

The Mastery of Passions

by HogwartsHoney

Severus thinks he might rather have died under Voldemort's wand than be sentenced to recover surrounded by Dark magic and Gryffindors.

One

Chapter 1 of 2

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"The happiness of a man in this life does not consist in the absence but in the mastery of his passions." - Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

Remus smells blood. Not fresh, perhaps a few hours old, but the metallic tang of it is unmistakable. Animal-like, he scents the air as Severus walks slowly through the room and takes a stool in a dark corner as usual. It could be thought of as stalking by the casual observer, the way Severus moves, but Remus now focuses on what he realizes is a sense of distress that radiates out from where Severus lurks in the darkness. The rest of the Order barely acknowledges the man's presence, although Moody's eye swivels around once or twice, as though checking for dark objects on Severus' person. Tonks and Kingsley are giving a report, and Remus tries to listen, but all his attention is focused on the man in the shadows. He sits absolutely still as usual, but even without a change, Remus can tell something's wrong. Yes, he thinks, *there is something different tonight*. It's not only his animal's instinct (still a bit sharp even five days after the full moon) that senses unusual vibrations, but he has a nagging feeling that something is terribly awry. He shifts his head subtly, hoping nobody notices that his attention is no longer on the matter at hand, but he's almost sure that he *feels* Albus' eyes on him. A slow turn of his head to make eye contact and he hears Dumbledore's voice inside his head.

"Something is amiss, Remus. You can see it too."

Remus nods slowly, making it look more as though he's stretching tight neck muscles than an acknowledgement. He can almost hear shallow breaths in the corner, and he feels as though he's reaching out with the very hairs on his body, his nerve endings as well as his magic straining to try to touch something of the man to ascertain just what has transpired.

Severus is twitching.

Small tremors, but they're still there, and it's maddening. He has tried to hide it, but his body is barely able to fight against going into shock, and he wishes for even a small dose of an Invigoration Draught. His eyes feel sandy, and his skin feels as though it's crawling with worms just under the surface the all-too-familiar aftereffects of Cruciatus. He knows that his nerves are still suffering from hours of being pushed to their limit, and his body is sheathed in pain and heat, with miniscule muscle spasms that he knows will go on for days. He fights to stay focused, tries to remain upright and silent so that he can endure this meeting, make his report privately to Albus, and then get to Hogwarts where potions and rest can hopefully help him recover. He's not sure he'll be able to Apparate this time it's never been this bad before, and his body is already so tired. Sweat runs down his neck as he bakes inside his robes, and he blinks his eyes repeatedly in an effort to stay focused.

Finally, the meeting is over after an interminable number of reports and lengthy discussions on each and every point, which only serve to frustrate Severus further. People are leaving, and almost against his will, he leans into the slight currents of air made by their passing bodies, trying to find some relief from the oppressive heat. Even that slight movement causes his legs to shake alarmingly, and for a moment he fears that they may collapse, but he flattens himself against the wall with enormous effort and glances around to see if anybody has noticed. Typically, the inane chatter that surrounds him precludes any interest in his well-being, but his scan of the room takes in Lupin, who still loiters in rather close proximity to his own wretched body. Severus glowers for only a moment, but all he needs is Albus; just to give his report and then *then* he can leave. He grits his teeth and tries to move, but to his dismay, Severus is suddenly aware that his body has finally succumbed and will betray him. He feels the slow but steady loss of control, and despite his considerable effort and mental fortitude, he is unable to stop himself from crying out as he falls. Strong arms surround him, only adding to his pain, and yet somehow they alleviate his distress.

"Get Poppy." He hears Albus' voice as if from a great distance, and he feels the arms tighten around him as he is lowered gently to the floor and everything mercifully goes dark.

Remus doesn't know which concerns him more, the nasty gut wounds and hideous bruising already forming on pale skin or the sight of Severus' forearms, slashed repeatedly as though he was holding them up as protection in front of himself while being whipped. But these are no regular whip marks. They look as though they are scored with fire, not leather, but instead of being cauterised, they are almost as flames themselves, so ragged are their edges and so angry and red.

Time seems to slow for an instant, and only the soft *ssh-ssh* of rippling magic breaks the silence as Poppy casts wave after wave of diagnostic spells over Severus' inert body.

"Merlin!" Madam Pomfrey breathes softly; her words sound like a benediction in the silence of the room, and Remus can feel his tension ratchet up another several notches. It isn't as though he's never seen anyone in pain after a battle living with the pack had been more than enough to harden him against human suffering but this! To see Severus Snape always proud, stiff and unreachable in his anger surrounded by his robes and his self-righteousness; to see *him* in this state, semi-conscious and almost delirious with the toxins still in his blood, his wounds opening him up to the air and impeding his recovery... well, to Remus, this speaks of more than just random torture.

There is a meaning behind these wounds. A message.

But for whom?

Dumbledore? Severus? The Order?

He knows that Kingsley and the other Order members working in the Ministry will do as much as they can while not having an official investigation, but with their only spy debilitated to this extent, there is little hope of finding out anything of consequence.

Screams.

Severus hears screaming and wonders where it's coming from, for there's nobody around. *Perhaps it's all in my head*, he thinks, and then has the insane urge to cackle hysterically because of *course* it's in his head. Everyone's there: the Dark Lord's there, Albus, Lily, his parents, everybody. He doesn't even know where he is, but he has an urgent desire to pass on a message to someone; he knows it's important but he can't remember what or to whom, but the screaming hurts *inside* him. Even though it's dark, he can still see or he *thinks* he can see but the screams echo, and voices are loud and discordant all around him, so it's better to retreat from the agony inside his head. Fall back and regroup: it's a sound battle technique, and he employs it now.

Back behind the walls...

There is safety here. Severus knows it, and the walls have kept him safe before protecting his mind and his elemental self from harm. It had been difficult to teach himself Occlumency, but nothing in his arsenal of weapons has ever been as useful or as necessary.

His walls are stone large, roughly-hewn blocks reminiscent of Hogwarts, the first place he'd ever felt safe. He remembers the day he first felt the power of his walls and the freedom they afforded him, and he had persevered to ensure that their structure was perfect, every chink and crack fixed and made right so that there could be no weakness in his defence.

The walls surround his sanctuary and his soul, but even as they protect him, they also entrap him, and he knows that he must not remain here. Although there is darkness and pain beyond the fortress, he must leave, and as he feels along the high walls of his mind for a way out, he is surrounded by his memories. The happy or turbulent ones are most jealously guarded. They float by, some still producing feelings of joy (his first wand) and others pain (his mother, her pain-dulled eyes clearing and her grip on his arm loosening as she died) but the walls still hold. He searches in the sweltering heat as a burning, driving feeling inside him echoes what he knows: that he must leave, must get out. The memories flash by faster, all jumbled now, and he tries to latch on to one tries to hold on to any form of reality but then Lily floats by: Lily, Potter and Black, standing in a huddle around Lupin on the ground as young Severus stands with his wand outstretched, another hex dancing on his tongue. He doesn't see Lily holding Potter and Black at bay he only sees the hurt and an odd light in Lupin's brown eyes and the indefinable something that always made him different. In another world, Severus might have held out his hand and helped the other boy to his feet, but it's Potter who helps Lupin up even as Lily shoots Severus a baleful and unhappy look, and he is almost sorry to see the light go out in Lupin's eyes as he turns away. Almost before he realizes it, Severus has taken a step towards them because this time something feels different, and he needs to see Lupin again although he can't say why, but maybe it's the bloody heat making him light-headed. He reaches out and grabs the boy, and as he turns, it's not the Lupin of their school days, but the man he knows now: older, tired and lined. The light is still there, oddly soft, and suddenly Severus realizes he's found his way out.

He grabs hold of the man, and for the first time since he's been inside the walls, he feels something tangible. Lupin looks directly at him, and Severus knows that he can see him, but somehow he can't seem to leave the walls behind, and he hates the urgency of his need for help. Still, he knows that he must take this chance, although he doesn't know *why*. The pull of Lupin is strong, like an anchor. Severus holds on harder, even though his sweat makes their grip difficult, and the walls begin to fade away and feel a little less solid. Lupin is close, and Severus can almost hear his breathing, and why it's fucking *Lupin* he'll never know, but he has to say something because, God, he needs...

"Lupin, help me."

But Lupin moves back, and the light shifts again as the walls close in around Severus. The heat surrounds him once more, and even though he is disappointed, he knows where the opening is now, and he can focus all his energy there to escape his own mind.

Remus sits looking at Severus, who still twitches restlessly, even after two days of potions and other healing spells. Dumbledore remains convinced that Severus will come back to them, and as Remus reclines in the chair, his right elbow on its arm and his thumb running across his lips absently, he realizes that the twitching appears to be different: more like dreams than muscle spasms. He leans closer as beads of sweat appear on Severus' pale forehead, while rapid eye movements and pained breathing betray distress. Severus' entire face is a mask of anguish, and Remus finds himself leaning even closer as the man continues through his episode. Dumbledore and Poppy have cautioned him never to wake someone in the midst of a dream, and certainly not to do anything to bother Severus, but somehow Remus cannot prevent his hand from reaching out to the suffering man. He notices his hand shaking as he moves his open palm alongside Severus' cheek, almost touching him, but hardly daring to, and then, gently, he brushes against the heated skin of Severus' jaw, softly, barely touching it at all. In a flash, his wrist is imprisoned by Severus' strong grip. Remus pulls back, half afraid of what will happen, and Severus' eyes flash open, filled with anguish and pain and hurt and despair, and he looks directly *at* Remus, boring into his eyes and soul, and something like terror grips Remus' heart.

"The walls... Lupin. *Help me.*"

And just as Remus is finally able to formulate a response, Severus is once more unconscious, his fierce grip loosening gradually until his hand falls back to the bed, but Remus hasn't moved *can't move*; he's shocked by what has just happened: that in Severus' moment of lucidity, he had not only recognized Remus but asked him specifically for help. The urgency of the request gnaws at Remus. *What walls? What's he talking about?*

Rubbing his bruised wrist, Remus sends his Patronus to summon Poppy.

Poppy Pomfrey shakes her head in worried disbelief as she hastens to the Floo and a moment later is disgorged into the sitting room at Grimmauld Place. Remus is there waiting for her anxiously, tension written over every inch of his body and his brown eyes filled with beseeching need.

"Poppy! Oh, thank Merlin! His eyes were open."

"When?" she asks briskly, as they both turn and head up the stairs to the room in which Severus has been recuperating.

"Just moments before I sent the Patronus. He seemed to be having some sort of episode, or nightmare..." Remus breaks off his sentence as they approach the door to the room, and he turns around quickly to face Poppy, temporarily blocking her.

"He was lucid. Just for a moment, Poppy, but he *saw* me."

Something about the way he says those words strikes Poppy as being significant, and her clinical mind stores it away for later. Right now, her main focus is Severus.

"Yes, indeed. Let me through, Remus."

Several diagnostic charms later, Poppy is still not pleased with the results. Although Severus' body has been traumatized and is even now feverish as it fights to expel the toxins (poison from the fire whip, possibly), his *mind* is unreachable. Completely unreachable by magic. She briskly straightens the sheets around him and ensures that he is comfortable, but even as she turns away, he begins to thrash on the bed. Poppy looks closely at Severus' face: beaded with sweat, jaw clenching repeatedly, breathing erratic. She doesn't need a Diagnostic Charm to know that his heartbeat is elevated, for he appears to be struggling in his dreams. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices that Remus shifts his weight from foot to foot in agitation and seems genuinely afraid that Severus will do himself an injury. Poppy hesitates she would rather not further complicate the situation by adding her magical signature to the mix then casts a weak Holding Charm, just enough to ensure that Severus doesn't harm himself. A quick glance at Remus seems to be enough to loosen the torrent of worry inside.

"Poppy, I don't know what to do. He's in distress, and there must be something else we can do for him. I-I think we need Dumbledore." The apologetic tone in his voice almost negates the near-insult, and his agitation is unmistakable. Again, she files that away for later.

"Remus, he's busy. You can't expect..."

"We need him NOW, Poppy. I can't do it, but it needs to be done." The young man is highly agitated and Poppy pauses as she considers his words.

"*What* needs to be done? Remus..."

But he has already left the room, and she can hear his footsteps echoing down the stairs, loudly enough to wake Mrs Black, and there are more screeches'*Filth! Blood traitors! Dark creatures in my house!*'

Poppy shakes her head again at the distasteful situation and tries not to listen to the muffled sounds of a shouting match between Sirius Black and his mother's portrait. She turns towards her patient on the bed and places her hand gently on Severus' shoulder, wishing that she could do more, but she fears that he is in a place where she cannot reach him.

Although Remus enters the study at a fast clip and completely unannounced, the Headmaster seems to have been expecting him. Remus barely pauses for breath as the older man looks up. "Albus. Sorry to disturb, but I need..."

"Yes, my boy, I know what you think you need, but I doubt it will be of much use."

"We have to try, Albus! Please!"

"Legilimency is not something to be trifled with."

"But, Severus..."

"Severus is a highly gifted Occlumens, and even in this state, I doubt that I could get anywhere near his mind."

"It's our only hope, Albus. What if he never recovers?"

Blue eyes that no longer twinkle hold his gaze. "I refuse to think that way, Remus."

"Perhaps *you* refuse, but it's a possibility. What if he never wakes up? What if he does, but he's lost to us? What if..."

A raised hand cuts off his impassioned speech, and Remus shakes his head, not knowing what has made him spool up like that. It's not as though he cares what happens to Severus. Not really.

Albus takes a deep breath before speaking, and Remus briefly wonders whether it's to steady himself or Remus. "I think that the possibilities are great that Severus has sustained damage far worse than anything in his past. However," he raises his hand again before Remus can interject. "However, I believe that what Severus needs to recover is quiet and some gentle care."

Remus looks at him questioningly. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, my dear boy, that you are the only person here who is eminently suited to the job."

Remus is stunned for a moment.

"WHAT? What about my work with Sirius? And what about *Sirius*? You can't expect that he'll be happy to have Severus here!"

Remus sees that Albus is waiting patiently for him to finish his tirade, and he shuts his mouth with a click. The old man's smile is once more gentle, although Remus wonders whether it's meant to placate rather than reflect the man's true feelings. "No, I can't imagine he will be. However, I do think that, with the Christmas holidays almost upon us, this is the safest place for him to convalesce."

"Since when has Grimmauld Place been considered 'safe'?" Remus mutters.

Dumbledore smiles, an indulgent and placating smile that Remus knows brooks no argument no matter how soft it appears on the surface, and his heart falls.

Severus will stay.

Remus will take care of him.

Sirius will probably do his nut.

Sirius can't remember a time when he's been this angry, and the way his life has been lately, that's saying something. Remus' complacent attitude about the situation isn't making things any better if anything, it only makes him that much angrier.

"But Sirius, for Circe's sake, we're not teenagers anymore!" Perhaps it's Remus' placating tone of voice or his imploring expression that makes Sirius grit his teeth.

"Moony, come ON, it's Snivellus. It's hard enough that you've always been civil to him, the bastard, but to touch him, to fucking take *care* of him? What's Albus thinking?"
Worse again that it's in my own house!

"Albus must have a good reason for this, Pads."

Sirius fumes silently, which is a difficult thing to do. Remus obviously can't or won't see the truth, but he'll have a bloody word or two with Albus. *Good reason, my arse. It's payback, nothing more. That pale, slimy git has always been his boy, and he's locked me in the bloody house just so I can see them steal Remus away from me...*

Remus understands Sirius' point of view, and he silently curses Albus for putting him in this position.

"I'm the only one, Pads. Everyone else has something to do."

The moment those words are out of Remus' mouth, he regrets them, and Sirius' expression becomes dark and shuttered all at once. "Yes, everyone except me," he says acidly. "I've been stuck in this rotting mausoleum of my family's with nothing but that accursed house-elf. When you came back and stayed, I thought that would make it bearable, you know? I thought that if I could just have one person who understood me..."

Since Azkaban, nobody's understood you, Sirius but Remus can never say *those* words out loud.

Sirius continues speaking. "...and Severus fucking Snape is in one of the bedrooms! Just WHEN did things go even more to shite than they were already?"

What Remus does understand is frustration. Sirius has lost so much his friends, his money and his youth and is still unable to do anything about it. The shining moment of possibility almost two years prior when it seemed that Wormtail's confession would finally set Sirius free is etched into Remus' mind: the image of Sirius' gaunt but happy face in the moments before the moon rose and Moony took Remus' place still haunts him. To this day, Remus wonders how differently things would have been if...

He shakes his head and throws off those thoughts. The children will be coming to spend the Christmas holidays with them here, and Remus hopes that they will prove to be enough distraction for Sirius, at least in the short term. Merlin knows they all could use a break.

Remus looks down at Severus' hand in his and ponders the odd sequence of events that have brought him to this moment.

Remus has been at the bedside at all times since Severus' first lucid words. Under Poppy's orders, and with Albus' assistance, the room had been enlarged, and Remus had been moved in.

Several times over the past few days, Severus has regained consciousness and occasionally recognized Remus. He has spoken softly with an undertone of urgency, but most of his words were slurred and unintelligible. Even as Remus struggled to understand Severus, he wondered whether the man he had known, the 'real' Severus, would ever have spoken to him in this way. He is ashamed of himself for enjoying their brief moments together, and his conscience prickles at the thought of enjoying another man's pain. No, 'enjoyment' isn't really the word for it; rather that Severus is broken, like Remus is broken, and in need of care.

Often, Severus calls out for help, obviously struggling with someone or something in his dreams, and against his better judgement, Remus has searched for a way to help Severus, feeling that he can do something useful. As the days progressed and Severus came closer to the surface, Remus began to doubt himself. He has become oddly attached to the man on the bed, sometimes looking thoughtfully at him as he passes a cool cloth over the furrowed brow and wondering again what life would have been like if things had been different. Remus' stomach had clenched every time the pale man awoke and recognised him, and whereas at first it had been with a sense of dread, lately he began to almost like their brief moments together. At those times, Severus wasn't a harsh, angry and hurtful man, for the layers of mistrust, scorn and darkness had fallen away, leaving only the man, someone in trouble, desperately trying to break free.

Remus understands that need for freedom better than most men. Even now, as he sits and ponders, Severus stirs again, moaning unintelligible words as his hands clench into fists, and Remus again wonders what he's fighting. Hopefully, eventually, he'll be able to ask.

Sirius is typically none-too-pleased at Remus' new sleeping arrangements and can often be found bemoaning this most recent turn of events at every possible opportunity, so much so that his mother's portrait has most impolitely suggested that he go hang himself and save everyone the trouble. Mad-Eye is rumoured to have agreed with her, and Sirius recedes into a dull anger, moodily grooming Buckbeak and glowering at everyone in his path.

Frantic news of Arthur's attack comes, but Remus is ordered to remain at Severus' bedside, for Dumbledore remains convinced that he will recover soon. Remus spends the night pacing, indescribably angry and feeling that he has been shunted off to the side his old insecurities rising up unbidden. *Does anyone really want me around?* He wonders whether the residual dark magic in the house makes the occupants tend towards morose thoughts, but then he thinks of Severus, so obviously trying to break free, and Sirius, fighting against the circumstances which fetter him to this house, and he considers that perhaps it isn't dark magic, but unhappiness and regret at lost chances.

Remus is alone once more when Severus awakens, and for the first time, he is thankful for it.

Severus tests the walls and they hold, all images secure within the impenetrable fortress. He is still driven by the urgent need to escape this sweltering, sickly place, and he draws out the one memory that holds the key and surrounds himself in it. Again, a teenaged Lupin is on the ground; again Potter and Black are subdued by Lily; but this time it is Severus who reaches out and helps Lupin to his feet; this time he can feel the warmth of Lupin's grasp and the roughness of his palm. Severus grips tighter and pulls the boy closer with even greater urgency, his heart pounding in his chest as he thinks *Finally, this is it! This time I'll make it; Gods, let me make it*, until he can feel a different kind of heat, one that radiates from the young body, and as Lupin's face gets closer it becomes clearer and older, and the light shifts, but the eyes remain unchanged. The urgency which filled Severus a moment ago is still there but greatly reduced; his cares wash away, and he is filled with a sense of peace and relief; a feeling that somehow everything is all right because Lupin is there.

Severus abruptly realizes that he is lying in a bed, and he inhales deeply. For the longest moment, his soul is able to breathe without effort, no longer constricted by anger or guilt or fear or animosity or anything just relief and gratitude.

He opens his eyes and stares into amber eyes as Lupin crouches over him with brows furrowed in concern. Their hands are still entwined and Severus isn't sure just what

has happened, but he feels as though he's been freed of some great weight, and he inhales again, deeply. Lupin is whispering something and it sounds like his name, but Severus is still a bit disorientated, save for the warmth of his hand in Lupin's. He looks at their clasped hands for a long moment.

"Severus?" An urgent whisper.

Suddenly, Severus is aware that they are in a bedroom surrounded by tattered wallpaper and curtains; a room in what can only be Grimmauld Place, and the image of Black's sixteen-year-old face sneering in hatred swims through his mind again. Darkly, he knows that expression has not changed in twenty years. Severus groans; his throat is dry, and he feels heated.

"Water," he rasps, and moments later, a cool glass is pressed to his lips, the liquid soothing his throat. "Why am I here?" He tries not to make it sound like an accusation, but he knows it comes out that way.

It seems as though Lupin is momentarily at a loss for words. "You turned up hurt at a meeting, and we brought you here. Do you remember anything?"

You. I remember you. But Severus doesn't say those words. He knows what Lupin is referring to, but he can't look Lupin in the eyes because he's ashamed of being so weak and needy in front of this man. Lupin had always been the weak one, powerless against Potter and Black, and Severus had always thought so little of the Prefect, berating him and putting him down at every opportunity. Now Severus is the one who's 'down', and even though Lupin hasn't said anything, Severus knows he must think it. Yes indeed, the balance of power is now with Lupin...

"Severus?"

"Meeting. Dark Lord. Torture. Yes, Lupin, I remember."

Lupin gives a shaky laugh, and Severus only then notices that they are still holding hands. Lupin realizes at the same moment and releases his hand in what seems to be a nervous gesture.

"What happened, Severus?"

"I must speak with Albus."

"He's at St Mungo's with Arthur. There's been an attack at the Ministry."

Severus shudders and feels *thin* somehow, as though he is but a shadow of his former self, and his mind whirls with images, fragmented memories from his last meeting with the Dark Lord. Through the haze of his screams, he had heard mention of the Ministry, but even now the memory of the pain makes the edges of his reality blur slightly, and he can feel the walls threatening to rise and protect him, just as they had done that night. He breathes steadily and deeply in an effort to calm himself and glares at Lupin with all his strength, pitiful though it feels.

"Get Albus. I don't care how, Lupin, but *do* it."

The shock and dismay on Lupin's face surprises Severus, but he is so weakened that he can only lay back in exhaustion and watch as Lupin sends his Patronus through the walls.

Hours later, Severus awakens to find Black standing quietly in the doorway, his body limned in the glow from the lanterns in the hall. Neither of them moves, but Severus has the impression that darkened eyes regard him critically for a moment before Black turns and walks away.

Sirius lounges at the table, the anger and contempt clearly visible on his once-handsome features.

"Moony, it was bad enough when he was out of it, but now that he's awake, you've done enough. Tell Dumbledore that you're through."

He knows that he shouldn't blame Remus; intellectually he knows it, but somewhere deep in his animal's heart he feels abandoned and betrayed. Nonetheless, he knows Remus' answer even before the man speaks.

"Sirius..."

Remus has always spoken softly, Sirius realizes. He was never one to raise his voice or make a scene. Sirius smiles wryly as he remembers that he and James were usually the ones to cause a fracas, whereas Remus would stand quietly by and try not to let it go too far. Then there was Peter. *Peter.*

Anger swells up inside Sirius again as his frustrations roil inside him. Peter that filth, once his friend, and he betrayed them *all*! Sirius shudders unconsciously at the memories of the darkness of Azkaban, the despair and his waning sanity, but now at least he is free from that. He had thought that by spending time with Remus, they could get back to the way things were, that somehow Remus' presence could drive away the unhappiness and the bad memories, and Remus could keep him sane. *But now he spends all his time with Snivellus, that slimy excuse for a wizard who doesn't deserve even the breaths that he takes in this house...*

Remus sits in the armchair and hangs his head in dejection.

"Albus, I can't do this anymore. He's combative, he *hates* me, and we both know that. I can't see that anything I do makes the slightest bit of difference to Severus or to our cause. There must be another way."

Albus smiles at him beatifically, and Remus is almost uncomfortable, both because he knows that smile and because he knows that Albus will bring his considerable force of will to bear upon him. "You must help him, Remus."

Remus looks at the Headmaster in disbelief. "Albus, how can I help the man when he refuses to have anything to do with me? Sirius is up my arse because of all the time I spend with Severus, tensions are running high, and I'm at the end of my rope."

"My dear boy, can you not see that Severus is a broken man? You must find a way to un-break him."

A sudden surge of anger rushes through Remus. "How can I 'un-break him'? Go back to the start of his fucking childhood, Albus? Find yourself a Time Turner and somebody willing to do it because I'm done!"

Let Albus deal with that. I hate the bloody way he just assumes that I'll do whatever he says and take all Severus' bullying. Remus turns to leave and is surprised to find that Albus has come between him and the door, even though Remus was closer to the door and didn't see Albus move...

The old man rests his hands on Remus' shoulders. "Remus, you must understand, even though your efforts appear to be wasted, I believe that Severus is doing all he can for us."

Remus is still angry, although it is tempered a little more now. "How can you be so sure? He doesn't seem to care any longer, and I'm not sure that I would, were I in his shoes."

"Alas, none of us can ever really tread in the footsteps of others." Dumbledore's face is suddenly tired, his expression closed, but Remus knows that there's something else

afoot, and it's unlikely to be pleasant.

"Tell me what I need to know."

Albus' expression doesn't change as he describes the details of Severus' first meeting with Voldemort after the events of the Triwizard Tournament. Remus shudders in revulsion as Albus details the way Severus suffered then: how Voldemort held him in a Full Body Bind as Alecto broke both of his wrists. Albus quietly recounts the scene, as though taken directly from Severus' memories, as Voldemort repeatedly cast a "Vibrato" spell on the broken bones, causing them to rattle and rub together excruciatingly. Remus is surprised to see Albus' face crumble with emotion as he describes Severus' condition and the way his throat was raw from hours of screaming, unable to speak, his hands and forearms mangled horribly.

Albus explains how he and Poppy worked on the injured man that night, Poppy on his body and Albus on his spirit and mind, and even though it hurt Albus to have to send Severus back, he knew that it was their only option. A partly-trusted spy was better than no spy at all, and Severus accepted his mission wordlessly.

Remus is shaking by the time Albus finishes recounting the story and Conjures a pail just in time to throw up everything he's eaten that morning. It feels like everything he's ever eaten is coming back up, and he's sick with it, sick with the thoughts and the images and the *bloody fucking hopelessness* of this war. His eyes water, but it's not with tears; no, he's definitely Not Crying over Severus Fucking Snape and the horrors that he's had to deal with.

Definitely not.

Gentle hands are on his back and Albus hands him a cool, moist towel. Remus wipes his face tiredly, and even before he gets up from the floor, he knows that he will do whatever it takes to help Severus. As harsh as Albus' story was to hear, his understated insistence that Remus help the man makes it clear to Remus that whatever Severus is going through this time has to be worse. Much, much worse.

"Damn you, Lupin. Let me go!"

"Go to hell, Severus."

"I've been to hell, you miserable shite, and it smells of werewolf."

Silence.

"Nice," Remus says sarcastically, with as much dignity as he can muster. "Now just sit back and let me do this."

"Get your hands away from me, you bloody..."

Remus has had enough, and he lets a little of the wolf show, enough of the self-assured and powerful spirit of the Alpha male to enable him to make his point. He feels it grow within him, the restlessness, the quickening of his heartbeat and the low, almost savage, internal growl. He meets Severus' furious eyes.

"Do NOT resist me, Severus." Remus hears the wildness of his own voice and revels in the sheer primal force of the animal. Severus stills, his hands frozen on Remus' robes.

The moment dances between them, a frisson of tension and fear and anger; a battle of wills, the winning of which Remus knows is vital to their continued relationship. Finally, after an indeterminate pause, Severus' eyelids flicker and he relaxes his grip somewhat.

Remus breathes a quiet sigh of victory as he props Severus up further on the bed and proceeds to tend his wounds, which Severus tolerates in ill-tempered silence. Remus clears away the bottles and bandages and removes the Warming Charm from the tray of soup. Turning towards his unwilling patient, he is met with a glare which would send even seventh-year Slytherins scurrying for safety.

"Severus, you must eat." Remus tries to keep his tone patient, but he is drawing closer to the end of his rapidly-fraying rope.

"Leave me alone, wolf."

"How do you expect me to help you when you're like this?"

"I expect you to let me die."

"Like any of us could be so lucky."

Again, silence.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I don't know why I said that."

"Because you meant it, you pathetic excuse for a wizard."

The ugly and unkind part of Remus might have meant it. A bit. "Now see here..." he splutters indignantly.

"No, *you* see here. I'm being held against my will in this dank bloody house surrounded by dark magic and Gryffindors, and you expect me to just sit back and enjoy it?"

Dark magic and *Gryffindors*. Remus raises an eyebrow and chooses to ignore that dig, but he isn't surprised. Severus holds house loyalty close to his breast as though it defines him. Always has. Probably always will. Still, Remus will not give the man the satisfaction of believing that he will take that lying down.

"Far be it for anyone else to have a moment's bloody peace with you around, Severus. For your information, I'm doing this for Albus because he asked me to, not out of some misguided sense of obligation to your sorry arse. And furthermore, eat the fucking soup. NOW!"

Their staring match continues for a long time, the silence broken only by Severus' angered breathing, but eventually, the dark man's expression twists into a resigned annoyance, and he grudgingly picks up his spoon. Remus tries not to smile as Severus makes a show of eating, and he pauses for a moment to appreciate the bowed head before him. It isn't an absolute act of submission, but it's a start.

Sirius sits at the table next to where Remus is finishing his breakfast. His friend looks exhausted, and Sirius feels a momentary pang of empathy.

"How can you stand to be in the same room with him?"

"Sirius, please. Can I have one day without you badgering me about him?"

He huffs indignantly and watches the slow movement of Remus' fork as his friend pushes the remnants of his scrambled eggs onto a half-eaten slice of toast.

"When can he leave?"

Remus closes his eyes for a moment and gives a little huff of his own, but this one is tired, resigned, defeated. "He asks the same question."

"What? That son of a..."

"Sirius. Just let it go."

But Sirius feels the anger and frustration rush through him as though a dam has burst. "Like hell I will, Moony. That man has taken advantage of my hospitality..."

"I'd hardly call it that!"

Mudblood filth! Blood traitors. Scum of my loins!"

"Shut it, woman!" Sirius roars as he rises and storms into the foyer, every ounce of his frustration finding release in those three words.

"How dare you stand before me in my own house..."

"I'm the last of your stinking bloodline, you sick, old woman, so this is MY house, and I'll do whatever the hell I want in it!"

"You were always such a disappointment to the family, an embarrassment, a smear on the good name of Black!"

"I was the only one with a thinking brain in my head who saw the dark ways for what they were."

"They were the path to salvation!"

"THEY WERE A DEATH SENTENCE!" he roars and feels the blood pounding through his head.

They both scream until Sirius is hoarse, and in a daze of fury he feels strong hands on his arm, only dimly aware as Albus takes him inside the study and closes the door that Remus slips quietly out the front door, dressed warmly for a walk in the cold.

The kitchen at Grimmauld Place is filled with merriment and laughter. Molly has prepared a massive feast, and Remus can hear Harry's voice mingling with Ron's and Hermione's as they tell Sirius about their term at Hogwarts. Remus pauses outside the door for a moment and listens to the sound of life and love in the house something that's been sorely missing. He has a fleeting thought for the bitter and angry man hidden upstairs, and his heart wishes for the thousandth time that things could be different.

Still, the fact that Sirius is engaging everyone with his outrageous stories means that he's no longer sulking. Remus is relieved a sulking Sirius makes a most uncomfortable housemate. He watches as Sirius' smile seems to erase many of the care lines on his face, and Remus sees for a moment the friend of his youth; the shiny, effervescent Sirius Black, Marauder of Marauders, king of mischief and faithful friend until the end of time.

Remus had always thought that the end of time would be further away, but war has a horrible way of shortening the lives of good men.

Harry laughs again, and for a moment, Remus is transported back to a time when his friends had all laughed like that, happy and carefree, at the end of their sixth year when they stood at the Hogsmeade train station waiting for the Express and their summer vacation. Remus remembers standing a little apart from the rest of them, seeing Peter tooling around on the fringes of their little group. James and Lily yes, he remembers them standing close together, but not excluding Sirius, who was regaling them both with some unlikely story, if Lily's raised eyebrows were anything to go by. Remus smiles, and he can almost hear their laughter trickling across towards him, remembering the way Sirius had turned and smiled at him, that same brilliant, engaging smile, and Remus had returned to the group.

The Sirius of today is still that young man at heart, even though age and Azkaban have taken their toll, and Remus is somehow bolstered by the thought that perhaps the love of friends and family *is* enough to see you through the bad times. He stands for a while longer, bathing in the reflected happiness of everyone in the house, and somehow, inexplicably, it cheers him up. Smiling, he straightens the food tray in his hands and climbs the stairs to his room.

One day Sirius finds Remus sitting near the fireplace in the library, deeply engrossed in a book with nearly indecipherable writing on the spine. He smiles to himself as his bookish friend hums softly and turns a page carefully, but as he moves into the room, Remus stops and looks up at him. Sirius is momentarily disappointed at the carefully hesitant expression on Remus' face they've argued during every one of their last several conversations, and he imagines that Remus is bracing himself for their next disagreement.

"Hello, Moony. Mind if we have a short visit?"

Remus' eyes flicker tiredly in the firelight, but his smile is convincing enough, as is his nod in the affirmative. Sirius feels relief flood his body, and the tension recedes just a little as he sits beside Remus, folding his hands carefully in his lap.

"Look, it's about Snape."

"Sirius." Remus' eyes flash with warning, but there is weariness there too, and it frightens Sirius so much so that he rushes on, his words tumbling one over the other. "I don't want this to come between us anymore. I can't lose you, no matter what, and if it means me accepting that Snape is in this house and that the two of you... Well, then, by Merlin, that's what I'm prepared to do."

Remus closes his eyes and leans his head against the high back of the chair. "Sirius, it's Albus' idea, not mine. You're behaving as though this is my fault."

"Moony, no, I meant... Look, Snape and I don't like each other, and that's not likely to change, but I'm trying to do better. For you, Moony. For us. Let's just... let's not talk about him, that's all."

Sirius is thankful when Remus opens his eyes again, yet he still feels so keyed up with his emotions and the tension that he's wound tight, his heart fluttering like a snitch as the moment stretches while Remus looks at him. He feels the gaze as though it burns him, as though Remus is searing through him to find the truth buried in his soul. Finally, Remus gives a small nod and Sirius can breathe again, can relax again, and he flashes Remus a relieved smile. Remus smiles back, and Sirius feels a warmth percolate through his body as their smiles broaden, and he feels the years fall away from both of them as they sit side by side in companionable silence.

TBC

Two

Severus thinks he might rather have died under Voldemort's wand than be sentenced to recover surrounded by Dark magic and Gryffindors.

After Christmas dinner, Remus excuses himself quietly and proceeds to 'their' room, as he's come to call it in his head. Once again, dark eyes meet his, but Remus is filled with good food and pleasant company, and he doesn't bother to rise to the unspoken challenge. Not tonight. Tonight he can put aside all unhappiness and allow Severus' animosity to simply flow over him.

The melody of a Celestina Warbeck song still dances through his head as he walks into the bathroom, and he hums the chorus as he removes his clothes, placing them carefully on a shelf. Severus hasn't moved nor spoken to him tonight, and Remus sighs quietly as he turns on the water. If only Severus would try if only he would give just a little bit, make things just a little bit more bearable for Remus, just enough to meet Remus halfway...

Remus steps under the cascading water and sighs happily as the warmth seeps into his skin. Working the soap into a good lather, he washes himself thoroughly, taking care over the still-tender scars from his last transformation. He inspects the ragged edges of the deep gashes on his forearm where Moony had gnawed on it in frustration, and although they are mending well, the repeated trauma to the skin means that the wounds will never heal smoothly.

Repeated trauma... wounds will never heal...

Suddenly, it seems as though a lock has clicked into place, and the solution is obvious with absolute clarity. Remus can actually feel relief flow over him like the water, and his body unwinds, no longer holding the tension it had before. Severus would never think of himself as needing help, but Albus had nonetheless steered Remus in the right direction with his encouragement and stories of Severus' past. The old man must have known that Remus' natural tendencies to protect and care would come through in the end and, with only minimal blackmail, Albus Dumbledore has once more managed to place his pawns exactly to his liking.

Remus steps out of the shower and towel dries himself, his mind turning over these various thoughts. Even though Severus is angry and defensive, Remus hasn't been hexed yet, something which is unusual. At first he suspected that it was due to Severus' illness, but now that has passed, and in spite of that, Severus remains secluded... Wait. Why does he need to be? Surely Albus can let him return to Hogwarts or wherever it is Severus normally goes during school holidays. Remus stops, the damp towel hanging limply in his hands as he cocks his head to the side, wondering. *Why is Severus really here?*

~*~

Severus turns the page of the book with ill will as he hears Lupin's humming in the bathroom. He is sick of this room, sick of this bed, and bloody sick of being a secret. Albus visited earlier and implored him to have compassion for Lupin, but Severus is still too set in his anger to contemplate compassion of any kind.

He realizes he has been staring into space, and his eyes snap back towards the pages of the book as Lupin emerges from the bathroom, his hair still damp from the shower. Severus can almost feel the heat emanating from the man's body as he moves around the room.

Severus grudgingly admits that Lupin hasn't been all that unbearable on his own. The man is still too bloody calm and pleasant for his own good, but he is well read, and Severus has spent more one-on-one time with him than with anyone save Albus in many years.

It could be worse. It could have been Black.

Severus also realizes that he no longer tenses up when Lupin enters the room and that he feels stronger physically. Poppy had said that care was what he needed, and he'd scoffed at her, but he can now admit that he does feel better, even though he tries to convince himself that it's due to the potions and not to the care.

He watches Lupin get ready for bed and studies the smooth, lean gait that seems almost to flow with every twist of his body. Lupin moves quietly he does everything quietly and Severus fleetingly wonders if he's that restrained all the time.

Shaking his head at that errant thought, Severus again turns his attention to the books he's been reading, but somehow, tonight, Lupin's movements are different, and Severus has spent far too many years as a spy not to pick up on that.

Lupin turns and smiles, and for a moment Severus imagines that he sees a slight difference in Lupin's stance, just a small shift of muscle and bone, but it changes things. Whereas normally Lupin is quiet and respectful, tonight he seems surer of himself, more direct somehow. Instead of feeling threatened, it makes Severus restless and cautious, although he can't exactly pinpoint why.

It comes as a shock, therefore, when Lupin stands beside his bed. Nothing about Lupin appears threatening, yet Severus is keyed up, his senses on edge. He raises one eyebrow enquiringly as Lupin clears his throat.

"There's something you're not telling me," Lupin says, and Severus catches the intensity of the meaning behind those casual words.

"There are thousands of things I'm not telling you, Lupin. What, have you had an epiphany? Suddenly noticed something about me?"

Severus realizes that he's said too much when Lupin's eyes narrow in suspicion. Uncharacteristically, he's let his own emotions cloud his thinking his anger is so powerful and even more so when mixed with frustration. The consequences of that could be dire. He chooses to remain silent and see what develops.

"I have noticed that you're not yourself, even though you seem to be fully healed. Is there some other reason you're here?"

Severus takes a deep, calming breath at that open-ended question and thinks carefully before he answers. Suddenly the werewolf has developed analytical skills, and it wouldn't do to be found out. He clutches the handle of his wand tightly, even though he knows it will do him no good, and he grits his teeth when Lupin notices.

"Apart from Albus' bloody whim? I'm here on his orders, if you must know," Severus growls, trying to draw Lupin's attention.

Too late! He sees Lupin's eyes flick towards his hand again, and he realizes that the man suspects something, which is confirmed in the next second when the business end of Lupin's wand is pointed directly at him. Severus' reflexes are equally as quick as the werewolf's, and his heart pounds in his chest as he lies on the bed, unwilling to lower his wand yet unable to properly defend himself.

"Why won't you defend yourself?" Lupin's voice is oddly soft and non-threatening, but a wand in the hand of an opponent is nothing to be scoffed at, and Lupin still hasn't lowered his arm. Severus realizes that he is beaten and grits his teeth as he slowly, slowly lets his arm drop, maintaining eye contact the entire time. Only when his wand is once more beside his body does he release his grip, and he hates to do it, hates to show weakness in front of Lupin of all people.

~*~

Suddenly, the door opens, and Remus tenses as Albus steps through. In one swift motion the Headmaster's eyes take in the scene, and he places his body between the two men, even though Remus is the only person still holding his wand.

"Remus, might I have a word?" It isn't a question, and Albus' quietly authoritative tone underscores that fact. Remus hears Severus' irritated huff of breath as Albus walks towards the door, indicating with a wave of his hand that Remus should precede him into the next room.

"Oh, you're going to enjoy this, Lupin," Severus snaps. "In fact, between you and Black, I'm not sure who will enjoy it more."

Remus turns and glances questioningly at Severus, whose face displays the most intense combination of anger, hatred and pure loathing that Remus has ever seen. He

shivers as he looks to Albus for confirmation, but the older man's reproachful gaze is centred on Severus.

"Severus, I really do think that you should tell him," he says, and Remus notes that even his admonishment takes on the tone of an order.

"Tell me what?"

"Why must you damn me to this perpetual hell, Albus? Can you not let me die like any kind soul would?"

Albus' laugh sounds slightly forced to Remus' ears, and as he looks between the two men, who stand locked in a battle of wills, he wonders just what he's about to find out.

~*~

Severus grits his teeth, hating the position in which he finds himself and tries to pour as much poison into his words as he can, hoping that he can burn away his own nagging self-doubt in the process.

"I'm weak, Lupin. Magically drained. Almost a bloody... Squib."

In a different situation, it would be amusing to watch as the conflicting emotions vie for supremacy on Lupin's face. Severus can see them all well enough. Disbelief. Shock. Confusion. Fear. He is a little surprised at the fear, but is also reluctantly gratified that Lupin does not gloat nor show any other emotion even remotely resembling satisfaction. On the surface of things, it would appear that Lupin is almost as profoundly affected as Severus. Severus dismisses that thought with an impatient huff, the only sound in the absolute silence of the room.

~*~

Remus is certain that time stops.

"What?"

He realizes his mistake when Severus' eyes flash darkly with anger. "What part of 'Squib' don't you understand, you miserable..."

Albus rests a quelling hand on Severus' shoulder. "Now, now, Severus. I'll explain everything to Remus. In the meantime, you get some rest. Come along, Remus, this way." Albus gestures for Remus to precede him through the door, and Remus walks automatically, his mind still trying to come to terms with what Severus has said.

A Squib? Severus Snape?

Albus leads Remus to the sitting room on the second floor, a relatively small and doxy-free room with a fireplace and a small, heavily-curtained window. Remus sinks gratefully into an armchair and tries to clear the random thoughts in his mind.

"It's his magic, Remus," Albus says heavily. "Severus exaggerates slightly, for he is no more a Squib than you or I, but his illness appears to have stemmed from the simultaneous attack of the poisoned whip and Voldemort's Legilimency, a situation which forced Severus' mind and magical field to protect him at all costs. His mind receded behind the walls of his own Occlumency, but the poison worked so quickly throughout his body that it made it almost impossible for him to escape his own shields. The mere fact that he is awake and lucid says more about his mental strength than I can say, but the end result is that his magical strength is extremely low and it's not returning as quickly as Poppy would like. Needless to say, this places us all in a highly undesirable position."

Remus sits in silence and tries to absorb the entirety of the situation. He realizes that, although he and Severus have never been friends or even friendly to each other, much of the man's animosity towards him stems from a sense of insecurity first as a victim at school, and now, being literally powerless in Sirius' house, surrounded by both dark objects and Order members.

I'm weak, Lupin. Magically. How much had it cost Severus to admit that to him?

~*~

Late one night, just as Severus is about to extinguish the lights and go to sleep, he is disturbed by the sound of Lupin entering the room none too quietly. Severus is mildly surprised to catch a whiff of alcohol, and it appears as though the man is slightly unsteady on his feet.

He raises an eyebrow in disbelief as Lupin undresses randomly, tossing his cardigan and trousers aside rather than folding them as is his ritual. Severus raises the other eyebrow when Lupin turns extravagantly and walks unsteadily towards his bed, peering through the semi-light and apparent alcoholic haze.

"Ah, Severus!" he says, just a little too brightly to be completely sober. "I've been thinking about your situation, and I think that what you need is compassion."

"Compassion?" Severus sneered. "Why the hell would I want that?"

"Need", Severus, not 'want'," he declares calmly, and Severus is momentarily stymied by the succinctness of that incomplete sentence, especially given the obvious over-consumption of what smells like Firewhisky.

"Need, Lupin? I hardly think we *need* to discuss this." Severus tries to add a menacing tone to his words, but even as he does, he knows that it will be completely ineffective on Lupin.

"Oh, on the contrary, Severus," Lupin says easily, slurring only slightly but with his infuriating smile and annoyingly easy manner still intact. Severus still tries to maintain some hostility and build some sort of defence against this kindness this "compassion" for Merlin's sake, but even as he catalogues Lupin's faults and all the reasons for mistrust, Severus is still undeniably a man, and the cast-iron will that he once possessed is still shattered along with the remnants of his magical powers.

It takes him only another moment to realize just how untenable his position is when Lupin draws closer again and settles comfortably at the foot of Severus' bed.

"On the contrary, your needs are precisely what aren't being met, and I believe it's time to change that."

Despite himself, Severus feels an unfamiliar shiver almost a thrill; a rush of adrenaline mere seconds before Lupin touches his leg gently. Severus jumps and is immediately embarrassed that he *has* jumped, but he quickly recovers enough to glower at Lupin. Unfortunately, the insufferable werewolf appears completely unfazed by his reaction and touches him again, patting his lower leg in a slightly clumsy and non-threatening way, but to Severus who isn't used to being touched this is something significant.

He refuses to back down from the challenge, however, and steadfastly remains where he lies as he fights to keep his voice steady.

"I fail to see how touching equals compassion, Lupin."

Again, an infuriating wolfish grin as the man moves closer still, his hand sliding up to rest on Severus' thigh.

"Ah, Severus, you can't know my heart, so you will have to get the message some other way."

Thankfully, Lupin makes no further overtures, but instead turns and settles on the bed alongside Severus. Against his better judgement, Severus allows Lupin to lie there, both of them leaning up against the headboard and staring at the ceiling, Severus' arms crossed defensively over his chest. He is keenly aware of Lupin's body and the

heat it produces, and he is restless at first, but he also realizes that he's talked more and felt more with this childhood enemy-turned-caregiver than with anybody else in more than twenty years. Eventually, Lupin's breathing evens out and Severus realizes that the infernal man has had the audacity to fall asleep in his bed, but as unfamiliar and cloistered as it feels to Severus, there is also the smallest hint of comfort there. He dozes fitfully, surrounded by the warmth and smell of Lupin's skin, and eventually sleep overtakes him.

~*~

Remus dreams of winter and of a warm fire, its glow casting both shadow and light on the sparse ground. He is outdoors, yet the breeze doesn't blow, and everything is absolutely still. He glances around and smiles at the others gathered nearby, but nobody is as close to the fire as he. He realizes that he should move further away to avoid getting burned, yet he simply stares into the knife-edged sharpness of each flame and shifts closer. Somehow he knows that the fire is life, and as the faces around him fade from view, smiling as they do so, it is the fire that grounds him and keeps him safe.

A rather loud grunt pulls Remus from his slumber, and he cracks open an eye, staring up into the face of Severus Snape. He blinks sleepily, still feeling the warmth of the blaze against his skin, but notices that the warmth is where his body is pressed against Severus'. Only mildly surprised, he shifts, feigning nonchalance even as he registers this minute victory in their eternal battle of wills. Only after an elaborate stretch does he move away from Severus' warmth, but not too far. Not yet.

"Mmmm... morning," he rasps, his voice still gravelly from drink and sleep, but his greeting is answered only by an indignant huff. Remus blinks rapidly as he sits up in bed, fully awake now and mildly amused at Severus' raised eyebrow, but he decides to see just how far he can push this.

"Did you sleep well, Severus?" He tries to keep his tone both light and strong, and he sees a momentary flash of annoyance on Severus' face before it is swept away by a tightly controlled grimace.

"Not exactly, Lupin."

Remus shivers as the silken voice flows over him like honey and wonders how long it's taken Severus to perfect that voice and the inflection of his words, but he barely has time to ponder that thought before Severus rises from the bed defensively. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like a bit of a wash before breakfast."

Biting back a grin at the mental images that pop into his mind, Remus sets his clothes to rights and leaves, turning briefly at the door to glance back at Severus' silhouette against the rising sun.

~*~

Severus groans as he falls back on the bed, his chest heaving from the effort of trying a simple Levitation Spell. To display weakness of any kind is mortifying, and despite the mild dizziness he feels after such exertion, he tries again, only to be frustrated once more by his lack of magic.

"Severus, you *must* allow yourself time to heal," Lupin insists as he enters the room.

"Would it kill you to knock?" Severus snaps, angrier than usual at the nonchalance of the werewolf. "I cannot allow myself any more time, Lupin. I detest being here, the new term is about to begin, and I..." he lowers his voice significantly. "And I have matters to attend to for Albus."

Lupin's furrowed brow and cross expression show all too clearly what he thinks of that statement. "Matters to attend to, indeed, Severus, but you must be fully healed before you can attempt to return to... those matters." Severus is surprised to see a shred of concern on Lupin's face, and despite his annoyance at things in general and Lupin in particular, he ponders that expression for a moment. The moment is shattered when Lupin sits on the bed beside him, almost close enough to touch.

"Don't touch me, wolf," he growls.

"Shut up, Severus," is the calm reply, and Severus glowers, feeling his anger warm him. He tries a different approach.

"Black has never liked me, and I can assure you that the feeling is entirely mutual."

"Be that as it may, can we simply agree not to talk about him?"

"But this is his house, Lupin. *He* is bloody everywhere."

"Just... let it go."

Severus splutters indignantly. "Let it go? Lupin, have you lost your mind? Have you somehow managed to forget the seven years of our schooling and everything that's happened since then?"

"It's not for that much longer, Severus. As you've said, the new school term is about to start and you need to convalesce. Here is simply the best place for it."

"Here?" Severus splutters incredulously this time. "Here? Lupin, I'm like a caged thing in this place, and you can't know what that's..."

Severus feels his face heating unexpectedly and has a moment of almost-regret at his rash statement. Lupin's face is a valiant attempt at nonchalance, or at least carefully studied calm, but Severus can see the anger beneath and, despite himself, he shivers.

"I think you'll find that I know very much how that feels, Severus." Odd that Lupin's voice can be so calm and yet take on the sound of glass: brittle and sharp. It is utterly new and different in an eerie way, almost as though the man has to distance himself from Severus in order to speak to him. Severus doesn't like it, although he can't exactly say why, and his skin is suddenly chilled as Lupin rises, taking with him his body heat.

"Besides, pushing yourself isn't going to make anything happen any faster."

"Then what will?" Severus shouts, all his anger and frustration and niggling doubts surfacing in an explosive way.

"Patience."

Lupin's blasé manner of speaking irritates Severus, yet he feels that, unlike Albus, Lupin actually has his best interests at heart. He can't say precisely why, and Merlin knows they've had enough disagreements throughout their association with each other, but Lupin seems to be trying, and he isn't cowed by Severus' vitriol, which is something else about the werewolf that has always angered Severus. Now he finds that it merely irks him.

"I'm hardly a patient man, Lupin."

"Patience, rest and your potions," Lupin continues in his gently admonishing tone. "Does Poppy still bring them to you every day?"

"Yes," grouses Severus, annoyed that he is forced to take someone else's concoctions rather than brew his own, even though he knows that the quality of Poppy's potions is perfectly acceptable.

Lupin looks down at him with his patented, calming expression. "And you have your own rooms, enough books to keep you reading for several lifetimes, and no pressure. All things considered, Severus, I believe you'll be ready to leave us soon."

The casual mention of his imminent departure gives Severus pause, and he watches in silence as Lupin leaves, closing the door quietly behind him. Once again the

thought causes the deep-seated fear to rise within him. Away from Grimmauld Place, damned though the house may feel, Severus will be alone. Yes, he prefers it that way, but this most recent bout of punishment from the Dark Lord has taught him one thing: he is absolutely expendable. He finds himself wishing he could confide this to Lupin, but dismisses the thought almost in the same moment. Severus isn't comfortable acknowledging his own feelings, yet alone sharing them with another, even if that other is Lupin.

"Fine," he mutters to the silent room. "I won't mention Black anymore."

~*~

Sirius has never seen a Resolution tree, and in fact, he doubts that any such thing exists, but he's eager to play along with Hermione's idea. The pine tree from Christmas has been replaced with a small birch tree, something she says represents rebirth, and upon its branches are fastened bits of parchment. "Write out your resolutions and tie them to the branches," she instructs the residents of Grimmauld Place, and Sirius smiles wistfully to see that a number of branches already bear little scrolls of parchment that look like decorations among the triangular leaves.

After several minutes of staring at the tree, immersed in thought, he takes a square of parchment and a self-inking quill and hurriedly scrawls out his resolution. Hermione said that they would be anonymous, even though all the resolutions would be read out loud on New Year's Eve, and Sirius smiles softly as he ties his parchment on one of the highest branches.

~*~

Remus hums merrily as he breezes into their bedroom and, without missing a beat despite Severus' grumpy demeanour, places a small tree branch on the antique writing desk against the window.

"What's that?"

Remus tries to hide his smile and fails miserably. "It's a branch from Hermione's Resolution Tree. I know you can't put yours on the one downstairs, but I thought that you'd enjoy being a part of it anyway."

One glare from Severus tells Remus that he might have been wrong in his assumption, but he continues happily, refusing to be dissuaded from his good mood.

"Well, I've put mine on, and there's some parchment and a quill for you to do the same, if you want to, of course. I'll see you later tonight, then?"

Without waiting for a word, Remus leaves, and he's sure that Severus' glare has scorched the back of his robes.

~*~

Severus glowers at the ridiculous branch on the desk with the single roll of parchment affixed to one of the leaves. Really, where *does* Lupin get his ideas from? A Resolution Tree. What good are resolutions when real life gets in the way of even the best laid plans?

Then again, life had certainly steered him directly into Lupin's arms, hadn't it? Severus would never have thought that the events of the past two weeks could have led him here.

He glares at the cheerful green branch again, convinced that the stupid piece of shrubbery should at least have the common decency to wilt under his glare. No? He harrumphs and reaches for a piece of parchment, just for something to do. Perhaps he can make a list of potions ingredients he'll need to restock the shelves...

Minutes later he still holds the parchment and quill in hand. *Resolution Tree. What the hell does one write for a resolution, anyway?*

~*~

Remus slides into bed well after midnight, his face wreathed in smiles at the sight of two pieces of parchment adorning their Resolution branch.

~*~

It is barely dawn, and Severus quietly observes the sleeping occupant in the bed next to his. Lupin sleeps on his side facing Severus, the bedclothes strewn around him as though he fought with them during the night. A thin beam of sunlight breaks through a chink in the draperies and falls in a line along the foot of Lupin's bed. Severus watches as the slice of light moves gradually up the bed towards the man's head, noticing the way everything it touches turns from grey and black to bright colours.

Eventually, the sunbeam falls across Lupin's face and the man stirs, blinking his eyes and stretching, and Severus cannot help but listen to the low groans and sighs. He finds himself wondering whether Lupin makes those noises often and shakes his head in utter disbelief at the betrayal of his own thoughts.

All too soon, Lupin is awake, and the moment that he is out of the bathroom, he heads directly for the branch, still sitting innocently on the desk. Severus had hoped for a bit of a respite from all things celebratory, but he realizes that Lupin will not be deterred. As the man approaches with the twig, Severus indulges in a deep sigh, for even though he will be happy to get this out of the way, he still feels a shred of uncertainty at the contents of his piece of parchment. Lupin flops onto Severus' bed and gestures to the branch with a great flourish.

"Shall we read them out loud to each other?"

"I think not, Lupin, if it's all the same to you." Severus is almost sorry that the joy seems to flicker for a moment in Lupin's eyes, but the werewolf seems to cover it well.

"Oh, Severus," Lupin groans. "Fine then. Here's mine. Go on, read it."

Severus is annoyed at the unreasonable nervousness he feels as he accepts the small scroll from Lupin. He slips off the ribbon and unfurls the parchment, trying to ignore Lupin's excited shifting next to him. He smoothes the paper and raises it to better catch the light, even though he knows that even without the thin shard of sunlight, there is more than enough illumination from the torches on the wall.

God, Lupin's handwriting is still small, neat and tidy. Nothing much has changed in that regard, I see.

Severus makes a big show of irritation at having to decipher such handwriting, and the wolf beside him loses his smile, slightly. Finally, with an air of being much put upon, Severus reads the painstakingly careful penmanship.

"I resolve to show my true feelings whenever possible."

Severus quirks an eyebrow and wonders about that for a moment, since being a Gryffindor means that Lupin wears his heart on his sleeve, as they all do, the fools. Still, the sun's glow illuminates the golden-amber of Lupin's eyes, and his face is wreathed in smiles, and Severus feels a stab of emotion so sharp that it almost takes his breath away. He recovers quickly, although he is still shaken by how powerful it was and how much it has affected him, and he resorts to his customary snark.

"Very well, Lupin. I imagine this will make your relationships with people that much more difficult, but good luck to you."

Does Lupin's smile fade again? Severus can't be sure, but he definitely sees that his body language is off. Disappointment? Yes, Severus is sure that Lupin has dealt with enough of that in his life, and the man should be no stranger to it by now, but oddly enough, he feels an unusual sense of unease, almost as though he has made a mistake. Before he can do much else, Lupin moves away from him, not a great distance, but far enough that there is no longer any intimacy in the space.

Grudgingly, Severus gestures towards the twig with his piece of parchment still tied to it. Lupin is still for a moment longer and wets his lips with his tongue in an oddly distracting manner before removing the scroll and opening it carefully with too much care, Severus muses.

Lupin makes a big show of straightening out the parchment, smoothing the paper and holding it just so. Severus follows Lupin's eye movements as they track along the words, darting back and forth as he reads and re-reads what is written upon the parchment.

Severus is actually nervous, he realizes, a highly uncomfortable feeling but one which has become rather routine in recent days due to Lupin's proximity. Now, as Lupin turns to him, his face a plethora of emotions, Severus can come to only one conclusion.

This, whatever it is that they have, is mutual. Entirely mutual.

All further thoughts are removed rather roughly as Lupin leans over and kisses him, hard. It isn't what Severus expects, but as he opens his mouth and returns the kisses with a fire of his own, he finds that it is exactly what he needs.

~*~

The thin light of pre-dawn filters through the dusty and tattered curtains, which line the room's solitary window, and casts its gentle rays on the bed below. Severus is once more awake, his mind filled with the events of the previous day, yet he refuses to move, as the heavy warmth of Lupin's body is pushed against his back and he finds it oddly comfortable. He inhales slowly as Lupin nuzzles the back of his neck, and the hairs rise as urgent shivers of want scatter along his back. Every nerve ending feels as though it is alive to almost excruciating sensitivity. Cruciatius without the cruelty and he arches his back, wanting both to escape the sensations and drown in them. He can feel puffs of Lupin's warm, moist breath ghosting along his neck and shoulders, and he grits his teeth against crying out but, oh! How he wants to moan and writhe and beg, and the breaths move lower along his shoulder blades and mid-back, and suddenly he can't *not* writhe because the sensations are more than just in his cock or on his skin, but *inside* him, screaming to get out.

Lupin's nose and lips caress his skin and touch each scar, pressing gentle kisses and hesitant touches that become bolder with each swipe of tongue, and soon Severus is so sensitized that he swears he could come from this alone.

Their breathing is loud in the silence of the room, but his mind is a maddening chorus of *God* and *yes* and *Lupin* and *more* and *need want take please*. His body shakes from pure desire, his skin is sensitive almost to the point of pain, and it feels as though electricity is coursing up and down his spine.

Finally *God*, *finally* Lupin places his hand on Severus' back, and Severus almost weeps from the sensation, his body crying out and craving the other man's touch. Roughened calluses feel like silk and honey as Lupin's hands run along Severus' neck, back, arms and hips, and Severus surrenders.

He arches his back, pushing his hips and arse against Lupin's groin and turning his head in his quest for lips and tongue. Severus moans actually *moans* as Lupin bites down gently on his shoulder, and it sounds so guttural and needy and *animalistic*, yet it only excites him more to hear the answering growl from the man behind him.

Severus' breath comes in short pants and, God, he tries to maintain control, but Lupin prepares him with long, wicked fingers, and then he's on his stomach, hands gripping the sheets as Lupin pushes inside him. The walls are shattering around him, and Lupin is everywhere: in him, filling him and surrounding him, and Severus lets go and surrenders the walls, lets them be sundered by the wolf as he grips Severus' hips hard and thrusts inside him, even as his tongue bites Severus' lips, probing and questing and demanding acceptance, and Severus gives it without further resistance because what is he fighting and holding back from? Images shatter before his eyes like the stained glass windows in the Great Hall destroyed by a huge force, but the images are his mind and the windows are his walls and the force is Lupin.

~*~

Sirius is certain that there is something amiss. More than once, he has glanced at Remus when the other man doesn't know he's looking, and the expression of quiet happiness on his friend's face tugs at Sirius' heart. He suspects that something significant has changed between Remus and Snape; Remus no longer has that tired and slightly desperate look about him, but more an impression of quiet determination and satisfaction. What really tugs at Sirius' heart is that Moony no longer seems to need *him*.

For a while at the beginning, Sirius knew that he was no good to himself or Remus. He was so fearful and nervous after his escape, wary of any and everyone, and when memories of Azkaban would begin pressing down upon him, the mere touch of another person was enough to send him screaming into darkness. How Remus made it through those days he'll never know, but he did, and he almost single-handedly saw Sirius through those terrible days and nights, whispering comforting words and holding him close.

C'mon, Siri; it's all right; just relax against me, it's me, Moony. Remember holding me after the change, Pads? Remember all those nights running under the full moon? Just breathe, Sirius, nice, deep breaths, and it will be all right. Shh, you're safe now; everything will be different now.

Remus was his anchor, his rock, his home.

Even Grimmauld Place has felt like a real home these past few weeks with all the activity, the hustle and bustle of Order members in and out, the Weasleys and Hermione, and Harry, of course, all living and laughing and arguing and discussing together. It was possibly the best Christmas Sirius had ever had.

Tomorrow his family will leave him again, and with Remus' heart and mind seemingly occupied elsewhere, Sirius begins to feel a bit like he had before, heavy-hearted and morose, and wonders whether he can find any measure of the security he'd once felt.

~*~

Severus is grimly satisfied as he successfully levitates his Transfigured wardrobe across the room, and he considers that his magical powers are as close to being restored as he can realistically expect. In fact, he thinks smugly, he's become better at Transfiguration than he was before, and he vaguely remembers a Muggle saying from his childhood, something about clouds and silver linings.

"When the term begins tomorrow, Severus, I want you to start Occlumency with Harry. I fear that Tom has become too powerful not to use their connection to his advantage."

Severus' magic peaks angrily at Albus' words, which doesn't help much with his control, and he sets the wardrobe down rather abruptly before turning and glaring at the Headmaster, who regards him with a brittle smile.

"Albus."

"We've discussed this, Severus, and I understand your concerns. However, after my own recent attempts to invade your mind, I believe that you will be strong enough to handle him. I fear that we may already be too late."

"The child is headstrong and willingly courts danger, Albus. Why do you think that these lessons will be of any value?"

"Danger courts *him*, Severus; it always has. You will do this and ensure that he is as ready as we can make him."

Severus feels the heat of anger rush through him, and his embittered thoughts fall on another boy with messy hair and glasses, many years ago. He isn't quick enough to shield his mind, and Albus makes a disapproving sound.

"He is not his father, Severus."

The hell he isn't.

"Remember that Muggle quotation I told you about, Severus? This is what I meant."

Severus pauses, his mind still steaming in anger, and he glowers as he remembers the words by some writer named Blackwell: *The hatred you're carrying is a live coal in your heart - far more damaging to yourself than to them.* Trust Albus to throw Muggle literature around at a time like this.

"Now is hardly the time to bring this up," Severus hisses through clenched teeth, all the while attempting to silence Albus with his very gaze, and for a moment there is only the heavy silence between them.

"You would do well to let him know tonight, Severus. I shall see you at Hogwarts tomorrow."

"I will need your Pensieve."

"Of course."

Severus glares uselessly at the back of Albus' purple robes as the white-haired man turns and leaves and considers his non-existent options.

Potter must be taught.

Severus must be the one to teach him.

They will probably both do their nut.

~*~

Severus straightens the sheet of parchment out on his desk and reads the most recent of many missives from Lupin.

Severus,

Today I remembered my visit to St. Mungo's and the unhappiness I saw on the face of the werewolf in the bed next to Arthur's. That is something I don't ever want to see on yours. Please be careful; or at least promise to try. Keep Harry safe.

Yours,

Remus

Severus smiles secretly at the possessive lines of the quill on the word 'Yours'; the slightly thicker deposit of ink on the capital letter, almost as though Remus was making his point to the parchment and expecting some form of resistance.

"Keep Harry safe." *That, my wolf, is more difficult than it would seem.*

Even though this letter is brief, Severus is torn between feeling conflicted because he feels as though he shouldn't get so much enjoyment out of them, and thrilled the tawny owl that arrives bearing these small instalments of Lupin's life is the highlight of his week. Their 'involvement' must be kept as yet another secret, and as he runs his fingers over the ink bearing Lupin's name, he feels the undeniable warmth of caring and belonging.

~*~

Kingsley declares the Order meeting underway and presents further information on Dark activity, together with a detailed plan of action. Remus' mind is far away, thinking about a dark-haired man in a castle hundreds of miles to the north and worrying. His owl to Severus returned without a reply, and his stomach has been in knots since then, for although he knows that with Albus no longer at Hogwarts, no-one is safe; he had hoped for something even a short sentence or two.

Remus feels the weight of someone's stare and looks up to meet grey eyes the colour of tempestuous clouds. For a moment, Remus feels transparent, as though every thought he has is being broadcast on his face, but Sirius cocks his head to the side questioningly, and Remus is suddenly reminded of Padfoot. Despite his unsettled stomach and nerves, he smiles, and the grey eyes clear.

The meeting is over but Sirius remains as the house gradually falls into silence. Remus hasn't moved he's not certain that he can and it feels as though years have passed when he feels the warmth of Sirius' hands on his shoulders.

"Tell the bastard to be careful and to watch over my godson," he whispers fiercely, squeezing Remus' shoulders firmly for a moment, and then the warmth is gone.

Remus closes his eyes and tries not to let the pain in his heart show.

~*~

Severus tries to ignore the sense of foreboding that covers him as he leaves the Headmaster's office. The sight of Potter and his friends at the mercy of Umbridge and her band of Inquisitors still burns in his mind, and Potter's cryptic message gnaws at him. He glowers as he closes the door to his office and quickly composes a message to Black, gritting his teeth and hating that he must send his Patronus *that* Patronus to the mutt, but needs will out. Judging by the look on Potter's face as he sat, trapped, in Umbridge's office, there isn't much time.

"Black. Confirm your location."

Within moments a shaggy dog Patronus shimmers into view.

"I'm in the kitchen, you arse. Where the hell else would I be, and why do you care?"

Severus swears elaborately, not even bothering to be annoyed by Black's brash and carefree words, as he knows that the foolhardy Potter boy has been tricked by the Dark Lord's plan. The panic in his eyes had told Severus as much. *Damn, that boy will get himself killed.*

Severus sends his Patronus to Lupin explaining what has happened, then hastens to Minerva's office. He can only hope that the Order can prevent things from spiralling out of control. No sooner is he inside the door than Albus' message arrives by Fawkes in a brilliant flash of flame.

We will deal with the Ministry. Stay put, maintain the illusion, and protect the school.

Severus rails against his instinct to do battle but knows that Albus is right.

"You are not a coward to remain behind, Severus." Minerva says, as though reading his thoughts. "Your bravery and loyalty are never in doubt to Albus nor me."

It shouldn't matter, but it does, and Severus allows himself the briefest moment of gratitude before he wraps his robes and his defences around himself and strides from the room.

~*~

Remus receives Severus' Patronus message as he, Sirius and Mad-Eye sit in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. He tries to ignore Sirius' raised eyebrows as the spectral shape enters the room and shivers slightly as Severus' deep voice resonates around him.

"Potter believes that Black is being held by dark forces in the Department of Mysteries. Alert the others quickly, and be careful, damn you."

Remus barely has time to register the sickened feeling inside him before Kingsley and Tonks rush through the door and Albus arrives via Fawkes in an eruption of flames.

"Death Eaters are in the Ministry, and Severus can't find Harry."

Quick looks are exchanged as everyone scrambles up from the table. Sirius shrugs on his cloak as Remus catches his eye.

"Remus, don't. I'm going, and that's final."

"Sirius, don't be absurd."

"Remus, NO!" Sirius shouts vehemently. "I will not stand by here and allow MY godson to be captured by those bastards." His face is flushed, and Remus knows that determined look on his friend's face. He looks around for assistance from everyone.

"Hell, yes, he has to come, Remus," Tonks says emphatically.

"Black has to stay in the house, Nymphadora. You know that." Tonks glowers at Moody, but Remus casts a semi-grateful look at him even as Albus remains silent. All eyes turn towards Kingsley who regards Sirius carefully for a long moment.

"We could use his wand arm. He's a good fighter, or so I've been told."

Sirius' eyes flash with satisfaction at his victory, and Remus' heart wrenches at how much younger his friend looks, hating that it has taken this disaster to bring him back to life.

The battle at the Ministry is intense and doubly fraught with fear as the children also fight against the Death Eaters. Remus spares a fleeting thought to Severus before he engages in battle. He eventually finds Harry and Neville and urges them to get the others and leave, knowing that he and the Order must secure the Death Eaters in order to keep the children safe. For a moment they look mutinous, but just then Albus arrives, and Remus pauses to wipe blood from a cut on his neck when the sounds of a duel draw his attention. He turns in time to see Sirius and Bellatrix engaged in battle, his friend's face handsome as he casually deflects her attacks and counters with his own.

No, Sirius, come on, don't push anything, he silently urges just as Sirius ducks a flash of bright red light. Remus breathes a sigh of relief just as a second jet hits his friend square in the chest.

Remus feels as though everything is happening at half speed as he moves towards Sirius. He is running as his friend stumbles backwards, running to catch him and stop him from falling, but Sirius is too close to the Veil, and Remus knows that he won't reach in time, but he nearly kills himself trying and then Sirius is gone disappearing behind the gossamer fabric without a word, and Remus knows he's gone, knows it, feels it in his very core. Harry sprints towards the arch, and Remus only just manages to grab him tightly around the chest. He can see the love and the terrible fear on Harry's face, and he knows that the boy will follow Sirius, will try to save him and bring him back, but nobody can find him now, and even as Harry struggles and Remus feels the frantic pounding of the fifteen-year-old's heart against his arms, he remembers another fifteen-year-old boy with hazel eyes and messy dark hair, and he *will not* let this Potter go.

Breathing hard, Harry struggles for freedom, and Remus' heart breaks at the memory of Sirius' surprised face as he fell through the veil. Harry screams at him, struggling even harder against his arms. Remus hears himself trying to explain, "There's nothing you can do..." *because there's nothing anyone can do for Sirius now, is there?* No, he cannot think those words because that would make it true, make it real, and he cannot believe that yet *another* friend has been taken from him.

"SIRIUS!"

The anguish in Harry's voice echoes Remus' own heart, and he barely finds the strength within himself to hold on. "He can't come back, Harry." Remus hears his own words, almost as though he has to convince himself too because Sirius was just *there*, and it would be *just like* Sirius to leap out of the Veil again with an irreverent grin and a dramatic flair, but the heavy feeling in Remus' gut tells a very different story.

Remus drags Harry away, and the boy struggles and fights him all the way, his eyes never leaving the arch. Albus is speaking, and Remus tries to listen, although it feels like his body and mind are slowly going numb. In the haze of hexes and curses, he looks around blindly. Death Eaters are contained, Tonks... hurt, Kingsley, Moody, Sirius...

Sirius.

Remus closes his eyes for a moment and tries to find strength from somewhere, but suddenly, in a rush of activity, Kingsley falls from Bella's spell and Harry is gone. Albus turns, and Remus sees the old man's worry in the split second before he dashes after Harry, leaving the rest of them alone in the room. Remus stumbles and nearly falls as he makes his way over to the rest of the Order. He moves among the wounded, helping where he can, and tries to keep a brave face as he attempts to calm everyone. In the distance, he can hear terrible crashes and explosions, but he knows that he cannot leave his post, regardless of the outcome.

"Albus."

The old man's face is tired, his posture stooped, as though he has the world of all Wizardkind on his very shoulders. "It's over, Remus. For now."

"Harry?"

"In my office. Go to Hogwarts with the children, Remus, and ensure that they are safe."

Remus nods, feeling sticky from sweat and the dried blood on his neck. He helps Kingsley and the others to the fireplaces where they Floo to the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

The rest of the day passes interminably for Remus. He wants to contact Severus, although Albus assures him that the dark man already knows the details of the altercation. Somehow, Remus has the feeling that Albus wants them to have as little contact as possible. He paces the infirmary in a semi-daze. Voldemort, an attack on the Ministry, half the Order wounded and... *Sirius*. No. He must not think of Sirius now, but even as he tries to concentrate on what is before him and what is still to be done, his sense of loss is so great and so all consuming that Remus finds it difficult to breathe.

That afternoon, Albus orders everyone to vacate Grimmauld Place, as ownership of the house is now in question. Remus stumbles woodenly through the front door and is assailed by memories, his heart clenching as he turns, fully expecting to see Sirius emerge from the kitchen as he so often did. Tonight an eerie silence has settled over everything, and the quiet house seems to whisper to him of death. Remus shudders repeatedly as he gathers his things and leaves without a backward glance.

Later that night, as Remus lies on his back in the grass of a small park and stares up at the starry sky, he knows that he will not see Sirius, the Dog Star, in the heavens, for that celestial body is hidden from him far below the horizon. Scanning the sky, he finds the constellation of Leo and watches for hours as it proceeds further into the western sky. He feels numb, as though he needs to process all that has happened but is incapable of doing so.

A shimmering Patronus arrives, and Remus closes his eyes against the pain that he feels, even as Severus' voice soaks into him.

"The usual place. I will be waiting."

~*~

Severus turns as the door swings open and, despite knowing what to expect from the recently bereaved, he is shocked at the state of the man before him. He has never seen Lupin look so pale or so lost, and he knows that the man is trying to maintain his strength knows it all too well, but he also suspects that the Gryffindor's courage is standing in the way of his release. Severus crosses to the door swiftly and gathers Lupin in his arms, and he can only hold him tightly and wait because he knows that Lupin will break, and Severus must be there to catch him when he does.

It doesn't take long. Initially, Lupin is tense, and Severus can feel the enormous effort to remain that way, but as Severus presses a kiss to his neck and whispers his name, it is enough to shatter the man's composure, and Lupin slumps against him, seemingly becoming boneless as grief finally overcomes him.

Severus lowers them both to the floor and remains silent, holding the shaking, weeping man against him and wishing that things could be different. Despite his own dark relief at Black's death, he wonders whether his own satisfaction is worth the price of Lupin's pain.

Hours later, in the eerie stillness of darkest night, he takes Lupin, slowly and with great care. Even though the usually-gentle brown eyes are closed, and Severus suspects that Black is the one in Lupin's mind, as he thrusts into the warm body below his and Lupin cries out his completion in a softly tortured whisper, tonight he will not begrudge Lupin his memories.

~*~

Remus tries to open his eyes, but they are puffy and heavy, almost painful. He feels the warmth of Severus behind him, and the flood of memories of the previous night cascades around him. He shivers at the memory of the sensations and Severus' gentle hands, and everywhere he had touched was like pure fucking magic, and wasn't that just the shit of it that it would take a Death Eater to make him feel alive again. His stomach churns uncomfortably as the sinking feelings of loss and regret settle onto him once more, but somehow their burden is a little easier to bear.

Severus stirs behind him, and he remembers how gentle and loving the man had been last night and wonders how he knew just what Remus needed.

They eat breakfast together with gentle touches and low voices, and they don't mention Sirius until Severus has to go. He embraces Remus fully, pressing their bodies together. Remus nuzzles his neck, seeking the last moments of comfort.

"He knew the dangers, Lupin, and as foolhardy as he was, he only wanted to protect the boy."

~*~

Severus holds Lupin close against him and wonders whether the man is ready to hear those words, and for a moment the silence hangs in the air around them. Finally, although he says nothing, Lupin nods into Severus' shoulder before catching his mouth in a fierce, hard kiss, almost as though he needs to regain a modicum of control. Severus would expect nothing less from the wolf.

~*~

The days after Sirius' death go by in a blur for Remus; a blur of people and meetings and commiserations, and even Tonks' gentle words and all her friendly love and affection can't prevent the memories of Sirius from beating against Remus' heart. As the days pass without word from Severus, he feels even more alone.

All too soon, the school term ends, and Remus accompanies Harry to King's Cross where he meets the Dursleys. He feels saddened that Harry is still so quiet he obviously misses Sirius, and Remus thinks again of James and Lily at another train station, all those years ago.

~*~

Later that summer, the Order meets to plan for Lupin's insertion into a wolf pack. Severus is adamant that he not go, but Dumbledore and the idiot werewolf agree that it's for the best. Severus darkly wonders just how many lives Albus is willing to sacrifice to get his way.

Severus paces in agitation as he awaits Lupin in the small cottage deep in the mountains. This is to be their last weekend together on the cusp of Lupin's departure, and the man is already twenty minutes later than expected. Severus is not prone to worry, but the tight-wire upon which they have all walked these past few months in preparation for the war has him on edge. Although he knows that Lupin is very capable, the man is a Gryffindor and therefore prone to acts of great stupidity and bravery. Severus is uncomfortable with the weighty feeling in his chest, even though he understands that their paths cannot be swayed or changed. He stiffens as he senses the displacement of air brought about by Apparation and is flooded with adrenaline and an intense feeling of relief as he feels the magic of the wards allow Lupin entrance. Without bothering to identify exactly where the emotion comes from, he presses his full length against Lupin's body, almost crushing him against the sturdy wooden walls as he kisses him passionately. In a movement almost too fast to see, Lupin reverses their position, and Severus tips his head back, baring his neck as Lupin licks and bites, moaning as warm hands make quick work of his myriad buttons.

"Gods, Lupin..."

"Severus... need you."

"Take, Lupin... fuck! Take!"

Hours later, as they lie with limbs entangled among twisted sheets, Severus listens to the rhythmic sound of Lupin's breathing.

"Lupin."

"Mmm?"

"I know that I am acerbic, abrasive, ill-tempered and an all-around bastard."

Severus can feel Lupin's gentle smile against his skin. "This is hardly romantic chatter, Severus, but yes, I'm fully aware of that."

Romantic chatter? We're on the brink of another bloody war and he wants romance? Severus huffs half-indignantly, but his momentary irritation is quashed as Lupin rolls over and lies across Severus' chest, his eyes liquid-brown in the light of the sole lantern.

"However," he says, and Severus waits. "In spite of it all, you never fail to be who you are with me."

Severus feels Lupin's words settle over him like a cloak, warming him even against his wishes. "Will you still believe that if I do something that, to all appearances, is truly abhorrent, something that makes me appear guilty in the eyes of everyone? Will you believe that it is all for a reason?"

Lupin pauses for a moment and rolls onto his back beside Severus, and Severus is pleased that he takes his time before answering. An immediate "Yes" or other placating remark would speak more of carelessness or an answer given without due consideration to its implications, and although he refuses to plead or acknowledge his own fears, he needs Lupin to be certain about the truth of their relationship.

~*~

Remus sees something in those eyes, or perhaps a fleeting expression on an otherwise impenetrable façade. The words Severus uses, "will" instead of "would", tells him that the awful deed must be done, and the chill of fear in his gut lasts only a brief second longer before the warmth of his love for this man, this tired soldier, washes through him. He cups the back of Severus' head as he gently draws him close for a kiss, putting everything he feels and all of his power into sending out a message of love and compassion.

Their kiss is slow and deep, almost languid, as though they both have all the time in the world, and in this moment, perhaps they do. Severus rolls over onto Remus' chest, never breaking their kiss, and Remus feels the heat of Severus' erection against his own. Shivers of delight and arousal flood him, and he moans into Severus' mouth as he spreads his legs and cradles Severus' hips, rocking up to meet every thrust.

Severus is licking and biting every inch of Remus' lips, and his hands tangle in Remus' hair as he presses down harder, sliding on the sweat from their bodies. Remus enjoys the delicious friction of their bodies and wraps his legs around Severus' waist, locking his ankles behind Severus' back and using them as leverage to get him, *closer, harder, more, more friction, so good*, and Severus' movements are jerky now as his breathing speeds up. Remus can almost hear him gritting his teeth as his jaw clenches in concentration, and the feeling of anticipation builds, builds inside him, and his entire body quivers, riding the knife-edge between ecstasy and pain, and then Severus cries out, thrusting harder, faster, and he's coming with a deep-throated groan. Remus feels the flood of heat and wetness between them, and the sensation of Severus' cock pulsing between their trapped bodies is all Remus needs as he falls from the knife-edge, falls, falls, falls, as wave after wave of pleasure wrack his body, and he empties himself, coming for what seems like forever as Severus gradually slows his movements until only their laboured breathing and pounding heartbeats can be heard.

Remus licks his dry lips for a moment before Severus plunders his mouth again, possessively and forcefully, as though they are still at the beginning, and Remus whimpers softly at the sheer exquisite torture of it all.

In the thin light of early dawn, they part, and the scent of Severus still invades Remus' senses as he is enveloped by Severus' embrace, and he clears his throat at the sudden surge of emotion.

"I will believe you always. I know your heart, Severus, and it does not lie to mine."

For a moment, the only sound is their breathing in the quiet of the room, and Remus hears the sound of Severus' jaw and throat working as the man swallows.

"My resolution," Severus says hoarsely. "I meant it, Lupin. All of it."

"I know," he whispers.

Severus grips him tightly for a moment, and Remus wants to press for details but realizes that it makes no difference. Instead, he watches as the tall man in dark robes turns and walks through the door and disappears with only one backward glance.

Remus reaches into his pocket and slowly removes the small scroll of parchment taken from the Resolution branch at Grimmauld Place. He unfurls it gently, and there, written in Severus' cramped but precise handwriting, is a single sentence.

"I will try my utmost never to hurt the one I love."

"I know," Remus whispers into the silence.

"The entire sum of existence is the magic of being needed by just one other person."

-Vi Putnam

~~~ *finis* ~~~

A/N: Albus quotes Lawana Blackwell, *The Dowry of Miss Lydia Clark*, 1999 (even though this story takes place before that book was written).