

Shadow Dwellers

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Rating: PG

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Warnings: This story is set post OOTP therefore there are spoilers.

Summary: Harry has nightmares, he's had nightmares for a long time, but they used to be about Voldemort. Now they are about never ending darkness.

Author's Notes: Well blow me, if this isn't my first gen HP fic. The bunny bit and demanded to be written without a pairing in sight. Thanks go to Soph for the beta.

Chapter 1 Nightmares

Harry sat up clutching at his throat, trying desperately to breathe. He felt as if he was suffocating, that his air ways were completely blocked, and it took him long moments to convince his starved lungs to drag in air. When he finally managed it he sounded like an old man breathing his last as he gasped down the humid air of his dingy bedroom. Breathing hard he reached for his glasses, hoping that with clarity he could convince his body that it had only been a dream.

This was not the first time he had dreamt of the stifling darkness that surrounded him and filled him and tried to drag the life from him, but each time it was as if he sank further in and it was more difficult for him to wake up. It was becoming so he was scared to close his eyes; this time he had not slept for two days until eventually it had been too much and he had had to lie down. He knew he should write to Dumbledore asking for help, but he was still hurting from the feelings of betrayal and he could not bring himself to do it, so he suffered alone.

They were only nightmares after all, he had had worse with Voldemort in his mind, but these were not coming from Tom Riddle. Harry knew what he was dreaming about; he understood all too well the horrors his mind was conjuring up: he was having night terrors about The Veil. Terror filled him at the idea that he had condemned his godfather to an eternity of inky blackness.

Pushing the covers back he swung his legs off his lumpy mattress and stood up. His chest still hurt from where he had literally stopped breathing as his subconscious took over, but it was passing. Sleep would not return tonight, and he dragged himself towards the bathroom.

For once the Dursley household had adapted to him, rather than the other way around. At the beginning of the holidays his nightmares about the Department of Mysteries had caused him to wake screaming, and no matter how Uncle Vernon yelled, Harry could not stop them, so the Dursleys had taken to sleeping with ear plugs. This meant that Harry could move around without waking them, and he dragged his tired body into the bathroom to take a shower.

Glancing in the mirror he wondered absently if he had died and just not realised it, after all he was a wizard and Binns had not noticed. His skin was so pale it was almost grey and there were large, dark circles around his red-rimmed eyes.

Somehow he had managed to grow some over the holidays. How he didn't know since his appetite was virtually non-existent, but it seemed that whatever Aunt Petunia had been forcing down his throat had kept him alive and healthy enough to gain height. His Aunt had taken the warnings from the Order seriously and she made sure he was fed if nothing else.

It was only as Harry stared at his blank reflection that it slowly dawned on him; it was the 31st, he was sixteen and he looked as if the life had drained out of him. Unable to summon up the energy to even be pleased that it was his birthday he slowly began to remove his clothes and then climbed into the shower; the water did little to help drag him further from his dream and the darkness lurked just behind his eyes, waiting to swallow him whole.

Usually, the longer he was awake the further away he could push the nightmare, but tonight it faded only a little and as he let the shower run over him it kept trying to come back. It was almost as if the dream was trying to take over his conscious mind and he had little with which to fight it. He turned the water to cold, willing the night terrors to leave him, but he found himself leaning against the shower wall, with starving lungs, not knowing how he came to be there.

It was then that adrenaline gave him the strength to move as he realised this was no simple nightmare, but even as he opened the shower door, he felt the darkness reaching for him again. Even as the water splashed off his back and through the opening onto Aunt Petunia's immaculate floor he began to fall. There was nothing he could do as his dream smothered his conscious mind and he collapsed to the ground.

Harry never felt himself hit bottom as sensations of the real world ceased, to be replaced by the stifling blackness that poured down his throat when he tried to scream, taking the air away from his lungs. He was dying as the airless mass of darkness squeezed him and stole everything from him, including precious oxygen. It surrounded him, filled him, took away all sight and sound, and leached the life from his body. This was the end, and in a moment of complete clarity Harry knew he could not escape. He would cease here: the blackness would consume him. Still he fought, but he knew it was hopeless; he would die, just like Sirius. His mind screamed its rebellion, but he could not free himself from the nightmare.

Even the sensations of suffocating began to fade as his senses started to shut down, and Harry realised there would be no waking from this dream. He felt as if he was suspended in a giant, airless mass of oil and life was about to escape him. Then something touched him, something alive and real and it sent electric shocks through his whole body.

[I have him,] a voice said, more in his mind than in his ears and suddenly air was rushing back into his lungs.

The suffocating blackness retreated and then the darkness became the blissful blankness of true unconsciousness rather than the horror of before.

"Wake up, Harry," a voice coaxed him and he reluctantly followed it.

He moaned and tried to move as consciousness brought with it an ache so pronounced that it was almost a stabbing pain. It was as if his whole body had been subjected to a blasting hex and he wished for the emptiness of oblivion again. Hands touched him and increased the ache where they met his body and he shied away, which hurt even more.

"Take it easy, Harry," the voice said this time and it was a startlingly familiar voice that his mind refused to believe, "you should lay still."

Even in his incredulity Harry's eyes flew open to see for himself what could not possibly be true, and his heart missed a beat. He sat up despite the pain and found himself pushing away from the figure before him. Yes this thing wore Sirius' face, yes it had his voice, but where his godfather's eyes should have been there was blackness, broken by ever moving tongues of iridescent fire. This had to be more of the nightmare and Harry squeezed his eyes tight shut again and willed himself to wake up.

"Harry," the mockery of Sirius said gently, but he refused to look at it. "Harry, I know this is strange and you're afraid, but it really is me."

Nothing in heaven or earth was going to make Harry open his eyes again; if he could not see it then just maybe it was all in his mind.

"I need your help."

Except that. Almost at the point of panic those words dragged Harry back from the edge and very slowly he opened his eyes just a little bit. The only thing he could see was Sirius. Wherever they were it was completely black and the only things that seemed to exist were himself and his godfather.

Sirius was wearing the same clothes he had been when he fell through The Veil, but he looked different somehow, other than the obvious. His skin was very pale and his hair inky black, and he almost seemed to glow in the darkness. The lines of suffering from his years in Azkaban seemed to have lessened, although they were still there, and his face seemed to be clearer than Harry had ever seen it, except in pictures of the Marauders.

"I know I look different," this copy of Sirius said gently, crouching down to Harry's level, "but it is the only way I can survive here."

It suddenly occurred to Harry that if his godfather had been changed by here then maybe so had he and his hands went to his face. He was not wearing his glasses and yet he could see.

"You're still the same, Harry," his companion said reassuringly, "you're not fully here. Most of your body is still out there in our world, but I went through the Veil."

"They told me you were dead," Harry replied, not quite willing to believe this version of his godfather yet, but feeling the hope begin to grow.

[And he would have been had his lust for life not been so strong and called us out of the darkness,] a voice said in his mind, and the fear came back to consume him again.

"I said I would explain," Sirius sounded annoyed and Harry knew he was not being spoken to, "you're frightening him."

[It is far easier to demonstrate,] the voice replied, [we have limited time.]

"What's that?" Harry demanded before his fear could consume him.

He stared around into the darkness, but he could see nothing.

"It's a who, not a what," Sirius said gently and slowly lowered himself into a sitting position.

[I am Facis,] the voice said in a much more conversational tone. [Your race once knew my people as the shadow dwellers, but it has been many generations since our races have interacted.]

Harry still could not see anyone but Sirius.

"Where are you?" he asked, his curiosity overcoming the fear of the strange method of communication.

"In me," Sirius said simply, "Facis is why you cannot see my eyes. It joined with me to keep me alive or the substance of this place would have consumed me."

"The darkness," Harry said, his mouth going dry and his voice almost failing.

His godfather appeared suddenly very remorseful.

"I'm so sorry you had to experience that, Harry," Sirius apologised earnestly, "but you were the only one we could reach. I would never have asked it of you if there was any other way."

There was such pain in his godfather's voice that Harry found himself reaching out and he placed a hand on Sirius' arm.

"I know," he said simply, and for the first time he was sure that he really was speaking to the real Padfoot.

[You were even louder than Sirius,] a voice said in his mind and it sounded almost exactly like Facis, but not quite. [I am honoured to meet a soul which burns do brightly.]

Harry did not really know how to react to that.

"Umm, thank you," he said eventually. "Who are you?"

[My name is Ignulus,] the second voice replied politely, [I am at one with your soul energy, to prevent you from harm. I must apologise for the discomfort, but it is unwise to exist in two places at the same time and your physical body is suffering for it, which is mirrored here.]

The whole idea made Harry uncomfortable, but he did not object as the memory of the touch which had caused the darkness to retreat came back to him. Now he recognised Ignulus' voice.

"Why are you helping us?" his life to this point had made Harry suspicious and he had to ask.

[Combining with physical beings gives us great pleasure,] Ignulus said openly, [it is more than enough reward for assisting you to survive in our place.]

[However,] Facis' more stern tone interrupted, [your kind cannot remain here and in your world for long, and those who exist here physically will become as we are in time. Hence our wish to return Sirius to your world.]

"How?" Harry did not even hesitate.

Those were the words he had been longing to hear and his heart swelled as he realised that his godfather could be restored. He was so filled with joy that he almost burst into tears, not that he was sure that was possible here.

[The Veil is a one way door,] Ignulus explained calmly, [for spirit energy it leads to the other side, for physical energy it leads here. It was someone's mistake. To return a body which has gone beyond the Veil another door must be opened from your world, one which leads from here to there. This may only be done by one of us. We may create doorways from there to here from this side, but we must be there to create those from here to there.]

Harry was confused; he did not understand why he was here.

"What do I have to do?" he asked, not sure what his role was to be.

"You have to take Ignulus back with you," Sirius said quietly, "and allow it to use your body while it creates the doorway."

Harry looked into the fiery gaze of his godfather and felt a little trepidation. It was not that he would not do it, he knew he would undertake any task to undo the tragedy he had instigated, but the idea caused the smallest stirring of fear.

"Like you and Facis?" he asked, not trying to hide what he was feeling.

[Almost,] Ignulus said gently, [but it would seem to you as if you were outside your body. It would be unsettling, but only one soul may reside in one physical shell in your world, without the most dire consequences.]

The ideas and foreboding that this revelation caused flowed round and round Harry's thoughts for a while, but slowly he nodded.

"What should I do?" he said firmly.

"You don't have to do this, Harry," Sirius said firmly as soon as he saw his fear. "What happened was not your fault and you don't owe me anything."

A laugh threatened to escape his throat then, but he realised his godfather was serious and he swallowed it.

"Yes I do," he said, and his decision made, the fear dissolved.

[Concentrate on waking up, Harry,] Ignulus said calmly, [and when you feel your body around you, do not resist when I push you out again.]

Harry nodded again and then on impulse threw his arms around Sirius.

"I love you," he said urgently, "and I will see you soon."

His godfather did not seem to know how to reply, but there was no time to talk. As Harry thought of waking this time he felt a sort of tug, almost like a portkey, and suddenly Sirius was no longer there. He felt his whole body convulse and pain shoot through all his nerves as he literally slammed back into his physical shell, but that was not the worst. Just as he realigned with his body he felt an agonising push and his instincts screamed at him to resist. It took all his will

power to let it happen as for a second time he was separated from his body, and suddenly he was floating, looking down at himself.

The first thing he realised was that this was not the Dursleys and with a quick glance around he realised that he was in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. It had felt like he had been asleep only a few minutes, but it must have been a lot longer since he could see his body lying in a bed in Madame Pomfrey's regulation issue pyjamas.

Professor Dumbledore was standing at the end of the bed with Remus and Madame Pomfrey; all three appeared very grave.

"There has been no change, Albus," Poppy said quietly and cast a sad glance at Harry's body. "It is as if he is barely there."

"I should have taken him from that house sooner," Remus berated himself, and Harry wanted so much to reach out and tell his friend that it was all right.

"It is not your fault, Remus," Dumbledore said evenly, for once the twinkle gone from his eyes, "I knew Harry was depressed and I should have seen something like this coming. However, all we can do now is attempt to bring him back to us by any methods available to us. Ron and Hermione will be arriving this afternoon; hopefully their presence will assist in encouraging Harry to wake."

Harry's attention was drawn back to his body as his eyes flew open. For a moment he almost panicked as black pools filled with iridescent flame stared at him.

[Do not worry, Harry,] Ignulus' calm voice drew his reaction back to manageable levels, [it will not be long.]

All sound in the room ceased as Harry watched his body sit up. He did not think he looked like Sirius had looked beyond the Veil, in fact his body seemed to be moving more like an automaton than a human being, as if Ignulus had trouble controlling it here. Staring straight ahead for a while, his body simply sat there and blinked.

"Harry?" Dumbledore was the first to speak.

[The finer points of control take time,] Ignulus explained in his mind, [I do not believe I am able to speak. This may be somewhat traumatic for your friends, but it cannot be helped.]

[They may try to stop you,] Harry pointed out, finding the whole method of communicating by thought very strange in this state.

A mental laugh was what came back.

[They may,] Ignulus said lightly, [and I promise I will not damage them in return.]

Fascinated, Harry watched his body push back the bed clothes and climb to the floor before turning to look around the room. Ignulus was obviously looking for something, but Harry had no idea what it was. It must have found it because Harry's body took an unsteady step forward, followed by another, which was much smoother.

"Harry?" it was Remus who tried this time, and Harry could see wands being drawn from their hiding places.

Ignulus seemed to be ignoring the fact that he was not alone as he walked slowly, but steadily towards the other side of the room, and what to Harry appeared to be a stretch of empty stone wall.

"We must get him back to bed," Madame Pomfrey said decisively and began to move to prevent Harry's body from reaching its destination.

Now Ignulus took notice and turned to look directly at the school nurse. They must not have been able to see his eyes properly when he first sat up, or at least that is what Harry concluded as he watched Madame Pomfrey raise her wand, to be quickly followed by both Remus and Dumbledore.

"Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey said firmly, "back to bed."

No one made a move to actually do anything and Ignulus turned back the way it had been facing, Harry could only assume that he had deemed the others to not be a threat. It was as Harry's body began to walk again that Dumbledore finally seemed to come to a decision and raised his wand. The full body bind fell off the headmaster's tongue with ease, but Ignulus did not stop and the spell never reached Harry's form. Ignulus raised one of Harry's hands and a wall of iridescent fire sparked into existence for a single moment, in time to absorb the oncoming enchantment.

"That is not Harry," Remus said with just a touch of fear in his voice.

It pained Harry to see his friends so worried and anxious, but there was nothing he could do and right now Sirius was more important. He concentrated back on his body, waiting to see what Ignulus would do next.

"That is not yet clear," Dumbledore said evenly. "Something has clearly occurred to change our perception of Harry, however, without drastic measures it appears we have little choice but to see where current circumstances lead us."

Ignulus was almost at its destination.

"Harry," the headmaster said firmly, "I cannot allow you to simply continue. Unless you wish to face me directly you must communicate."

[I do not wish there to be conflict,] Ignulus told Harry as he stopped the body walking. [It would have been easier had you been alone.]

[I never get to do anything the easy way,] Harry replied in a resigned tone and watched as his body once more turned towards the other three people in the room.

Speech was obviously still beyond Ignulus since it just maintained Harry's body just standing there, staring.

"Are you Harry Potter?" Dumbledore asked directly.

After a moment Harry saw his head shake slowly from side to side.

"Where is Harry?" the headmaster asked his second question quickly.

Ignulus raised an arm again and before Harry had a chance to react he found himself surrounded in the iridescent fire. For a split second he was looking directly into Dumbledore's eyes and he knew he could be seen, all he had time to do was nod.

"You are inhabiting Harry's body?" was the next question.

The headmaster did not sound anxious, but then Harry had rarely seen Dumbledore anything but in control. Ignulus nodded.

[Time is limited,] it told Harry, [I must continue with my task.]

[Just don't make any sudden moves,] was the only advice he could think of to give.

There was no way to make Dumbledore understand completely or he knew Ignulus would already have done it. As it was he watched as his body turned back to the wall. For a moment the headmaster appeared undecided and Harry prayed he had been able to communicate in that moment that this was what he wanted. When Dumbledore slowly lowered his wand Harry gave a sigh of relief, or at least he tried and then realised that he had no body to be doing that and here he did not even have the illusion of a body either.

Ignulus brought up both of Harry's hands, placing the palms together above his head. For a moment there was complete stillness and then, under Harry's amazed eyes he saw his palms part, both now covered in a much thicker blanket of the fire which had so recently surrounded him. Putting both hands flat on the wall Ignulus then began to move then down and apart in a rough arch shape, leaving a trail of fire on the stone work as it went.

To Harry it seemed to take forever, and he could feel the power moving through his body in intense waves even though he was disconnected from it. It was quite incredible to watch and the whole procedure seemed to have the three adults spellbound as well.

The moment Harry's hands met once more along the bottom of the arch shape the stonework inside vanished into complete blackness. Panic threatened in him as he saw it, the memory of the suffocating darkness reaching up to claim him trying to take away his control.

[It cannot hurt you, my friend,] Ignulus said gently in his mind, [it will never touch you again.]

"What is it?" Remus still sounded worried, but also in awe of what he was seeing.

"A gateway," Dumbledore said without hesitation and Harry turned to look at the headmaster.

He saw something in Dumbledore's face then that he had seen in the headmaster's office after the fiasco at the department of mysteries: regret and hope. Without a doubt Harry knew that Dumbledore recognised what he was seeing.

There might have been more conversation, but at that moment a shadowy figure appeared in the darkness. No details were visible, just a vague shape, but Harry could see Sirius' stance in the pale reflection, and every second the tones became clearer. It took long moments for the figure to become properly recognisable as a

human being, and by then there were enough clues to show anyone who had known Sirius the truth. Harry heard Remus choke back a gasp as a pale hand appeared from the flat surface and then he was too involved to really be aware of what anyone else was doing.

His body reached out and took the hand, creating a circuit between this world and that beyond The Veil and power flooded through his system and his soul. He found himself only millimetres from his body with a desperate need to regain control.

[A moment longer,] Ignulus requested calmly, but holding himself back was almost more than Harry could bear.

As his body stepped back and pulled on the hand, staying separate from his physical shell was agonising. He watched in fascination as Sirius emerged from the gateway, but what was almost stranger was the shadowy form his godfather left behind: iridescent fire in a perfect copy of the man himself. Facis, it seemed, now resembled Sirius in every way.

As his godfather stumbled and fell into his arms Harry couldn't take it any longer and he obeyed the need to return to his body. It was like being slammed up against a wall as he was dragged back to where he belonged as if on elastic and he had absolutely no control of his movements as his mind tried to realign with his physical shell. For a fraction of a second he was suspended in place as the fire that was Ignulus surrounded him, and then he was falling to the floor with Sirius in equally dire straights.

Looking up he saw Ignulus come together into an amorphous blob of energy which slowly formed into a very indistinct human head and torso. With a start Harry realised that it was vaguely his shape, but Ignulus did not seem to have been with him long enough to have taken up his form as Facis had with Sirius.

[Know that it has been an honour and a joy to share your being,] Ignulus said in his mind as Harry struggled to keep his mind and body from shutting down. [If you need me, Harry Potter, I will be listening.]

And then a flame from the human form reached out and caressed him down the side of his face and his neck, before Ignulus moved almost faster than his eye could follow, straight at the gateway. Almost the moment the last flame of the incredible being vanished into the darkness the flame and hole in the wall simply ceased to be, and if Harry had not been holding a barely conscious Sirius in his arms he might have thought it was all a dream.

He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, but his abused body was having none of it and he could do nothing but gracelessly pass out as his vision went silver and the room lurched worryingly.

End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2 Chapter 2 - Dreams

"'ne m're min'te, 'unt Petunia," Harry mumbled and turned over, dragging the nice warm blanket with him as someone tried to wake him.

"Did he just call me, Aunt Petunia?" a rather scandalised voice made it much more clearly into his brain the second time.

He would recognise those tones anywhere and as he realised that Ron was talking to him it all came back and he shot upright in bed and almost fell out the side. If his best friend had not been there to catch him it could have been most embarrassing.

"Watch it, Harry," Ron said cheerfully, "or Madame Pomfrey will have to fix your cracked skull."

He was rather dazed, but it didn't stop Harry staring around the hospital wing looking for evidence that he had not been having a bizarre dream. There were now screens round one of the other beds.

"Where is he?" he asked rather inarticulately, desperate for confirmation.

"Sleeping," Ron said as if he understood exactly what Harry was feeling.

"Madame Pomfrey says he might be asleep for a day or so," it was only as she spoke that Harry realised Hermione was even there. "She told us to tell you that he will be fine, but he's exhausted so he won't wake up for a while."

For a few moments Harry just sat there, clinging to Ron so he didn't fall out of bed as he processed this information. He had experienced it all, he had been part of what brought Sirius back, and yet it seemed so strange and dreamlike that it took forever for his mind to accept it. When it did he gave a rather hysterical giggle and then promptly burst into tears. Ron's grip on him stiffened.

"Um, Harry?" his best friend sounded rather confused and at a loss to know what to do.

"Ron," Hermione said quickly, "don't just stand there."

There was still no change in Ron's stance and Hermione gave an exasperated huff.

"Men," she said exasperatedly. "Oh, just get out of the way," and Harry found himself being passed from one friend to the other as Ron moved and Hermione took his place.

He then became the subject of a warm hug as he let out the strain of the past few weeks in a stream of tears. Hermione rocked him and patted his back in a very motherly fashion that he had only ever felt from Molly Weasley before, and he let go as his control cracked completely.

"It's okay, Harry," his friend said gently as she held him.

At some point a warm hand was placed on his shoulder and he didn't need to look up to know that Ron had moved around the other side of the bed and was offering support in his own, awkward way. It didn't help him stop crying, but it did comfort him and help him to at least start to bring himself under control.

When he began to hiccup (thanks to the sobbing) he began to think about what was actually going on and he could not help feeling a bit of a prat. His friends had come to wake him up and see if he was okay and he had promptly turned into an hysterical wreck. Harry was more than a little mortified.

He drew back from Hermione with his face colouring from more than the crying and hoped that his friend's shoulder was not too soggy. For a moment he considered wiping his face on his pyjama sleeve, but then a brightly coloured hankie was offered to him. Accepting it he looked up to find that Madame Pomfrey and Dumbledore had joined Ron and Hermione at some point, and his mortification grew. Taking the opportunity to hide, he buried his face in the handkerchief and tried desperately to stop hiccupping.

"Take it slowly, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey's professional tones informed him calmly, "you've had quite a shock."

The hysterical giggle threatened again, but he refused to lose it again and swallowed the reaction as best he could. Looking up he hoped he did not look as much of a mess as he felt and inwardly cursed as he hiccupped again. Madame Pomfrey passed him a glass of water.

"Little sips," she instructed, without the slightest hint that she was unimpressed with his behaviour.

Aunt Petunia had always turned her back on him when he cried, and Uncle Vernon used to yell, so he wasn't quite sure what to make of the whole situation. No one seemed upset with him, but he was sure that blubbing all over the place could not have pleased anyone.

"Feeling better, Harry?" Dumbledore asked in a very fatherly tone.

Sipping his water, Harry gave a small nod. He still felt a little wobbly, both physically and mentally, but he was pretty sure he could manage.

"If you don't mind, Mr Potter," Madame Pomfrey said, taking over from the headmaster and giving him a small smile, "now that you are awake I would like to give you a check up to make sure you are not suffering any lingering effects from your experience."

Harry wasn't sure how much scrutiny he could put up with at the moment since he was self-conscious and hideously embarrassed, but he nodded again anyway. With her usual efficiency the school nurse went to work and Harry tried to sit there patiently. A couple of diagnostic spells and a little prodding later Madame Pomfrey gave him a much more confident smile.

"You will need rest for a day or so," the healer said, and she sounded as if she felt this to be a personal triumph, "and you could do with several good meals, but other than that, you are in perfect health, Mr Potter."

"Thank you," Harry said quietly, still not sure how to react at the moment.

The healer turned in place and fixed each one of his visitors with a stern gaze.

"Do not over tire him," she said firmly, and then walked away.

Dumbledore gave him a warm smile as Harry looked at his companions through his fringe. He wondered briefly if they would go away if he hid under his covers

and refused to come out. The burning in his cheeks would just not leave him as he kept remembering what an idiot he had just made of himself.

"Well, My Boy," Dumbledore said with the usual grandfatherly persona in place, "you gave us quite a scare, but in this case I believe we all agree that the means to the end was worth every moment of worry. Would you care to tell us what happened?"

Guilt at what his surrogate family must have been going through threatened to add to the turmoil of emotion already going through him and he had to bite back on the urge to start crying again. It was a bit like being on an out of control broom and he fixed his eyes on his hands in a desperate bid to bring himself under control.

"If you would rather wait until you have had some time to recover," Dumbledore said kindly and placed a gentle hand on Harry's arm, "that will be perfectly acceptable, My Boy."

Shaking his head, Harry let his eyes flick up for a moment before taking a deep breath and demanding of himself that he take a hold of his mind and deal with this like an adult. Hermione perched herself on the edge of the bed and took his hand, patting it in a most motherly fashion. When he glanced at her she smiled in a very supportive manner.

"Sorry," he said quietly as he gathered his thoughts.

"What for, Mate?" Ron asked with a genuinely confused tone.

"For blubbing all over you," Harry said in a very tiny voice.

"Don't be silly," Hermione said seriously. "Harry, you brought Sirius back from the beyond The Veil; he was dead, a little emotion is to be expected."

"Hermione is correct, Harry," Dumbledore said in his most patient and wise tone, "please do not worry about such matters."

Harry really wasn't sure if he believed them, but it was nice of them to try and be nice about it. Taking another sip of water he gave Hermione a small smile and used her presence to bolster his courage.

"Sirius wasn't dead," he began eventually. "The Veil is a gateway." Trying to order his thoughts into some logical order was not as easy as he had hoped and he dragged up the facts slowly. "It goes to the other side for spirit energy, at least that's what I was told, but for living people it takes them somewhere else, somewhere dark."

He shivered at the memory of the darkness, it had been one of the most frightening experiences of his entire life and he had quite a few to choose from.

"The darkness is suffocating," he said in little more than a whisper as he remembered the tendrils of blackness, "it tries to smother the life out of you."

Staring at his hands he barely saw the real world as his mind filled with the blackness which had been haunting him for weeks.

"You have been to this place, Harry?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Looking up, Harry nodded, using the view of the headmaster's face to banish the terrifying thoughts from his head.

"But not physically," he tried to explain, but it seemed so dreamlike now and sounded strange when he said it out loud. "Sirius was calling me."

The whole idea was pretty far out even for a wizard, but Harry knew he had to explain somehow.

"I didn't know what was happening to begin with," he did his best not to sound completely insane; "I just kept having these nightmares of nothing but darkness. He said I was the only one he could reach. I don't really know how I got there, but I was pulled in and the darkness attacked me, but Ignulus found me and made it retreat."

"Ignulus?" Dumbledore prompted gently.

Ideas were tumbling about in his head and Harry realised they were popping out of his mouth with little to give them any sense to his companions. He took another calming breath and set about organising what he knew with something resembling sense.

"Ignulus is the," Harry wasn't quite sure how to describe his temporary passenger, "being," he decided on eventually, "who opened the gateway from this side to bring Sirius back. It called itself a Shadow Dweller. They exist there, beyond The Veil. Ignulus said they used to talk to Wizards, but it was a long time ago for us. The Veil was a mistake made by a wizard some time in history, I don't think it is really supposed to exist. Facis, another Shadow Dweller, was inside Sirius, keeping him alive there."

"And you allowed this Ignulus," the headmaster asked as Harry paused again to gather his thoughts, "to possess your body to create the gateway."

Harry nodded.

"They can create gateways from here to there while on the other side, but to create one from there to here they have to be here," he tried to explain, but he knew so little himself that it sounded stupid and inept. "They enjoy contact with humans; I don't really understand why, but they said that if Sirius stayed there he would become one of them and they wanted to save him. I just did what they asked me to."

Dumbledore appeared very serious when Harry gathered the courage to look up at the older wizard.

"And you realise how dangerous that could have been to your person, do you not?" the headmaster asked, the twinkle gone from his blue eyes once more.

It had never really occurred to Harry that he had any choice in the matter, let alone that what he had let Ignulus do was dangerous.

"I had to get him back," was all he could think to say.

Dumbledore's expression softened.

"I am aware of what you had to do, My Dear Child," the headmaster said warmly, "but trading your life for Sirius' would have been a most regrettable transaction. You are precious to us, Harry, please try to remember that."

The angry, bitter teenager Harry had found himself to be over the past year wanted to shout that it was only because of the prophesy, but as he looked into Dumbledore's eyes he saw a warmth there that belied that statement. He found himself wanting to cry again as his shaky grasp on his emotions slipped at the realisation of what he had put the headmaster and his friends through. Looking down he tried to blink away the tears, but this time they would not go and he felt his mask begin to crack.

The bed moved as Hermione stood up and he felt his hand released, but before he could react strong arms wound around him. The smell of old books and lemon drops filled his nose as he was pulled into a warm embrace and he could do nothing but let himself relax into it. He needed the support and the comfort and he could not hold to his Gryffindor bravery anymore. The betrayal and anger he had been feeling all summer began to crumble as he cried silently.

"Oh, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly, "what have we done to you?"

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Harry had fallen asleep in the headmaster's arms, and over the next two days he did a lot more sleeping as well. In between he chatted and played games with Ron and Hermione. At first his female friend had tried to talk to him about his first awakening, but Ron seemed to realise how uncomfortable it made him and had taken Hermione aside for a quiet word; ever since it had been studiously ignored as a possible subject of conversation.

Remus visited a couple of times, but they seemed to understand each other without many words, and the werewolf spent most of his time at Sirius' side. Harry would have liked to have been with his friend but Madame Pomfrey refused to let him out of bed. The first time he had tried to visit the loo the healer had marched him straight back to his blankets and offered an alternative. The second time he had tried to sneak by her and had been given a stern talking to about energy levels and cracking heads open on porcelain. However, there was nothing that would have kept him in bed when he heard a moan coming from Sirius' bed.

Sliding out from under the covers he did not even stop to pull on the dressing gown lying on the chair next to his bed. The stone floor was freezing on his feet, but Madame Pomfrey had confiscated his slippers to prevent him walking anywhere and he was not about to wait around for her to give them back. Running silently on bare feet he crossed to the screened bed and put his head round one of the partitions.

Remus was sitting next to Sirius watching his friend intently, but the werewolf looked up as soon as Harry intruded on their little space.

"He's waking up," Remus said quietly, and beckoned Harry to his side.

Harry did not hesitate and moved between the screens quickly, until he was standing right next to Remus. No more words passed between them as Sirius groaned again and drew both of them to focus back on his recumbent form. As he watched, Harry felt all fluttery inside, as if his heart had been hit with a Jittering Jinx, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. As Sirius' dark eyelashes finally flicked

back it was as if Harry could see everything in minute detail and the world moved with an agonising slowness, narrowing down to only the three of them.

Blinking up at the ceiling, for a moment Sirius did not appear to be seeing anything, but then grey eyes slowly began to track across the space above him until they fixed on Harry and Remus. Harry stopped breathing all together, it was just easier. For a moment there was no reaction on Sirius' face at all and his godfather just blinked at Harry, eyes slowly moving between him and Remus.

"Thank you," Sirius said very quietly in a voice that sounded like he had swallowed sharp stones.

The fluttery feeling exploded inside Harry's chest like a blasting hex and his knees all but gave out. If Remus had not been there he would definitely have fallen as his body seemed to be snatched from his conscious control. A small part of his brain concluded that maybe Madame Pomfrey had been right to keep him in bed, while another section proposed the theory that it was simple shock, and the rest just didn't know what to think. He felt himself being sat down as he closed his eyes and hoped that the disorientation would go away quickly.

"Steady there, Harry," Remus' gentle tones said quietly, "slow even breaths."

He did as he was told and when he opened his eyes again he was glad to find that everything seemed to be normal. When he plucked up the courage to finally look up he found Remus standing next to him with an arm draped protectively around his shoulder, and Sirius half propped up on the bed on one arm, looking worried. The first thing that jumped into his head was that his godfather looked really tired and shouldn't be sitting up like that.

"Lie down," he said, reaching out to touch Sirius' hand without really considering what he was doing. "If you fall out of bed, Madame Pomfrey will kill us."

"Promise not to faint on us, and I might just take that advice," Sirius replied as the look of worry on his face was replaced by a slight smile.

Harry was about to protest that he was not going to faint when he realised that that was exactly what he had almost done, and so he nodded rather sheepishly. Sirius took his hand in his before Harry could withdraw it and then gingerly lay back down without letting go. Harry really didn't know what to do and he looked to Remus for help. The werewolf appeared somewhere between joy and amusement, and the enormous happiness radiating off Remus rather took Harry's breath away.

In their little meetings over the last few days they had both been quiet and contemplative, but now Remus seemed to be broadcasting his emotions to the rest of the room.

"Can I get you anything, Padfoot?" the werewolf asked.

"If you can find me a headache potion I will be in your debt for life," Sirius said and lifted his free hand to his temples. "Again," he added as an after thought.

"I'm sure Madame Pomfrey has something in her stores," Remus said with a bright smile, and then the werewolf turned and walked through the screens.

That left Harry alone with Sirius and he was terrified. He looked anywhere but at his godfather until a squeeze of his hand made him glance at his companion.

Sirius had an understanding expression on his face, and a deep emotion in his eyes that Harry could not quite figure out.

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," his godfather said quietly, "it was mine. I underestimated Bellatrix and wound up paying the price."

"But..." Harry tried to contradict Sirius.

"No buts," the other wizard said in an amazingly firm tone considering the fact that Sirius could do little more than whisper. "You're still a child, Harry, whether or not Voldemort tricked you has nothing to do with this. Grown wizards with years of experience can't keep him out of their minds, there's no way you could have protected yourself, no matter what Snape tried to tell you. You bear no blame. I am so sorry for what I have put you through. Please forgive me."

Harry could find no words to say, he didn't even know what to think. Sirius was asking for his forgiveness and yet he knew it should be him on his knees begging to be absolved of everything he had done. It was all his fault; he had not studied Occlumency properly, he had allowed Voldemort into his mind, it was all his doing; if he had not been so stupid this would never have happened.

"I," he said quietly, trying to find something in his mind that would make sense. "You would never have been there is it wasn't for me."

Was all that would come out of his mouth.

Sirius looked at him and for a moment he thought his godfather was about to cry. Instead, much to Harry's horror, Sirius forced himself into a sitting position and dragged Harry towards him. An strong embrace that belied the exhaustion in his godfather's face enfolded Harry and he was almost crushed to Sirius's chest.

"We have failed you, Harry," his godfather whispered in his ear, "we have failed you so badly and yet you don't even see it. I promise you this; it stops now. I love you and I will do everything in my power to protect you. I almost lost the chance and I will not let it happen again."

The vehemence in Sirius' tone was almost frightening and it finally broke through Harry's denial. He felt the love coming through the arms that held him and he realised that it didn't really matter who had caused what, all that mattered was that Sirius loved him and he loved Sirius. For the first time since the Department of Mysteries he allowed himself to remember that fact and nothing else and he reached around Sirius and clung to him.

That was how Madame Pomfrey found them a few minutes later, and it was only reluctantly that Harry let Sirius go so that the school nurse could examine his godfather.

Madame Pomfrey had finally sent Harry back to his own bed when he had fallen asleep curled up beside his godfather. The only things keeping him in place had been Sirius on one side and the bedside cabinet on the other and he had not complained when he had been escorted back to his own space. The next morning, Madame Pomfrey had also presented him with clothes and told him he was free to wander around as long as he did not overexert himself. That had been three days previously, and Harry could technically have been living in the guest rooms with Ron and Hermione, but no one had seen fit to ask him to leave the hospital wing.

He spent most of his time with Sirius and whoever else was visiting at the time, and for a while he let himself be simply happy.

Sirius was still very weak from his transition from beyond The Veil back to normal reality and he could still barely sit up on his own, let alone move from his bed, so Harry made sure he was there for anything his godfather might want or need. The change in Sirius' physical shell had not reverted since he came back, but it seemed to be taking its toll out of him now, rather than when it had happened. He looked a lot younger than before the Veil, but to Harry his godfather looked very tired all the time.

Madame Pomfrey had prescribed weeks of bed rest and nothing more strenuous than a nice game of chess. Hence Ron had been drafted in to play since Harry was at best, not good, and at worst very bad at the game. Since Sirius had beaten them all except the reigning Gryffindor chess champion, it was now a battle between the two of them. Harry was sitting in a chair watching the game next to Remus who was reading a book. Hermione was on the other side of the bed also watching the game and offering little snippets of chess history, much to the players' annoyance.

It was as Ron's queen set about demolishing one of Sirius' knights that Harry heard the sound of hurrying feet. Everyone was very shocked when the screens opened to reveal Snape.

"Aurors," the Potions master said shortly. "We have just received word from Kingsley. It appears your resurrection caused some backlash in the Department of Mysteries, Black, and the Unspeakables have tracked it back to your magical signature and Hogwarts. Fudge, like the idiot he is, has taken a whole squad of Aurors off chasing Voldemort to track you down. I have been instructed to remove you to a safe place."

Snape did not appear particularly happy about his assignment, but the man was nothing if not efficient. Harry wanted to panic, but chose instead to try and be rational about it. Sirius needed to be taken to somewhere the Aurors would not find him and that was all that mattered.

"One more thing," Snape said coldly, "they were instructed to bring a Dementor with them. Fudge had given them orders to bring you back, preferably sans soul."

Harry knew he must have gone completely white, but he was pretty sure nothing could match Sirius' pallor at that moment. Doing his very best not to think about Dementors and soul eating Harry picked up the chess board and put it to one side as Remus began to help Sirius out of the bed. Then Harry began to undress.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Ron asked, sounding very perplexed.

"There's a used hospital bed," Harry said, not pausing in what he was doing, "someone has to be in it when the Aurors arrive. Last time I checked I'm the best excuse we have for Hogwarts to be open to students over the summer holidays."

When he glanced at Snape, Harry thought he might actually have seen respect in the man's eyes at his explanation. His own bed was neatly made thanks to the house elves so that would not be a problem.

"Accio pyjamas," he said, taking his wand out of its hiding place and holding out his hand.

The garment landed in Harry's grip as Remus put himself under Sirius' left arm and pulled them both into a full standing position. From what Harry could see, Sirius could barely hold himself up, and his godfather's legs were shaking from the effort of just standing. It did not look as if it would be a fast getaway.

If Sirius had been well he could have just changed into Padfoot, but as it was his godfather could not manage a good jelly legs jinx, let alone an Animagus transformation, and Harry knew it.

"Quickly," Snape snapped at them, "they were Apparating to outside the grounds when I was given the message. It seems Fudge does not trust the Auror department to not have leaks."

"We're going as fast as we can," Remus replied in kind, totally out of character for the werewolf.

They tried to walk, but Sirius stumbled and they almost fell leaving Remus to drag them back to a standing position. Harry would have gone to help them, but he was too busy getting changed.

"Sorry, Padfoot," Remus said apologetically, "but I'm going to have to carry you."

Being a werewolf had a few advantages, and one was that Remus was a lot stronger than he looked. Although the ex-Professor was nowhere near as broad as Sirius, Harry knew that Remus had enough strength to lift the Animagus and Snape as well if he so chose. Sirius did not appear pleased, but he acquiesced and Remus was about to hoist him into a fireman's lift when Harry felt the familiar cold creeping up his spine.

"They're here," he said, dropping the pyjama top he had been about to pull over the t-shirt he was wearing, and gripping his wand tightly.

In under a second, everyone but Sirius was armed and they turned to look at the door through the gap in the screens in time to see six Aurors and a Dementor come into the room.

"It's Black," one of the Aurors said as the two groups came face to face.

"Don't come any closer," Harry said firmly, stepping in front of Sirius and raising his wand.

Before the acknowledged return of Voldemort the Aurors might have laughed at him, but since then attitudes had changed about the Boy Who Lived. Now his version of events after the Triwizard tournament was taken as fact and it was known he had duelled with Voldemort and won. That it had been more by luck than judgement was not common knowledge and the Aurors froze where they were.

"Mr Potter," the man who had to be the head of the Auror group said evenly, "we are here to arrest the convicted murderer Sirius Black, please stand aside."

"My godfather," Harry made sure to stress the word 'godfather', "is innocent. He was convicted without trial or even the chance to testify under Veritaserum. You want him, you go through me."

Panic threatened at the back of his mind, especially when he saw the Dementor swaying in place, but he refused to let this happen. They were not going to take Sirius and that was the end of the matter.

The Dementor moved away from its keepers slightly and Harry heard the screams beginning in his mind. He wanted to close his eyes and fall to his knees trying to block out the sound, or to cast his Patronus and protect them all, but he could do neither without giving the Aurors a shot at Sirius. He prayed Dumbledore would arrive and do something to help them; he did not think his bluff would last for long.

"Call that thing off," he said coldly, trying to keep any trace of emotion from his voice, "or I will deal with it myself."

The influence of the foul creature was becoming stronger and this time, behind the screams there was darkness; the slow, creeping darkness come to swallow him whole. They had a standoff, but Harry knew he could not hold out for long and at the first sign of weakness the Aurors would attack. As the darkness and screams seeped through his mind wiping out rational thought, he mentally begged the universe for help.

[I hear you, Harry,] the voice that flowed into his mind caused such relief that he laughed; a small hysterical sound. [Let me help you.]

The Dementor moved towards him, seemingly sensing his distress and as his mind threatened to cave under the assault he opened his being and allowed Ignulus in. For a moment he felt the tearing and then he was standing beside himself and his arm came up, shooting fire at the Dementor. The creature exploded as if made of glass, shards of darkness flying everywhere before they dissolved in the light like so much ash.

"You will not touch one of ours," it was Sirius' voice, but Harry knew it was not his godfather who spoke.

Turning, he could see the ghostly form of Sirius standing next to his body.

"What in Merlin's name?" one of the younger Aurors asked the world in general.

As one, six wands pointed at Harry and Sirius, and it appeared Facis did not like that. This time it was Sirius' hand which came up and a sheet of fire erupted from his spread fingers. The Aurors found their wands on the floor before they could do anything about it. Harry would have cheered for joy had he had a mouth to do so.

"We are the only light in our darkness," Facis said, its power ringing in the tone of Sirius' voice. "We seek communication with pure souls. You will not be allowed to harm one of ours."

Ignulus was still incapable of more than simple movements with Harry's body, but it appeared Facis was a great deal more eloquent and in tune with Sirius'.

[We cannot stay long, Harry,] Ignulus told him silently, [Sirius is too weak. What do you wish us to do?]

Harry did not know how to reply. He did not want the Aurors hurt, but he had to get Sirius out of here. As he was trying to decide Dumbledore walked through the door.

"Greetings, Shadow Dwellers," the headmaster said formally, "I thank you for your assistance. I guarantee Sirius Black's safety and would request that you do not harm those who seek to take him."

It was a strange speech, but Harry knew Dumbledore would keep his word.

[Whatever the headmaster asks,] Harry replied silently, sure that Ignulus would pass on the information.

Facis, looking through Sirius' eyes regarded Dumbledore with an even, fire filled glare.

"As you wish, Albus Dumbledore," the Shadow Dweller said in an even tone. "We shall take our leave, but know this, if harm comes to ours, we shall return."

"May your fire shine into the void," the headmaster said and bowed his head.

Sirius' face was a picture of surprise as Facis reacted to this. Harry knew he had missed something, but he was not sure what.

"May your soul rest easy in its shell," the Shadow Dweller replied in a very formal manner.

It seemed that Dumbledore had more information about beyond the Veil than had been known when Harry helped bring Sirius back. Harry knew it should not have surprised him, the headmaster was always well informed, but he could not help it. He made a mental note to find out more himself.

[Goodbye, Harry,] Ignulus said and without any further warning Harry found himself slamming back into his body.

For the second time in under a week he came back to himself trying to stop Sirius from cracking his skull open on the floor.

"Accio wands," he heard Dumbledore say, and by the time he looked up the headmaster was holding all of the Aurors' fallen weapons.

It was almost enough to take his mind off Sirius' only semi-coherent condition, but not quite. He gave his godfather a quick once over with his eyes and then looked back at the intruders.

"Professor Dumbledore," the lead Auror said in a very dangerous tone, "you are obstructing the law."

"Ah, but the law was obstructed once before," Dumbledore replied, nothing about him the doddering old man people so often saw, "and I find myself disinclined to allow it to happen again. Sirius Black is innocent; I have established this to my own satisfaction..."

The Auror went to object.

"... and now," the headmaster continued in a very stern tone, "we shall establish it to your satisfaction."

This was the wizard who had defeated Grindelwald, the man whom Voldemort himself was afraid of, and there was no arguing with him. Harry cradled Sirius in his arms and watched Dumbledore exert his authority.

"Severus," the headmaster said with the crack of command in his voice, "the Veritaserum."

Snape did not hesitate and walked over to Dumbledore and handed him a small vial from somewhere on his person. Why Snape was carrying the potion Harry could only guess, but he really did not care at that moment. The headmaster handed the vial to the lead Auror.

"I do not care what you have to do to verify that this is Veritaserum," Dumbledore said calmly, "but do so now."

The Auror handed it to one of his colleagues who uncorked it, sniffed it and then tasted the tiniest amount.

"Name," the lead Auror demanded instantly.

"Miles Barrenthorp," the other man said instantly, and then passed back the vial with a nod.

"I am satisfied," the Auror said and gave the potion back to Dumbledore.

Poppy had entered the room behind the headmaster and she had been growing more agitated through the whole procedure, Harry saw her finally snap.

"Headmaster," she said as Dumbledore turned to where Harry was holding Sirius, "you cannot be suggesting that Veritaserum be given to Mr Black. In his condition it could kill him."

At those words Harry went cold.

"Alas, Poppy," the headmaster said evenly, "I fear we have no choice. As I understand it, even the trip to Azkaban could do the same. Of course it is up to Sirius."

His godfather was barely conscious, but at that, Harry felt Sirius look up at the people on the other side of the room.

"Better anything than going back there," Sirius said in a tone that begged no argument.

"Come on, Sirius," Remus said and caused Harry to look round from where he was staring hard at the headmaster, "let's get you back to bed."

What Harry wanted to do was hex the Aurors into oblivion and run as far and as fast as possible with his godfather, however, the rational part of his brain knew that was not going to happen. The unshakable trust he had had in Dumbledore had been broken after the Department of Mysteries, but he had no choice other than to trust the man now. He knew that if the headmaster thought there was too much danger to Sirius he would not allow this, and if Dumbledore believed the risk was worth the end then Harry had to go along with it. Being pushed out of his body and then returning to it had not been pleasant and his legs wobbled as he went to stand, but there was no way he was missing this.

"I am correct, am I not," Dumbledore said once Sirius was back in bed and everyone else was gathered around, "that testimony taken under Veritaserum is legally binding no matter where the inquisition is conducted?"

"You are," the lead Auror said evenly.

"Then please administer the legal dose," the headmaster said calmly, "and we shall finally have an end to this matter. Everyone must remain totally silent once the potion has started to work."

Harry swallowed as his mouth and throat completely dried out. He fervently wished that he could have taken his godfather's place, but Sirius was the only one who could tell the truth of this. There was complete quiet as the Auror gave Sirius the recommended number of drops of the potion and they waited for it to start working properly. Once the lead Auror nodded, one of his colleagues pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill which he set on the bed.

"State your name," the lead Auror said firmly and the quill wrote down the question.

"Sirius Black."

The tone of his godfather's voice was almost frightening with its total lack of emotion; Harry hoped he would never have to see it again after this day.

"Are you now or have you ever been a Death Eater?" the Auror asked clearly.

"No," Sirius replied, and the answer obviously surprised the officials even as the quill recorded it.

"Have you ever been in the employ of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" the Auror tried again.

"No."

Sirius' firm response caused even more shock.

"Did you betray James and Lily Potter to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

That caused a murmur to go round the Aurors who were quieted by a stern look from their leader.

"Did you kill Peter Pettigrew?"

"No."

"Did you cause the explosion that killed Peter Pettigrew?"

It seemed to Harry that the Aurors wanted to make very sure of their facts.

"No. He's not dead."

There was the murmuring again. Harry thought about hexing them silent, and by the looks of things Snape seemed to be in agreement.

"Did you cause the explosion that killed the Muggles?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

As the interview went on, more and more colour had drained out of the lead Auror's face. To Harry it looked as if the wizard was slowly realising that he had almost condemned an innocent man.

"Give him the antidote," the lead Auror said without any further questions.

Snape stepped forward immediately, but the official did not wait to see what would happen. He picked up the parchment and quill and then looked Dumbledore straight in the eyes before looking at Harry and then glancing at Sirius.

"I will file this myself," the Auror said evenly, "and the official proclamation will be made tomorrow even if I have to do that myself as well."

Dumbledore handed the man the group's wands and then they left without another word. By the time Harry turned back to the bed, Madame Pomfrey was laying a very pale Sirius back down. Before his godfather's head even hit the pillow Harry saw Sirius' eyes flick closed and for a second he was afraid that Madame Pomfrey's dire prediction had come true, but the idea vanished as he saw his godfather's chest gently rising and falling.

"He'll sleep until at least tomorrow," the school nurse said after a few moments. "I believe he is in no danger."

Harry breathed a huge sigh of relief and all the nervous energy keeping him going flowed straight out of him. He thought that it would be a really good idea to sit down, unfortunately he was nowhere near a chair and so the floor was his only refuge. He had been standing next to Snape and the tall man peered down at him.

"And what, pray tell are you doing down there, Mr Potter?" the Potions master asked with his usual scathing tone.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Harry replied, without even trying to hide his sarcasm.

Harry could quite frankly say that over the previous week or so he had had just about as much excitement as he could take. Yes Sirius was not only alive, but officially innocent as well, and that was more than Harry had ever dreamed would

be possible, but now all he wanted to do was go and hide somewhere quiet for a while until term began. The morning edition of the Prophet had been full of nothing but the fact that Sirius was innocent. It seemed that Auror Claypole, as Harry had learned from reading the man's name in the paper, had done exactly as he had promised, leaving Fudge with no recourse but to follow his lead. Harry did not think that the Auror was very happy with the Minister if the way the wizard kept glaring at Fudge in the publicity photo was anything to go by.

The possible scandal was career ending stuff according to Hermione who had also pronounced over breakfast earlier that day that the Ministry were going to owe Sirius huge amounts of compensation for his unlawful detention, and Hermione was rarely wrong, but Harry really didn't care about that. He was just hoping Sirius would wake up soon, since his godfather had now been asleep for over twenty four hours and Harry could not help worrying. Remus said he got it from his mother and that worrying was in his genes, but not to let it go too far, which was of course easy for a person with Zen-like calm to say, but Harry had to fight the urge to Hex his serene friend. One day Remus was going to start twinkling and turn into Dumbledore, and then they were all going to be in trouble.

The screens were gone from around the other occupied bed on the ward since it didn't matter if anyone wandered in and saw Sirius, and Harry found that his eyes continually made their way back to his godfather no matter what he started out doing. Reading the very old book on Shadow Dwellers Dumbledore had produced when he visited was almost a lost cause, even if it was very interesting.

How Facis and Ignulus would affect the fight against Voldemort, Harry had no idea. It seemed that someone under threat from a Dark Lord had never been cited as an example of those in contact with the elusive race Harry and Sirius were now intimately familiar with. He was pretty sure that Ignulus would not take kindly to someone trying to kill him, but he was also certain that it could not possibly be as simple as asking the Shadow Dweller to kill Voldemort for him. That would just be far too easy, and the Slytherin in him point blank refused to believe anything so straightforward.

The book hinted about all sorts of possibilities, but it did not actually come out and say anything, at least not that Harry could understand, especially in his distracted state. There was talk of bargains and mystical rites and all sorts of practices that Harry was pretty sure had fallen out of use generations ago. He and Sirius had not needed rituals and spells, and he did wonder if what the book talked about was a fashion of the time, mumbo-jumbo to keep away experimenters, or dumb luck on his and his godfather's parts. If he ever figured out how to contact Ignulus without being in mortal peril he decided to ask. For now he was happy to know that he was safe and so were his godfather and all his friends, but he would be even happier if Sirius would wake up.

There were so many paths open now, paths he had thought closed when Sirius fell through The Veil. His life was not simple, it probably never would be, but he could say for now that he was content. Thinking too far ahead made his head ache and right about then playing chess with Sirius and lasting more than ten minutes seemed like a good goal in life.

The End