tower," Dumbledore continues. "You have both certainly proven that you were properly Sorted. Unfortunately, I dare not risk your being seen by any more students." He pauses for a moment, tapping his fingers against his lips. "I think -- yes."

He gets up and crosses the room to a trunk that Remus has never noticed before, despite repeated visits to the Headmaster's office. Murmuring a quiet incantation, Dumbledore opens the trunk and pulls out an achingly familiar bundle of silvery-grey material. Remus feels something in his chest tighten almost to the point of pain.

"That's--" Sirius starts, and is unable to finish.

"James left it in my care just before he went into hiding," Dumbledore says gently, "with instructions that it be used to further the Order's work, if it were needed. He also instructed that if anything should happen to him and to Lily, it was to be given to Harry when the boy entered Hogwarts. I can not think of a more appropriate caretaker for it in the meantime."

He passes the Invisibility Cloak to Sirius, who takes it with the reverence of a man handling a reliquary, then clutches it desperately, as if afraid that this last tangible evidence of James will vanish even as he touches it.

"Thank you," Sirius says hoarsely, eyes bright with unshed tears. Remus tries to swallow around the lump in his throat. Dumbledore simply nods and changes the subject with a delicacy that should not surprise Remus, but does nevertheless.

"As I am sure you are both aware," he says, and looks over his half-moon spectacles at the pair of them, "there are seven or eight unused dormitory rooms on the fourth floor in the west wing. I suggest that you avail yourselves of one of them. I will also remind you to set wards and charms to warn yourselves of any intrusions."

"We will." Remus answers for both of them, because Sirius is still too near to tears to risk speech. "Come on, Pads." They both rise, and Sirius spreads the Cloak over them with hands that shake only a little.

"Sleep well," Dumbledore says, as they step out into the hall.

The attack on the Dursleys is the final straw, at least as far as Alastor Moody is concerned. Phineas Nigellus might want him to sit idly by and wait for events to break, but that sort of passive behavior is not Moody's way, and it never will be.

That doesn't mean that he's going to rush off half-cocked like certain other people have been doing recently. Black and Lupin are not thinking clearly at the moment, no matter how clever they are *in extremis*; but then, they are both young, and entitled to the foolishness of young men.

Moody knows better. If he goes charging blindly into the fray, the Ministry will get word before he's made any real progress, and bloody Crouch will shut him down in a hurry. No, if he wants to get anything done, he will have to talk to the sort of people who won't talk to the Ministry -- and that will be bloody dangerous without a badge to back him up.

Fortunately, he has his reputation. He's spent twenty years scaring the shit out of Britain's Dark wizards, and badge or no, it won't take much to remind them that cooperating is better for their health. It would be enough if he were going to stick to his usual network of informants.

He's not.

There's no point in talking to the little people who usually fill in the gaps of any intelligence operation. If he's going to prove Black innocent, he needs to talk to the higher-ups -- and he won't be able to scare them into submission. There are precious few, even among the Death Eaters themselves, who can name all of their compatriots, and fewer still who will be willing to listen, much less cooperate.

Alastor knows just where to start.

Lucius looks with some annoyance at the stack of paperwork that he still needs to complete before next month's charity ball. It will, he is quite certain, be a horribly tedious affair; still, it is part of a larger campaign to repair his public image, one that if handled correctly might even be enough to allow him to stand for election and win. No Malfoy has ever been Minister of Magic, though several have been the power behind the throne, and it would be... amusing to be the first, particularly with his already tarnished record to contend with.

He is about to start on the paperwork when a prickle along the back of his neck alerts him to someone asking for entrance through the Floo network. Rising, he murmurs the incantation that allows the petitioner's head to come through and nearly blinks in surprise when he recognizes Mad-Eye Moody.

"Malfoy," the man says without even a pretence at courtesy. "We need to talk."

"Oh?" Lucius raises a deliberately offensive eyebrow. "Is this a follow-up from the Ministry on my sister-in-law's demise, then?"

"Don't be cute," Moody growls. "You know damn well that I'm not with the Ministry any more."

"True," Lucius nods. "Then again, you're the sort who doesn't require official backing to be dangerous."

"You should know," Moody scowls.

Lucius smiles, acknowledging the hit. "*Touché*. Of course, considering how foolish the Aurors are making themselves look these days, perhaps you should be grateful to have lost your official backing. I certainly wouldn't want to be associated with that mess."

"What mess?"

"Oh, that's a bit much," Lucius draws. "I heard all about your aborted interview with my dear sister-in-law. You must have *some* idea as to what's really going on."

"Can the crap, Malfoy," Moody barks. Really, the man has no patience. "What are you trying to say?"

"Quite simply, that my less-than-beloved cousin was never a member of the Dark Lord's coterie." He catches the flicker in Moody's expression. "But then, you knew that."

"I didn't expect you to admit it so quickly."

"No? But then, you've been out of touch. Perhaps you didn't know that someone attempted to frame me yesterday evening. "

"Why do you think I contacted you?" Moody snaps.

"I *see*," Lucius says, and he does. "In that case, Moody, feel free to come through the fire. I'll swear any oath you like that you'll be perfectly safe. It seems we have a great deal to talk about."

Author's Notes: I know it's been forever since my last update; still, I haven't forgotten about this story. As always, feedback of all sorts is more than welcome. My thanks to marauderswolf for beta-help, and to everyone who's taken the time to read/review so far.