

But Charlie's hands on his stomach seemed to be enough, and inch by inch he relaxed into the embrace. When Charlie finally felt him loosen fully against him, having drifted into a light doze, a spark of relief and triumph tingled in his body.

It was the worst day Sirius had had since he and Charlie had got together, and for a moment Charlie had worried he wouldn't be able to bring him out of it.

Warmth, sun and human contact; three things Sirius had been denied in Azkaban. With a combination like that, and a little patience, he could drag Sirius back from even the darkest corners of his own mind. Charlie glanced up at the sky with a small quirk of his lips, mentally thanking the weather for cooperating. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if it were raining.

They were out there for hours, Sirius waking up occasionally with a full-body jerk, but Charlie soothed him every time. At one point, Charlie summoned the book he'd been reading about the migration habits of various European dragon breeds, propping it up on a conjured bookstand to read while Sirius stared up at the cloudless sky with that chilling, vacant gaze.

Ceri brought lunch out to them. Ripe, juicy berries, and toasted sandwiches cut into bite-size squares. Packed with flavour — another thing to distance Sirius from the prison in his mind.

Sirius didn't talk, but Charlie didn't expect him to. Later, when they were back to reading and staring respectively, Harry appeared from the direction of the house. He approached cautiously, and Charlie offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. The teen's eyes were sympathetic as they flickered down to his godfather, who didn't react at his presence.

"Draco and I were thinking about swimming for a bit," the green-eyed Gryffindor started, "but Moony said we should check with you first. Don't want to disturb."

"We're fine," Charlie assured, running a hand through Sirius' hair. "Just relaxing out in the sun. Bit of laughter in the background won't harm anyone. Just don't drown," he teased. Harry brightened up — then, cautiously, he stepped closer, leaning in to hug Sirius around the shoulders.

"Love you, Padfoot."

Sirius reflexively hugged him back. "Love you, too, kid. Have fun swimming."

And inside, Charlie cheered, because that meant Sirius was present enough to have registered the conversation. Finally, the shadows were lifting.

But it was slow going. When the sun began to set, the breeze picking up a slight chill, the pair of them went inside — back up to their bedroom. The fire was still going, the room swelteringly hot, and Sirius sprawled on the bed with a heavy sigh.

Charlie settled in beside him, still touching but not as close — if Sirius was ready to come out of his own head, he didn't want to overwhelm him. He ran his fingers through Sirius' long hair, blunt nails scratching across the man's scalp in a way that made him smile faintly.