

laughter at the memory, shaking his head. "It took me and Moony both to get him out of there, and then he could barely stand up, the antlers were so heavy. We had to go to dinner like that and pretend it was a prank gone wrong."

"He didn't manage to get rid of them until about one in the morning," Remus added, chuckling.

"Not as bad as the tail I got stuck with for about two days," Sirius pointed out ruefully. "It was a nightmare! I couldn't sit properly in class, people thought I had some sort of medical problem."

"Nah, Robin Waters just told everyone he shagged you bow-legged," Remus informed him. Sirius' eyebrows shot up.

"Did he, now? That explains so much." He snickered to himself. "Anyway, Harry, the moral of the story is, be careful when you practice, and make sure you've got an alibi if you do get stuck with unexpected animal parts. Preferably a better alibi than I apparently did." He flushed at that, and Harry laughed.

"Noted." He couldn't wait to start working on the transformation itself. Saturday couldn't come soon enough!

.-.-.-.

Severus should've known the peace wouldn't last. When the first week of July passed by without so much as a twitch from his Dark Mark, he thought he'd managed to avoid it, but then it burned when he was in the middle of brewing a potion, and he swore softly.

He took the coward's way out, telling Ceri to let Remus know where he'd gone. Then he donned his robe and mask, walked to the property line, and disappeared.

It surprised him, how easy it was to fall back into that role. He'd expected difficulty clearing his thoughts, drawing up that darkness within him that had drawn him to Voldemort to begin with. There was so much light in his life these days. But with the knowledge that that light was on the line if he should fail, by the time he walked up the steps to Malfoy Manor he was a perfect loyal Death Eater, and always had been.

Seeing the Dark Lord again was an eye-opening experience. Harry had described his twisted, snake-like appearance, but Severus hadn't realised it was so grotesque. He didn't look human anymore.

"I have stayed close to Dumbledore, my Lord. The old fool believes me loyal to him, but I only serve you. I knew when you returned you would need someone at the school, someone in the headmaster's good graces. I positioned myself where I thought it best to turn young minds to your cause." The words came easy. The screams came easier. Even when the Dark Lord was pleased with your work, he'd still Crucio you just to remind you of what could happen should that change.