

Sometimes it felt like Sirius' whole life had been a series of cages. His parents, Azkaban, Grimmauld, now this.

He could hardly stand to breathe, sometimes, feeling the iron bars of confinement wrap around his lungs, closing him in.

At least he wasn't alone in this cage. He glanced beside him, at Charlie lying in bed next to him, book open but not really reading it. Both of them were lost in their thoughts too often, these days.

The end was coming. Harry's birthday was only days away, and he'd seen the look in his pup's eye. That kid was working on a plan, had something up his sleeve.

This cage would be broken, one way or another. Sirius just wondered what kind of freedom he would find on the other side of it.

The ever-present knot of fear and worry tightened in his chest, the cold seeping in, the kind of feelings that always made his brain beg to be Padfoot, to not feel those feelings for just a little while. He didn't give in, not this time.

Instead, he shuffled closer to Charlie, tucking himself under the dragon tamer's muscular arm. Pillowed his head on that broad chest, let his fingers find the dog tattooed on Charlie's left pec. Just looking at it made his heart swell with affection.

"Hello, sweetheart," Charlie murmured, putting his book down and shifting to hold Sirius better. "What's the matter, then? Or are you just bored?" he added, giving a wolfish grin. It would be too easy to go with it, to start teasing his fire-haired love and replace the knot of worry with the hot flood of arousal. But it wouldn't solve the problem, and Sirius had learned over the last few years not to let things fester.

"Just thinking," he replied quietly, throwing one leg over Charlie's, plastering himself against his side like an extra layer of blankets. Like a shield.

"Terrible stuff. I try not to if I can help it," Charlie said, giving a faint smile. Sirius snorted. The redhead grew a little more serious, tangling a hand in Sirius' long hair. "Anything I can help with?"

"Only if you can promise me we'll all come out of this alive," Sirius replied bitterly. He felt Charlie tense beneath him, and briefly regretted bringing it up.

"Would if I could, my love." Charlie's arm was warm around Sirius' bare shoulders, their room a little stuffy in the late-July heat. "All I can do is promise my best."

Sirius sighed, a long, slow release of air. He buried his face in Charlie's throat, squeezing his eyes shut. "I wish it was just you I was worried about," he confessed. "I mean, I wish I wasn't worried about any of it. But when I stand in that hall, when I look at everyone I know is going to be fighting..." Remus, Narcissa, Tonks, Severus. *Harry*. Draco, the kids, so many people who should not have to put their lives on the line before they'd even had the chance to