After The Tournament

by bluewerewolfprose

Summary

What if Remus and Sirius realised Harry was being abused? What if all Dumbledore’s careful plans were pulled apart by the power he relied on most of all?

After the Triwizard Tournament, a traumatised Harry admits he can't go back to Privet Drive. Sirius and Remus refuse to submit to Dumbledore's plan and take him back to Grimmauld Place with them, where they must learn how to live together, how to care for one another, and how to trust one another. After so long, can they build a family together? Will they even have a chance when a war rages outside their door? And can the prophecy ever be fulfilled?

Notes
Hey, lovelies! This is my first attempt at a HP fic (that I've ever let anyone see) and it's basically me taking a hammer and attempting to fix the canon because there are some character deaths I simply cannot live with. And I'm an author, so I'm well acquainted with character deaths! (Don't worry, I want to keep the characters as close to canon as possible because I love them, well most of them, but what happens to them is gonna be better, damn it!)

I'm still not 100% sure who'll end up being dragged into this fic, but pretty much everyone will be there. Not dying. Mostly. Sort of. Well, some of them, anyway.

The first chapter has several direct references to TGOF, but after this chapter I will be forging a bunch of new territory. I hope you enjoy! Please throw kudos and comments to my voracious writer's ego, it's very demanding. Also I'm happy to receive constructive criticism :)

Enjoy!
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Now I have work for each of you,” said Dumbledore. “Fudge’s attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher—the old crowd…” (TGoF p618)

“There’s no need,” said a hoarse voice from the doorway. “It’s already done.” Dumbledore spun around, and Sirius leaned around the taller man to see Remus Lupin striding toward them, removing a moth-eaten travel cloak as he came. Sirius felt the bands of anxiety loosen, just a fraction, from around his chest.

“I see you anticipated me,” said Dumbledore, sounding almost nonplussed as he glanced between the two men. Sirius shrugged. Even Dumbledore didn’t need to know everything.

“Sirius told me Harry was hurt,” Remus said abruptly, his usually quiet demeanor distinctly ruffled. Close to, Sirius could see the fear etched into the lines in his face, and he felt a pang of guilt. His message had been short, too short. Triwizard Cup a trap. Voldemort returned. Harry hurt. Tell the others. Come asap.

“I’m okay,” Harry volunteered from the bed. He looked like he wanted to climb out of it again, and was only restrained by Molly’s hand on his arm. Remus’s face sagged for a moment, and Sirius caught a glimpse of the terror the other man had been hiding, the same terror he’d felt when he realised Harry was missing from the Quidditch pitch earlier. Not Harry. Not Harry too. Remus composed his expression almost immediately, but he couldn’t stop himself stepping over and drawing the boy into a hug. Molly looked away tactfully as Remus blinked tears from his eyes, resting his chin on top of Harry’s untamed head for just a moment. When he pulled away, Harry exchanged a surprised look with Ron and Hermione, but he also looked touched. Remus let out a sharp sigh and turned back to Dumbledore.

“I realise you need our help, but Harry needs us tonight. There is very little Sirius and I can do right now.”

Harry flushed to the roots of his hair at these words, and looked down at his knees. Sirius’s heart ached at the boy's surprise upon finding himself with so many protectors. He should have been able to take their presence for granted. Instead he expected them to leave.

“As touching as this no doubt is,” Snape drawled, “not all of us can say the same.”

Sirius forced himself not to respond to the obvious barb, although if Harry hadn’t looked so fragile, he would certainly have given Snape a piece of his mind. He caught the look Remus threw at him and smiled tightly, shaking his head briefly. There would be plenty of time for Snape baiting later.

“Quite,” Dumbledore said, still watching Remus and Sirius as though not quite sure what to make of them. “Quite,” he added more confidently. “Severus, I am sorry to ask this of you. If you are ready?” Snape drew himself up to his full height, his pale cheeks whiter than usual, his expression unreadable.

“I am,” he said.

“Then, good luck,” said Dumbledore. They watched in silence as Snape swept out of the hospital.
For several long minutes, nobody spoke. Remus was still standing with his hand on Harry’s shoulder, and for a moment, when he looked up at Sirius, his eyes sad and serious, it felt like there was no one else in the room.

“I must see the Diggorys,” said Dumbledore, breaking the spell. “Harry, take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later.” They watched Dumbledore leave, and Remus turned to help Harry back into bed. Harry looked up at Sirius.

“If you have to go, it’s okay,” he said, and Sirius could see the effort it cost him to say it. He forced another smile and tweaked Harry’s toes through the blankets.

“We’re not going anywhere,” he said. “Like Remus said, there’s nothing either of us can do tonight. You take your potion, we’ll be here when you wake up.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably, avoiding looking at everyone gathered around him.

“I’m just going to be sleeping, I don’t mind,” he said, and now there was a definite tremble in his voice.

“Here, Harry, you take this,” said Molly softly, passing him the cup of potion. “You need a good sleep, and then we’ll talk about getting you home.”

Harry took the cup without a word and downed the contents. Almost immediately, his eyes started drifting shut. Molly stood, but Remus was there before her, tucking the covers around Harry’s shoulders with a tender expression that made Sirius’s heart roll right over. Harry muttered something indistinguishable as he slipped further into unconsciousness.

“What was that?” Remus frowned and leaned closer. Harry mumbled again, and while no one else could hear what it was he said, they could all see the immediate effect it had on Remus. His face froze, the colour draining from his features as he leaned over Harry’s bed, his face still close enough to Harry that the boy’s dark hair brushed against his cheek. His features seemed locked in an expressionless mask, but his eyes burned.

“What? What’s wrong?” Sirius asked in a low voice. Remus slowly straightened, and Sirius was alarmed to see that his hands were trembling.

“What did he say?” whispered Hermione, looking as frightened as Sirius suddenly felt.

“Sirius, you and I need to have a word with the Headmaster,” said Remus quietly. The controlled anger in his tone sent a shiver down Sirius’s spine.

“What—?” started Molly.

“Not now, Molly,” said Remus. “I’ll explain when we return. This cannot wait.” Without waiting for a response, he turned and strode from the room, Sirius hurriedly shifting back to his canine form and trotting along in his wake.

They were halfway across the castle when Sirius caught hold of Remus’s sleeve in his teeth and dragged him behind a tapestry into a hidden alcove. He transformed back into human, and for a moment, he was overwhelmed with memories of this same alcove, of a younger Remus Lupin, of things long past and lost forever. He shook his head to clear it and looked up at Lupin, who was still trembling, his limbs tensed as though he was ready to stride off again at any moment.
“Would you like to tell me what’s going on before we talk to Dumbeldore?” Sirius demanded in a harsh whisper. “What did Harry say?”

“Did you know about his aunt and uncle?” Remus hissed, and for a moment, he almost resembled the wolf Sirius had seen so many times. He fought the urge to step back. This was a Remus Lupin he’d only seen twice before. Whatever Harry had said, it had to be something truly horrific if it could do this to him.

“I know Harry stays with them in the summer,” said Sirius slowly, eying Lupin carefully, testing each word before he said it. “I know Harry doesn’t get on with them all that well, but other than that, I don’t know much about them.”

“He’s frightened of them, Sirius,” Remus said, snapping off the statement like a tomb door closing. “He’s so frightened of them he said he can’t go back, he was begging me not to send him back to them because he couldn’t take it. Sirius, they’re hurting him.”

Sirius felt the blood drain from his face, and for a moment he almost felt as though he’d fall. No, not Harry. He closed his eyes against a sudden onslaught of unwanted memories, a roar of jumbled screams and insults deafening him, the ghosts of a thousand bruises racing across his skin, the stairs in his old house once again rising up to meet him as he fell—was pushed—down, and down, and down…

He gasped as he wrenched himself from the flashback, the worst he’d had since leaving Azkaban, and Remus reached out to steady him.

“Not Harry,” he whispered, his lungs empty and his heart racing. He looked up at Remus with hollow eyes, panic rising, grasping at Remus’s arms with desperate fingers. “Tell me I didn’t leave him with—” He couldn’t bring himself to finish.

“You didn’t know,” Remus whispered, his fury subsiding for a moment, his voice suddenly gentle. He rubbed Sirius’s arm, the simple gesture carrying across two decades, reminding Sirius of the first time he’d realised that not every touch had to hurt.

“But he wrote to me, he told me things were bad! I just left him there, I should have realised, I—”

“Sirius Orion Black,” whispered Remus forcefully. “You did not know. This is not your fault.” He paused and breathed sharply through his long, thin nose. “Dumbledore, however, is another story.”

Sirius blinked as this new observation hit him like a weight to the face. Regardless of what he ought to have known, there was no way Albus Dumbledore hadn’t known that Harry was being abused. There. He’d managed to think the word. He almost gagged on it, his limbs turning to rubber at the thought of his godson, his best friends’ child, the one he’d sworn to protect, being hurt the way he had. Hadn’t he suffered enough?

“Sirius, did you hear what I said? I said Dumbledore knows.” Remus leaned down so he could look Sirius full in the face. Something about those warm, brown eyes managed to break through the panic and grief and agony, reaching down into his stomach and stirring the rage behind it all. He took a long, deep breath, feeling the life come back to his limbs, then another, and another.

“Right,” he said firmly. “Well, whether he knows or not, it stops now. Harry is coming home with us.” He snapped his mouth shut on the last word, but he couldn’t unsay it once it was out. Remus stared at him for a moment longer, his eyes widening just a little, before he nodded and turned toward the tapestry that was hiding them. Sirius let out a wobbly breath and concentrated, welcoming the wave of prickling magic that always accompanied his transformation. Things were always
simpler as a dog.

“Remus, are you looking for me?”

Sirius’s hackles rose at the sound of the Headmaster’s voice. He turned and barely stopped himself from growling as the older man approached. His shoulders were bowed, and he looked tired, but Sirius had no sympathy to spare for Dumbledore.

“I was, Headmaster,” said Remus quietly. Sirius admired his composure. Personally, he was fighting the urge to give Dumbledore a good nip. The older man looked quizzically from one to the other, sensing that something else was wrong.

“Come up to my office,” he said.

“That might be best,” agreed Remus, and this time there was a distinct note of warning. Dumbledore acted as though he hadn’t hear it however, leading the way up the stairs with his usual serene air, lifting his robes clear of his feet with graceful decorum. The others followed in silence. The moment the door closed behind them, however, Remus’s mask of composure fell away.

“Tell me you didn’t know about Harry’s aunt and uncle,” he demanded without precursor. Whatever Dumbledore had expected, this hadn’t been it. He looked between Remus and the suddenly human Sirius with an air of confusion.

“I presume you’re referring to the Dursleys,” he said.

“The Dursleys who are abusing my godson,” Sirius snapped. Dumbledore stared at him for a moment, and then he deflated, his shoulders sinking, expression falling, just a little.

“Please, sit. This will take some time to explain,” he said, waving a couple of chairs into existence. Both Remus and Sirius ignored the seats and continued to glare at Dumbledore.

“There is nothing to explain,” said Remus shortly. “You’re clearly aware of the situation, and it’s going to stop. Now.” Dumbledore opened his mouth to protest, but Sirius cut him off.

“I don’t give two shits what your vaunted reasoning is, Headmaster,” he spat, twisting the last word around his tongue like a curse. “Harry is a child. He will be coming home with me, where he will be safe.”

“Safe? With a wanted man living in hiding?” asked Dumbledore, with a valiant attempt at his usual calm. “It’s hardly a life for a fourteen-year-old wizard.”

“You make it sound like I’m living on the streets!” Sirius said, his voice rising. “You know I have a home, and how safe it is! He’s in far less danger with me than with those— those people!”

Dumbledore’s lips thinned and he heaved a sigh.

“I understand why you’re so upset, both of you,” he said. “Please sit. I will explain what I can. You must understand,” he added, raising a hand to forestall further objection as both men opened their mouths. “You must understand that there is more under the surface than either of you are aware. Harry’s life will be in danger if you take him from his family.”

“It’s in danger now,” said Remus, and his quiet observation carried more anger, more of a threat, than anything anyone had said so far. Dumbledore sighed again and conjured a third chair for himself, collapsing into it and closing his eyes. For a moment, he almost looked his age. Sirius and Remus exchanged a grim look before they conceded and took their seats. After a moment, Dumbledore opened his eyes and leaned forward, long fingers clasped in front of him.
“When Lily died for Harry, she gifted him a lasting magical protection, more powerful than anything Voldemort can comprehend,” he said.

“We know this,” said Sirius, but it was Remus who hushed him this time. His eyes were fixed on Dumbledore’s face, burning with an intensity Sirius had rarely seen.

“When I realised what Lily had done, I took advantage of it and created the most powerful magical protection I could conceive for Harry. This protection will keep Harry hidden from Voldemort until he is of age—as long as he resides with his mother’s relatives. That is why I left Harry with them, despite knowing how they felt about Lily and James, and about wizards. I felt it was the best chance Harry had of remaining alive.”

“That’s not good enough,” said Remus. “A wizard as powerful as you has other ways of keeping people safe. And Voldemort was gone. Why the need to protect Harry that way?”

“Because I knew, as I have always made clear, that Voldemort was not gone, at least not for good,” replied Dumbledore with a bite of impatience. “And I knew that, when he returned, he would go after Harry. As you are both painfully aware, I do not have the best record when it comes to protecting the Potters.”

Sirius felt the colour drain from his face, and when he glanced at Remus, he saw his lips had turned white.

“Why is Voldemort so determined to kill Harry?” he asked, overlooking the pointed reference to Peter's betrayal. “And don’t expect us to believe it’s because Harry was there when he died. Why try and kill a baby in the first place?” Dumbledore looked up, eyes shifting between Sirius and Remus, who seemed to be frozen in his seat. He seemed to be considering how much to tell them.

“Voldemort tried to kill Harry Potter because of a prophecy, made before Harry’s birth. It speaks of a child born at the end of July, destined to kill Voldemort. He believes it refers to Harry.” Sirius sat rooted to his chair. All these years they’d assumed Lily and James had been killed simply for their role in the Order. All these years, Dumbledore had been keeping this from them, the man they trusted to lead them, the man in whose hands they’d placed their lives. All this time.

“Harry doesn’t know.”

“He is just a child, Sirius. Imagine the impact of such a burden.”

“As opposed to the impact of the seventeen years of abuse and neglect you planned for him?” shouted Sirius, jumping to his feet. “He’s just a child!” He threw the words back in Dumbeldore’s face like a slap. The old man didn’t recoil, merely watched Sirius with those infuriatingly calm blue eyes.

“There are other ways of keeping him safe,” said Remus, his voice level as he reached out and took Sirius’s hand, ready to hold him back if necessary.

“But none as reliable,” replied Dumbledore, just as calmly.

“You mean none as suitable for your purposes.”

“Of course I want to equip Harry with the best possible protection, and, yes, weapons against Voldemort that I can.”

“You want to turn him into a weapon!” interjected Sirius, beginning to see where this is going. “You want to use the protection Lily gave him against Voldemort! Even though Voldemort has the same
“What?” Remus asked, suddenly diverted.

“Voldemort brought himself back using Dark magic, some of which involved taking Harry’s blood,” Sirius explained. Remus’s expression folded in on itself, and for a moment there was nothing but fear and deep grief. Then the moment passed and he turned back to the Headmaster.

“He is a human being, Dumbledore, not a chess piece,” said Remus, and for a moment he almost seemed Dumbledore’s younger mirror, with his calm facade and furious, blazing eyes.

“I don’t care what plans you have for him,” Sirius snapped. “He will not spend another minute with those people.”

“How many lives are you willing to risk for two years of relative peace for one boy?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

“I know the right thing when I see it,” said Remus firmly. “I have never believed in sacrificing others for the greater good, as you well know, and I will not begin now. Not with a fourteen-year-old boy. Harry will come with us.”

There was that word again, “us”. Dumbledore noticed it too, and raised his eyebrows for a moment. Then he shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry you feel that way. You know I have only ever wanted the best for Harry. I care about him. But these are not easy times.”

“I remember another boy you cared about,” said Remus harshly as he stood, his six feet two inches towering over the seated Dumbledore. “I remember you told me to forget him. I remember you told me I was mistaken. I remember you were sure then. And you were wrong.”

Dumbledore looked up at him, and Sirius was almost sure he saw tears glittering in his eyes, but he was too preoccupied to care. You told me to forget him. Remus was talking about him. It was Dumbledore who had told him Sirius was the traitor, it was Dumbledore who had convinced him to leave Sirius to his fate. Sirius could barely hear over the roaring in his ears. He stared down at his old Headmaster as though looking at a stranger.

“I was wrong,” said Dumbledore quietly. “And I will not stop you from taking Harry. But I beg you to reconsider. I have only his best interests at heart.” Sirius felt his lip curl in disdain.

“Somebody’s best interests, perhaps,” he said. “But not Harry’s.”

And with that, he turned and led Remus from the office, leaving Dumbledore to contemplate the sudden destruction of his plans in solitude.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

After informing Dumbledore that Harry will never, ever be returning to the Dursleys, Sirius and Remus now have to decide what to do next. Where can they go? How can they keep Harry safe? And can they reconcile their own differences in order to help Harry?

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to the people who commented and left kudos, I appreciate it super muchly! I hope you enjoy this chapter, I'm really loving writing this concept. It's been flitting about my writery head for a few years, it feels so good to finally get it out. :) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius, once again in the form of a giant black dog, trotted ahead of Remus as they emerged from Dumbledore’s office, down one corridor and then another, propelled by a furious energy that made him feel as though his skin was crawling with insects.

“What are we going to tell Harry?” Remus murmured as they passed a pair of ghosts, who were talking quietly together about the evening’s events. Sirius’s claws faltered on the flagstones. He glanced around and led Remus into an empty classroom nearby.

“I don’t know what to tell him,” he admitted, as soon as he was in possession of human vocal cords. Despite the late—or rather, early—hour, the large windows still let in enough light to see by. Sirius glanced out at the moon, only a few days past full. Even after all these years, he kept time by it, remembered each stage. Remus would still be feeling the after-effects of the last moon, the aches and the exhaustion—sometimes worse. Once, Sirius would have known just how bad it had been. Remus wouldn’t let on if he was hurting now, not any more.

“Perhaps we should figure that out before we tell him,” Remus suggested, running a finger through his fading hair. In the dim light, the shadows under his eyes stood out like bruises, the scars on his face resembling open wounds. Sirius felt a sudden, mad longing to bury his face in Remus’s chest, and immediately resented the pang of grief when he remembered why that would be a terrible idea. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes to quell any other unexpected urges and focused on the problem at hand.

“Harry trusts Dumbledore,” said Sirius sadly. “Admires him, even. I don’t think we should tell him we argued. It would only hurt him more.”

“I agree.” There was an awkward moment as they stood and stared at one another, the usual barriers between them worn down by the stress of the evening. Sirius huffed uncomfortably and looked away. He didn’t know what to think. Too much had happened, too fast. Fifteen years ago, perhaps he would have been able to deal with this, would have known what to do—or at least he would have
possessed the sheer stubborn bloody-mindedness that could substitute for a solid plan in a pinch. Now, he felt like he was wading through an ocean of uncertainty, just doing the best he could and hoping he didn’t hurt anyone else. At least, not more than he already had.

“Dumbledore’s right about one thing, though,” he said aloud. “We can’t take Harry anywhere until we’ve set up some kind of protection.” He could feel Remus’s eyes on him still, but he refused to look at him.

“The best protection is still the Fidelius Charm,” Remus said cautiously. Sirius’s lip twisted in disdain. “I know you don’t like it, any more than I do,” Remus continued, “but we must think about Harry now.”

“I am thinking about Harry,” Sirius said retorted. “Which is why we’ll use the fucking Fidelius Charm, and I’ll even let Dumbledore perform it himself.” He ran his fingers through his long, black hair, tugging at it in frustration. “I don’t have to like it, though.”

Remus tutted and reach out, gently pulling Sirius’s hand away from his hair before he could do any damage to himself. Stepping closer, he gathered the tangled mess and pulled it into an approximation of a bun behind Sirius’s head, securing it with a silent charm. Sirius batted his hand away as soon as he was done, and stepped back, shocked at how easily they fell into their old, familiar patterns. James had always laughed at Remus’s habit of tying back Sirius’s hair, but Remus had done it anyway, preventing Sirius from ripping it out of his head when he was angry, or from chewing on it when he was anxious. Sirius scowled at him in the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” said Remus softly. “I didn’t think.” Sirius opened his mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but it somehow turned into another sigh before it could escape. Like it or not, and he wasn’t sure which he felt more, he and Remus needed one another. Harry needed them.

“We should talk to Minerva,” he said, determinedly changing the subject. “If anyone can tell us what to do, it’s her.” He forced a wry grin and Remus chuckled in return.

“Lead the way, Pads.”

They found Minerva McGonagall in her office, still wearing a cloak, as though she’d just come in from the grounds. She eyed both of them with suspicion as they entered, and Sirius had to fight the urge to straighten his robes. No matter how much time passed, Minerva McGonagall would always be their teacher. It was written into her bones.

“I don’t know why I’m surprised,” she said dryly, eyeing Sirius critically. “I suppose Potter had something to do with your escape last year?” Sirius shifted uncomfortably. He hadn’t anticipated being interrogated as though he were a teenager caught sneaking food from the kitchen, and he didn’t enjoy it.

“And I suppose a certain rumour about illegal Animaguses and Peter Pettigrew being a secret Death Eater might just have a grain of truth to it?”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” asked Remus with a smile.

“Not much,” Minerva replied primly. “Although I don’t know why Headmaster looked so upset when I left him just now. Perhaps you can tell me?” she asked, waving them both into seats on the other side of her desk and tapping her wand on the kettle to bring it to the boil. Remus and Sirius
glanced at one another uncomfortably. They had never quite been sure how much they’d really
managed to get past her when they’d been at school, but she certainly had a knack for knowing
when they were up to something. She also had a knack for reading the Headmaster. Sirius doubted
anyone other than Minerva would have noticed that anything was wrong. The man was as
infuriatingly unreadable as stone when he wanted to be.

“We told him Harry will be coming home with us,” said Remus, and Sirius could see him fighting
the nervous urge to jiggle one knee, the way he’d always done. When will everything stop being
about that time? He glanced back at Minerva, and was pleased to discover they’d managed to
surprise her.

“Good grief, why?” she asked. “Surely you know Harry stays with his family for his own
protection?” Remus snorted softly and Sirius grimaced.

“They’re abusing him, Pr— Minerva. Harry’s frightened of them.” He glanced at Remus and did his
best to keep his voice level as his stomach started tying itself in knots again. “We didn’t know until
he told Remus, just now.”

He looked up again to see the blood drain from Minerva’s face, her lips pressed together and her
eyes widening in horror. For a full thirty seconds, she couldn’t move or speak. Then she raised a
shaking hand and pointed her wand at the kettle, which poured hot water over teabags in three cups.
She seemed more shocked than Sirius had ever seen her.

“I knew he didn’t have a happy time with them,” she said after a moment. “But he never said, not
even to Molly, or she would have never let him go back there.” She looked up again, and Sirius
recognised the expression of haunted guilt in her eyes. It was the mirror of what he felt, what he
would feel forever now. “We should have known, shouldn’t we?”

“Yes,” said Remus. “We should have. And Dumbledore did know.” Minerva’s eyebrows contracted
fiercely.

“Surely he wouldn’t have left Harry there if he knew they were abusing him,” she said. Sirius
wondered if she was trying to convince them or herself. “I know you’re upset, but blaming
Dumbledore won’t help Harry.” Sirius felt heat rising up his cheeks and opened his mouth to say
something rude and probably regrettable, but Remus once again held up a hand to stop him. Some
things never change.

“He already admitted he knew about it, Minerva. There’s nothing to be gained from discussing it
further.”

“He told me Harry was safe from Voldemort with his family, but he never gave a hint, never said
anything about what was really happening.” Sirius felt a sharp pang of sympathy for her. He had
once admired Albus Dumbledore the way she did, but that had passed a long time ago. He wasn’t
sure how he felt about him now. It was all too difficult. What isn’t these days?

“Regardless of who knew what and when, we know now, and Harry will not be spending another
second with those—” Remus trailed off. He couldn’t bring himself to call them people, but Sirius
knew he couldn’t call them monsters either.

“Harry is under our protection now,” Sirius said firmly.

“Well,” said Minerva, pulling herself together. “You are right, of course. There is no point dividing
the few people who know about Voldemort’s return before we can even act. I know you’re angry,
but Dumbledore would have had his reasons. The first consideration is Harry’s safety, of course.”
“We can stay at my parents’ old place,” said Sirius. “The Ministry won’t be able to get in, so I’m in no danger there. My father was paranoid, and it’s got some formidable protections, but it’ll need more to keep Voldemort out. After the argument we just had with Dumbledore, though…”

“You thought I might be an appropriate go-between,” surmised Minerva. She looked sternly down her nose at him, then let out a long breath. “I have a suggestion that might ease the tension, although I don’t know that you’ll like it.”

“I don’t like any of this much,” Sirius muttered into his teacup.

“Oh, do stop complaining, Black, it’s not all bad,” Minerva said. “Voldemort’s only returned, the Ministry doesn’t believe us and will try and sabotage all of our efforts at every turn, and you’re still a wanted man.”

In spite of himself, Sirius laughed, the sound harsh and uncomfortable. He didn’t do enough of it these days. He’d forgotten how for a while.

“When you put it like that,” he said, favouring his old professor with a rakish grin. She smiled and shook her head, although Sirius thought there was a hint of sadness in that smile.

“Since the Order of the Phoenix is being recalled as we speak, and we have no base of operations, I suggest you offer your house for that purpose. It might go some way to glossing over your argument, or at least giving both sides a way to pretend it never happened,” she added dryly. “And Harry will always be surrounded by our best and strongest. There’s nowhere safer for him than the heart of the Order, not now the Ministry will be trying to discredit him.” Sirius ran a finger over his bottom lip and looked questioningly at Remus, who had been drinking his tea in silence. He smiled wearily.

“It is the most logical solution,” he said. “Would you be willing to make the offer, Minerva?”

“Certainly,” she replied. “But after we’ve all had some sleep, I think. I suggest you two head back to Remus’s for now and get some rest. There will be time to sort all this out in the morning.” Sirius stood and opened his mouth to protest, but Remus laid a hand on his arm and he subsided.

“Harry’s not going anywhere,” said Remus softly. “And we both need a few hours’ rest. We’ll be back before Harry wakes up.”

“Use my Floo,” said Minerva, gesturing to the fire in the corner. Sirius chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. He’d promised Harry they’d be there when he woke up. But a glance at Remus’s tired face decided him. He stepped toward the fire and took a handful of Floo Powder from the pot on the mantelpiece.

“We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he said, before he turned and followed Remus into the fire.

Sirius blinked as they emerged into the cold, grey darkness of Remus’s tiny flat, a single, low-ceilinged room at the top of a dingy Muggle house that had been turned into flats back in the 1950s and left to its own devices ever since. The greenish flicker from their Floo fire flickered out, leaving them in almost total darkness. Remus waved his wand vaguely at the fireplace, and then at several lamps placed apparently at random about the place. Sirius looked around curiously—he’d never seen this place, hadn’t been able to picture the kind of home Remus Lupin would have now he was so much older, and so much more tired.

The room itself had seen better days. The plastered ceiling sagged a little between the beams, and Lupin would have to duck to fit under the door frames. An old wrought-iron bedstead took up most
of the room, a small kitchenette crammed into one corner the rest of it. There was a tiny table, which, like every other flat surface was mostly crammed with second-hand books, and a single armchair in front of the fire. It was the home of someone who never had visitors, and didn’t expect any. And yet, for all that, it was welcoming, almost cosy. Perhaps it was merely Remus’s presence that made it feel that way—the blanket tossed over the back of the armchair, the dog-eared copy of *Lysander’s Theory of Transfigurative Limitation* left open on the table, the half-drunk cup of tea next to it, the single bottle of wine on the tiny benchtop, the clean dishes drying next to the sink. There was a small cauldron on the stove, the one Remus had always made his potion in, and a dog bed on the floor that had obviously been recently slept in. Clearly there was no one visiting from whom these things would need to be hidden. Sirius couldn’t tell if the weight in his stomach was sadness or longing or nostalgia, and he had very little interest in figuring out which.

He looked up to find Remus watching him warily, almost as though he were afraid of what Sirius would think of his home, as if he was afraid Sirius wouldn’t like it.

“I forgot to let Molly know we weren’t coming back,” Sirius said, to cover the awkwardness.

“I’ll send her a message,” said Remus, and the relief at having something to do other than deal with Sirius Black being in his house was obvious. He waved his wand and a blue-white shape appeared, a canine shape that deepened the crease between Remus’s eyes every time he saw it. Nevertheless, he spoke composedly to it, letting Molly know they’d return to the school before morning. It appeared to nod once, before it bounded away through the wall.

“Of course not,” he said. “There’s nothing I can do about it, though, so I make do.” Sirius instantly felt guilty for bringing it up. It was hardly Remus’s fault, all this.

“We should get some rest,” he said. He fiddled with the inside of his pocket for a moment. “I’m sorry if I scared you, before. I should’ve sent a— a longer message.” He didn’t say *I should’ve talked to you sooner*. He also didn’t say *we should’ve figured this out by now*. He didn’t have the right words for that. This apology would have to do for now.

Remus turned back to him, running a hand over the back of his neck.

“I understand,” he said. “Considering what had just happened, you can hardly be blamed for being brief.” He paused, leaning against the bench as he tested the words in his head. “I’m grateful—” He shook his head with a wry half-smile, as though laughing at his own incoherence, before looking up and meeting Sirius’s gaze. “Thank you for contacting me. I know it can’t have been easy.”

As it had when Remus had first appeared in the Hospital Wing, the tension sitting in Sirius’s chest seemed to ease a little, as though there was a chance things might be all right after all. As though there was a chance…

“No matter what happened between us, Harry needs both of us,” he said, and he knew it was true. There was no one else in the world who could care for Harry as much as they did, no one who knew his history, his parents’ history, the way they did. Even Molly couldn’t offer the boy that. They were family. Remus smiled, a sad, tired smile, and nodded. There was a silence in which both of them wanted to speak and neither of them knew what to say, but it felt as though there was at least the
possibility of words now, sometime, when they had more time.

“I’ll take the armchair,” Remus said. “We’ll need to go back in two hours if we want to be there before Harry wakes.” Sirius opened his mouth to argue, and caught Remus’s amused gaze. *Are you two really arguing over who gets to be the gentleman?* Lily had always laughed at their tendency to fight over who got to be more uncomfortable. The corner of his mouth lifted, but his momentary amusement was suddenly overtaken by a huge yawn, and he realised how tired he really was.

“I’m too tired to argue with you,” he said, shuffling the few steps to the bed and collapsing on top of the covers. He tried not to think about how dirty and dishevelled he was as he kicked his shoes off and curled up on his side. “Wake me up when it’s time to go,” he muttered. The last thing he remembered was Lupin chuckling softly as he tucked the blanket around himself, settling into the armchair with his eyes on the flickering fire.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Remus and Sirius return to Hogwarts to collect Harry. How will Dumbledore react? What are the Order's plans, now Voldemort has returned?

Chapter Notes

Thank you again to everyone who left comments, it means so much to us writery types! I'm so glad you're enjoying it, and I hope I can live up to expectations!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was far too early and Sirius was far too comfortable when he became aware of someone moving about nearby, telling him to wake up. He mumbled something indistinct and yanked the blanket, which he didn’t remember pulling over himself last night, over his head, refusing to return to full consciousness. The voice came closer, and the blanket was tugged back from his face.

“Pads, wake up.” Sirius groaned and pushed his face into the pillow to block out the light, but he managed to identify the voice as Remus’s. He grabbed the hand that was currently shaking his shoulder and tugged, attempting to pull the hand’s owner into bed so he’d stop trying to wake him up.

“C’mon back t’bed,” he muttered.

“Sirius, wake up,” Remus’s voice commanded, as the hand pulled itself away. “For Merlin’s sake,” the voice muttered to itself. “You’d think by the age of 36 you’d be able to get yourself out of bed like an adult.” Sirius became fully and very suddenly awake as he registered where he was and why he was supposed to be getting out of bed while it was still dark outside.

“It’s nearly six,” said Remus, who looked unreasonably awake, although hardly well-rested. “I told Molly we’d be back by then.”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Sirius through a huge yawn. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he added guiltily, grateful for the hair that was hiding his blush at the thought of trying to pull Remus into bed with him. “I wasn’t really with it.” Remus snorted.

“Yes, I spotted that,” he said. “Are you getting up, or not?” Sirius sighed and slung his legs over the side of the bed. In less than ten minutes, he had showered in Remus’s tiny bathroom, restrained his wayward hair in the neatest bun he could manage, and was dressed in some of Remus’s spare robes, which he’d had to shrink down in order to avoid looking like a child in their parents’ clothes. He was now clutching a metallic mug with a lid, which Remus had called a travel mug, which was full of life-giving tea.
“Why do mornings have to happen so early?” he muttered resentfully as Remus passed him the pot of Floo Powder from the mantelpiece.

“For someone who’s been on the run for a year, you are unbelievably soft,” Remus observed with a grin.

“Oh, shut up,” said Sirius, and stepped into the fire.

To nobody’s surprise, Minerva was already sitting at her desk when he stepped out of her fireplace and into the office, making sure the ash from his robes fell on the hearth rug and nowhere else.

“He’s still asleep,” she said, not looking up from what looked like a stack of first-year exams.

“Oh, ‘Molly’s waiting for you in the Hospital Wing.’” The fire flared green again as Remus appeared.

“How much do you think we should tell her?” Sirius asked, watching Minerva carefully. Her quill paused and she looked up, her brows contracted in thought.

“The truth,” she said. “I think we can all see the danger of keeping secrets in times like these.” She paused. “I hope you’ll be fair to Albus, however. I know how you feel about this, particularly you, Black, but things like this aren’t always black and white.” Sirius snorted at the pun he was almost certain was intentional.

“Don’t worry,” he said bitterly. “We’ll keep things friendly.” Remus shot him a quelling look.

“We know what’s at stake,” he said firmly. “Both of us do.”

Despite his professed confidence in Sirius’s ability to behave himself, Remus couldn’t help but mutter instructions to the black dog as they hurried upstairs and across three corridors to the Hospital Wing. There wasn’t much Sirius could do about it but suffer in silence, since he doubted snapping at Remus would really get his point across. By the time they reached the entrance to the hospital, however, his hackles were starting to rise in irritation. He followed Remus through the door calmly enough, but he couldn’t quite contain himself once they’d made sure Madam Pomfrey was still sleeping in her room.

“Merlin’s beard, Moons,” he said, turning abruptly back into a human. “Are you going to lecture me all morning?”

“It’s very tempting,” said Remus through gritted teeth. Molly poked her head around the screen that shielded Harry from curious eyes and looked questioningly at them. She still seemed to view Sirius with some suspicion, but she was obviously determined to keep it to herself for now.

“I was wondering when you two would turn up,” she whispered, coming forward. “Is everything alright?”

“Just fine, Molly,” said Remus, smiling reassuringly. “How’s Harry?”

“Still asleep,” she said. “But I don’t know what to do when he wakes up. Albus said he’d be staying at school, but honestly, that can’t be good for him, not after what happened. I’d offer to take him home with us, but, oh, I don’t know, he’s always so insistent on sending him back to those relatives of his.” She trailed off, as though realising she was rambling. “What was it you needed to tell us, anyway? What was so urgent last night?” Remus glanced uneasily at Sirius. Molly was one of the most loving, caring people they’d ever met, but she did rather have a tendency to explode when someone she loved was hurt. It wouldn’t help to have her do that now.

“Perhaps we should sit,” suggested Remus, gesturing to a pair of empty beds nearby. Sirius sat
beside him, and Molly sank onto the edge of the bed facing them, her face an open picture of concern.

“Harry told me something very upsetting last night,” said Remus. “And it’s had rather a significant effect on our plans.” Molly made an exasperated noise in her throat.

“Morgana’s robes, Remus, I’m not a child,” she snapped in a whisper—quite a feat, Sirius thought with a tiny quirk of his lips. “What did he tell you?”

“The Dursleys were abusing him,” he said bluntly, ignoring the Look Remus shot at him. “So Remus and I are taking him home with us.” Molly’s mouth fell open and she stared at them for so long Sirius started to wonder if they should be calling the nurse.

“Oh, the poor boy,” she murmured eventually, returning to planet earth with both feet running. “But surely he’d be better off coming home with us, where there are more people to take care of him.” She either didn’t notice the thunderous expression descending onto Sirius’s face, or she didn’t care to notice, as she stood and started to pace back and forth, wringing her hands. “He could sleep up in Ron’s room, of course, they could keep each other company.” Remus laid a careful hand on Sirius’s arm as she continued. “Oh, the poor dear, no wonder he always looked so miserable. I had no idea! And Dumbledore always said he had his reasons, but surely he can’t think this is a good idea—”

“Molly!” interrupted Remus. She stopped in her pacing and looked up, startled. “Harry is coming with us to Sirius’s home. With Dumbledore recalling the Order, Sirius has offered it as a base of operations. Harry will be safe there, he’ll have the best protection.”

“We’re going to take Harry home today,” he said, forcing his voice to remain even. While he’d like nothing better than to throw an impressive tantrum, he had to remember that Harry’s welfare depended on his behaving like a sensible adult—not to mention the tantrum Madam Pomfrey would no doubt throw if she found a convicted murderer in her Hospital Wing.

“I expected as much,” said Albus calmly. “Minerva told me about your suggestion, Sirius, and I am very grateful for the offer of Grimmauld Place as an Order safehouse. If you are amenable, I can arrange to have the protections set up immediately. Filius is ready to perform the Fidelius Charm at your leisure, and I am quite at your service as Secret Keeper, if you will allow me the honour.” Sirius couldn’t quite keep the surprise off his face at Dumbledore’s easy capitulation—nor at the surprisingly diplomatic decision to have Professor Flitwick perform the Fidelius Charm. Not everything is black and white, he reminded himself dryly. That didn’t alter his decision, however.

“Remus will be Secret Keeper,” he said, firmly but quite coolly. He met Dumbledore’s steady gaze unflinchingly.

“I understand your inclination,” said the Headmaster delicately, “but given the work Remus will shortly be undertaking for the Order, are you sure this is the most practical decision?” Sirius glanced at Remus, who seemed to be trying to fade into the background. His hands were clasped behind his back and he was looking at the ground, his grey-streaked hair falling over his forehead and hiding his eyes. Sirius pursed his lips. He knew Remus would accept whatever decision they made, and for some reason that infuriated him. That he didn’t know just who he was angry with, or why, did not help his temper. This is about Harry, he told himself.
“It is my home, Headmaster. Mine and Harry’s now, and Remus’s, as long as he wants it.” He avoided looking at Remus this time. He couldn’t quite summon the courage to see his expression. “Remus will be Secret Keeper.” Dumbledore looked from one man to the other, his expression once again that of a man who couldn’t quite figure them out.

“Very well,” he said at last.

“We may as well get that out of the way now, while Harry’s asleep,” suggested Remus, finally stepping forward. Sirius found his heart beating rather faster than necessary, and he was still quite unable to look directly at Remus. The fifteen minutes it took Flitwick to respond to Dumbledore’s message (sent via house elf) was excruciating. Molly and Remus carried on the conversation with admirable determination, Dumbledore contributing whenever he felt so inclined, and staring out the window if he couldn’t be bothered. His usual eccentric, unruffled air—the absolute sense of serene confidence in his own ability that had once put Sirius so at ease—was leaving Sirius distinctly ruffled. If Flitwick had taken a single minute longer, he wasn’t sure he could have prevented himself from giving Dumbledore another piece of his mind. The arrival of the Charms professor, however, reminded him of what was to come. And of the last time he’d been involved in this process.

“Molly, would you be so kind as to ensure we are not disturbed?” said Dumbledore. “I don’t have time at present to explain Sirius’s presence to anyone else.” Molly nodded and took up a post just outside Poppy’s door, muttering a brief charm to keep their voices from reaching the Matron.

“And I will make sure our young patient remains undisturbed,” said Dumbledore, moving toward Harry’s bed so he could keep an eye on the sleeping boy. “Now, if you would, Filius.”

The process itself was quite short, but very complex. Sirius wasn’t sure he would be at all capable of duplicating the spell, and Charms had always been one of his favourite subjects. It was bad enough that they were standing in the middle of the Hospital Wing, with the possibility of being interrupted at any time, and with Dumbledore watching on. It was bad enough that he and Remus had to stand with their hands joined for what seemed like an interminable length of time. Sirius shivered as he felt the magic binding them together, and wondered how Peter could have felt that same magic, that same connection, and still betrayed his best friends to their deaths. He scowled and pushed the thought from his mind.

“The Charm is complete,” announced Flitwick, after about ten minutes. “Remus, you are the only one who may reveal the location of Sirius’s house. I’ll leave it to you and Albus to arrange the details. If you’ll excuse me, I should be in the Great Hall for breakfast, keep an eye on things after last night.” With a brief farewell, he was gone, leaving them once again alone.

“Remus, I’m afraid your services will be required, sooner rather than later,” said Dumbledore, coming forward.

“I was prepared for that, Albus,” Remus replied. “As soon as Harry is settled at home this afternoon, I’m at your service.”

“Very well. I’m afraid the Diggorys wish to see Harry this morning. They want to know what happened in the maze.”

“It’s not going to happen,” said Sirius harshly. “I know they just lost their son, but I won’t let Harry be put through that again, not now. He’s been through enough, Dumbledore.”

“It’s fine,” came a voice from behind them. Sirius spun around to see Harry standing at the foot of his bed, looking slightly dazed, but a little stronger than last night. “I’ll see them.” Remus started toward him, his expression gentle.
“Harry, you don’t have to, not yet,” he said. “There will be time for that when you’ve rested.”

“No,” said Harry stubbornly. “I know what they must feel like.” He paused and swallowed hard, and Sirius’s heart ached as he saw the effort the boy was putting into staying calm.

“If that’s what you want,” he said reluctantly. “And then you’re coming home.” Harry looked up at him, and Sirius saw the flash of fear in his eyes. “With me,” he added quickly. “You’re coming home with me. You’re not going back to those Muggles.”

Harry stared at him, his expression warring between hope, confusion, and fear.

“I thought I couldn’t go with you,” he said.

“That was until we found out what those… people… are doing to you,” said Remus, barely controlling the anger in his voice. To lose his temper now would only upset Harry. “Now that we know, we won’t ever let them near you again.” Harry stumbled back a step and sat down hard on the end of his bed.

“I didn’t mean—” he started. “I’m sorry I—” He faltered again, apparently at a loss, and Sirius felt his heart break a little more. He stepped forward swiftly and knelt in front of his godson, taking Harry’s warm hands between his two cold ones.

“Harry, you have nothing to be sorry for,” he said fervently. “You did nothing wrong. I’m only sorry, so very sorry, that we didn’t do this sooner.” He paused and waited for Harry to look at him. There were tears gathering in the corner of Harry’s eyes, although he was clearly trying to hide them. “None of this is your fault, Harry,” Sirius whispered. “None of it. I promise.” Harry’s lip trembled, just a little, and he nodded, dropping his gaze to his knees.

“Poppy’s coming,” hissed Molly, scuttling toward them. Sirius looked up at Harry and grinned suddenly.

“Guess I’d better not get caught like this,” he said. In another moment, the great black dog was sitting in front of Harry, one paw resting on his knee. Harry smiled gratefully.

“Don’t worry, Harry dear,” Molly said softly, coming to his side and putting a motherly arm around him. “It’s all going to be alright now.”

It was a day of business and boredom, heartbreak and exhaustion. Sirius sat by Harry’s side as he met with Mr and Mrs Diggory, his big head resting on his godson’s arm as he answered their questions, talked to them of their son, and listened to them speak. His admiration of this miraculous boy grew as he listened to Harry. Despite everything he’d been through, he still cared about these people, still felt their pain. How many other people could do as much?

Remus was left to run between Sirius and Dumbledore, and Minerva and Dumbledore, and Minerva and Sirius, as he organised for Harry’s things to be packed away, told certain people how to access Grimmauld Place and what to do when they got there, and tried to prevent Sirius from stalking up to Dumbledore’s office to give him another lecture. Ron and Hermione didn’t make things easier, running up to the Hospital Wing as soon as they were free to see Harry, and refusing point blank to leave him.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry assured them, managing a lopsided grin. “I’ll see you soon, and I’ll write, I promise.” Ron nodded stoically, but Hermione still looked unconvinced.
“But what about Sirius?” she pointed out. “He’s still on the run.”

“It’ll be fine,” Harry said dismissively, waving a careless hand. “Dumbledore’s sorted everything.” Sirius couldn’t help his hackles raising at the satisfied nod Hermione gave in response to this statement, but fortunately nobody noticed.

And finally it was time to go. Remus, Molly and Minerva somehow contrived to lead Harry and Sirius through the corridors around dinner time without bumping into any inconvenient students. The few who did pass them contented themselves with staring at Harry and continuing on. Harry himself seemed to withdraw into himself, not paying the slightest attention to what was going on around him.

“We’ll see you very soon,” Molly whispered, pulling him into a tight hug on the hearth rug in Minerva’s study. “You owl us if you need anything at all.” Harry offered a small smile and waved goodbye as she stepped into the fireplace and said “The Burrow”. Remus handed Harry a small piece of paper, on which was written The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix are at 12 Grimmauld Place, London, before stepping into the fire. Harry waved goodbye to Minerva, then followed.

Sirius turned to the professor and offered a tentative smile. Her stern expression had him wondering what he’d done wrong now.

“Good luck, Sirius,” she said quietly. “I think you might need it.” Sirius pursed his lips. Although he’d rather stick his wand in a hornet’s nest than admit it, he knew she was right.

“I’m sure I’ll see you soon,” he said, and stepped into the fire. He emerged into the shadowy dimness of a kitchen that hadn’t been cleaned for some time. Turning to Harry and Remus, he hoisted a reasonable simulacrum of his old grin onto his face.

“I don’t know about you, but I think takeout is in order.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The first night in Grimmauld Place brings up some old emotions.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who commented, this fic is so much fun and you guys just make it better!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sirius watched Harry carefully as they sat clustered around one end of the long kitchen table, upon which was spread a selection of various dishes that Remus had been forced to collect — having food delivered to a house no one could find was always a difficulty, and neither Harry nor Sirius could safely leave the house. Sirius suspected Harry felt almost as claustrophobic about this imprisonment as he did himself, although he couldn’t possibly feel the same way Sirius felt about being stuck in this house, of all houses. Just sitting in the kitchen made the scars on his chest itch. He had to force himself not to start chewing on his hair again.

The house was bad enough on its own, without the added influence of bad memories. Sirius had yet to see Kreacher, the ancient house elf who still, at least in theory, cared for the house. For all he knew, the little beast could have crawled off and died somewhere. Everything was covered with a thick layer of grime, the windows almost impossible to see through, antique spider webs criss-crossing the ceiling with no sign of their former occupants. It was a house that had been left to die. And he wanted more than anything to let it get on with it, yet here they were. How tragically ironic, that this house should be the last safehaven for the unwanted son of the Noble House of Black and his blood-traitor godson.

“I think the kitchen will be a good place to start cleaning up,” said Remus, his sudden observation startling both his companions, who’d been staring moodily at their food, lost in their separate maudlin contemplations. Sirius blinked a couple of times and looked around, wrinkling his nose at the layers of grease and dirt covering every surface, and the soot stains that crawled up the chimney and over the ceiling.

“At this point it’d be easier to just Reductor the whole thing and start again,” he said, half wistfully.

“Well, that is your usual method of cleaning,” said Remus with a grin. Sirius tutted in reply and
maintained a dignified silence. Remus snorted and leaned towards Harry. “You should have seen what he did to our old living room when I asked him to clean the carpets.” Harry glanced at Sirius, the hint of a smile sidling cautiously onto his face, as if afraid to be caught in such hostile territory.

“He’s exaggerating,” declared Sirius, waving his plastic fork in the air. “I slightly misjudged the experimental Charm I was using, that’s all.”

"He set the couch on fire."

Harry snorted, almost choking on a mouthful of curry. He swallowed hurriedly and grinned at the image of Sirius attempting to clean. Somehow, although he didn’t know his godfather well, the idea of him accidentally setting the couch on fire didn’t surprise him at all.

“Well, I say he set it on fire,” said Remus.

“Moony —”

“It was more sort of an explosion, if I recall.” By this time Remus and Harry were both chortling, and Sirius could feel the corner of his mouth twitching. He refused to sacrifice his dignity, however, and glowered at the pair of them as fiercely as he could manage.

“Traitor,” he said. “You watch I don’t start sharing embarrassing stories of you.” Remus grinned shamelessly.

“Harry’s still a minor. You can’t tell him those for at least another three years.”

This time Harry really did choke, and Sirius had to lean over and thump on the back while trying not to laugh. Harry, bright red and wheezing slightly, stared at his new guardians.

“I don’t think I want to hear them in three years either,” he said fervently. Sirius sniggered.

“Oh dear, you have led a sheltered life, my dear Harry,” he said. “Perhaps I should tell you some of the things we got up to.” Harry raised a defensive hand, as though fending off a potential threat.
“No thanks!”

Sirius pouted dramatically, and Harry couldn’t help smiling again.

“How about a tour of the house?” Remus suggested quickly, as though afraid Sirius really would start trying to corrupt his godson’s innocent mind on the first night in his custody. Sirius shrugged, his earlier uneasiness returning.

“It might be a bit risky,” he said. “I don’t know what’s in all these rooms, there could be anything living upstairs.” Harry grimaced.

“Does that mean we have to sleep in the kitchen?” he asked, looking around in dismay. Sirius grinned again, forcing aside his feelings of discomfort.

“Don’t be daft. C’mon, let’s go see what my mad mother got up to after I left.” He couldn’t help the hard note that crept into his voice at the thought of his mother. He knew Remus was looking at him, but he pretended not to notice, assuming an air of nonchalance as he brandished his wand. “Come, fellow adventurers!” he declared, gesticulating wildly at the kitchen door. “Let us once more into the unknown!”

Harry looked as though he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or be nervous, and settled for an uneasy mixture of both. Nevertheless, he pulled out his wand and lit it, his curiosity to see where his godfather had grown up stronger than his nervousness.

The hallway was dark and creepy-looking, even in the bright wandlight. Various dust-shrouded shapes huddled in the gloom, the remains of cloaks, umbrellas, and hat stands turned into ghosts and monsters, the curtain-covered portraits lining the walls softening the outlines and making it impossible to distinguish where one shadow ended and the next began. Sirius couldn’t help the shudder that rippled down his spine as he stepped into the house. The kitchen had been bearable. It wasn’t somewhere he’d spent a lot of time when he was a child, but this was the hallway in which he’d stood, broken and bleeding, too old for his fifteen years and yet so much younger, and told his parents he’d had enough. He’d screamed every insult he could think of and a few he’d made up for good measure and slammed the door behind him. He hadn’t returned until they were both gone. He’d been Harry’s age then. It felt like a century had passed since then. It felt like yesterday.

He gasped and jumped, just a little, as he felt a warm arm brush against his. It could almost have been an accident, except that it was Remus’s arm. The reassuring warmth pressed against him just
long enough to remind him that he wasn't alone now. There was no one left to hurt him. He took a deep breath and hoped Harry hadn't noticed.

"As you can see, my parents didn't go in for cheerful decor," he joked half-heartedly. Harry grimaced, taking a few steps ahead of them and examining a lumpy shape against the wall.

"Is this a troll's foot?" he asked. Sirius stepped up behind him and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Yep," he said. "One of my grandfathers cut it off himself, apparently. Don't ask me which one, I don't actually care to know."

All three of them jumped as a sudden, deafening shriek filled the hallway. Harry and Sirius were immediately on the alert, wands held before them as they searched for the threat. Remus, however, had seen the source of the noise, and lowered his wand immediately--although judging from the expression on his face, he wasn't exactly in favour of whatever it was.

Sirius stepped forward and felt the colour drain from his face as he beheld one of the portraits that, until they had spoken, had been hidden behind curtains like the others in the hallway. Now the curtains had flung themselves open to reveal the screaming, ranting face of an older woman, her hair coming down from its old-fashioned cap, the skin yellowing and stretched, the eyes wild as spittle flecked its writhing lips.

"HOW DARE YOU RETURN HERE, SHAME OF MY FLESH!? HOW DARE YOU BESMIRCH THIS NOBLE HOUSE WITH YOUR FILTH?!" Remus raised his wand and wordlessly forced the curtains shut with a charm. The sudden silence echoed like a tomb.

Sirius couldn't move, couldn't breathe. He hadn't seen her the few times he'd been here before. He'd left before that portrait was painted, hadn't know it was there. He'd thought he'd escaped from her, that the memories of her would be all he'd have to contend with. But she was there, hanging in the hallway, next to those stairs, the ones whose marks he still wore on his ribs, sitting right where he'd have to walk to get to his bedroom, to the bathroom, to welcome guests. Will I ever be free of her? he thought frantically, his heart pounding in his chest as he stared at the closed curtains. He knew he should be moving on, should be doing something, saying something, but his brain had frozen, pummelled by memories and nightmares--sometimes they were one and the same.

"What was that?" asked Harry, sounding aghast. Sirius blinked. Harry. That's right. They were here for Harry. Him and Remus. Both here. For Harry. It was just a painting, that was all. Nothing more. He could throw it out tomorrow if he chose. He could burn it. He paused for a moment before replying, making sure his voice wouldn't betray him when he spoke. Harry didn't need to be
worrying about him right now.

"That was my charming mother," he said, falling back on his usual coping strategy of sarcasm and dark humour. "As you can see, I didn't inherit very much of her charming personality." Harry stared at him, open-mouthed.

"Your mother?" he asked. "But-- How--" He trailed off, blushing as he apparently realised his questions could be considered rude. Sirius smiled grimly, clenching his fingers tight around his wand to stop them trembling.

"My family and I didn't get on," he said simply. "I left home when I was fifteen." Harry looked up at him, his eyes wide and solemn. All of a sudden, it was very hard to see James in that thin, pale face. James had never suffered as Harry had, as Sirius had. He'd been the best friend Sirius had ever had, the first person to show him that not all people were evil. But he'd never understood, not really, what Sirius had lived through. Sirius's chest tightened. He wished Harry couldn't either.

"Shall we head upstairs?" Remus suggested quietly, meeting Sirius's gaze over Harry's head. *Three traumatised kids together,* Sirius thought sadly. *God what a disaster we are.*

"If there's another portrait of my mother, I'm doing to it what I did to that couch," he said aloud. Remus smiled gently, far too understanding, and Harry let out a nervous chuckle. Sirius turned and led the way upstairs.

They didn't bother with most of the closed off rooms. Magical houses tended to attract magical pests, and Sirius couldn't be certain that all the scutterlings and murmurings behind the closed doors were rats. Instead, they headed up to the top of the house, where Sirius was shocked to see his name still on his bedroom door, the parchment on which he'd scrawled it yellowing and curled, but the Permanent Sticking Charm he'd used still in effect. He'd fully expected his mother to have the door replaced, but here it was. *Sirius Orion Black.* The name he'd chosen, not the one forced on him. The final rift between him and his parents. He rubbed uneasily at his chest, the scars itching again, and reached for the door handle.

He stepped forward cautiously until he was in the middle of the room and stared around. It had changed no more than the label on the door. Everything was a little faded, a little yellowed, and very dusty, but it was exactly as he'd left it, right down to the scraps of paper that had been swept onto the floor in his hurry to leave, that fateful last day. He felt irrationally angry about that. It had no right not to have changed. And yet it was satisfying too, and oddly comforting, that he'd left a mark here, a reminder of himself, something his parents couldn't break or destroy, whatever their reasoning had been. He breathed in the musty air, and somehow it smelled different here, less damp, less depressing than the rest of the house. He waved his wand and lit the chandelier hanging in the centre of the room.
“I think you need a decent decorator as much as your parents did, Pads,” Remus opined from the doorway, where he and Harry had lingered. Sirius glanced back at them and found Harry blushing at the bikini babe posters stuck to the wall by the bed. Morgana’s pasty round buttocks, he thought. He looks less like James with every passing minute. Imagine being embarrassed by bikini models.

“How dare you cast aspersions on my most excellent taste?” cried Sirius, adopting his most affronted attitude and flouncing further into the room. “My sense of style has always been impeccable and you know it.”

“Tell that to the eyeliner you wore in sixth year,” Remus snorted. Harry’s eyes widened further.

“You wore eyeliner?” Sirius shook his head and grinned widely, wondering how on earth the most famous boy in the world had managed to remain so completely sheltered.

“I certainly did,” he said. “And for your information, I looked fabulous.” He narrowed his eyes at Remus in an exaggerated expression of disdain and started gathering the papers on the floor. They were mostly worthless, a few amateur portraits sketched into the corner of parchments, some hastily noted song lyrics that he’d long forgotten, a torn page of Potions notes written in such a hurry that it was practically illegible. He stacked them neatly and put them on the desk, not quite able to bring himself to throw them in the empty bin beside it.

Harry now stepped into the room, cautious as ever, as though he felt he might be invading. Remus remained in the doorway. Sirius felt a flicker of annoyance, and of hurt. It hadn’t been like this before. Remus had never kept himself separate like this, but now… Sirius sighed and turned back to his desk, flicking through the scraps of his old life he’d left behind. He found a small stack of photos and cackled triumphantly, holding them out to Harry.

“See, I told you I looked fabulous,” he said with a wink. Harry looked down at a picture of two sixteen-year-old wizards. One of them was almost painfully neat, dressed in jeans and a sweater, his shirt collar pressed and folded just so, his hair combed back from his scarred face. The other wore all black, his jeans and T-shirt both scattered with holes, his hands decorated with mesh gloves, and his eyes lined generously with black. His hair had possibly started in a bun, but now fell across his grinning face. Harry stared at the teenage version of his godfather, who waved happily up at him. Sirius glanced at Remus in amusement. Living with them would certainly be an education for Harry. Sirius pushed aside the momentary twinge of worry, one he’d not felt for some time—what if Harry was too sheltered? What would he say when he found out about Sirius’s… more personal history? Truth be told, they barely knew each other, family or not. What if Harry couldn’t handle Sirius’s occasional forays into Maximum Queer? What if he was uncomfortable with Sirius’s naturally flamboyant personality, the one he hoped to discover again, when things calmed down? What if he had a problem with his new guardian dating—not that dating had been a major
consideration for longer than Sirius felt inclined to dwell on. What if they were too different to be a proper family? He shook his head. Time enough for all that later. All that mattered now was that they were here, and they were safe. *And since when are families perfect?* he thought. *Just because he’s different, doesn’t mean things aren’t going to work out.*

Despite the temptation to continue digging around his own room, Sirius led them on to the other bedrooms on the top floor, including his bedrooms, finding them all in a state of severe disrepair. He felt a vicious sense of pleasure at the ruin of his parents’ room. Perhaps his own mark had been left more strongly on the house than theirs after all. He knew he was putting off one last room, however, one he’d been trying not to think about. *Regulus.* His thoughts had been skating away from the name since they’d first arrived. His little brother. The one bright spot of his younger days. The first one to know his secret. The first one to use his name. The one who comforted him when he had nightmares, as he did in return.

The one who broke. Except when he broke, he didn’t explode like Sirius, but folded in on himself, collapsing into a mere shell, a puppet whose strings were pulled by someone else. It had started when Sirius had gone to school and ended when Sirius left the house, leaving him alone with their parents. The memory of those dark, expressionless eyes watching from the stairs still haunted him. He’d never even got to say good bye, and he hated Regulus for it, even while guilt sometimes felt like it was tearing him in two. He should have helped his brother. Perhaps he’d still be alive.

Sirius’s sardonic comments on the general state of the house grew darker and harsher with each room, despite his attempts to keep things light. Remus stayed close, hovering close enough to touch, but not touching. Sirius thanked his lucky stars--ha!--that Harry was too interested in the house to really pay attention to Sirius’s quickly sinking mood.

Sirius paused outside Regulus’s door. It looked as untouched as Sirius’s had, and Sirius wasn’t sure if he hoped more that it was destroyed like the others, or in tact. He held his breath and opened the door, barely noticing when Harry followed him inside.

Dust motes twinkled in their wand light, making the room look mysterious and creepy. Sirius lit the chandelier to reveal a room whose layout was the mirror of his. The similarity ended there, however. There were no bikini babes on the walls, no pictures of motorcycles, no mess, no *life.* Text books were stacked neatly on the desk, along with writing materials laid out so precisely they could have been measured with a slide rule. The only hint that a living person had ever inhabited this space was the Slytherin crest hanging over the desk and the photograph of a green-clad quidditch team leaning against the ink pot.

“My brother,” he said quietly, handing the photo to Harry. “Regulus. He died a long time ago.” Harry looked down at Regulus’s tiny figure in the photograph, studying the other Seeker as though he could learn something important about him from this single photograph.
“I’m sorry,” he said softly, handing the photo back. Sirius placed it carefully back where it had come from.

“It was his own fault,” he said wearily. “He joined the Death Eaters, as soon as he left Hogwarts. My parents were so proud.” His lip curled at the memory. He hadn’t been speaking to them then, but he’d heard. “The fool got so far in before he realised what they were really about, and then he panicked. They killed him when he tried to leave. You don’t become a Death Eater just on a whim.” He laughed harshly, the sound completely lacking in humour. Harry stared up at him.

“How did you--” As before, he couldn’t seem to finish the question.

“Family isn’t everything, Harry,” Remus said, staring down at the photograph. “Sometimes you have to make your own.” He looked up at Sirius, his eyes warm and gentle, and Sirius felt some of the weight lift from his chest. Just a little.

“Well,” said Sirius briskly, running as always from the threat of too much emotion. “Since this is the only other livable room for now, you might as well stay here, Harry. If that’s all right?” he added, suddenly nervous. Harry looked around and nodded.

“Thanks, Sirius,” he said, turning to his godfather, his face serious. “This is great.” Sirius smiled and ruffled Harry’s tousled head.

“Well, I don’t know about you,” he said, “but there’s no way I’m sleeping tonight. You want to make a start on that kitchen?”

Harry groaned exaggeratedly, but followed them out of the bedroom.

“It could be worse, Harry,” said Remus. “You could be stuck reordering Sirius’s bandana collection.”

“On second thought, the kitchen sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes
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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hey there, lovelies! Thanks to you awesome people once again, I'm so grateful for the people commenting and sharing the love. I'm sorry I keep writing chapters that cover such a short amount of time. I have SO MUCH STUFF PLANNED OUT, so many exciting things to get to!! But I guess this means more fic for you lovelies? So... silver linings I guess?
I will be posting weekly for now, I'll throw in an extra chapter whenever I have some spare time but uni dropped on me like a very droppy thing and I am SWAMPED. So weekly it is for now.
Love you all so much! Stay awesome!

Remus bid them both farewell as soon as they returned downstairs.

“I’m afraid I’ve already stayed longer than I planned. Dumbledore will be waiting for me.” Nevertheless, he hovered on the kitchen hearth, as though unwilling to leave them. Sirius wished he’d hurry up, before the words please don’t go, Moony made themselves from his rapidly-sinking stomach to his mouth. Harry’s expression was one of dismay, and Remus put a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You understand why I have to go, don’t you Harry,” he said gently. Harry’s expression grew more determined, and he nodded. Remus looked over Harry’s shoulder at Sirius, his own expression unfathomable. Sirius hoped what he was thinking wasn’t visible on his face, but after so many years in prison, he wasn’t sure he still had the ability to hide his emotions. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to contact you for a while.”

Sirius nodded, precisely as Harry had, and forced a smile. He suspected it was more of a grimace, and perhaps a pathetic one at that, because Remus stepped forward and briefly hugged both Sirius and Harry, before turning and Flooing back to Hogwarts without another word. Sirius watched the green flames flicker back to orange and forced himself not to sigh. There were so many things he should have said, that he wanted to say, and he hoped he’d never say. Everything just felt wrong like this.

“So,” he said, clapping Harry on the back. “Where d’you think we should start?”

It took them two full days to clean the kitchen, during which they heard once from Remus, who sent them the briefest letter by owl to let them know he was safe. Sirius tried not to dwell on his absence as he and Harry Scourgified the sink and floor and walls and table and pots and pans, over and over, peeling back layer after layer of grime and grease.

Their work was made slightly easier when Molly arrived the following day with a basket of food and a veritable arsenal of Mrs Skower’s Heavy Duty Magical Cleaning Products, which she quickly put to good use. Sirius thought she was a little harsh in her comments on the incompetence of an ex-convict who’d spent part of the last year living off rats, and a fourteen-year-old wizard who lived in a castle full of house elves. He was too grateful to have clean plates off which to eat, however, that he managed keep his retorts mostly under his breath.
Other members of the Order dropped in briefly, renewing old friendships and attempting to be polite about their new safehouse. Sirius wasn’t sure which he preferred less—watching people he’d once fought beside try and make awkward small talk that didn’t involve words like ‘prison’, ‘murder’, or ‘why the fuck didn’t you kill Pettigrew when you had the chance you useless prat’, or being left alone with Harry in this house that echoed with bad memories and rats.

Perhaps it would have been easier if Harry had been feeling better, but after what he’d been through, Sirius was honestly surprised Harry could even get out of bed in the morning. He never complained, never mentioned what had happened, just ate when instructed and cleaned from morning ’til night. Sirius watched him carefully to make sure he didn’t do himself any harm, but he felt completely helpless in the face of this blank stoicism. He tried vainly to make conversation, and Harry would join in when required, but Sirius could tell he wasn’t really there. He was friendly, and seemed to be grateful to have something to do. He greeted the Order members politely, and didn’t attempt to avoid company. But when left to his own devices, Harry would sink into a fugue state, as though simply waiting for more instructions. It was like watching someone under a poorly-performed Imperius Curse, and Sirius hadn’t the faintest idea how to help him. He barely knew this silent, tousle-haired boy. He didn’t know what he liked, other than flying, didn’t know how to talk to him, didn’t know how he usually spent his summers. All he knew was that he was hurting, and that he wasn’t ready to let anyone in. So they cleaned.

“How in the ever loving fuck did all of this end up here?” Sirius burst out on the third morning. He looked positively wild, with his hair tied back only in theory, and in reality sticking up at various impossible angles, his sleeves rolled up past his elbows, and his robes smudged with filth. Harry grunted in reply, muttering cleaning charms under his breath as he attempted to clean a row of cupboards, the last challenge in this room. They’d both been surprised to discover that underneath the grime, the cupboards were made of a pleasantly light, greyish timber—Sirius had half-remembered visions from his childhood of a dark cavern of a kitchen, but when it was properly clean, it would be surprisingly light and airy. Molly and Sirius’s cousin Nymphadora Tonks had already added to the pleasant environment by hanging several bunches of dried herbs over the long table, and returning the burnished copper pots to their proper place along the wall by the stove. Where they were currently working was still the colour of milky coffee, although this was an improvement on the espresso hue it had possessed only an hour earlier.

“Hey Sirius,” he said, tugging on the handle of the last cupboard, a tiny, almost pointless triangle tucked in next to the sink. “I can’t get this cupboard open. D’you know what’s in here?” Sirius crossed the kitchen and gave the handle a sharp pull. It didn’t move a millimetre.

“Merlin only knows,” he said. “Maybe we should just let it alone. There could be anything in there.”

Harry surveyed the cupboard with an apprehensive expression, but raised his wand nevertheless.

“That’s what you said about the pans with the rats in them,” he said, standing and preparing to force the cupboard open with magic. “There was nothing scary about them either.”

“Except their beady little eyes,” Sirius muttered. “All right, if you insist. You’re more persnickety than Molly, honestly.”

Harry snorted disbelievingly and pointed his wand at the cupboard, muttering “Alohomora”. Sirius opened his mouth to explain that a cupboard that was stuck wouldn’t respond to an unlocking charm, but he was stopped by the click and creak of the cupboard door opening. The both made disgusted noises at the odour that unrolled from the fetid interior, a combination of mouse droppings, old socks, and blue cheese.

“Aargh, who is invading Kreacher’s home?”
Sirius swore loudly and lowered his wand, putting his arm over his nose instead to filter out some of the smell. Harry’s expression was one of intrigued disgust as he looked down at the ancient house elf peering out of the cupboard door. The elf hardly fit into the tiny space, which appeared to be crammed with old rags, scraps of mouldy food, and various glittering items that could have been jewellery.

“Damn it, Kreacher!” Sirius exclaimed. “We’ve been messing about in here for three sodding days, what the hell d’you think you’re playing at, hiding under the sink the whole time? Why didn’t you let us know you were here? I thought you were dead!”

“Kreacher?” Harry asked, quirking an eyebrow in Sirius’s direction.

“Don’t blame me,” Sirius replied. “My father named him. Thought it was absolutely hilarious.”

“Make sure Hermione doesn’t hear you say that,” said Harry fervently. Sirius snorted and turned back to the house elf, who was still cowering in the entrance to his hovel.

“Well?” Sirius demanded.

“Mistress did not call Kreacher,” the elf replied sulkily. “Mistress did not want Kreacher.”

Sirius felt the breath freeze in his throat. Mistress. He hadn’t heard that in so long, he’d almost managed to forget what it felt like, almost managed to convince himself it was all a bad dream. There was a ringing in his ears. He knew Harry was looking at him, waiting for an explanation that he wasn’t ready to give. Oh Merlin, I’m not ready for this, he thought desperately.

“You know perfectly well that I am not your Mistress,” he said aloud, and his voice shook. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Harry. “I am your Master, and you will never address me as mistress again.”

Kreacher stared at him for a long moment, before bowing his head in an exaggerated sign of obedience.

“As Master wishes,” he replied. “Although it would kill his mother if she heard it, so it would, she would cry for the loss of her daughter all over again, it would break her heart.”

“My mother didn’t have a heart, Kreacher,” Sirius snapped.

“Sirius, what—”

Sirius finally forced himself to look at Harry, terrified of what he’d see. There was nothing but confusion in Harry’s features, but that did little to allay Sirius’s fears. Harry was, after all, painfully ignorant of certain things. He turned his attention back to Kreacher. One problem at a time, he thought firmly, although it didn’t stop his hands from shaking. He realised he was tugging at his hair and shoved it out of his face with an impatient exclamation.

“In a moment, Harry, okay?” he said. Harry looked at him for another moment.

Okay,” he said.

“Master would have called Kreacher if he’d seen any sign of Kreacher being alive,” he said to the elf, attempting to sound authoritative, rather than terrified. “What the hell have you been up to for the past decade, adding dirt to the house?” Kreacher muttered something indistinguishable under his breath and Sirius felt his temper rising, dulling some of the fear. He’d never liked the sneaky little beast, even before he’d become Master Sirius.
Kreacher had been his mother’s pet—quite literally, as far as his mother had been concerned. It had seemed like every time he turned around, Kreacher had been there, watching, reading to report the slightest infraction. Sirius knew, intellectually, that Kreacher had no choice in whether or not he reported to his mistress, but the little thing had always seemed to take such joy in dobbing Sirius in. It had been Kreacher who had forced him to come out in the first place, after he’d found Sirius removing his binder before bed one night. Don’t think of that, Sirius told himself abruptly, feeling the stirrings of a full-blown panic attack begin in his gut. That was a memory he couldn’t deal with right now, not with Harry watching and no Remus around. Remus hasn’t been around for thirteen years, he reminded himself roughly. You’re a fucking adult, Sirius, just deal with this.

“This is Harry, Kreacher. He is living here now as well,” he said aloud. “Although I’m sure you already gathered that, you little sneak,” he added under his breath. “Remus will be taking a room when he returns, and you will take orders from both of them just as you would from me, do you understand?”

The folds of papery skin around the elf’s mouth twisted in an expression of utmost revulsion, and Harry shifted uneasily. He clearly didn’t like the elf either.

“Kreacher understands,” said the elf. “Kreacher understands that Master is bringing werewolves and blood traitors and Mudbloods into his mother’s home, although it would kill her if she were alive, it would indeed, it would kill her.” Sirius couldn’t take any more. He growled and slammed the cupboard door shut with a wave of his wand.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he said. Harry glanced once at the cupboard, before following Sirius into the darkened hallway.

Once they were ensconced in Sirius’s bedroom, which looked very similar to the way it had when they’d arrived, Sirius found himself completely lost for words. Harry sat on the end of the bed and waited, watching as Sirius paced up and down. The boy’s calm, almost understanding gaze did nothing to soothe Sirius’s feelings. It shouldn’t be so difficult, not after all these years. Merlin, there had been a time when he’d been so proud, so out. When had he lost that? When had he allowed that to be taken from him? He realised he had a chunk of hair in his mouth and spat it out impatiently, raising both hands to resecure the mass of black curls in a bun behind his head.

“It’s not a big deal,” said Harry at last. Sirius looked up sharply from where he stood by the desk.

“I—” he started, then realised he had no idea how to go on. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. “It’s been a long time since I had to deal with… any of this.” Harry nodded seriously, seeming to understand.

“I don’t really know anything about it,” he said simply. “But I don’t care if you’re trans. You’re still Sirius to me.”

Sirius dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to speak. Just like that, he thought. It was so like James, so matter of fact, as though anything else was unthinkable. Sirius was just Sirius, and that was all that mattered. He felt tears threatening and cleared his throat loudly, not sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry. He settled on a wobbly smile.

“I didn’t tell you before because I just—” He paused, wondering how to explain his silence. If he was honest, it just hadn’t occurred to him, not really. He was a man, it was that simple. He wondered if that would make sense to Harry.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Harry again. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. Or anyone else,” he added fiercely, as though ready to challenge any potential listeners to a duel if they insulted his
godfather in any way. Sirius settled on laughter and chuckled. This boy really was a miracle.

“You sound just like your dad,” he said. Harry smiled, the first real smile Sirius had seen in two days. He felt the weight on his shoulders lift a little more. Perhaps things wouldn’t be so bad.

“Is that why the eyeliner?” Harry asked curiously, standing and crossing to the desk where he picked up the photo of Sirius and Remus. Sirius snorted.

“No, the eyeliner was because I’m a fabulous queer,” he declared, relief making him expansive. He bit his tongue, wondering if he’d said too much too fast. Accepting or not, Harry might need some time to adjust to that version of Sirius. If that version of Sirius even still exists. Harry snorted and looked down at the photo, and Sirius came to stand at his shoulder, smiling at the wildly waving teenagers in the picture. Well, one wildly-waving teenager and one demure teenager who looked like he was trying not to laugh.

“I think it would suit you better now,” Harry said thoughtfully, although Sirius could see a slight blush on the boy’s cheeks, as though Harry found this kind of discussion awkward but was determined to have it anyway. “With the beard and all,” Harry added, gesturing toward Sirius’s five o’clock shadow which had slept in and become more of a midnight shadow. Sirius chortled.

“You can be the one who explains that to Remus,” he said. Harry grinned up at him, and for a moment, things seemed… better.

The next two weeks were cleaning, cleaning, and more cleaning. After they finished the kitchen—leaving Kreacher’s hideous den firmly locked—they moved onto the rest of the ground floor, cleaning out each room with the assistance of whichever Order member might have dropped by that day. Sirius began to suspect they’d been sent to make sure Sirius and Harry were still alive, since they had very little news, and only minimal reason to be there before they properly set the place up. He found some use, however, in ferrying messages back and forth to Hogwarts, and in keeping Molly too busy to fuss over the dark shadows under Harry’s eyes and the paleness of his cheeks.

They might not talk about it much, but not a night had gone by that Sirius hadn’t been woken by Harry’s nightmares—if he hadn’t already been awoken by his own. They rarely spoke of the subject of such terrors. Instead, Sirius would sit by Harry on his bed and talk about the more amusing of his escapades of the last year, about the time he’d found himself in a muggle animal shelter, or the time a six-year-old witch had tried to adopt him. Sometimes Harry talked about school, about Hermione and Ron and the other boys in his dormitory, about his classes, about Minerva’s strictness and Flitwick’s bottomless enthusiasm, about Dobby the house elf, although this often strayed too close to Winky and her part in the Triwizard Tournament to be a comfortable topic. Sometimes they gave up on sleep altogether and drank hot chocolate at the kitchen table, playing chess or Exploding Snap to pass the time. Once, after they’d cleaned out the living room, Sirius read aloud from some of his favourite books, and Harry was clearly surprised that he enjoyed this as much as winning at Exploding Snap. Sirius couldn’t help being amused at Harry’s rapt expression as he finished reciting his favourite epic ballad.

“And you thought you wouldn’t enjoy poetry,” he said, prodding Harry with his big toe. Harry flushed as he denied he’d thought any such thing.

“It’s all in the reading.”

Both Harry and Sirius jumped up as Remus appeared in the doorway. Sirius ran his eyes over the
other man with concern, noting his pallid skin and weary expression. But he was smiling fondly at both of them, in a way that made Sirius’s heart beat a little faster. He’d been keeping busy, worrying about Harry, getting the house ready for the Order, and he’d almost managed not to think about Remus, worry about Remus, have nightmares about Remus being hurt, being killed, not wanting to come back.

He couldn’t help it. He stepped forward and threw his arms around Remus, hugging him close and burying his face in the taller man’s neck. Remus let out a faint noise of surprise, but his arms came around and pulled Sirius tightly to him. For a moment, it felt like no time had passed at all—until Harry cleared his throat and the two of them pulled apart, blushing and smiling sheepishly. Sirius couldn’t help the happy little jolt of his heart when Remus kept one hand on his elbow.

“You’ve made a lot of progress,” said Remus, to cover the sudden awkwardness.

“Come into the kitchen,” replied Harry, apparently oblivious to the atmosphere between his two guardians, or at least pretending to be. “We were just going to make hot chocolate, and you can tell us where you’ve been.”

Remus’s hand tightened briefly on Sirius’s elbow, and they smiled at one another, before turning to follow Harry toward the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
It was early morning before Sirius finally convinced Harry to go to bed. The boy had been reluctant to leave the two of them alone, or perhaps simply reluctant to be alone himself. Sirius felt slightly guilty as he watched him leave the living room, his shoulders slouched over, but he needed to talk to Remus, to know what was going on, and some things couldn’t be discussed in front of a fourteen-year-old, no matter who that fourteen-year-old happened to be.

“He’s not sleeping.”

Sirius sighed and closed the door.

“No,” he said. “If it goes on much longer, I’ll get Poppy to make something up for him.”

“Well will you get her to make something up for you as well?” Remus asked, standing in front of the fire with his hands behind his back. Even in June, these basement rooms were cold, and Remus looked as though he hadn’t been properly warm since he’d left them two weeks earlier. Sirius ignored the question and flumped into an armchair nearby.

“I haven’t told him,” he said after a moment. “I didn’t want to do it without— without back up.”

He’d almost said without you, but he couldn’t quite manage it. There were moments when it seemed like everything that had gone wrong between them was right again, but most of the time there was that invisible barrier between them, made of all the words they’d said and hadn’t said, and it would take more than a smile or a hug to bring it down.

“We have to tell him, and soon,” said Remus, frowning. “He’ll never forgive us if we keep it from him.”

Sirius sighed and stood abruptly.

“Do you believe this prophecy?” he asked. Remus looked down, brow contracted in thought as he worried at his bottom lip.

“I don’t know. It’s clear Voldemort does, and that Dumbledore thinks he can use it.”

Sirius’s frown became a scowl, and he started pacing, as though he could shed some of his restless anger if he moved fast enough.

“I don’t give any number of fucks what Dumbledore thinks at present,” he snapped. “I’m not going to let some bullshit prophecy determine the fate of my godson. He’s fourteen years old, he’s not
going to be used to take down Voldemort. That’s the Order’s job, not Harry’s.”

Remus waited patiently for Sirius to stop pacing and calm himself before he replied.

“As it happens, I agree with you,” he said quietly. “But that doesn’t change the fact that both Dumbledore and Voldemort set store by the blasted thing, which means it’s going to affect Harry whether we like it or not. And Harry needs to know.”

“You’ve seen him,” Sirius said, looking up at Remus with pleading eyes. “He’s already hurting enough. This will just make things worse.”

“I know.” Remus’s eyes were sad, his expression one of unspeakable exhaustion, the kind that came from more than mere physical exertion. “But we’ve already had this discussion, Pads. No more secrets, that’s what we said. Especially not from Harry. It will only hurt him more in the long run if we keep it from him.”

Sirius held his gaze for a moment, running his fingers through his hair, which had long since given up on any semblance of order. After a long silence, he nodded.

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “Tomorrow, after breakfast. We’ll tell him together.”

Sirius didn’t sleep that night. He and Remus had stayed up almost until dawn, discussing the work Remus was doing for the Order. Sirius’s heart ached for him as he spoke of the dark, neglected corners of the wizarding community where the monsters hung out. There was that old, familiar wry tone to Remus’s voice when he spoke of werewolves in that way, the bitterness and self-hatred only kept at bay through constant effort and self-deprecation. Sirius could see things hadn’t improved over the last decade. There had been a time, a very short time a very long time ago, when it seemed Remus might be starting to accept himself, trust himself, perhaps love himself for who he was rather than in spite of it. But that was long gone now. He didn’t speak of those years of separation, and Sirius didn’t ask. He knew too well what Remus would say and he couldn’t quite bring himself to hear it.

He practically shoved Remus towards his room as the sun began to lighten the horizon. He had no intention of sleeping himself, and there were no other rooms clean enough to use. It hurt more than he wanted to admit, that reluctance to share his space. Perhaps it was simply Remus’s habitual politeness, but it hurt nonetheless. He remained downstairs, staring at the embers in the grate as the sun peeped through the high basement window.

“What the hell are you planning?” he muttered to himself more than once. He knew some of the Order’s plans, plans to protect the original prophecy, and he couldn’t help wondering what Dumbledore hadn’t told them. Was there something more to it? Was there a bigger reason Voldemort needed it? Why on earth would they devote so much of their time to protecting a prophecy Voldemort already knew of? After two solid hours of wondering, he had no answers, and was angrier with his old Headmaster than ever.

“What?”

He jumped and turned to find Harry standing in the doorway, still dressed in his pyjamas and with his hair even more dishevelled than usual. Sirius forced a tired smile onto his face and stood.
“Morning, Harry. What time is it?”

“Nine something, I think,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair - or attempting to. His fingers tangled almost immediately and he gave it up as a bad job. Sirius yawned, his body suddenly remembering it hadn’t slept at all and sending him various uncomfortable reminders.

“Breakfast,” he decided. “Coffee,” he added, as his brain supplied more information. Harry grunted in reply. He might have spent more time in bed, but he looked as though he hadn’t slept much either.

“Goddamnit I wish I knew what I was doing. Surely there’s an instruction manual on how to parent like an actual adult. As none was immediately forthcoming, he led the way to the kitchen, where they found Kreacher poking about in one of the cupboards, apparently searching for something.

“What in Merlin’s name are you doing in there,” demanded Sirius angrily. The elf jumped and bashed his wrinkled head on the shelf above him.

“Kreacher is cleaning,” said the elf, emerging backwards from the cupboard and bowing ridiculously low. “Kreacher lives to serve the Noble House of-”

“Oh shut up,” Sirius snapped irritably. “If you want to clean something, you can start by taking down those portraits in the hall.” Kreacher’s small eyes widened in apparent shock.

“Master would have Kreacher take down the memorials of his noble ancestors?” the elf asked, too shocked to even try and turn ‘Master’ into an insult for once.

“Yes, Kreacher, I would take them down and burn them, but I’ll settle for sticking the whole lot in the attic and forgetting about them if it’ll make things easier.” Kreacher stared at Sirius for almost a whole minute before shuffling out of the kitchen toward the hallway, muttering thankfully indecipherable invectives as he went. Harry watched the exchange from the kitchen table, his eyes shifting from Kreacher to Sirius as though trying to figure something out.

“Coffee?” Sirius said, pretending not to notice his godson’s curiosity.

“Please.” Harry yawned widely. “Sirius, why do you hate Kreacher so much? I mean, he’s horrible, but…” He paused, as though considering his words carefully. “It’s just you seem to really hate him.” He watched Sirius warily, clearly afraid he’d crossed some sort of line. Sirius sighed, torn between wishing he didn’t have to answer and gratitude that Harry trusted him enough to ask personal questions. I guess real families tell each other things, he thought wryly. Who knew?

“Kreacher never liked me,” he said. “He always sided with my parents, and…” He trailed off, forcing his mind blank, forcing the memories away, back into the dark hole where they belonged. “He watched what they did to me and did nothing. I know it wasn’t his fault,” he added, as though expecting Harry to object. “I know he can’t help it, but it happened and I can’t help how I feel about it.” He started to turn back to the stove to start making coffee when Harry stood abruptly, crossed the kitchen, and hugged him tightly. Sirius was surprised, and more touched than he cared to admit, although if Harry’s expression when he stepped back was any indication, he hadn’t quite expected to do it either. Sirius grinned and ruffled Harry’s hair.

“Is that coffee I smell?” Remus shuffled into the kitchen, looking, if possible, even more exhausted than either of his companions. He was wearing an old T-shirt and some striped pyjama bottoms that had once belonged to Sirius and which had required an Engorgement Charm in order to fit Remus significantly larger frame. They were now rather baggy and somewhat moth-eaten. He looked, as far as Sirius was concerned, unreasonably adorable. Sirius huffed in annoyance and turned back to the stove.
“You still like it black?” he asked.

“Why would I want it any other way?” There was something in Remus’s tone that sent a tingle down Sirius’s traitorous spine, and which Harry seemed to find amusing, although it could have just been a cough. _Now they’re ganging up on me_ , he thought, not sure if he was aroused, amused, or just annoyed. _Well that’s just brilliant_.

By the time he delivered the coffee and a stack of toast to the table, Harry and Remus both looked more awake, and had clearly overcome their previous possibly-at-Sirius’s-expense amusement. Harry was simply intent on his breakfast, but Sirius knew perfectly well what the looks Remus was shooting at him meant. He tried to ignore them, but he’d known Remus for too long to be able to pretend he hadn’t noticed. After five minutes of silence, he glared at Remus, who look back quite serenely and unrepentantly, and then turned to his godson.

“Harry, we have to talk to you about something,” he said, immediately cringing at how awkward he sounded. Merlin’s saggy left manboob, it sounded like he was about to attempt the sex talk. Harry looked up suspiciously, his mouth full of toast.

_Oh gods, are we going to have to give Harry the sex talk? Shit. Shit fuck._ Sirius shook his head and forced himself to focus. He felt his heart speeding up before he even got a word out. This was definitely absolutely going to be a giant fucking disaster.

“On the night of the third task, we found out why Voldemort has been targeting you,” he said, rather more quickly than he intended. Harry stopped chewing, and they could see it was an effort to force himself to swallow.

“He already told me,” he said nervously, looking from one Marauder to the other. “He said he needed my mum’s blood so he could have her protection.” Sirius and Remus exchanged a glance that was both sad and fearful. Remus leaned forward, his hands crossed in front of him in a gesture that was so painfully reminiscent of teenage Remus explaining a complicated concept in Transfiguration that Sirius was momentarily overwhelmed by nostalgia.

“Have you never wondered why Voldemort has targeted you before?” Remus asked gently. “Or why he targeted your parents when you were an infant?” Harry’s face took on a grey tint, the shadows under his eyes growing even darker.

“It was because they were in the Order,” he said softly. “What else would it be?” Remus left out a soft breath.

“I’m afraid he was targeting you, Harry,” he said. Sirius half expected his godson to shove his chair back, to shout at Remus that he didn’t believe him, to storm out of the room. But he did none of those things. He simply sat there, as though frozen, staring at Remus.

“There was a prophecy made about Voldemort that made him believe you’re the one who is destined to kill him,” Sirius said. “He tried to kill you when you were a baby to stop it coming true, but he failed, and he’s been trying to make up for it ever since.”

Now Harry did react, standing so fast that his chair shot backward and hit the cupboard behind him.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” he demanded jerkily. Sirius felt his ribcage shrink a size or two at the catch in Harry’s voice.

“We only found out that night,” Sirius said, unable to keep the pleading note from his voice. He didn’t think he could handle Harry looking at him with blame in his eyes. “We wanted to wait until
you were feeling a little better before we dumped this on you as well.”  *Dumbledore doesn’t want us to tell you anything*. He could feel the words on the tip of his tongue, straining to get out, but he bit his tongue. Blaming Dumbledore, ruining Harry’s trust in one of his heroes, wouldn’t help the boy.

Harry leaned forward and put his hands on the table, breathing a little too fast, a little too shallow.

“I can’t.” He shook his head, his tongue stumbling over the words. “I don’t want this!” Sirius and Remus stood at the same time, both rounding the table to stand on either side of him, each with an arm around his shoulders.

“It’s just a prophecy, Harry,” Sirius said urgently. “Voldemort might be soft enough to believe in it, but that doesn’t make it true. You don’t have to do anything. We’re going to keep you safe.”

“Divination is notoriously unreliable,” Remus added reassuringly. Harry’s mouth quirked, even in the midst of his panic.

“That’s what Hermione says.”

“And she is completely right,” Remus smiled. “This is something you need to know, because while Voldemort believes it, he will keep targeting you. But you also need to know that Voldemort is not your responsibility. That’s what the Order is for.”

Harry looked down at the table, one finger tracing the stain left by his coffee cup.

“I can’t just do nothing,” he said. “I want to help. He killed my parents.” *Because of me*. Sirius could hear the words Harry didn’t say, and they broke his heart all over again.

“This is not your fault, Harry,” he said, low and fierce. “None of it is. You are our responsibility now, and as long as that’s true, we will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“I know you want to fight,” Remus added, before Harry could interrupt. “And I understand why, but there are more ways to win this war than mere duels. And more people fighting it for their families and loved ones than you realise. Do you understand?”

Harry looked up at them both and nodded, blinking heavily to hold back the tears in his eyes.

“I need some time to figure this out,” he said. Sirius nodded and stepped back, letting him go. He paused in the doorway and looked back.

“Thanks for telling me,” he said. “Why didn’t anyone tell me before?” The pause before Remus answered was heavy with tension.

“They were trying to protect you,” he said. “Not everyone realises how dangerous secrets can be.”

Harry nodded once and left the room. They listened to his footsteps retreat upstairs, before Sirius sank onto a chair and buried his head under both arms.

“He’ll be all right,” Remus said, still standing next to him.

“Or he’ll do something really stupid,” said Sirius to the table that was pressed against his nose. “He is James’s son, after all.” Remus laughed, a short, choking sound, quickly stifled.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he admitted. “Of all the people to have the responsibility of raising Harry Potter, how the fucking hell did it end up being us?” Sirius sat up and pushed his hair back from his face.
“I believe you’re not supposed to use that language when you have children in the house,” he said.

“As if you haven’t said worse in front of him already,” scoffed Remus. “I’ve heard you swear in front of him this morning.” Sirius laughed for a moment, before it faded into a sad smile.

“We should have been the ones raising him from the start,” he said. “And you know it.” Lily and James shouldn’t have died. Peter shouldn’t have been Secret Keeper. I shouldn’t have been arrested. We should have been together.

“I’m just afraid…” Remus waved his hand vaguely.

“Me too.”

“He’ll be all right.”

Sirius stood and forced his hair back into its habitual bun.

“Maybe we should make sure he doesn’t leave the house for a while though,” he said.
OMG I actually managed to write this when I planned to write this! I am now dead from shock, sorry, no more chapters for you! (In reality I’m just trying to avoid studying, lbr.) Thank you again to everyone who liked, shared, and especially people who commented, you are my favourite lovelies! I’d love to hear from you over on Tumblr, come say hi! (Link at the bottom of the chapter.)

Sirius almost fell over in shock when he emerged from the kitchen to find four of his ancestor’s portraits leaning against the hallway door, muttering to themselves about the indignity of their position as Kreacher threw dust sheets over them. He’d given the elf an order simply to get him out of their way, but here he was, successfully removing the portraits that he and Harry had so far failed to budge, thanks to his mother’s Permanent Sticking Charms.

Kreacher was muttering to himself rather more loudly and in far less politically correct terms than the portraits he’d already taken down, and those pictures that still remained seemed to be picking up on the tension. More than one was attempting to look down the hallway to see what was going on, and scowling in the way only a Black could scowl when their two-dimensional image was unable to glimpse anything out of view of their frame.

“Sirius?” said Remus mildly, examining the work over his shoulder.

“You horrid little maggot,” he added silently, because one followed order did not a friendship make. Kreacher confirmed this opinion by glaring sideways at his master through slitted eyes.

“Kreacher lives to obey his noble master,” he rasped. He somehow managed to inject ‘noble master’ with the same venom as ‘horrid little maggot’, but Sirius found he didn’t care as much as usual.

Sadly, this exchange woke the most vocal of the portraits, the one they’d all been tip-toeing around - quite literally - since they’d arrived a fortnight ago, and Kreacher’s favourite.

“You dare defy your ancestors, you unnatural beast?!” The curtains in front of his mother’s portrait flew open, revealing her wild eyes and spittle-flecked jowls in their most unpleasant aspect. Sirius felt his gut clench the way it always did, and his head swam for a moment, but there was something else rising up, ahead of the panic, stronger, at least for a moment.

“I’ll defy whomever I please, you horrid old bag!”

There was a part of him, which seemed to be separate, sitting slightly behind and slightly to the right of his own body, that observed this sudden outburst with mild surprise and no small amount of pleasure.

“How dare you address your mother like that, after I carried you and raised you?! You dare insult me to my face?”
“YOU’RE DEAD AND BURIED, YOU’RE NO MORE THAN A MEMORY AND I WILL INSULT YOUR MEMORY UNTIL I loose MY VOICE BECAUSE YOU NEVER CARED FOR ME OR MY BROTHER, YOU ONLY EVER CARED ABOUT YOUR DAMN NAME AND YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR BLOOD STATUS!”

He was faintly aware of a clattering on the stairs as Harry stumbled into the hallway, clearly under the impression they were being attacked by something. Remus reached out and drew him into the doorway of the kitchen, out of the way. This was something Sirius needed, he knew, and he would only interrupt if he had to. Sirius was only vaguely aware of this. In truth, he could hardly feel his own limbs, could hardly believe he was having a shouting match with a fucking portrait for Godric’s sake! And yet here he was, trembling and ranting, pointing his wand right up against his mother’s hateful visage, and he felt… Good?

“YOU HAD A DUTY TO YOUR FAMILY AND YOU RAN AWAY LIKE A COWARD BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T HAVE YOUR OWN WAY, YOU BROKE MY HEART, YOU HEARTLESS CHILD!”

Something snapped inside Sirius - finally - and he raised his wand.

“REDUCTO!” he roared, and the portrait - and the wall behind it - exploded, flinging chips of stone and plaster everywhere. He was forced to throw himself back toward the kitchen to escape injury, but when he sat up, half tangled in Harry and Remus’s legs, he saw that the portrait had vanished. There was nothing left but the smoking wreckage of the wall and a very shaken-looking Kreacher.

“Shit, Kreacher, are you okay?” asked Harry, as soon as he was sure Sirius had escaped injury. He scrambled around his very shaken godfather and dashed down the hallway to where the elf was frozen, one hand raised to the portrait he had been about to take down, which was now shouting incoherently.

“Feel better, do we?”

Sirius, his mouth still open in shock at what he’d done, turned from where he was still half-lying on Remus’s legs, so he could see the other man’s face. Remus looked both concerned and amused, as though he was awaiting more information before he decided which would take precedence.

“I-” Sirius searched for words over the ringing in his ears, but he couldn’t find any. He shook his head and forced his mouth to close so he didn’t look quite so gormless.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” he said finally, watching Harry as he knelt next to Kreacher, checking him over and talking quietly to him. “How is that boy even possible?” he added faintly.

“I have no idea,” Remus said. “But your bony arse has completely cut off all the circulation to my foot. If you wouldn’t mind?”

“Oh, sorry.” Sirius found himself coming back from whatever planet he’d been orbiting with rather a bump, as he became aware just how close to Remus he really was. He stared at Remus for a moment, before scrambling hurriedly to his feet. He decided that if he pretended he wasn’t blushing, it was the same as if he wasn’t blushing, and turned abruptly to his godson.

“Is he all right?” he forced himself to ask.

“I think he’s a bit upset,” said Harry awkwardly, clearly not quite sure how to deal with the house elf who was now sitting in the middle of the debris-strewn floor with a look of abject horror on his wrinkled face.
“Well, he’s not the only one,” muttered Sirius. He wanted nothing so much as to kick Kreacher back into his den and lock him in there forever, but with Harry looking so concerned, he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. He walked toward them and knelt down in front of the elf, clearing his throat awkwardly as he glanced up at Harry.

“Ah, Kreacher, I’m-” He paused and cleared his throat again. He could feel Remus laughing at him. “I’m very sorry for what just happened.” I wish you’d vanished along with that old bitch so I don’t have to deal with you. He almost felt guilty for thinking it with those green eyes watching him.

“Do you- Do you need a cup of tea?” Kreacher blinked slowly and Sirius physically winced as he said the words aloud. I just asked the incarnation of Satan’s arsehole if he wanted a cup of tea. What the fuck? Remus coughed suspiciously behind them and Sirius turned to glare at him.

“Th- Thank you, Master.” Sirius stared at the elf in shock. Kreacher clearly didn’t quite know what to think either, but there was no trace of the hatred he usually showed Sirius in his voice.

He let Harry usher the trembling creature into the kitchen, and the three of them exchanged bemused glances in silence as Kreacher sipped a cup of strong, sweet tea. After the most excruciatingly awkward fifteen minutes Sirius thought he’d ever experienced, Kreacher put his cup down decisively and looked up at his master.

“Kreacher will return to his work now, with Master’s permission,” he said stiffly. Sirius thought he might faint, but managed to remember how to speak.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” he said, just as stiffly. What. The. Fuck.

Harry’s expression of approval almost made it worthwhile.

It took them most of the rest of the day to repair the hole in the wall and clean up the hallway, although Kreacher proved to be more helpful than Sirius would have thought possible. He still muttered under his breath, and after his shock began to subside, it was clear his opinion of Sirius hadn’t undergone a significant change. He was far more inclined to take orders peacefully, however, and even condescended to treat Harry with something approaching, well, not goodwill, but at least with no outright disgust.

Sirius himself wasn’t quite sure how he felt. He knew from experience that there would be some form of unpleasant reaction later on - three decades of mental illness had taught him how to spot the patterns - but for now he felt almost… free. They talked more freely and loudly than they had since they’d arrived, ignoring the suspicious rustling behind the skirtingboards and the buzzing from the locked room above them, which Sirius was sure was caused by Doxies. He even found himself laughing with Remus as they pulled down the moth-infested curtains in the front room.

“Merlin’s beard, what happened here?”

Sirius stuck his head into the hallway and grinned as Molly Weasley picked her way gingerly over the pieces of stone and plaster that were still littered everywhere.

“I thought I’d extend this front room,” he said. “But Remus thinks open living is too 1970s for a Victorian house. Do you have an opinion?” He stepped into the hallway, his face a picture of open innocence. Molly snorted and examined the hole that Remus had almost managed to repair, which was still covered in scorch marks.

“I’m glad you found a way to remove that monstrosity, in any case,” she said. Her voice was
“What brings you to our humble abode?” he asked gruffly, stepping back and leading her toward the kitchen.

“Well, since there’s only a week until the children come home from school, I thought we should discuss arrangements.”

“Arrangements?” Remus asked, heading past them to the sink to wash the plaster dust off his hands.

“Well, since the Order will be centered here, it makes more sense for Arthur and I and the children to stay here during the holidays,” she said, as though this should have been obvious. Sirius blinked and searched for an argument against this, but found he had none. It did make more sense, and what was more, it would probably be better for Harry to have his friends around. It hurt him to admit that, but as Remus had reminded him, he was Harry’s guardian, not his friend. No matter how much they cared about each other and enjoyed each other’s company, Harry was not a replacement for his father.

“A week isn’t very long,” he said aloud. “How many rooms will you need?” Molly pulled a notebook out of her tapestry bag and consulted a page that she’d covered with bright blue scribbles that looked completely indecipherable to Sirius.

“Well, Arthur and I will obviously need one. If Ron can share with Harry, then we can put the twins in one room, Hermione and Ginny in another, and Bill and Charlie will be in and out at times, so perhaps a couple of spare rooms would be a good idea for Order members to use. And I think if we cleaned out some other rooms for day use, so the children can have a place to spend time…” Sirius found his brain desperately trying to zone out in self defence as she carried on planning.

“What about Percy?” asked Remus gently. Sirius returned to the reality with a bump. Molly looked down at the table, her face suddenly white.

“He won’t be coming,” she whispered, and her face crumpled. Remus was around the table in a flash, one arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“Oh Molly, I’m so sorry,” he said softly.

“He’ll come around, Molly,” Sirius added. “You’ll see, just give it time.” Having only heard about Percy from Harry and Remus, Sirius secretly felt he wasn’t much of a loss, but he felt desperately sorry for Molly. After a moment, she blew her nose loudly on a bright yellow handkerchief and looked up, forcing a smile onto her face.

“Well now,” she said. “There’s no use dwelling on that when there’s work to be done. I’ve no other jobs for the next two days, so I’m here to help.”

“You might regret that offer,” Sirius warned with a grin. “There’s no knowing what we’ll find in these rooms.”

Molly stuffed her handkerchief and notebook back into her bag and stood up.

“Sirius Orion Black, I have raised seven children,” she said firmly. “I might not have done a perfect job, but I promise you there is nothing in this house that will shock me.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”
Sirius was surprised at how good he felt, working alongside Remus and Molly to clean the second floor for the imminent arrivals. Arthur dropped by whenever he had a spare moment, although he had to be careful where he was seen, as his position in the Ministry was already precarious, and he had other tasks to perform for the Order. There were other Order members coming and going, and in the end Sirius found Kreacher was a great help, making tea and keeping the pantry stocked against unplanned cleaning parties.

Harry, however, was not feeling so good. Sirius remembered how he’d felt going through the same time, and knew there was very little he could do, but it was painful watching his godson go through it all the same. After so many years concentrating on surviving, Harry was finding what so many victims of abuse did - that freedom from the abusers didn’t necessarily mean freedom from what they’d done. Learning that he could also be destined to kill the most feared Dark wizard in living memory had done nothing to help, and he now spent hours alone in his room. Sirius made sure he took him food, and Harry forced himself to help when he could, and to spend time with Sirius and Remus in the evenings, as they read aloud to one another and chatted. But there was always a barrier there between him and his guardians that no amount of tea or silly stories or attempts at comfort could break down, and there was nothing they could do but wait for Harry to come to them when he was ready.

Three days after Sirius had blown away his mother’s portrait, Remus made an announcement that did nothing to help.

“I’m going to have to leave again tomorrow.”

He and Sirius were washing the dinner dishes. Harry had gone early to bed, although Sirius had heard Kreacher take him a hot cocoa later. Almost everyone else in the Order was busy, except for Molly, who had taken it into her head to decorate the girls’ room upstairs.

“Dumbledore sent you orders this afternoon?” Sirius had seen Remus’s face when the barn owl had arrived earlier, and had tried not to think too hard about it.

“It’s not just that,” Remus said, rolling his shoulders uncomfortably and keeping his eyes fixed on the plate he was drying, although it was already perfectly dry. “It’ll be full moon soon. I’ll have to go back to my flat after I’ve done what Dumbledore wants me to do.”

Sirius paused in his scrubbing and turned to glare at Remus.

“You have to do what?” he demanded. “Why?”

“You know why,” said Remus abruptly, picking up the stack of dry plates in front of him and carrying them over to the cupboard. Sirius knew he was trying to avoid looking at him.

“No I bloody don’t,” he said. “We’ve already cleaned out enough rooms for you to stay here, and Dumbledore told you Snape’s making your Potion for you.”

“I can’t-“

“Don’t tell me you can’t,” snapped Sirius, feeling the same strangely disembodied rage coming over him that he’d felt just before he’d blasted his mother to smithereens. Don’t *Reductor* your friend, he reminded himself sternly. *Even if he is being a giant self-sacrificing twit.* “There is no reason you can’t stay. You promised me you’d stay and help me with Harry.”
Remus turned around and glared at him.

“I don’t see how a wolf who barely remembers his own name is going to help anyone,” he said angrily. “And we both know that as soon as you and Harry are settled here, I won’t be necessary.”

Sirius felt his mouth fall open at the sheer pigheadedness of such a statement. He wasn’t sure if he was more hurt or angry or simply feeling desperately sorry for his stubbornly ridiculous friend.

“Are you out of your mind?” he asked, voice rising. “Harry needs you at least as much as I do, and that’s not going to change no matter how much we settle in! You can’t possibly believe that!”

“I’m sure you mean well, but—”

“I mean well? Oh, for the love of Merlin, Moony, I love you but sometimes you make me want to—”

“Am I interrupting?”

Both men spun to see Dumbledore stepping out of the fire, which they hadn’t heard over the sound of their shouting match. Sirius was privately grateful for the Headmaster’s appearance, since he wouldn’t have to explain precisely what he’d meant when he said he loved Remus. Although Moony’s inconveniently accurate memory probably won’t let that one go, he thought, feeling slightly panicked.

“Not at all,” said Remus, as Sirius attempted to compose himself. “Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

“Thank you, that would be appreciated, although if you have something stronger, I wouldn’t say no.”

Sirius examined Dumbledore closely for the first time and noticed that he looked rather tired. Given the news they were hearing from other members of the Order, this was hardly surprising, but it wasn’t encouraging. Somehow, he could never picture Dumbledore as anything other than invincible, yet he looked decidedly mortal and vulnerable at present.

Sirius finished with the dishes as Remus made the tea, their fight glossed over for the moment by seemingly mutual agreement. Dumbledore hadn’t got that memo, however.

“I hope I’m not overstepping my bounds, but I trust your personal issues aren’t affecting your ability to care for Harry,” he said quietly. “I appreciate that this isn’t an easy situation in which you find yourselves, but Harry really must be your priority.”

Sirius froze, the boiling anger he’d felt toward Remus a few minutes ago freezing into rock hard fury.

“Harry is as well as can be expected,” he said icily. “Considering.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” replied Dumbledore, sipping his tea calmly. He showed no indication that Sirius’s anger had any affect on him whatsoever. “This is very good, thank you,” he added, nodding toward Remus. Remus regarded him with a glare that should have had the power to maim at twenty paces.

“Forgive me, but how Sirius and I organise our home life is really not your concern,” he said. Dumbledore took another sip of his tea and put the cup carefully back in its saucer.

“Harry’s well-being is all of our concern,” he said. “As you are now well aware.”
Sirius’s fingers fought to clench into fists, and he forced himself to at least feign calmness. If Harry’s safety hadn’t depended on he and Remus so heavily, he doubted he could have managed it, but there was nothing he wouldn’t do for his godson.

“Harry is not your weapon,” he said through gritted teeth. “We are doing everything possible to keep him safe.”

“Have you considered that Harry might view things differently?” asked Dumbledore, raising his eyes to Sirius’s, his sparkling blue gaze making Sirius feel as though he were seeing right through into his head. He scowled, and this time it was he who reached out and stopped Remus stepping forward.

“Harry is fifteen years old, and his father’s son,” he spat. “I’m quite certain he would sacrifice himself without a second thought. But he is a child, and as such, is the responsibility of his guardians.”

“As he now has competent guardians,” Remus added, “we will take responsibility for keeping him safe, regardless of what his ridiculously noble values tell him he should be doing.”

“You are not his parents,” said Dumbledore softly.

There was a soft hiss of breath from the doorway, and all three men turned to see Molly glaring at them - or, rather, at Dumbledore. She was looking at him as though she hadn’t quite seem him properly before.

“Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore,” she said, pulling herself up to her full height - which was far more intimidating than it had any right to be. “You should know full well that blood does not equal family. We all love and care for Harry as much as any parent. How dare you tell us we are not good enough? How dare you tell these two, who have already done a better job caring for him than anyone else?”

Sirius heard the note of guilt in her voice, and thought he understood. She knew, as well as he did, the they should have acted sooner.

Dumbledore nodded, his expression unwaveringly calm.

“I apologise,” he said. “You are right, of course. Please forgive me.”

Molly was still breathing rather heavily, but she bowed her head in acknowledgement.

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Molly was still breathing rather heavily, but she bowed her head in acknowledgement.

“Let’s not speak of it again,” she said sternly, eyeing all three men. Sirius suddenly felt as though he’d been reduced to ten years old, and nodded obediently. There was a long silence, during which nobody did anything but sip their tea.

“I actually came to speak with Remus, if you would permit me?” said Dumbledore eventually.

“I’ll go help Molly,” Sirius said, standing quickly and retreating. He knew he was being cowardly, but the previous fifteen minutes had been frankly hellish, and he was only too happy to escape. Some Gryffindor you are, he thought wryly.

He was momentarily distracted by the room into which Molly led him, however, which was almost unrecognisable as the clean but dingy room he and Remus had finished cleaning out only a few hours earlier. It was now warmly lit by various lamps, and decorated with patchwork and polished timber furniture, all ready for the girls to occupy it in a few days.

“Molly, you are a genius,” he said, smiling at her. She fussed with one of the bedspreads,
“I hope they like it,” she worried. “I’m not sure what these teenagers want, to be honest. But I suppose it’s just for the holidays, so…”

“Teenagers don’t like anything,” Sirius chuckled. “But at least they’ll be comfortable.”

Molly smiled at him and sat down. He followed her, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he stared at the colourful rug that lay between the twin beds.

“Do you think it will help Harry, having them here?” he asked, unable to keep the worry out of his voice. Molly rested a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sure it will,” she said. “And in the meantime, I have a suggestion.”

“Oh?”

“I know you don’t want Remus to go away, but you could take advantage of it and get Harry out of his room at the same time.” Sirius looked confused. “Get Harry to help you set up a room for Remus. He doesn’t have his own yet. You two could make him something special.” She paused, as though considering her next words carefully. “It might help Remus feel more welcome here as well,” she said softly.

Sirius bit his lip. She was right. He really should have thought of it himself, but he’d been so caught up in his own troubles…

“Thanks, Molly,” he said, and he hugged her, surprising both of them. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Molly’s smile was a little wobbly, but her expression was warm as she surveyed him.

“And you will never have to find out.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Aaaaaah I'm sorry this is late! This week has been ridiculous - two assignments, three sick kids, and slightly sick me. But here we are, got there at last! I love love love all you wonderful people who comment, it's so great to be able to chat to people who are reading and who love HP and also have Opinions on things we'd like to change or what it meant to us it's just awesome. :)
I hope you enjoy!

While Sirius had deeply appreciated the increasing presence of the Order members over the previous week, and the feeling of actually doing something useful, the air of action and hope that came with them, he wished he had more time for Harry. He made sure Harry ate, and he still found himself sitting up with him when they couldn’t sleep, reading and chatting, pretending that it was completely normal to awaken screaming nearly every night. But he couldn’t help feeling guilty every time he was distracted cleaning another room, or discussing guard duty schedule, for which he’d assumed responsibility. If one of the Order didn’t claim his attention, Harry would inevitably retreat to his room during these times, with no one for company but Kreacher, who would follow him with a hot beverage of some kind.

Apparently the little beast had taken a strange liking to Harry after the portrait incident, something that made Sirius decidedly uncomfortable, although he couldn’t exactly articulate why. He wondered if perhaps they should have allowed him to remain at school, where at least he would have had the company of his friends, but he knew that in reality, no matter where he was, Harry would be struggling now and there was very little he could do except be there for him and wait for the worst to pass.

“Make sure he doesn’t spend all his time hiding,” Remus murmured to Sirius as he prepared to leave. They had steadfastly refused to discuss their argument, or Dumbledore’s interruption, and Sirius thought they were doing a fine job of pretending everything was, well, fine. Harry, however, appeared to disagree.

“I’m right here,” he said crossly. “And I’m not hiding. And you’re both being weird.” Remus and Sirius exchanged startled glances, before both breaking into laughter.

“Sometimes I forget you’re not just James’s son,” Remus chuckled. “What a Lily statement that was.” Harry snorted, although the corner of his mouth twitched suspiciously.

“You two acting weird has nothing to do with my mother,” he said. He hugged Remus briefly, both still looking slightly awkward about it, but just as clearly determined to get past that. “See you soon,” Harry said. “I’m off to bed.” He shot a meaningful stare at Sirius that made him laugh again.

“That one was pure James,” he grinned, watching the boy stump off up the stairs. Remus smiled as well, although it was tinged with sadness.

“James wouldn’t have noticed either of us behaving strangely unless someone had explained it in a three page document with footnotes,” he said. “To be honest, I’m surprised Harry noticed.”
“I thought we were doing so well, too,” said Sirius with a sigh. “Does this mean we’re going to have to actually resolve this like adults?” He kept his tone light and joking, the way he always did when things got too emotional. Scared? Make a joke. It’s the Marauder way. Remus looked down and shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

“I’m not sure it’s that simple,” he said quietly. “But I’m willing to give it a try if you are. As soon as I get back.” Sirius’s mind immediately went into overdrive, prodding at this statement in an attempt to extract as many potential meanings as possible so that he could spend at least the next three days worrying about it. Brilliant, he thought.

“Done,” he said. “Take care, Moons. We’ll see you soon, right?” He spoke seriously now, forcing Remus to look at him. Remus smiled, just a little.

“Of course. I’ll be back before you know it.” He laid a hand on Sirius’s shoulder. “Take care of Harry, won’t you?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Without another word, Remus turned and strode down the hallway. He couldn’t Floo to wherever Dumbledore was sending him. He would have to Apparate away from the house. Sirius watched the door close behind him and for a moment he found it hard to breathe. Dilvish’s hairy ballsack, he thought mournfully. Wasn’t two puberties enough? This is ridiculous. He shook his head sharply and went to finish cleaning the Doxies out of the drawing room curtains.

Teenage Sirius could never have imagined the difference that one family could make to Grimmauld Place, but he still found himself slowing as he passed each room to admire the work that he and the Order - and Kreacher - had done to make the place not just livable but almost… homely? There were still rooms containing Merlin-knew-what, that were closed off until they had enough Order members to tackle them, or until Moody could at least warn them what they were up against. But the hallways were no longer lined with scowling portraits, and it was possible to walk in the front door and have a conversation without setting off a dozen screaming Black ancestors. For the most part, Sirius was relieved to find he no longer felt trapped in old memories. It was hard to equate the light, clean living room he and Harry had set up with the cold, dingy mausoleum of his childhood. But it reminded him so strongly of what he had never had, and what Harry had been missing for so long, and his heart ached for both of them.

The end of term left little room for such reflections, however, as the Weasleys descended on Grimmauld Place in a tumult of noise and luggage and red hair, various family members hugging him as they stumbled across him, or shouting up and down the stairs as they searched for items they were absolutely sure they’d packed but couldn’t find. After half an hour of this, Sirius found himself retreating upstairs in search of some peace.

He’d thought his godson was downstairs with Ron, who had joined his older siblings in the kitchen for an impromptu brunch - Sirius had forgotten just how much teenagers could eat - but as he passed Harry’s door, he heard voices from inside. Assuming it was Ron settling in, Sirius went to open his own door, but it wasn’t Ron’s voice that replied to Harry. It was Kreacher.

Sirius froze, his hand reaching for his own door as he fought the urge to eavesdrop. What on earth was Kreacher doing chatting with Harry? The tone was conversational, not the sound of one person giving orders to another, or one particularly nasty little creature muttering epithets. Sirius glowered at his conscience until it gave up and went to sulk in the back of his mind, and crept back toward
Harry’s door.

“What was he like?” said Harry from the other side. Sirius could hear the sound of someone shuffling papers and tidying. Kreacher was apparently cleaning Harry’s room. It didn’t sound like something Harry would have asked him to do, but Kreacher did seem to like Harry more than Sirius. Perhaps he’d volunteered? Sirius shook his head. *Don’t even try to figure that one out*, he told himself.

“Master Regulus was a good boy,” said Kreacher. “He was always loyal to his family, always kind to Kreacher.” Sirius scowled and resisted the urge to remind Kreacher why Sirius had hated him. *You don’t get to have your say when you’re eavesdropping*, his conscience reminded him smugly. *Oh shut up*, he thought.

“He was a Seeker,” said Harry, and Sirius remembered the picture in Regulus’s room. He shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t like to think of his brother, the one who had once been his friend, who had cried with him, who had helped him wrap his ribs after a bad night. *Who had been too weak to stand up to them*.

“Master was a very talented boy,” said Kreacher. There was a note in the elf’s voice that Sirius had never heard before. It wasn’t the slavish adoration he’d had for Walburga, but genuine affection. Kreacher had actually cared about Regulus. “Kreacher misses him.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, so softly that Sirius almost missed it. “I should’ve realised it’d be painful for you.” There was a suspiciously loud sniff from an elfish nose.

“Master Harry does not need to be sorry. Kreacher is happy to remember Master Regulus.”

Sirius closed his eyes, his stomach churning, the noise from downstairs fading into the background. He didn’t know what to think.

He shook his head and retreated to his room.

“Hermione sent an owl to say she’ll be here for your birthday,” Molly said to Harry as she cut bread for their lunch. “The letter’s over there on the sideboard if you’d like to read it.” Harry grinned and went to retrieve it, Ron reading over his shoulder as they shoveled ham and lettuce sandwiches into their mouths. Sirius watched Harry out of the corner of his eye, immensely relieved when the boy went back for thirds. He knew he hadn’t been eating properly.

“Hey Sirius, Mum said you still need to get rid of the Doxies in the dining room?” Fred called down the table, his mouth full of ham. Sirius caught the suspicious look Molly sent toward her son and grinned.

“You volunteering?” he asked. Fred shrugged nonchalantly.

“I’d rather be doing that than hanging curtains,” he said, screwing up his nose at his mother. Molly rolled her eyes.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you two,” she said sternly. “Don’t think I can’t tell when you’re up to something. I have been your mother for a very long time.”

“Why mother,” exclaimed George, clasping a hand to his chest. “Have you no faith in us?”
“None whatsoever,” replied Molly, although this time she seemed to be fighting a smile.

“Daggers, Mum, right to the heart,” said Fred, pulling the most exaggerated tragic expression Sirius had ever seen.

“To the heart,” added George. Ginny, Harry and Ron were all snorting into their sandwiches, and Sirius was forced to hide his face behind his tea cup so no one saw him laughing. *This responsible adulting lark is difficult*, he thought.

“All right,” said Sirius as they cleared lunch away. “The twins can take care of the dining room, and Molly’s finishing off the spare bedrooms. Harry and I have a job of our own up on the top floor, if anyone wants to help out.”

“What job?” asked Harry.

“It’s about time your other guardian had a room of his own, don’t you think?” Sirius grinned. Harry smiled back and nodded.

“Definitely.”

With the interruption of a visit from Moody and a meeting of some of the Order - which they’d had to defend against some very determined eavesdroppers - it took them two days to clear out what had once been Sirius’s parents’ room. He’d been nervous to begin with, fearing that the room would bring back yet more unpleasant memories. But as they removed the layers of dirt and Vanished unwanted furniture and polished up what they were keeping and got the twins to help remove the Doxies and rats and allowed Molly to fuss over the curtains, he realised that he’d seen inside this room so rarely that it had little power to frighten him. His parents were not the kind to allow children to climb into bed with them when they had nightmares, or when they were up early on a Saturday morning. He’d feared this room as a child simply because it was out of bounds. Now he was inside it, it was, well, just another room.

Besides, it was hard to feel scared of a room with a giant dog bed in the corner covered in images of printed pages from Remus’s favourite books.

It was almost dinner time on the second day by the time he and Harry could finally step back and admire their handiwork. If Sirius was honest, it now looked far better than either of their rooms. He hoped like hell that he’d remembered Remus well enough to anticipate his needs.

“We’re not bad as decorators, what d’you think?” he said to Harry, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “We should do your room next.”

“I don’t mind it,” he said, grinning. “I’m not as fussy as Remus.” Sirius snorted.

“That’s true,” he said. “Well, I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Maybe wait ‘til Ron’s gone,” Harry said. Sirius laughed aloud. He’d seen the state of Harry’s room since his friend’s arrival, and he had to agree that there would be little point trying to clean it up while Ron Weasley occupied it. He’d heard Kreacher muttering about it several times as he passed him on the stairs, but it was a very small price to pay to see Harry smiling again, and to see him coming out of his room voluntarily. Molly had been right. Having a project and some friends his own age was already helping Harry. He wasn’t well, Merlin knew how long that would take, but at least he was eating and smiling and talking again without having to force himself.

“Sirius, are you up here?”
“In here, Molly,” Sirius called. The door was pushed open behind them and Molly gave a gasp of surprise.

“Oh this is much better,” she said approvingly. “Even if you did keep those horrid curtains.” Harry coughed suspiciously and Sirius grinned.

“I figured Remus’ll only end up changing everything around when he gets here anyway,” he said.

“I’m not sure whether to be touched or insulted,” said Remus from the doorway. He looked even worse than the last time Sirius had seen him. He was dirty and looked like he hadn’t slept since he’d left four days earlier. But he smiled warmly at Sirius as he stepped into the room, sending a herd of nervous centipedes marauding through Sirius’s digestive tract.

“You’re back,” he said, rather obviously.

“Molly contacted me,” he said wearily. “Did you do all this?”

“Everyone helped,” Harry said quickly. He looked just as nervous as Sirius felt. *I’m not the only one who wants you here, you have to see that*.

“Thank you,” Remus said quietly. “It’s lovely.” And he stepped quickly across the room and wrapped both Harry and Sirius in a hug. It was several long seconds before any of them felt the slightest inclination to let go.

“Arthur said he could help you collect the rest of your things from your flat in the next few days,” Molly said. “You just settle in and try to get some rest.”

Sirius was almost certain no one else noticed the suspicious glint in Remus’s eye at this motherly sentiment.

“Thank you, Molly. As soon as I’ve reported to Dumbledore, I will certainly do that.”

Molly smiled fondly at him. Sirius fought back another chuckle. Was there anyone Molly Weasley wouldn’t try and adopt?

“Come on Harry, dear, Ron and Ginny are helping me out in the kitchen, if you wouldn’t mind peeling some potatoes?” Harry nodded and followed her from the room, directing a last smile at Remus as he left.

Remus turned back to Sirius.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I’m glad I came back.” Sirius smiled, and hoped Remus wouldn’t notice how wobbly it was.

“I’m glad, too.”

There was little time for conversation after dinner, as Dumbledore called another meeting. Unlike the previous meeting, every member was present except for Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was currently on guard duty. Sirius would have had no issue with this if it didn’t mean he’d have to be polite to Severus Snape in his own kitchen. *So when you’re feeling sorry for yourself, it’s your parents’ kitchen, and when you’re pissed off it’s yours? Sirius Black you are a walking disaster.* Whoever’s kitchen it was, Sirius could feel his wand hand itching as he glared down the table at the
“Thank you all for meeting at such short notice,” said Dumbledore, standing and smiling around at everyone. “I am sorry to open on such a sombre note, but I have this afternoon received confirmation that Jonas Weatherill appears to have been placed under the Imperius Curse. We are doing everything we can to release him, but for now, we must assume that he is not the only one in the Ministry. So be careful.”

“Be careful, ’e says,” muttered Mundungus Fletcher to Sirius. “Be careful, when we’re fightin’ ruddy You Know Oo. Good one, eh.” Sirius snorted softly and nudged Dung to shut him up.

“This obviously makes our current task of guarding the Prophecy rather more difficult. I have taken steps to protect our guards, as follows.”

Sirius raised his hand and Dumbledore nodded at him, surprised.

“Forgive me, Headmaster, but why exactly are we still guarding the Prophecy?” he asked. He could feel the rest of the Order turning to stare at him, half of them of the opinion that he was either quite mad or very stupid, and the other half clearly thinking he might have a point.

“I have already explained the necessity of keeping Voldemort from hearing the rest of that Prophecy,” said Dumbledore steadily. “If he were to hear the rest, to understand the full import of his choices, he could act in unpredictable ways.”

“You mean he might stop targeting Harry?” Sirius suggested dryly. Dumbledore straightened, his brows drawing together.

“I cannot say what he would do. But while he is focused on this aim, we can more easily manage our counterattacks.”

“Except we aren’t attacking,” said Moody, leaning forward. “We’re standing guard and sneaking about.” A wave of muttering passed along the table.

“What alternative would you suggest?” asked Minerva sharply. “That we start attacking people in their homes? With no certain intelligence, with no Ministry support? Our position is highly tenuous.”

“I’m not saying that it isn’t,” said Sirius, speaking loudly to be heard over the muttering. “But surely we can consider the idea that we’re wasting our time protecting this Prophecy. You’ve told us the rest of it, we can all make a judgement here. I’m of the opinion that if Voldemort hears it, he won’t change much at all. It’s not going to help him win, especially not if we keep Harry safe and away from him. What harm could it possibly do that’s worth risking the lives and freedom of so many Order members?” There was a long silence.

“What if he doesn’t react the way you think he will?” Arthur asked. “What if it makes things worse for Harry?”

“How much worse could it get?” said Remus. “Voldemort already believes he’s the one destined to kill him, it won’t change anything.”

“What if he targets someone else?” said Tonks. “What if he interprets the Prophecy the way Dumbledore did, and goes after the Longbottom kid?” Remus shrugged.

“I find it quite unlikely that Voldemort would make that connection, given the ample evidence he has that Harry is a danger to him.” Tonks nodded, apparently giving this point serious consideration.
“Are we really willing to risk Voldemort gaining valuable intelligence in this way?” Dumbledore asked, a hint of impatience in his voice.

“If he wants the Prophecy, he has to get it himself or get Harry to get it,” said Sirius. “If he goes himself, there’s a chance he’ll be caught, or at least seen by the Ministry, which can only be good for us. We already know he’s likely to target Harry, and we’re far better off helping protect him than the Prophecy itself. Let the Ministry take care of it, or not.” He glanced around at the other Order members. “I’m sorry, Headmaster, I just think there are better ways of fighting this war.”

Dumbledore pressed the tips of his fingers together and surveyed Sirius over the tops of his glasses.

“Severus,” he said. “Your unique position might throw some light on this issue. What do you think of Sirius’s suggestion?”

Snape tapped his lip with one finger, considering his answer as he stared across the table at Sirius.

“I cannot absolutely say,” he said slowly. “As you are well aware, the Dark Lord does not share all his plans or thoughts with anyone. I suspect Black is right, and that allowing him to attain the Prophecy will not significantly change the Dark Lord’s overall strategy. It may, however, expedite his plans, or perhaps intensify his attempts to manipulate Harry, which would certainly endanger the boy’s life.”

“I never said we shouldn’t protect Harry,” Sirius snapped. Snape inclined his head with a sneer.

“Very well,” he said. “It is clear many people at this table are considering your opinion, Sirius. Shall we take a few days to consider and discuss it at our next meeting?”

There was a general mutter of agreement and Minerva scribbled a note on the parchment in front of her. Sirius kept his eyes fixed on nothing in particular and tried to ignore the look Snape was directing at him.

“You’d like nothing better than to see your precious Dark Lord get to Harry, you slimy git,” he thought viciously. He wasn’t aware that his thoughts had shown so clearly on his face until he felt Remus’s hand on his arm.


It took another half an hour to get through the reports of various members, including Snape, whose infuriating air of superiority had Sirius’s shoulders tensing again. But it was at last over, and everyone got up to leave. Snape, however, approached them, carrying a small flask.

“Lupin, I have the rest of your Potion,” he said, loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear. “As though we all needed reminding of Remus’s condition, thought Sirius, anger rolling in his gut. Remus, however, remained resolutely calm.

“Thank you, Severus,” he said, taking the flask. “I appreciate it.”

“Remember to take it all,” Snape said. “We wouldn’t want any accidents, would we.” He looked down his nose at both of them and swept into the hallway. Sirius balled his hands into fists.

“Just one little curse,” he muttered. “Surely that’s reasonable, just one.”

“Reasonable yes,” said Molly, coming to stand beside them. “Helpful, no. You are an adult and a parent, now, Sirius. You have to be responsible, for Harry’s sake at least.”

Sirius turned to look at her with horror.
“Merlin’s beard, anything but that!” he exclaimed. “The things I do for the people I love!” Remus and Molly laughed, and as Sirius caught a glimpse of Harry and the other children attempting to eavesdrop on the departing Order members from the stairway, he felt like it might be worth it after all.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Harry wondered if he should feel guilty about eavesdropping on the Order’s meeting, given the lengths Sirius and Remus had already gone to to keep him safe, but his curiosity was stronger than his conscience. In fact, when confronted with the curiosity of the members of the Weasley family not yet old enough to join the Order, his conscience retreated into a corner, stuck its fingers in its ears and hummed ‘Cauldron Full Of Hot Strong Love’ while it pretended everything was fine. Which was how Harry, Ron, Ginny and the twins found themselves crouched on the landing above the kitchen door, attempting to listen in on the first full meeting of the Order since the Weasleys had arrived.

“It’s like they don’t trust us at all,” muttered Ginny, glaring down at the kitchen as though it had personally criticised her. “I still don’t see why we can’t know what’s going on, it’s our family too.”

“Never fear, sis,” George said quietly, clapping her on the shoulder. “Fred and I have a solution.”

Fred held up a handful of what looked like flesh-coloured string.

“Extendable Ears,” he announced proudly.

“You may applaud later,” said George. “When it won’t get us yelled at.”

Ron took a fleshy string, one end of which was attached to what looked like an actual human ear, and held it at arm’s length, his expression somewhat doubtful.

“This is gross,” he said.

Fred and George exchanged a long suffering look and each took an Extendable Ear, inserting the non-eared end into their own hearing organs and letting the other end of the string fall toward the kitchen below. Once the Extendable Ears reached the floor, they started wriggling toward the door in the most unsettling manner. Ron looked appalled, but Harry and Ginny had to cover their laughter.

“If you don’t want to hear what’s going on, fine,” said Fred loftily.
“Don’t expect us to fill you in, though,” added George. “It’s not our fault you’re so sensitive.”

Ron scowled at the twins and shoved one end of his string into his ear, Ginny and Harry quickly following suit. Harry almost jumped in surprise when his Extendable Ear reached the door. He could hear a jumble of voices almost as though he were in the next room. The sound was still garbled, however. It was like trying to hear through water.

“Damn it,” George muttered. “The calibration must have got mucked up.”

“You’re the one who thought a sock would be the best way to store them,” said Fred, pulling out his wand and aiming it at the Extendables. The other three pulled their Extendables from their ears.

“Would you rather Mum found them?” asked George, also pointing his wand at their creations.

“These have been in your socks?” whispered Ginny, outraged.

“We just put these in our ears!” said Ron. “You gits,” he added for good measure.

“There’s nothing worse in my socks than what’s in your hair, Ronnykins,” George hissed.

“I’ll give you Ronnykins,” Ron snapped back in a whisper, starting toward his brother, but Ginny whacked him on the back of the neck with her wand and he desisted. Harry watched this exchange with a grin on his face, although he couldn’t quite ignore the twinge of jealousy he so often felt around the Weasleys. He could never quite forget that he wasn’t really a part of their family, or that he might have had siblings, just like Ron, if it weren’t for Voldemort. He pushed the thought aside as George finished whatever he was doing to the Ears.

“Okay, try again,” he said.

“If you aren’t too delicate for our sock ears, that is,” Fred added with a disdainful look at his brother. Ron stuck a finger up at him and shoved the Extendable back in his ear. When Harry did the same, he found that he could now hear precisely what was going on. Sirius was speaking, and it took a moment for Harry to realise he was speaking about him.

“We already know he’s likely to target Harry,” said Sirius sharply. “And we’re far better off helping protect him than the Prophecy itself.”

Harry sat back, hardly hearing what was said next, avoiding the suddenly intense looks from his friends. So they really were still taking the Prophecy seriously. He’d wondered, after Sirius had told him about it. Both Remus and Sirius had assured him he needn’t worry about it, that it might not even be true, but it sounded like the Order was still going out of their way to protect it. He was startled from his reverie by Snape’s voice.

“I suspect Black is right,” said the Potions master, and Harry’s expression darkened as he pictured Snape’s expression of superiority. “Allowing him to attain the Prophecy will not significantly change the Dark Lord’s overall strategy. It may, however expedite his plans, or perhaps intensify his attempts to manipulate Harry, which would certainly endanger the boy’s life.”

They heard Sirius snap an angry reply, but it was drowned out by Ron’s, “What the bloody hell is going on, Harry?”

“Later,” Harry muttered, avoiding meeting the others’ eyes. He wished he didn’t have to explain this, at least not yet, but it looked like there was no avoiding it now.

The rest of the meeting seemed to drag, as first Snape, then Mad-Eye, then Tonks and Mundungus
Fletcher gave their reports. It seemed as though Harry’s first impressions had been correct. Rather than outright war, everything had gone quiet. Voldemort was in hiding, working in secret, rather than confronting the Ministry head on. Harry wasn’t sure which would be more frightening, this quiet, creeping invasion of Dark wizards into the Ministry, or all out war.

He spent most of this time filling the others in on the various members of the Order, most of whom the Weasley children didn’t know or had only met in passing. Harry’s favourite so far was Nymphadora Tonks, who could change her appearance at will. Harry had never met a Metamorphmagus before, and he was not-so-secretly envious of Tonks’s abilities.

Mad Eye Moody was another story. Tonks admired the man a great deal - although that didn’t stop her cheeking him at every opportunity. He’d trained her as an Auror, and they were as close as any two people could be when one of them was a deeply paranoid, traumatised, rude old bugger and the other was a clumsy, over-enthusiastic, rude young woman with bubble-gum pink hair. Harry couldn’t quite forget that Crouch Jr had worn Mad Eye’s face for a year, including the time he threatened to kill Harry. He still jumped every time he bumped into Moody in the hallway, but Moody didn’t seem to notice. Perhaps he was used to it.

There was a sudden scraping of chairs from the kitchen and a sharp rise in the volume of conversation that signalled the end of the meeting. The listeners hurriedly pulled their Extendable Ears out of sight and stuffed them into their pockets, leaning toward the hallway from their spot on the landing in an attempt to catch any hint of a conversation as the assembled witches and wizards left.

Tonks winked up at them as she headed toward the door, arguing loudly with Moody about the efficacy of certain wand movements when using a Stunning Spell. Harry grinned and waved. His smile faded somewhat as Dumbledore passed the foot of the stairs without so much as a glance in their direction. He was apparently deep in conversation with Professor McGonnagall, but that didn’t prevent her from directing a tiny smile in their direction. Harry watched the door close on his Headmaster with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Dumbledore had barely talked to him since the Tournament. And yet he was still talking to the Order about the Prophecy. The Prophecy that concerned Harry. What was going on?

“So are you going to tell us what’s happening?” Ginny said as Sirius and Remus emerged from the kitchen, both of them glaring after Snape as he swept toward the front door. Harry threw another glance at the front door and chewed on his bottom lip. He knew his friends deserved to know what was going on, but he needed to have some of his own questions answered first, and there were only two people who could do that.

“Sorry, guys,” he said, scrambling to his feet. “I’m not trying to get out of it, but I have to talk to Sirius. Tomorrow, yeah?” Ginny and the twins glared at him, the similarities between the siblings even more striking than usual. Ron didn’t look pleased, but he clapped Harry on the shoulder reassuringly.

“No problem, mate. Hermione’ll be here tomorrow anyway. Best you tell us all at once, eh?” Harry nodded and shot an apologetic glance at the others before heading downstairs.

“What are you lot still doing out of bed?” asked Molly as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“It’s only 9:30, Molly,” Sirius laughed. “And they’re on holidays.”

“Don’t think I don’t know what sort of hours you keep when you’re at school,” Molly said, waving a finger in Harry’s general direction. “At least when you’re home I can make sure you’re taken care
of. Don’t you be long, Harry dear. I’ll go up and get the others sorted.” Sirius leaned against the doorway and smiled fondly after her. Harry was surprised to see the affection in his godfather’s face. He and Molly often had little arguments over things like coffee stains on the tables and the kinds of stories Sirius liked to tell about his pre-Azkaban days, but there were points upon which both of them were firmly allied. Mostly those points centered around Harry.

“You look like you have something on your mind,” said Remus, ushering Harry into the kitchen and closing the door softly behind them. Harry noticed he looked tired, and that Sirius was glancing at him rather more often than was usual, even for Sirius. Not for the first time, Harry wished he knew how things really stood between the two men, but he had no idea how to ask that question. And right now, he had more urgent matters to discuss.

“I wanted to ask about the Prophecy,” he said slowly, not quite sure how to word what he was thinking.

“I take it our meeting wasn’t quite as private as we would have hoped,” drawled Sirius, pushing the still-warm teapot toward Harry and leaning back in a chair. Harry poured himself a cup of tea and dunked some sugar into it. He knew he was blushing.

“Don’t worry,” Remus said, rolling his eyes. “Although I hope you realise that there is a reason these meetings are supposed to be secret.”

“I wish I could join the Order,” Harry said. “Maybe I could be useful for once.” He scowled, staring mulishly into his tea without drinking it. Sirius leaned forward.

“But I don’t want to hide away while all this is going on,” Harry protested, looking up. “Voldemort’s building an army, and I’m just stuck here, hiding.”

“You’re not the only one,” said Sirius, his expression darkening. “But there are times when hiding is the best option.”

“Besides, Harry, we have to do what’s best for you,” said Remus. “I know you’re used to making your own decisions, but you’re our responsibility now. We care about you, everyone here does.”

“Remus and I might not be A+ parenting material,” Sirius added, “but we’ll always do what we can to protect you.”

Harry dropped his gaze again, tracing a vague pattern in a puddle of spilled tea and trying to ignore the sudden wetness in his eyes.

“I’m not complaining,” he mumbled, but Sirius interrupted him.

“Of course you’re complaining,” he said, waving a hand airily. “No one in this family’s ever been good at staying out of a fight.” He laid a warm hand on Harry’s arm and smiled at his godson. “I know it’s not easy Harry, but I promise, it’s for the best.”

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to ask the question that had been bothering him since the day after the Tournament.

“What about the Prophecy?” he asked. “You’re still protecting it. Does that mean it’s still important?”

Remus and Sirius exchanged glances, the mood in the room growing suddenly serious.
“Not everyone thinks so,” said Remus carefully. “We’re currently deciding whether it’s worth protecting it at all.”

“You said Voldemort already heard the Prophecy, that’s why he came after me,” said Harry, looking up, desperate to understand. He’d spent the last few weeks feeling like he was a chess piece, being moved about by a giant hand he couldn’t see. The image haunted his dreams. When he wasn’t dreaming about… *Don’t think about it, don’t think about him*.

“Voldemort knew some of the Prophecy,” Sirius said. Remus’s mouth thinned, as though he didn’t quite approve of Sirius’s sudden openness, but Harry had no interest in being shielded. He needed to know, he needed the truth.

“What doesn’t he know that’s so bad?” asked Harry urgently.

“The Prophecy doesn’t name you,” said Sirius. “It just talks about a baby boy born at the end of July destined to kill the Dark Lord. The part Voldemort didn’t hear talks about that boy having powers he doesn’t know about, and that Voldemort marking him as his equal will be important.” Harry’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“What does that even mean?” he asked. “I don’t have powers like Voldemort.”

Remus smiled, a sad, wry thing.

“Dumbledore says the power it’s talking about is love,” he said. “And I have to admit, it’s a compelling argument. Love is why you keep fighting Voldemort, what makes you the extraordinary person you are.” Harry could feel himself blushing again. “And love is what caused Lily to sacrifice herself, what has kept you safe all these years.”

“It’s why Dumbledore left you with those monsters,” Sirius muttered, his lip curling in a very dog-like snarl. Harry was surprised at how angry his godfather looked. It wasn’t Dumbledore’s fault the Dursleys had… Well, it wasn’t Dumbledore’s fault.

“It wasn’t Dumbledore’s fault,” Harry said aloud. “He didn’t know. I never… I never told anyone. I shouldn’t have said anything, I’ve only messed things up now, with the Prophecy and everything.”

Harry found himself suddenly enveloped in a four-armed hug that was both very touching and very uncomfortable and also smelled slightly of wet dog. His two guardians pulled away just as suddenly as they’d embraced him, all three looking very red for some reason. Sirius, however, leaned forward and forced Harry to look at him, taking both Harry’s hands in his.

“None of this is your fault,” he said seriously. “I promise you, Harry. None of it. Not the Dursleys, not Dumbledore, not the Prophecy, nothing. You deserved better, from all of us. This isn’t on you.”

Harry held his gaze, the inexplicable wetness forcing itself from behind his eyelids again.

“Okay,” he whispered.

“We’ll figure it out,” said Remus softly. “Whatever it takes, Harry, we’re here with you. You’re not alone.”

Harry gave them both a watery smile. Things were still a confusing, disastrous mess, but at least he had these two. His parent’s best friends. His guardians. His family.
After Molly ushered Harry up to his room and settled herself into her private sitting room with Arthur (“We might never leave if you keep showering us with these luxuries, Sirius Black!”), Remus downed his Potion and went to leave the kitchen as well. Neither of them had had a chance to discuss what Harry had said, and Sirius wasn’t sure he could bring himself to talk about it. Harry was clearly suffering, and clearly feeling guilty about being here. Typical Harry, trying to take everything on to himself. It had been all Sirius could do to stop himself blurtling out the truth - that Dumbledore had known full well how Harry was being treated, and that he’d allowed it to happen. Sirius wasn’t sure he could deal with Harry’s reaction in any case. More than likely, the boy would excuse his Headmaster, claim he was only doing what he thought was best. Sirius couldn’t bear to hear it.

Sirius looked up and realised Remus was moving. He was almost to the door before Sirius shoved his chair back and followed him, stopping him before he could head up the stairs.

“Let me stay with you, at least for tonight,” he said, before he could lose his nerve. There were so many things still left unsaid and unresolved between them, but he still couldn’t bear to think of Remus up there on his own, curling up in his dog bed without anyone for company. Remus looked down at him in surprise, his expression suddenly guarded.

“I don’t know, Pads,” he said. Sirius felt a sharp pain right through his ribs, but there was also anger there too. Things shouldn’t be like this.

“I know things haven’t been the easiest,” he said. “But we used to spend every full moon together. You always said it made things easier.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said softly. “You don’t have to.”

“Maybe I want to,” Sirius replied irritably. “You’re as bad as Harry, you great self-sacrificing prat.” Remus chuckled suddenly, his eyes suddenly warm, dancing with humour.

“Hello Pot, meet Kettle,” he said. “Very well, if you’re going to make such a Thing out of it, you may as well join me.”

“I’m not making a Thing out of anything,” Sirius protested, trailing behind Remus as he headed up the first flight of stairs.

“No, of course not,” replied Remus, and Sirius could hear him rolling his eyes. “Sirius Black has never made a Thing out of anything in his life.”

“Precisely,” Sirius said with a sharp nod.

“Drama queen,” Remus muttered, not quite under his breath.

“Oh that’s it, Moony, you’re in for it now,” Sirius hissed, forcing himself to be quiet as they passed the guest bedrooms.

“I’m absolutely petrified,” Remus shot back, and now his shoulders were quivering with laughter.

It wasn’t until much later, when Remus’s long snout was resting - and snoring - on Sirius’s furry back, that Sirius realised just how long it had been since he and Remus had bantered like that. He smiled a doggy smile and nestled his head more comfortably on his paws. Perhaps things were finally working themselves out.
Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Yay, bonus chapter! Here is your apology for the last couple of late chapters. I hope you enjoy! I definitely had fun writing this one. :) I can't believe the real action of the plot hasn't even started yet! This is gonna be one looooong fic, so I hope you're all up for that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius was woken just after dawn by a loud groan. He opened his eyes to see a very human - and completely naked - Moony attempting sit up. While the Wolfsbane Potion had definitely improved his transformations, they still left him exhausted and aching, and he was obviously struggling. A glance through the gap in the curtains confirmed Sirius’s suspicions that Remus had only just Changed back. He extracted himself from Remus as gently as he could, respectfully averting his eyes as he Changed back to human and yanked a blanket from the bed.

“Up you get,” he said, wrapping the blanket firmly around Remus’s shoulders and hauling him to his feet. All Remus could manage in reply was another groan. Sirius knew that if he hadn’t been lying on a dog bed that was barely softer than the floor, he would have stayed where he was for at least another twelve hours. Sirius managed to lug his staggering form across to the bed and tuck him in. Remus barely opened his eyes throughout the entire process.

Sirius finished fussing with the blankets and paused, still leaning over the bed. Remus looked so pale, his scars standing out more sharply than usual, his hair flopping over his face in need of a good trim. Best not mention that to Molly, he thought, brushing the offending locks gently away from Remus’s eyes. He repressed a sigh. While Remus had been in his wolf shape, it hadn’t been so weird, being together - almost like old times, before they’d become lovers, and then ex lovers with one and a half decades of angst between them. God I wish things weren’t so complicated, Sirius thought sadly. He straightened and brushed his own hair back from his face before turning to leave. He stopped when a cold hand grabbed his own.

“D’n go, Pads,” Remus muttered, without opening his eyes. Sirius felt his heart pounding in his throat. He’s exhausted, he’s practically talking in his sleep, he thought desperately. The sleep talker tugged on Sirius’s hand, pulling him toward the bed. “‘M cold. C’m back t’bed.”

“I hope to Merlin you remember you asked me to stay,” Sirius whispered as he clambered over Remus and lay down on top of the covers. “If I get yelled at because of this, I’m going to be pissed.”

“Shut up,” Remus grumbled. “More warm less noise.” Sirius sighed and bit his lip. He felt as though they were teetering on the edge of something, and he wasn’t quite sure if he was ready to find out what was on the other side. They were both feeling vulnerable, both half-awake at best, and…

“Stop thinking s’much and be the big spoon.”

“You always were the charmer,” Sirius said, and gave in. For a moment, he was terrified by how easy it was. Then the warmth of Remus’s body started to seep through the blankets and sleep started to cloud his brain. He decided to take Remus’s advice and stopped thinking.
“My arm is completely numb.”

Remus’s voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. Sirius muttered indistinctly and pulled his hair over his face, attempting to hide from whoever was moving about beside him.

“Pads, wake up.”

Sirius growled petulantly and opened his eyes to find that, whatever Remus’s voice might be doing, the man himself was very close indeed. He blinked several times while he waited for his brain to supply words.

“Morning, Moony,” he said.

“Barely,” Remus replied. Sirius’s brain helpfully reminded him that Remus was still completely naked underneath the covers, and immediately short-circuited. He settled for blinking again until he could remember how to behave like a human being.

“I see you’re up to your usual morning standard,” Remus smiled, pushing Sirius’s hair away from his face. Sirius winced at the bright sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains.

“Hello Pot, meet Kettle,” he groaned, somewhat impressed with himself for remembering Remus’s words from the previous night.

“I would like to point out that you aren’t being yelled at,” Remus said, still smiling. *Still naked*. Sirius closed his eyes in the hope that this would improve matters. It didn’t. He was still uncomfortably - very uncomfortably - aware that Remus’s lanky frame was pressed up against his body, separated from him by a few layers of blankets and yesterday’s robes. His breath was warm against his face, and Sirius could still feel him smiling. *How does he not have morning breath? How? This is not fair*.

“So you remember asking me to stay,” Sirius said, forcing his eyes open again. It was almost too much, being this close, seeing those warm, brown eyes like this again. *I’m doomed*.

“Yes.” Remus looked down at his hands where he was fiddling with the hem of the blanket where it was starting to unravel. “Thanks for listening.”

“You’re hard to resist when you’re sleepy,” Sirius replied with a lopsided grin. Despite his teasing tone, he could feel his patience fraying one awkward moment at a time. No matter what had happened between them, no matter what had gone wrong, no matter what horrible things they’d said to one another a year ago, he was still absolutely, completely, and irrevocably in love with Remus bloody Lupin.

“Merlin’s pants, this is ridiculous,” Remus bloody Lupin exclaimed suddenly. Sirius stared at him, taken aback.

“Merlin’s pants ?” he said, half laughing.

“Yes, Merlin’s sodding pants and Morgause’s saggy tits and Morgana’s curly brown bush as well!”

Sirius couldn’t help it. He knew they were supposed to be having a moment, but he couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled out of him at the sight of a naked, apparently frustrated Moony, referring to the normally-private regions of their most famous magical figures. After a moment, Remus joined in,
and Sirius wondered if the world could get any more perfect than that moment, the two of them having slept late on a summer morning in the school holidays, about to head downstairs to cook breakfast for their godson and his friends.

Before the usual terror that inevitably followed on the heels of such moments, had haunted him since his escape from Azkaban, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Moony’s laughing mouth. He half expected the other man to pull away, to freeze, for things to be different. Instead, a long, freckled arm wound around his neck, pulling him closer, as though it was the most natural thing in the world for them to be kissing in Remus’s bed the morning after full moon. *It should be the most natural thing in the world.*

After what felt like a perfect, sunlit eternity, they pulled apart and simply stared at one another. As usual, Remus was the first to break the silence.

“I can’t do it any more, Pads,” he murmured, tugging gently on a strand of Sirius’s hair. “I can’t pretend I’m not in love with you.” Sirius continued staring, a smile spreading slowly across his face as he registered what Remus had said.

“Thank fuck,” he said, more enthusiastically than eloquently. Remus snorted and darted forward to kiss him again.

“I’m sorry I listened to Dumbledore,” he whispered when they pulled apart again, his expression suddenly serious. “I should have known. I did know. I just…” He waved a hand in the air, unable to find the words. Sirius grabbed the hand and pressed it to his chest, holding Moony’s guilty gaze.

“I should’ve come after you. I thought you were Imperiused for fuck’s sake, I shouldn’t have left you in that place.” He shuddered, remembering the one time he’d seen the places Remus was forced to go, gathering intelligence for the Order about the werewolf community. He’d seen worse since, far worse, but it still sickened him that Remus, good, gentle Remus, was forced to live like that.

“We both fucked up,” he said aloud. “The whole world was fucked up. I should never have said the things I said.”

“Neither should I.”

“Can we…” Sirius paused and took a deep breath. Even now, knowing the answer, with Remus’s hand clasped in his own, the words stuck in his throat. “Start again with me, Moons.”

“Fuck yes,” whispered Remus. Sirius laughed so hard he nearly fell off the bed.

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Harry was woken the next day by a loud squeal and a large quantity of bushy hair being shoved into his face as Hermione hugged him.

“Ow,” he managed.

“I’ve been so worried about you, your letters were absolutely useless, you prat! How are you?”

“Let the man wake up before you start interrogating him, ‘Mione,” Ron said groggily. He and Harry had decided to share the massive four poster bed rather than try and fit another bed in their room. Harry was privately very glad of the company, although he felt more than a little guilty about just how many times his nightmares had woken Ron since he’d arrived. Ron was surprisingly good at dealing with it, however, merely shuffling closer and sitting with Harry in silence until he felt better.
It was a relief not to be obliged to explain anything, although Harry knew Ron must be absolutely bursting with curiosity by now.

Ron’s restraint upon Harry’s return to their room the previous night was even more surprising, considering how little he knew, and Harry was very grateful. He wasn’t sure how he felt about things yet, and having to go through them with Ron wasn’t something he could quite face on top of all the unnecessary emotion that had somehow appeared in his discussion with Sirius and Remus.

Hermione’s arrival, however, meant that, ready or not, he was going to have to provide the others with some answers - answers he wasn’t sure he had himself. Not until after breakfast, though, he decided, his stomach growling impressively. He hadn’t realised how late it was. The sun was already glaring through the curtains, and the air outside was warm.

“Sorry, Hermione,” he said, extracting himself gently from her death grip. “I didn’t have much to say, we’ve mostly been cleaning.”

“Harry James Potter, you are such a boy,” Hermione huffed, but there was a note of affection in her voice.

“We were waiting for you to get here so he could tell us all at once,” explained Ron reasonably. “We haven’t really had time to get deep and meaningful. You should’ve seen the rats in the second dining room. Size of dogs, I swear.”

Hermione shuddered and looked around Harry’s room, apparently taking in the distinctly green decor for the first time.

“You’re joining Slytherin, are you?” she asked, wrinkling her nose disdainfully. Harry shrugged.

“It was Sirius’s brother’s room. I haven’t got around to changing it.”

“That mad elf would probably burst a blood vessel if you tried,” Ron snorted. “He’s obsessed. Always popping in for a chat about good old Regulus the Death Eater.”

Hermione gasped.

“Sirius’s brother was a Death Eater?” she squeaked. Harry shrugged again. He knew it should bother him, sleeping in the same bed as someone who had once believed in Voldemort’s Pure Blood obsession, but Kreacher’s stories of his old Master - and Sirius’s albeit brief reminiscences about his childhood - had left Harry feeling more sympathetic than repulsed. Regulus Arcturus Black sounded like the kind of kid who could have turned out okay if he hadn’t been forced to live with such a hateful family.

I wonder how many Voldemort groupies could say the same, he thought, suddenly struck with the contrast between this image of Regulus, and his disdain for Malfoy’s Slytherin cohort. How many of them would have chosen differently, given the opportunity? How many of them were suffering, right now, the way Sirius and Regulus had suffered? He shook his head. In the end, did it really matter? Of course it does, he thought. It could change everything. He could feel the beginning of an idea forming in the back of his mind, but he knew if he prodded at it, it would disappear. He noticed Hermione staring at him and forced himself to concentrate.

“From what Kreacher says, it wasn’t exactly his idea,” he said.

“Who’s Kreacher?” Hermione asked.

“Sirius’s house elf. He’s-”
“Bonkers,” interjected Ron.

“Ron!” Hermione chided him.

“You can’t really blame him, locked up in this house with only those old portraits to talk to” Harry said fairly. Ron’s expression indicated he could, indeed, blame Kreacher for being not only strange, but often quite creepy. Harry didn’t have the energy to argue with him. He didn’t mind Kreacher these days. He was cleaner, and muttered less, and seemed to be warming up to the idea of having a house full of blood traitors and Mudbloods with surprising speed. Perhaps he, like Harry, had simply needed time to adjust to the idea that people might actually be nice to him.

“I’m starving,” announced Ron. “Have you eaten, Hermione?”

“Hours ago,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “It’s nearly lunch time.”

“Or second breakfast,” said Harry, grinning. “Best part of the holidays.”

When they reached the kitchen, Harry froze in the doorway. Sirius was frying bacon and eggs, and Remus was standing behind him, arms wrapped around his waist.

“Holy shit,” said Ron succinctly. Hermione thumped him and look smug, as though she’d known all along.

“Ronald Weasley, I will wash your mouth out with a Scouring Charm if I hear that word from you again,” said Molly from the end of the table, without looking up from her paper. Both Sirius and Remus started and whipped around, looking distinctly nervous. Arthur cleared his throat nervously and stared very hard at his porridge. Harry continued staring at his guardians, a strange, warm bubble of air expanding in his chest.

“Harry, I, we…” Sirius appeared to run out of words and shrugged helplessly, his expression extremely anxious. Harry suddenly remembered how his limbs worked and crossed the kitchen in two steps, wrapping his arms around both men at the same time.

“This is brilliant,” he said.

“About time, too,” said Arthur. Ron still looked as though someone had smacked him with the frying pan, but he nodded his approval. Harry felt as though his brain was circling somewhere several feet above his body, but he didn’t mind at all.

“I knew it!” he said, grinning broadly. For the first time in weeks, he felt… happy. Really, truly, and completely happy, as though nothing else mattered. In half an hour he was going to have to tell his best friends that he was fated to kill the most feared Dark wizard in history, and he’d have to decide whether or not he believed that, and their entire world was at war, but right now, two of the people he loved most in the world were happy, together. Together.

“I’m starving,” announced Ron. Sirius chuckled and turned back to the breakfast, Remus went to pour the tea, and the morning moved on. Together.
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Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hey lovelies! I'm posting the next few chapters a little more quickly because some of the information in them is pretty much verbatim from the books (although not in the same context or order) and I don't want you lovely readers to get bored. It's kind of important for the rest of the plot, so I can't leave it out! I hope you don't mind!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, Harry, spill,” said Ginny as soon as they were all gathered in Harry’s room. Breakfast had drawn out into lunch, the mood in the house remarkably lighter than usual at the news that Sirius and Remus were a couple. Again. Harry still wasn’t sure he could quite take it in, but he was certain that he was pleased.

While they’d eaten, Sirius had opened up more about the days after Hogwarts when he and Remus had lived together, before their roles for the Order had taken over and ruined their lives. Even while they laughed together over silly stories - Sirius’s punk rock phase, the time Remus had brought home so many library books that their dining room table had collapsed, the story of how Sirius had come to own his motorcycle, which he now fully intended to get back from Hagrid - the shadow of that first war still hung over everything like smoke. Harry longed to know what had really happened, but nothing in the world would convince him to ask. They looked so happy together, their smiles holding the promise of something like a lasting family. It was too fragile to risk over something that had happened so long ago.

“You know you can talk to us about anything, mate,” said Ron, glancing nervously at the others. Harry felt his bacon and eggs sitting like a stone in his stomach and he shifted uneasily on the bed, where he sat between his two best friends. George was straddling the desk chair backwards, and Fred was braiding Ginny’s hair on the windowseat. Everything looked too peaceful in the afternoon sun, with the summer breeze fluttering the curtains, to be ruined with talk about Voldemort. But it had to be done.

“Okay,” Harry said. “But it’s going to take a while.” He took a deep breath and Hermione took one of his hands, giving him a reassuring smile. He smiled back and began. “I dunno how much they told you, but the night of the Third Task…”

He didn’t leave anything out. There was some details he couldn’t quite bring himself to talk about, but he told them everything they needed to know. It felt wrong, almost traitorous, to tell anyone what the Dursleys had done to him, but Hermione tightened her grip on his hand, and Ron sat close on his other side, and he forced himself to say the words. Ginny growled when he told them about the time he’d been locked outside on a winter’s night because he hadn’t finished laying mulch, and when he confessed to the real source of the scars on his legs, George’s fists clenched. But they let him talk, somehow sensing that he needed to get it out.

The Dursleys were only the beginning of the story, however. Telling them about the Prophecy was even harder than he expected. He couldn’t quite bring himself to look at them while he told them, as though their expressions of shock would make things worse.

“Dumbledore thinks you’re destined to kill You Know Who?” squeaked Hermione when he was
finished. She looked thoroughly taken aback that someone she respected as much as Dumbledore could take something like a Prophecy seriously.

“I guess so,” said Harry glumly. “That’s why he wanted me to stay with the Dursleys.”

“Well that’s rubbish,” said Ron. “Prophecy or not, you can’t stay with a bunch of, of…” He waved his hands wildly in an attempt to find a word bad enough to describe Harry’s relatives.

“He didn’t know what they were like,” Harry muttered. “And I shouldn’t have said anything. Now it’s messed everything up.”

“Don’t be daft, Harry,” said Fred. “Ron’s right, no matter what, you couldn’t stay there.” Harry shrugged and looked down at his hands.

“I should be doing something,” he said. “Not hiding away here.” Hermione bumped him gently with her shoulder.

“You really are a prat, sometimes, you know that?”

He looked up and glared at her. His mood was not improved when she simply smiled in return.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself, Harry,” she said, as though explaining something to an overwrought toddler. “There’s a whole Order of people working against You Know Who right now, and you’re feeling guilty because you’re safe? That’s the most Harry Potter thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“She’s right, mate,” said Ron from his other side. Harry glared at him as well.

“You can get as pissy as you like,” said Ginny, “but even the Order aren’t taking the Prophecy seriously. You know what we heard last night. They’re considering taking the protection off it.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t think they should,” Harry objected, half-heartedly. A part of him - a very large part - wanted to be convinced that Hermione was right, that Sirius and Remus were right.

“Dumbledore isn’t the only person in the Order,” said George.

“And Divination isn’t a reliable source of intelligence,” Hermione added, sniffing disdainfully. “I read about Prophecies in third year, and apparently many of them never come true.”

“What if this one is though?” Harry asked desperately. “What if I’m the only one who can kill him, and I’m just sitting here enjoying myself?”

The others laughed outright at this question, and Harry stared at them, somewhat hurt by this light-hearted treatment of his deepest fears.

“Harry, when have you ever ‘just sat around enjoying yourself’?” Hermione snorted. “You’re pathologically incapable of not getting into trouble.”

“I don’t ask for trouble!” Harry objected. He was feeling rather put upon.

“You haven’t quite got the hang of avoiding it, though,” Ginny pointed out.

“You’re not helping.”

“And your life isn’t exactly a barrel of laughs,” Ron said. “I mean, look at us, sitting here talking about You Know Who and, you know, child abuse.” He glanced fearfully at Harry as he said the
last two words, as though afraid he was overstepping, but Harry was grateful that at least one person could talk about it bluntly.

“But that’s not happening any more,” he said. “Things are…” He trailed off with a shrug. “I like it here.” And I’m afraid that if I get too comfortable something will go wrong and someone will get hurt. Again.

Hermione sighed and all five of them exchanged significant glances.

“You’re allowed to be happy, Harry. Even after what’s happened. The world won’t blow up because you have people who care about you and want to keep you safe.”

Harry was grateful that Hermione didn’t seem to expect a response, because he didn’t think he’d be able to talk past the lump in his throat. For someone who was, all things considered, feeling happier than he’d for years, he sure was feeling like crying a lot.

“One thing I want to know is why knowing this Prophecy would make You Know Who change his plans,” Ginny mused after a long silence.

“Sirius said it doesn’t name me, so maybe they think he’d go after someone else?” said Harry, who’d been wondering the same thing. “And Remus said the Prophecy said something about me having powers Voldemort doesn’t have, although Dumbledore thinks that just means love.” He ignored the flinch from his companions at Voldemort’s name. “Maybe if Voldemort hears that he’ll try something different?”

“Wait, if it doesn’t name you, then how do we know it’s even talking about you at all?” exclaimed Fred. “It could be any poor bastard.”

“As long as they were born at the end of July the same year as me,” said Harry, remembering what Sirius had told him.

“There’s a lot of babies born at the end of July,” said Ginny. “Hell, Neville’s the same age as you, it could be talking about him for all we know. And who says it has to be a British wizard?”

Harry sat back on the bed, staring at an ink stain on the floorboards as his mind raced. Maybe they were right. Maybe Voldemort had made a mistake. Maybe it wasn’t him.

“We all know you want to fight You Know Who,” said Ron. “You don’t need a Prophecy to tell you that. Maybe give it some time, though, eh? Sirius and Remus are right. You don’t need to run out and challenge him to a duel right now.”

“Well said!” agreed George, sounding slightly surprised that his brother had managed such astounding insight. Harry managed a lopsided grin.

“Thanks,” he said. “You’re not totally terrible friends.” Hermione snorted and punched him in the arm.

“Ow!” he objected, but his smile broadened. Maybe it would be okay to let someone take care of things, just for a bit.

“Right, now that’s cleared up,” said George.

“We need to know what’s going on with Sirius and Remus,” said Fred.

“Yeah, Harry, spill,” said Ginny. “How come none of us knew anything about it?”
Harry looked up to see them all looking expectantly at him. He couldn’t help it. He threw back his head and laughed.

The rest of the afternoon was dedicated to cleaning out the dusty old cabinets in the drawing room. They had cleaned the room itself over a week ago, removing the horrible old tapestry with Kreacher’s assistance - although Sirius had had to swear that he wouldn’t throw it out, but would instead add it to the growing pile of Black paraphernalia in the attic. Sirius had been adamant about Vanishing it all, but Harry had convinced him that Kreacher would be much happier if he conceded this one point, and that a house with a happy Kreacher was a happier house in general. Kreacher, who hadn’t heard this conversation, had softened so much toward Sirius upon hearing that his most prized treasures wouldn’t be destroyed that he had voluntarily brought Sirius a cup of tea the night before, and hadn’t muttered a single epithet under his breath for two whole days.

The house was almost entirely livable these days, with only a few reminders of its former occupants, like the drawing room cabinet, left to dispose of. Sirius had no idea what most of these things were. Some of them he remembered from his childhood, like the silver snuffbox full of Wartcap powder and the music box that had them all nodding off to sleep before Ginny had the sense to slam the lid shut. Some of the items were rather reluctant to be Vanished, so they had to be thrown into a garbage bag in the middle of the floor.

“Can you open this?” Ron asked Sirius, passing him a heavy gold locket inlaid with green stones in the shape of an ‘S’, or a snake. Sirius scowled at it. Another reminder of his family’s ties to everyone’s least favourite House. He tugged briefly at the clasp, but it wouldn’t budge. He wasn’t really sorry. Whoever’s picture was inside it, he was certain he wouldn’t care for them. He shrugged at Ron and tossed the locket into the rubbish back.

“NO!”

Everyone jumped as Kreacher barreled into the room, heading straight for the garbage bag and shrieking in apparent horror as he rummaged desperately through the trash.

“What in Merlin’s name-” Sirius thundered, rising, but Hermione put her hand on his arm.

“Kreacher, what’s wrong?” asked Harry, kneeling down next to the elf, an expression of sincere concern on his face. Sirius immediately felt guilty, and then felt annoyed about feeling guilty.

“Master Regulus’s locket, Master Sirius must not throw away Master Regulus’s locket, he must not, he must not!” rasped Kreacher, finally locating the locket and clasping it tightly to his chest, backing away from the room full of people staring at him as though afraid they were about to snatch it back.

“It’s okay, Kreacher, you know Sirius promised not to destroy the important things,” said Hermione, stepping forward cautiously. Kreacher only held the locket tighter to his chest and kept backing away from the room full of people staring at him as though afraid they were about to snatch it back.

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“It’s okay, Kreacher, you know Sirius promised not to destroy the important things,” said Hermione, stepping forward cautiously. Kreacher only held the locket tighter to his chest and kept backing away, swinging his head from side to side and muttering to himself. He looked quite mad, as mad as when they had first found him. But for the first time, Sirius felt something like pity for him.

“What’s so important about my brother’s locket, Kreacher?” he asked, trying to keep his voice gentle. Kreacher’s muttering rose in volume until it was a wail.

“Kreacher failed Master Regulus, Kreacher failed, Kreacher is a bad elf, a bad servant, oh why did Master Regulus ever go to the cave, why did he trust Kreacher with his most important of tasks, Kreacher has failed him!”
Sirius’s stomach clenched. Whatever Kreacher was upset about, it seemed like more than just a devotion to his old Master. Regulus had obviously given Kreacher some task, something the elf had been unable to do - an elf who could miraculously unstick Permanent Sticking Charms and Apparate messages to Dumbledore inside Hogwarts.

“Why don’t you tell us about it, Kreacher?” said Hermione. “Here, sit down on this stool and Ron will get you some tea. Won’t you Ron,” she added with a glare at Ron, who’d opened his mouth to object.

“Sure thing,” Ron muttered, heading for the door.

Kreacher allowed himself to be ushered onto a footstool, where he sat rocking and sobbing, clutching the locket to his skinny chest. Sirius sat in a chair nearby, fighting the urge to shake the tiny creature and force him to speak. If Remus hadn’t had his hand on his shoulder, he might have done just that. What had his brother done? What was the locket? Was the elf simply insane and imagining things? He hated not having answers, but there was clearly no getting anything out of Kreacher while he was in such a state.

After drinking his tea, and after several more assurances from Harry and Hermione that Master Regulus would be fine with Kreacher telling his secret to his own family, Kreacher finally began.

“When Master Regulus joined the Death Eaters, he was so proud,” Kreacher whispered. Sirius fought the urge to punch something. Of course it was going to be a story about his brother’s pathetic infatuation with Voldemort. Why had he expected anything else?

“Master Regulus was always a good boy, always did what was asked of him. And he was always kind to Kreacher. He told Kreacher of his tasks, of the Dark Lord’s plans. He was proud, so proud.”

Hermione and Harry exchanged horrified glances, but remained sitting close to Kreacher, comforting him. Sirius felt sick. He grasped Remus’s hand tightly. He wished he could run away, walk out of the room and not listen to whatever was coming next, but his limbs wouldn’t move.

“One night, Master Regulus came home and told Kreacher the Dark Lord had need of a house elf. He volunteered Kreacher. Master Regulus told Kreacher to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered and then to return home and tell him what he had seen. Kreacher was proud to serve Master Regulus, so he went to the Dark Lord.”

There was dead silence in the room now. Nobody moved. Every eye was locked on Kreacher’s tear-streaked, snot-stained face as he rocked back and forth on his stool. Even now, he wouldn’t release his grip on the locket.

“The Dark Lord took Kreacher to a cave by the sea, where there was a great underground lake, a lake full of the dead. In the middle of the lake was an island. The Dark Lord took Kreacher to the island and showed him a basin of potion there. He made Kreacher drink the potion.” Kreacher’s voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper. “The potion made Kreacher sick. He saw… terrible things. Terrible things.”

The pause that followed was unbearable. Remus’s grip on Sirius’s shoulder was painfully tight.

“The Dark Lord placed this locket in the basin and refilled it with potion. Then he left Kreacher on the island and went away.”

“He left you there?” Hermione asked, a grey tinge to her lips. Kreacher didn’t seem to hear her.
Now that he had begun his story, it was as if he couldn’t stop. He barely registered that there was anyone else in the room.

“Kreacher was thirsty, so thirsty,” muttered the elf. “Kreacher went to the water to drink, and the dead dragged him under. Kreacher was drowning. But Master Regulus had ordered Kreacher to come back, so Kreacher did.”

“Merlin,” Sirius muttered. Suddenly he saw the elf before him not as the tormentor of his youth but as a fellow victim. How had he never realised? He slumped forward, burying his face in his hands. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the pathetic creature in front of him.

“What happened then, Kreacher?” Harry asked. His hands were visibly shaking, but his voice remained calm.

“Kreacher told Master Regulus what had happened. Master Regulus thanked Kreacher, but Kreacher thought he was troubled. A few weeks later, Master Regulus came to Kreacher and asked Kreacher to take him to the cave. So Kreacher did.”

The listeners exchanged startled glances, but none of them dared interrupt now.

“Master Regulus…” Kreacher trailed off, his shoulders shaking once more. “Master Regulus…” Hermione laid a hand on Kreacher’s shoulder as he tried to control his sobs.

“Did he make you drink the potion?” she whispered.

“No,” said Kreacher dully. “Master Regulus drank the potion. He took the Dark Lord’s locket from the basin and replaced it with another. He ordered Kreacher to return home and to never speak of what happened to anyone. He ordered Kreacher to destroy the Dark Lord’s locket. And then Master Regulus was dragged into the lake and he did not come out and Kreacher had his orders, he had to come home, and he never spoke of what happened but Kreacher failed Master Regulus, he failed him! He could not open the locket, he could not destroy it, no matter what he tried! Kreacher failed Master Regulus!”

At this, Kreacher’s composure broke completely and he threw himself onto the floor, sobbing and beating the boards with his horny little fists, the locket still clasped tightly in one of them. Harry looked helplessly up at Sirius, but Sirius barely registered. He couldn’t quite believe what he’d just heard. His brother, the brother he’d thought had died a coward, trying to run from Voldemort, had sacrificed himself to get… what? What was so important about that locket that Voldemort would go to such lengths to hide it?

“I’m so sorry, Pads,” Remus murmured in his ear, his condolence covered by the sudden astonished conversation of the others. Sirius squeezed his hand briefly. He didn’t know what to feel.

“We must get that locket to Dumbledore,” he said decisively. There would be time for feelings later. The true Black way. “We can’t leave it with Kreacher, not something that important.”

“How are you going to get it away from him?” Remus asked as they watched Harry and Hermione coerce the elf back onto his stool, sniffing and shaking and still gripping the locket for dear life.

“We promise to destroy it for him,” Sirius said. “That’s what Regulus told him to do, after all. We help Kreacher follow his orders.” Remus nodded, and Sirius turned back to the elf.

“Kreacher,” he said cautiously. “My brother wanted that locket destroyed, and so do we. We think it might be important. Do you think…” He paused and took a deep breath. Merlin, it would be so much easier just to order him to give it to me, he thought. But Harry was looking at him with that
trusting expression and he couldn’t do it. And maybe I don’t want to treat the poor wretch the way Voldemort did, he realised with another wave of nausea and shame. “Could you please give it to us, Kreacher? I promise I will tell you where it is, and what is happening. And I promise, on my family’s name—” he shuddered, but ploughed on “- that we’ll destroy it for you. For my br... For Regulus.”

Kreacher looked up at him, his eyes shining with tears, and snot dribbling out of one nostril.

“Master promises to destroy it?” the elf asked, his voice harsh. “Master swears to Kreacher?”

“I swear,” Sirius replied solemnly.

Kreacher stared down at the locket in his hand for a long, tense moment.

“Very well, Master Sirius,” he said, and passed it up to Sirius. “Thank you, Master.”

Sirius stared down at the elf. He felt as though his whole past was tumbling down around his ears, everything he’d known, or thought he’d known, falling apart.

“Come on, Kreacher, let’s get you down to the kitchen, you look like you need a good rest,” said Hermione. Sirius watched as she, Ron, and Harry escorted the elf from the room. The other Weasleys stared awkwardly at Sirius and Remus, not sure what to do.

“We need to get this to Dumbledore immediately,” said Remus. “I’ll send him a message.” Sirius nodded and sat back in his chair, turning the locket over in his hands, completely ignoring the others. It was so small, so harmless-looking. Yet just touching it sent a shiver down his spine, and he felt the urge to fling it across the room. He hoped it was only his imagination, but he feared something terrible was coming, something he couldn’t quite see yet, but something that would change all of their lives forever.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hiiiii! Thank you so much for your lovely comments on the last chapter, I was really worried about it, so it was awesome to hear that it wasn't as bad as I thought. I hope you enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was late that evening before Dumbledore arrived on the doorstep of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. It had been an excruciating afternoon for everyone in the house, as they all attempted to behave as if nothing significant had happened, even though they all felt as though a great shadow was hovering over the house, ready to engulf them. Their one comforting thought was that Dumbledore would have the answers. Sirius, however, could feel no such reassurance. No matter what Dumbledore told them - and given his recent history, it wasn't likely to be much - he couldn't stop picturing his brother as Kreacher had described him, sick and frightened, being dragged beneath the waters of a black lake by dead hands.

During the rest of the day, as he forced himself to finish cleaning out the drawing room cabinets, as Arthur got rid of the Boggart in the writing desk so they could move both pieces of ugly old furniture up to the attic, as he helped Molly and Remus prepare dinner, he could feel the others watching him. He tried not to resent it. They were worried about him, he told himself, not judging him. They'd already known what his family were, already known about his brother. But somehow Kreacher’s story had made it all so real. And so much worse.

So it was a relief when, after the sun had set and the square was bathed in a muggy twilight, Dumbledore finally appeared.

He greeted them cordially enough, although Sirius noted, with yet another burst of resentment, that the Headmaster avoided talking to Harry directly. He'd been aloof with the boy ever since the Tournament, as though punishing him for choosing to leave the Dursleys. Sirius would never have believed the older man capable of such pettiness if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes. He pushed aside his anger, however, and followed the others into the kitchen.

Dumbledore looked around at the assembled crowd and smiled his twinkling smile.

“As wonderful as it is to see you all,” he said, addressing the younger generation, “I fear this is a matter for the Order. I hope you can forgive an old man his rules and regulations.”

The Weasley children glanced mutinously at one another, but it seemed they were too much in awe of Dumbledore to say anything. Hermione nodded as though she agreed with the Headmaster, earning herself a look of disgust from both Ron and Ginny. Harry, however, stepped closer to Sirius and looked up at Dumbledore. Judging from his expression, he had definitely noticed the way Dumbledore had been ignoring him, and he wasn’t best pleased.

“We already heard Kreacher’s story, sir,” he said. “We want to help if we can.”

Dumbledore smiled down the table, although Sirius noticed with another bubble of anger that he didn’t meet Harry’s eyes.
“Alas, Harry, we have these rules for good reason. I assure you, anything you can know, Sirius and Remus will pass on to you.”

Harry scowled, but allowed Molly to usher them out of the kitchen. When she returned, Dumbledore sealed the door with an Imperturbable Charm - “One cannot underestimate the ingenuity of one’s students,” he chuckled - and indicated that they should all sit.

“Now we are all comfortable, Sirius, if you would.”

Sirius felt his stomach turn over. He hadn’t intended to be the one to recount Kreacher’s tale. Remus, however, came to his rescue.

His version of the elf’s tale was shorter and more matter-of-fact, but Sirius felt even worse hearing it again. Everything he’d believed, everything he’d thought about his family, every resentment and treasured feeling of superiority he’d harboured, that had carried him through his worst years, now weighed heavily on his conscience. How different could things have been if he hadn’t run away? What if he’d made more of an effort to stay close to his brother? If he hadn’t despised Kreacher so much as a teenager, would he have found him more sympathetic? There were no answers, and no going back. Only regrets.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely oblivious to Sirius’s struggles. His face grew more and more grave the longer Remus talked. When he was finished, the air in the kitchen twanged with tension as they waited for Dumbledore’s response. Even Sirius, wallowing though he was, was desperate to know what was so important about this locket.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” Dumbledore said, after a long pause. He looked almost ghastly, his cheeks hollow, his eyes almost glowing with intensity as he stared at the locket. He knows what this is. It sat before him on the table, the stones glinting sinisterly in the lamplight. “Before we discuss this any further, I must know how much of this Harry has heard.”

Sirius frowned at him.

“All of what Remus just told you,” he said. “He was there with the rest of us.”

Dumbledore’s haggard expression turned stony, and Sirius felt his gut clench.

“Then it’s as bad as I feared,” he said, half to himself. “We have no more time to waste. I must send for Severus immediately.” He pushed his chair back from the table and had already pulled his wand from his sleeve before Arthur interrupted him.

“What on earth are you talking about?” he said. The others murmured their support.

“For Merlin’s sake, just tell us what’s wrong!” said Sirius, rather more loudly than he’d intended. He flushed slightly as the others turned to stare at him, but remained glaring steadfastly at Dumbledore. The Headmaster returned his glare coolly, wand still half raised, before returning slowly to his seat. Sirius thought he saw a brief hint of surprise flash behind the half-moon spectacles, but it could have been his imagination. He doubted there were many these days, however, who would stand up to Albus Dumbledore the way he just had. Not many thirty-six year olds are as petty and over-dramatic as you, his conscience observed primly. He ignored it.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore. “Perhaps you are right, Sirius. I will keep it brief, however. I am very much afraid that the connection that has existed between Harry and Lord Voldemort for the last fourteen years, of which I trust we are all by now aware, has been dangerously strengthened since
Voldemort’s return.”

Molly gasped and the colour drained from Remus’s face. Sirius continued to watch Dumbledore, whose calm demeanour gave very little away. Just when things were starting to go well, he thought, trying to ignore the feeling that the earth was falling away from beneath his feet.

“You think he can see into Harry’s mind?” he asked aloud, his voice level.

“It is a definite possibility,” replied Dumbledore. “The connection that already existed seemed to be quite random, although Harry’s dreams last year certainly indicated the possibility of its being stronger than we’d hoped. However, when Voldemort forged another link by taking Harry’s blood the night of the third Task, I believe he may have opened a passage of sorts between the two. Voldemort may indeed have access to Harry’s thoughts – and perhaps Harry might occasionally glimpse some of what is in Voldemort’s mind as well.”

“And we cannot assume Voldemort is ignorant of it,” Remus said, running both hands through his hair. “If he has indeed been inside Harry’s mind, he will have seen the locket, and he’ll know we’re questioning the usefulness of the Prophecy.”

Dumbledore glanced up sharply.

“The children were eavesdropping at the last meeting,” Arthur said wearily. “Obviously that’s a mistake we can’t afford to make again.”

“Is this why you’ve been avoiding Harry?” asked Molly suddenly, eyes narrowed as she stared suspiciously at Dumbledore. He had the good grace to look slightly ashamed of himself, although Sirius doubted even the strongest soul could face Molly Weasley when she looked like that.

“I confess, I did not wish to do anything that might prompt Voldemort to become aware of the connection, or use it. I fear that if he learns I view Harry in any other light than that of an ordinary student, he will use it against both Harry and the Order.”

“He’ll try and possess him,” said Remus in a hollow voice.

“It is a possibility.”

Sirius wondered if this nauseous feeling in his gut was going to settle in permanently.

“Why Snape?” he asked, suddenly remembering where Dumbledore had been heading before he’d interrupted.

“Harry will have a chance of defending himself against incursions if he learns Occlumency. Severus is the most accomplished Occlumens I have ever met.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Forgive me, Albus, but that is the worst idea you’ve ever had,” said Remus quietly. Dumbledore smiled faintly. Apparently he was determined not to take offence. Sirius wasn’t sure why this annoyed him so much.

“This is hardly something we can afford to hesitate over,” Dumbledore said. “Harry must learn to close his mind, and he must learn immediately.”

“And you think Severus Snape is the person to teach him that?” Sirius demanded. “He despises Harry, he treats him like garbage! He can barely teach him Potions, let alone something like
Occlumency.” Sirius barely registered that he was tugging on his hair again in his frustration.

“He has a point, Albus,” said Molly. “Occlumency does require at least a modicum of trust. I can’t see Harry being willing to learn from Severus, no matter how good he is.”

“I’m open to other suggestions,” said the Headmaster, his tone still infuriatingly mild. Remus and Sirius exchanged glances. Neither of them were skilled Occlumens - Remus in particular had never taken well to it. Sirius suspected it felt too close to lying. How Remus managed to go undercover with a pack of terminally suspicious werewolves, he had no idea.

“Tonks!” exclaimed Arthur triumphantly, after the pause had become painfully long. “She got the highest grade in her year, I remember her telling me.”

Sirius felt some of the tension drain out of his shoulders. Thank Merlin for Arthur bloody Weasley.

Dumbledore tapped his bottom lip thoughtfully.

“Yes, Nymphadora certainly has a talent for it,” he said. “Very well, I will call her here immediately. And I trust I do not need to warn you all to keep any information about the Order utterly secret, from all of our young friends.”

“We understand,” said Molly hurriedly, before Sirius could make a rude remark.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore, standing once more and smiling around. “I must bid you all farewell for now.”

“Wait a moment,” said Sirius, standing also. “What about the locket?”

“Ah yes, thank you for bringing it to my attention,” Dumbledore said. “I shall investigate it immediately.”

He smiled at Sirius again, but there was something… stretched about it, as though he were desperate to get away from Sirius’s questions, from their watching eyes. The old man reached out a hand for the small gold oval, but Sirius was too fast. Before his hand could close over it, Sirius had Summoned it right into his own palm.

“Do you really expect us to believe that you have no idea what this is?” he demanded.

“Sirius, really!” exclaimed Molly, scandalised.

“Forgive me, Molly,” Sirius said, “but I’m rather tired of all the secrets piling up around here lately.”

“We understand, old friend,” said Arthur gently. “But perhaps this isn’t the right way to go about things.”

Sirius tightened his grip on the locket and ignored them, glaring determinedly at Dumbledore, who continued calm and impassive. What I wouldn’t give for a snuffbox full of Wartcap powder right about now, Sirius thought furiously. He was vaguely aware that he was being both immature and unreasonable, and he didn’t care a jot.

“What is this thing?” he asked again, holding it up, all the while keeping a tight grip on it in case Dumbledore decided to turn his own trick back on him.

“Perhaps if you allow me to investigate it, I could better answer that question,” said the old man, his tone still quite even, although his expression as he stared at Sirius was calculating, as if he was trying to figure out how far Sirius was willing to push him.
“I’d really rather you answered it now,” said Sirius. He could hear a ringing in his ears, and he was more than half afraid he was making a complete fool of himself. But there had been that moment, when Dumbledore looked down at the thing, when he’d heard the story, and he just knew …

“For Merlin’s sake, Sirius, just give him the damn thing,” Remus hissed, tugging at Sirius’s sleeve. Sirius pulled his arm out of reach.

“I’ll be perfectly happy to just as soon as I have some answers,” he replied, summoning whatever remnants of Black arrogance he still had and looking firmly down his nose at Dumbledore - quite an impressive feat, given Sirius was the shorter by a good six inches. Dumbledore didn’t move, and nobody else dared speak.

“Enough secrets, Albus,” Sirius said in a low voice. “However good your intentions, they’ve done nothing so far but hurt your own people.”

Dumbledore blinked.

Well I’ll be a knackered Niffler, Sirius thought, suddenly remembering he really ought to breathe in occasionally.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore slowly. “Allow me to send this message to Tonks, and I will tell you my suspicions. They are only suspicions, mind you, nothing concrete.”

“That’s all I ask,” said Sirius, sitting back down.

Everyone else in the room seemed to let out the breaths they’d been holding. They watched Dumbledore leave the kitchen to send his message, and turned to stare at one another.

“You really are an insufferable prat,” said Remus, clearly torn between exasperation and fondness, although exasperation seemed to be winning at present.

“I know,” replied Sirius with a rakish grin. He suddenly felt inordinately pleased with himself.

“Well thank goodness one of you has some sense,” Molly muttered, getting up to brew fresh tea. “I hate to think what Harry would get up to if he was left alone with you, Sirius Orion Black.”

“Not three weeks ago you were defending my parenting skills,” objected Sirius.

“Clearly I was suffering from momentary insanity,” she replied, giving him a stern look over the top of the kettle. Sirius simply grinned more widely. She threw her arms in the air and turned back to the cupboard to find some biscuits, but Sirius was almost certain he saw the hint of a smile as she looked away.

There were no more smiles when Dumbledore returned, however. His haggard expression had returned, although he was clearly trying to hide it.

“Tonks will be here first thing in the morning,” he said. “I hope it will be soon enough.”

“We can only do what we can do,” said Arthur firmly. “For now, let’s get this locket business over with.”

Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers in front of him, staring up at the opposite wall as he considered his words.

“I trust Harry has told you of his experience with the diary of one Tom Riddle in his second year?”
he asked Sirius and Remus. Sirius had heard the story, although not from Harry. It was no wonder Molly and Arthur had both turned suddenly pale. If it hadn’t been for Harry destroying said diary, their beloved daughter would have died, and a young Lord Voldemort would have returned. Both men nodded, and Dumbledore continued.

“I confess the nature of the diary intrigued me at the time, and I began to investigate its properties. This was admittedly rather challenging, given Harry had quite thoroughly destroyed it, and no trace of Riddle remained. After some months, however, I ascertained the diary’s true purpose. It had been, before its encounter with the fang of that Basilisk, a Horcrux.”

Sirius had the distinct sensation of falling from a great height. He was hardly aware of Arthur standing suddenly, or Remus’s hissed expletive. A Horcrux, he thought vaguely, his pulse thundering in his ears. A piece of Voldemort’s soul, trapped in a diary. And a locket. A locket in my parent’s house, in my house.

In your hand.

He looked down, his fingers uncurling. His previous urge to fling the horrid thing across the room returned in full force, but his limbs seemed only tenuously connected to his brain, and he merely stared at it.

“This is part of Voldemort’s soul?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore softly. “I confess I have been searching for such another item ever since Harry brought the diary to me. I thought it impossible that Voldemort would have allowed his only means of survival to be so easily destroyed if he had not made another. But locating it has, I confess, been nigh impossible. Tracing Tom Riddle’s history is not an easy task.”

Sirius’s hand finally connected with his brain and he dropped the locket hurriedly on the table, unconsciously wiping his hand on his shirt as he stared at it in disgust.

“You’ve known about these for two years?” Arthur asked softly. There was an edge to his voice that Sirius had never heard before.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore simply.

“Why didn’t you bring it to us?” Arthur asked, his tone still level, still with that something.

“I couldn’t be sure such a search was worthwhile,” Dumbledore replied. “And as we’ve already seen, secrets shared often go further than one intends. This is not the kind of information that one can risk. If Voldemort ever found out that we have discovered his secret…” He trailed off. Sirius’s lip curled in disgust at the reference to the children’s eavesdropping, and Arthur was looking at Dumbledore as though seeing him in an entirely new light.

“Clearly such a search was worthwhile,” said Remus. “Had you employed the Order, this might have been discovered earlier.”

“Perhaps so,” said Dumbledore. “Although in my defence, the Order has been recalled for all of a month, and we have had some other, rather pressing issues to concern us.”

“What must we do now?” asked Molly brusquely, apparently tired of the sniping.

“I will take the locket with me to Hogwarts and destroy it.”

“How?” asked Sirius, his old academic curiosity resurfacing for a moment.
“The Sword of Godric Gryffindor,” Dumbledore replied with a half-smile. “It is a remarkable object indeed.” His smile faded. “But I fear our task is not yet over. There is every change Riddle has more Horcruxes hidden away against this very eventuality.”

Sirius felt his mouth drop open.

“Voldemort made more of these things?” he asked, his anger at Dumbledore momentarily subsumed in horror. To rip one’s soul in half once was bad enough. Twice was horrific, but this. This was unspeakable.

“From what I have learnt of Riddle, it is very likely.”

There was a moment of silence as they attempted to take in the full scope of what Dumbledore was suggesting.

“The Order has to know,” said Sirius finally. “We’ve been wasting our time on that Prophecy, and we all know it. We should be concentrating on finding… these.” He couldn’t bring himself to even say the word. Just knowing he’d held it in his hand, that it had touched his skin, made him feel sick. _No Scouring Charm on earth can make me feel clean after that_, he thought.

“You know I do not share your views on this,” said Dumbledore. When Sirius went to reply, he held up a long-fingered hand. “However, as has been made abundantly clear over the past several weeks, I have perhaps misjudged the situation. I will bring it to the Order at the next meeting.”

“They won’t be pleased that you’ve kept it from us,” said Arthur sternly. “And rightly so.” Dumbledore smiled tiredly.

“If I can weather Sirius Black’s displeasure, I’m sure I have very little left to fear,” he said. Sirius simply gave him a Look, and Dumbledore chuckled. “In fact,” he added, as though a new idea had suddenly occurred to him, “I will push my luck even further and ask a great favour of you, Sirius.”

“Ask away,” said Sirius suspiciously.

“I wonder, if I share such information as I have gained with you, if you might be willing to take on some of the task of locating more of these Horcruxes.”

Sirius blinked in surprise. He wasn’t sure if he was being punished or rewarded for his stubborn rudeness, but he found he didn’t much care. He knew he should be more concerned with the seriousness of this task, but to be honest, he was simply overjoyed to be given something to do that was more than cleaning or making tea.

“I’d be happy to help,” he said aloud, deciding to treat the request as a peace offering, regardless of how it had been intended. Dumbledore smiled broadly, apparently content with this new state of affairs.

“I hope you will all accept my apology once again,” he said. He sounded sincere, if nothing else. “I can only say in my defence that I thought I was acting for the best.”

“What’s no more about it,” said Molly. “There’s no point raking over past mistakes while there’s work to be done.”

“Quite right,” agreed Arthur approvingly.

When they’d bid Dumbledore farewell, and while Molly shooed - or attempted to shoo, hindered rather than helped by her husband - the children towards bed, however, Remus and Sirius fell into
more gloomy reflections.

“It’s a pity not all mistakes are rectified so easily,” Sirius murmured, watching as Arthur joked with Harry and Ron.

“Molly’s right though,” said Remus softly, reaching for his hand. “Perhaps we can’t fix the past, but we don’t have to let it ruin the future.”

Sirius looked up at him and grinned, squeezing his hand.

“You’re quite the poet, tonight, Moony,” he said.

“Must be all this being in love nonsense,” Remus replied. Sirius didn’t think he could compete with that, so he settled for kissing Remus long and hard, until Ron and Harry started making fake retching sounds behind them.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Heya! Thanks again for your encouragement on the last few chapters, I love love love to hear from you. I am absolute trash for comments and feedback, I'm not gonna lie. This chapter needs some proofreading, I know, but it's past midnight so I'll get to it tomorrow. Hopefully I'll have time to do a full edit on all the chapters that are up while I'm on break, since I know there are a few errors and awkward bits. Yay, holidays! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Harry,” Ron called from upstairs. Harry turned from the sink, where he’d been getting a drink of water, and headed for the kitchen door, relying on wandlight to find his way. He’d woken with a raging thirst at three in the morning, but he thought he’d managed to sneak out without waking Ron. His poor friend had endured far too many nights of broken sleep, and Harry had hoped to get through without waking him, just this once.

He pushed the door open and found himself staring down a long, dark corridor that bore no resemblance to the passage that led to the stairs outside the kitchen. The hair on the back of Harry’s neck prickled. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he’d been here before, although he didn’t recognise it. How had this passage come to be in Sirius’s house? What the hell was happening?

He took a step forward, the tiled floor of this strange corridor cold against his bare feet. The itching on his neck intensified and he clutched his wand tighter in front of him.

“Harry…”

The voice came from a towering black door at the end of the hallway. It didn’t sound like Ron this time. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Harry realised he must be dreaming. That was the reason this place was so familiar, he must have dreamt it before and forgotten it, getting it jumbled up amongst all his other nightmares.

Any second now, a giant hand would no doubt descend from above and push him forwards, toward that door, where he was plainly supposed to be. The voice was still calling, becoming more and more insistent. His feet were moving forward as though on castors, no matter how much he told them to stop.

The door grew closer, and Harry could feel excitement growing under the fear. There was something in there, something on the other side, he could sense it, he wanted it.

“Harry!”

Harry sat up with a start. Molly was standing beside his bed, cup of tea in hand. It was clearly well past three o’clock, although glance through the curtains suggested the sun hadn’t been up for long. A sudden wave of irritation, no, rage, welled up in Harry. He’d been so close. He blinked at Molly and the moment of fury subsided, as if it had never been, leaving him feeling oddly empty and disoriented.
“Are you alright, dear?” Molly whispered. He blinked again and nodded vaguely.

“Yeah, fine,” he muttered.

“You need to get up, Tonks is here to see you,” she said, still keeping her voice low. Harry frowned.

“Why?” he asked.

“She’ll explain everything downstairs. No point waking the others just now,” she said, glancing at Ron, who was snoring with his mouth open on his side of the bed. She put the cup of tea down on the dresser and started picking up clothes from the floor, tutting quietly to herself as she folded them over the back of the desk chair.

“Mrs Weasley, can I… Would you mind leaving so I can get dressed?” Harry whispered to her. She straightened, looking at him in surprise.

“Oh, sorry dear,” she said. “I’ll wait for you downstairs. And you and Ron can tidy this lot up later,” she added, managing to sound very stern for someone who was still whispering. Harry grimaced. He was tempted to flop back onto the pillows and close his eyes again, but he liked Tonks - and he didn’t really want this morning to be the morning he discovered what it was like to be on the receiving end of Molly Weasley’s famous temper.

Two minutes later, tea in hand, he descended to the living room that had been unofficially assigned to Harry, Sirius, and Remus. *Almost as though this really is our house, just the three of us*, thought Harry. It still felt weird even thinking about it. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was going to wake up one morning and find it had all been a mistake, and that Dumbledore was going to send him back to the Dursleys after all. He sighed and tugged his T-shirt straighter. Somehow, in the dim light, he’d managed to put on one of Ron’s shirts, which was rather too large for him, but he couldn’t be bothered changing.

“Wotcher, Harry,” Tonks greeted him from a chair in front of the fireplace, smiling cheerily and raising her own mug of tea in a salute. Sirius and Remus were standing on either side of the fire, both of them looking even more tired than Harry felt. Harry could hear Molly clattering about in the kitchen below, preparing breakfast for those few who were awake.

“Hi,” Harry said, trying to suppress a yawn and failing. “What’s going on?”

His two guardians exchanged worried looks, but Tonks looked calm enough.

“Dumbledore wants you to learn Occlumency,” she said, sitting forward and waving Harry into the opposite seat. “And I’ve been volunteered as your teacher.” She grinned, apparently not at all upset by this. “Since I’ve got Auror duty and Order duty, this is about the only time I can spare.”

“What’s Occlu- whatever?” Harry asked suspiciously, sitting as instructed. It was barely six o’clock in the morning. Whatever was going on was clearly far more serious than Tonks seemed to think.

“Occlumency is the ability to shield one’s thoughts and emotions from other wizards,” said Remus. “Usually wizards can only read each other’s thoughts-”

“That’s called Legilimency,” interjected Tonks helpfully.

“Indeed,” continued Remus. “Usually Legilimency requires eye contact, but it seems you’re a special case.”
“Of course I am,” Harry sighed, slumping back in his chair.  “Why am I a special case?”

“It seems the connection between you and Voldemort might give him the ability to see into your mind, even from a great distance,” said Remus softly.  “And vice versa.”

Harry’s heart slithered slowly down toward his feet.  Just when he’d started to think things might be sort of okay, it turned out Voldemort could read his mind.  Of course.  He looked up, panic squeezing his ribs suddenly.

“What about all that stuff I heard the other night?” he asked.  “What about the locket thing?  Did Voldemort see that?  Does he know where we are?  Is that why you couldn’t tell me what the locket was?”

“We don’t know,” Sirius said soothingly.  “But we have a solution, so don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic?!” Harry exclaimed, jumping to his feet, his head spinning.  “He could know all about the Order, all about what you’re doing!  I have to go, I have to get back to the Dursleys right now, I’m putting you all in danger just by being here!”

“Harry, stop!” Sirius commanded loudly, cutting through Harry’s panic.  “You are not putting us in danger!  That’s why Tonks is here, to teach you to shield yourself.”

“But how will that help if I’ve already given away all our secrets?” Harry asked frantically.  “The dream I had this morning could have been Voldemort messing with me, he could already know everything!”

“What dream?” Remus asked sharply, stepping forward and grasping Harry’s arm.

“Take it easy, Remus,” said Tonks, still looking far too calm in Harry’s opinion.  “He’s already freaked out, just relax.”

“Sorry,” Remus muttered, relaxing his grip, but keeping his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Tell us about the dream,” said Sirius, who was still standing by the fire.  He was paler than usual, one hand gripping the mantelpiece tightly, as though afraid he’d fly away if he let go.

“It was… Well, it wasn’t actually that bad,” Harry admitted, suddenly realising how strange his dream actually sounded.

“Tell us anyway, Harry.  It could be important,” said Tonks.  Harry nodded, shifting uncomfortably.  He hadn’t even told Ron about his nightmares.  He suddenly wished he hadn’t said anything, but it couldn’t be helped now.  And if it helped the Order…

“I was dreaming I’d woken up in the middle of the night and went downstairs for a drink of water,” said Harry.  He described the dream in as much detail as he could remember, although it was quickly becoming fuzzy in the light of day.  When he mentioned the black door, however, all three adults exchanged meaningful glances.

“This is good news,” said Remus.  “Surely it shows that Voldemort doesn’t know we’re considering taking our protection away from the prophecy.”

“Or he could simply not care,” said Sirius darkly.  “He could be trying to use Harry anyway.  Protection or not, it’s risky for him to go the Ministry right now.”

“But he’s still concentrating on the prophecy,” said Tonks, “and not the Ho… Not the other thing.”
Harry listened to this exchange with bated breath. They seemed to think there was a chance he might not have passed on anything vital. *Yet.* Could they really tell that from a single dream?

“How could he *not* know, though?” asked Tonks. “From what Dumbledore said, it should be a two-way thing. That’s why he’s been staying away.”

Harry felt a bubble of anger explode in his chest as he realised what this meant.

“That’s why Dumbledore’s been avoiding me?” he said loudly. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

The others started, as though they’d forgotten he was there, and all three exchanged nervous glances.

“He was trying to protect you,” said Tonks awkwardly, and Harry could tell that even she didn’t think it had been a good idea. Sirius and Remus were both looking distinctly displeased.

“Even Dumbledore makes mistakes,” said Sirius. “And most of them involve keeping too many secrets.” Harry shrugged uncomfortably. As angry as he was right now, he couldn’t help feeling a little defensive of his Headmaster.

“Well, he did think Voldemort could read my mind,” he said. “But if he can’t, why not?”

This question appeared to stump all three of them.

“What about the Fidelius Charm?” asked a voice from the doorway. They all turned to see Fred and George, still in their pyjamas, standing just outside.

“We heard your dulcet tones, Harry,” George grinned.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t bottle it all up like that, mate,” said Fred.

“Oh shut up,” Harry grumbled.

“What do you mean, the Fidelius Charm?” asked Tonks, looking interested.

“Well, Harry’s not Secret Keeper, is he?” said Fred. “So he can’t tell anyone where we are.”

“Or what we’re doing,” added George.

“Or who’s here.”

“Or what they’re saying.”

Harry looked around at Sirius and Remus, and was immensely relieved to see the smiles slowly dawning on their faces.

“They’re right,” said Tonks, grinning broadly. “They’re bloody right. As long as Harry stays here, old Mouldy Forts can’t get into his head.”

“But how come I still get his thoughts?” asked Harry, desperately wanting to believe them.

“He’s not Fideliused, obviously,” said Fred, as though Harry was being very silly.

“It’s a one way filter,” said George. “His thoughts can come in, but yours can’t go out.”

“I mean, it’s still rubbish, having to put up with Lord Corpsicle’s brain farts,” Fred admitted.

“But at least you don’t have to worry about your gaseous outpourings going the other way.”
This was too much for Tonks, who succumbed to a fit of the giggles and nearly choked on her tea. Sirius and Remus were clearly trying to behave like serious adults, but their lips twitched suspiciously.

“Lord Corpsicle?” Harry asked, grinning with relief.

“It was that or Reptilius the Great,” Fred shrugged. “It’s early, don’t judge me.”

Harry snorted.

“Thanks, guys,” said Tonks, finally catching her breath. “Now bugger off so Harry and I can get started.”

The twins bowed to the room and meandered off towards the kitchen, from which emanated the appetising smell of bacon and sausages. Tonks turned back to Sirius and Remus, who both looked far happier than they had just a few minutes ago.

“You too,” she said sternly. “Out.”

The two men looked startled by this order.

“But we were just-”

“Out,” ordered Tonks. “Occlumency is hard enough to learn as it is, without your parents breathing over your shoulder.”

Parents. Tonks didn’t appear to notice that she’d said anything out of the ordinary, but Harry felt the word humming in the air, vibrating just under his ribcage, full of promise - and no small amount of fear. It’s only been a couple of weeks, he thought. Don’t get ahead of yourself. But it was very hard not to do so when Sirius, very reluctantly, pushed himself off the mantelpiece and laid a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder as he left the room. Like family.

“We’ll be in the kitchen if you need us,” said Remus, glancing at Tonks. She simply raised an eyebrow at him and waited for them to close the door behind them.

“Right,” she said, turning back to Harry. “Let’s get started.

Occlumency was hard, harder than anything Harry had ever had to learn. Even the Patronus seemed easier, at least in retrospect. Tonks began by helping Harry extract several of his more private memories and store them in a series of small glass phials, a process that both fascinated Harry and slightly creeped him out. Being able to watch his own thoughts swirling gently behind the glass was distinctly unnerving. Tonks did the same, being careful to keep their memories separate from one another.

“Why do we need to take these out?” Harry asked nervously.

“The fastest way to learn Occlumency is if I use Legilimency against you and teach you how to defend against it,” said Tonks. “But it’s a bit rude to just go stomping about in someone else’s head without letting them cover up the more embarrassing stuff, don’t you think?”

Harry smiled tightly, still feeling rather apprehensive, but relieved that he could at least keep some of his secrets.
“Why are you doing it, though?” he asked.

“In case you manage to reverse the process,” she said. “I did it once, by accident. Mad Eye was not happy.”

Harry stared at her in disbelief, unable to imagine her besting Moody, let alone being able to read his thoughts. The way he was feeling now, he doubted he’d ever be able to keep Tonks out of his mind, let alone see into hers.

“What did you see?” he asked, wondering if he really wanted to know. Tonks simply winked and told him to pay attention.

Harry was absolutely pants at Occlumency. No matter how many times he tried to keep Tonks out of his mind, she was always able to break through, rummaging around inside his head until he felt like his whole mind had been turned inside out. Tonks, however, seemed unfazed. She didn’t berate him or get angry. She simply stopped after each attempt, explained where Harry was going wrong, instructed him on how to clear his mind (over and over and over), and had him try again. But after a while, even her patient tutelage began to wear on Harry’s already-frayed nerves.

“I can’t do it,” he burst out after nearly an hour. “I’m not good at this stuff, I can’t just not feel things!”

Tonks lowered her wand, which had been pointing at Harry, and smiled wryly.

“I know how you feel,” she said. Harry snorted disbelievingly. Remus had said she was the best. She’d broken into Mad Eye Moody’s thoughts. There was no way she’d ever been as completely useless at Occlumency as he was.

“Really,” she said. “For the first few weeks, I was total rubbish. Every little thing I felt got in the way of it and I thought I’d never get it.”

“What changed?” asked Harry curiously. Tonks flopped into her armchair and pointed her wand at their nearly-empty mugs of tea. They refilled, although rather faster than necessary, slopping tea onto the table. She ignored the mess and took a sip of the now-steaming brew. Harry followed suit, suddenly realising just how exhausted, sweaty, and thirsty he was.

“Moody got pissed off with me,” she said, chuckling. “Well, more pissed off than usual. He said I was being a, what was it? Oh yeah, a *whiny, self-indulgent prat sack with all the self-discipline of a Niffler in a jewellery store*.”


“He was right though,” she said. “I forgot why I was learning Occlumency in the first place. I kept thinking it was about me and my feelings, and those feelings kept getting in the way. I’ve never been one to keep things to myself. Heart on my sleeve and all that.”

Harry blushed as she looked at him pointedly.

“So what did you do?”

“Well, once I remembered that I was learning this to protect my fellow Aurors, and the people I care about, it seemed a whole lot easier,” she said. “And that’s what you’re doing, protecting everyone here. That hero complex has gotta be good for something, right?” She winked at Harry and downed the rest of her tea. He smiled back. Somehow it was hard to be angry with Tonks, even if she had just implied you were a *whiny self-indulgent prat sack* with a hero complex.
“Okay, let’s try again,” he said determinedly.

“Full hero mode,” Tonks replied, raising her wand.

“What if they’re wrong?”

“Sirius, for Merlin’s sake, sit down,” said Molly, attempting to push him into a seat and shoving a plate of breakfast in front of him. He prodded it half-heartedly with a fork for a second before leaping up again and resuming his pacing.

“We’re not wrong,” said George around a mouthful of sausage.

“What happens if Harry can’t keep him out?” asked Sirius, tugging anxiously at his hair. He looked across the table at Remus, who seemed just as unhappy as he did. He spoke far more calmly, however, and Sirius once again wondered how it was that Remus had never got the hang of Occlumency. What if Harry can’t get it either? He stuck a hank of hair in his mouth and chewed on it. It didn’t help.

“Possession requires a vulnerable target,” said Remus. “Harry’s aware of what’s going on, and has the best Occlumens we can get to teach him. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Of course he will,” said Molly, starting to slice a second loaf of bread. Sirius eyed the pile of food in the middle of the table and suddenly realised he wasn’t the only one who was worried. Molly had made enough food for the entire Order, and most of their guests wouldn’t be awake for at least another two hours. You’re not in this alone any more. He stopped in his tracks and forced himself to remove the hair from his mouth, before returning to his seat.

“You’re right, I’m being daft,” he said, pulling his breakfast toward him. He didn’t feel in the least like eating, but at least it would be something to do until Tonks and Harry reemerged.

“Thank you for breakfast,” he added to Molly. “It looks delicious.”

“Yeah, thanks Mum,” said Fred.

“Although I don’t think you needed to feed the whole of London,” said George. Molly raised an eyebrow at her sons and they returned their attention to their plates immediately.

“How much longer will you be with us, Remus?” Molly asked, perching herself on the edge of a seat and buttering herself a slice of bread. Sirius kept his eyes on his plate and tried to pretend he didn’t feel like his heart had slid right down through his stomach.

“I’ll have to leave tomorrow, I’m afraid,” said Remus. He’d told Sirius last night, which was the only way Sirius could now hear it with equanimity. Of all the times for Remus to be leaving, now was the worst. Harry was linked to Voldemort, who had who knew how many Horcruxes spread about the country, Dumbledore was no doubt keeping more vitally important secrets under the delusion that he was protecting them, and the Ministry was actively targeting members of the Order with the aim of discrediting them, or worse, arresting them.

“You won’t be gone long, I hope?” Molly said gently. Remus smiled at her and shook his head.

“I’ll be here as often as I can,” he said. “I have to be careful, though. I’m afraid that to many of them I look too much like a tame werewolf.”
Sirius’s lip curled at the phrase. *You can’t tame a werewolf.* It was an old saying, one that came up every time some decent person at the Ministry attempted to fight for werewolf rights to work and protection. As much as he despised the people Remus was being forced to associate with, part of him couldn’t blame them. That was what he’d done for a while after all. *Become what the people who hate you fear the most. Be what they hate and be it at full volume.* Unfortunately, being a werewolf at full volume tended to leave a body count. Being a full volume queer just tended to leave glitter in your underwear.

“It’ll be alright,” Remus said, leaning across the table and taking Sirius’s hand. Sirius forced a smile.

“I know,” he said. “I don’t have to like it, though.”

“I don’t like it much myself,” Remus admitted. “But needs must. If Hagrid doesn’t have any luck with the giants, we’re going to need all the-” He was interrupted by the doorbell.

“I’ll go,” said Sirius, getting up and definitely not lingering by the living room door on his way down the passage, absolutely not.

“Buckbeak!” he exclaimed as soon as the door was opened. He remembered himself just in time and bowed hurriedly, but he needn’t have worried. The Hippogriff made a strange whicker in his throat and scrambled through the door, which was not quite large enough for him, bashing his wings along the walls as he shoved Sirius backwards, nudging his chest where he’d sometimes kept treats for the beast.

“Easy there, fella,” Sirius laughed. He was surprised at how good it was to see the giant creature. He’d been forced to leave him behind in order to take care of Harry, and he’d had very little time to think about him since, but he found now that he’d rather missed him.

“He was quite eager to see you again,” said a voice from somewhere near the door, which was now just able to be closed.

“Professor Flitwick,” exclaimed Sirius, attempting to see him over Buckbeak’s wings and failing. “Thanks for bringing him! I hope he didn’t give you any trouble?” And what the hell am I supposed to do with him now?

“Oh no, not at all,” said Flitwick airily, although knowing the Professor, this could have meant anything from “he was an absolute delight” to “he tried to eat my fingers and flew into a tree” and nobody would ever be able to tell the difference. Sirius finally managed to convince the enthusiastic Hippogriff to stop butting him in the chest and ushered the tiny Professor towards the kitchen and breakfast. This left him standing in a rather narrow hallway with a large winged creature and no idea what to do with it.

“Kreacher!” he called.

“Yes, Master?”

It was still very strange to Sirius to hear Kreacher respond so politely to him. He half-expected the elf to launch into a tirade of hateful muttering, but it didn’t happen.

“Any ideas?” Sirius said faintly, waving in Buckbeak’s direction. Kreacher looked up at the Hippogriff and bowed gravely. Buckbeak returned the gesture immediately, apparently taking to the elf without hesitation. Sirius immediately became concerned that Buckbeak was losing his discernment.

“If Master will give Kreacher permission,” said the elf, “Kreacher can clear out the box room upstairs
for the use of this noble beast. Provided the Hippogriff is permitted to fly on a regular basis, this
should be adequate in the short term.”

Sirius reminded himself not to stare.

“Thanks, Kreacher,” he said.  *Don’t sound surprised that the little beast is being helpful. You had
an epiphany about this, remember?*  “His name’s Buckbeak,” he added after a moment.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Buckbeak,” said Kreacher, nodding seriously to the Hippogriff, who
knelt down and allowed the elf to scratch his head.  *What the ever-loving… ?*

“How are we going to get him up the stairs?” asked Sirius, eyeing the rather narrow staircase.

“Never fear, Master,” said Kreacher, still patting Buckbeak.  “Kreacher will manage. Master should
run along and finish his breakfast before it gets cold.”

Sirius blinked for a few moments and then did as he was told, leaving Kreacher murmuring
complimentary things to Buckbeak and reminding himself that he was, in fact, awake.

“So Buckbeak was pleased to see you?” Remus asked with a teasing smile.  Sirius sat down next to
him with a thump, taking one of the seats the twins had just vacated.  He still wasn’t quite over the
shock of Kreacher’s sudden and hitherto unsuspected *penchant* for taking care of magical creatures.

“Yeah,” he said vaguely.  “Kreacher’s putting him in the box room.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Molly asked, half-laughing.

“Kreacher was just *nice* to me,” said Sirius.  “I think I need more coffee.”  Remus snorted and
pushed the coffee pot toward him.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised,” he said.  “He’s been through a lot. Hermione and Harry
were obviously right, he just needed someone to be nice to him.”

“It works wonders on humans, as well, I hear,” observed Molly.

“What?”

“She means you’re not such a temperamental brat these days,” said Remus, taking a bit of toast.
Sirius glared at him.

“You said it, not me,” said Molly, starting to collect plates.

“It doesn’t matter who said it if you’re both thinking it,” said Sirius, crossing his arms sulkily.  “I am
not, and have never been, a temperamental brat. I might be a bit theatrical at times, but that’s not the
same thing.”

Remus’s shoulders were shaking.

“I’m sure even the Professor here has noticed the improvement,” he said, still somehow managing to
keep a straight face.  Flitwick looked up from his breakfast, his eyes wide in alarm.

“Oh no, I will not be drawn into this discussion,” he exclaimed.  “I learned long ago not to make that
mistake!”

Molly snorted and Remus laughed aloud.  Sirius pouted around at all three of them.
“See, even your favourite Professor thinks it’s true,” said Remus.

“You are absolutely the worst boyfriend of all time.”

“I challenge you to find anyone else who’d put up with you, you giant drama queen,” Remus said, grinning fondly and tugging at a stray lock of Sirius’s hair. Sirius batted his hand away, but he could feel a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He missed this, this ridiculous banter, the kind of thing you only did when you felt… Safe.

They were interrupted by Harry and Tonks’s sudden appearance in the doorway. Sirius stood abruptly, his good mood immediately dropping away in the face of his earlier concern.

“So?” asked Remus, trying and failing to hide his apprehension.

“Stop worrying, you old farts,” said Tonks. “He’ll do fine. He managed to keep me out a couple of times at the end there. By the time he goes back to school, the inside of his head will be as safe as this house.”

Harry flushed at this praise, but he couldn’t help looking a little pleased with himself.

“How are you feeling, dear?” Molly asked, hurriedly dishing him a teen-sized breakfast.


“Not so bad,” she scoffed. “I am a fantastic teacher.”

Harry grinned at her.

“I guess you’re alright.”

Sirius watched this banter with relief. If Harry could be so relaxed after one lesson, especially given how frantic he’d been only ninety minutes earlier, perhaps Tonks was right, and he would be fine after all. What’s going to go wrong next, then? he thought darkly. So far it’s just been putting out one fire after another. He suddenly remembered how soon Remus was due to leave and tried to ignore the sudden ache in his gut. Nothing was going to go wrong. Remus would do his job, and it would be crappy, and then he’d come home, to Sirius and Harry. He would be fine. He will be fine.

Remus seemed to sense the direction of his thoughts, or perhaps he was simply relieved himself at Harry’s apparent change of mood, because he reached out and squeezed Sirius’s hand reassuringly.

“You’ve got your overthinking face on,” he whispered, while Molly tried to talk Flitwick into having seconds and the Professor questioned Tonks about her teaching methods.

“That’s my normal face,” Sirius replied, wrinkling his nose.

“Maybe it’s time for a change, then,” Remus said, shuffling closer so he could rest his head on Sirius’s shoulder. Sirius couldn’t help it. He smiled.

“As you wish, Moons.”

Chapter End Notes
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Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hey lovelies! Just a quick note about the next few chapters: if you’ve only seen the movies (or aren’t acquainted with the books or movies) you might find some of this next bit hard to follow because I’ve assumed a knowledge of some details that only appear in The Half-Blood Prince book. I promise you won’t miss out on anything important in this chapter if you haven’t read the book, but I’ll need to make sure those details are in the next few chapters so please let me know if you need me to do that! If I don’t hear anything, I’ll just proceed as planned and assume everyone is familiar with THBP. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sirius was glad he had something to occupy his thoughts over the next few days, because he missed Remus terribly. His nights were filled with visions of Remus lying hurt somewhere, bleeding and abandoned, left to die in the darkest corner of the wizarding world. It was a relief to turn his attention to Order business during the day, although it was hardly cheerful work.

Aside from the ever-increasing list of people they couldn’t trust, the lurking suspicion that anyone they didn’t know could be Imperiused, and the fear that Voldemort - now officially dubbed Lord Corpsicle by the younger residents of Grimmauld Place - could even now be targeting their friends and family, Sirius had now taken on a large portion of the responsibility for tracing the Horcruxes. Dumbledore had brought him several memories from a variety of seemingly random sources, and several hundred pages of notes, many of which were no long relevant now that they’d located and destroyed the locket.

“How have you been the only one to make the connection between Riddle and Voldemort?” Sirius asked, flipping through the first few pages as he stood at the desk in his bedroom. He wasn’t too keen on having memories of the Dark Lord stored so close to where he slept, but it was hardly something he could just leave lying about the public areas of the house. While he was absolutely certain that nobody here would betray the Order, there were several residents whose curiosity was often stronger than their common sense. And we’ve all been wrong before.

“I suspect many have connected the two,” said Dumbledore, examining the posters above Sirius’s bed. “Most of them are too ashamed to admit they ever knew him, let alone admired him. Or they are, and quite rightly, afraid of what would happen if they spoke.”

“But if we’d known the connection earlier, maybe we could have done something more to stop him last time,” said Sirius angrily. “We might have found all this out earlier.” He waved his hand at the vials of memory and the notes.

“You must realise that this is the result of many years of research,” Dumbledore replied. “During a time of peace, no less. If I had not known what to look for, I should never have come even this far.”

Sirius huffed irritably. He knew his bad mood had at least as much to do with his fear that he wouldn’t be able to find anything more than they already had. If Dumbledore hadn’t been able to
find any more, how could he expect to do any better when he couldn’t even leave the house?

“I must confess, I’ve never understood the appeal of these,” Dumbledore mused, looking up at the bikini-clad model on Sirius’s wall. Sirius snorted.

“It pissed off my parents,” he said. “That was appeal enough, believe me.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Dumbledore replied, smiling genially. “Although I suspect there was an alternative that would have done a better job.”

“Ah, but I wouldn’t want to make Remus jealous,” Sirius said with a wink. For a moment he forgot why he was angry with the Headmaster, why they’d butted heads for so many years, what the older man had done. Dumbledore, however, didn’t seem to have forgotten. The Headmaster shifted uncomfortably, still facing away from Sirius, his hands clasped behind his back.

“I feel I must apologise to you, and Remus when he returns,” he said. “If I had not been so sure of myself fourteen years ago, if I had listened to Remus when he assured me you were innocent…”

Sirius felt as though a shadow had passed over the sun, and he wished Dumbledore hadn’t said anything. He’d wanted an apology, had been angry that he hadn’t got it, but now he wished he hadn’t heard it.

“How could you not know?” he asked. “Why didn’t James tell you we’d changed the plan?”

“I suspect it never occurred to him in the few moments we met after he performed the Fidelius Charm. I should never have let him perform it himself,” he added in a mutter.

Sirius shuddered at the memory of that night. Peter, holding James’s hand as James performed the Charm. Lily watching on, Harry wriggling impatiently in her arms. Harry, asking for Moony. Sirius felt the dark weight of fear on his chest as though he were still there, as though it had happened only a moment ago.

“None of it should have happened the way it did,” he said, and his voice was hoarse. “I wasn’t thinking clearly. I just wanted to get to Remus.”

“He told me what happened afterwards,” Dumbledore confessed. “You thought he was Imperiused, that’s why you didn’t tell him you’d made the switch.”

“He was so strange when he came home, I didn’t know what to think,” Sirius whispered. “I should have made him stay, I should have talked to him, but I didn’t know what to do.” He was barely aware now that there was anyone else in the room. Memories crowded in on him, suffocating him. “Of course he was acting strangely because of what he was doing, going into those places. It was too much for him, but I didn’t see it. So the next time he went away, we did it, we performed the Charm and made Peter Secret-Keeper. Merlin-” His voice broke.

“They were dark times,” said Dumbledore softly. “We all did what we thought was best. We all made mistakes. Some worse than others.”

“He never even came to see me, you know. In Azkaban. Not once.”

“He couldn’t face you, believing you had betrayed him.”

Sirius looked up to find the other man gazing down at him. The sympathy and terrible guilt shining in Dumbledore’s eyes was almost more than Sirius could bear.
“No more secrets this time,” he said harshly. “They killed too many people and left the rest of us broken.”

Dumbledore smiled sadly.

“You sound like James,” he said. “Would you have us trust blindly, as he did?”

Fiery rage burned up Sirius’s oesophagus and it was all he could do to keep his voice level. His hands were shaking, but he chose his words carefully.

“I want us to learn from our own mistakes,” he said, “instead of using my friends’ deaths to justify what we did wrong.”

Dumbledore seemed to freeze for a moment, his expression unreadable.

“Very well put,” he said quietly. “I had forgotten you had such a way with words.”

The silence drew out unbearably, Sirius still trembling with anger. James and Lily’s smiling faces taunted him from across the years, offering him their assurance that Remus would be fine, their thanks for his help the last words he’d ever heard from them.

“Can we move past this, do you think?” Dumbledore asked finally, his voice giving very little away, other than an evident desire not to make things worse. Sirius opened his mouth to say something inadvisable, then remembered what Remus had said the night he’d left. You don’t have to like the man, but we are trying to save the world, Pads. Behave. He closed it again and took a deep breath.

“I think we must,” he said, when he was sure he was calm. “There’s too much at stake for us to be fighting about the past.”

“I am grateful you feel that way,” said Dumbledore, with a hint of his usual sparkly-eyed smile. “I’m sure your rather excellent mind will be well up to the momentous task before us. I would hate to lose such assistance because of our personal issues.”

Sirius snorted and turned back to the desk. While he was glad they were moving away from the dark and dangerous terrain of the past, he felt he could rather do without the blatant attempt at buttering him up. I know how smart I am, I don’t need reminding, thank you.

“Where should I be starting?” he asked.

“Once you have oriented yourself with the memories and notes here, I think it will be quite obvious that the first task will be to determine just how many Horcruxes we should be looking for.”

“I take it you have suspicions?” asked Sirius, picking up a phial of memory and swirling it absently, watching it curl like liquid smoke.

“Nothing certain,” replied Dumbledore, crossing the room so he could examine the notes he’d brought. “Only that he would have made more. It could even be that the locket was the only remaining Horcrux.”

“But you don’t think so,” said Sirius.

“No, I do not.” Dumbledore shuddered, a sufficiently uncharacteristic expression of distaste that Sirius was momentarily distracted from his dark mood.

“What makes you think he made more?” he asked.
“I met with him, the memory is here,” said Dumbledore, pointing to one of the phials. “He was still young then, early in his career, so to speak, but already he seemed… less than human. He grew far worse over the years, harder to recognise, until even his own teachers could no longer recognise him.”

Sirius chewed thoughtfully on a strand of hair.

“I’ll get to work on this lot straight away and see if I can come up with anything.”

Dumbledore nodded and they both turned toward the door.

“Sirius, I hope you know I am truly grateful for your help,” the Headmaster said, pausing with his hand on the handle. “And for what you are doing for Harry. I realise it might not seem it, but I really do care about him, about all of you.”

Sirius blinked at the unexpected confession, completely at a loss for a reply.

“Well, I think that’s enough emotion for one day,” said Dumbledore brightly, opening the door. “I suggest we convene to the kitchen for a cup of tea and both pretend that nothing happened like proper British men.”

Even after everything, Sirius couldn’t help but laugh.

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“I hear Fudge is still blaming you for the sudden upsurge in Dark magical activity,” Bill said to Sirius a few evenings later. He’d returned to London the week before, taking a job at Gringotts so he could be of use to the Order. While he preferred to live in his own place - Sirius privately thought he'd do the same if Molly was his mother - he spent much of his spare time at Grimmauld Place.

“He has to have someone to pin it on,” Sirius said, reaching for the gravy boat. “Otherwise he’d have to admit he has no idea what he’s doing.”

Everyone was gathered around the kitchen table for dinner. Sirius wasn’t sure at what point they’d given up on keeping the children out of Order business, but it hadn’t taken very long. The meetings were still kept secure, and Dumbledore had - for once, quite rightly - forbidden them from revealing the truth about the Horcruxes, at least for now. But the Ministry’s activities were regular mealtime conversation, something Sirius privately felt was a good thing. He never had approved of keeping children ignorant of reality. It only made them do daft things.

“How do people still believe that bollocks?” Ginny asked from further down the table. “The Daily Prophet’s ladelling it on so strong I can’t believe anyone’s still swallowing it.”

“Not everyone has our inside information, sis,” said Bill, ruffling her hair. “Remember, not too long ago, we thought Sirius was a criminal as well.”

“Sirius is a ruddy criminal,” opined Mad Eye. “Just because he didn’t do what he was put in prison for, doesn’t mean he didn’t do anything.”

Sirius chuckled and passed Mad Eye the dish of roast potatoes.

“Nice to know you think so highly of me,” he said. “I’ll return the favour and tell you that your student has definitely surpassed you, old man. Harry’s Occlumency is going better than any of us expected.”
“Maybe he’s less of a pain in the arse to teach than Nymphadora was,” Moody grumbled. Tonks grinned unabashedly and threw a bread roll at her mentor, which Fred caught deftly before it could connect and they all got Stunned by accident. Harry didn’t seem so amused by the exchange, however.

“Tonks is just being nice,” he mumbled, blushing and looking down at his dinner. Sirius thought he looked uncomfortable, which surprised him, given the way the boy looked after most of his lessons - exhausted, certainly, but generally pleased with his progress.

“Believe me, Harry, Tonks is honest to a fault,” he said reassuringly.

“He means I’m an arsehole with no verbal filter,” Tonks said, winking at Harry, who smiled relunctantly.

“Same thing,” Sirius grinned. “If she says you’re doing well, you’re doing well.”

“But I still can’t do it most of the time,” Harry objected. “I only kept her out once this morning!”

“Doing better than me, mate,” said Ron, who’d joined in the last two lessons. He’d claimed it was because he had an interest in being an Auror in the future and would take any help he could get, but Sirius suspected it was simply to keep Harry company. He tried not to mind that Tonks had allowed Ron and Hermione to join in a couple of lessons, when she still wouldn’t even let him in the room.

“I told you before, Harry,” said Tonks seriously. “It takes some time. You already said you went two nights without any You Know Who dreams, that’s pretty good for someone who’s only been learning a week.”

Harry poked at a piece of squash with his fork, looking even more embarrassed.

“If Nymph-” Moody paused as he caught Tonks glaring at him and cleared his throat awkwardly. “If Tonks says you’re doing well, then you’re doing well. Stop being so maudlin about it and eat up.”

Further down the table, Bill and Arthur had continued the discussion about the Ministry’s determination to ignore Voldemort’s return. Ginny and Hermione were listening intently, their expressions grave.

“I take it you heard about the new transport proposal?” Arthur asked Bill. Bill nodded, his lips pursed.

“I’m just glad they brought it in after I was back in the country,” he said. “If they start monitoring all Floo travel, it’s going to make life very difficult for us.”

“Can they do that?” asked Hermione, appalled. “Surely that’s illegal.”

Arthur shrugged, but his expression was ugly.

“It’s coming directly from the Minister’s office,” he said. “Who’s going to challenge that when everyone’s feeling so nervous?”

“Which is why the Ministry is making sure everyone stays nervous, right?” said Ginny. “If they really wanted to keep everyone calm, the way Fudge said, they wouldn’t be spreading all this muck about Sirius and his criminal accomplices.”

Bill smiled wryly at his sister.
“How come you got all the brains in the family?” he asked. Ron overheard this last observation and punched his brother in the arm on general principle.

“Must take after her mother,” said Arthur fondly.

The following day was Harry’s birthday, an event that had left Sirius even more anxious than he’d felt at the prospect of decoding Dumbledore’s Horcrux notes. He couldn’t help but notice how little he really knew about his godson, but Molly treated this concern with great disdain.

“He loves you to bits, Sirius,” she scoffed. “You could give him a secondhand robe and a used tissue and he’d still think the sun shone out of you.”

Sirius found he couldn’t speak for several minutes after this observation. Once he’d recovered, however, he and Molly set about decorating the dining room for a party. Since Harry couldn’t leave the house, the Order came to them - which was hardly different from any other night, except for the extra noise and Butterbeer.

Sirius tried to join the festivities, but his stomach was in knots. Barely a month earlier, he’d been living rough, surviving on rats and scraps while he just tried to keep Harry alive. He’d had no one, not really. All his old friends believed him a murderer, except for Remus, who was barely speaking to him. And now this. Harry was here, in his house. Remus was back in his life where he belonged, even if he still had to risk his safety for the Order. Most days it seemed they were actually making a decent job of being a family, and they were constantly - too constantly, it sometimes seemed - surrounded by friends who made everything just a little easier. After so many years of darkness, Sirius couldn’t help but worry that everything was going to blow up in his face - or that he was somehow going to mess it up. Suddenly, he had so much to lose.

His primary worry tonight, however, was that he’d made completely the wrong decision about Harry’s birthday present. What the hell did one get a fifteen-year-old that said “I love you” without being too… well, too… something? When the fuck did I get so old?

“I will cut that hair if you don’t stop chewing on it,” Molly murmured, bumping him lightly with her shoulder as she passed him a glass of mead.

“I’d like to see you try,” Sirius replied, nevertheless tucking his hair hurriedly back into its bun. Molly simply raised a challenging eyebrow before running her gaze over the assembled guests.

“Who would have thought such a change would be possible in a month?” she said, sighing happily. “They look so happy.”

Sirius looked over to where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were gathered around Mad Eye, who was showing them an old photograph. Sirius couldn’t see the picture, but he guess from Harry’s wistful smile that it was one of his parents. He tightened his grip on the package under his arm and tried not to grind his teeth.

“Stop worrying, for goodness sake,” Molly scolded. “He’ll love it.”

“You said that already,” Sirius replied.

“And I was right already.”

“You’re not helping.”
“Well, how about you go and give it to him instead of standing over here like a gloomy statue, and then you might actually be able to enjoy yourself.”

Sirius looked down at Molly, not sure if he was more exasperated or grateful. Her expression softened and she patted his arm gently.

“I know why you’re nervous,” she said. “It’s all so new, and with Remus away, it just feels… wrong.” Sirius looked down at the package in his hand, the one Remus had wrapped before he’d left. He blinked away the sudden blurriness in his eyes.

“It will be fine,” said Molly. “I promise. Everyone feels that way in the beginning, but in time, things will get easier.”

“You mean everyone worries that the fifteen-year-old they sort of accidentally adopted after more than a decade in prison won’t like the birthday present they got with their gay lover who just happens to be a werewolf, who is currently undercover trying to convince other werewolves not to join Lord Voldemort?” he asked with a wry grin. Molly laughed.

“You might think you’re all that and a bag of chips, Sirius Black, but every parent goes through it.” She gave him a little shove. “Now go and be awkward and emotionally repressed with your godson before I have to do it for you.”

Sirius wrapped his arms around her before either of them quite knew what he was doing.

“Thanks, Molly,” he whispered hoarsely. “I have absolutely no bloody clue what I’m doing.”

“That’s the secret,” she replied, hugging him back. “None of us do. Now go.”

“Not without me, you don’t.”

Sirius looked up and found himself wondering if the top of your head could fall off from smiling too hard.

“Remus!”

He laughed as Harry bounded across the room and hugged his… other godfather? Uncle? Parent? There didn’t seem to be an official name for whatever Remus was, but Harry didn’t care a jot. He was smiling almost as broadly as Sirius, and Sirius realised, somewhat guiltily, that he hadn’t been the only one worrying.

“You could have warned us you were coming, we’d have waited,” he said, wrapping his arms around Remus as well and burying his face in his neck, just for a second. He didn’t smell as clean as he usually did, wasn’t dressed as well, and worn, the way he always did when he returned, but it was still his Remus.

“I didn’t know,” Remus confessed, looking somewhat overwhelmed by the sudden excess of hugging. “I can only stay a few hours, I’m afraid,” he added apologetically, looking down at Harry. “The people I’m staying with will be expecting me back later tonight.”

“It’s okay,” said Harry, although he looked a little disappointed. “Come have something to eat.”

“Not before we give you our present,” said Sirius hurriedly, crossing his fingers where they were hidden behind Remus’s back and holding out the package he was still clutching in his other hand.

“You didn’t have to-”
“Oh shut up and open it,” said Sirius, grinning in spite of himself. Harry grinned back and ripped open the package to reveal a simple, leather bound book. Harry opened it curiously to find the first few pages taken up with photos of the three of them that Ginny, Fred, and Arthur had taken at various points during the last few weeks. Most of the time, they hadn’t even realised they were being photographed, although there were also some group shots of the Order that had required at least twenty minutes of shouting in order to get. Sirius and Remus both watched anxiously as Harry turned over the few filled pages, gazing down at each picture with an unreadable expression.

“We left the rest blank so you can put in whatever you like,” said Remus, unable to stop himself filling the silence. It had been the only thing they could think of that would say welcome to your new home, but they’d both still worried that it was a bit, well, dorky. Sirius clutched Remus’s waist nervously, as though awaiting judgement. Harry looked up and smiled, although it was a little wobbly.

“It’s really great,” he said sincerely. “Thanks.” He pulled another photo from his pocket, the one Moody had been showing them earlier, and slid it wordlessly into the album next to the group shot of the Order. It was a picture of the last Order of the Phoenix.

Sirius felt his throat close over as he looked down at all those familiar faces, so many of them gone now. But Harry smiled down at them as though he was glad to see them, even if he was sad as well. Maybe old memories can be new beginnings as well, thought Sirius. After a moment he frowned at himself. What the hell does that even mean?

The daunting task of Present Giving over, he found he enjoyed the party much more after that, making everyone laugh with his rendition of Come String My Lights, and encouraging Fred and George’s muggle magic tricks by throwing popcorn at them with unerring accuracy. He was just starting to feel pleasantly warm and sleepy, leaning back into Remus as Arthur and Bill attempted a dramatic retelling of Babbit Rabbity and the Hopping Pot, when Remus leaned down and whispered in his ear.

“Is it horribly selfish of me that I want you all to myself for an hour?” he asked. Sirius shivered as Remus’s warm breath caressed his neck.

“Incredibly,” he murmured back. “Lead the way.”

Molly shook her head as she saw the door close behind them, but she was smiling. They deserved every moment of happiness they could get.

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You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Heya! Thanks for your lovely comments and for sticking with me. :) It's so great to hear from you. I apologise if there are any errors in this chapter, I'm practically falling asleep so I'll have to go over it again tomorrow. I hope you enjoy anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 15

Grimmauld Place quickly fell into a routine after Harry’s birthday. The house was now unrecognisable, its previously dingy rooms light and airy, smelling of summer air and Molly and Kreacher’s cooking. Kreacher had greeted the news of the locket’s destruction with the greatest, although admittedly tearful, joy, and had since become as unrecognisable as the house. The teatowel he now wore across his skinny chest was as clean as the kitchen, and his fetid den was swapped for a roomier and better-smelling cupboard under the stairs. Harry had felt somewhat uncomfortable about this, but as Kreacher himself seemed to consider it an unheard of luxury, he said nothing.

Harry’s lessons with Tonks continued three times every week. Now that he could at least keep most of the dreams at bay, Tonks didn’t feel the need to come every morning, and their lessons shifted to evenings. Ron and Hermione joined in most of them, and Harry was surprised to find that all three of them were reasonably matched for skill. He’d expected Hermione’s discipline to give her something of an edge, but as Tonks explained, it wasn’t just about making yourself do something. Sometimes it was about making yourself not do things, or not think things, which was far more difficult.

After a fortnight of regular lessons, of long days spent discussing everything from Voldemort to Quidditch to Fred and George’s joke shop, a new danger emerged. Harry was bored. Unlike the others, he couldn’t leave the house, even for short periods. Now that he’d left the Dursleys for good, the protection they’d afforded him was gone, and nobody was willing to risk his safety on a trip to Diagon Alley, or even a walk around the square. Sirius was also working on something for the Order, something that kept him shut up in his room for hours at a time. Harry tried not to resent it, but he couldn’t help feeling left out.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Sirius, a couple of nights after Harry’s birthday, as they sat together in their little living room near the kitchen. “I know it can’t be easy, being kept in the dark.”

“It’s okay,” Harry shrugged, trying to act like it really was okay. “I get it.” Sirius grinned.

“This is me you’re talking to,” he said. “I know it’s shit, but I promise, as soon as I can tell you what’s going on, I will.”

Harry nodded and offered his godfather a smile, but it didn’t make him feel any better when he passed Sirius’s closed door every morning, knowing he would most likely only see him at mealtimes. While nothing on earth could make him want to go back to Privet Drive, he soon found himself feeling claustrophobic and longing for the end of summer.

Fred and George seemed to be having the same problem.
“We haven’t been able to work on anything new while we’ve been here,” George complained to Harry one afternoon.

“Why not?”

“Mum,” said Fred. “Well, Mum and the fact we’ve run out of funds. We might be able to make some more money when we go back to school, if we can sell the stock we have, but it won’t get us very far.”

Harry sat bolt upright in his chair.

“Hold that thought,” he said. He dashed upstairs, taking them two at a time and nearly bowling over Kreacher, who was carrying a tray of half-empty teacups down to the kitchen from Sirius’s room.

“Sorry!” Harry called as he dashed past, skidding on the landing as he turned into his room. Hedwig clicked her beak at him as he hurried to the desk and rummaged through the one drawer he’d appropriated for himself.

“I’ll let you out later,” he promised her. Pausing only to assure himself that Molly hadn’t returned from the shops, he headed back down the stairs at a run.

“Here,” he panted a moment later, thrusting a heavy sack at Fred. “Take it.”

Fred and George both stared at him as though he’d spoken Parseltongue.

“Isn’t that…?”

“My Triwizard money. You can use it for the joke shop.”

“You’ve gone bonkers,” said George, looking awestruck.

“I don’t want it, and I don’t need it. Just take it.”

“He really has gone bonkers,” said Fred. “Why us?”

Harry shrugged.

“I reckon we need a laugh,” he said. “And if anyone deserves this it’s you.”

“But that’s…”

“A thousand Galleons, yeah,” Harry grinned. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” said George.

“Buy Ron some new dress robes, eh? And say they’re from you.” The twins both looked up and met Harry’s gaze, and they all burst out laughing.

“Fair call, that,” said Fred.

“He looked like Aunt Mabel.”

“Yeah, if Aunt Mabel was a spinster in the 1890s.”

Sadly, while Harry no longer had the bag of Galleons weighing on his mind, and while Fred and George now had plenty of work to occupy them, Harry himself was still absolutely and utterly bored.
“It wouldn’t hurt you to catch up on some of the work you missed last year,” Hermione suggested a few days later. She, Ron, Ginny, and Harry were sitting in the living room that had been appropriated by the younger generation. She was working, as usual, at the desk, reading her way through the pile of books her parents had bought her on a family trip to Diagon Alley a few days previously.

Harry groaned at the thought of doing schoolwork.

“I want to be less bored, Hermione,” he said. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Ha!” exclaimed Ron from the other side of the room, where he and Ginny were playing chess. Ginny sighed loudly as Ron captured a bishop. This was the fourth game in a row she was losing.

“Your game’s still too aggressive,” Ron advised. “There’s no point taking out my pawns like that if it makes your pieces vulnerable.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ginny muttered, shoving a rook forward irritably. “I’m going to lose my mind as well if I have to listen to you lecturing me on chess for another minute.”

“I’m not lecturing,” said Ron. “But if you want to keep losing, fine by me.”

“You’re a better chess player than everyone in this house, as long as Charlie’s not here,” said Ginny. “No matter how many times you lecture me, I’m not going to beat you, and you know it.”

“Not with that attitude,” sniffed Ron, capturing the rook. Ginny opened her mouth to say something Harry knew was going to be rude, but Hermione seemed to have suffered as much bickering as she could take.

“Well, if you’re all so against academic work, what about something practical?” she asked, somewhat waspishly.

“Like what?” Ron asked suspiciously. “If you mentioned anything to do with spew, I’m not interested.”

“For your information, it’s nothing to do with S. P. E. W, although I have been working on a mailing campaign, if you must know, and.”

“What’s your idea?” asked Ginny impatiently.

“Well,” Hermione started, still clearly irritated, “I thought perhaps we could continue with the Defense Against the Dark Arts training we were doing with Harry last term. I mean, we’re at war now. You never know when that kind of thing might come in handy.”

Harry snorted.

“You think Mrs Weasley is going to be happy with us shooting curses at each other up here?” he asked.

“Mum is definitely not going to be happy with us shooting curses at each other,” said Ron.

“I’m not saying we have to do it all by ourselves,” said Hermione. “In fact, Molly might even be a good teacher.”

The other three stared at her.

“Our mum?” said Ron incredulously. “You think she’ll agree to teach us Defense Against the Dark
"Arts?"

"Why not?" Hermione asked defensively. "She was in the Order the first time, she must have fought, just like everybody else. Just because she’s your mum doesn’t mean she’s incompetent."

"I should write that down and stick it in a frame," said Molly, pushing the door open with her foot and carrying a large tray full of sandwiches and pumpkin juice into the room. "I thought you might be hungry."

"We don’t think you’re incompetent," said Ginny hurriedly. Molly snorted.

"Of course you don’t," she replied, raising an eyebrow. "Just old."

"Mum!" Ron protested.

"So why are my fighting skills under discussion?" Molly asked, turning to Hermione, who blushed furiously.

"We just- I mean I just had the idea that perhaps, if you were okay with it, we could learn some extra Defense Against the Dark Arts skills," Hermione said.

"I would have thought there were some other skills you could all be learning as well," said Molly, pouring out four glasses of juice. "Especially as it’s OWL year for three of you."

"Don’t remind me," Ron muttered.

"One comfort to me is that I won’t have to, provided you keep Hermione around," said Molly. "But I suppose it’s not such a bad idea, especially for three people who seem to constantly find themselves in such ridiculously dangerous situations," she added sternly, looking at Ron, Hermione, and Harry in turn.

"We don’t do it on purpose," Harry objected.

"Of course you don’t, dear," Molly replied. Harry was almost sure she was being sincere.

"So you’ll help us?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Let me talk it over with Sirius tonight," Molly said. "But I want to make it clear that no matter how many lessons you have or how much you think you know, you are still school children, under our care, and that these skills are not a license to go out and put yourselves in harm’s way." She put her hands on her hips and gave them all a warning look.

"Yes, Mrs Weasley."

"Yes, Mum."

Everyone exchanged looks as they gathered around the food.

"I didn’t see that coming," said Ginny, reaching for some juice.

"She didn’t say we could definitely do it, though," said Ron. "Maybe it would’ve been better if we hadn’t told her."

"It’s not like we could hide something like that," Harry scoffed. "Or have you forgotten what that Reductor Curse sounded like?"
“Oh yeah…”

“So I hear you lot want to start up a Defense Against the Dark Arts study group,” Sirius said to Harry that night. Harry looked up apprehensively at the odd note in Sirius’s voice.

“We just wanted something useful to do,” he said carefully. “And it’s OWL year, so…”

“Don’t worry,” Sirius laughed. “Molly doesn’t think it’s a completely terrible idea, as long as you’re supervised. And there are enough Order members in and out of this place that we should be able to keep you entertained.” Harry grinned.

“Excellent.”

“But we have one condition,” Sirius added, and Harry realised his apprehension hadn’t been misplaced. “I want Hermione to help you catch up on the work you missed last year.”

Harry groaned and slumped back in his chair.

“I didn’t miss that much, honestly,” he objected half-heartedly.

“So you can tell me all about Grinchek’s Three Principles of DeMaterialisation, then,” said Sirius, raising an amused eyebrow at him. Harry frantically searched his memory for Grinchek, or anything about DeMaterialisation. He remembered something about Vanishing Spells, but the rest wasn’t even a blur.

“Erm…”

“Ex-actly,” said Sirius. He leaned forward, his expression growing serious. “I know you’re not used to having someone on your back like this,” he said. “Hell, I wasn’t either. But Molly’s right. Remus and I are your guardians now, and that means we’re responsible not just for your safety, but for making sure you end up, you know, not as messed up as us.” He smiled briefly, and Harry found himself unable to say a word. He still wasn’t at all keen on doing school work when he could be doing literally anything else, but the thought of having someone who cared about how he did at school, who wanted to make sure he was going to have a good future, was… Was… It was like having family.

“I’ll do my best,” he said, his voice cracking a little. Sirius clapped a hand on his shoulder and grinned.

“I’m sure you will,” he said. “And in return, I’ll give you your first lesson tomorrow.” Harry grinned. It was almost a fair trade.

The two weeks after Harry’s birthday reminded Sirius quite forcefully of the life he’d once thought he’d have, once the war was over the first time. While his peers would have been surprised to hear it, he’d always liked the idea of an academic life, studying obscure Charms and Spells, figuring out new ways of doing magic. The war had interrupted all of that, and he’d thought it was over forever. One could hardly study while on the run from the Ministry. But now, presented with Dumbledore’s notes and evidence, he found himself falling oh-so-easily into his old habits of research and study, taking notes and searching for connections the way he’d once done when comparing the results of
different Potion ingredients. It was hardly the subject matter he would have chosen, but his mind had been starved of this kind of thinking for so long that he was almost grateful.

He was sorry he couldn’t spend much time with Harry, but he reasoned that it was for Harry he was doing this. The sooner he and Dumbledore could find the rest of the Horcruxes, the sooner Harry would be safe. The sooner all of them would be safe, for Harry was, at the moment, in far less danger than Remus. Sirius still found himself unable to sleep, afraid of what was happening to Remus at that very moment, missing him terribly, remembering all the things that had gone wrong fourteen years earlier. But there was nothing he could do to help, so he worked.

After two weeks, he knew Dumbledore’s research back to front, and could replay each of the memories in his sleep. The problem was, there wasn’t enough information. It was clear Voldemort had made his first Horcrux while still at Hogwarts, so it seemed reasonable to assume that it was there, while he was still learning, that he might have been most open about his plans. But who would he have told?

The most obvious answer was, of course, his friends, the ones who would become his Death Eaters. And yet Malfoy hadn’t known what the diary really was, or he wouldn’t have let it out of his possession. According to Dumbledore, Riddle had been intensely private, secretive. He wouldn’t have told anyone he considered an inferior - which he plainly considered his Death Eaters - about something so important, surely? But if he’d told no one, then how would they ever know?

Sirius sat back in his chair and sighed, running his eyes over the mess of notes he’d stuck to the wall above his desk.

“Having a rough time?”

Sirius started and leapt to his feet, crossing the room in three steps and wrapping Remus in a rough hug.

“You never tell me when you’re coming home!” he exclaimed, burying his face in Remus’s neck. Remus hugged him back, pressing a stubbly kiss to his forehead.

“I never know,” he said. “But I should be able to stay for a few days this time, maybe a week.”

Sirius felt like he might cry from happiness.

“That is definitely good news,” he said hoarsely. “I missed you.” He could feel Remus smiling against his forehead.

“I missed you too,” he said. “Merlin, it’s good to be home.”

Home. How fast things had changed. Two months ago the mere concept of ‘us’ had been almost too much to mention. Now here they were, as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had ever gone wrong. No, Sirius thought. Not as if nothing had gone wrong. As if everything went wrong and we were stronger than that. He felt his heart swell a little at the thought. If they could survive all that had happened, they could survive anything.

“Harry tells me you’ve been working since I left,” Remus said, breaking their embrace and stepping further into the room. Sirius smiled wryly.

“Just a little research on the methodology of Horcruxes, and on everyone’s favourite Dark wizard,” he said. “So far, it’s not looking good.”

“Is this Sirius Black, academic extraordinaire?” Remus teased, staring up at the notes on the wall. “I
thought there was nothing you couldn’t research.” Sirius laughed.

“I hadn’t tried researching Lord Corpsicle before,” he said.

“Lord Corpsicle?” Remus asked dubiously.

“Blame Fred,” Sirius said. “Or George. Whichever. I’m trying to figure out who Riddle would have talked to about this at school. There’s no way he would have shared it with anyone afterwards, but when he was first figuring it out?” He shrugged. “It’s a small chance, but it’s better than nothing.” Remus pushed aside a few pages of writing and examined the list of staff who’d been teaching at Hogwarts at the time.

“What about Slughorn?” he asked, pointing to a name on the list. “You know what he was like. If Riddle was as talented as people remember, he definitely would have collected him.”

Sirius crossed the room to stand beside Remus and laid his head on his shoulder.

“You think Riddle would have confided in him?” he asked doubtfully. “I always thought he was a bit of a bumbler.”

“He may not have,” mused Remus. “But Slughorn was always more… flexible, and he was a very knowledgeable wizard. If Riddle talked to anyone at Hogwarts, I’d lay money on it being Horace Slughorn.”

Sirius looked down at the page and nodded slowly. If Remus was right - and he so often was - then they had a place to start searching again.

“I knew there was a reason I liked having you around,” he said, leaning up to kiss Remus’s jaw. Remus turned and kissed him back, a hum of pleasure rumbling in the back of his throat.

“Is that really why?” he murmured against Sirius’s mouth, pulling the other man closer. Sirius laughed.

“Well, maybe not the whole reason.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

I want to start by saying a big thank you to everyone who migrated over from ff dot net. I'm sorry you couldn't keep reading it on your preferred platform, but I'm really glad you're here! I've just finished planning out the next few chapters and I'm pretty excited about writing them. :) I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry stared down at the page in front of him and sighed. He felt like his brain was stuffed with warm cotton wool, and the Potions book in front of him was not helping.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he announced. “I wasn’t that bored after all, and we don’t need DADA lessons.”

Hermione looked up from her rather larger pile of books and frowned at him.

“You know Sirius wants you to do this anyway,” she said. “You’re not getting out of it that easily.”

Harry slumped in his chair and groaned dramatically. Hermione always seemed to know just what buttons to push to activate his conscience. Ron looked up from where he was struggling through a stack of Divination notes on the couch.

“Now you know what it’s like to have parents,” he grumbled. As soon as Molly had heard Sirius’s conditions for DADA lessons, she’d enthusiastically extended the deal to include her own children, a decision that had resulted in a great many rude comments being directed at Hermione. Hermione herself seemed rather pleased with the turn of events, however, since it meant she no longer had to put up with the others interrupting her daily reading sessions. Except for all the times they paused their study to complain, that is.

“I can’t believe Mum’s making us study in exchange for learning how to defend ourselves,” said George mutinously. He and Fred had both endured a rather unpleasant fifteen minutes after they’d declared that, as legal adults, they were no longer required to abide by such arrangements. Molly had begged to differ, with the result that the twins now joined the under-seventeens during their daily study sessions.

“We’re at war and I’m stuck in here revising goblin history,” Fred grumbled. “I’d like to know how that’s going to help anyone ever.”

“It helped your brother get a very good job,” said Molly, bustling in with a sheaf of clean parchment. She shooed Crookshanks off the desk where he’d been sleeping in a patch of sun and plonked the parchment down. “And now he’s doing some very important work for the Order, which is more than I can say for either of you at present, so no more of your moaning, thank you very much.” She aimed a stern glance at her sons, who returned it with interest and an extra helping of sulkiness.

“I still don’t see why I have to do this too,” Ginny muttered as Molly left. “My grades were fine. I’m basically being punished for you lot being hopeless.”
“Oi,” said Harry. “It’s not my fault a nutter spent all of last year trying to kill me.”

“Fair enough,” replied Ginny. “What’s their excuse then?”

“You got me,” Harry grinned.

Ron waved a sarcastic salute at his friend and his sister without looking up from his book, but Fred and George exchanged a smirk.

“I bet you wouldn’t call us hopeless if you knew what we were working on upstairs,” said Fred. Ginny snorted.

“Oh sure,” she said. “What is it now? Five Ways To Piss Off Mum So You Can Never Leave Home? Or is it Seven Ways To Get Yourselves And All Your Siblings Locked Up For Life?”

“Such a downer today, sis!” George exclaimed. “You have no faith in us.”

“We have faith in your ability to get us all in the shit,” said Ron, running ink-stained fingers through his hair and leaving a dark blue streak behind.

“Fine,” said Fred, crossing his arms across his chest and glancing behind him to make sure his mother wasn’t about to burst in on them. “Just don’t come begging to us when you need time off from classes and you can’t get any.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione, peering suspiciously at the twins over the top of a particularly giant tome, *Adventures in Arithmancy Vol III: The Lost Calculations*.

“Only that we are fantastic geniuses who have almost perfected our greatest achievement to date,” said George airily. Ron and Ginny both rolled their eyes.

“Given your greatest achievement so far was that time you both ate a Jumbo Box of Fizzing Whizzbees in one sitting and ended up in St Mungo’s, that’s not saying a lot,” said Ginny.

George sighed tragically.

“They doubt us, Fred,” he said.

“You’d think they’d know better by now,” Fred replied.

“I guess they won’t be needing any Skiving Snackboxes this year,” said George.

Harry watched this performance with great amusement. For all that Fred and George messed around - and for all that their siblings enjoyed ribbing them - they really were incredibly bright. As far as Harry could tell, the only reason they hadn’t got twelve Owls apiece was because they simply couldn’t be bothered. Hermione had suggested it was a form of rebellion designed to differentiate themselves from their older, high-achieving brothers, but she’d given up her attempt to explain this when she’d caught sight of Harry and Ron’s befuddled expressions.

“Well, someone’s got to ask,” said Hermione, sounding resigned. “What is a Skiving Snackbox?”

“I’m glad you asked, dear madam,” said Fred grandly - although still quietly, so as to not attract the attention of his mother. “It is nothing more nor less than the greatest leap forward in class avoidance since the invention of the Weeping Boils Curse.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Hermione muttered.
“You may scoff,” said George, “but you’ll be coming to us soon enough. OWL year is Hell.”

“Only if you want to actually get any OWLs,” Harry pointed out.

“And since you three appear to be depressingly studious,” said Fred, ignoring this interruption, “you will soon find yourselves longing for relief, which is where our Snackboxes come in.”

“A complete range of sweets to make you ill,” announced George proudly. “Not enough to endanger your life, but enough to get you out of class, which is, after all, what any good student desires.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and disappeared behind her book again. Harry and Ginny exchanged an amused glance, both of them trying not to laugh in case Molly got the impression that they were having fun and came to tell them off. Ron, however, was frowning.

“Where did you lot get the money for all this?” he asked suspiciously. “No way the ingredients for stuff like that comes cheap.”

Harry’s smile slid off his face and he shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t exactly sure why he didn’t want anyone to know that he’d given the twins his Triwizard winnings, but he suspected Mrs Weasley wouldn’t be happy. Given that he’d caught her crying about Percy on more than one occasion, he didn’t want to be the cause of another rift in the family, and he doubted she’d approve of Fred and George’s ambition to open their own joke shop. For once, the twins seemed to notice his discomfort, because they both winked at Ron.

“Ask us no questions and we’ll tell you no lies,” said Fred, tapping his nose.

“I can hear you lot chattering, you know,” Molly called up the stairs. “Get back to work, or no lessons for you!”

They all exchanged exasperated looks and shuffled their books a little closer.

“The way she acts, you’d think everything was fine,” said Ron, tugging on one earlobe as he frowned at his page and turning that inky blue as well.

“She’s just trying to keep us all safe,” said Hermione reasonably, turning a page.

“But we’re not safe, are we?” said Harry irritably. “There’s no point pretending we are.” He felt somewhat guilty saying it aloud, but he still found he resented Sirius, Remus, and Molly for their constant attempts to keep them all in the dark. He wasn’t used to being treated like a child, and it rankled. *I defeated Voldemort twice, and escaped from him just a few weeks ago, and they’re making me do Potions revision*, he thought.

“It’s weird, though, isn’t it?” said Ginny quietly. “Voldemort’s been back for nearly two months now, and it’s like nothing’s happened. I thought for sure something would have, I dunno, blown up or something by now.”

“It could have, for all we know,” said Fred, scowling. “They don’t tell us anything.”

“Maybe you two geniuses should be working on a way to get the Extendables past the Imperturbable Charms, instead of finding ways to skive off class,” Hermione observed from behind her book.

“You’re welcome to help with that,” George offered.

“No thanks,” Hermione replied. “Personally, I don’t think it’s such a good idea for us to be listening
in on Order business right now.”

Ron and Harry exchanged exasperated looks.

“Of course you don’t,” said Ron. “That would involve breaking the rules, oh dear, how terrible.”

Hermione put her book down impatiently and frowned around at them all.

“I’m less concerned about the rules,” she said, “than about the fact that Harry hasn’t learned Occlumency well enough yet to keep the inside of his head safe.”

Harry felt his stomach clench. He’d almost managed to forget his connection with Voldemort over the past week or so. The strange dreams about dark corridors had stopped completely, leaving him only with regular nightmares which, while horrifying, didn’t leave him feeling dirty, as though something unspeakable and filthy was living inside him. Tonks was pleased with his progress, and seemed to think he’d be fine to return to Hogwarts on the first. He’d almost managed to believe it. He looked down at his hands and said nothing.

“That was a bit harsh,” Ron said. “He’s doing pretty good, Tonks said so last night. And the Fidelius Charm is keeping Corpsicle out anyway.”

“And what happens when we go back to Hogwarts?” Hermione pointed out. Her cheeks were flushed, but she was clearly determined to make her point. “The Fidelius Charm only protects us while we’re here.”

“I get it,” Harry said shortly. “I can’t go looking for information about what the Order’s up to. Just drop it, okay?”

Hermione nodded awkwardly and they all fell silent, their eyes fixed determinedly on their books.

When Buckbeak had first arrived at Grimmauld Place, Sirius had been worried the poor creature would struggle being locked up. The Hippogriff seemed to understand the need to remain hidden, however, and suffered his effective imprisonment with surprising grace.

Sirius had to admit that Kreacher’s unexpected friendship with the beast had probably helped. When he wasn’t arguing with Molly over which herbs should go in a beef stew, or chiding Harry and Ron for the smell of old socks and owl shit that pervaded their room, or bringing Sirius fresh cups of tea to replace the ones he’d forgotten to drink while he was working, Kreacher was in the attic, bringing Buckbeak treats and sitting with him for hours at a time, telling him about his years with the Black family and showing him the relics he hadn’t let Sirius throw away. It was doubly fortunate that Buckbeak had shown up when he had, since Kreacher’s new favourite person, Harry, was being kept rather busy with his revision, his lessons, and his friends.

Sirius still felt guilty for leaving poor Buckbeak alone so much, however, especially after they’d spent a whole year with only each other for company, so he frequently found himself trudging up the highest flight of stairs to say hello. Now that the house was so full, Remus often joined him simply for the chance to get some peace and quiet. Buckbeak seemed to enjoy Remus’s company, which Remus was constantly surprised by, given what he must smell like to the Hippogriff.

“He know what a good judge of character I am,” Sirius declared when Remus mentioned it for what felt like the hundredth time. “Besides,” he added, slipping his arms around Remus’s waist from behind, “you smell pretty good to me.”
Remus snorted.

“From anyone other than you, that observation would be decidedly sleazy,” he said.

“Whereas I am pure class.”

“Oh no, you’re a sleaze,” said Remus. “I’m just so used to it that it doesn’t bother me any more.”

Sirius made an outraged noise and disentangled himself.

“You see what I have to deal with?” he said to Buckbeak. The Hippogriff looked up from his plate of steak and regarded Sirius impassively. If he’d been a human, he would almost certainly have rolled his eyes. Sirius laughed and plonked himself down on a stack of tapestries in a careless manner that would have had Kreacher in tears. Remus sat on the floor next to him, leaning against his knees. The sat in silence for some time, simply enjoying each other’s company.

“What are you thinking?” asked Sirius the Unable-To-Sit-Still after a while. Remus chuckled darkly and shifted his head where it rested against Sirius’s thigh.

“I was wondering if I could just stay up here with Buckbeak until the war’s over,” he said. “Just skip the whole thing.”

Sirius smiled sadly and ran a hand through Remus’s hair, which had become uncharacteristically shaggy over the last two months.

“I won’t tell Dumbledore if you don’t,” he said. Remus smiled, but it faded quickly.

“It’s worse this time, Pads,” he murmured eventually. Sirius felt the room shrink a little. He had to force himself to keep stroking Remus’s hair smoothly, although he knew his hands were trembling. He remembered the last time.

“Greyback?” he asked softly. Remus hadn’t spoken about what he was doing beyond what he said at the meetings, but he’d said enough to paint Greyback as a frighteningly powerful figure in the werewolf community - not to mention the one who’d turned Remus. And Greyback liked Voldemort. A lot.

“Yes and no,” said Remus. Sirius gave up on the hair stroking and wriggled off the tapestries so he could sit next to Remus and put his arms around him. Remus sighed and laid his head on Sirius’s shoulder. He looked and sounded utterly exhausted. “The mandatory declaration laws the Ministry passed last year haven’t helped,” he said. “Even more of us have been left without jobs. The Ministry won’t help us. That Umbridge woman pops up in the Prophet at least once a month talking about how dangerous and terrible we are. Most of us are living in the enclave because there’s nowhere else to go. Greyback’s just taking advantage of a problem the Ministry created.”

Sirius tightened his arm around Remus’s shoulders. He didn’t know what to say. It didn’t feel like the right time for righteous anger, even while a furious diatribe burned in the back of his throat. He’d always felt so helpless when it came to the way the wizarding world treated werewolves.

“I don’t know what to say to them any more,” Remus said, and it was almost a whisper. “What can I offer them except more of the same?”

“What about the ones you told me about?” Sirius asked. “The ones who were starting to look for work in the Muggle world? I thought they were interested.”

Remus settled more comfortably into Sirius’s arms and shook his head. Sirius wished he knew what
to say. Remus was the one who would keep fighting no matter what, the one who never lost hope, the one who always found something to keep them going. But this Remus looked broken. **Hopeless. Helpless. And it’s our side that did this to him.**

“They’re afraid,” he said. “They’re afraid of what Greyback will do if they work with us. And they’re afraid that, even if they help, the Ministry will abandon them as soon as the war’s over. And they’re right to fear it.”

“Do you have to go back?” Sirius asked tentatively. Remus took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Yes.”

Sirius stared past Buckbeak at the opposite wall, not really seeing it. He knew Remus could never give up, not while there was a chance he could help someone, maybe convince a few of them to at least stay away from Voldemort. But hearing it was like a punch in the gut. He pressed a kiss onto the top of Remus’s head.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Remus said, shaking his head. He toyed with the buttons on the front of Sirius’s shirt - as teenagers, they’d both taken to wearing muggle clothing at home, finding trousers and shirts more comfortable than voluminous robes most of the time. “They don’t trust me, they know I worked with Dumbledore before. Greyback’s warned them about me, but I have to try.”

“Greyback knows you’re there?” Sirius demanded, leaning back so he could look into Remus’s face. “Why the hell didn’t you say anything?”

Remus blinked up at him.

“I assumed it was obvious,” he said. “I mentioned him in my reports.”

“You didn’t say he knew about you!” Sirius exclaimed. “Merlin’s beard, Moony, what if he decides you’re too dangerous?”

“What do you want me to do?” Remus snapped, sitting up. “No one else can do this, Pads, and it needs to be done.”

“Not if it costs you your life!” Sirius glared at Remus, but he knew it wasn’t really him he was angry with. It was this whole wretched mess. And Remus was right. If Sirius could have been out risking his life, even for a chance as slim as the one Remus was working for, he’d do it in a flash.

“Can we not fight about this?” Remus asked, his eyes pleading.

Sirius immediately felt like the biggest wanker in the universe. He reached out and pulled Remus close again.

“I’m sorry, Moons, you’re right. You know I’m not angry with you, I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

Remus buried his head in Sirius’s shirt and nodded, tightening his arms around his boyfriend’s waist.

“I wish none of this was happening, too,” he said, his voice a little muffled by Sirius’s chest. “Merlin, what a mess.”

“You know I’ll come get you if anything goes wrong,” Sirius said.

“No you bloody won’t,” Remus replied sternly. “You getting arrested isn’t going to help me, or
Harry. Tonks and Arthur know where I am, they’ll keep an eye on me.”

“Fine, fine,” Sirius muttered, but he privately determined, then and there, that if he had even the slightest hint that Remus was in danger, it would take more than the threat of arrest to keep him hiding in Grimmauld Place, Harry or no Harry.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Whew, this chapter just made it in on time. Sorry for the weirdly irregular updating, my mental health (and real life tbh) is all over the place at the moment, so I'm just doing my best. Thanks to everyone who comments, you really help keep me going (because I'm a writer and I'm a slave to my ego). I'm so sorry drarry is taking so long to show up. I PROMISE it's going to happen, but this first part took up way more chapters than I expected. So if you came here for that, it is on its way, it's just taking longer than planned. I hope no one feels like I've misled you. That's enough blathering for now, here is the chapter. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Order meetings had never been particularly fun - at least not this time around - but the longer Voldemort’s sneaking silence dragged on, the more tense each meeting became. It wasn’t merely the Dark Lord’s refusal to go public that was getting on peoples’ nerves, however. The Ministry’s determination not to believe Dumbledore was making life harder for the Order each and every day, and with so many Order members working in the Ministry, things were beyond unpleasant.

“Well, it’s definite,” Tonks announced mid-August. Her hair was a brilliant scarlet and she looked decidedly disgruntled. “The Wizengamot decided the Travel Restriction and Monitoring legislation is lawful. As of next Thursday, the Auror’s office can monitor and intercept whoever the hell we like without approval from the courts and without evidence.” She flumped into a seat next to Arthur and crossed her arms across her chest. “It’s fucking bullshit.”

“Concise as always,” observed Dumbledore with a smile. “This was not unexpected, however. We have our ways of working around it.”

Tonks let out a snort of disgust.

“We shouldn’t have to work around it,” she said. “What the hell happened to civil liberties?”

“Fudge happened to them,” replied Sirius, plonking a bottle of Firewhiskey and half a dozen glasses on the table. “He’s never given two shits about doing what’s right, as long as he gets to be in charge.”

“Now that’s not entirely fair,” said Arthur mildly, accepting the glass Sirius passed him. “He was a good enough man once.”

“Good enough isn’t good enough for the Minister of Magic,” said Molly firmly. “Whatever he was once, he’s as good as opened the door for You Know Who to come back again, and we’re going to have the very devil of a time stopping him if we’re fighting the Ministry as well.”

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore, in a tone that indicated that the time for complaining was over. “However, as I pointed out, we have ways to work around these not-unexpected changes. They are still unable to track Patronuses, for the time being, so we have at least one form of reliable contact.”
"It's a pity Patronuses are so difficult to conjure," Remus replied.

"Harry suggested we look into something called a mobile phone," said Arthur, pronouncing the words carefully. "It’s a muggle technology that allows people to contact one another instantly. It might be worth trying."

"Perhaps you can look into that, Arthur," said Dumbledore, making a note on a piece of parchment in front of him. "You’re hardly going to be questioned for doing what is ostensibly your job."

"I’ll get Harry to give me some details," said Arthur, grinning. Sirius exchanged a smirk with Remus. They could both tell Arthur was fighting the urge to bounce up and down in his seat with excitement. Sirius had seen muggles using the things they called mobiles when he’d been on the run, and he could just imagine how much Arthur would love using one. The real trouble would be getting him to put it down.

"Now that we are focused, what else do you have to report, Tonks?" Dumbledore asked. Tonks took a swig of Firewhiskey and pursed her lips. The shadows under her eyes indicated her double duties to the Auror Department and the Order were taking their toll.

"There have been two more disappearances in the last fortnight," Tonks said, her tone taking on a more professional, detached tone. For a brief moment, it was possible to see the talented Auror she really was, underneath the garish hair and goofy sense of humour. "I only found out about the second today, they’re trying to keep it quiet even from us Aurors. One was a Ministry administrator, Hildegarde Bromide, reported missing by her brother last week. Possible signs of disturbance at her house, but nothing certain. Fudge’s people are trying to chalk it up to ‘running away while bored and single’, but her brother thinks otherwise."

"Which department did Hildegarde work in?" Remus asked grimly.

"She floated around, but mainly on Level One. She was working with the Minister on his education reforms most recently."

A low murmur of disgust ran around the table.

"What is your opinion?" Dumbledore asked, as unruffled as ever.

"Kingsley and Mad Eye think she was targeted because she had access to the Minister. Possibly she resisted the Imperius Curse, it’s been known to happen, and they had to get rid of her."

"Until we hear otherwise, it seems very likely," agreed Dumbledore. "And the other?"

"A Danish scholar, Betina Fransen. She was on exchange at the Winklehorn Private Academy and vanished while on a shopping trip three days ago," said Tonks, glancing down at her own notes. Sirius felt a brief pang of nostalgia and regret. He’d once considered Winklehorn as a future career. Voldemort had ruined that for him, as he’d ruined it for Tonks’s missing Dane. "The Academy won’t talk about what Betina was researching, but she graduated from Beauxbatons with top grades in Divination."

The other Order members exchanged significant glances.

"Voldemort’s not even trying to be careful," said Sirius. He ran a fingertip around the rim of his glass, frowning thoughtfully. "Disappearances like that, especially an international student, aren’t going to go unnoticed."

Tonks’s upper lip curled.
“We know old Morgue Breath has people inside the Ministry,” she said. “Fudge is actively trying to prove everything’s fine. At this point, Voldy McMouldypants could show up in the middle of the Ministry itself and I still don’t know if Fudge would believe it.”

Sirius muttered a choice phrase under his breath, and if the murmur that once more ran around the table was any indication, he wasn’t the only one. Even Tonks’s increasingly creative nicknames for Voldemort couldn’t soften the fact that Fudge had practically thrown open the gates and invited Voldemort to take over the wizarding world.

“We can only work with what we have,” said Dumbledore decisively. “I take it Kingsley has you looking into things on the quiet, as I believe the phrase goes?”

Tonks flashed him a grin.

“You know me, quiet as a mouse,” she winked. Molly made a strange sound that could have been an amused snort or a cough, depending on your interpretation.

Perhaps we can find a pattern in these disappearances that will tell us where Voldemort is headed next,” said Dumbledore. “Not only so we can head him off, but if there’s any chance we can reveal him to the public, we must take it.”

“Well duh,” Remus muttered under his breath. Sirius thought he might crack a rib trying not to laugh. Dumbledore appeared not to notice, and turned instead to Arthur, who was looking rather more mellow than seemed reasonable in the circumstances, perhaps because he was well into his third glass of Firewhiskey.

“Ah yes,” he sighed. “Me. Not much to report, I’m afraid, at least nothing concrete.”

“You do have a certain knack for filtering the facts from the rumour mill, Arthur,” said Remus dryly. “What’s it churned up lately?”

Arthur settled more comfortably in his chair and crossed his hands over his belly.

“More of the same, I’m afraid, and most of it yanked straight from the front page of The Daily Prophet.” He sighed heavily. “Concerns about Harry’s welfare and whereabouts, people concerned he’s been whisked off to a secret location to be brainwashed by his Headmaster.” There was a collective snort of unamused laughter. “My personal favourite came from Jebediah Wambly just yesterday, though,” he added. “He’s of the opinion that the evil Dark wizard, Sirius Black, has absconded with The Boy Who Lived in order to enact revenge for his fallen master.”

Sirius chuckled into his whiskey. As much as he despised Fudge’s cowardice, he couldn’t help but be amused at the Ministry’s determination to put every unexplained disappearance, curse, or incidence of petty vandalism directly at his feet. The day Voldemort returned and he was exonerated was going to be even more satisfying because of it.

“At least they’re concerned for Harry, rather than vilifying him,” observed Molly seriously. “I was worried, the first week or so after the Tournament. It looked like they were going to try and drag him down with Dumbledore.”

“They certainly would have done,” said Dumbledore with a chuckle, “if the evil Dark wizard, Sirius Black - aided and abetted by the despicable Remus Lupin - hadn’t absconded with him. A decision with more benefits than some of us foresaw, I think.” He raised his glass and toasted Sirius and Remus.

Well I’ll be a Niffler’s nutsack . Sirius stared at the Headmaster in surprise, and he knew Remus was
doing the same. Was this really the same Albus Dumbledore speaking, the one who had attempted to guilt them into sending Harry back to his aunt and uncle?

Dumbledore, as usual, pretended not to realise that he’d said anything extraordinary.

“Will these rumours have any influence on the progress of the educational reforms?” he asked Arthur. “Will they use fears for Harry’s safety against the school?”

Against you, you mean, thought Sirius, and immediately felt guilty. Not ten seconds ago the man had admitted he’d been wrong. At least give him five minutes before you start being snide.

“To be honest, Albus, they don’t need any more justification,” said Arthur. “A student died at the end of last term, they’ve got all the leverage they need. Oh, they’ll use this,” he added, forestalling Tonks’s attempt to object. “They’ll use it, they’ve wanted to get their hands on Harry to, erm, debrief him since he left school. But they don’t need it, and it won’t change much.”

“Besides,” added Molly, “The Prophet’s in the Minister’s pocket, they’ll print whatever will support him. They don’t need facts about Harry to use him to their advantage.”

“That was what I feared,” said Dumbledore, a little grimly. “I’m thankful he is protected from the worst of it here.”

What the fu-

Sirius didn’t have time to process this new development - actually protecting Harry? - as Dumbledore looked down at his papers, suddenly seeming uncomfortable. He glanced briefly at Sirius and cleared his throat. Sensing something more serious was to come, everyone around the table stilled.

“I’m glad we are a small group tonight. You are the most trusted members of the Order at present, and there is another issue about which I would value your opinion,” said Dumbledore slowly.

“However, it is not one I would wish to be the subject of general conversation, even amongst other members of the Order.” He ran his eyes around the room, and Sirius felt the breath still in his lungs. If he’s about to do what I think he’s about to do then I quit, forever and always, I will never judge anyone ever again.

“I fear it is time to discuss Horcruxes.”

Harry lay on the floor of the living room and watched Ginny teasing Crookshanks with an old quill, while Ron demolished Hermione at chess. How Ron was still able to convince anyone in the house to play against him, Harry wasn’t sure, but he seemed to have no lack of opponents. The only time anyone ever really challenged him was when Bill dropped by, which was infrequent at best, as he was so busy with his new job, work for the Order, and the ‘English lessons’ he’d offered Fleur Delacour.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Ron asked Hermione, one eyebrow raised skeptically as she slid a bishop across the board. Hermione pouted, her finger still resting on her piece.

“Of course I’m not,” she snapped. “You’re the chess whizz, not me.”

Harry knew precisely where the evening was headed when Hermione used that particular tone. He exchanged an amused glance with Ginny and wondered if he’d be better off heading upstairs to visit Buckbeak and the owls, who were now being housed in the attic with the Hippogriff. It might be smellier, but at least it wouldn’t be as loud. He’d just made up his mind to move - assisted by the
incredibly smug expression on Ron’s face when his queen claimed Hermione’s disputed bishop - when there was a tap on the door.

“Why, this is quite the picture of domestic bliss,” Dumbledore observed from the doorway, quite failing to notice the furious expression on Hermione’s face, or the way Ron’s mouth was half open, definitely on the verge of saying something incendiary.

“I wanted to personally deliver these for you,” the Headmaster continued serenely, stepping forward and handing a bundle of parchment envelopes to a surprised Hermione. “I apologise for the lateness. I hope you will forgive us if we have been a little distracted with other concerns.” He smiled around at the four of them, and Harry realised he was still lying on the floor. He sat up abruptly.

“Thanks, Professor,” he said belatedly, taking his envelope from Hermione as she passed them around. He wasn’t sure what else to say. Dumbledore still wasn’t quite looking at him, although he was certainly being more friendly than he had been all summer. Harry felt a wave of resentment wash over him. It wasn’t his, Harry’s fault The Daily Prophet were being dicks about Dumbledore, after all. It wasn’t his fault Voldemort was back, or that no one believed them. And it wasn’t his fault Sirius and Remus had taken him away from the Dursleys.

Harry felt an uncomfortable prickle in his shoulders at this last thought. If he was honest, it was his fault. He was the one who’d told Remus he didn’t want to go back there, but he’d been drugged at the time, how was he to know they’d overreact like that?

A second later, the Hermione voice in the back of his head scolded him for even thinking like that. As Sirius had already said, Harry hadn’t been safe there, and he had every right to be here, where he was cared for, and safe, and even, on occasion, happy. And it wasn’t fair for Dumbledore to be angry about it.

Harry realised they’d all been staring at one another in silence for a rather longer time than was comfortable, but Dumbledore seemed thoroughly unconcerned.

“Well, I see you are all suffering the usual response to seeing your teacher away from school,” he smiled, eyes twinkling. “I shall bid you goodnight.” He waved a hand at nobody in particular and left the room.

“Well that was awkward,” said Ron.

“That was so rude of us,” Hermione replied, shaking her head mournfully. “We could at least have offered him a seat.”

“And said what?” snorted Harry, ripping open his letter to find the usual list of books and equipment.

“Somehow I don’t think ‘how’s the war going’ was going to be such a good conversation starter,” said Ginny.

“Small talk is a possibility, you know,” Hermione said sternly.

“A boring one,” Harry retorted.

“Yeah, how is talking about the weather supposed to be less awkward?” asked Ginny. Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but was distracted by the stunned expression on Ron’s face as he looked down at his letter.

“What’s wrong with you?” Harry asked.
“I-” Ron started, but seemed unable to formulate a full sentence. “I got-” He held his letter out to Hermione with a beseeching look.

“Oh my goodness!” Hermione squealed when she took the letter and a red and gold badge fell out onto the table. “Ron, you’ve been made Prefect!”

Harry shot to his knees and stared at the badge on the table. He’d completely forgotten that fifth year was when Prefects were chosen. He could already see the badge nestled in Hermione’s letter, which was the precise opposite of unexpected. If he was completely honest with himself, though, he would not have expected Ron to be made Prefect in a million years. Hadn’t Harry been the one always winning points for bravery, saving the school, being Champion? Ron was just there…

He looked down at his knees, his cheeks hot. He was being an arsehole, wasn’t he? He glanced at Ginny and knew she’d followed his thoughts exactly. She shot him a warning glare and turned to her brother.

“You know I’m not going to give you an easy time of it just because you’re my brother,” she said, grinning to hide the brief exchange with Harry. She might be protective of her siblings, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t take the piss.

“Not surprised,” Ron snorted. He still looked gobsmacked. He picked up the badge again and held it out to Harry for inspection. Harry forced a grin on his face and hoped it looked genuine. He was happy for Ron. He really was. Ron was forgotten far too often, apparently even by the person who was supposed to be his best friend.

“Well done, mate, you deserve it,” he said with feeling. Ron didn’t seem to question his sincerity and smiled as well.

“I thought it’d be you, though, for sure,” he said.

“Nah, I cause too much trouble,” said Harry. He could feel Ginny watching him, but the more time he had to process the sudden development, the more he recognised those jealous, resentful feelings for what they were. And he knew it probably wouldn’t have been as bad if Dumbledore hadn’t been so weird lately.

“Dumbledore said you lot had your letters,” said Molly from the doorway. Harry could tell she’d been dying to come up and be nosy, and this made him smile properly. Sirius poked his head over Molly’s shoulder and winked at Harry, confirming his suspicions.

“Ron made Prefect,” said Ginny, affecting a disdain for this development that Harry knew was entirely false.

“What?” Molly squealed. “Oh Ronald, how wonderful!” She darted forward and wrapped her son in a hug so tight his face went red.

“What’s going on in here?” Fred asked, poking his head around the doorway as well.

“Your brother’s been made Prefect,” said Sirius, now laughing openly.

“Oh no,” Fred groaned.

“That’s everyone in the family now!” exclaimed Molly, releasing Ron and wiping her eyes. Ron massaged his neck and tried to remember how to breathe.

“What are Fred and I, next door neighbours?” asked George indignantly.
“This is so unexpected!” said Molly, ignoring him. “We should celebrate, I’ll make us all some tea.” She bustled out, muttering happily to herself.

“That is the most English thing I’ve ever heard,” said Sirius.

“What a disappointment you are, Ronald,” Fred sneered, plonking himself on the couch next to Harry. “At least Harry has his priorities straight.”

“Name one time Ron wasn’t getting in trouble right next to me,” Harry objected.

“Name one time it wasn’t because you got in trouble first and asked him to help,” George replied. Harry opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Exactly,” said Ginny, grinning. “I guess we’ll have to resign ourselves to being the only Weasleys who aren’t try-hards.”

By this point Harry was laughing, most of his resentment washed away. If he was honest with himself, part of him was relieved that he wouldn’t have to take on Prefect duties, which had looked dull as dishwater when Percy was the one doing them - although that could have been because it was Percy doing them. Sirius clapped Ron and Hermione on their shoulders.

“Well done, you two,” he said. “At least you know your parents will be proud of you, even if the rest of us know just how tedious the next three years of your education is going to be. All that behaving, all that helping teachers.”

“What would you know about it?” Remus asked, bringing a large plate of cake into the room. “You and James spent your whole time as Hogwarts getting into as much strife as possible and leaving me to clean up after you.”

“You weren’t Prefects?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Nah, James and I were less suited to the brown-nosing life,” said Sirius airily, wrapping an arm around Remus’s waist and grinning at Harry over the other man’s shoulder.

“You were lazy sods,” Remus corrected him, but he was smiling. Harry laughed again. Prefect badge or not, he suddenly felt much better.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I'm feeling so productive today, yay! I can't wait to read the comments on this one, not gonna lie. Let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day Arthur Weasley brought home an armful of mobile phones was one of the happiest days of his life - not that he would dare admit such a thing in front of his wife and children, of course. Hermione and her parents had taken Arthur and Minerva to purchase a phone for each member of the Order, including, for reasons best known to Arthur himself, one for each of the children, despite the impossibility of their ever using them at Hogwarts, and the fact that Molly would never dare let them out of the house without supervision.

Harry had, of course, seen various iterations of the device in his cousin’s possession over the years, but he’d never actually used one himself. It was a welcome break for all of them, spending an afternoon being instructed in the art of turning them on, connecting them to the network, and then figuring out how to use them. Ginny was the first one to find the app store, and after that there was no getting them back. Minerva quickly discovered Pinterest and had to suddenly rush off back to Hogwarts to ‘mark some papers’. (Sirius was pretty sure the phone wouldn’t work in her office, since magic tended to mess with muggle technology, and he could just imagine her expression of disappointment.) Fred and George managed to cram so many apps onto their phones in the first hour that none of them would work and they had to figure out how to delete them. Ron found a chess app and stopped scrolling. It seemed he’d finally found a worthy opponent in a computer program. Harry and Hermione gave up trying to engage him in conversation after a while. He sat scrunched up one end of the couch, muttering to himself until the battery went flat, while they tried to beat each other in a game that seemed to involve crushing candy for some reason.

Sirius, however, wasn’t so happy. After feigning interest for the first half an hour to keep Arthur happy, he’d retreated to the kitchen. Remus was leaving again as soon as his phone had enough “charge”, whatever that meant, to be worth taking with him. Sirius knew he shouldn’t let his bad mood show. Remus was going into dangerous territory, he didn’t need to have Sirius’s shit lumped on him as well. But Sirius had never been good at hiding his emotions. A true Gryffindor, he thought dryly as he waited for the kettle to boil.

“I think we may have lost Arthur for good,” said Remus behind him. Sirius turned and forced a smile.

“Who knew muggles were so inventive, eh?” he said.

“Well, they did invent the television,” Remus pointed out, stepping into the kitchen. “What was that thing we used to watch with James? The one with the redhead, Scully. He was always going on about her being like Lily.”

Sirius really did smile this time, reaching out to pull Remus closer. Remus slid both arms around him, trapping him against the bench. He didn’t mind a bit.

“The X-Files,” he said. “You know you’ve always been my Mulder.”
“I’m completely mental, you mean?” Remus asked bumping his forehead against Sirius’s.

“Exactly.” Sirius leaned forward and rested his head against Remus’s chest, his hair finally giving up on today’s attempt at order and falling down around his face. Remus rested his chin on the top of Sirius’s head and sighed.

“I’m sorry I have to keep doing this,” he murmured. “I know it’s hurting you too.”

Sirius swallowed the lump in his throat and shook his head.

“No, I’m being selfish,” he said softly. “You don’t need to be worrying about me as well. I just want you to be safe, you know that.”

Remus pulled back and took Sirius’s face in his hands, pushing the unruly hair away from the other man’s eyes.

“I’ll come back to you this time,” he said. “I promise. It’s not going to be like last time.”

Sirius clenched a fist in the front of Remus’s shirt and blinked hard, wishing he could believe that everything would be better. But the evidence so far suggested that happiness wasn’t something he’d ever get to hang onto for long. *Best enjoy it while you have it, then.*

“I love you,” he said aloud. Remus leaned forward again and kissed him, deep and a little bit desperate, his body pushing Sirius more firmly against the benchtop. Sirius could feel the hard counter pressing into the base of his spine. He slid his arms up and around Remus’s neck, burying his hands in the other man’s hair and tilting his head so he could deepen the kiss. Remus hadn’t shaved since yesterday. His stubble was rough against Sirius’s face, but he didn’t care. He didn’t care that they were in the kitchen, that the door wasn’t locked, that there were nearly a dozen other people in the house at that moment. He just wanted to get as close to Remus as he could. He pushed himself onto his toes, moaning a little into Remus’s mouth. Maybe they could sneak upstairs without the others noticing...

“Erm-”

*I knew there was a downside to having kids.*

Sirius was grateful that Remus didn’t jump away from him at the interruption. Since neither of them were wearing robes, that would be embarrassing for all of them. He stifled a little groan as Remus’s leg brushed against him in *just* the right (or was it wrong?) place as he turned to greet Harry.

“Sorry,” Harry stammered, looking as though he’d quite like to retreat. Sirius crossed his fingers in the hope that he would, and then felt somewhat bad about it. Harry had clearly come looking for them, he must have had something important on his mind.

“It’s fine,” he said, waving Harry forward and ducking behind Remus into the closest seat before anyone could get a good view below the belt. Remus busied himself with the kettle, which had started boiling while they were preoccupied, completely unnoticed by either of them. Sirius wondered how many times Harry had said “erm” before they’d heard him.

“It’s fine,” he said, waving Harry forward and ducking behind Remus into the closest seat before anyone could get a good view below the belt. Remus busied himself with the kettle, which had started boiling while they were preoccupied, completely unnoticed by either of them. Sirius wondered how many times Harry had said “erm” before they’d heard him.

“I can- I mean, it can wait,” Harry said, taking a couple of steps forward and swinging his arms awkwardly. Sirius grinned.

“It’s perfectly all right,” he said. “It’s about time you learned about the birds and bees anyway,” he added, winking. Harry’s eyes widened in panic.
“I don’t need- I already- Shit.”

Sirius couldn’t help it. He threw back his head and laughed. Even Peter hadn’t been this awkward about snogging. Imagine if he’d caught them doing something actually salacious, he’d probably spontaneously combust from embarrassment.

“Stop teasing,” Remus scolded, putting two cups of tea on the table and waving Harry over. Harry managed an embarrassed grin and shuffled over to his seat.

“So,” said Sirius, attempting to control himself. “What’s so important that you needed to interrupt a perfectly good snogging session?”

Harry muttered something indecipherable under his breath and took a sip of tea.

“Ignore him,” Remus advised. “The longer you know him, the worse he gets. You wait until you catch him in one of his Maximum Queer moods.”

Harry shot a suspicious look at Sirius and Sirius burst out laughing again. Merlin, he’d needed that. And isn’t this what parents were supposed to do? Embarrass their kids? Clearly Harry had been poorly served in that regard as well.

“Oh, I’ll behave, I promise,” he said. “What can we help you with?”

This time, Harry’s awkwardness didn’t seem to have anything to do with the incredibly gay birds or the suspiciously fabulous bees. He toyed with the handle of his teacup for a moment, opened his mouth, shut it again, and sighed heavily. Sirius glanced at Remus, who shrugged before turning his eyes back to Harry.

“Do you really have to go away again?” Harry burst out, apparently a little louder than he’d intended. “I mean, I know you have stuff to do, I just, it’s full moon in a few days, and, well, shouldn’t you stay here where it’s safe?”

Sirius felt the tea he’d just drunk settle in his stomach like cold mercury. He’d been so caught up in his own worry, he hadn’t stopped to make sure Harry was okay. It had been enough that Harry had been busy, smiling, spending time with his friends. It hadn’t occurred to him that he’d have the same worries as well. *Remus isn’t just your family now.*

“Harry, we all have work to do for the Order,” Remus said gently. “It’s not always safe work, but it needs to be done. And I’m the only one who can do this.”

“But why now?” Harry asked, more confident now he’d finally got the words out. “What’ll happen if you just don’t go back for a bit. Make something up, tell them you got stuck somewhere.”

Remus sighed and ran his fingers thoughtfully around the rim of his mug. His expression was sad. Sirius knew he didn’t want to be having this discussion, didn’t want to be telling the child he was helping to care for that he had to put himself in danger. He reached out and tangled his fingers with Remus’s.

“If they never see me Change, Harry, they’ll never trust me,” said Remus after a moment. “I’m trying to convince them that there’s another way to live. If they never see that, how can I expect them to change?”

Harry looked down at the table, his expression sullen.

“What if something goes wrong?” he asked.
“Tonks and Mad Eye know where I am,” Remus said reassuringly. “And now Arthur has these phones, I’ll keep in regular contact with them.” He leaned across the table and laid a hand on Harry’s arm. “There are people there I can stay with, who I can trust,” he said.

Harry looked up and nodded, and it occurred to Sirius how strange it was to hear Harry urging caution, telling someone to stay behind instead of cheering them on - or, more likely, volunteering to come with them. *Maybe we’re having a good influence on him after all,* he thought. *Weird.*

“I promise I’ll be careful,” said Remus. “I promise I’m coming back to both of you. I’m not going to get myself hurt, not when you two are so useless at looking after yourselves.”

Sirius protested loudly against this last observation and shoved Remus lightly in the shoulder, but Harry looked a little happier. He was smiling again, at least. But Sirius knew the only thing that would make either of them really happy was Remus walking back through that door after full moon. Until then, they would just have to be there for each other and hope.

Remus could tell he’d arrived in the enclave before he even climbed off the Knight Bus. A werewolf could always smell another werewolf, and no one lived in this dank little cul de sac if they weren’t lycanthropically inclined - at least not for long. It was a short, narrow alley, the houses looming over the potholed street keeping it in perpetual shadow. Most of the windows were boarded up or covered with plastic. The view wasn’t worth a damn, and no one wanted anyone else seeing what was going on in their flat.

The enclave itself was home to the rejects of magical society. Banshees, disenfranchised house elves, a few goblins, vampires, anyone who wasn’t human enough to count as a ‘proper’ wizard, but wasn’t beast enough to be truly wild. Most of them were unemployed, plenty were taking or selling illicit Potions (usually both), at least half couldn’t do magic at all, and all of them had given up. The enclave was where you ended up when all your other options were exhausted. It was where Remus had come after the first war, where he’d returned every now and again when things got too hard. It wasn’t fair that it hadn’t changed in the last 12 years.

He hunched his shoulders under his cloak and shoved his hands into his pockets, one closing around his wand and the other around the phone he’d only just learned how to use. Unlike the children, who could magically make music and games appear on theirs, he knew how to send messages and how to, what was it? *make a phone call.* He’d promised Tonks he’d message her twice a day to let her know where he was and that he was okay. Except tonight. Paws couldn’t operate a phone.

He hoisted his small bag higher on his back. Inside were the precious ingredients for the Wolfsbane Potion. He had enough for himself and all three of his friends, who lived in a cramped basement flat halfway down the row. Unlike many of the residents, they preferred a quiet life, mostly working muggle jobs as cleaners or serving fast food. The others judged them, they knew. Acting like a Squib was even worse than trying to act like a wizard in the eyes of Greyback’s followers, but Jim, Kevin, and Thomas didn’t let it stop them. The Ministry might have made it impossible for them to work in the magical world, but they’d do what they could to get by, even if it meant living like muggles. If it weren’t for full moon, they would have left the enclave already. If Remus could prove to them that the Wolfsbane Potion worked, however, that might change.

“Weerrrl, if it ain’t our ol’ friend Wolf Wolf,” said a sneering voice said from the shadows. “All shiny an’ new and stinkin’ of humans.” The voice hissed the last word.

“Where you been at, Wolf Wolf?” came another voice from the other side of the narrow street. The
hairs on the back of Remus’s neck stood up. He’d met both of these men before. Usually they were satisfied with a few insults, a few threats, but this felt different.

“What’s that yore carryin’, Wolfy?” asked a third voice behind him, and Remus very quietly thought: *Fuck*. This was an ambush. At the very least, he was about to get a beating. He clenched his fingers around his wand inside his pocket and went to turn into an Apparition, but it was like trying to Apparate into a wall. Someone wanted him badly enough to work an anti-Apparition jinx - no mean feat, and probably something none of these thugs were capable of. This was really bad news.

“I’m just visiting friends,” he said, attempting to sound unthreatening.

“That why you just tried to Apparate away then?” sniggered the first voice. A tall figure in dark, stained jeans and a baggy T-shirt stepped out of the shadows, leering at Lupin.

*Fuuuck*.

“You surprised me,” Remus said, turning so he could see the figure behind him. This one reminded him of Peter a little, small and ratty, although perhaps chihuahua-like would be more appropriate. The one to his left was the only one who wasn’t a werewolf. Golden Bob was a vampire who tagged along after Midas. No one knew why, but Remus didn’t care at this moment.

“What is it you want?” he asked wearily. If they were going to get to a beating, they might as well get it over with.

“We hear yore talkin’ to some of our lads,” said Midas. Little Mickey sniggered. “We hear where yore sayin’ maybe there’s a way to do full moon different.” He took a step towards Remus and Remus stepped back, pulling his wand from his pocket and holding it in front of him.

“Maybe we don’t like that,” said Midas, his sneering smile dropping away. Remus swallowed hard.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he said. He thought he could probably deal with all three of them. Wizard-haters didn’t tend to expend a lot of energy on becoming talented duellers, but it still wouldn’t be easy. His eyes darted quickly between the three of them, attempting to keep them all in focus.

“Well that’s good news, ain’t it lads?” Golden Bob said, spreading his hands wide. “We don’t wanna fight wiv you either, Wolfy.”

“Then what do you want?”

“We wanna remind you who you are,” growled a voice right behind him.

*Fuck*.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Sorry not sorry. Lemme know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took Remus some time to return to consciousness. Sound returned first. The distant rumble of traffic mingled with the dull thud behind his temples. A small engine of some kind hummed nearby. He could hear the sound of a house creaking around him, as though it was warming or cooling. Someone breathed nearby. Two someones.

He could smell old timber and fresh rat droppings and dust and the rich, warm scent of a werewolf nearing full moon.

Where the hell am I?

He couldn’t quite manage movement yet, so that question would have to wait. He tried something simpler.

What happened?

That didn’t help much either. All his fuddled brain could bring to mind was a blur of voices, a growl, a struggle, and then… He gave up and let himself drift back to sleep.

When he returned to consciousness again, he felt much better, but only for a moment. He could tell from the scents wafting on the breeze that it was late afternoon. Somewhere, on the other side of the wall he was lying against, people were beginning to cook dinner. He heard a voice down the street calling for a child to come inside. A car door slammed further down the street.

Shit.

Somehow, this didn’t seem to cover it.

Fuck.

That didn’t do it either.

Fuck fuckety fucking arseholes and giant hairy troll balls. Buggeration. Fuck.

“Finally decided to wake up, then, Wolfy,” said a cheery voice from nearby. Remus groaned and forced his puffy eyes open.

He was lying on the floor of a dilapidated basement, one that had obviously been abandoned for some time. Heavy timber benches ran around three of the walls, scattered with what looked like muggle tools. The concrete floor was cold, even though the air in the room was warm. Midas sat against the opposite wall, observing him casually, as though this were the most normal thing in the
world. Remus’s memory chose this moment to remind him what had happened. There was a tumble of voices, a struggle, a nauseous thud, and then blackness. Whoever had been behind him in that alley had stunned him.

He groaned again and attempted to haul himself upright. He remembered his training well enough, even though his mind still felt like it was stuffed full of cotton wool. As he slid his hands under him, he pressed his palms against the pockets of his robes. Predictably enough, his wand was gone. The phone, however, was not. He felt a tiny leap of hope in his gut, and hoped it hadn’t showed on his face.

“What’s going on, Midas?” he asked. His mouth was dry, his voice rasping against his throat.

“I’d’ve thought a smart fella like you coulda figured that out by now,” Midas said, grinning to show his lengthened incisors. Remus had heard rumours he’d had them altered by a muggle dentist, but he doubted Midas would have sullied his mouth with muggle technology.

“Your friend was a little over-enthusiastic,” Remus replied, leaning his head back against the wall now he was upright and closing his eyes to stop the room spinning. “Forgive me if I take a moment to catch up.”

“I wouldn’t take too many moments,” Midas chuckled. He sounded like he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Remus could feel the hair on his limbs standing up, straining to grow, even though he could still see sunlight through the thin basement window. He resisted the urge to bare his teeth in a growl. The wolf wouldn’t help him. Instead, he focused on his hand, the one he’d deliberately placed half underneath him, just in the right place to ease the phone from his pocket without Midas seeing.

“D’you wanna know what I hate about people like you, Wolfy?” said Midas conversationally, clambering to his feet and stretching.

“I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me either way,” Remus couldn’t stop himself muttering. Midas merely grinned and started wandering around the basement, poking at the abandoned tools on the benches, leaving fingerprints in the dust. Remus followed him with his eyes, fingers working as fast as they could without attracting Midas’s attention.

“You fink you got it all figured out,” Midas said. “You fink cos you can speak like them buggers the Ministry, you know better’n us. When really yore nuffin’ but a pet to them. Not even a pet, cos else you wouldn’t keep comin’ down ‘ere.”

Remus wasn’t really listening. He’d heard it all before, and in his more honest moments, he knew Midas had a point. That didn’t mean he was going to sit here and let the bugger do… whatever it was he was planning to do. He just managed to stifle his hiss of triumph as he turned the damn contraption on, managing to keep it mostly hidden under the folds of his robes. *Thank god Arthur figured out how to make it stop that infernal beeping noise.*

“Fing is, Wolfy, no matter how many times you go crawlin’ back to ‘em, yore always gonner end up ‘ere, wiv us. Cos we’re the only ones’ll take yer. We’re yore people, Wolfy, like it or not.”

“I’ve never denied that,” Remus said softly, eyes darting between Midas’s slow perusal of the remnants of whatever family had previously lived here and the phone. He’d managed to open the call box and there was Sirius’s name, the number he’d called only a day earlier in order to practice. He punched the button and closed his eyes again, sliding the phone back under his robes, praying that Midas wouldn’t hear Sirius’s voice when he answered - and that Sirius would know what it meant. *Even if he does, how will he find me when I don’t even know where I am?*
"Remus? What's happened? Why are you calling?" Remus froze. Sirius’s voice was faint, but there was no way Midas wouldn’t hear it. Midas turned around suddenly to face him. For a moment, Remus was sure he’d been discovered, but then Midas merely smiled and he realised — wizards had no idea what phones were. Midas had probably assumed the voice came from outside, merely one among a dozen on the street above.

"Good news for you, then, Wolfy," he said. "You get to have fun with the family tonight!"

Remus’s gut clenched and for a moment he thought he might be sick. He forgot all about the phone, couldn’t have heard Sirius’s voice if he’d tried. His ears filled with a strange buzzing and his head swam again. He’d known, as soon as he’d woken that second time, where this would lead. He just hadn’t wanted to think about it.

"You don’t have to do this," he said weakly. Midas crossed the room in three quick strides and squatted down right in front of Remus.

"I fink I do," he said, smile gone. "See, pup, you keep tellin’ us we should control ourselves, but seems like every full moon, you ain’t around. And then we find you today wiv a bunch of mucky herbs and you wanna act like you ain’t doin’ exactly what them Ministry buggers want.” Midas leaned forward some more, and Remus could smell his fetid breath. He wanted to lean away, but there was nowhere to go with a wall behind him. "We ain’t gonna be tamed, Wolfy,” Midas said. “We wanna see just how your self control goes when you ain’t got yer Potions.”

Sirius was halfway down the stairs when he felt his pocket start to vibrate and the infuriatingly tinkly tune Ginny had put on his phone started up. He’d tried to change it, but hadn’t been able to figure out how, and now the children had taken to calling him on it just to annoy him. It was unbearably frustrating just how quickly the younger generation had taken to their new toys. Sirius thought he might just have his head wrapped around how to ‘make a call’ and possibly send a text, if you gave him half an hour and smaller fingers.

Cursing, he fished the wretched device out of his pocket and the air solidified around him. Remus. He almost dropped the phone in his haste to answer the call.

"Remus?" he almost shouted into the phone. "What’s happened, why are you calling?" He mashed the thing to his ear, but there was no answer, just the faint whoosh of static and what might have been a voice in the distance.

"Remus!" He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it. There was that little timer Mr Granger had showed him, telling him he was still connected. Maybe he can’t speak. His throat constricted and he put the phone back to his ear again. "Remus? For the love of Merlin, answer me." This time the voice was clearer, a voice Sirius didn’t know. When Remus answered, Sirius’s whole body went numb. For a moment he couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak.

"Golden Rob’s just outside that door. When the moon rises, he’s gonna open it. And yore gonna remember who yer really are."

"No."

"You ‘ave a nice rest ‘til then, Wolfy.” There was the sound of a door closing, then more static, and a sudden beeping sound. Sirius stared down at the screen. The timer had stopped. Somehow, Remus had been cut off.
Sirius unfroze and a second later he was pelting down the stairs, yelling for Molly, Arthur, anyone who would listen. He stumbled into the kitchen, where Molly was just finishing dinner.

“Sirius Orion-”

“Remus is in trouble,” Sirius managed to gasp. “He just called me. They’ve got him, the fundamentalist nutters, they must have taken his Potion things, they’re going to let him loose tonight.”

Molly stared at him, a wooden spoon still raised in one hand as the pot behind her started to bubble over.

“Molly, he’s in trouble!”

She blinked once, and then she was moving as well, sliding the pot off the stove and pulling off her apron.

“Right, we need Tonks, I’ll sent a Patronus.”

“The phone call just shut off before I could speak to him,” Sirius said as Molly pulled out her wand.

“One thing at a time,” she said, as Arthur poked his head around the kitchen doorframe, followed by a curious gaggle of teenagers.

“What’s happening?”

“What did the twins do this time?”

“It wasn’t us!”

“Who was yelling?”

“Did Kreacher forget to put his towel on again?”

“It was probably Crookshanks pretending to be a stair carpet, like he did yesterday.”

“I still don’t see why you can’t just watch where you’re going.”

“I still don’t see why your cat has to lie right in the middle of the staircase.”

“Who yelled?”

“BE QUIET!”

Molly, having sent her Patronus while Sirius had a hasty and utterly silent panic attack in the middle of the kitchen, turned now to the rest of the household and quickly repeated what Sirius had told her. As soon as she was finished, they all opened their mouths to ask more questions, but Arthur held up a hand to stop them.

“Let Sirius talk, let’s get all the details, and then we can figure out what to do.”

Sirius wondered if he’d ever be able to talk again. His eyes found Harry’s face. In the chaos of questions and shocked exclamations, they were the only two who were silent, their voices stolen by fear.

“Sit,” Molly ordered, waving her wand. A chair slid across the kitchen floor and knocked Sirius’s knees out from under him. He collapsed into it, and the shock of movement jolted him back to his
You fought in a war already, damn it, he told himself. You survived bloody Azkaban. You can deal with this as well. We’ll save him. He took a deep breath and explained Remus’s phone call.

“First things first,” said Hermione. “Call him back.”

“What if they hear it?”

“My parents put it on silent before he left so that wouldn’t happen.”

Sirius blinked, feeling slightly ashamed of himself. Right now, a fifteen-year-old was thinking more clearly than he was. He’d been there for that.

“Right. Right, I’ll do that.” He fumbled with the phone and managed to get himself to the right screen without any irritating ‘help’ from the younger members of his audience. But it wasn’t Remus’s voice that answered.

“*The number you have dialled is not available.*”

“What does that mean?”

“Either his phone is broken, off, or out of battery,” said Hermione swiftly. Harry collapsed into a chair next to the table just as there was a thundering knock on the door and Tonks burst into the hallway.

“I’m gone for less than a day and your bloody boyfriend gets himself into trouble,” she exclaimed, clearly audible before she even reached the kitchen. The crowd of Weasleys and Hermione parted to let her through. “Where is he, do we know yet?”

“No, he called Sirius—”

“He didn’t say anything—”

“They’re going to make him Change—”

“WOULD YOU ALL BE QUIET OR I WILL SEND YOU UPSTAIRS THIS INSTANT!”

Everyone fell silent and Molly turned back to Tonks.

“We know where he went this morning, but I doubt they’ve left him there,” she said. “If we want to get him out before nightfall, we have an hour and a half to do it, maybe less.”

“Right,” said Tonks. “We need to figure out where he is. Any suggestions?”

The assembled crowd looked helplessly at one another, but Arthur looked strangely calm.

“Hermione’s father told me about a way to locate lost or stolen phones,” he said. “I think he said it was called PGS. I have the codes we need upstairs. We should be able to find him on a map within twenty minutes or so.”

“Well don’t just stand there, go and get them!” said Molly. Arthur turned and dashed out of the kitchen, leaving everyone standing and sitting in panicked, awkward silence. Sirius felt as though his head was still spinning, although having something to do was certainly helping. As soon as we find out where he is, I’m going to get him. Nobody is making me stay here while Remus is in danger. He knew just how bad this could go. Remus would rather die than risk harming an innocent person.
The process of getting a map location, or GPS, as it turned out to be, was completely incomprehensible. Tonks, Harry, Arthur and Hermione all bent over the phone, trying to figure out how to find Remus’s phone on the map. Sirius was nearly going mad.

“I should be out there looking for him,” he muttered, standing abruptly, unable to sit any longer.

“I know you’re afraid,” Molly murmured, slipping an arm through his and forcing him to stand still, out of the way. Ginny, Ron, and the twins stood huddled in the doorway still, watching on with grey faces and grim expressions. “But remember that Remus isn’t the only one you have to worry about now.”

Sirius whirled around, opening his mouth to snarl at her, but he immediately felt ashamed. She was right.

“I know,” he said, after a moment. “As soon as we know where he is, I have to go and get him though, you know that.”

“What about Harry?” Molly whispered. “What happens to him now if you get hurt as well? You two are his family, you’ve promised him that. Are you willing to risk taking it away from him, after everything he’s been through?”

Sirius stared at the floor, scuffing his toe along it. The scars on his chest itched and he longed to scratch them. He settled instead for tugging at his hair. His scalp protested at the rough treatment, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I have to,” he said, turning to Molly, his expression pleading with her to understand. She sighed and nodded.

“I know,” she said. “We both know I’d do the same if it were Arthur.” She turned her eyes on her husband, her expression half proud, half afraid. This was war. Chances were, it would be Arthur on the other end of that telephone before it was all over. Sirius looked down at the floor again and tried not to think about what was happening to Remus right at that moment.

Remus’s head had finally stopped spinning long enough that he could explore the confines of his temporary prison. After cursing for a full three minutes the uselessness of a phone that stopped working after one phone call, he began examining the basement carefully. A single glance had been enough to assure him that escaping through the window would be impossible. Even if it hadn’t been too small for him to fit through, there were no doubt more of Midas’s gang hanging around outside. Inside the room, there was very little of interest. Old tools, most of which were rusty and blunt and rather confusing to a wizard’s eye. A few tins of… something… that had long since rusted shut. A lot of dust. A heavy sheet of tarpaulin. Nothing that would help him escape, or fight off a vampire and several werewolves if he did.

Remus could feel the progress of the sun as it descended, faster and faster, the day progressing inevitably toward darkness and his worst nightmare. He’d never bitten a human. Tonight couldn’t be the night that he did. He couldn’t live with himself. And Midas knew it.

There was only one option. There wasn’t much in this basement, but an inventive person could make do. And this was one area that Remus had given far too much thought.

He walked the length of the benches again, long fingers sliding slowly over each forgotten object, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. In the middle of the second bench, he found his best
option. It was a long piece of rust-splotched metal set into a plastic handle. The end wasn’t particularly sharp, but it was sharp enough, tapering to a strange cross shape. He had no idea what it had originally been for.

He hefted the thing in his hand. It would do. If Sirius didn’t find him in time…

Glancing again at the window, he settled back against the wall and waited for the sun to set.

Chapter End Notes

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Harry watched as Arthur tapped away at his phone with infuriating slowness. Hermione was hanging over Harry’s shoulder, her fingertips digging into the bone, but he could hardly feel it. All he could think of was Remus, the gentlest man he knew; the one who was reading Beowulf to Harry and Sirius on the nights they couldn’t sleep even though Sirius was constantly teasing him about the title; the one who had teamed up with Molly one afternoon against the teenagers and staged a mock battle instead of their usual DADA lesson (and who’d caught Harry in a Leg-Locker Curse that had taken an hour to wear off properly); the one who made Sirius smile as though nothing bad had ever happened or could ever happen; the one who made Harry feel like maybe, just maybe, he had a chance at having a real family.

“It says it’s not available,” said Arthur, jabbing at the phone in frustration. “What does that mean? I’m sure I’m doing everything correctly.”

“Did you write it down properly?” Tonks asked, trying to take the phone from him. He pulled it away from her and checked his notes again.

“I’ll call Dad, he might know what’s wrong,” Hermione said, pulling out her own phone. It was strange that a bunch of wizards, who were capable of magically incapacitating another human with a single word, were so stymied by a tiny electrical box. Imagine Malfoy’s face if he heard this story, Harry thought, a sick feeling settling in his stomach. Order of the Phoenix, brought down by a muggle toy.

He couldn’t sit still any longer and jumped out of his chair, crossing the kitchen to stand beside Sirius. Molly had already left, Flooing to Hogwarts in search of Dumbledore. With no clue of how many people they could be facing when they finally figured out where Remus was, they needed all the help they could get.

“Is there any other way we can find him?” he asked desperately. “Maybe someone saw something, doing something to get Remus back, but they were just… waiting.

“Can’t we at least go to where he was last?” he asked desperately. “Maybe someone saw something,
maybe they can tell us where they took him.”

Sirius’s expression shifted abruptly.

“Harry, you can’t come with us,” he said sternly. “It’s far too dangerous, and not just because we’re tracking a bunch of werewolves on a full moon.”

Harry scowled fiercely.

“I care about him too,” he objected. “I can’t sit here waiting!”

“You can and you will,” Sirius said, his tone firm.

“But—”

“No, Harry.” Sirius turned and placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders. His expression was sympathetic, but Harry was too angry to care. He was sick of being treated like a child. *I survived the damn Tournament and they’re acting like I’m made of glass.*

“I know you’re brave enough,” Sirius continued, “and I know you’re a very capable wizard. But you’re 15 years old, and Lord Voldemort is looking for you.”

Harry’s scowl deepened.

“You don’t have to remind me,” he muttered resentfully. Sirius lifted one of his hands to Harry’s cheek and forced him to meet his gaze. Harry glared back at him mutinously.

“Harry, I know you know this,” Sirius said quietly. “We don’t know what we’re going into here, and we can’t spare the energy to protect you as well. If you come, you’ll only put Remus, and the rest of us, in more danger.” He paused and took a deep breath. “And I can’t risk losing you as well. I love you, Harry. You can hate me for it if you want, but I’m going to keep you safe, no matter what.”

Harry dropped his eyes, the heat rising in his cheeks. Sirius’s hand was still on his cheek and he wished he’d lower it. For some reason it was making his eyes water.

“Promise me you’ll stay here with Arthur,” Sirius said. Harry huffed out an impatient breath.

“Fine,” he said ungraciously. “What about you though? Why do you have to go? Dumbledore said you weren’t supposed to leave the house either.”

“I’m an adult,” Sirius said with a wry smile, clapping Harry roughly on the shoulder. “I don’t have to listen to my par- my guardians. Or my old teachers, come to that.”

Harry stuffed his hands into his pockets and glowered up at Sirius, unwilling to let the conversation go.

“I don’t want you to get hurt either,” he said, his admission sounding somewhat grudging. Sirius’s smile grew a little softer, and a lot sadder. Harry found it hard to maintain his ire in the face of his godfather’s understanding expression. He felt as though Sirius could see past his anger to the swirling mess below, the mess he was currently trying very hard not to examine.

“I know, Harry,” he said. “But you know me, I’m a survivor.”

“We’ve got it!” exclaimed Hermione. “The phone’s turned off, but Dad helped us figure out where the last call came from. Here.”
Argument forgotten, Sirius and Harry stepped closer so they could see the map on the tiny screen. It showed a rather dull-looking suburban neighbourhood some way to the North-West of London, a little pink marker pointing to an address that looked just the same as every other house in the street, and the street next to it, and the one next to that.

As they pulled on cloaks and checked wands, the fireplace flared green again and Molly stepped back through, followed by Professor McGonnagall. The older woman was dressed in muggle clothing, a knitted jumper and slacks, wand at the ready and clearly prepared for action.

“We’ve found him,” Arthur said, before either of them could speak. “Where’s Dumbledore? We might need him.”

McGonnagall’s lips thinned.

“I couldn’t get hold of him. He’s off on one of his excursions and left no instructions.”

Harry’s temper, already over-stretched, finally snapped.

“He’s supposed to be the head of the Order,” he said, rather louder than necessary. “Remus is out there on his orders, he can’t just leave!” All the resentment he’d been feeling toward his Headmaster for the last two months roared to life, like fire licking up the inside of his oesophagus, threatening to spring out of his mouth in a torrent of bile and fury. The only thing that kept him from saying more was Sirius’s hand on his shoulder - and the dangerous contraction of McGonnagall’s eyebrows.

“There’s no time to argue about it,” Sirius said. “Who else is there?”

“Kingsley’s at the Auror Office now,” Tonks announced. “I just sent him the address, he’ll Apparate now and meet us at the end of the street.”

“Do you think five of us will be enough?”

“Minerva and I can scope it out without them knowing we’re there.”

“It’s a muggle neighbourhood, we’re going to have trouble keeping this quiet.”

“There’s no way we can form a plan from here, we’ll have to meet Kingsley and check it out.”

Harry stepped back as the adults exchanged instructions in terse, clipped syllables. For the first time in his life, he was being forced to stand aside, to let someone else take care of things. If you’d asked him a year ago, he would have said this was what he wanted. Now, he just wanted to grab his wand and jump on his broom and find Remus.

“What if it’s a trap?”

The room fell eerily silent at Ron’s question. The Order members exchanged grim glances, some kind of unspoken agreement passing between them.

“We have to risk it, Ron,” said Molly, laying a hand on her son’s shoulder. “If there’s any chance we can get him out, we have to do it.”

Ron looked up at her, more serious than Harry had ever seen him, and it struck him with sudden force that he wasn’t the only one whose family was in danger. The knot in Harry’s gut tightened painfully, making it hard to breathe.
“It’s almost dark,” McGonnagall reminded them, glancing out of the high kitchen windows at the twilit sky.

“We’ll let you know what’s going on as soon as we get there,” Molly murmured to Arthur. “Keep an eye on this lot, you know what they’re like.”

Arthur smiled at his wife, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Take care of yourself,” he said. He leaned his forehead against hers for a moment, and Harry looked away, feeling as though he’d intruded on something intensely private.

And then they were moving and Sirius was hugging him roughly, letting him go before he’d even had time to hug him back and they were out the door and Harry hadn’t even said goodbye. Silence fell, and the seven who’d been left behind looked at one another helplessly.

“What now?” George asked his father, his face pale, looking younger than Harry had ever seen him.

“We wait.”

Sirius turned hurriedly as they Apparated in the corner of a small park, their arrival covered by an overhanging tree and near-darkness. The air around them was still warm, the scents of dried grass and sun-parched earth filling their noses. At any other time, Sirius would have been overjoyed simply to be outside, but he had no room for anything other than Remus. He shrank immediately into his canine form and turned to find Kingsley Shacklebolt, another Auror and Order member, stepping out of the shadows.

“I’ve already snooped around the address you gave me,” he said without preamble. “The place hasn’t been lived in for a while, but there are at least four guards hanging around outside.”

“Werewolves?” Tonks asked.

“I can’t tell,” Kingsley replied. Sirius barked to get their attention.

“Sirius is right. He and I can do the first sweep,” said Minerva, straightening her jumper fussily. “We’ll be able to tell immediately if they’re werewolves.”

Sirius barked again. Werewolves or not, if any of them come within wandshot of me, they’re gone.

“What do we do once we have Remus?” Tonks asked, turning to Kingsley. He was her senior, and had far more experience dealing with the Ministry. If they were going to be leaving cursed werewolves lying around, they’d need to make sure they didn’t lead back to the Order.

And in a place like this, cursed werewolves are the least of our worries, Sirius thought, the magnitude of their situation beginning to properly dawn on him. Until now, his only concern had been getting Remus back. But Remus wasn’t the only one in danger here. Every human in this neighbourhood, and every surrounding neighbourhood, was in danger. And they couldn’t call the Ministry for help. Nausea settled like concrete in Sirius’s stomach, his tail twitching uncontrollably.

“We’ll confine them in the house,” Kingsley said. He’d obviously already considered their options. “They’ll be human again in the morning and safe. We can guard them overnight if necessary.”

“Remember, they’re like giants, it will take at least three Stunners to put one down,” Molly added.
She looked so different from her usually motherly self. Her face was set in hard lines, almost frightening in the shadows thrown by the streetlights behind the trees.

“Let’s do this,” said Kingsley, taking charge. “As soon as we know where Remus is, get back here and we’ll go in together. The muggles in these houses have to be our first priority at all times.” He turned to Sirius and raised an eyebrow. Sirius fought the urge to growl and bowed his muzzle instead. He knew his duty, no matter how much he hated it.

There was no need to say any more. Minerva disappeared from Molly’s side, a tabby cat appearing in her place. Sirius set off without waiting to see if she was following.

They were four houses down from the address Arthur had given them, but there was no need to check for house numbers. Sirius could smell the werewolves almost before they left the park. There was a soft ‘mew’ beside him and he knew Minerva had caught it as well. The cat made another soft sound and darted away from him, heading through the back garden of the house next door to their target. Sirius continued along the footpath, trying to ignore the increasing darkness. He could feel the moon rising behind the houses, racing them. *Wait for me, Remus. For the love of god, please wait.*

When he reached the house, he ducked behind an untrimmed shrub against the fence and peered through the leaves to examine it. There was a dim light emanating from the basement windows alongside the house, but no others. The windows were boarded up, graffiti adorning most of them. Sirius could smell two figures lounging just inside the front door. He twitched his ears forward, leaning into his heightened senses, searching, searching…

*There.* Remus was the one in the basement, and he was alone. There was the faint scrape of his boots against concrete as he shifted position and Sirius allowed himself a single relieved breath. *He’s still alive.*

All his muscles strained to run at that window, to scramble through it, to make sure Remus didn’t do anything stupid, but he knew it wasn’t safe. The moment he stepped out of his hiding place, the guards at the front door would know he was there. He’d be no help to Remus if he was caught now.

He saw Minerva dart back across the garden. She’d already made her way around the back of the house and was heading back to report. Sirius followed her.

“The two at the front are definitely werewolves,” Sirius said, as soon as he had a human mouth. “They’re relaxed at the moment, they don’t seem to be expecting any problems.”

“There’s one in the back room as well,” said Minerva, her mouth twisting distastefully. “And a vampire further inside the house.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“A vampire, keeping company with werewolves?” he asked. “And here I thought this lot were fundamentalists.”

“I suppose needs must,” Molly said darkly. “I suggest Kingsley and I take the back, Minerva and Tonks take the front. They’re far less likely to be noticed, and can hopefully get close enough to take out those guards before the muggles notice anything.”

“Agreed,” Kingsley said. “Sirius, you go straight for Remus.”
Sirius breathed a sigh of relief. He felt a little guilty for not helping the others, but it was dark now. Remus wouldn’t wait much longer for them. _It’s a miracle he’s waited this long_. He glanced at the rooftops. There was already a golden glow visible over the lower houses, and although he tried to tell himself it was just the lights of the city, Sirius knew better. They were almost too late.

“Any of us can call a retreat,” said Kingsley. “Watch one another’s backs.”

The five of them exchanged grim nods, patted one another briefly on the shoulder, and then they were moving.

Sirius changed back mid-stride, this time hurling himself back up the street as Kingsley and Molly Apparated to the rear of the house, their appearance shielded by the unkempt garden Minerva had seen. Minerva and Tonks moved more slowly, Tonks taking on the appearance of an older woman, her gait growing more unsteady as they came into view of their target.

Minerva went first, padding almost invisibly up to the tiny porch and leaping silently behind the ratty old couch that was slowly falling apart under the front window. She poked her head out after a moment and ‘meowed’ softly. Tonks, who had kept walking and was now almost past the house, turned abruptly and pelted back across the yard with astonishing speed. There was a sudden yell from the two men loitering around the front door as Minerva reappeared, brandishing her wand, before all four of them disappeared inside the house, spells flashing red and green, shouts and cracks echoing in the night air.

Sirius pricked his ears forward, listening for sounds from the other side of the house. He thought he could hear Molly yelling something, but she didn’t sound hurt. He leaned forward, sniffing deeply in an attempt to find the best path into the house, but as he moved out from under the shelter of his shrub, another odour reached his nose, one that was dark, and rich, and overpowered every other scent.

There was no coherent thought. One moment he was crouching in the front garden, the next he was pelting through the door, still in the form of the black dog, darting through curses and counter-curses, leaping over the still form of a strange man as he headed for the stairs. His paws scrabbled as he ducked around Kingsley, who was duelling with a pale man in the narrow hallway, the flashes of their spells leaving bright trails behind Sirius’s eyes, but he didn’t stop.

The basement door was locked. Sirius was forced to pause long enough to return to human, not bothering with the niceties of _Alohomora_ as he simply blasted the door open. It flung back on its hinges, bouncing off a rusting set of shelves and almost hitting him in the face as he darted through before it fell off its hinges and fell to the floor. But he didn’t notice. He had eyes only for the man who was lying on the floor, a sharp metal stick still clutched in one bloody hand, a dark pool spreading below him.

Sirius almost had to stop and throw up, but he forced his stomach to behave as he dropped to his knees, his trousers immediately soaked in blood.

“Remus, you bloody idiot,” he muttered, pressing desperate hands to the rough wound in Remus’s neck, looking for something, anything, that might show him the other man was still alive. He was rewarded with a groan and he almost laughed with relief.

“Hang on, I’m here,” he said, scrabbling for the wand he’d dropped on the floor beside him. Remus groaned again, hands moving weakly against the floor, lips moving as he tried to form words.

“Shut up, would you,” Sirius gasped, trying to see through the tears pouring down his face. His hands shook as he raised his wand. “I’m going to heal you and then we’re leaving.”
“Too late.”

Sirius almost didn’t catch the words, almost didn’t realise what Remus meant, almost told him to shut up again, that he wasn’t going to let him die. But before he could speak, he heard the change in Remus’s breathing.

“Oh shit.”

He’d seen it so many times before, but it was different this time. They weren’t in a safehouse, there was no Potion, no James to keep them company, no Forest to get lost in.

Sirius knew he should be running now, but Remus was between him and the door. It was already too late. He heard the sounds above him change, yells turning to snarls as the combatants Changed. Kingsley shouted something, but Sirius couldn’t hear it above the guttural sounds coming from Remus, the groans that accompanied the crunch of joints realigning themselves. He tightened his grip on his wand and stepped back, crouching, ready for… what?

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, attempting to sound reassuring, but his voice trembled and gave him away. You shouldn’t be doing this, said his conscience. You could just Apparate out, right now, lock the door.

I’m not leaving him, not here, he thought firmly. He’d never forgive me.

What about Harry? You promised him you’d come back. You promised Remus you’d never do this to him.

He ignored all of it, holding out a conciliatory hand to what was looking every moment less and less like the man he loved.

The werewolf - it wasn’t Remus any more, not really - writhed on the floor, spreading blood through its own fur, its groans turning to whines, but Sirius could see the wound closing even as he watched. The wolf was always a good healer.

“Remus,” he murmured, staring desperately into the wolf’s eyes, searching for something, anything, that resembled Remus. For a moment, there was a flicker of something, but it could have been his imagination. He ran through his options in his head, wishing his brain would be more helpful. He could try and Stun him, but the chances of him getting more than one spell off before the wolf was on him were… not good. He could Apparate out, but that left them with the same problem they already had - at least one werewolf roaming loose in a suburban neighbourhood. So what was left?

He looked up and met the wolf’s eyes again. There was no trace of human left now, the hulking beast examining him with interest, its nostrils flared, a growl unrolling in its throat as it stalked toward him.

I’m an idiot, Sirius thought, almost laughing aloud at what he was considering doing.

“If I survive this, you’re going to kill me,” he told the wolf, who could almost reach out and touch him.

Before he had time to think about what he was doing, he leapt forward, as high as he could. He landed on the wolf’s back, noting with mild surprise that he’d judged the jump perfectly.

Not stopping to consider how utterly, unspeakably, unforgivably stupid he was being, he wrapped both arms around the wolf’s belly and twisted.
There was a loud crack and he was rolling, the floor beneath him splintered and dusty, the growls of the wolf almost deafening in his ears. There was a moment where he seemed to be tussling with a great, noisy hairball, or perhaps a Yeti, and his head collided with something hard, the world starting to go fuzzy. He was dimly aware of a sharp pain in his leg as well, but his brain was, for once, cooperating. There was only one thought registering at that moment. *Be dog.*

Sirius felt his body Change again, the pain in his leg and head becoming more and more insistent as he did so. He forced his eyes open and found himself muzzle to muzzle with the wolf. It stood over him for a long moment that seemed, at least to Sirius’s foggy brain, to extend into eternity. Then it sniffed sharply and turned away. Sirius could hear its claws scraping on the wood floor as it crossed the floor, but he couldn’t quite manage to lift his head to see where it had gone.

*Well, that couldn’t have gone any worse,* he thought, and passed out.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Drama, drama, drama. Thanks so much for your comments. I love hearing from you, what you're thinking, where you expect things to go, and what you think of the characters. (I also just like knowing people are still reading, cos, you know, writer ego...).
I'm especially touched by the couple of people who've said they love trans Sirius. It makes me so happy to know that it means something to you - I know I've struggled finding characters who represent me as a trans person, so it's so great to hear I could help, even if it's just in fanfic (although we all know what my next novel is gonna be about!). Y'all are beautiful and I love you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Wake up.”

The voice travelled slowly through Sirius’s brain, prodding aside the fog of sleep and finally registering as words. After a couple of tries, he remembered what the words meant. He wondered vaguely why the voice wanted him to wake up, given how much every single part of his body hurt. He decided, upon reflection, to ignore the voice and hope it went away.

“Sirius, for Merlin’s sake.”

The voice was persistent, Sirius would give it that. It was starting to sound a little irritated as well. He wondered if it would go away if he said something. He pondered this for a moment, but the effort of making words happen seemed too great, so he simply huffed a small sigh and tried to go back to sleep, where there were no disembodied voices to bother him.

“You stupid, stupid man, what have you done? What have I done?”

Sirius huffed another, larger sigh. He really didn’t see why it was so important that he wake up, but it was clear he wasn’t going to get any peace until he did. He tried to open his eyes, but that made the pounding in his head worse. He stretched his arms instead, trying to find a more comfortable position, wondering as he did so why his bed was so hard and splintery. He groaned as a fiery lance of pain shot down through his neck and settled in his shoulders. At least, he tried to groan.

“Try not to move too much,” said the voice. Sirius open his mouth to tell the voice that he’d been trying to do just that until some annoying prat started telling him to wake up, but all that came out was a strangled whining sound. He frowned and tried again. Same result.

“Merlin’s balls,” the voice muttered. Sirius managed to open one eye a crack. He wondered for a moment why everything was so grey, but his head hurt too much for thinking. He closed the eye again and waited for the next idea to arrive. **Dog**, his brain supplied helpfully. He turned this new thought over a few times. **Oh yes**, he thought. **I’m dog**.

“Well this is going to be fun,” said the voice. Sirius’s brain, having successfully delivered one idea, decided to donate another just for the fun of it. **Remus**. After another moment, and a truly stupendous work of mental arithmetic, he arrived at the following conclusion: **I’m a fucking idiot**.
He huffed another doggy sigh and decided that this was quite enough thinking for one day.

“At least there are no students around,” said Remus, somewhere above him. Sirius could hear movement close to his head, but he had no intention of opening his eyes to see what was going on. A second later, he wished he had, because he felt a pair of arms sliding under him and lifting him bodily into the air. This was the exact opposite of fun and he yelped loudly.

“Sorry, love, but if you won’t wake up, I have to carry you.”

You could just let me go the fuck back to sleep, Sirius thought, and then felt quite proud of himself for making it all the way through a whole sentence. He pondered on his word choice for a moment, wondering if he should have added another swear to emphasise his point. It was far better to dwell on sentence structure at the present time than on what was happening to his body, which seemed to be decidedly unpleasant.

Remus might have been trying to be gentle, but his arms felt like iron bars, and Sirius’s head lolled unpleasantly, half-on and half-off one of Remus’s shoulders. Every movement sent more shafts of pain shooting down his neck, and that was only the beginning of his problems. Every joint and muscle ached, but his right leg was a bright spot of exquisite agony. He would have been impressed by it, if it didn’t make him want to chew his own leg off.

He whined again as Remus leaned forward, the movement jolting his body unbearably. He wished he could just pass out again. He waited for his brain to cooperate, but it was no longer receiving messages and left him to suffer.

“I’m so sorry.” Remus seemed to be repeating it like a mantra, as though if he said it often enough, Sirius would stop whining at him. Well that’s daft, thought Sirius, this idea occurring to him quite suddenly mid-yelp. Not his fault I tackled a werewolf. Having condescended to provide a semi-coherent thought, his brain finally gave in and he passed out again.

“I should have known.”

Damn it, now there was a second voice. Why couldn’t they just let him sleep?

“I didn’t know what else to do.”

That was Remus, at least he remembered that much.

“I’ll send Poppy a message,” said the first voice. It sounded very familiar. There was something about that long-suffering tone… “You can put him down here,” it said.

Well thank Merlin for that, this being carried around nonsense was definitely not Sirius’s favourite thing.

“Um. Do you think you could, erm…”

Now what was the problem? Couldn’t they see he was dying?

“I presume you’re referring to the fact that the only thing preserving your modesty is the giant dog you’re carrying?”

Wait, what?
“Um, yes. Yes, that is, in fact, what I was referring to. Would you be so kind as to provide an alternative?”

Wait, what?

“Very well.”

There was a faint swishing noise, and Sirius became aware through the fog that where he’d been pressed against warm skin, he was now surrounded by cool fabric. He whined again, hoping Remus would get the message. Thankfully, he found himself being lowered onto a flat surface. It wasn’t as soft as he would have liked, but at least he was no longer being jolted about.

“What happened to you both?” asked the first voice. It was close by, but at the same time seemed to come from a long way away.

“I honestly have no idea,” said Remus’s voice. “I… don’t remember much.”

Even through the buzzing in his ears, Sirius noticed the pause. Something had happened last night, before the jumping-on-the-raging-werewolf part that was front and centre in his mind, something he didn’t want to think about. Even in his semi-conscious state, the hair on his hackles started to raise. He could feel the shape of the memory nudging at the edges of his fuzzy mind and he didn’t want to look at it. He focused instead on the voices, letting himself drift again.

“I think he has a concussion,” the first voice was saying. “Ah, Poppy, would you mind?”

A long conversation ensued that Sirius didn’t even try to follow, as someone poked and prodded at his aching body with fingers that were definitely not gentle enough. A third voice muttered various medical-sounding words, interspersed with sarcastic mutterings from the first voice, and worried questions from Remus. Sirius tried to lie still and hoped someone would do something helpful at some point. When they reached his leg, however, there was such an explosion of noise above his head that he couldn’t help whining again.

“What happened here?” the third voice demanded.

“Oh god, I don’t know,” said Remus. He sounded distressed, and Sirius wished he had the energy to reassure him, but those fingers were poking at him again and it hurt. “Did I do that?”

“I’m not sure what did it.”

“Tell me I didn’t bite him!”

“Calm down, Remus, let Poppy sort him out.”

“He was a dog, though, why would I bite him?”

“For all we know, he caught his leg on something. It’s a mess, I can’t tell you what happened.”

“That was why I- This wasn’t supposed to happen, what if I’ve-”

“For the love of Merlin, Remus, stop fussing!”

Sirius whined again. These three really were the most insensitive people he’d ever had the misfortune to encounter. He was absolutely, definitely dying and they were having an argument.

“If you’ll hold him still, I’ll start patching him up.”
That didn’t sound promising.

Several hands descended on him, holding him down in a way he would have resented quite forcefully, if he hadn’t been immediately distracted by the fact that Voice Number Three was finally doing something useful.

The first thing he noticed was that his brain was less fuzzy, and the pain in his shoulders was retreating up toward his head. Then even that was shrinking until it was little more than an ache and he could finally open his eyes. He huffed out a little sigh of relief. Although he was by no means feeling better, at least his head no longer felt like it was about to fall off.

Remus was standing right next to him, leaning over his head with his hands pressed into Sirius’s shoulders. Sirius looked up into his eyes and felt as though someone had knocked the air out of him - although that could admittedly have been because Voice Number Three, whom he now recognised as Madam Pomfrey, was messing about with his ribs, which were crackling in a quite disturbing manner.

“I’m so sorry, Pads,” Remus whispered. Sirius shifted his head so he could nuzzle at Remus’s arm, but it didn’t seem to reassure Remus at all.

It took close to half an hour for Poppy to finish working. Sirius wished she hadn’t left his leg for last, because it really was incredibly painful. Even when she finally got there, she spent an inordinately long time examining it, so much so that Sirius finally snapped and Changed abruptly back to human.

“Are you going to heal the bloody thing or not?” he snapped, pushing Remus and Minerva’s hands off him and sitting up. He blinked as his head swam, taking a moment to get his bearings. He was half-sitting, half-lying on one of the House tables in the Great Hall, which was currently empty aside from the four of them. He turned a glare on Poppy as she clutched - a little over-dramatically, he thought - at her chest.

“Mr. Black,” she said sternly, recovering herself. “When you are a trained Healer, you may treat your wounds however you see fit. Until the day that our morning bacon arrives with the post, however, you will kindly allow me to do my job.”

“I have no problem with you doing your job,” Sirius replied sharply. “I wish you would.”

“I definitely preferred him when he had paws,” Poppy said to Minerva.

“We all do,” Minerva replied. “I’d best send a message to Grimmauld Place while you finish cleaning him up.”

“I’m right here,” Sirius snapped as Minerva strode away toward the Entrance Hall. In truth, he quite liked Poppy. She’d been the one to help him through his unique experience of puberty, finding ways to administer his treatments without raising the suspicions of other students, reassuring him when things didn’t go quite as planned. Alternately scolding him and comforting him after James had found him in the bathroom in their fifth year, bleeding from wounds he hadn’t managed to heal… Just thinking about that day made the scars start itching again, but he ignored them in favour of being sulky.

“Pads, she doesn’t know what…” Remus’s breath hitched, distracting Sirius from his pantomime of annoyance. Sirius looked up at him, confused for a moment, and then he remembered.

*Oh.*
Remus was looking at him helplessly, his usual veneer of calm washed away by fear. Sirius remembered that look, the same one he’d had that night they told him they knew. He immediately felt terrible and reached out a hand, pulling Remus close enough so he could lean against him while Poppy cleaned the wound.

“Stop worrying,” he mumbled into Remus’s robes. He could feel the other man trembling, his muscles tensed as though the only thing keeping him in the room was Sirius’s arm around him. Now that Sirius had begun to remember the previous night, without the shield of a concussion, the rest of it was coming back, hitting him hard. He was momentarily surprised about how unafraid he was about the possibility of becoming a werewolf. It was the rest of the memory he was having trouble with. He tried not to think about it, but his brain had an uncanny ability to show him the worst possible parts of every event.

Remus lying helpless, barely breathing, his own blood spreading about his head.

He squeezed his eyes shut and hugged Remus tighter. He didn’t know how to feel about that. He didn’t want to think about it at all. He was therefore rather grateful to be distracted when Poppy finally started healing his leg. The huge open gash in the side of his calf closed smoothly, leaving only a slight scar - a much smaller one than those on his chest, and one that probably wouldn’t itch every time it rained or he had a bad memory.

“Good news,” said Poppy, as if questions like “did I turn my stupid boyfriend into a werewolf when he tackled me in a basement” were something she dealt with every day. “You must have caught him with your claws rather than your teeth. It wouldn’t close if you’d bitten him.”

“Thank Merlin,” Remus whispered harshly, covering his face with his hands. If Sirius hadn’t been holding onto him, he would have stepped back, but Sirius knew exactly where Remus’s mind was going, and he wasn’t having a bar of it.

The door to the Entrance Hall opened again and Minerva strode back toward them.

“The door to the Entrance Hall opened again and Minerva strode back toward them.

“Molly and Arthur are waiting for you in the kitchen,” she said. “They aren’t best pleased with either of you. And they’re not the only ones,” she added, glaring fiercely at both of them. Sirius had the good grace to look at least a little guilty.

“I meant to send you a message,” he muttered.

“I’m sure you did,” Minerva replied dryly. “You can explain yourself to me later. Right now, you have a godson to answer to.”

Sirius wondered if he still had a trace of concussion, because he suddenly wanted to throw up and go to sleep all at once. What a f*cking mess. Instead, he sighed heavily and hauled himself off the table, managing by some miracle to stand upright without assistance.

“Lead the way, then.”

“What the hell were you two thinking?” Molly demanded the moment they stepped through the front door. Sirius was leaning on Remus, although it was an even bet which one of them was in worse shape. Sirius suspected it was only guilt keeping Remus on his feet.

“Sirius! Remus!” Harry’s exclamation temporarily interrupted Molly’s lecture, as the boy thundered down the hallway and threw himself at his guardians. They almost landed in a heap on the floor,
Remus’s grip on one of the coathooks the only thing keeping them upright as Harry squeezed both of them in a strangulating hug.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Sirius said as soon as he could get enough oxygen. “I couldn’t send you a message, I got knocked out once we got to the-”

“You can explain to all of us, thank you very much,” said Molly. Sirius was honestly surprised her self-control had lasted that long. “Into the kitchen this instant, both of you.”

It would have been almost amusing, if Sirius didn’t know precisely what he’d put all of them through. He sighed and allowed Harry to take some of his weight from Remus, barely conscious of the boy’s worried questions. Now they were home - is that what this is now? - the reality of what they’d done, of what had happened, was sinking in, like a slow poison seeping through his skin.

“Sit,” Molly ordered when they reached their destination and found the rest of the household waiting for them, including Kreacher. Everyone jumped out of their seats as the trio entered the room, but Molly glared at them and waved them into seats, before turning back to Sirius and Remus.

“Explain.” She looked too angry even to shout, which for Molly, was very angry indeed.

Sirius collapsed into a seat and tried to stifle a groan as the force made every single one of his joints ache. Healed or not, he still felt like shit. Molly was still glaring at him, however, and the eyes of the other members of the household were fixed on him, demanding an explanation.

“The short version is, Remus Changed before I could do anything, so I Apparated us to the Shrieking Shack. I got knocked out when we arrived, and I was Pads, so I couldn’t get you a message.”

“Why on earth would you do anything so stupid?” Molly demanded. “If you Apparated, you had to be human, which means you grabbed hold of a werewolf - sorry, Remus, dear - who could have taken a bite out of you! What on earth were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking, much,” Sirius said, rather more sharply than he’d intended. He suddenly found he was very angry indeed. “I’d just found my boyfriend with a great hole in his neck because the daft self-sacrificing bugger thought he needed to protect everyone, I wasn’t really in the best frame of mind!”

There was a sharp intake of breath around the table and a momentary silence. The younger generation all looked slightly frightened - all except for Harry, whose expression seemed to have frozen, his face shutting down. Bugger. I should not have said that.

“You lot, upstairs, now,” snapped Molly.

“But Mum-”

“NOW, FRED!”

With much muttering and complaining, the Weasley children filed from the kitchen, Hermione following, her expression resembling nothing so much as a rabbit caught in wandlight. Harry, however, stayed resolutely where he was.

“Harry, dear, this isn’t a conversation you need to hear,” said Molly, somehow sounding remarkably gentle for a woman still trembling with fury. Harry crossed his arms, his expression moving from blank to determined.

“They’re my guardians,” he said.
“Just let him stay, Molly,” Arthur said softly from the other side of the table. “He’s going to have to hear this soon enough.”

Molly pursed her lips, clearly wanting to argue, but there was something in Arthur’s tone that seemed to decide her against it.

“I want a better explanation,” she said, turning back to Sirius and Remus. Sirius glanced sideways at his partner. Remus was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees as he stared at the ground. *Not a good sign,* Sirius thought, an icy fear settling in his stomach.

“I meant to bring him back here, shut him up in the spare upstairs room with me,” Sirius said. “But he scratched me when I went to grab him, and it surprised me, so I ended up at the Shack instead.” He glanced up at Harry. “Sorry,” he said again, knowing it wasn’t enough.

“What about the other bit?” Harry asked softly. Sirius shuddered at the betrayal in the boy’s voice. *You promised to take care of him. You turned that promise into a lie.*

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Remus said quietly. “I waited until after the sun set, but Midas and his gang were threatening to set me loose on innocent muggles. I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself. I wasn’t going to hurt anyone, it was all I could do.”

“It wasn’t all you could bloody do,” Sirius snapped, rage flaring again. “You could have barricaded that door so you couldn’t get out, you could have tried to get out. Did you even try?”

“Of course I tried!” Remus replied sharply. “You make it sound like I wanted to do it!”

“Didn’t you? Not even a little bit?”

This was too much for Remus. He stood abruptly, his chair toppling backwards and landing on the floor with a startling crash.

“Don’t make this about last time,” he said. “You know it’s different.”

“I don’t see the difference,” Sirius replied, forcing his legs to support him as he stood as well. “You promised me, Moons, you promised it wouldn’t happen again.”

“I promised I’d wait next time.”

“This has happened before?” Harry demanded, standing as well. The three of them stared at each other, Molly and Arthur forgotten, teetering on the edge of something awful. Sirius could hear the blood rushing in his ears, his pulse thudding in his neck, afraid that if he said the wrong thing he would break everything. *Just like I always do.* But he was so angry.

“It happened before,” he said. “I don’t want to know how many times it’s happened since.”

“I promised you,” Remus said, his voice rising. Sirius knew his words had stung. “I kept my promise, I waited as long as I could, I was already Changing!”

“Would you two stop?” Harry exclaimed. “What’s the point? You’re… you’re here, and you’re not dead. Just… just stop.” His voice was steady, forceful, but Sirius could hear the slight hitch in the boy’s breathing, and his anger drained suddenly away, leaving him trembling and weak once more.

“Merlin, Harry, I’m sorry. You’re right,” he said, stretching an arm around Harry’s shoulders and pulling him close. “What a mess.”
Remus stayed separate, his eyes damp, looking at the floor.

“What if it happens again?” he said. “I can’t put you through this, it’s not fair.”

“Would you stop -” Sirius began, but he was interrupted by a loud tap at the kitchen window. Startled out of a stunned silence - that Sirius was sure wouldn’t have lasted much longer anyway - Molly went to let it in. It was carrying a bright red envelope, which she handed to Sirius with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m guessing this is Tonks’s reply to Minerva’s message,” she said.

“Oh bollocks,” said Sirius. He glanced at Harry, who gave him a smirk as if to say “you deserve this and you know it”, before ducking away from him. Sirius didn’t blame him. He sighed and, bracing for impact, tore the letter open.

DEAREST COUSIN, OR WHATEVER YOU ARE. I WOULD LIKE TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU ARE A GIT. KINGSLEY AGREES AND ASKED ME TO TELL YOU THAT YOU ARE ALSO A PRAT. SINCERELY, TONKS. ALSO, IF REMUS IS WITH YOU, KINDLY TELL HIM I SAID HE’S A GIT TOO.

Sirius stared at the letter as it burst into flames, dropping it with a yelp as it burned his fingers.

“Well,” he said, rather pointlessly.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Molly muttered.

“Perhaps it would be best if we try and move past this now,” suggested Arthur. “I know it’s been awful, but you’re here, you’re alive, and that’s what matters.”

Remus opened his mouth to object again, but before he could speak, the door burst open to reveal the other members of the household.

“Would you stop yelling and just hug already?” said Ron. “You know you’re going to end up doing it, and some of us haven’t had breakfast yet!”

“Ron!” Hermione said, scandalised. Sirius, however, took one look at Harry, and another at Remus, and all three of them burst out laughing and did as they were instructed.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always for your feedback, it is life for me! I'm getting through the last couple weeks of uni right now, so I'm mostly only writing when I'm procrastinating - SO MANY ESSAYS. So I apologise in advance if updates are a little slower.

Once we hit November, Dobby will be freeeeeee and I'm really looking forward to getting into the main body of the story. I know I've been saying that for forever, but WE'RE NEARLY AT HOGWARTS WOOH! (Don't worry, fans of the grown ups, they're definitely not disappearing!) For Drarry fans, Hogwarts is good news for you :D

Also, thanks for bearing with any editing errors. While I'm so short on time, I'm mostly just throwing these things out and posting them without proof-reading, so I'll go through when I'm free and do a proper edit. Hopefully I haven't messed up any important details... Eep...

Love you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Molly insisted that everyone eat breakfast together before she would allow Sirius and Remus to head upstairs for some much-needed rest. While he felt guilty for not staying downstairs with Harry, Sirius was barely able to keep his eyes open by the time he’d finished his porridge, and he was only too glad to follow Remus to his bedroom. They’d been sharing it more often than not the last few weeks, and Sirius didn’t plan to let Remus out of his sight any time soon. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Remus lying on that basement floor...

“I vote we never do that again,” he said, collapsing fully clothed on top of the covers.

“Agreed,” Remus replied, lying next to him and covering his eyes with one arm. Sirius immediately shuffled closer and snaked an arm around Remus’s waist. He needed to reassure himself that Remus was still there, still breathing. Remus shifted so Sirius could rest his head on his chest, pressing his nose against Sirius’s hair.

“I’m sorry, Pads,” he murmured. Sirius closed his eyes. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about it all, other than sick.

“I’m sorry too,” he said. “Promise me you’re not going back.” He felt Remus stiffen under him.

“You know if the Order needs me to go I can’t say no,” he said.

Sirius raised himself up on one elbow and glared down at him. Angry, he thought. I’m definitely angry.

“You bloody well can,” he said sharply. “You can tell Dumbledore to stick his suicide mission up his arse and stay here where you’re safe.”

“We’re at war, Pads,” Remus said, shifting his arm slightly so he could look up at Sirius. “This is more important than me, more important than all of us.”
“Romancing werewolves isn’t the only thing you can do for the Order,” said Sirius. He wished he could shake some sense into his boyfriend, but he just looked so… small.

“I’ll do whatever is needed of me,” Remus said.

“We need you too,” Sirius whispered. Remus covered his eyes again and groaned.

“We’re really crap at this family thing,” he said. Sirius laughed humourlessly and dropped his forehead so it rested on Remus’s chest.

“Total pants,” he agreed. He sighed and looked up at Remus again. “God, I don’t know how to do this.”

Remus opened his eyes and raised a hand to brush the hair away from Sirius’s face.

“I remember James saying the same thing,” he said. “How do you fight a war and raise a child?”

Sirius leaned into Remus’s hand and closed his eyes against unexpected tears. He remembered James’s face that night, before they found out Voldemort was after them. He’d been frightened, hopeful, determined to do the right thing - just as soon as he figured out what it was. And he never got the chance. Someone else made the choice for him.

Maybe that was the reality of war. Maybe there wasn’t a right and a wrong choice, there was just doing the best you could and hoping like hell you weren’t fucking up. It was just a mess, no matter what you did.

“I can’t do last night again, Moons,” he said. “It’s too much.”

Remus looked up at him solemnly, hand still resting against Sirius’s cheek.

“I can’t put others at risk,” he said.

“Well then, promise me you’ll stay here every full moon,” Sirius said, raising himself a little higher. “I know you have a job to do, we all do. Although if Dumbledore sends you back into that pack I will personally rip him a new one-”

“Pads.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Can you promise me that much? Promise all of us?”

Remus appeared to mull it over. After what felt to Sirius like far too long, he nodded.

“Yes,” he said. He raised his other hand and pulled Sirius closer. “I promise. And I’m sorry, Pads, I really am. You know I didn’t want to.”

Sirius rested his forehead against Remus’s and took a deep breath. They both smelled like sweat and blood and dog breath, but he didn’t care.

“I know,” he said softly. “I’m sorry for what I said. I love you, Moons.”

“Love you too,” Remus said, and raised his head the fraction of an inch it took to kiss him. Sirius groaned and returned it hungrily, if a little sloppily. They were both exhausted and aching, but the need to reassure themselves and each other that they were still there was too urgent for sleep.

It was one of those times when the past and the present seemed to merge together, when it felt like no
time had passed between their first clumsy time together in the prefect’s bathroom and now, twenty years older, with twenty more years worth of scars and grief and pain written onto their bodies. They moved slowly, quietly, hands and lips moving reverently over bruises and scrapes and aching joints, comforting one another.

As he drifted of afterwards, Remus’s arm wrapped tight around his waist, Remus’s body warm at his back, Sirius was surprised to find that his cheeks were damp. He closed his eyes and sighed, allowing himself to drift, wishing he could wake up tomorrow and find it had all been a dream, that the war was over, and everyone he loved was safe. For a moment, he almost wished he wouldn’t wake at all, but before he could examine that thought, he was asleep.

Sirius was woken some hours later by a soft knocking sound. He burrowed deeper under the blankets and tried to ignore it. He definitely wasn’t ready to get up yet. Unfortunately, the knocker didn’t seem to understand how knocking was supposed to work, and opened the door anyway.

“Remus,” came Harry’s voice in an uncertain whisper. “Are you awake?”

There was a groan from behind Sirius and he felt the blankets shift slightly. He huffed grumpily as a cool breeze found its way under the covers and burrowed further down.

“What’s up?” said Remus groggily.

“Professor Dumbledore’s here, and there’s a guy downstairs who says he knows you.”

Sirius growled loudly and sat up, his hair falling in tangles over his face as he squinted at Harry.

“Tell Dumbledore not to go anywhere,” he said. “I need to shout at him for a bit.”

Harry grinned, although he looked a little uncomfortable about standing in their bedroom. Good thing he didn’t come up here earlier, Sirius thought with a small smirk. Wasn’t that supposed to be one of the things kids did, catch you going at it and ask embarrassing questions? Or, in the case of Harry, probably just die of embarrassment themselves.

“You might have to get in line,” Harry said. “Mrs. Weasley’s already started.”

Remus chuckled and went to swing his legs out of bed, before remembering he was completely naked.

“Give us ten minutes, Harry,” he said. “I think we both need a shower before we start yelling at anyone.” Harry flushed and nodded, before retreating downstairs. Sirius flumped back onto his pillows with a thump and groaned again.

“I’m too old for this shit,” he said.

“You mean you’re too much of a drama queen for this shit,” Remus corrected him, leaning over and planting a kiss on his lips. “Get your arse out of bed, you stink.”

“Didn’t bother you last night,” Sirius grinned up at him.

“I have low standards.”

Sirius threw a pillow at him.
They emerged into the kitchen fifteen minutes later to find the entire household waiting for them, along with Dumbledore and Minerva. Sirius had planned out several cutting remarks, and was just opening his mouth to deliver the first, when Remus interrupted him.

“Thom?”

A pathetic-looking figure at the end of the table stood up. Sirius hadn’t noticed him at first. All his attention had been focused on Dumbledore, but even if it hadn’t been, Thom was the most unnoticeable person he’d ever seen. His clothes were drab, his skin wasn’t pale, but had a dusty, grey tint, and his hair was the epitome of Mousey. A memory nudged at Sirius. *Thomas*. He was one of the werewolves Remus had been going to stay with.

Sirius tensed immediately, his hand going for his wand. They still didn’t know who’d tipped off Midas and his crew. How had this walking embodiment of nothingness found them? They were supposed to be hidden. This man now knew the faces of half the Order.

Nobody else seemed perturbed by this. Someone had made Thomas a cup of tea, and it looked like they’d all been having a nice chat while they waited for Sirius and Remus.

“Hey Wolfy,” Thomas said, glancing nervously at Sirius. Upon closer inspection, he looked exhausted - not surprising this close to full moon. “We thought you were a gonner there, mate.”

Remus laid a warning hand briefly on Sirius’s arm before dropping into a seat.

“I almost was,” he said. “I’m sorry I never got to you.”

Thomas waved a hand dismissively.

“Not like you can help Midas being an ar…” He paused, apparently suddenly becoming aware that a large part of his audience was underage, and cleared his throat awkwardly. “You can’t help what Midas did. Glad you’re okay.”

“How are Jim and Kevin?” Remus asked, accepting a cup of tea from Hermione.

“They’ll be up and about in a couple days,” said Thomas. “Didn’t have such a good time of it. But maybe next time’ll be different, right?”

Remus nodded solemnly.

“I stand by what I promised,” he said. “We’ll find a way to get you the potion for the next moon.”

Thomas’s face was impassive, but Sirius saw a flicker of something that could have been relief - or it could have been his imagination. Sirius finally condescended to sit down, but he kept his eyes on the newcomer. Nothing good could come of his being here, even if he was on the level.

“Thomas was telling us about the effect Midas’s arrest has had on the enclave,” Dumbledore said, leaning forward and claiming their attention. Sirius suddenly recalled his intention to shout at the Headmaster for a good ten minutes, but it seemed that would have to wait. “The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was notified that a group of werewolves and a vampire had got into a fight in a muggle suburb and arrested all of them. They are awaiting trial, but I think it’s safe to assume they will spend a significant time in Azkaban.”

Sirius snarled angrily.
“The only good thing to come out of those bloody laws,” he said. “Magical Creatures,” he added with a sneer. “For the love of Merlin.” Remus nudged him with an elbow and he lapsed into angry mutterings. That the love of his life was supposedly classified as “sub-human” always set him off on one of his rants, and this time was no exception. It should have been Aurors going after Midas’s gang, not a bunch of zoo-keepers. Them being animals won’t stop them going to jail like humans, I notice, he thought, lip curling.

“I beg your pardon, Thomas,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. “Our friend Mr. Black has rather strong feelings about the Ministry position on werewolves.”

“It’s no problem,” Thomas said. “I reckon I might have the same feelings.” A ripple of laughter ran around the table, breaking the tense silence for a moment.

“No one knows what’s going on,” continued Thomas, glancing at Dumbledore as though asking permission to speak. If he was acting a part, he was very good. He seemed completely docile, and nervous about being around so many wizards, as though he feared they would turn on him. I suppose that’s not an unreasonable fear, Sirius admitted grudgingly. It didn’t make him feel any better about it.

“Has Greyback made an appearance?” Remus asked. Sirius could hear the strain in Remus’s voice and wished he could do this for him. Greyback was Remus’s demon, the figure that stalked his nightmares, the creator of his worst memories. His very body was a reminder of what Greyback had done, and yet he had been willing - still was willing - to face down the beast if it would protect others. Sirius’s stomach soured with shame. Remus was braver than any other person in this room, and he had derided him for it, blamed him. What kind of partner was he? He pushed his guilt aside and focused on Thomas’s reply.

“No, we don’t know where he is. He never came to the enclave much anyway. Always said he had better things to do. Midas usually went to him.”

“This seems like the best opportunity for us to get the enclave on our side,” said Arthur. “Judging by what Remus has told us, Midas was the ruling force. There’s a power vacuum now that we might be able to step into, if we move fast enough.”

“You’ll be lucky to get most of them,” Thomas warned. “They’re scared, as much of you lot as they are of Greyback most of the time. But you might get a few of them, if you can offer something.”

“Such as?” Minerva asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously. Perhaps the others weren’t as welcoming as Sirius had first suspected.

“If Wolfy’s potion is as good as he said, that’d be a start.” Thomas said earnestly, leaning forward. “But what we need most is to get away from that place. While we’re stuck there, we just keep getting sucked back in. Some of us have jobs, but it’s hard to keep ’em when you have to take every full moon off. It doesn’t take a wizard long to figure that out, and, well, most of us don’t wanna work for muggles. You know how it is.”

There was a long silence as everyone around the table considered the problem. The power vacuum left by Midas’s gang would be open for a week at the most, probably only a day or two before Greyback was back in control. How did they house an unknown number of werewolves in a safe place in that time?

“How many?” Remus asked. “I can think of at least seven who’d take the offer, if we could provide a guarantee.
“Prob’ly ten all up,” said Thomas, relief crossing his face. He’d clearly expected to be rebuffed. For a moment, Sirius’s suspicion subsided and he saw how much courage it had taken Thomas to come here. Wizards weren’t known for their acceptance of werewolves, and yet here he was, sacrificing what little dignity the world had allowed him, asking them for help. All for the sake of his friends.

“I don’t know how we’re going to find jobs for that many people in that short a time,” Arthur said, tapping a finger on his chin. “Or find homes.”

“How much will it cost to rent a place?” Harry asked suddenly. Sirius looked at him in surprise.

“I don’t know, we’d have to look into it,” Dumbledore replied. “It might be possible to find somewhere near Hogsmeade for a reasonable price, perhaps a group of farmhouses that could be repaired.”

“I’ll pay for it,” said Harry firmly. Sirius wasn’t sure if he wanted to bang his head on the table or hug his godson. He was tempted to do both. Only a Potter could make a statement like that as though it was the most natural, obvious thing in the world. Ron and Hermione were the only ones who didn’t seem surprised. Ron merely rolled his eyes and Hermione muttered “of course you will”.

“We don’t want no charity,” Thomas objected. “We don’t wanna be treated like animals, we want a chance to make our own way.”

“It’s not charity,” Harry objected. “It’s... compensation. For all the crap you’ve had to put up with from wizards. I’m just offering to help ‘til you can figure out jobs and stuff. If you can get your potion it’ll help, right? You won’t have to take so much time off?”

Thomas stared at the boy as if he thought Harry had lost his mind. After a couple of moments he seemed to conclude that Harry was indeed serious, and nodded, eyes still wide.

“Yeah, it’d help.” He shook his head, and Sirius noticed a slightly flush along his cheeks, a suspicious glimmer in the corners of his eyes. “You can do all that, we won’t just stay outta the fight, you’ll have us on your side.”

“You don’t have to do anything in return,” said Harry fiercely, and Sirius decided he was definitely going to hug Harry for a solid five minutes because the boy was a miracle. “You shouldn’t need help with all this stuff.”

Remus reached for Sirius’s hand under the table and gripped it tight. Sirius squeezed back, glancing up at his boyfriend with a smile. Remus didn’t seem to be able to speak, but Sirius understood.

“We’ll sort out the details immediately,” Dumbledore said, smiling broadly at everyone - particularly Harry - clearly immensely pleased by this turn of events. “I of course will assist Harry with this. Thomas, if you would like to accompany Minerva and myself to Hogwarts immediately, we will begin preparations.”

Sirius shook his head in amazement at the strange and sudden turn of events. He couldn’t quite process what was happening, but he knew that if it worked, it meant Remus would no longer have any reason to go back to the enclave - and they’d have nearly a dozen werewolves on their side.

“I am definitely too old for this shit,” he muttered.


Chapter End Notes
You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
*runs in, waving frantically* I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Uni work got the better of me this last week, but I'm all finished now, so I am at your disposal (mostly, I should have a book being published the end of this month...). Thanks for bearing with me, and for everyone who's commented. And howdy to everyone who's new! It's so great to hear from you. I live for comments, so please, don't be shy!

WE'RE FINALLY GETTING TO HOGWARTS IN THE NEXT FEW CHAPTERS!! WOOH! And you beautiful patient drarry fans know what that means... ;D SLOW BURN!! Mwahahahahahahahaha. I will make you suffer...
I love you really, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry didn’t seem to feel as though he’d done anything extraordinary by offering to finance a werewolf colony right next door to his school. He’d waved away all attempts at praise and stumped upstairs to his Transfiguration homework as soon as Dumbledore had left, Ron and Hermione following silently. Sirius wondered, as he watched them leave, if it was possible to explode from pride.

“How does he even exist?” Remus asked faintly. He’d been rendered almost speechless by Harry’s announcement, barely able to reassure Thom before he left with Dumbledore. Sirius smiled fondly at him.

“You would have done exactly the same thing in his place,” he said. Remus merely shook his head disbelievingly and Sirius’s pride was tinged with sadness. What did it say about the way wizards treated werewolves that Harry’s one act of kindness seemed so impossible to so many people?

Dumbledore returned with their new acquaintance just as dinner was being served.

“Success,” Dumbledore said, beaming around at the expectant crowd gathered in the kitchen. “Happily for our expedition, Professor Sinistra has a thorough knowledge of the Hogwarts holdings and located us a large farmhouse and associated outbuildings on the edge of the Hogwarts grounds. They should be perfect for our new friends”

“They’ll need a bit of doing up,” Thom said gruffly, apparently feeling the need to rein in Dumbledore’s expansive optimism.

“My dear man, my staff and I are quite at your disposal on that front,” Dumbledore said, waving a dismissive hand. “We’ll have you comfortable in no time.” Sirius couldn't help chuckling at this exchange. Thom seemed determined to maintain a realistic outlook, while Dumbledore would admit no possible barrier to their undertaking. Sirius suspected Thom and Minerva would get along quite well.

Dinner somehow turned into a celebration without anyone really intending it. Thom seemed as thoroughly overwhelmed as Remus had been that morning, eating in small, nervous bites, hardly joining in the jovial conversation as he looked around at his new allies. He seemed half-afraid that
he would be thrown out of the house if someone noticed him. Arthur sat next to him and engaged him in quiet talk, telling him about his job at the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, questioning him about his plans for the farmhouse and what it would mean for his future.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Thom said, when Arthur asked about his long term plans. “I’m grateful, I really am. But this place your man’s found us is still in a school, isn’t it? It’s more a question of how long we’ll be allowed to stay.” Arthur regarded him sympathetically and patted his shoulder.

“I know it’s difficult to believe, given your experience with wizards up until now,” he said, “but Dumbledore isn’t like that. He won’t force you out.”

Thom merely shook his head and took another bite of apple pie.

The following week turned into a series of problems and dramas that needed to be solved. First, it transpired that Thom was using a borrowed wand, and that he and his compatriots had only three wands between about ten. This resulted in what Sirius dubbed a Peak Molly Moment - the first of many, as it turned out - when Molly dragged a weakly protesting Remus right back into the enclave, gathered up Thom and all his friends, and Apparated them all to Diagon Alley, where Sirius’s bank account assisted with the purchase of nine brand new wands.

Once this crisis was solved, Minerva discovered to her horror that several of Thom’s friends had never had the benefit of a formal education, or had been educated in muggle schools, meaning that wands were at best useless and at worst a disaster. Remus found himself once again bustled out of the house, this time so he could begin teaching the group of poorly-shaven, rough-spoken, tougher-than-nails werewolves the basics of magic use.

“I’m not sure who was more embarrassed, me or them,” he groaned to Sirius that night. “For Merlin’s sake, they’re almost all older than I am!”

Sirius knew he should be more sympathetic, but he couldn’t help laughing.

“You always said you liked teaching more than anything,” he grinned. He was lying along the couch with his head in Remus’s lap, watching Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny play a spirited game of Exploding Snap.

“I suppose at least they can’t be any worse than you and James,” Remus said, letting his head flop back and closing his eyes. “Although if they were, I’d have to get Tonks to arrest them.”

“How dare you, we were a joy and a delight,” Sirius said, sniggering.

“To yourselves, perhaps,” Remus replied. “To the rest of us, less so.”

“What does that say about you?”

“We’ve already covered this. I have appallingly bad taste.”

Sirius laughed immoderately at this, finding himself in an unaccountably good mood. Even though Remus was away from the house all day helping Thom and his friends, the danger was suddenly drastically diminished, and he was home each night. And in a few days, once Dumbledore, Minerva, Flitwick, and the other teachers, had finished rebuilding the farmhouses, Remus’s work would be entirely focused there, teaching and negotiating, helping his fellow werewolves find work and learn how to live a life that didn’t revolve around fear. It was a task far more suited to his talents, one that would make him happy - not to mention one that was far less likely to get him killed. The
aches of their full moon near-disaster still lingered, reminding Sirius just how lucky they had both been.

He caught Harry looking at him and winked.

“I hope you’re paying attention, young Harold,” he said. “If you’re not careful, you’ll end up like your poor, long-suffering step-godfather, and fall in love with an absolute nightmare like me.”

Harry snorted and carefully placed a card on the table, watching it cautiously for a moment in case it blew up in his face.

“I reckon I have better taste in men than that,” he said. Ron, who hadn’t really been concentrating, looked up in astonishment and dropped his card. It exploded forcefully, blowing a hole in the table and covering the four of them in soot. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny seemed hardly to notice, however. They were all staring at Harry, who looked quite unconcerned, although Sirius noticed that his cheeks were a slightly darker brown than usual underneath the soot.

“Well that’s one way to come out,” Remus said mildly. Harry grinned and Sirius let out a celebratory whoop. He could hardly believe that such a thing was possible, when he remembered Harry’s innocence upon first coming to Grimmauld Place. We managed to corrupt him in less than two months, he thought, rather pleased with himself. You’d be proud of him, Prongs.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Hermione asked, sounding thoroughly put out.

“I just did,” said Harry. “Ginny’s deal.”


“For fuck’s sake, Ron, bisexuality is a thing, you know,” Ginny snapped. “Honestly, you’d think you were raised in the Dark Ages.” Ron flushed beet red.

“I never said I had a problem with it,” he objected.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so proud of you,” Hermione said, leaning across the ruined table and hugging him. He made a face at Ron over her shoulder, but Sirius could see he was really rather pleased by her reaction.

“I swear, we must be the gayest generation at Hogwarts ever,” Ginny declared, waving her wand and repairing the table.

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Sirius said, somewhat offended that anyone could think such a thing possible.

“But take it personally, Pads,” Remus grinned, tugging on a strand of Sirius’s hair. “They’re still under the delusion that all us adults have always been boring.”

“Nobody has ever thought that about Sirius,” Ginny pointed out.

“I should hope not!” Sirius said.

“Besides, we’re no gayer than anyone else,” said Ron. “Who else is there?” Hermione and Ginny turned long-suffering looks on him that had Remus shaking with silent giggles.

“If they haven’t told you, then we obviously can’t,” Hermione said primly as Ginny dealt out the next hand.

“Did you know about anyone else?” Ron demanded, turning to Harry. Harry shrugged.
“No, but we’ve kind of had other things on our minds lately, haven’t we?”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione sighed.

“What, it’s not his fault he’s been busy,” Ron snapped, apparently quite put out that he’d missed something of such vital importance. “So much for gaydar.”

“I didn’t say it was Harry’s fault he didn’t notice,” Hermione replied. “But you two do have a tendency to be a little… self-absorbed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron started, flaring up.

“If I’d known this was going to start an argument, I would’ve waited until I didn’t have to put up with it,” Harry said impatiently, interrupting what looked like a promising row. “Are you two going to play or what?”

“That one was pure Lily,” said Sirius, chuckling.

“Definitely Lily,” Remus agreed, smiling down at him. Sirius wondered if it was possible to feel any happier than he did right at that moment.

Of course, one joyous moment didn’t solve their continuing complications as they attempted to fight a war that no one would admit was happening and rehouse twelve werewolves, some of whom were half-wild.

“We’re gonna have to move everyone tonight, or we’ll be stuck” Thom announced at breakfast five days after full moon. He had become a regular visitor at Grimmauld Place, joining them for meals as he and Remus obsessively discussed the details of what Sirius was stubbornly referring to as the ‘commune’ and what Thom refused to call anything other than the ‘farmhouse’.

“Frankly, I’m astonished Greyback hasn’t made a move earlier,” said Remus grimly. Only Sirius noticed the way his jaw tensed when he said the other werewolf’s name. He shifted slightly so his leg rested against Remus’s under the table, offering what comfort he could.

“Kingsley held things up with those bastards who attacked you,” Tonks said, from further down the table. “Made it look like they might get bail, so Greyback would think Midas would be back to keep a lid on things.” Tonks was breakfasting with them after another Occlumency lesson. She’d returned to daily lessons as the start of term neared, determined to give Harry the best possible chance of keeping Voldemort out of his mind once he left the protection of the Fidelius Charm.

Thom looked up at Tonks admiringly.

“You lot really aren’t like them other Aurors, are you?” he said, shaking his head. “Fancy putting your neck out like that for a bunch of dogs.”

Remus’s mouth thinned at this last word, an insult that many of Thom’s group had reappropriated for themselves.

“We don’t agree with the Ministry any more than you do,” Tonks said firmly, flinging a slice of toast down the table as she noticed Thom’s empty plate. Thom caught it deftly and grinned as he slathered it with butter.
“Wouldn’t bet on that,” he said. “But it’s good to have you on our side for once.”

“How long until the commune’s ready?” Sirius asked Remus, stealing a mushroom from Remus’s plate before he could object.

“At least another two days, according to Dumbledore,” Remus said fretfully. “All the stray magic around the school has been interfering with the repairs. I really don’t know what we’ll do with everyone until it’s ready.”

“Why don’t they stay here?” Hermione asked. Her tone was casual, but Sirius could tell she was expecting resistance.

“How on earth are we supposed to fit twelve extra people in this house?” Molly asked, hands on her hips.

“Twelve people who aren’t in the Order,” Tonks added around a mouthful of fried tomato.

“I’m not in the Order,” Thom pointed out. Tonks saluted him with her fork, but Sirius couldn’t help sharing her concern. Thom was no longer an object of distrust. Remus had known him for years, as it turned out, (Sirius wasn’t jealous of this, not at all), and trusted him. They knew very little of the eleven others, however, aside from the fact that they hated their life in the enclave. Helping them find a place in the commune was one thing. Inducting them into the Order of the Phoenix was quite another.

“We can’t leave them in the enclave if Greyback’s coming,” Remus said. Sirius had an awful feeling that if someone didn’t find an alternative solution soon, he was going to find himself sleeping on the couch so a complete stranger could have his bed. And you’d be doing the right thing, too, you selfish bugger, his conscience prodded him. He wasn’t quite ready to admit defeat however.

“What about Hogwarts?” Harry said. There was a sudden silence as everyone considered this suggestion. Harry shifted uncomfortably under the unexpected attention his idea had garnered and continued, “There won’t be any students for another week or so, right? And Dumbledore said the farmhouse is only a couple of days away, so… I mean, it’s just an idea.”

“It’s not a bad one,” Sirius said, smiling suddenly. “At least no one would have to sleep on a couch at Hogwarts.”


“It’s not a bad one,” Sirius said, smiling suddenly. “At least no one would have to sleep on a couch at Hogwarts.”

“Seems like the easiest solution, since it’s right next door to where we’re going.”

“I’ll send Minerva a message now,” said Molly, bustling out of the kitchen. Sirius thought she looked slightly disappointed at the loss of a lycanthropic horde to feed, but no doubt she’d find enough to do organising the move. There really is no one she won’t adopt, he thought fondly. Thom, however, looked slightly disgruntled.

“Sorry your house isn’t finished,” Sirius said. Thom waved away this concern, but his frown stayed in place.

“What’s bothering you?” Remus asked. Thom prodded moodily at his toast, as if considering his words.

“I know you mean well, Wolfy,” he said, “but you don’t understand what it’s like for the rest of us, not really.”
Sirius opened his mouth to object, but Remus held up a hand and he fell silent.

“What have I missed?” Remus asked seriously.

“Your Order here, they all seem like good people,” Thom said. “Hell, better than any wizards I’ve ever met, especially your kid there.” He nodded down the table at Harry, who flushed to the roots of his hair and studiously pretended not to have heard. “But us, we’re not part of it, you know? I get it, you know I do. You don’t know most of us, you can’t trust us, but it gets old. Some of the fellas will notice.”

Remus nodded, his expression grave, and Sirius felt his stomach twist uncomfortably. He wished there was something he could do to make things better, easier. He didn’t know Thom well yet, but he respected him, and he of all people knew what it was like to be left on the outer. He rubbed his itching chest uneasily and tried to swallow his unease. Some things took time, no matter how good anyone’s intentions. They were doing all they could for Thom and his people now, and once the war was over, there would be a chance for more. For now, they could only do what they could do and hope for the best. He leaned forward and met Thom’s proud gaze.

“I know promises are just so much hot air,” he said. “But we’re not going to just shove you out in the countryside and leave you there. And not because we want to use you, either,” he added quickly. “We’re all here because we want to do better.”

“Also, Harry will probably curse us if we don’t help you to the very best of our ability,” Remus added with a wink. Thom chuckled reluctantly.

“Best not start an argument with The Boy Who Lived,” he said. “Give it some time, eh? You do right by us, they’ll come around.”

“You have my word,” said Sirius, holding out his hand. This time Thom laughed properly, taking his hand and shaking it.

“I dunno how you put up with ‘is lordship here, Wolfy,” he laughed. “But I reckon he’s growin’ on me.”

Harry hadn’t intended to come out right then - he hadn’t really planned to come out at all, at least not yet. He’d only really started to consider that he might not be 100% straight in the last few months, and hadn’t really had the luxury of examining it. But Sirius had been joking about falling in love and it had just sort of… happened.

Ron and Hermione, of course, seemed to take it in their stride. Harry had at first been worried that Ron would be uncomfortable sharing the bed with him, but after he’d awoken the next morning to find Ron drooling on his, Harry’s, pillow, and Ron’s arm slung across his chest, his worries had eased. Fred and George had of course spent the next few days flirting shamelessly with him, which had prompted Ginny to say “I told you we were all raging queers” at least six times, although Harry wasn’t sure if the twins being enormous flirts necessarily translated to them being gay, as such.

If he was honest, the strangest thing about it all wasn’t his friends’ reactions, but the freedom he felt once he’d said it. Here, with what felt more and more like a real family with each passing day, he hadn’t had to think twice about announcing such a thing. It really wasn’t a big deal. He shuddered to think what the Dursleys would have said if they’d known. He could never have been honest with them - hell, while he was there, he wasn’t sure he could even have been honest with himself.
All in all, Harry was surprised at how happy he was leading up to September the first. Normally this was the time of the holidays he started marking the days on the calendar, desperate to escape. Now he had almost mixed feelings about returning to school, even though, if he was honest with himself, he missed the castle, and his lessons, and his other friends, and even Dobby randomly showing up and creating chaos.

He didn’t want to leave Sirius and Remus, not now, so soon after the full moon incident, and not when they were really starting to know one another. He also didn’t want to leave the safety of Grimmauld Place.

That was the real problem, Harry knew. Grimmauld Place was safe. Voldemort couldn’t find him here, the Dursleys couldn’t find him, The Daily Prophet had no idea where he was, he didn’t have to worry about anyone here being a surprise homophobe, and he didn’t have to worry about messing up his Occlumency and spilling the Order’s most important secrets.

“Wow, you really know how to worry, kiddo,” Tonks said one morning, a few days before term was due to start. She lowered her wand and stuck it in the pocket of her robes, leaning one arm against the mantelpiece behind her as she observed Harry thoughtfully. Harry shrugged, embarrassed that Tonks had managed to see so much.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ll get it right next time.”

Tonks sighed and smiled fondly at him.

“I’m not criticising you, you goof,” she said. “You’re doing well. I’m not worried about you going back to school, I just want to make sure you’re okay.” She stepped forward and poked him playfully in the shoulder. “You know, like friends do.” Harry flushed at these words, but he was immensely pleased. He admired Tonks very much. She was funny and irreverent, but she was clearly highly skilled, intelligent, and a talented Auror - everything he wished he could be.

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “Just, a lot’s been happening lately.”

“Understatement of the century,” Tonks snorted. She took him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. “Look, I can’t promise that everything will be alright,” she said. “Things go wrong every day, and Merlin knows the world’s messed up right now. Hell, I can’t even promise you won’t fuck up and let old Mouldy Farts see what’s going on in your head.” Harry’s stomach jolted at the thought, but Tonks tightened her grip on his shoulders and her tone was firm. “I want you to remember that we’re all here for you, Harry. You’re not on your own any more, you’re part of a family now. And whatever happens, no matter how bad it is, we’ll figure it out. That’s a promise.”

Harry wished his throat hadn’t closed over, because he would have quite liked to say ‘thank you’, but Tonks understood.

Chapter End Notes

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Sirius leaned back in his chair and stretched with a groan. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been seconded in his room, trying to force the collection of memories to give up the location of another Horcrux - or just to confirm that there actually were more to find. The light slanting through the open window indicated late afternoon, and he suddenly became aware of just how hungry he was. He slumped moodily and closed his eyes against the glimmer of the Pensieve, huffing half-heartedly at the hair falling over his face, but not bothering to actually do anything about it.

He ran his mind over Dumbledore’s memory of Riddle as a boy and found himself shuddering, despite the warm breeze coming from the window. Compared to the corpse-like figure he would later become, that boy had seemed on the surface to be just another child. Perhaps that was what made him so frightening. He could have passed unnoticed in the street, and all the while he was already torturing animals and other children, already shaping who he would become.

And everyone just let it happen, Sirius thought, the realisation startling him. Dumbledore had said he’d been suspicious of Riddle, but he’d satisfied himself with watching from afar as the boy became less and less human, created the following that would become the Death Eaters. Hell, Riddle had murdered a fellow student, and yet his teachers did nothing. In a strange way, Riddle had been as much failed by the adults around him as that murdered girl. As Harry has been. As Remus was. As I was.

Sirius’s maudlin train of thought was interrupted by a knock on his door.

“Open up, Pads,” Remus’s voice demanded from the other side. Sirius sighed and pointed his wand at the door, which he’d locked earlier against ‘accidental’ interruptions by the younger members of the household, of which there had already been several.

“Merlin, you look like someone just accused you of being straight,” Remus said, taking in Sirius’s
glowering expression. Sirius snorted and turned back to the Pensieve, extracting the memory he’d been examining and returning it carefully to its phial.

“You try spending the day wandering about in other people’s memories and see how you like it,” he said. Remus shut the door behind him and crossed the room to stand behind Sirius’s chair.

“No progress, then.” It wasn’t a question. Sirius leaned his head back so it was resting against Remus’s shirt.

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly. “But I do know that I’m seriously questioning every teacher we’ve ever had.” Remus made a scornful sound and slid his arms around Sirius’s shoulders, dropping a kiss onto his forehead.

“When have you ever not questioned an authority figure?” he asked. Sirius looked up at him, his expression sombre.

“I’m serious, Moons,” he said. “Riddle was a disaster waiting to happen, and at least one of the people responsible for him knew it. He was neglected, abandoned, mistreated, and it was clear it’d affected him. But no one did anything about it. No one found him a different home, no one talked to him, they just left him to his own devices and hoped for the best.”

Remus’s brow lowered thoughtfully and he lowered his head until his chin was resting in Sirius’s hair.

“I suppose I never thought about it,” he said. “What little Dumbledore said of the boy always made it sound like he was just made that way.”

“We, of all people, should know that’s not how it works,” said Sirius, uncomfortable all of a sudden with how he’d just accepted Dumbledore’s image of Riddle.

“It’s so much easier to believe evil people just spring from the womb that way, than to think they might be shaped by their lives,” Remus said with a sigh.

“Maybe he was born that way,” Sirius said with a shrug. “Merlin knows he was a terrifying kid, even before Hogwarts. Maybe nothing anyone did would have made a difference, but…” He trailed off, worrying at his bottom lip with his teeth. He sighed sharply and pulled himself together.

“Either way, I don’t suppose it’ll do us much good worrying about it now,” he said.

“Don’t dismiss it,” Remus said. “If you noticed that kind of neglect from a few memories, there’s no doubt that someone as astute as Riddle was reputed to be would have been aware. Knowing that might help.”

“That’s true.” Sirius made an exasperated noise and tugged sharply at his hair, which was already falling down again. “It’s probably why he was so attached to that Slytherin link,” he said, turning back to his notes. “Although how he found out about that, I still don’t know. Ugh, what I wouldn’t give to be able to get out of this damn house and go look at these places. Secondhand research like this is driving me mental.”

Remus smiled and grasped his hand, tugging him out of his chair.

“Perhaps you could take a break and spend some time with your godson, who will be leaving for school in the morning.”

Sirius flushed at the meaningful note in Remus’s voice.
“I was going to come down in a moment,” he said.

“Of course you were,” Remus replied dryly. “Just like you were absolutely about to come down when Molly came to get you last night, and the night before.”

Sirius dropped his head guiltily. Where he’d been able to ignore Molly’s hints the day before, he found himself helpless in the face of Remus’s mild rebuke.

“I was kind of hoping no one would notice,” he muttered. With Remus’s time taken up with moving Thom’s people into the commune, and Molly bustling about the place organising Hogwarts supplies and transport schedules, Sirius had felt a creeping depression stealing over him. The house that had been so bright and loud and full of people for the last several weeks was about to be emptied of most of its life, the most important part of which was his godson. He was trying not to think about how much he was going to miss Harry - not to mention how frightened he was about the unknown danger Harry was heading into.

“I gave you credit for more intelligence than that,” Remus snorted. “And we both know it’s only half true.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sirius said, irritated. It was bad enough that Remus could see through his pathetic attempts to hide from the fact that Harry was about to leave, but now he was being critical instead of sympathetic.

“You’re a drama queen, Sirius Black,” Remus said, his tone still infuriatingly mild. “You never do anything if it won’t get you attention.”

“You think I’m researching Lord Voldemort because I want attention?” Sirius’s voice rose in proportion to his outrage and he put his hands on his hips, more hair slipping down from its inadequate bindings. Remus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, although the slight twitch of his lips suggested he wasn’t as tired of Sirius’s antics as he pretended.

“You’re a drama queen, Sirius Black,” Remus said, his tone still infuriatingly mild. “You never do anything if it won’t get you attention.”

“Yes, I have a particular fondness for arses,” Remus continued, his tone now as dry as the Sahara in midsummer. “But right now, I’d quite like to smack you.”

The two men stared at one another for a long moment.

“Surely that makes me more like an arse,” Sirius said. Remus wrestled manfully with his expression, but he was helpless in the face of Angry Sirius Logic.

“I always do,” Sirius said, satisfied with this small victory. He knew Remus was right, and he also
knew he had no intention of admitting it. “Speaking of arses, though…”

“Sirius Orion Black, if you don’t get your arse down those stairs and spend time with our child right this second I will lock my door every night for a week!” Remus said sharply. Sirius snapped to attention and almost ran for the door.

“There’s no need to resort to threats,” he muttered as he yanked it open.

“If you listened to me in the first place, I wouldn’t,” Remus called after him. But Sirius was grinning as he took the stairs two at a time. Our child.

Harry stared at the open trunk in front of him and tried not to have a panic attack.

“Oi, mate, are you going to shut that, or just stare at it?”

When Harry continued to stare at the trunk as though it might offer up the secrets to immortality, Ron rolled his eyes and threw a pair of socks at him.

“What was that for?” Harry objected, returning to earth with a thud. He scooped up the socks and threw them back to their owner, who caught them with an unrepentant grin.

“You’ve been staring at that trunk for the past ten minutes,” Ron said. “I was starting to think you’d been Petrified.”

At any other time, Harry would have put on a brave front. He was The Boy Who Lived, right? He’d faced Voldemort… well, too many times, to be honest. He definitely wasn’t scared about going back to school.

“You’re worried about going, huh?” said Ron. Harry grunted and slammed his trunk shut.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. Out in the corridor, they could hear what sounded like every other member of the household, and several erumpents, thundering up and down the stairs, yelling at one another as they searched for lost items, and cursing as they ran into each other and dropped their breakfast.

“You heard what Tonks said, you’re all ready,” Ron said bracingly, although somewhat distractedly, as he tried to coax a very excited Pig into his cage. The tiny owl had been allowed down from the attic after breakfast, and Ron seemed to be regretting this decision immensely. All the activity had sent Pig into a frenzy, and he was now rocketing about the room, ricocheting off walls and furniture and hooting gleefully. Hedwig, already locked in her cage, watched the performance with an air of dignified disdain. Harry winced as Pig bounced off Ron’s head and Ron made another wild grab for the owl.

“If you don’t get down here right now, you’re going to have to stay here without me,” Ron said crossly, putting his hands on his hips and glaring up at his pet. Pig hooted shrilly at him as he took one more lap around the room, but he seemed to decide Ron was serious and shot towards his cage, barely avoiding knocking himself out on the back of it as he zoomed inside. Ron slammed the door shut, muttering about useless pets while Harry tried not to laugh at him.

“Aren’t you two ready yet?” said Hermione, poking her head through the door. Her hair was even more boisterous than usual, and she looked distinctly harassed. “The other trunks are already in the hall, the taxis are going to be here in fifteen minutes.”
“Harry’s worried about going back,” said Ron. Harry glared at him.

“I told you, I’m fine,” he said. Hermione came further into the room, shutting the door behind her and cutting out at least some of the noise.

“Of course you’re worried,” she said. “But you told us what Tonks said the other day. We can deal with anything that comes up, us and the Order.”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry muttered, turning to fiddle with the straps on his trunk. “You’re not the one who might accidentally reveal the Order’s plans while you’re asleep.” He glanced up and caught Ron and Hermione exchanging a meaningful look. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Ron assured him hurriedly. “Just…”

“You might be forgetting the most important part of what Tonks said,” Hermione finished for him, her tone brusque, as though she Harry to react poorly and was bracing herself for impact. Harry glowered at her.

“Which is?” he snapped.

“We’re in this together,” Hermione said patiently.

“That’s the problem!” Harry said, exasperated. “It’s not just me I’m putting in danger, it’s everyone!”

“And we all signed up for that,” Ron said, glancing at Hermione as though he wished he could check with her before he spoke in case he got it wrong. “Mate, you’re not the centre of the universe you know. We’re all carrying this thing.”

“You don’t have a creepy mental link to Voldemort, though, do you?” Harry snapped.

“No, but Harry, everyone knows we’re your friends. If you’re in danger at Hogwarts, so are we, and we know just as much as you.”

“No one’s going to kidnap you in your sleep and interrogate you!” Harry yelled, unable to believe that they couldn’t wrap their heads around this simple point.

“Fine,” Hermione snapped. “It’s all terrible, you’re absolutely destined to ruin everything, and the world will probably explode.”

Harry and Ron both stared at her in shock.

“Take it gently, you said,” Ron said weakly. “Go easy on him. He’s under enough stress already, you said.”

“Well, I forgot what a self-sacrificing git he can be,” Hermione said haughtily.

“Oi!” Harry said. He didn’t think this was fair at all.

“Well, you are,” Hermione said. “We’ve done everything we possibly can, Tonks thinks your Occlumency will keep everyone out, what more do you want? Do you want to stay here forever?”

“Of course not,” Harry said weakly, still waiting for his brain to catch up with events.

“Well then,” said Hermione, as though everything was settled. She paused and took a deep breath, nodded to both of them, turned on her heel and left the room. Harry and Ron stared at the door as it
closed behind her.

“What just happened?” Harry said faintly.

“I don’t know,” Ron replied. “But you’re not having a panic attack, so let’s count it as a win, eh?” Harry blinked and realised he was right. He glanced at his best friend and found that the corner of Ron’s mouth was twitching suspiciously.

“You git,” he said.

“We’d better get a move on, or Mum will kill us,” said Ron, hauling his trunk off the bed with a grunt.

“Okay, one sec,” said Harry, double-checking the room for anything he might have left behind. His eye caught the photo of Regulus on the desk, and he hesitated. He didn’t know why, but there was something about Sirius’s little brother that intrigued him. Perhaps it was silly, but he scooped up the photo and tucked it into his trunk. Somehow, it made him feel a little better. He shut his trunk again and followed Ron downstairs.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Yay, back to work! And the chapter is about the thing I said it was going to be about! WINNING! Now I just gotta keep this up...
Thanks for being patient with me while I had a meltdown and got sick, you guys are awesome!
Also I love hearing your predictions about what’s coming at Hogwarts, keep ’em coming. EXCITED!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius peered through the narrow strip of magically reinforced glass in the front door at the three muggle taxis below. As usual, Molly had taken charge, assisted by Remus, who had put off his daily trip to the new werewolf commune (Thom still steadfastly ignored Sirius every time he called it that) in order to accompany Harry to the station. Molly had gently suggested that perhaps this was not the most politic move, as The Daily Prophet and the Ministry had both been questioning Harry’s whereabouts over the summer, and the appearance of an old teacher at King’s Cross might be suspicious, but Remus had been adamant. Sirius still couldn’t leave the house, and he wasn’t about to let Harry leave for Hogwarts without a proper goodbye from at least one of them. Sirius hadn’t mentioned his thoughts on his house arrest, figuring the less he said beforehand, the less likely it was that Molly would find a way to keep him locked up.

“I still don’t see why they’re so determined to keep me here,” he muttered to the heavy timber of the door. The rest of the household were still milling about behind him. Their trunks were all outside, being heaved into the taxis by the long-suffering drivers, but by the sound of it, there were a remarkable number of absolutely essential items still floating about the house.

“Master must stay here, where Master is safe,” came a voice from somewhere in the region of Sirius’s knees. Sirius glanced down to find Kreacher peering through the same strip of glass at the chaos below. Tonks had just arrived, disguised today as a brusque older woman with tightly curled grey hair and a tweed pant-suit. She announced her presence by tripping over a trunk and spilling its contents into the street. Sirius could hear her apologising in a thick (and terrible) Welsh accent.

“Master isn’t about to be arrested at King’s Cross Station,” he told Kreacher irritably. “It’s not like I can’t disguise myself.”

“Master Harry would never recover if anything were to happen to Master Sirius,” Kreacher chided him. Damn elf knows my weak spots, Sirius thought glumly.

“Master Harry should have both his guardians with him when he heads off to school,” he said aloud, squashing the guilt back down where it belonged. “We’re not going to see him until Christmas, and he’s worried about his Occlumency. It would make him feel better.”

Kreacher muttered something indecipherable. It was so reminiscent of the elf’s former conduct, and yet had such a different meaning, that Sirius couldn’t help chuckling to himself. They lapsed into silence, watching as Molly and one of the drivers argued over the best way to pack a car.

“Will Master Harry really be alright?” Kreacher asked in a low voice. Sirius was rather taken aback
at the worry so evident in the elf’s voice. He tried to find a reassuring smile, but found he couldn’t quite manage it.

“I hope so, Kreacher,” he said, glancing back to where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were leaning against the wall, chatting. The other Weasleys had ducked back into the kitchen to forage what they could from the remains of breakfast. From where he stood, Harry looked calm enough. It could be hard to tell with him, though. If Harry thought it would upset other people, he was distressingly good at hiding his emotions.

“Are you going to sulk all morning, Sirius, or are you going to be a good host and get us a cup of tea?” Moody yelled from the kitchen doorway.

“No time,” Sirius called back. “They’re putting the last trunk in now.”

“Would’ve had time if you hadn’t been acting like a child for the last fifteen minutes,” Moody grumbled, striding towards him. Sirius glanced out the window to where Remus was chatting with Molly and made a split-second decision.

“Oh for- Sirius, you’re supposed to stay here,” Moody growled as Sirius’s form was replaced by the black dog. Sirius barked cheerfully at him and Moody rolled his eyes.

“I should Stun you, you daft bugger, but I don’t fancy being yelled at by your bloody godson,” the Auror said grumpily as Molly ran back up the stairs. They’d had a tremendous disagreement about ordering the muggle taxis, since no muggle could see the house, and it would be rather difficult to explain several children appearing out of nowhere. The only alternative, however, had been walking, since there was no way they could borrow Ministry vehicles again, and there was a strong chance Floos and Apparition would be tracked.

Tonks and Remus had eventually solved the problem of the muggle drivers - with rather more enthusiasm than necessary, Sirius thought - by parking an abandoned car on the other side of the square. When it was time for the others to leave the house, they set it on fire.

“Alright, everyone out. Quick, while they’re not looking,” Molly ordered, chivying Moody out the door ahead of her. When Sirius slipped past her, he was sure he heard a word slip from her lips that she would never have allowed her children to say, but she had no time to force him back inside. In this part of London, car fires weren’t exactly unusual, and wouldn’t distract the muggles for long - although both Tonks and Remus had time to berate Sirius in an undertone before the drivers turned around.

“I thought you were supposed to stay here,” Harry whispered, crouching down next to him. Sirius whuffed softly and headbutted Harry’s knee.

“When has Sirius ever done what he was supposed to do?” Remus asked dryly. Harry grinned in reply, but Sirius caught the worried look he shot his way.

“What if someone recognises him?” the boy asked Remus quietly.

“We’ll deal with it if we have to,” Remus replied. “Trying to make him go inside will just draw attention to us at this point. As he well knows,” he added sternly. Sirius opened his mouth in a doggy grin and tried not to think about the numerous lectures he was going to get when they got home again.

“Oi, no one said nuffin’ about takin’ no dog,” objected the nearest driver when he’d had his fill of watching things burn.
“We can leave him here if it’s any trouble,” Molly said hurriedly, but Sirius merely trotted over to a more sympathetic-looking man and whined, wagging his tail. Remus sighed audibly and shook his head, but Sirius ignored him. The man grinned down at Sirius.

“I don’t mind,” he said gruffly, giving Sirius’s head a quick pat. “Who’s a handsome boy, then?” Sirius reminded himself that this was for Harry (of course it was for Harry, who else would it be for?), and that it was worth the indignity of being spoken to like an infant. Ron was still sniggering when they piled into their taxi, accompanied by Harry and Remus.

Remus sat in the front and engaged the driver in idle chat, steering the conversation away from awkward questions about trunks, school crests, and certain dogs, while Ron, Harry, and Sirius stared out the open windows, relishing the relative freedom. Even though he hadn’t technically had to stay at Grimmauld Place the way Sirius and Harry had, Ron had still been shut up there all summer, and they were all a little stir-crazy. Sirius huffed a little miserably at the thought that, while the boys would be heading toward relative freedom, he would be back in that house in a matter of hours.

King’s Cross was as busy as ever, and Sirius found himself almost overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of noise and bodies all pressing against him as they made their way through the station. He almost hadn’t realised how long it had been since he’d been around people, but it suddenly struck him that the last time he’d encountered a crowd like this up close was about fourteen years ago. He found himself panting to calm himself down, and stuck close to Harry as they strode through the station.

They separated into smaller groups as they headed through the station, eager to avoid notice as they headed for the platform. The muggles streamed past them, most not paying them the least attention, although a few of the younger passengers eyed the owls and Sirius with interest. Sirius’s ears twitched as they wove their way through the crowds, listening for any hint that things weren’t what they ought to be. It was hard to keep track of their enemies these days. If the Death Eaters weren’t following them, the Ministry could be looking for them, not to mention that there were no doubt a few very unfriendly werewolves who would quite like to get their hands on Remus.

But nobody stopped them, there were no shouts, no suspicious figures following them. It seemed like any other September the first. Just two families and their friends seeing their children off to school. Sirius almost stopped in his tracks at the thought that, if they succeeded in finding the Horcruxes, if they managed to stop Voldemort, they would be here again next year, and the year after that. They would be just like any other family. Well fuck, he thought. Somehow, the thought of a future that extended beyond a few weeks had been unthinkable. There was too much at stake, too many risks, too much to fear. And yet…

“Don’t think we were followed,” Moody growled as they gathered on platform 9¾, surrounded by robed parents, tearful younger siblings, and children who had all apparently forgotten a very essential item. Sirius hadn’t quite realised just how talented children were at losing things. He wondered if he should have checked that Harry had everything. Was that something parents were supposed to do? Why wasn’t there an instruction manual for these things?

“I didn’t notice anything suspicious,” Tonks confirmed, glancing around casually, as if merely observing the scene. Sirius couldn’t help but admire her when he saw her like this. She was such a goofball most of the time, it was almost strange to see how competent she could be. “You losers got everything?” she asked, turning back to the gathered teenagers. And then, of course, she says something like that.

“We’ll owl you anything you left behind,” Molly said, fussing with Ginny’s collar.

“Geroff, Mum,” Ginny said, batting Molly’s hand away.
“How on earth did you get so tall?” Molly sniffed, wringing her hands. Sirius felt a pang of unexpected sympathy. He wasn’t the only one worried for his child.

“How, Sirius, and I have a gift for you,” Remus muttered, pulling a small package wrapped in brown paper from his jacket. “Don’t open it now. It’s a two-way mirror. We have the other. Sirius and James used to use them to talk when they weren’t supposed to be talking.” He paused and shot Sirius a stern look, and Sirius returned it with a doggy grin, his mouth wide open and his tongue lolling to the side. Remus rolled his eyes and turned back to Harry. “The Ministry is monitoring the Floos and your mail will probably be searched. If you need to tell us anything important, you tell us through this.”

Harry took the package and nodded seriously, his earlier calm cracking slightly.

“Are the Ministry really going to search our mail?” he asked. “At school? Won’t Dumbledore stop them?”

Remus glanced down at Sirius once more.

“Dumbledore’s position on what happened last summer has eroded much of his power. I’m afraid the Ministry is going to have rather more say in what goes on at Hogwarts than they have in the past.”

Harry stared down at the parcel in his hands.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” he said. Remus put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and Sirius butted his knee with his head.

“It’s not great,” Remus said honestly. “But we can handle this. If you need to tell us anything, just look into that mirror and say either of our names.” He paused, waiting for Harry to look up at him. “Don’t try and handle things on your own this year. I know you’ve always had to in the past, but we’re here for you now.”

Harry stared at him for a long moment before nodding again.

“Okay.”

They had no time for more, as Molly hurried them toward the train. Everyone hugged everyone else, Moody complaining the whole time, and Tonks somehow getting hugged twice (“I told you I was their favourite, Mad Eye”), and they clambered on. Harry was the last to board, hugging Remus tightly.

“We’ll see you at Christmas,” Remus said, trying for a hopeful smile, which Harry returned as best he could.

“For Merlin’s sake, Sirius, try and act more like a dog,” Tonks hissed as Sirius rose up on his hind legs and put his front paws on Harry’s shoulders. Sirius ignored her. He couldn’t let Harry go without a proper goodbye. Harry grinned and ruffled the fur on Sirius’s neck. Then the whistle was blowing, and Harry was shutting the door behind him, all five teenagers leaning out to wave goodbye to the little group still gathered on the platform.

“Be good!” Molly called. “Don’t forget to write! We’ll see you soon!”

Sirius sat beside Remus and wished fervently that he had hands so that he could wave a proper goodbye. Instead he sat and watched the engine steam out of the station, taking half his insides with it.
“Home,” Remus said quietly. As Sirius followed him out of the station, he felt something inside him shift. No matter how hard it was, no matter how long it took, he was going to find the way to defeat Voldemort. Next time Harry left for school, he wanted to be able to wave him goodbye.

Harry watched the small group on the platform disappear around the bend with mixed feelings. He knew Sirius shouldn’t have come - hell, Remus shouldn’t have either - but he couldn’t help being glad that they had. There was something about having both of them there, risking everything to be a family, daring the Ministry and Voldemort and the world in general to try something. All over something as small as Harry’s leaving for school.

“You okay, Harry?” Ginny asked, nudging him with her elbow. He looked around and smiled.

“Yeah, fine,” he said. “Shall we get a carriage?”

Ron and Hermione exchanged awkward glances.

“We have to report to the Prefect’s carriage first,” said Hermione, tugging anxiously at the hem of her shirt. “I don’t think we’ll have to stay there the whole time, the letter just said we need to get our instructions.”

“Oh, sure, okay,” said Harry. The warm ball of hope that had been sitting in his chest a moment ago dimmed a little. He’d never travelled the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

“I wish we didn’t have to, mate,” Ron said, shifting from one foot to the other. “It’s a real pain, I mean, you know we’d rather-”

“It’s fine,” Harry interrupted him, giving him a shove toward the front of the train. “We’ll save you seats.”

“Thanks,” Ron muttered, still looking worried. Harry offered him a grin and the two of them departed.

“Come on, let’s find a compartment before they’re all full,” said Ginny bracingly.

Harry noticed that even more whispers and stares were accompanying him than usual as they made their way slowly down the train.

“You’d think they’d find something better to talk about,” he muttered to Ginny as a group of Ravenclaw sixth years gawked openly at him.

“They’re probably all wondering where you’ve been all summer,” Ginny whispered back. “The Prophet’s been suggesting all kinds of nonsense. Last week, they said you might’ve fled the country to get away from Dumbledore. Said they had reports of you being seen in Syria of all places.”

“Yeah, Syria’d be the perfect place to go to get away from a war,” Harry snorted. He wasn’t really up on international affairs, but he remembered hearing the muggle news mention Syria enough times to know it wouldn’t be top of his list of holiday destinations.

“They’re going to be really disappointed when you tell them the story the Order came up with,” Ginny said. “Oh, hey Neville!”
Harry looked up to see his dorm-mate, Neville Longbottom, cradling Trevor the toad and looking, as usual, a tad lost.

“Hey Harry, hey Ginny. Alright?”

“Alright,” Harry said. “You wanna sit with us?”

“Sure,” said Neville. “But everywhere down here’s full.”

“Don’t be daft, there’s plenty of room here,” said Ginny, gesturing to the compartment behind Neville. He flushed and muttered something about ‘not wanting to disturb anyone’.

“It’s just Luna,” Ginny said. “She’s fine, come on.” She slid the door open and led the way inside. “Hey, Luna,” she said to the compartment’s single occupant. The girl looked up slowly, as though surprised to find herself in the presence of other people, or even on a train in the first place. Her expression indicated that she could have simply wandered in by accident.

“Oh, hello, Ginny,” she said vaguely. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Ginny, waving Neville and Harry into seats. “Good summer?”

“Oh, quite lovely, thank you,” Luna replied, peering at Neville and Harry over the top of the magazine she’d been reading upside down, her pale skin and white-blond hair making her look almost ghostly, even in the bright sunlight. “You’re Harry Potter,” she said, after studying Harry for a few minutes.

“I know I am,” Harry said, taken aback.

“The Prophet said you’d run off with Ylias Grey, the Quidditch player, to live in Japan,” Luna said. “Was it nice there?”

Harry stared at her for a few seconds before deciding that she was serious.

“I wasn’t in Japan,” he said. “I was on holiday at the beach with Ginny’s family.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Luna said serenely. “I hear Japan is very beautiful.”

“Ylias Grey is thirty-seven years old,” Ginny said, covering a smile with one hand.

“Is he? Oh, then I suppose it’s much better that Harry turned him down then,” Luna said. “I don’t know who you are,” she added, turning abruptly to Neville, who was staring at her with a mixture of confusion and something approaching awe.

“I’m nobody,” he said hurriedly, dropping his eyes.

“No you’re not,” Ginny said sternly. “You’re Neville Longbottom.”

“Same thing,” Neville muttered, almost under his breath, then yelped when Ginny punched him in the arm.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Luna said politely, before disappearing behind her magazine.

It was over an hour before Ron and Hermione reappeared, during which the only noteworthy incident was Neville showing them his newest... plant?... and somehow managing to cover them all in Stinksap. At which point, of course, Cho Chang opened their compartment door.
“Uh, hi Harry,” she said uncertainly, eyes roaming over the dripping, stinking inhabitants. “Bad time?”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Harry muttered. He couldn’t even wipe the stuff off his glasses, because his hands were full of Neville’s pet toad Trevor.

“Um, well, I just wanted to say hi,” Cho said hurriedly.

“Hi,” Harry said, somewhat blankly. Cho glanced around again and nodded awkwardly before sliding the door closed.

“Well that couldn’t have gone any worse,” Harry said, slumping back into his seat.

“You could’ve been naked,” Ginny suggested helpfully.

“You’re right, that would’ve been worse,” Harry agreed. Neville looked mortified.

“I’m really sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realise it would be so enthusiastic.” Harry shrugged as Ginny pulled out her wand and charmed them all clean again.

“There’s a secret monastery in Tibet with monks who are half human, half alligator, who have defensive mechanisms like that,” Luna said dreamily. The other three stared at her, but she simply turned a page in her magazine and continued reading.

When Ron and Hermione returned, they looked distinctly disgruntled.

“Guess who’s Slytherin prefect,” Ron said before anyone could even say ‘hello’. “Oh, hi, Neville.”

“Not Malfoy,” Harry groaned as Neville waved.

“Got it in one,” Ron said with a scowl, nabbing one of Harry’s chocolate frogs and biting its head off.

“And Pansy Parkinson is the other Slytherin Prefect,” said Hermione, after Ginny had introduced them both to Luna. “I can’t believe they chose the worst possible people from Slytherin to be Prefects, there must be some half decent ones, surely.”


“You have a point there,” Hermione sighed. Harry found himself thinking unaccountably of Regulus’s picture, tucked neatly into the side of his trunk. For some reason, the thought of Sirius’s younger brother made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. He remembered the half-idea he’d had during the summer. What if they aren’t as bad as we think they are? He didn’t have time to dwell on it, however, because Malfoy chose this moment to poke his head into the compartment, flanked as usual by Crabbe and Goyle.

“So you’re not dead after all, Potter,” Malfoy drawled, leaning casually against the doorframe. “The wizarding world can breathe a sigh of relief, the Boy Who Fluked is alive and well.”

“What do you want, Malfoy?” Harry snapped. His momentary feelings of generosity weren’t very tenacious when faced with Draco Malfoy. His conscience prodded him gently, but he ignored it.

“Just wanted to celebrate the miracle of your return,” Malfoy said with an expression of exaggerated innocence. “When I saw the Weasel made Prefect, we all figured you really must have died.”

“Or run off with Ylias Grey,” Luna said helpfully. Harry closed his eyes and prayed for patience.
“Tell me, Potter, how does it feel to be second-best to Weasley?” Malfoy sneered. Harry’s lip curled at the implication, although it struck rather too close to home for comfort.

“Ron deserves to be Prefect,” he said staunchly. “Unlike you, he’s not an arsehole.”

“Tch, tch, you’ll have to mind your manners, or I might have to give you detention,” Malfoy said, sickly smile still in place. Harry fought the urge to curl his hands into fists. Punching Malfoy before they even got to Hogwarts probably wouldn’t fall under Remus’s definition of ‘taking care of himself’.

“I’d like to see you try,” Hermione said stiffly to Malfoy. Malfoy’s grin widened.

“Be careful, Potter,” he said, pushing himself upright again. “I’ll be dogging your footsteps from now on.”

Harry felt his gut clench, but Malfoy had sloped off before he had a chance to respond. When he glanced up at Hermione, he knew she’d noticed it too, but while Neville and Luna were with them, they couldn’t say anything. There was nothing they could do but sit back and eat their way through their snacks, looking forward to the feast to come and wondering aloud what kind of nightmare creature they’d have for a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year.

“I hope they find someone competent this time,” said Hermione fretfully.

“I hope they find us a vampire,” said Ron enthusiastically.

“I’d prefer a Klorax,” said Luna. Nobody bothered to ask what a Klorax was. It was the fifth non-existent creature she’d mentioned since lunchtime, and her explanations seemed to somehow get more outlandish with every creature.

“I just want someone who doesn’t try and kill me at the end of the year,” said Harry. He was only half-joking.

“We’ve already had two Death Eaters,” said Ginny around a mouthful of pumpkin pastie. “How much worse can we get from there?”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
I am a human dumpster fire and I apologise. Also I love you all, thank you so much for sticking with me!

The next few chapters will refer a lot to canon again while we settle into Hogwarts, but there's plenty of new stuff so hopefully it's not too boring. Don't worry, I'll be heading back off into fanfic wilderness soon enough. Mostly I'm just trying to make sure I'm setting up all the right plot points now, and my head feels like it's going to explode. XD

Lots of love to all of you,

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing Harry noticed when they stepped off the train was an unfamiliar voice floating across the sea of black robes.

“First years! First years over here, please!”

He craned his head around a seventh year in front of him and saw a witch he recognised as Professor Grubbly-Plank, Hagrid’s replacement from the previous year, waving the first years toward the boats. He stopped in his tracks and stared. Where was Hagrid?

“Get a move on, Harry, you’re blocking the door,” Ginny said right behind him.

“Right, sorry,” he replied vaguely, still looking around as though he expected Hagrid to appear in the middle of the crowd, apologising profusely for being late.

“Where d’you think he is?” he muttered to Ginny as they made their way toward the carriages. Ron and Hermione were still back with the train, making sure the students got off with all their things and preferably without injuring one another.

“Hagrid?” Ginny asked quietly. “Guess he’s still wherever Dumbledore sent him over the summer.”

There had been several veiled references to Hagrid’s secret mission over the summer, but the adults had made sure to keep it from them. Hagrid had only had time to send Harry a quick note at Grimmauld Place before he’d headed off for who-knew-where, and it had just said “see you when I get back”. Harry rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. It felt like a bad omen, somehow, not seeing Hagrid looming cheerfully over the terrified first-years when they arrived.

“Do you think he’s okay?” he asked aloud.

“We would’ve heard if something serious had happened,” Ginny said back. “But don’t keep on about it, people will notice.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry replied, heart sinking a little further. He’d spent all summer wishing desperately that he could join the Order, do something, know something. Now he suddenly realised how much of a barrier that knowledge would create between him and his classmates. For a moment, he was almost glad of his ignorance, although, given who he was, this didn’t last more than the most fleeting
of moments.

He trailed after Ginny as she headed toward the carriages, lost in worried thoughts about Hagrid. He barely glanced at the skeletal horses pulling the carriages as he clambered in, followed by Neville and Luna. They still creeped him out a bit, even though this was the third time he’d seen them. The first time had been the worst, freaked out as he’d already been after encountering the dementors on the train at the beginning of third year. The horses seemed harmless enough, mostly ignoring the students who were milling around them, pulling the carriages as though instructed by invisible drivers, but there was no avoiding the fact that they looked mostly dead, and very spooky. Harry was glad he didn’t have to have anything to do with them the rest of the year.

“Did you see that Grubbly-Plank woman?” Ron asked as soon as he and Hermione reached the carriage, just before they started moving.

“Yeah, I guess Hagrid’s still away,” Harry said, shooting Ron a sharp look. Neville and Luna were listening to their conversation.

“You don’t think he’s left, do you?” Ron asked, completely missing the hint.

“He’s not a very good teacher,” said Luna.

“He is too,” Harry, Ron, and Ginny replied at the same time.

“Erm, yes, he’s very good.” Hermione said when Harry glared at her. Luna shrugged and turned her eyes toward the window, apparently unperturbed by their difference of opinion. The only upside to this little outburst was that it seemed to have distracted Ron from his wondering. Harry glared at Luna for a second before turning his eyes towards the castle, which was growing closer with every passing second. It looked peaceful, just as it always did, lights twinkling in hundreds of windows and spilling out of the front door. For the first time, however, there was a heavy weight sitting in his gut at the sight of his favourite place, his first home. It wasn’t just Hagrid’s absence, or the eerie feeling the strange horses always gave him. He couldn’t help remembering the last time he was here, the abrupt manner in which he’d left, the rumours that must have flown about afterwards. For a moment, it didn’t feel like home at all.

The carriages drew up as usual, however, and in the clatter and bustle of everyone getting out, bumping into old friends, shouting at one another over the heads of other students as they filed into the Great Hall, McGonnagall presiding over the chaos and greeting older students with her usual stern nod, the feeling slipped away and Harry followed the others into the Hall with his thoughts on dinner.

Which lasted for a moment, until he realised just how many heads were turning to follow him as he crossed the Hall, turning to whisper to one another. Hell, some of them didn’t even bother to whisper.

“He’s not at the teacher’s table,” Ron muttered into Harry’s ear, distracting him. Harry glanced up at the Hagrid-less head table and shrugged.

“He’s probably still doing whatever Dumbledore sent him to do,” he said, repeating Ginny’s words from earlier. “Not like we can ask questions, is it?”

“Yeah, fair point,” said Ron as they took their seats. “Who d’you think that witch is, talking to Dumbledore?”

“Probably the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” Hermione said. “It’s the only vacant
position, isn’t it?”

“She looks like one good curse would finish her off,” Ron mused, looking up at the short, squat woman who was leaning confidentially toward Dumbledore as though imparting state secrets. She was dressed in bright pink, with a pink alice band in her hair, and while her lips smiled constantly, it never quite reached her eyes. She bore an unfortunate resemblance to an overdressed toad.

“As long as she doesn’t try and wipe our memories or murder us, I’m all in favour,” Harry said. “Surely we’ve got to have one year where things don’t go tits up.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you,” said Ron. “And yet here we are.” Harry and Hermione snorted, but quickly covered their laughter as McGonnagall filed in with the first years and the Sorting Hat.

As soon as the Great Hall was quiet, the Hat opened the rip in its brim and began to sing. It wasn’t quite like the previous years, where it merely informed the gathered students about the qualities desired by each house before the Sorting began. This year, there were rather a lot of bad rhymes about unity and pulling together in the face of adversity. Harry found himself glancing over at the Slytherin table with an uncomfortable itch between his shoulders and a guilty weight in his chest, so distracted by his own chain of thoughts that he didn’t even notice everyone staring at him again.

Malfoy was listening to the song with a sneer fixed firmly in place, looking like the git he was, but underneath Harry’s usual disdain, there was another, far less simple emotion. Here was another change. A few months ago he would have scoffed along with Ron and Seamus at the end of the song, the thought of making friends with Slytherins too ridiculous to contemplate. But Sirius and Regulus seemed to hover at the edge of his consciousness, ready to pop in and remind him that the world wasn’t always black and white. What if there were Slytherins who were only going wrong because of their families? What if they only needed someone to talk to? What if they felt pushed aside by the other houses, forced into some pointless rivalry? What if they’re only what they are because it’s what they’re told to be?

Harry shrugged uncomfortably and said nothing as Ron snorted derisively at the idea of making friends with Malfoy of all people, and merely watched the Sorting. This wasn’t the kind of thinking he was good at. He was far happier when things were simple, good and bad, light and dark, us and them. According to Snape, that was what made him so pants at Potions.

He could feel Hermione’s gaze on him, but he ignored it. He wasn’t sure enough about what he was feeling to discuss it with her yet, even though he knew she could probably help. He was half afraid her tendency to get overexcited about things would just confuse him - or outright put him off. He knew that wasn’t fair, but it was what it was.

Once the Feast began, however, he had more important things to worry about.

“So, Harry, where’d you disappear to last term?” asked Seamus as soon as the food appeared on the platters in front of them. His tone was abrupt, almost pugnacious, as though he expected Harry to shout at him. Harry was surprised. He and Seamus had always got along well, but Seamus looked almost angry.

“Mrs Weasley took me back to her place,” he said, the lie they’d been rehearsing all summer coming easily. Occlumency hadn’t just helped keep the inside of his head safe, it seemed. He wasn’t sure he liked this realisation, but he kept his expression polite. “She didn’t think I should hang around after what happened,” he added meaningfully. Seamus had the good grace to blush.

“Fair enough, mate,” Dean said hurriedly, and judging by Seamus’s sudden squawk, he’d kicked his friend under the table. “People round here can be nosy bastards.”
“I was just asking,” Seamus muttered resentfully, rubbing his shin under the table.

“Well don’t next time,” Ron said irritably, around a mouthful of potatoes. Seamus glared at him and opened his mouth, but Harry didn’t have the energy for an argument. He wasn’t best pleased at being questioned his first night back either, but he wasn’t surprised.

“It’s fine,” he said loudly, nudging Ron sharply with his elbow. “Just leave it, alright?”

“Alright for you to say,” Seamus said, with a bloodmindedness that Harry hadn’t seen in him before. “You’re not the one whose mam didn’t want them to come back this year.”

“What, why?” Ron asked, surprise taking over from anger.

“Cos of all the nonsense Dumbledore’s been spouting,” Seamus said, a mulish expression on his face. “About You Know Who being back and all.”

Harry felt a ringing in his ears. Curiosity he could handle, just about. Rude, nosy jerks were par for the course around here. But this was Seamus, someone he’d known for four years, shared a dorm with, laughed with. Hell, he’d met Seamus’s mother, he’d liked her. And now they were accusing him of lying? Because that’s what it amounted to. If Dumbledore was talking nonsense, it was because of Harry. He could feel the angry retort fighting to get out, Hermione’s hand on his arm doing little more than irritate him further.

It’s not about you, it’s about them.

Harry’s conscience usually sounded suspiciously like Hermione, but since starting Occlumency, Tonks’s voice occasionally got a look in. Clearly it was going to be a night of uncomfortable feelings. Merlin, he wished he could ignore all these weird thoughts and just get angry for one, just shout at someone or hate them without having to feel… this. But Tonks’s voice was right.

He forced himself to take a deep breath, to clear his mind. It wasn’t easy, when he felt like punching Seamus right in his stubborn face, but if he couldn’t deal with a 15-year-old git, how could he expect to keep Voldemort out?

“It’s not nonsense,” he said flatly, while Ron spluttered incoherently, the only reason he hadn’t responded being the potatoes he’d choked on in his rage. Harry thumped him roughly on the back, glaring at Seamus all the while. “I was there, I saw him. If you don’t believe me, fine. But it’s not going to change the truth.”

Seamus glared right back at him, mouth drawn into a thin line. He looked as though he’d quite like to say something back, but Harry’s calm response seemed to have robbed him of some of his self-righteous anger. Dean shot Harry an apologetic glance and immediately talking about Quidditch, the ever-reliable subject for any emergency conversation change.

They made it through the rest of dinner without starting a nuclear holocaust, although it was mostly because Dean, Hermione, and Neville developed a sudden and mysterious habit of interrupting any statement that might be considered even slightly controversial with a question about Neville’s cactus, or what classes they were taking this year, or what they thought about the Wimbourne Wasp’s chances next season with their new Chaser lineup. Harry mostly ignored them, concentrating on his food and trying to remember why he wasn’t allowed to kick Seamus under the table as well. Dean had already done it at least twice. Harry hoped Seamus had a very large bruise.

The night wasn’t over, however. When Dumbledore stood up to speak at the end of the feast, when everyone was feeling pleasantly full and thinking only of their beds, they found themselves suddenly...
faced with a very pink, very toadlike presence instead, one who was apparently determined to talk them into a stupor. Dumbledore introduced her as Professor Umbridge. As Hermione had predicted, she was the new DADA teacher, although if her introductory speech was anything to go by, they were in for a very dull year. Perhaps she was worried they wouldn’t sleep properly their first night back, although Harry privately felt that boring students to sleep at the table wasn’t really a helpful solution. His initial surprise at her speaking at all lasted only long enough to realise just how incredibly awful said speaking was. He and Ron spent the rest of the speech staring vacantly toward the top table, eyes glazed, mouths slightly open, chins resting on their hands. Hermione, however, did not seem at all bored, although she certainly didn’t look entertained.

Harry made a valiant effort to concentrate as phrases such as “progress for progress’s sake” and “perfecting what needs to be perfected” drifted past him. The students around them didn’t seem to be faring any better. Most were whispering amongst themselves, or at best, staring vaguely as Ron and Harry were doing. Only a few seemed to be really paying attention.

“Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating.” Dumbledore’s voice permeated Harry’s stupor and he jerked back to reality, finding that Umbridge had finally stopped speaking and Dumbledore was now discussing Quidditch tryouts.

“Yes, it certainly was illuminating,” Hermione muttered.

“You what?” said Ron. “That was a load of old waffle.”

“You didn’t listen to a word she said, did you?” Hermione hissed. Ron shrugged unabashedly.

“Go on then, what was so great about it?” Harry asked, lip twitching a little at the long-suffering expression on Hermione’s face.

“I didn’t say it was great,” she whispered, glancing up at Professor Umbridge. “I just said it was illuminating. Didn’t you hear what she said at the start? The Ministry values education?”

“Yeah, so what?” Ron said. “Mum and everyone’ve been talking about that for weeks.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, lowering her voice even further, so Ron and Harry had to lean toward her to hear. “This is what they were worried about. Umbridge isn’t just here to teach.”

“She’s not?” said Harry, confused.

“She’s here to keep an eye on things,” Hermione said darkly. “The Ministry’s interfering at Hogwarts.”

Harry might not understand what that meant as well as Hermione seemed to, but the thought sent a shiver down his spine. Given everything the Ministry had been doing the past few months, this couldn’t be a good thing.

It was past midnight when Sirius heard someone calling his name. He’d just been slipping into a doze, Remus pressed against his back, and at first, he thought he’d imagined it. It came again, however, and this time Sirius recognised Harry’s voice. *Oh Merlin, tell me something hasn’t gone wrong already.*

“Coming,” he mumbled, trying to remember how close you had to be before the mirror could pick up your voice. He groped on the bedside table for his wand and lit it, grabbing the mirror that he’d been
carrying everywhere with him since that morning.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, holding the mirror up so Harry would be able to see him. Harry’s face was half-hidden by shadow. Sirius caught a glimpse of familiar hangings behind him. He must be sitting by the fire in the common room.

“Nothing much,” Harry said. Even in the dim light, Sirius could see that he looked awkward. Remus grumbled beside him and sat up, squinting in the wandlight.

“‘S that Harry?” he asked blearily. “Wha’s wrong? Wha’s happened?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said hurriedly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up, I thought you’d still be up.”

“We’re old,” Sirius snorted. “Don’t worry about it, Remus missed you anyway.”

Remus snorted and nudged him with his shoulder.

“Don’t listen to him, he’s been sulking ever since Molly yelled at him this morning.”

Harry stifled a laugh.

“Serves you right,” he said. “Thanks for coming, though,” he added, more seriously.

“You didn’t think I was going to let you go without a proper goodbye, did you?” Sirius asked. “So what’s new? No one giving you any trouble, I hope?”

Harry grimaced.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” he said. Sirius scowled. They’d known it would be difficult for Harry, especially to begin with. While the *Prophet* wasn’t criticising him as harshly as they had been Dumbledore, they’d come up with enough ridiculous stories to keep the entire population of Hogwarts gossiping for weeks.

“I wanted to ask you about our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor,” Harry said, before Sirius could say anything.

“Why, who is it?” Remus asked in surprise, shifting until he was sitting behind Sirius with his head resting on his shoulder, so they could both talk to Harry.

“Her name’s Umbridge,” said Harry. Sirius felt Remus tense behind him and he fought the urge to snarl. Clearly he’d spent too long as Pads earlier, although he thought it was an entirely reasonable response when it came to Dolores Umbridge.

“You’ve heard of her,” Harry surmised.

“You could say that,” Remus said darkly. “She drafted some legislation a few years back that’s made it almost impossible for lycanthropes to find work. She’s half the reason the enclave exists in the first place.”

“What the hell’s she doing teaching, though?” Sirius asked disgustedly. “That bitch shouldn’t be allowed within ten miles of a school.”

“Sirius,” Remus said warningly.

“What, like you haven’t called her worse.”
“Not in front of impressionable youngsters, I haven’t,” Remus replied.

“Which is why you should be the one teaching,” Sirius said. “Did Dumbledore say anything about her?” he said to Harry before Remus could reply.

“No, but she gave the most boring speech I’ve ever heard in my life,” said Harry. “I don’t remember any of it, but Hermione said she’s working for the Ministry.”

Sirius sighed heavily. They’d known the Ministry was trying to get one of their people into Hogwarts, but they hadn’t expected this. Possibly our friendly Headmaster should have warned us, Sirius thought darkly. Even he had to admit, however, that the past week had been more than a little chaotic.

“They’ve been trying to find a way to get to Dumbledore since June,” he said aloud. “I guess they took the first chance they got.”

“So she’s a spy, then?” Harry asked, his lip curling with disdain.

“Essentially,” said Remus. “Although I wouldn’t be surprised if Fudge pushes things further the second he has an excuse. He might award her extra powers, even make it possible to go against Dumbledore, if he can drum up enough support.”

“Sounds like it won’t be that hard,” Harry said glumly. “Some of the parents didn’t want their kids to come back this year.”

Sirius could hear the strain in Harry’s voice and wished he could reach through the mirror and hug him. No wonder he’d called them. If parents had been tempted to keep their children away, there were two people they would blame, and Harry was second on that list.

“After the hatchet job the Ministry and the Prophet have been doing, I can’t say I’m surprised,” Remus said sadly. “There’s not much you can do about it except keep your head down and stay out of trouble.” Sirius fought down an unexpected smile at the emphasis on the last part of Remus’s sentence.

“That’s what I wanted to ask,” Harry said, shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably again. Sirius recognised the gesture. For a moment, he was forcibly reminded of his teenage self, asking advice from Euphemia Potter for the first time. It had felt so strange, actively seeking out an adult. He almost hadn’t done it, had almost continued as he always had, sorting things on his own, but Euphemia had been so gentle with him, so understanding… He shook his head and forced himself to return to the present.

“What should we do?” Harry asked. Sirius smiled reassuringly at his godson.

“Stick to the plan,” he said. “Chances are, she’ll try and question you about where you were over the summer. Just tell her the story we already worked out, and don’t let her get to you. If you’re worried about anything, you can always call us, any time.”

“Even though we’re old and sleepy,” Remus added with a grin. Harry didn’t crack a smile, however.

“What’s bothering you?” Sirius asked gently. Harry chewed on his bottom lip for a second, apparently considering his words carefully.

“Shouldn’t we be doing something?” he burst out. “I mean, everyone’s just going on like it’s all normal, but Voldemort’s back and there are Death Eaters out there right now, and we’re worrying
about some Ministry witch teaching DADA? Shouldn’t we be, I dunno, *telling* people or something?”

Sirius smiled sadly.

“I wish it were that simple,” he said. “And it’s not like we’re not. Why do you think Dumbledore’s in so much trouble right now? He’s telling everyone, he won’t shut up about it.”

Harry snorted, apparently unamused.

“Harry, I know how much you hate to hear this, but this isn’t your job,” said Remus. “You’re *supposed* to feel like things are normal, it means we’re still doing something right.”

“But if we just keep pretending, then Voldemort wins,” Harry said quietly.

“We’re not pretending,” Sirius said firmly. “You’ve seen what we’re doing. And I know you’re not going to let your classmates keep pretending either. But,” he added, seeing Harry’s mouth open, “don’t go picking fights with your teachers, eh? Be careful, pick your battles.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” Sirius said, injecting a stern note into his voice that he thought Minerva might be rather proud of. “You don’t help anyone by getting in trouble.”

Harry scowled mutinously at them for a moment, before his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“I hate this,” he mumbled.

“I know,” Sirius said softly. “Believe me, I know. But can you trust us this once?”

Harry met his serious gaze and nodded.

“Okay.”

“Now get off to bed, before someone comes looking for you,” said Sirius. “We’ll be right here if you need us. For anything,” he added. Harry nodded again and smiled at them both before saying goodbye. His face disappeared and the mirror suddenly reflected their own faces instead. Sirius met Remus’s gaze in the mirror for a moment before laying it back on the bedside table.

“Fuck,” he said succinctly.

“Fuck indeed,” Remus replied. “Shit, fuck, bugger, and arsehole too.” Sirius leaned back so he could stare at his boyfriend, and then broke into a sudden fit of the giggles.

“You are utterly ridiculous,” he laughed. Remus raised an eyebrow at him.

“I feel like that was an entirely reasonable response to the situation,” he said.

“Reasonable, maybe. Hilarious, absolutely.”

Remus rolled his eyes and flomped back onto his own pillow.

“What should we do about Harry?” he asked. When Sirius didn’t immediately stop laughing, he poked him in the ribs with a sharp finger.

“Ow! Talk to Minerva when you’re up there tomorrow,” Sirius said. “You’re basically there every
day as it is, might as well keep an eye on Harry at the same time.”

“That’s another concern, if that hag is running around Hogwarts. What if she finds the farmhouse?”

Sirius sighed. He felt another clusterfuck of a problem coming on, as if they hadn’t had enough of them already.

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow,” he decided. “I’m too old for this shit.”

“Drama queen.”

Sirius smiled as he extinguished his wand and snuggled back up to Remus.

“Damn right.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Howdy howdy! This part of the story is haaaaaard because I'm trying to mix canon with the new story and also not be incredibly repetitive and boring. Uuugh. You'll notice there are some direct quotes from OOTP in this chapter. It was the best way I could find of bringing the two together. Hopefully there won't be too many chapters of this before I can start really fucking things up again. :D

Please let me know if it's working, or if it's not, or just what you think is going to happen next.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry woke next morning with a vague feeling of unease lurking just behind his ribcage. He lay on his back for a moment, staring at the shadows on his hangings, wishing he could just go back to sleep. But the others were already moving around, and he suspected that being late to class on his first day wouldn't come under Remus's definition of “staying out of trouble”.

A rather alarming thought occurred to him as he dragged his robes toward him. Will McGonnagall write to Sirius and Remus if I get in trouble? It wasn’t something he’d had to worry about since beginning Hogwarts. The Dursleys couldn’t care less what he got up to while surrounded by wizards, but Sirius and Remus - let’s be honest, mostly Remus - would probably care a whole lot. Harry sat clutching his robes for a moment, trying to fit this new development into his head. He wasn’t sure whether he liked it or not, and he suspected he wasn’t going to figure it out in a hurry.

On the heels of this vaguely alarming new concept came the realisation that he ought to be practicing his Occlumency. Harry sighed heavily. This year was clearly going to be a lot more complicated than he’d anticipated, and not just because of Voldemort.

“You’d think they’d find something better to talk about, wouldn’t you?” Ron muttered as they entered the Great Hall with Hermione half an hour later. Stares and whispers followed Harry once more as he found a seat between Hermione and Ginny and began to butter himself some toast.

“What’s the latest rumour?” Ginny asked, when Hermione told her what they were talking about.

“The last story in the Prophet suggested Dumbledore had kept Harry at Hogwarts all summer against his relatives wishes and was brainwashing him.”

Harry choked on his toast as the image of the Dursleys being swamped by wizarding reporters appeared in his brain.

“You don’t think they interviewed the Dursleys do you?” he wheezed as Ginny thumped him enthusiastically on the back.

“Probably,” Hermione replied. “What would they have said?”
Harry snorted, mildly amused by the idea of Uncle Vernon fielding questions about his nephew from a bunch of demanding wizards.

“Probably that I’m the antiChrist,” he said with a shrug. “I dunno what Dumbledore told them when I didn’t go back there in June, I never asked.”

“He should’ve sent Magical Law Enforcement round there,” Ron said. His voice was low, but he sounded furious. “They shouldn’t just get away with what they did.”

“Ron,” Hermione whispered warningly, but Harry didn’t mind. He knew they’d avoided talking about why Harry was no longer with the Dursleys, and he was grateful. But now that he had some distance, it was almost a relief that someone had mentioned it.

“It’s fine,” he said. “As long as I don’t have to see them again, I don’t care what happens to them.”

Ron looked like he was ready to embark on a fresh tirade, but he was interrupted by the arrival of the mail, which included Hermione’s copy of *The Daily Prophet*.

“Know what your enemy is saying,” she said darkly, catching the disgusted expressions of her companions.

“Gran cancelled our subscription,” Neville said, clambering into a seat on the other side of the table. “She said the enemy had enough people listening to it already.”

Harry grinned at him, and he found that, on the whole, he didn’t feel as bad as he would have expected.

After a day that included History of Magic, Potions, and Divination, however, Harry’s equanimity was somewhat stretched as they approached their first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson with Professor Umbridge. They’d already discussed what Sirius and Remus had told Harry the night before (after Hermione had told Harry off for being careless enough to use the mirror in the common room “where anyone could listen in”), but their only conclusion was that they needed to be careful not to draw attention to themselves. Harry was starting to feel almost like a spy in his own school, which he wasn’t sure he liked all that much.

Umbridge was waiting for them when they arrived at the classroom, looking more toad-like than ever. Harry felt a surge of fury at the smug little smirk on her face as he remembered Remus’s expression the night before at the mere mention of her name. If what he’d said were true, she was part of the reason Thom and his friends were left practically homeless and relying on strangers for support. She’d helped force people like Remus and Thom into a position where Voldemort seemed like a good option, and yet here she was, teaching them Defense Against the Dark Arts.

*Pick your battles*. Harry scowled as he remembered Sirius’s words. He doubted his godfather had ever picked a battle in his life, unless picking all of them counted, but he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. As much as he might hate it - he was a Gryffindor, after all - he knew Sirius was right. And it wasn’t just Harry who’d be in the shit if Umbridge decided she didn’t like him.

“Good afternoon!” said Professor Umbridge when everyone was seated, her little-girl voice grating against every single one of Harry’s nerves. Hermione twitched beside him, and he knew he wasn’t the only one. Somehow, the thought was comforting. If they had to suffer, at least they were all suffering together.
Only a few people had muttered a reply to Umbridge’s greeting.

“Tut, tut,” she said, her tone suggesting she was talking to a group of toddlers in a daycare centre. “That won’t do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply: Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

Every single face in the room wore the exact same expression of taken-aback disgust, but as no one was willing to challenge a new teacher so soon in the first lesson, they obliged her.

“Wands away and quills out, please.”

There was a groan as everyone complied. Harry, who’d had a quick glance at their textbook during break, wasn’t surprised. It was as dull as dishwater, and about as useful, in Harry’s opinion.

He was so caught up in his gloomy ruminations that he managed to get through the first fifteen minutes of the lesson almost on autopilot, mindlessly copying down the notes Umbridge wrote on the board, and opening the offending textbook to page five when instructed without taking in a single word. He only came to his senses when he realised that Hermione hadn’t opened her book, an event so surprising that it broke through his stupor. Instead of following their instructions, she was sitting in her seat with her hand raised, staring intently at Professor Umbridge. Umbridge, in turn, seemed determined to ignore her, but as half the class was soon staring at Hermione, she was forced to admit defeat.

“Do you have a question, dear?” she asked. Her sugary tone could have supplied a toffee-making factory for a year.

“Yes, I’d like to know when we’re going to practice using defensive magic,” Hermione said. Harry and Ron exchanged startled glances at the steel in her tone. They’d been on the receiving end of Hermione’s ire enough times to know that she was really, very, extremely pissed off, but they’d never expected to hear her direct such a tone at a teacher.

“Using defensive magic, dear?” Umbridge asked with a little laugh, as though Hermione’s gaze wasn’t about to burn her up on the spot. “I can’t imagine why you would need to do that in my classroom.”

“How are we supposed to practice the spells if we don’t use them?” Hermione asked, still glaring. On the other side of Ron, Dean was staring at Hermione with open admiration, as were half the rest of the class. Some of them seemed to be under the impression that the world was coming to an end, and the rest, that they’d never truly appreciated Hermione Granger until this very moment.

“If you study the theory hard enough, that will be sufficient to pass your OWLs, which, after all, is the aim of this class,” Umbridge said, her voice noticeably less sweet this time, her eyes narrowing as she studied Hermione.

“But what about using them in the real world?” Dean asked.

“You will raise your hand if you wish to speak in my class, Mr -”

“Dean Thomas,” Dean said. Umbridge turned her back on him.

“Please continue reading from page five,” she said. Several more hands shot up, and Harry could see her gritting her teeth. He fought back a grin. He was as furious as anyone that they weren’t going to be allowed to practice defensive magic, but seeing his fellow Gryffindors reduce her to a simmering ball of rage so early in the first lesson, despite her attempts to hide it, was uniquely satisfying.
“Yes, dear?” Umbridge asked, hitching her smile and her sugary tone back into place and gesturing to Lavender Brown.

“Lavender Brown, Professor, and it’s like Dean said, what’s the point of learning theory if we can’t use the spells in real life?”

“Are you a Ministry-approved educational expert, Miss Brown?” Umbridge asked. Lavender shook her head. “Well, then, you will kindly allow me to teach in the manner that the Ministry believes is best suited to your young minds. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way—”

“What good is that?” asked Harry, no longer able to help himself. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be—”

“Hand, Mr Potter,” sang Umbridge. Harry put up his hand, glaring at her and ignoring Hermione’s warning looks - as though she could criticise him at this point - but Umbridge had already turned her back on him. There was no escaping the rest of the class, however.

“Do you have a question about the chapter, dear?” she asked Seamus, her smile looking as though it was stapled to her face.

“Seamus Finnigan, and no, but it’s like Harry said,” Seamus started, talking very fast as though expecting to be interrupted, “if we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be risk free.” He subsided, face very red as he avoided Harry’s eye. Apparently, when given a choice between Umbridge and Harry, he’d picked Harry. Better than nothing, I guess.

“Do you expect to be attacked in my classroom, Mr. Finnigan?” Umbridge purred.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Seamus muttered.

“Please speak up, dear,” Umbridge said.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Seamus said loudly, his expression defiant. A wave of muttering broke out, several students nodding fervently in agreement.

“I fear you have been taught some very dangerous ideas—” Umbridge started.

“Our first year teacher tried to kill Harry,” said Parvati loudly.

“Your hand is not up.”

“Our second year teacher was a fraud who accidentally wiped his own memory while he was trying to attack two of us,” Hermione said. “And that was while a monster was attacking the school.”

“Miss Granger, you will kindly not speak out of turn!”

“Last year we had a Death Eater in disguise as a teacher,” said Neville, surprising everyone - including himself, if his expression was anything to go by.

“As I said, you have been taught in an extremely irresponsible way—”

“Going on averages, I’d say we’ve got a three out of four chance of being attacked in this class. Makes sense for us to want to be able to defend ourselves,” said Ron cheerfully.

“That is enough,” Umbridge spat, all sweetness gone from her tone. Her smile had vanished, leaving behind cold fury. “You will respect the rules of my classroom, or I will put every single one
of you in detention. As I have explained, your teachers have been grossly irresponsible, or
dangerous halfbreeds—"

“Professor Lupin was the only teacher who didn’t try to kill us,” Harry said, half-rising from his seat.

“Detention, Mr Potter,” said Umbridge silkily. “Friday evening at eight o’clock, my office.”

Harry glared at her, still half out of his seat, his hands resting on his desk. His ears were ringing. He
knew he shouldn’t be arguing with Umbridge, but he couldn’t get Remus’s face out of his head.
Remus Lupin was the kindest, strongest man he knew - even Sirius admitted that was true - and he
couldn’t let Umbridge insult him like that.

“He was the best teacher we ever had,” Dean said. Harry looked over at him gratefully. Fury still
burned in his throat like bile, but there was something about Dean’s confident statement, spoken
almost calmly, that cut through the irrational desire to shout in Umbridge’s toad-like face.

“You too, Mr Thomas,” Umbridge said. “And if nobody else wants to join them, I suggest you turn
to page five and continue reading Chapter One.”

“Harry, what were you thinking?” Hermione hissed as soon as they were free of the classroom.

“I’m not in the mood for a lecture right now,” Harry replied irritably. “I know I shouldn’t have, and
Remus will probably yell at me as well, so just leave it.”

“Steady on, mate,” Ron said as they shoved through the crowds heading for dinner. “It’s not
Hermione’s fault Umbridge is a troll.”

Harry sighed. The noise of the crowds around them were pressing on his eardrums, making his head
spin. What he needed more than anything was a few moments of peace and quiet.

“Sorry,” he said, offering Hermione what he hoped was an apologetic smile. “I just need a couple of
minutes, okay?”

Hermione’s expression softened and she nodded.

“We’ll be in the Hall,” she said, and tugged Ron away. Harry turned and headed towards a disused
classroom he knew was down the next corridor. He just needed a few minutes alone to calm down.
He couldn’t help remembering what Tonks said - if he wasn’t careful, extreme emotions could take
over, and put his Occlumency at risk. Umbridge was clearly in the top ten worst people in existence -
he thought Snape still probably beat her, at the very least - but she wasn’t worth revealing Order
secrets to Voldemort over. Plus, I’m in enough trouble as it is , he thought, wondering whether he
could “forget” his mirror for the next couple of days and avoid the bollocksing - or more likely, stern
talking-to - that Remus would no doubt think necessary.

Unfortunately for Harry, his disused classroom was at that very moment in use, which would not in
itself have been such a problem if he’d noticed the user before he’d shut the door and slumped onto a
dusty desk, and if that user had not been Draco Malfoy.

Harry hadn’t noticed him at first, as he’d been half-hidden behind a stack of uncomfortable-looking
chairs. He’d been reading a letter when Harry entered, which he’d crumpled up and shoved into a
pocket as soon as Harry had entered. For a moment, surprise rendered them both speechless.
“Feel free to leave, Potter,” Malfoy said, when Harry simply stared at him. Harry was already at the end of his rope, and the disdainful sneer that accompanied these words was the death knell to his self control.

“Sod off, Malfoy, you don’t own the castle,” he said. When he looked back on it later, he’d wonder what on earth he was thinking. The truth, of course, was that he wasn’t. He’d wanted a few minutes to himself, nothing more. Just to clear his head. He was trying so hard to do the right thing, and then there was bloody fucking sodding arseing Malfoy. Of course there was.

Malfoy didn’t seem to be thinking much more clearly in that moment, which would have surprised Harry if he’d been capable of rational observation. Malfoy was normally more controlled than Harry, less prone to the Gryffindor fuck-it attitude. This evening, however, he was as reckless as Harry.

“Nor do you,” Malfoy snapped back at Harry. “Or does being the Headmaster’s pet give you special rights we mere mortals don’t know about?”

“Get fucked,” Harry snarled pushing himself off the desk, hands balled into fists. He didn’t even think to go for his wand. Some wizard you are, he thought, much later.

“Oh, very witty, Potter,” Malfoy said, coming around the stack of chairs and crossing the distance between them. “I dare say you’ll make Minister for Magic with such verbal abilities.”

“Don’t you ever shut up?” Harry asked.

“I’ll shut up as soon as you get out,” Malfoy said, his expression darkening. Harry could hear the same ringing in his ears that he’d heard in Umbridge’s classroom. He was dimly aware that he was being absolutely ridiculous, and he absolutely didn’t care. He grabbed a handful of Malfoy’s robes in his fist.

“Don’t tell me what to do, you poncey git,” he said. It was not, upon reflection, the most devastating insult he’d ever come up with, but it seemed to do the trick. Malfoy’s fist swung into Harry’s vision and he just managed to duck to the side enough that it grazed his cheek rather than breaking his jaw. It still hurt, however, and Harry was quite happy to return the favour.

As most fist-fights outside of movie studios are, it was a short, scrappy, almost hilarious affair that was more awkward wrestle than actual fight, both boys attempting to stop the other hitting them as much as they were attempting to hit. Had either one of them thought, in that moment, to go for their wands, it would have been a very different story. As it was, however, they were neither of them thinking clearly, and were far more interested in venting their frustration in the most physical way possible than in actually being effective.

After a couple of minutes of wordless grunting and shuffling and muffled cursing, during which Harry scraped his shoe down Malfoy’s shin and Malfoy managed to knee Harry painfully in the thigh, there was a sharp tearing sound, and Malfoy’s sleeve tore from wrist to elbow.

“You clumsy fuck,” Malfoy yelled, pulling back in surprise. “These are new robes!”

Harry barely heard him. His hot rage seemed to have turned to ice at the sight of Malfoy’s bare arm, the distinct mark of a large hand visible near the elbow. It was obviously fresh, the bruising no more than three or four days old. Harry knew those bruises only too well.

“Are you listening to me, Potter?” Malfoy demanded, adjusting his robes with apparent nonchalance. A glance at his face, however, was enough to tell Harry that his suspicions had been correct.
“Where did you get that bruise?” he blurted out. Malfoy froze for a moment, eyes widening just a fraction, but his shock passed so quickly that Harry could have imagined it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Malfoy said disdainfully. “And if you’re done trying to tear my clothes off, I have places to be.”

Harry shook his head, completely at sea by such a drastic change of circumstance. A second ago, he would have quite happily strangled Malfoy - he wasn’t sure he didn’t still want to - but that mark, so familiar, changed everything.

“I’ve seen bruises like that before,” he said quietly, not moving. Malfoy’s lips twisted in a sneer.

“We’ve all seen bruises before, Potter. No doubt I’ll have some fresh ones later, thanks to your ridiculousness.” He started to push past Harry, but Harry reached out a hand to stop him. Malfoy glared down at the hand on his arm.

“You don’t know when to stop, do you?”

“Who did it?” Harry asked helplessly. Damn it all, this was Malfoy, the King Wanker of Hogwarts, but there were some things you just didn’t wish on anyone.

“Let it go, Potter.” There was more than the hint of a snarl in Malfoy’s voice. His eyes flashed dangerously.

“You should tell someone, get some help,” Harry said. To his surprise, Malfoy laughed humourlessly.

“You really are a pathetic git,” he said. “Get your hands off me and go save someone who actually wants it.” Malfoy wrenched his arm from Harry’s grasp and swept from the room, slamming the door behind him. Harry stared at the closed door, thoughts buzzing around like stunned mosquitoes in his head, none of them quite connecting. He wasn’t sure what had just happened, but one thing he was sure of: Draco Malfoy’s life wasn’t nearly as perfect as he’d always thought.

Two things. There was no way he was going to let it go at that.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose, come say hi!
Hi! I know this is a little shorter than usual, but the last week and a half have been quite difficult, so this is what we’ve got. I’ll try and get an extra chapter up this weekend to make up for it. Hello to all the new people, thank you so much for your lovely comments, they make me so happy whenever I read them :) 

I will be keeping up with my weekly-or-more-often chapters over Christmas, because this is fun. At some point I'll do the edit I keep threatening, which won't change the plot, but some of the extraneous waffle might get cut, so sorry for putting all my early readers through that. XD I know it needs a ton of proofreading, so thanks for sticking with me in spite of that.

Someone suggested I turn this into a series rather than one long fic, but there isn't really a neat cut off in the narrative that will allow for that, so onward we march. I know it is already Many Words. I guess that's the downside of a WIP, you don't edit out the extra stuff the way you do when writing a novel.

I'll try and reply to everyone's comments when I have time. ❤

Unfortunately for Harry, he quickly found himself distracted from Malfoy. He’d barely sat down and started filling Ron and Hermione in on what he’d just seen when McGonagall swept down from the teacher’s table and instructed him to follow her. He swiped a piece of bread as he stood up, Ron and Hermione offering sympathetic expressions as he was led from the room like a man going to his execution.

“What on earth were you thinking, Potter?” McGonagall demanded as soon as they were seated in her office. “Not one day in and I find you already have a detention, and from Professor Umbridge no less.”

“She was insulting Remus,” Harry said sullenly. He felt it was slightly unfair that he was here while Dean got to finish his dinner.

“Remus Lupin is a grown man who is quite capable of standing up for himself,” McGonagall said severely, her brows contracting even further.

“He can’t when no one’s there,” Harry objected. He knew he was pushing his luck, but he’d lost some of his fear of McGonagall over the summer, and he was still vibrating with anger and something less definable after the events of the afternoon. “And what about Thom and his friends? Umbridge is half the reason they were stuck in that enclave place. We’re just supposed to say nothing?”

McGonagall sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She looked exhausted.

“Potter, normally I would agree with you, but surely you understand that our circumstances at present are difficult. While your dedication to Remus is admirable, you cannot bring yourself to the
attention of Dolores Umbridge.

Harry scowled furiously.

“I know she’s working for the Ministry,” he said. “I don’t see what she can do to me, though, aside from give me detention.”

McGonagall lifted her eyes to the heavens as though asking for guidance.

“You are fifteen years old, Potter. You’ve been privy to most of what’s gone on in your home over the summer. Surely you know better than that.”

Harry squirmed under her sharp gaze. He didn’t want to admit that she was right. It would be so much easier to just throw caution to the winds. After all, it had always worked for him in the past. *Except when it didn’t.* He shivered at the ghost of memories he’d rather leave behind.

“Yeah, I know,” he muttered. McGonagall leaned forward, her expression less stern and more worried than he was used to seeing.

“It’s not only you I’m worried about,” she said. “Your behaviour reflects on all of us, and on the school.”

Harry nodded, the bread he’d scoffed on the way up the stairs sitting heavily in his stomach.

“You will apologise to Professor Umbridge for your outburst, and you will do your detention with her on Friday evening.”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, the sullen tone returning.

“I know this is hard on you,” McGonagall said softly, and Harry looked up in surprise. “I’m proud of you for having the courage to stand up for what’s right. But there is more than one kind of courage, Potter. Do you understand?”

Harry stared at her for a long moment. He’d never seen her look so vulnerable, and it was this, more than any lesson from Tonks or warning from Sirius, that finally made him realise just how serious things were.

“I understand, Professor,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” McGonagall replied, her usual brusque tone returning. “You may go. Send Thomas up to me, please.”

“Goodnight, Professor.”

By the time Harry reached the common room ten minutes later, he felt like his head might explode. Life was never exactly simple at Hogwarts, but his first day had been full of more surprises than even he was used to, and none of them good.

“How bad was it?” Ron asked sympathetically when Harry plonked himself down on their favourite couch in the corner. Harry shrugged and gratefully accepted the roast beef sandwich Hermione had brought up from dinner.

“Could’ve been worse,” he said. “She didn’t yell at me, at least.”

“Did she warn you about Umbridge?” Hermione asked shrewdly. Harry nodded, mouth too full to answer.
“What’s Dumbledore doing, hiring that old bat?” Ron asked angrily. “It’s O.W.L year, and we’re not even going to be learning the spells.”

“I doubt Dumbledore had much choice,” Hermione said darkly. “It’s not like there are a whole lot of applicants for that job in the first place, and the Ministry’s been talking about their educational reforms for weeks. I imagine he was forced to take her on.”

“Well, that’s not on,” Ron said indignantly. Hermione shrugged.

“Under another Ministry, it might be a positive move,” she said. When Ron and Harry made outraged noises, she raised an eyebrow at them as though they were both intolerably ignorant.

“Ministry oversight is a good thing under most circumstances,” she said patiently. “It encourages transparency, and allows parents to have a say in how the school is run.”

“Yeah, but if you get someone like Fudge in, it fucks it all up,” Harry objected.

“And if you have a poor Headmaster, how is that any different?” Hermione asked. Ron groaned and flopped onto his back on the floor.

“Please tell me we’re not going to argue about politics all night,” he said, throwing an arm over his eyes. Hermione snorted and prodded him with a toe.

“It’s people ignoring politics that’s got us into this mess in the first place,” she pointed out.

“Still boring though,” Harry said. He was treated to an eye roll, but Hermione didn’t seem inclined to pursue her point.

“What was it you started telling us before McGonagall dragged you off, Harry?” Ron asked, moving his arm so he could look up at them. “What happened with Malfoy? I didn’t see him at dinner.”

Harry was immediately distracted from his unpleasant feelings towards the Ministry. He leaned forward and described everything that had happened in the classroom, and what he suspected about Malfoy’s home life.

“Are you sure that’s what you saw?” Hermione asked gingerly when he was finished. Her expression had slowly darkened as Harry told his story, but now she looked more worried than angry.

“I’m telling you, it’s not the first time I’ve seen a bruise like that,” Harry said staunchly. Hermione and Ron exchanged glances.

“You think I imagined it, don’t you?” he demanded.

“No, of course not, Harry,” Hermione replied hurriedly. “It’s just that, well, Malfoy? Being abused? He’s always talking about his home as though it’s perfect.”

“You think he’d tell everyone if he was getting beat up?” Harry said sharply. “You know what he’s like, always having to be the best all the time. No way would he admit to something like that.”

Hermione chewed on her lip, clearly torn. Ron rubbed a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in all directions.

“What if it was just an accident?” he asked. “Like Malfoy tripped and someone grabbed him or something? Or he was playing Quidditch with friends? Hell, it could’ve been one of the
Harry wanted to growl with frustration. Why couldn’t they see the obvious?

“The bruises are too old for them to have happened at school,” he said through gritted teeth. “And you didn’t see his face when I asked him about it. I’m right, and you just don’t want to admit it.”

Hermione looked up at him, horrified.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry, it just seems so surreal, the idea of Malfoy having… that… done to him. But of course we trust you.”

Ron nodded awkwardly from his place on the floor.

“What’re you going to do about it?” he asked Harry. Harry sighed and leaned back against the couch. That was the million galleon question, wasn’t it?

“I have no idea,” he said. “But I’m damn sure not going to do nothing, even if it is Malfoy.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged another look. They were clearly still worried, but, whether they really believed him or not, they were ready to follow his lead.

“We’re with you mate,” said Ron. “Even if it is Malfoy.”

Harry’s decision to do something to help Malfoy was easier made than followed. That night, as he sat in his bed, staring at Malfoy’s dot on the Marauder’s Map, he wondered what Malfoy was thinking. When he’d first seen the bruises on Malfoy’s arm, all he could think was that they were the same. But it wasn’t true. The people hurting Malfoy were his actual parents, not the people who’d reluctantly taken him in after the parents who loved him had died. Was there anyone in Malfoy’s life who stood up for him? Was there anyone who would take him in, insist that he come stay with them, fend off Malfoy Senior when he came to get his son?

Was there even anything Harry could do? Would Malfoy even let him help?

Harry sighed and put the map away, his fingers brushing against the photo of Regulus as he did so. He stared down at it, mind churning uncomfortably, unable to come to a single solid conclusion. Everything was just a confusing mess and he had no idea where to even start unpicking it.

How many of Malfoy’s friends were suffering the same thing? How many of them followed their parents out of some misguided loyalty, or worse, out of fear? And then they come here, where the only people they can trust are other Slytherins going through the same shit, Harry thought. It was a painful realisation after four years spent happily doing everything he could to thwart any Slytherin endeavours, cheerfully shooting down any suggestion of inter-house unity.

Is this what you felt like, too? he wondered, looking down at Regulus’s thin, serious face. Sirius had always had friends to help him, reasons to fight back. Perhaps Regulus had never been given that chance. Was it too late to offer it to Malfoy?

It was some time before Harry slipped into an uneasy sleep, where he dreamt that giants were trying to step on him while Malfoy, trapped in an iron cage, yelled his name.

“One day,” Remus said wearily. “He couldn’t go a single day without picking a fight with Umbridge.”
He and Sirius were in their sitting room near the kitchen after dinner that night, reading the letter Minerva had owled them. Sirius was divided between amusement and concern, although amusement was currently winning. His day had started too well to be ruined by a single detention - he’d finally decided that Slughorn, Riddle’s old teacher, was the one most likely to have answers, and was preparing to question him.

“How is Harry being in trouble a surprise to you?” he asked. Remus looked up at him and frowned.

“I’m not at all surprised,” he said. “But I am concerned. How is he going to make it through a whole year with her if he can’t go even one day without getting into a shouting match?”

“To be fair, it wasn’t just him,” Sirius replied. Remus merely shook his head. Sirius narrowed his eyes as he examined Remus’s face. He knew that look.

“You’re actually feeling guilty about this, aren’t you?” he asked accusingly. “You’re feeling guilty because Harry loves you and wanted to stand up for you.”

Remus shifted uncomfortably.

“I am not feeling guilty,” he said stiffly. “But we should have prepared Harry better for what he’d have to deal with. Especially after he came to us with his worries.”

Sirius snorted.

“Yeah, like that would’ve helped,” he said, leaning forward and pouring them both another glass of port as Kreacher ambled in to clear away their supper dishes.

“Will Master Harry be alright?” the elf croaked. He’d been serving cake when McGonagall’s owl had arrived and had heard the whole thing.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Remus replied reassuringly. The difference in the elf since they’d found Regulus’s locket was still astonishing, even though they’d witnessed it firsthand. He was respectful even to Sirius now, tending the house with something approaching enthusiasm, and keeping Buckbeak from going absolutely mental trapped up in the attic. But most startling of all was the firm attachment to Harry, that resulted in Kreacher asking about him at least three times a day, and in Sirius’s exasperated promise to tell Kreacher whenever they heard from him.

“Master Harry is noble and courageous,” Kreacher said decisively, balancing cake, plates, and a sharp knife rather precariously in his spindly arms. “He does what is right and should not be punished for it.”

Sirius chuckled.

“You’re not wrong, Kreacher,” he said. “Don’t worry, detentions aren’t that bad, even at Hogwarts.”

“Kreacher hopes so,” said the elf, his tone somewhat threatening as he bowed his way out of the room. Sirius cast an amused glance after the elf, but he immediately grew more serious as he considered Harry’s predicament. As much as he hated to admit it, Remus was right. Harry getting into a fight on his first day wasn’t a good sign.

“We’re going to have to talk to him, aren’t we?” he said with a sigh.

“Worse, we’re going to have to tell him off,” said Remus sternly. Sirius groaned and sprawled dramatically across the couch, slumping across Remus’s lap.
“Can’t you do it?” he asked, giving Remus a winning look.

“Why, so you can be the cool dad?” Remus asked, wrinkling his nose at Sirius.

“I’m already the cool dad,” Sirius objected. “You’re the teacher, you know all about this discipline nonsense.”

Remus rolled his eyes.

“If this is your attitude, I’ll make you write him by yourself,” he said.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me.”

Sirius sighed and threw a hand over his eyes in peak dramatic fashion.

“Parenting is the hardest thing in the world,” he declared.

“Sure it is,” said Remus, who would probably pull something if he didn’t stop rolling his eyes soon. “Although it’s probably easier if you’re not trying to raise James Potter’s son. Now get up, you big lump, and get some parchment. We need to write the little shit a letter.”

As it turned out, it was a good thing Sirius and Remus hadn’t been able to agree on just what their letter should say, since the next morning brought more bad news.

POTTER DISRUPTS CLASSES declared page 3 of The Daily Prophet, which was abruptly covered in flecks of toast as Sirius choked on his breakfast.

“Fuck,” he said. Remus snatched the paper from him, his eyes narrowing the further down the page he read. For a short article, they had certainly managed to cram a lot in.

“Potter’s mystery summer has now been explained… wonder if these influences are positive… The Boy Who Lived clearly not receiving the discipline he needs… Sources at the school…” Well, I suppose it was only a matter of time before something like this happened,” Remus said darkly, folding the paper up with a disgusted look. “No need to ask who these ‘sources’ are.”

“How the fuck do they justify this shit to themselves?” Sirius snarled, shoving his plate away from him. “Sharing a kid’s personal record with a fucking newspaper, where the fuck do they get off?”

“Knowing Umbridge, torturing small animals,” Remus replied. Sirius snorted mirthlessly. Remus really was upset, if he was indulging in that sort of dark humour.

“What the hell are we supposed to do?” Sirius asked. What on earth could they do, aside from tell Harry to keep his head down in future? The papers and the Ministry were going to attack him no matter what he did. Unless he came out and denounced Dumbledore as a big lying liar, of course, but that wouldn’t happen in this lifetime.

“Minerva could lodge a formal complaint to the Ministry, or to the Prophet, for unprofessional conduct, but I imagine that would only make things worse,” Remus said. He was picking at his breakfast unenthusiastically. He’d lost his appetite as well. “If I get a chance, I’ll talk to her when I’m up there today.”

Sirius nodded mournfully, wishing, not for the first time, that he could go up there himself. Maybe hex a teacher or two while I’m there. There was nothing he could do, however, except return to his
research. The sooner they destroyed Voldemort’s Horcruxes, the sooner they could take Voldemort down. *And the sooner all this will be over.*

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Firstly, this chapter needs a TW for child abuse. Not majorly graphic, but could be a problem.

December is actually trying to kill me, but I'm super, super, SUPER excited about this part of the story, so I hope you like it too!

Extra special thanks to everyone who's commented, you're so lovely and I absolutely cried at a couple of them because aargh it's so lovely to hear from people who like what they're reading. I love you all!

When Harry awoke to the sound of an owl tapping on the dormitory window the next morning, he almost wished he’d kept quiet in Umbridge’s class. Almost. The image of that smug, toad-like face was still fresh enough in his mind that whatever lecture he was about to get still seemed worth it.

Fortunately, the other boys were still asleep, so Harry was spared any questions about the origin of the letter as he scrambled over to the window to retrieve it. The owl swooped into the room and settled on the curtain rail of Harry’s bed, clearly waiting to take back a reply. Harry sighed, braced himself, and tore open the letter.

Dear Harry,

Minerva has informed us that you have somehow already earned yourself a detention, which for anyone outside our family would surely be counted a record. Just because you are a Potter, however, doesn’t mean you should attempt to live up so magnificently to your father’s legacy. While I can’t say with any honesty that James would have done differently, he would have been wrong as well.

Moons and I are very disappointed, particularly given the conversation we had with you on the topic of certain people. I understand why you felt the need to speak up in her class, and we’re both proud of you for it. But there is more at stake now. I know you know this. Your education and safety is more important than anything else. You’re not betraying anyone by keeping your head down and concentrating on your lessons. Remember the bigger picture, and the people who could be affected if you cause trouble in the wrong places. And, if you can manage it, remember you’re allowed to take care of yourself as well.

I wish we could have talked this through in person, but for now, a letter is the most we can risk. Take care of yourself, Harry. Let us know how you’re going, and please promise us you’ll keep on top of that self-righteous temper of yours. The owl will be waiting to bring back your reply. I hope she arrived early enough to avoid the breakfast crowd.

Love Padfoot and Moony.
Harry stared at the letter in his hands, his vision unexpectedly blurry all of a sudden. He was torn between affection, amusement at the image in his mind (which, it transpired, was very accurate) of Remus standing over Sirius and making sure he told Harry off properly, and a healthy dose of indignation that he was being told off for doing the right thing.

Most strong, however, was the uncomfortable double sensation of grief and joy that accompanied this first instance of parental attention. It ought to have been his parents writing this letter, ought to have been Lily standing over James’s shoulder and sternly reminding him that yes, they were angry with Harry, even though they both knew she was as proud as anyone. And yet Remus and Sirius still felt like the family Harry had never known, the promise of parents that had been stolen from him, of people who cared for him, not merely because he was Harry Potter, but because he was Harry.

The owl apparently felt he had spent quite enough time emoting, because she swooped down from her perch and pecked him none-too-gently on the hand to get his attention.

“All right, all right,” Harry muttered, leaning over to his bedside cabinet and pulling out his writing implements. “I’m doing it.”

Figuring out what to write was rather more difficult than Harry anticipated, however. He stared at the blank parchment for a full five minutes before the faint stirrings of his dorm-mates warned him that he needed to get on with it. He ran his gaze over Sirius’s letter again, wondering what to reply to first. It said very little more than McGonagall had said the previous night, but it still made him feel uncomfortably guilty, a sensation he found he didn’t like at all.

Remember the bigger picture, and the people who could be affected if you cause trouble in the wrong places. Harry shifted uncomfortably. As much as he hated to admit it, Sirius, Remus, and McGonagall were right. And it wasn’t just the Order Harry could be risking by drawing Umbridge’s attention. Thom and his fellows were in danger as well, living so close to the castle while a known werewolf-hater was in residence. The thought made him slightly ill, but at least it made it easier to write his reply.

Dear Pads and Moony,

Your owl woke me up before six o’clock, so nobody noticed her. Everyone’s still asleep and I’ll send her back to you before they wake up.

I’m not sorry for what I said, but I am sorry for what it could have done. I wasn’t thinking, but I promise I’ll keep quiet from now on. McGonagall gave me a lecture last night, and don’t worry, I listened. My detention is Friday night, and McGonagall told me I have to apologise. I’ll do it today in class, but you can explain to Dean Thomas why. He got detention too, he’s going to think I’ve lost my mind.

I wish we could talk, hopefully once the detention is over with it’ll be safe. Probably should listen to M’s advice, though, and be careful about letters.

I hope you’re doing okay, and say hi to everyone for me. Tell T I’m doing everything she said and I haven’t had any problems. Take care, and Pads, take your own advice and don’t do anything daft. If I have to promise, so do you.

Love Harry.
Harry didn’t have time to write anything more, because Seamus had already entered his pre-waking snort symphony, which meant there was about five minutes before Harry would be found out. He tied the letter hurriedly to the owl’s leg and let her out, returning to his bed just in time for Seamus to shuffle hurriedly in the direction of the bathroom. Harry sighed and leaned back against his pillows. He hoped his second day of classes would at least be better than the first.

As Harry had expected, apologising to Umbridge was even less fun than having her shout at him. He’d decided to do it right at the beginning of class, before his fellow students had settled enough to listen in, but he still caught Dean shooting him disbelieving looks out of the corner of his eye. Hermione and Ron both shot him comforting glances when he took his seat, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

For the rest of the week, Harry concentrated on keeping his head down in Umbridge’s classes. While in Snape’s dungeon, he might react to unfair treatment with a scowl or muttered epithets (or sometimes outright sass if he felt he had nothing to lose). In Umbridge’s presence, however, he forced his expression to remain a blank mask, only managing to tolerate her gloating smile and breathy voice by reminding himself that Harry losing his temper was what she actually wanted, and by listing all the swear words he could use to describe the old toad when he, Ron, and Hermione were safe in the common room again. He wasn’t sure he could have managed it without Tonks’s training. *Who knew Occlumency would come in so handy?*

He was thankfully somewhat distracted from his battle with Umbridge by the other bombshell of his first day. Harry was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy.

Unfortunately, Malfoy seemed to be going out of his way to avoid Harry, and even with the aid of the Marauder’s Map, Harry completely failed to catch him alone. Harry still didn’t know what he could actually do to help - or even if Malfoy wanted help. He just knew he couldn’t pretend it hadn’t happened.

Ron and Hermione were sympathetic, but after Harry nearly ran late for his first class on Friday morning because of another attempt to corner Malfoy in the corridors, Hermione was unable to control herself any longer.

“I understand why you want to do something, but Padfoot was right, you need to be careful,” she hissed as Flitwick explained the difference between Expanding and Extension Charms. “I feel bad for Malfoy, too, but you can’t get into any more trouble.”

“I’m not getting in trouble, I just want to talk to him,” Harry whispered back. “And it’s not like Umbridge can tell me off for talking to someone.”

“If you run late for class, you’ll be in trouble again, and she’ll report it straight back to the Ministry.”

“I wasn’t late, Hermione, stop worrying.”

“You’re getting a bit obsessive, though,” Ron muttered from Hermione’s other side.

“I just want to help!” Harry hissed angrily. They were forced to abandon their conversation as Professor Flitwick turned around, looking for the source of the disturbance. Harry wasn’t at all sad to let the subject drop, and he was as determined as ever to make Malfoy talk to him about what was really going on at home.
Friday evening saw Dean and Harry bidding their friends farewell and trudging down the corridors to Umbridge’s office.

“Detention for doing the right thing,” Dean said glumly. “Didn’t think that would happen outside of Snape’s classroom.”

“I don’t think Umbridge would know the right thing if it stole her ugly Alice band,” Harry said.

“I still can’t believe you apologised to her,” Dean scowled. Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

“I told you, it’s not like I wanted to,” he said. “But I reckon McGonagall’s right, we’re better off keeping our heads down and not drawing attention to ourselves. We don’t want to give the Ministry any more reason to mess with the school.”

Dean grunted in reply and they walked in silence down two flights of stairs.

“What d’you think she’s going to make us do?” he asked.

“Whatever it is, it won’t be good,” Harry replied.

“Well, it is detention,” replied Dean reasonably. Harry rolled his eyes and they lapsed back into silence until they reached Umbridge’s door and Dean raised his hand to knock.

“Good evening, boys,” she greeted them, her voice as syrupy as Harry had ever heard it. He was too shocked by her office decor to be as bothered by it as he usually might, however. Every surface that could have ruffles had ruffles. Everything that could be made pink was pink. Everything that could conceivably have cats added to it had cats on it, although the wall of creepy plates upon which were painted moving, technicolour kittens was altogether the worst aspect of the thing. Harry was immediately offended on behalf of all cat-loving spinsters everywhere, and sideways glance showed that Dean was at least as appalled as he was.

“Before we begin, I would like to discuss the reason you are both here,” Umbridge said, and Harry tore his eyes away from a particularly garish kitten who was staring at him as though he could see into his very soul. “You are both under the impression that my classroom is a place for political discussion. You are wrong.” She paused, as though waiting for a response, and Harry’s shoulders tensed. As much as he wished he could unleash the furious diatribe building in his throat, he was more worried at that moment that Dean would say something regrettable and get himself - or, more likely, both of them - into more trouble.

It seemed, however, that Dean agreed with Harry’s suggestion about keeping their heads down, because he said nothing. Umbridge’s smiled broadened.

“My classroom is a place of learning, and your _ahem_ frankly dangerous views are not welcome. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” Dean and Harry chanted dully. Harry’s jaw ached from the effort of not shouting at her. _It’s not just you_ , he chanted to himself in his head. _Don’t give her what she wants_.

“Excellent,” Umbridge said with a rather sinister little giggle. “Now, boys, tonight I would like you to write some lines for me.” She gestured to a pair of desks on the other side of the room, upon which lay parchment and quill. “I would like you, both, to write _I will respect my teachers_ .”
“How many times? Professor?” Dean asked, and it sounded as though he were gritting his teeth.

“As many times as it takes for the message to sink in.” Umbridge’s smile revealed far too many teeth for Harry’s liking.

As they settled into their seats, he discovered one other problem.

“You haven’t given us any ink,” he said. “Professor.”

“Oh, you won’t need any ink.”

Harry and Dean exchanged glances, but neither of them dared to speak while Umbridge was right there, so they both picked up their quills and began to write.

Harry gasped loudly as he felt a searing pain in the back of his hand. Looking down, he saw the words *I will respect my teachers* etching themselves into the dark skin as though being written by a scalpel. Blood welled quickly in the cuts, but before more than a couple of drops could spill, the cuts began to close over, leaving the skin slightly reddened, darker and irritated. Judging by the gasp that came from Dean’s desk, he’d just had the same experience.

Harry stared up at Umbridge, who had returned to her desk and was now watching him with her smile still firmly in place.

“Yes dear?” she asked. Harry glanced at Dean, who was staring at his hand in horror. *Keep your head down. There is more at stake now.*

“Nothing,” he said, and began to write.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 30

Hey beautiful people! Thank you so much for being patient with me, you are the most awesome readers anyone could hope for. And thank you to everyone who has left such amazing comments (even though some of them absolutely made me cry because they were so nice). You make writing this even more fun and I love you so much!

Although you really need to stop encouraging me to throw Umbridge under a bus because honestly, it's hard enough not to do that already. XD

Let me know what you think of this chapter. I ended up going into more detail than I planned (as usual!), and I'm not sure if it drags or not. If you guys feel like it's going a bit slow, I will try and speed things up in the next chapter.

Dinner was over by the time Umbridge allowed Harry and Dean to leave her office, their hands stinging and the words they'd been forced to write outlined faintly in red on the backs of their hands. While the cuts weren't bleeding, whatever healing charm was on the quills had become less and less effective the longer they'd written. Neither of them had said a word while they were in Umbridge's office. Harry had a feeling Dean was in shock, and he wasn't far from it himself.

He'd had too many bad experiences with adults who were supposed to be responsible for his welfare to be surprised by this new turn of events, but somehow, having spent the summer with people who cared about him and looked after him, it was even worse to discover that Hogwarts was just as unsafe as it always had been. For the first time in four years, he felt as if he were seeing things clearly.

He and Dean walked in silence down the first three corridors, both lost in their own horrified thoughts. Harry's ears were ringing and he felt like he couldn't get enough air. The only thing he was really sure of was how angry he was, and not just with Umbridge either. Everyone had told him to keep his head down, do the right thing, and he had, he'd done everything they'd said, and it hadn't changed anything. He clenched his shaking fists by his side, breathing hard and running through all the things he wanted to shout at McGonagall next time he saw her.

“How the fuck did that banshie get hired as a teacher?” Dean said eventually. He had himself mostly under control, but Harry still thought he heard a tremble in Dean's voice.

“The Ministry forced her on Dumbledore, I think,” he said. “Their educational reforms and all that.”

“That's bullshit, they can't know she's doing shite like this to students.”

Harry grunted in reply. He wasn't so sure any more. He wouldn't put it past Fudge to have let Umbridge loose on Hogwarts knowing full well that she was a sadistic child-torturer. They lapsed into silence again until they reached the portrait hole. Neither of them knew quite what to say.

“Harry!” Hermione cried when he hauled himself into the common room. He managed a grimace in response as Dean nodded awkwardly and headed off to talk to Seamus.
"What happened?" Ron asked, sitting forward with a concerned expression. "Did she make you write an essay about dangerous halfbreeds?"

Harry flopped into a chair and wondered just what he should say to them.

"Harry?" Hermione said tentatively.

Harry took a deep breath and showed them his hand, where the marks from the quill were still faintly visible. He kept his eyes down as he explained exactly what had happened in Umbridge’s office. He didn’t think he could handle their expressions of horror and sympathy.

"She can’t do that," Ron hissed when he was done.

"If the Minister wants her here, maybe she can," Harry said, his mouth twisting in a dark scowl.

"Ministry or not, that's torture," Hermione said indignantly. "You need to tell Dumbledore, right now."

"He’s not here," Ron said. "I heard McGonagall talking to Flitwick at dinner."

"Well, McGonagall, then," said Hermione.

"What’s she going to do?" Harry asked. "She can’t overrule Umbridge."

"You can’t do nothing," Ron said. "Write to Pads, then, he’ll know what to do."

"NO!" Harry said, rather more loudly than he’d intended. There was a slight dip in the noise surrounding them as several people turned to stare at him. Dean frowned in his direction and Harry shrugged apologetically.

"I’m not going to tell Pads," he said, lowering his voice. "He’d come down here and hex her, he’d get himself arrested again."

"Harry-" Hermione began.

"No, Hermione," Harry said firmly. He sighed heavily and scrubbed roughly at his hair, trying to think. "I’ll tell Remus," he said, annoyed with himself for not figuring out this solution earlier. Remus was far more cool-headed, he’d know who could do something, and he wouldn’t tell Sirius anything that would make him risk his freedom. He was still angry with Remus for telling him to go along with Umbridge, but the more reasonable part of his mind knew that it wasn’t Remus’s fault. Nobody could have predicted that the old toad would have turned out the way she had.

"That’s an excellent plan," Hermione said approvingly. "Will you write him now?"

Harry bit his lip, thinking.

"I’m going to use the mirror," he decided. He knew he should write instead, but the thought of having to sit around waiting for a reply was unbearable. "But not here," he added. "I’ll take the invisibility cloak and talk to him in one of the classrooms on the fifth floor."

"Are you sure you want to risk it?" Hermione asked, looking concerned again.

"We’ll come with you," Ron said, shooting Hermione a Look. For once, she gave in without further protest, and allowed Harry to shoot upstairs and grab the mirror, cloak, and the ever-useful Marauder’s Map.

As they hadn’t yet reached curfew, they didn’t bother covering themselves before they left the
common room, and merely used the Map to avoid running into any undesirable people on their way
to their favourite disused classroom.

When they arrived, Hermione locked the door with a charm, and they seated themselves comfortably
behind a stack of old History of Magic textbooks where they wouldn’t be immediately visible to
anyone opening the door. Harry had learned one thing from his encounter with Malfoy, at least.

Sirius was the first to appear in the mirror, which wasn’t surprising, given it was his. Harry felt a jolt
in his stomach as he forced himself to smile at his godfather. Even knowing that it was to protect
him, he hated lying to Sirius.

“I hope this isn’t you calling to tell me you got yourself another detention,” Sirius said once they’d all
exchanged greetings, his stern tone only half-joking. Harry snorted.

“No, I did what you said and kept quiet,” he replied. “I bet you wouldn’t have been so well-behaved
if you’d had a teacher like her.”

“Probably not,” Sirius replied airily, “but the benefit of being my godson is that you can learn from
my mistakes.” Harry grinned weakly.

“So no getting convicted of murders I didn’t commit, then,” he said. Sirius chuckled.

“What’s the reason for this call, if not to rant about your detention?” he asked. “Not that I’m not
happy to hear from you, mind you.”

Harry shifted uneasily, wondering if this really was such a good idea after all. Hermione elbowed
him in the ribs.

“I actually wanted to talk to Moony,” he said, his nonchalant tone almost believable. “He was
talking about some History of Magic books that helped with his O.W.Ls, and Binns is so boring I’m
going to fail if I don’t find something better to read.” Harry knew he was babbling, but he couldn’t
stop himself. Sirius didn’t seem to notice, however, and grimaced.

“Sounds like nothing much has changed then,” he said. “I’ll go get him. I hope you don’t mind if I
get us some coffee while you talk to him, History of Magic always sends me to sleep.”

Harry chuckled, relief flooding through him. He hadn’t been sure how he was going to get Sirius
out of the room, but it looked like he wouldn’t have a problem.

Sirius’s face disappeared, and they could hear him talking to someone out of sight, before Remus
appeared in the mirror. He looked tired, but healthier than the last time they’d seen him, and Harry
broke into a genuine smile.

“Pads says you need some help with History of Magic?” Remus asked. He looked pleased to see
Harry, but somewhat puzzled. “I don’t remember telling you about any particular books, but I’ll help
if I can.”

“Is Pads still there?” Harry asked, keeping his voice low and hoping like hell that only Remus could
hear him. Remus frowned and glanced up, as though double-checking that he was alone.

“He’s gone down to the kitchen,” he said. “What’s wrong? Did something happen in your
detention?”

Harry took a deep breath and told Remus everything that had happened, showing him the marks on
his hand - now almost completely faded - and about his fears of what Sirius would do if he found
out. Remus’s expression grew darker and more furious as Harry talked, and if Harry hadn’t known him, he would have been almost afraid of him.

“Does anyone else know about this?” Remus asked when Harry had finished.

“I don’t think so,” Harry said. “I mean, Dean probably told Seamus, but we were the first ones to get detention.”

“Why didn’t you go straight to Professor Dumbledore?” Remus asked.

“He’s not here,” replied Harry with a shrug, although he was annoyed by the chiding tone in Remus’s voice. Remus scowled.

“All right, go back to the common room and stay there. I’m coming up to talk to Minerva right now.”

Harry’s stomach sank. He hadn’t wanted to get anyone else involved, and he especially didn’t want Remus coming up here and putting himself in harm’s way. There was no knowing what Umbridge would do if she found out a werewolf was trying to get her in trouble.

“What are you going to tell Pads?” he asked, trying frantically to think of a reason Remus should stay home.

“Just that Minerva needed to see me, I’ll tell him she sent a Patronus.”

“But what if—”

“No, Harry, I’m going to sort this out,” Remus said firmly. “I know you want to keep us safe, but if you think any of us will just sit here and allow a teacher to torture her students, you are sadly mistaken.”

“He’s right, Harry,” Hermione said. “What if she does it to someone else?”

Harry looked down, chagrined.

“Well, when you put it like that,” he muttered.

“Precisely,” Remus said brusquely. “Now get back to your common room. I’ll contact you soon and let you know what’s happening.”

“Tell Si— Pads we said goodbye,” Harry said hurriedly. Remus’s face jiggled around in the mirror in a way that made it clear he was already moving.

“I will,” he said. “Love you, Harry.”

Harry flushed a bright red.

“Love you too,” he muttered, wishing heartily that Hermione and Ron weren’t standing quite so close.

Remus smiled at them briefly and the mirror went blank.

Remus wasn’t entirely sure how he’d managed to get out of the house without arousing Sirius’s
He tugged his cloak straight and strode towards the castle, anger thrumming in his veins. The look on Harry’s face as he told him what had been done to him would haunt his dreams for years to come, he knew it. The boy had been horrified, yes, but Remus was almost certain that, were it not for Hermione, Harry would have attempted to brush it off. *How many other horrible things has Harry suffered in silence?* Remus growled furiously under his breath and quickened his pace.

As curfew was still a few minutes away, the front doors were unlocked, allowing Remus to slip inside unnoticed. He almost ran up the stairs, heading for Minerva’s office without really seeing any of the figures hurrying past him on their way back to their dorms.

“What if they already know? What if they can’t do anything? What if the Ministry is letting her do it? These questions spun around in Remus’s head, fear churning in his stomach. The Ministry was a mess these days. There was no knowing what the Minister would or would not approve in his current state of power-hungry paranoia. Remus was afraid that Fudge would permit Umbridge almost anything, provided it helped him get rid of Dumbledore and his supporters.

He took a deep breath and attempted to compose himself as he knocked on Minerva’s door. He needed answers, and this was the best place to start looking.

“Remus! This is quite a surprise,” she said when she opened the door, her tone indicating she was aware the surprise might not be altogether pleasant. He followed her into the office and seated himself while she sealed the door with a Silencing Charm.

“What calamity has befallen us that required such a risk?” Minerva asked once she was seated once more.

“Do you know what Umbridge made Harry and Dean do in their detention this evening?” Remus asked without preamble. Minerva’s eyebrows shot upwards. She’d clearly been expecting trouble from the Order instead.

“I was informed they would be writing lines,” she said slowly. “Your presence would indicate otherwise.”

“Not exactly,” Remus said, his lips thinning.

As he explained what Umbridge had done, the colour drained from Minerva’s face and her expression settled into one of cold fury.

“Harry tells me Dumbledore is away at present, so I came straight to you,” Remus finished. “I realise the tenuous position we’re in, but this is torture, pure and simple, of children, no less, and-” He was interrupted as Minerva raised a hand to stop him.

“I assure you, had I known what she had planned, I would never have allowed it, Ministry be damned,” she said, her voice trembling with rage. “I will have to speak to Harry and Dean immediately. If we are going to make accusations against Dolores, we must ensure that we have proof.”

Remus sat in silence as they waited for Harry and Dean to reach the office from the common room. When they arrived, they both looked distinctly worried that they were about to get into more trouble. Harry glanced at Remus with an almost pleading expression, as though he wished he could take back everything he’d said. It was too late for that now, Remus thought. Whether he wanted it or
not, Harry was going to be protected, and with him, his fellow students.

“I understand you have both been subjected to the most unforgivable treatment this evening,” Minerva said without preamble. Harry and Dean exchanged surprised looks, before nodding. “I don’t wish to draw out this truly dreadful experience for you, but I must ask if you still have evidence of what Professor Umbridge did.”

Harry and Dean wordlessly held out their hands. The marks were almost gone, although the back of their hands were still red and angry, their dark skin not sufficient to hide what had been done. Minerva took one hand, then the other, examining it closely, before prodding it with her wand. Remus knew she was examining the magical traces that would have been left behind by the enchanted quill, traces that would provide the evidence they needed if they were to report Umbridge. Both boys flinched a little at the contact, but they forced themselves to endure it.

Remus forced himself to remain still throughout the process, but his heart ached as he watched their faces. They were so young, and they deserved so much better. *All of this simply for defending me.* He felt sick to his core.

“I am sincerely sorry to you both,” Minerva said quietly, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. “That such a thing should happen to you at all is absolutely appalling, but that it should happen at school, where you ought to be safe…”

“Well, it is Hogwarts,” Harry muttered, drawing a reluctant chuckle from Dean.

“As soon as I have spoken to the Minister and the Board of Governors, Madam Pomfrey will see to your hands,” Minerva said, her usual brusque tone returning. “If you will allow us another half hour, however, we will be able to demonstrate what has been done to you. With your permission, of course,” she added. “If you do not wish to participate-”

“Of course we’ll help,” Dean said, outraged. “If my hand hurting for half an hour will get that old bi- get her fired, then fine.”

“What Dean said,” Harry agreed. “But with more swears,” he added in an undertone that Remus was almost certain Minerva didn’t hear.

“I commend you both for your courage,” Minerva said, and Remus was shocked to see the suspicious glimmer in her eyes. “I will call Fudge immediately and put a stop to this. If you two would be willing to wait outside, I will call you when you are needed.”

Remus stood hurriedly before the boys could leave, only just preventing himself from drawing Harry into a hug.

“I’m very sorry that standing up for me was punished so harshly,” he said quietly, wishing he had better words, wishing he didn’t have to hide his true relationship with Harry from Dean, wishing, above all, that the world were a different place where things like this didn’t happen.

“It’s not your fault,” Dean objected.

“Yeah, we’d do it again tomorrow,” Harry said, and Remus was sure he saw a suspiciously James-like challenge in Harry’s eye. *So we should expect more letters about detentions, then,* Remus thought wearily, but the bubble of pride and ache of guilt fighting for supremacy inside him didn’t leave much room for anything else.

“You are a credit to Hogwarts,” he said quietly. Both boys blushed and nodded their farewells, before heading back out into the corridor.
Remus breathed a sigh of relief as he turned back to Minerva, to find her already sending a Patronus to the twelve Governors, and preparing to Floo the Minister directly. Perhaps things weren’t so bad if Minerva was willing to go straight to Fudge.

He sat back in his seat as she stuck her head in the fireplace, his stomach churning as he listened to her furious tone and Fudge’s muffled replies. It sounded as though Fudge was rather annoyed at being summoned so peremptorily, but barely thirty seconds passed between Minerva returning to her desk and Fudge appearing in the fireplace. His expression was one of deep disgruntlement as he brushed soot from his green bowler hat.

“I really don’t see why this couldn’t wait until tomorrow, Minerva,” he grumbled, nodding vaguely in Remus’s direction by way of a greeting.

“When it comes to the safety of my students, Minister, there is no time to waste,” Minerva replied coldly. Remus was struck, and not for the first time, but the contrast between the two figures before him. Minerva was cold, controlled, her bearing dignified and, well, rather noble, if truth be told. Fudge was a dithering, grumbling child in comparison, his expression sullen and his fingers toying with the hat in his hand almost as though he were nervous. It was only years of self-control that allowed Remus to hide the rush of disgust and anger he felt.

“You tell me Dolores has done something to concern you, but really, I fail to see how her teaching methods are any of your business, Minerva,” Fudge said, attempting to mimic Minerva’s dignified stance.

“They are my business when they involve torturing students,” Minerva said, preventing any further blustering. “She had them write lines using an enchanted quill that etched those lines into the back of their hands.

Fudge blinked several times, apparently shocked into silence.

“She had them write, quite literally, in their own blood, Minister,” Minerva continued mercilessly.

“Oh, come now, that’s a bit harsh, surely,” Fudge protested.

“She forced two students to repeatedly cut open their own hands as punishment for speaking out of turn in her class,” Minerva said, preventing any further blustering. “She had them write lines using an enchanted quill that etched those lines into the back of their hands.

Fudge blinked several times, apparently shocked into silence.

“She had them write, quite literally, in their own blood, Minister,” Minerva continued mercilessly.

“Are… Are you sure of this?” he asked, reaching desperately for some semblance of self-assurance and failing dismally.

“I saw evidence of it myself,” Remus said. “The students in question still have the marks on their hands.” Fudge turned to look at him, his eyes narrowing. Remus could practically see the cogs turning inside the man’s brain.

“As you’re no longer employed at Hogwarts, I must assume you are in contact with a student here,” Fudge said slowly. A glint of dull triumph appeared in his eyes. “Ah, I believe I understand now,” he said, looking between Minerva and Remus with what he obviously thought was a piercing glance. “Harry Potter has been making baseless accusations again. And as usual, you two have fallen for it.”

“Harry was not the only one in that detention,” Minerva said, looking down her nose at him, not bothering to hide her disgust. “Another fifth year, Dean Thomas, was also subjected to the same treatment.”
“Now, look here, Minerva, if you think I’m going to take the word of two teenagers, one of whom has a history of, well, instability—”

“You seem to have decided your position before seeing any evidence,” Minerva said, her voice rising as she cut him off. “I can assure you, we would not make these accusations lightly, Minister. I have examined both boys’ injuries, and I am certain that if you were to search Dolores’s office, you would find the instruments used to inflict them, not to mention the parchment bearing the boys’ blood.”

“Well, that’s not, I mean you surely don’t think—”

They were interrupted by the appearance of a glowing silver fox in their midst, which spoke with a voice Remus didn’t recognise.

“Governors informed. Most serious charges Will be on grounds within hour.”

Fudge stared, horror-struck, as the fox dissolved into silver mist.

“You informed the Governors?” he demanded, turning back to Minerva. He seemed almost panicked now.

“Of course I have,” Minerva said, her voice cold enough to restore the Arctic ice sheet. “This incident has jeopardised the safety of the students. As Deputy Headmistress, I could do nothing less. I suggest you examine the evidence before they arrive, so that you might be more prepared.”

Fudge made several attempts to form a coherent sentence that might forestall this necessity, but failed miserably. After some effort, he nodded miserably and allowed Minerva to call Harry and Dean back into the office.

And thus began the awful, yet somehow tedious, business of examining the evidence. Once Harry and Dean had displayed their hands once again, and once Minerva had pointed out the magical traces left by the quill, again, the boys were sent to the Hospital Wing for treatment. Remus managed to squeeze Harry’s shoulder reassuringly while Minerva and Fudge debated the validity of trace magic (a debate which Minerva won, to nobody’s surprise, even Fudge’s), but he felt awful that he couldn’t accompany him. Tonight, of all nights, he should have had one of his family with him. He felt as though they were failing him all over again.

He didn’t have time to dwell on these unpleasant thoughts, however, as the Governors started trooping into Minerva’s study, some of them greeting Remus, some ignoring him, some bursting into outraged protests as soon as they entered the room. What surprised Remus, however, was how none of them seemed to doubt Minerva’s word. They were all, in their own fashion, clamouring for blood, and under the force of all twelve, there was very little Fudge could do. Remus took a vicious kind of pleasure as he watched the man wither under their outrage, almost folding in on himself as though being crushed by their collective fury. He’d been afraid that Fudge’s need for control and power would win, but it seemed he’d overestimated him.

“Very well,” Fudge said crossly, after Gregory Hardcastle had berated him for a full five minutes for allowing Umbridge into the castle after promising educational reform. “Call Dolores in.”

“That won’t be necessary, Cornelius,” came a voice from the doorway. “I am already here.”

Chapter End Notes
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Chapter Notes

I hope you have as much fun reading this as I had writing it. I may have been in a slightly silly mood when I was working on it, so... You know what, I'm not even sorry, just enjoy XD

If I randomly stop posting for a week or two, please don't panic, I have definitely not abandoned this fic! My laptop died on me last week and I'm having to rely on my old computer which occasionally just doesn't turn on, so things will happen when they happen. (I'm off to get a quote for repairs tomorrow, wish me luck, I'm so poor! *cries*). I swear I love this fic too much to stop working on it now.

Thank you again to everyone who has left comments and kudos, and hello to the new people, I appreciate you so so much and your comments give me much life and happiness. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Remus felt the bile rise in his throat as he took in the squat figure standing in the doorway. Dolores Umbridge appeared to be completely unflustered by the presence of all twelve Governors and the Minister, although it could simply have been because she had no idea what was to come. She clasped her hands demurely in front of her and gave her habitual little cough as she smiled around at the packed room. When her gaze found Remus, it hardened noticeably, her bulging eyes becoming stone-like and furious. He didn’t usually let that kind of reaction bother him, but tonight it was all he could do to stop himself hexing her into next week.

“May I ask what is going on, Cornelius? Ahem, I mean Minister, of course.” Her giggle grated on every single one of Remus’s nerve endings, and he could see Minerva wincing.

“It appears some rather serious accusations have been made against you, Dolores,” said the most venerable-looking Governor, Ainsley Livingstone, when it appeared Fudge wasn’t going to do more than mumble uselessly. “I must say, the evidence is quite compelling.”

“And just what are these accusations?” Dolores asked, her smile broadening as she stepped further into the room and allowed the door to swing shut behind her. “Who are my accusers?”

“I am,” Minerva declared coldly. “On behalf of two of my students who you assaulted earlier this evening.”

Dolores stared at Minerva as though the Transfiguration professor were an interesting type of slug she were seeing for the first time.

“Assaulted?” she asked, with yet another titter. “My dear Minerva, surely you are being overdramatic. Or, perhaps, these students are being overdramatic. I assure you, I have never assaulted anyone in my life.”

Remus managed to fight down a snort of disbelief only through sheer power of will. He dreaded to think what would have happened if Sirius was here instead of him.
“Clearly we have very different definitions of the word,” Minerva began, but Ainsley held up a hand and she nodded respectfully, falling into silence. Remus had to admire her performance. Minerva McGonagall never gave way to anyone unless it suited her.

“I’m afraid Cornelius, Minerva, and young Remus here have all seen the evidence. Do you deny that you forced two students to use an enchanted quill to cut words into the backs of their own hands during a detention this evening?”

Dolores’s smile hardened in her face until it was almost a grimace, but it did not drop.

“I have no wish to deny it,” she said. “As the teacher who gave them detention, it is up to me to determine a suitable punishment. As your witnesses can no doubt attest, no permanent harm was done.”

“No harm was done?” Remus said, unable to keep quiet any more. “Just because their cuts were healed - and had they remained in the room much longer, that would not have been the case - does not mean Harry and Dean were not harmed. They should not have to fear injury at school!”

He knew as soon as he stopped speaking that he’d played right into her hands. She practically purred as she turned to him.

“Oh yes, I’m sure you know all about that, Mr Lupin,” she said softly. “Perhaps we could debate the relative harm of a small cut as opposed to a werewolf bite.”

“I say!” objected one of the Governors. Dolores ignored him and continued to smile broadly at Lupin.

“I fail to see how my condition is at all relevant to this discussion,” Lupin said through gritted teeth.

“It’s entirely relevant, since it was your condition that these two boys were so rudely discussing in my classroom,” Dolores said sweetly. “Perhaps that’s the real reason we’re here, Minister,” she added, turning toward Fudge, who was looking thoroughly lost, twirling his hat between his hands. “Mr Lupin here thinks he has cooked up a scheme to get me fired, simply for teaching the Ministry approved curriculum.” She turned back to the assembled Governors and spread her hands appealingly. “But I am here at the Ministry’s behest. If some students find my lessons not to their taste, it is really not for them to complain.”

“Your curriculum isn’t being questioned, Ms Umbridge,” said a tall woman whose face was mostly nose - a nose that she was currently looking down to great effect. “Although if this kind of attitude is part of it, perhaps it ought to be. However, it is your teaching methods with which we find fault.”

“As I said, I am here at the behest of the Ministry,” Dolores replied. “What is happening here is that Mr Lupin is aiding Dumbledore’s staff to sabotage the Ministry’s efforts for reform.”

“That’s a bit much, wot?” protested the previous I say -er, whose name Remus had temporarily forgotten. “Dumbledore’s been nothing but cooperative. And young Lupin here’s a top-notch fella, never had any problems with him, despite his unfortunate, er, issue.”

There was a chorus of well-said s and good show s and Remus was suddenly aware of just how incredibly British this whole affair was. He was certain, from what he knew of the United States or Europe, that a meeting about child abuse would not be proceeding this calmly.

“I’m afraid Dolores is right about one thing,” Fudge said petulantly. “This school has been very resistant to the changes we’d like to make here-”
“If your changes involve cutting open students’ hands, then I’m quite on Dumbledore’s side,” said Mostly Nose. “Where is Dumbledore, by the way?” she added, turning to Minerva. Remus’s stomach clenched. Whatever Dumbledore was doing, he certainly hadn’t wanted attention drawn to his absence, and now the Minister and the Minister’s lackey were not only aware of it, but were waiting with bated breath for whatever excuse Minerva could come up with.

“I’m afraid he was called away on personal business prior to this incident,” Minerva replied, as collected as ever. “I have sent him an owl to inform him of the event, but I understand he had a great distance to travel and it no doubt has yet to reach him.”

“And what, pray tell, was this personal business?” Umbridge simpered. Remus’s wand hand twitched.

“As it was personal, it will hardly surprise you that he chose not to share it with his staff,” Minerva replied sharply, turning a hawk-like expression on Umbridge. “I believe it was a family matter, but I had the good manners not to enquire further.”

“Are you certain it was not something regarding his, ahem, pet project?” Umbridge asked. Remus felt a chill march down his spine at the obvious reference to Fawkes, but Minerva regarded her with supreme unconcern, not a flicker of alarm on her face. She really is extraordinary.

“I haven’t the faintest idea of your meaning, Dolores, but Professor Dumbledore’s present location is quite irrelevant to the matter at hand,” Minerva said. (“Hear, hear,” contributed Lord I Say.) “As Deputy Headmistress, I am empowered to act on his behalf in any and all matters. As the Governors are here as well, this matter can and must be handled immediately.”

“You cannot seriously expect to discipline a teacher for such a minor matter,” Umbridge objected, tittering as though the very idea were ridiculous.

“Quite right,” huffed Fudge, attempting a weak little laugh. “Why, if our teachers had been disciplined for that sort of thing, we’d’ve had no teachers left.”

Years of undercover work were insufficient to keep Remus’s disgust from showing on his face, and he wasn’t the only one.

“It was one thing in the old days, but things are different now, Fudge, old man,” said one Governor placatingly.

“And I hope we can all agree, for the better,” added Mostly Nose sternly.

“Quite so,” put in Lord I Say. “These young chaps might be a bit soft for our taste, but it’s a brave new world and all that, wot? What’s best for the kiddies and so forth?”

“The fact remains that I have Ministry approval for my-”

“I beg your pardon, Dolores,” Minerva interrupted smoothly, “but your teaching methods are not covered by an Educational Decrees, merely your appointment. The standards to which you are required to adhere are the same as all teaching staff, as you were informed when you were first employed.”

Umbridge’s smile slid from her face like pond slime from a frog’s back, revealing cold anger.

“Anyone aware of the difficulties I have faced in the mere fortnight since I accepted this role would readily sympathise with my methods,” she snapped.
“And what difficulties are those, precisely?” Remus asked. “While Defense Against the Dark Arts is certainly a challenging subject, I fail to see how it could require the assault of two of your students.”

“Enough!” Ainsley declared, and everyone fell silent, all eyes turning toward him. “Minerva, we have all heard the evidence against Ms Umbridge. What is your recommendation?”

Minerva drew herself up to her full height and Remus once again had the impression of the shadows closing in.

“I recommend removing Dolores immediately from her position as teacher, and from any further role within Hogwarts.”

Umbridge’s mouth dropped open in horror.

“This is quite ridiculous,” she said faintly. “Do you not see, Cornelius, the kind of treatment I have been subjected to?”

“Firing a teacher who has abused a student seems quite a reasonable response to me,” observed Mostly Nose, to a murmured chorus of agreement.

“I agree,” said Ainsley, frowning down at Umbridge. “Your conduct has been most shameful, and while I can understand that it might be difficult for some of us to keep up with the changing times, your responsibilities were made quite clear to you when you accepted the position. The Governors will finalise your severance package in the morning. For now, I request that you leave the grounds immediately.”

“But you can’t-” Umbridge gasped.

“I’m afraid we can,” Ainsley replied coldly. “Your presence is no longer required. I will have some of the elves escort you to your lodgings and insure you are packed in short order.”

Umbridge opened and closed her mouth a few times, apparently in shock. After a long moment where everybody simply stared at her, she turned and tottered from the room.

Remus almost fell back into his chair, his knees suddenly weak with relief, and a mad urge to laugh threatening to overwhelm him. He managed to control himself in time for Ainsley to turn to Fudge, a severe frown darkening his brow.

“I’m afraid, for all your talk of reform, Cornelius, you’ve left us worse off than before,” he said. “Not only have two of the students been harmed quite unforgivably, but the teacher you insisted we take has left a vacancy a mere week into the school year.”

“I think that might be the least of our problems, Governor Livingstone,” Minerva said coolly. “While we certainly cannot choose a permanent replacement at such short notice, we have an excellent candidate for a temporary Defense Against the Dark Arts professor right here.” She waved her hand in Remus’s direction and he froze, his brain threatening to short circuit under the sudden gaze of twelve Governors and the Minister for Magic. Mostly Nose narrowed her eyes as she examined him and then nodded approvingly, a move that was echoed by at least half the Board.

“See here, Minerva, you can’t just fire my staff and then replace them without consultation. Especially not with, well, I mean, there were problems last time,” he rambled, but Ainsley rounded on him once more.

“As the good professor already made clear, Cornelius,” he said, his voice carrying a note of dignified
disdain that Remus could never hope to match, “she is proposing young Lupin here as a temporary solution to the problem. The Board will consult with Dumbledore as to a long term solution in due time.”

“The Ministry will-”

“Not be required to participate in the hiring practices of a private institution,” Ainsley finished for him. There was a suspicious snort from Lord I Say and Remus looked quickly at the ground as he tried not to laugh at the outraged expression on Fudge’s face.

“Very well,” the Minister said stiffly, jamming his hat back on and heading for the fireplace. “I see how things are. I assure you this is not the end of this discussion.”

“Quite right, Fudge, old chap,” said a hitherto silent Governor. “The sooner we get on with the official enquiry, the better.”

“Inquiry?” Fudge stuttered, turning back, his hand already reaching for the Floo Powder.

“Naturally,” said Mostly Nose. “A teacher you recommended, who the Ministry vouched for, has committed a frankly heinous offense. We will expect a date for the enquiry as soon as possible. And I’m sure The Daily Prophet will be most anxious to know the details,” she added, smiling quite politely as she threatened Fudge with his worst nightmare.

“Right,” said Fudge faintly. “Of course. I’ll- I’ll have my office notify you.” And with no more than a vague nod, he stepped into the fire and was whisked away.

The remaining crowd turned back to Remus, the mood already considerably lighter now that Umbridge and Fudge had departed.

“Congratulations, dear fellow,” said Ainsley, reaching out to shake Remus’s hand. “Glad to have you back on board.”

Harry and Dean were waiting impatiently in the Hospital Wing for Madam Pomfrey to stop fussing over them when Professor McGonagall and Remus entered, both looking as though they’d aged several years, but also looking happy, which Harry took as a good sign.

“I’m happy to inform you that Dolores Umbridge is no longer in the employ of Hogwarts,” Minerva said, breaking into rare smile. Harry let out a breath he hadn’t even known he was holding and Dean’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“Bet she’s not pleased,” Dean observed with a grin. Remus snorted, failing to hide his own smile.

“Not in the slightest,” he said.

“But who’s going to take Defense?” Harry asked, somewhat put out that his favourite subject was once again without a teacher, and rather sooner than usually occurred, although if it meant being rid of Umbridge, he might be prepared to give it up for the rest of the year.

“Ironically enough,” Remus said, his smile broadening, “me.”

Harry and Dean turned to stare at one another, and both of them let out identical whoops of jubilation. Harry barely managed to stop himself jumping up to hug Remus, who was looking as
though Christmas had come early. Sirius had been saying for weeks that teaching was what suited Remus best, and Harry was with him one hundred percent. Remus had been the best teacher they’d ever had, and for Umbridge to not only be kicked out as a result (however indirectly) of her hatred of him, but also replaced by him, was just the most perfect resolution to this whole mess. Unfortunately, in front of Dean, the best he could do was loudly join in the general happiness at this news.

“That’ll show her,” Dean crowed for the third time, thumping Harry hard on the back. Madam Pomfrey seemed to decide this was a sign that they should both be back in their dormitory (Harry wasn’t sure why they were even still in the Hospital Wing, when all they’d needed was a small healing charm, but it was Madam Pomfrey after all), and chivvied them all out the door.

“If I might have a word with Mr Potter before I go, Minerva?” Remus asked, sounding far more nonchalant than Harry felt about this whole secret family nonsense. Minerva nodded and waved to Dean to follow her toward the Gryffindor dormitories.

“I will inform Mr Weasley and Miss Granger that you will be along shortly, Potter,” she said over her shoulder, throwing him a stern look that he interpreted as don’t you dare go wandering about the corridors all night I don’t care if your new father is a teacher now I was your teacher first, which he felt was rather a linguistic feat for someone who hadn’t actually said a word.

When McGonagall and Dean were out of sight, Harry immediately threw his arms around Remus and hugged him, attempting to be as loquacious with his hug as McGonagall had been with her Look, since he had no idea how to express what he was feeling. The night had, on the whole, been A Bit Much.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Remus asked softly when Harry had stepped back again and they had started walking slowly toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry shrugged uncomfortably. If he was honest, he was still feeling slightly resentful that everyone he’d trusted had told him to behave himself and he’d still ended up in a mess. But as soon as he’d called Remus, he’d come straight up to the school to talk to the Deputy Headmistress, just like a regular parent. He hadn’t hexed anyone (well, Harry didn’t think so, he presumed McGonagall would have mentioned something like that), and now Umbridge was gone, just like she ought to be. Harry had no idea how to feel about any of it.

“I’m just glad she’s gone,” he said aloud. “And I think I need a cup of tea,” he added. Remus chuckled and threw an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“I think I need more than that,” he said. “If I escort you to the kitchens, can I trust you to return to Gryffindor Tower once you’ve found your tea?” He narrowed his eyes at Harry, and Harry adopted an outrageously innocent expression.

“I’m a model student!” he said. “How could you even ask me that?”

It was a few minutes before Remus stopped laughing, during which time they redirected their path toward the kitchens.

“I wish I could stay for longer, Harry,” Remus said when he’d calmed down. “I feel terrible that our advice got you into this situation. It should never have been allowed to happen.”

He stopped walking and forced Harry to look at him, one hand still on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m very proud of you, Harry,” he said seriously. “Your father would never have shown such a sense of responsibility, or courage, in asking for help. I know how hard that must have been for you. Considering all you’ve been through, I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d tried to deal with it
yourself. I’m—"

He didn’t get any further, because Harry hugged him again, this time at least partly because he was absolutely certain he was going to do something embarrassing, like bawling his eyes out, if Remus didn’t shut up immediately. As it was, he clung to Remus for far longer than was strictly necessary, and both of them were awkward and red-faced when they parted again.

“Sirius is going to kill us, isn’t he?” Harry said, as much for something to say as from any great desire to point out the bleeding obvious. “Or maybe himself,” he added. “Can you die from throwing a tantrum?” Remus grinned.

“I’ve been dealing with your godfather for a very long time, Harry, don’t you worry about it.”

Harry grinned back and they walked the rest of the way in companionable silence.

He was feeling considerably better when he bid Remus goodnight (after wishing him as much luck as he knew how to wish him), tickled the pear that concealed the door handle, and opened the door to find Draco Malfoy sitting at a table, looking fluffy-haired, exhausted, and as though Harry was the last person on planet Earth he wanted to see.

_Naturally_ , thought Harry.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Oh. My. Granny Weatherwax. I can't believe how long it's been since I was able to get to this fic aargh!! My life has been a ridiculous drama fest the last few months (and mostly not in a good way ugh). I know you guys have been waiting for an update, so even though I haven't finished the second part of this chapter, I thought I should post it so you have SOMETHING.

Thank you for being patient with me. I promise I'm not going to let this fic die, I just had some serious shit to deal with in my personal life. It's still going on, but I'm over letting it keep me from doing what I love. I've mostly finished the rest of this chapter, so I'll post it as soon as it's edited. (I'm having so much fun, dramatic Sirius is my fave, so much better than dramatic My Life!) If updates are a little unpredictable over the next few months, please forgive me. I'm doing the best I can, and I love you guys!

Enjoy, my darlings! xo

There was a loud clatter as Malfoy stood abruptly, not paying the slightest attention to the still-steaming tea that was spreading across the table. The elves who had been fussing around him leaped back, squeaking in alarm - all except Dobby, whose face lit up as he caught sight of Harry.

He had no time for more than a “Harry Potter!” before Malfoy shoved his chair back and stalked toward the door where Harry was still standing, not quite sure what to do with himself. This was the perfect opportunity to talk to Malfoy, to get him to admit what was going on, but it had been a long night, and he had no idea what to say now that he was faced with a clearly-furious Malfoy.

“Are you going to move, Potter?” Malfoy snapped, his voice low, a pink flush spreading across his cheeks. “Or am I going to make you?”

There was a chorus of horrified squawks from the elves. They were clearly more impressed by Malfoy’s bravado than Harry, who found himself snorting at the threat. Dressed in his pyjamas, with dark circles the size of saucers under his eyes, and his hair flopping into his eyes, Malfoy hardly looked intimidating.

“What are you going to do?” Harry asked. “Yawn at me?”

Malfoy’s face flushed even redder. If looks could kill, Harry would have been reduced to ashes, or
perhaps some kind of extra-concentrated ghost.

“Get out of my way,” Malfoy snarled. “And stop following me.”

“I wasn’t following you!” Harry protested indignantly. Of course, he had been for much of the previous week, but he felt if he was going to be yelled at, he’d rather it was for something he’d actually been caught doing.

“Oh really,” Malfoy said. “I supposed it’s just a coincidence that you happened to appear in the kitchen just as I came down for some tea.”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said, shrugging. “You’re not the only one who drinks tea, you know.”

“Bullshit.”

“Master Draco, please don’t raise your voice like that,” said Dobby from the table, where he was mopping up the spilled tea. “It is making the other elves nervous.”

Harry tensed, expecting Malfoy to turn and start shouting at the elf, but to his astonishment, he merely closed his eyes and took a long breath.

“Move,” he said, opening his eyes again when he’d decided he was calm enough. Harry debated with himself for a moment, and unfortunately, won.

“No,” he said. “Not until you admit I wasn’t following you.”

“That’s ridiculous, Potter, even for you.”

“Fine, I guess you’ll be staying the night in the kitchens then,” said Harry, thoroughly annoyed at being called ridiculous, especially when he was being ridiculous. But Malfoy had been driving him mental all week, dodging him and hiding, and he didn’t know why. He just wanted to help him, for Merlin’s sake. Although right now, he’d settle for thoroughly pissing him off.
Malfoy glared at him, clearly hoping that he could move Harry through sheer force of will. Harry stared back, schooling his expression to one of boredom, since he knew it would annoy Malfoy the most.

“If you weren’t following me, why were you out of bed?” Malfoy said reluctantly.

“I was helping McGonagall get Umbridge fired,” said Harry, grinning. He still wasn’t completely convinced the last two hours hadn’t been a very strange dream. Malfoy seemed to be wondering the same thing.

“Fine, if you don’t want to tell me, don’t,” he snapped. “I’ll just have to keep assuming the obvious. And I’m leaving, whether you like it or not.”

Harry immediately felt guilty for baiting him when he was clearly having a bad night.

“Wait,” he said, raising a hand, but Malfoy didn’t seem inclined to listen. He went to push past Harry, but Harry moved so his body blocked the doorway. He was suddenly strangely desperate to stop Malfoy leaving. He couldn’t quite explain to himself why, and he certainly wasn’t going to examine his motives when Malfoy’s fists were curling in such a threatening way.

“Potter, I swear to Morgana-”

“No, look, just wait, I promise I wasn’t following you,” Harry said quickly, raising his hands to show he wasn’t going to hurt Malfoy. (And possibly so they were near his face, where they’d be able to protect him from stray punches.) “I really was up with McGonagall, and the Governors, and Fudge. Dean was there, too, the whole school will know about it tomorrow. Umbridge…” He trailed off, wondering how on earth he could explain his evening. Wondering why he was even bothering to try. This was Malfoy of all people. What the hell is going on?

“Perhaps Master Draco would like a fresh cup of tea?” Dobby suggested brightly. He hadn’t moved during the entire exchange, but he was watching both of them closely, his round eyes narrowed slightly, as if he were trying to figure something out.

“Master Draco would like to go back to bed,” Malfoy snapped. “Before Potter tries to pile more of his drama on me.”
“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Harry demanded. “You’re the drama queen here, not me!” Malfoy snorted disbelievingly.

“I’m talking about you trying to turn me into some tragic charity case,” he sneered. “I don’t know what issues the Boy Who Lived could possibly have, but you’re not using me to work them out, thank you very much.”

“Don’t try and pull that shit, Malfoy,” Harry snapped. If he’d been much younger, he would have stamped his foot. Why the hell was Malfoy so determined not to admit what was happening to him? “We both know what’s going on, your parents are-”

It was lucky his hands had been so close to his face still, or Malfoy’s punch would have left quite a bruise. As it was, the glancing blow still pushed his glasses into the bridge of his nose, leaving it throbbing, and leaving Harry fighting the urge to slap Malfoy straight.

“Master Draco!” Dobby shouted, hurrying forward. “You will not harm Harry Potter, he is only trying to help!”

“You can shut up as well!” Malfoy yelled, stumbling backwards as though someone had grabbed him around his waist. Harry suspected Dobby had something to do with that. “You can all sodding well shut up and leave me the fuck alone! I don’t need your help, I don’t want it! I’m not your fucking charity case, Potter! I don’t need to hear about how perfect your life is and how sorry you feel for me! You can get stuffed!”

He was standing a few feet away from Harry, trembling from head to foot, his face flushed a dark red, his chest heaving and his eyes wild. Harry got the impression that he would have started throwing things if Dobby hadn’t been magically restraining him.

“Is Harry Potter all right?” the elf asked quietly, looking up at Harry with concern. Harry nodded, his gaze still fixed on Malfoy. *How the fuck could anyone feel sorry for this fucking fucker?*

“Yeah, thanks, Dobby,” he said vaguely, his brain whirring. “You couldn’t get us that tea, now, could you?” Dobby nodded and grinned.

“Of course, Harry Potter,” he squeaked, hurrying over to the long countertops the ran around the room. The other elves seemed to have vanished, although the odd glint of an eye or glimpse of an ear from behind the other tables and furniture suggested they hadn’t gone far. Only Dobby had been
brave enough to stay after Malfoy started shouting.

Harry turned his attention back to Malfoy.

“You think I’m sorry for you?” he asked quietly. Malfoy grimaced. He looked like he was either going to spit at Harry or be sick. “Well, I’m not,” said Harry. “You’re an arse. But I know what I saw, and I’m not just going to forget about it.”

“What a fucking hero,” Malfoy spat. Harry stared at him for a long moment. Why do you care so much? Why does this even matter? If he doesn’t want your help, just leave him to deal with it. But that was the point, wasn’t it? If Harry had had his way, he would have spent the summer with the Dursleys. He would have kept doing what Dumbledore wanted. The only reason he hadn’t was because Sirius and Remus had forced him to accept their help. Except I wasn’t as much of a shit about it, Harry thought. He sighed. Maybe I do have a bloody hero complex.

“Why do you care so much? Why does this even matter? If he doesn’t want your help, just leave him to deal with it.” But that was the point, wasn’t it? If Harry had had his way, he would have spent the summer with the Dursleys. He would have kept doing what Dumbledore wanted. The only reason he hadn’t was because Sirius and Remus had forced him to accept their help. Except I wasn’t as much of a shit about it, Harry thought. He sighed. Maybe I do have a bloody hero complex.

“You know how I know about those bruises?” he asked wearily, heading toward the table next to Malfoy and dropping into a seat. He laid his head on his arms, his voice slightly muffled as he continued talking to the table. “My Aunt Petunia used to grab me like that. It was a good thing they made me wear my cousin’s clothes, or they never would have been able to cover up the marks.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Potter,” Malfoy said. His voice was still trembling, but now there was an edge to it, something under the rage. Harry twisted his head so he could look at Malfoy without sitting up again. Dobby seemed to have frozen, paused in the middle of making more tea, his back still turned toward them, clearly listening intently.

“Uncle Vernon didn’t bother with grabbing,” Harry said. He turned his face back toward the table. Somehow it was easier if he told the scrubbed timber rather than Malfoy. It was easier to pretend it was just a story, rather than something that made him want to be sick. “He always said a swift kick was worth a thousand words.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Potter,” Malfoy said. His voice was still trembling, but now there was an edge to it, something under the rage. Harry twisted his head so he could look at Malfoy without sitting up again. Dobby seemed to have frozen, paused in the middle of making more tea, his back still turned toward them, clearly listening intently.

“I don’t give a fuck.” The red flush was retreating now, leaving Malfoy pale, only a single blotch of high colour on each cheek. His eyes were more hollow than ever. He didn’t seem to be able to look away from Harry.

“What do you want, Malfoy?” Harry asked, eyes narrowed. “I don’t get it. They’re treating you like shit, why would you want to stay? Why d’you go home every holiday? Why’re you always defending them to everyone? I know I didn’t tell anyone either, but I never thought they were good people.”
“I told you, Potter, I’m fine,” Draco hissed. His teeth were chattering now, his arms moving in little jerks as though he were fighting the enchantment holding him and failing.

“Yeah, you look it.”

“Harry Potter,” Dobby said softly, sliding the tea things onto the table. “Dobby is sorry for what your family did to you. Dobby did not know.” Harry smiled sadly.

“Nobody did, Dobby,” he said. “I thought it was just, you know, a thing that happened, until—” He cut himself off and sighed sharply. There were some parts of this story he couldn’t tell in front of Malfoy. “I bet you had it worse.”

Dobby waved his hands dismissively, but Harry could see the truth in his eyes.

“Dobby wishes he could have protected Master Draco, though,” the elf said sadly. “Dobby tried sometimes, but a house elf can’t do very much.”


Dobby shook his head seriously and reached out a long-fingered hand to pat Malfoy’s shaking one.

“Some promises should be broken, Master Draco,” he said. “Let Harry Potter help you. He just wants to be your friend.” Harry barely restrained a snort of amusement at the idea of Draco Malfoy being his friend, but a moment later he was struck by the realisation that yes, that was indeed what he must be trying to do. Because where else could this go? Either Malfoy would leave as soon as Dobby released him, or he’d accept Harry’s help. And there wasn’t much else Harry could offer him.

“You promised.”

Harry could see the moment when Malfoy broke, the last shreds of his self control coming apart at the seams.
“Shit, fuck!” Harry cursed, as Malfoy pitched forward, his breath coming in sharp sobs. Dobby had released his enchantment, and it seemed Malfoy could no longer support his own weight. Harry leapt from his seat and somehow managed to stop the Slytherin collapsing onto the floor. But this meant that now all of Malfoy’s weight was resting on Harry, who was the shorter of the two by a good three or four inches, and the best he could manage was to slow their descent so that nobody fractured their kneecaps.

The pair ended up slumped awkwardly on the flagstones, Malfoy leaning on Harry and sobbing while Harry rubbed his back in what he hoped was a comforting manner and freaked out completely. *This was not what I planned on happening!* he thought desperately. *What the fuck am I supposed to do now?*

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose. Come say hi! :)
Chapter Notes

*sidles in* Another half a chapter anyone...? I hope Dramatic SiriusTM makes up for the slow updates. I love you guys, you're so encouraging and patient with me! I miss being able to spend more time on this stuff, but I've had some good news on my personal front, so things should be looking up soon.

Thanks for being such fantastic readers! Love you!

CL

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius was “cleaning” (aka pacing) the kitchen when he heard the front door close and Remus calling his name from the hallway. He darted up the stairs immediately, hating how pathetically eager he was for news. Since Remus had left more than three hours ago, he’d been completely alone in the house (Kreacher didn’t count) and he’d spent most of the intervening time stewing on the fact that Dumbledore still insisted on keeping him locked up here, like some kind of… Prisoner.

There was no denying that, even if he didn’t count the previous year that he’d spent living in a cave, surviving on rats and garbage and little else, or the year before that he’d spent as a dog, he’d traded one prison for another. It was, admittedly, a much nicer prison than the one he’d spent twelve years slowly going mad in, but it didn’t make him feel any better right at this moment. It didn’t help that Harry hadn’t bothered to wait and talk to Sirius again when he’d called before. Remus said they’d had to get back to the common room before curfew. Sirius had merely scowled in reply.

He knew it wasn’t rational, but he couldn’t help feeling like the rest of the Order were leaving him out of things on purpose, avoiding passing on information they were afraid would upset him, treating him like a child - exactly like the children - as though they thought he couldn’t handle the reality of what was happening, as though he hadn’t been through more than most of them already.

“What did Minnie have to say for herself that was so urgent?” Sirius asked Remus now, trying to keep his tone level as Remus shook out his coat and hung it by the door. If Sirius didn’t know better, he would have thought his boyfriend was avoiding his eye, taking an unnecessarily long time making sure it hung straight. Like anything in this place is going to stay straight for long, he thought.

“I could use a cup of tea,” Remus said. He was definitely avoiding Sirius’s eye. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

“Moony,” Sirius said suspiciously.

“Don’t worry, I’m not keeping secrets, just give me a minute,” Remus replied. He sounded both tired and wary. Sirius’s sense of foreboding grew stronger. When Remus needed tea for a discussion, it was usually so he had some kind of shield between himself and Sirius when Sirius went ballistic.

“Good, because I’m tired of being kept in the dark,” Sirius snapped. He knew he was being unreasonable. It wasn’t Remus who was keeping things from him, and it wasn’t Remus’s fault he was stuck here.
Remus muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “I wouldn’t mind being in the dark sometimes”, and Sirius’s frown deepened.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like where this is going?” Sirius asked, stalking after Remus into the kitchen, irritation prickling at the back of his neck.

“Perhaps you’re psychic?” Remus suggested warily, tapping the kettle with his wand so it boiled instantly.

“Or you’re transparent,” Sirius snorted, flinging himself into a seat and glowering up at Remus. Remus didn’t reply, merely poured two mugs of strong, black tea and carried them to the table. When he didn’t immediately speak, Sirius leaned forward, as though glaring at him from a closer range would somehow make him speak. Remus merely sighed morosely and stared into his tea.

“I was going to ask you not to flip your shit,” he said, “but given your current impression of a thundercloud, I won’t bother.” Sirius sat back and rolled his eyes, not touching his tea.

“Get on with it, Re,” he snapped. “This dark and mysterious crap isn’t winning you any favours.” Remus sighed again and forced himself to meet Sirius’s annoyed gaze.

“Minerva didn’t call me,” he said. “I went because Harry needed my help.”

“What?!”

Sirius leapt to his feet, his chair skidding across the floor until it hit an uneven flag and tipped onto its side. He ignored it, focusing instead on the traitor in front of him. He couldn’t have been more shocked and hurt if Remus had punched him in the gut.

“What do you mean, Harry needed help?” he yelled. “What kind of help requires you going up to Hogwarts this late at night? Why didn’t you tell me? How could you lie to me about something like this?”

Remus opened his mouth in an attempt to answer at least one of these completely reasonable questions, but Sirius found he was less interested in explanations than he was in shouting some more.

“I fucking trusted you, I trusted you both!” he ranted, now pacing up and down the length of the table, waving his hands in his rage. “Now it turns out you’re both treating me like a child?! We’re supposed to be a family, that’s what you said, you utter dimwinkle !”

Sirius’s sudden fury only blazed higher at the suspicious twitch of Remus’s mouth at the word “dimwinkle”. “Why didn’t Harry ask me for help? What was so fucking difficult that he couldn’t-”

“SIRIUS FOR THE LOVE OF MERLIN SHUT UP!” Remus shouted, getting to his feet. Sirius opened his mouth to tell Remus where he could shove his “shut up”, but at the same moment it occurred to him that he actually did want to know what Harry needed help with, and that perhaps it might have been important, and that perhaps, if was really the father figure he was insisting he was, he should probably have made sure Harry was okay before he shouted at Remus for not telling him.

Bugger .

He took a deep breath and sat down in another chair with as much dignity as he could muster, eyeing Remus coldly. Remus let out his breath in a huff and sat as well.

“Is Harry alright?” Sirius asked stiffly.
“He is now,” Remus said. “But if I tell you what happened, you have to promise you won’t start shouting again or run off and try to curse anyone until I finish the story.”

“I will promise no such thing,” Sirius said furiously, leaning forward as though he planned to send this chair flying across the room as well.

“Fine,” Remus said, with the air of someone dealing with an angry toddler. “I won’t tell you then.” He stood up again and started moving toward the door. Sirius stared at him in disbelief.

“Moony!” he objected.

“Pads,” Remus replied coolly, pausing in his retreat. Sirius glared at him, but he remained entirely unmoved.

“Fine,” Sirius ground out. “I won’t start shouting or run off and curse anyone until you’re finished telling me what happened.”

“Now try that again without your fingers crossed in your pocket,” Remus said, narrowing his eyes.

“Remus!”

“Fine, but if you start yelling, I’m putting you in a full body bind.”

“Fine!”

“Fine.”

“Get on with it then!”

“I will, if you’d shut up for two seconds!” They both glared at each other for another moment, and then Remus began. “The real reason Harry called me tonight was because Umbridge…”

“I WILL TURN HER INSIDE OUT I WILL BURN HER AT THE STAKE I WILL THROW HER INTO THE OCEAN WITH A BOULDER TIED AROUND HER ANKLES I WILL CUT OFF HER FUCKING HEAD WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS HOW FUCKING DARE SHE unk-”

“I told you I’d put you in a body bind if you started yelling.”

“So now I have to plan an entire term’s worth of lessons over the weekend and figure out how not to give away that we’re raising Harry to every single member of his class.”

“Mmmf fffmpegpphh!”

“Oh, sorry,” Remus said. He waved his wand and Sirius sat up from where he’d been lying prone on the cold floor for the last half an hour.

“Thanks a fucking bunch,” he grumbled, rubbing his elbow where it had been knocked against the table when Remus had cursed him.
“I did warn you,” Remus said, sipping his third cup of tea as though cursing your boyfriend was an entirely reasonable thing to do of an evening.

“So what’s going to happen to Umbitch now?” Sirius asked resentfully, still rubbing his bruises as he hauled himself back into his chair. He picked up his tea and took a sip, grimacing at how cold it was. Remus leant forward and helpfully applied a Reheating Charm. Sirius was too pissed off with him to appreciate the gesture.

“If I know Fudge, very little,” Remus said darkly. “The Governors are insisting on an enquiry, and I have no doubt Fudge will put on some sort of display for the Prophet, but we both know it won’t mean anything.”

“How the motherfucking fuck is she not being arrested?” Sirius demanded furiously. “She tortured a pair of fucking teenagers!”

“Minerva’s going to submit a report to the Law Enforcement team, but Fudge will probably quash it,” Remus said. He sounded rather defeated for a man who’d just been offered a job he loved.

“Fuck,” Sirius said succinctly.

“Quite,” Remus replied. They sat in silence for a long moment, during which Sirius tried to pin down a single thought long enough to examine it. His mind was a mess. He was still frightened for Harry, horrified that their advice had led to him being harmed, and still half-intending to march right up to the school and shout at Minerva and Dumbledore and anybody else within earshot until he felt better. Hell, part of him simply wanted to march up to the school and bring Harry home, where he could be sure that the boy was safe, where he could keep an eye on him.

All this would have been quite enough to keep him occupied without the revelation that Remus was going to be teaching again. It had been what they’d talked about, what Sirius had wished for him, but he hadn’t thought it would come so soon. It wasn’t supposed to happen until I could go with him, Sirius thought guiltily. The man he loved had just been given back his dream job, the thing that made him happiest in the world, and he was being a selfish dick about it because it meant they wouldn’t be able to live together.

What if he doesn’t want me back once he’s been gone for a while? Sirius tried to ignore the evil little voice in his head, but it had a point. What kind of sane person wanted a boyfriend who flew off the deep end at the slightest provocation? Who threw tantrums like a toddler? Who needed a full body bind curse to keep them quiet while you told them information they actually wanted to know? Sirius had been brimming with fiery rage not five minutes ago, but now he felt exhausted, barely able to lift the mug of tea to his lips.

“When do you leave?” he forced himself to ask, trying to keep the dread from his voice. A moment later, he hurriedly added, “Congratulations, by the way.” He offered a smile that he was sure looked more like a grimace. Remus looked at him in surprise.

“I’m not leaving Grimmauld Place,” he said, frowning. Sirius stared at him, his heartbeat suddenly very loud in his ears.

“You’re not?” he asked, pathetically hopeful.

“Of course not,” Remus scoffed. “I’ve been spending every day near Hogwarts for the last few weeks already, why on earth would I need to move?”

This kind of emotional rollercoaster was rather too much for Sirius. He lunged forward and hauled
Remus into a hug, ignoring the tea that spilled as Remus attempted to put it back on the table.

“I really am happy for you,” Sirius mumbled into Remus’s neck. “I’m sorry I’m such a selfish dick.”

Remus chuckled and hugged him back.

“You’re a fucking arsehole,” he said. “But you’re my fucking arsehole, Sirius Orion Black.”

Sirius Fucking Arsehole Orion Black definitely didn’t sniffle into his boyfriend’s neck because he definitely wasn’t crying even a little bit.

Another thought occurred to him.

“Oh boy, Snivellus is going to be pissed.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

*runs in* *gasps for breath* *throws chapter at you all*

I. Am. So. Sorry. I've put a (not really) brief explanation for my extended absence in the start of the chapter. I just want to say again how grateful I am for all you lovely people reading along. I love you to bits, and I'm so glad you like this story enough to comment on it. I promise I haven't given up on it, or you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hey all! I know it’s been a really long time since I posted a chapter and I am so sorry. I’ve tried to start a chapter so many times, but I haven’t been able to finish anything. Your comments over the last few months have been truly lovely and supportive and I really appreciate you all. Thank you so much for being patient with me.

I wanted to put a little explanation here for why I’ve broken my promise to post regularly, because the reason why I’ve been absent is kind of central to the reason I’m writing trans!Sirius. If you’re not interested in this, head down to the first break for the next chapter. Trigger warning for fellow trans peeps, I’m going to talk very explicitly about dysphoria, so you might want to skip it if you find that hard to read.

I know I’ve already mentioned (more on Tumblr than here) that my mental health hasn’t been the best of late, not to mention I’ve had a few personal dramas to deal with. But the main reason things have been rocky for the last several months has been because I’ve been struggling a lot with dysphoria, which is something a lot of trans people deal with, and it’s really, really hard.

Dysphoria is different for everyone, but for me, it’s like being stuck in a body that belongs to someone else. One of the hardest things for me is knowing that even people who really try hard to acknowledge me as a man still see a woman when they look at me - and the only way that will ever change, at least in this culture, is if I physically transition. Even though I use my real name in everyday life, and most people who know me (try to) use male pronouns for me, there’s always an awareness that I’m never seen for who I am.

My dysphoria is the sensation of being invisible, unrecognised, and at the same time, feeling as though I’m trapped under a spotlight that’s burning me where I stand. All the parts of me that people read as “female” feel so visible all the time. Every time someone gets my gender wrong, every time someone tells me I look “pretty”, every time someone tries to sell me the “woman’s version”, I’m reminded that I don’t quite fit in this world, that no matter what, these people still see me as a woman playing dress up.
It is inexpressibly painful not to be seen. It is agony to feel like my soul is screaming at these people from behind a wall made up of all the parts of me I didn’t ask for and don’t fit inside. It’s even harder knowing that if I could just be seen, to be recognised for who I am, I might even like my body, or at least I wouldn’t want to rip myself out of it. Our culture places so much importance on gender and everything that goes with it that to be seen as a gender I’m not cuts me to the bone. I’ve got to the point in the last year where that pain is just too much, and the result has been that I’ve been basically immobilised, unable to do much except the bare minimum to keep myself and my family going. All my work has suffered, and I hate it. Dysphoria is a serious dick of a thing to deal with.

I’ve heard from a few fellow trans guys how important it’s been for them to read a genuine trans character like Sirius, and this is one of the reasons - we don’t see ourselves anywhere. Being invisible sucks, and the relief of reading about another person who feels how we’ve felt, who has experienced what we have, is so profound that I can’t even begin to describe it. The first well-written trans man I ever read was in a Harry Potter fanfiction, and I literally cried reading it. So of course when I went to write my own fic, at least one of my characters was going to be a trans man, just like me. Because I want to feel seen. I want, in some way, to show myself to the world. And I want other trans men to know that you’re not alone. I see you, you are real and wonderful and worth fighting for.

I don’t know how I’m going to go getting back into regular posting. I’m still dealing with some serious issues, and it’s hard going. But I’m fighting through it, and I really want to get back to the things I love doing - this fic being one of them. Thank you again for your support, and I hope you can stick with me, however long it takes.

Love Cam. xo

It was some time before Dobby and Harry could convince Malfoy to haul himself off the floor and into a seat at one of the tables. Once he’d got Malfoy settled, Harry was half tempted to make his escape, but since he was the one who’d started this disaster fest in the first place, he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. Besides, Dobby was looking at him as though he were a hero again, and a curfew didn’t seem a good enough reason to disabuse him of that notion.

“I hate you,” Malfoy muttered hoarsely, refusing to look at Harry as he sat down opposite. The sentiment was robbed of its venom as Dobby threw a blanket around Malfoy’s shoulders and pushed his third attempt at tea into his shaking hands.
“Master Draco needs to drink,” Dobby squeaked firmly. “Harry Potter and Dobby will talk while Master Draco recovers his strength.”

Malfy glared at Dobby through bloodshot eyes.

“I don’t need to recover anything,” he snapped. He might have sounded more convincing if he hadn’t sniffed loudly at the end of the sentence.

“Of course not, Master Draco,” Dobby said, passing a second cup to Harry and clambering onto the stool next to Malfoy.

Harry stared down at his steaming mug and wondered if he was supposed to say something at this point. Perhaps this was what bulls felt like when they accidentally wandered into china shops. He hadn’t meant to actually **break** Malfoy, he’d just wanted him to admit that something was wrong, the git. **Of course Malfoy couldn’t just handle it like a normal human**, Harry thought grumpily, glancing up at the subject of his irritation through his eyelashes.

Malfy didn’t look much like Malfy at the moment. His shoulders were collapsing inwards, as though the weight of the blanket were too much for him. His hands were so pale they were almost blue, even wrapped around the hot mug of tea. His face, on the other hand, was blotchy and red, dark circles made even darker by the tears so recently shed. Harry sighed. He hated the ferrety prat, but he couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. As much as he hated to admit it, he probably understood what Malfy was going through right now better than most people in the school.

“What is Harry Potter going to do to help Master Draco?” Dobby asked, jolting Harry from his thoughts. The elf had fixed Harry with an unusually penetrating look, and Harry found himself quite unnerved.

“I thought—” he started, then stopped. He hadn’t thought, had he? He’d just done. **Like always**. He’d been so busy trying to get Malfy to admit to what was happening, he’d completely failed to plan for what would happen when he did. He sighed. It was too late to worry about it now. He’d got what he wanted, and now Malfy was broken and it was apparently up to him to fix it.

“Potter doesn’t have a plan,” the Broken Human in question sneered. Even with a completely blocked nose, he still managed to convey completely contempt. “He never does. He just barges in where he’s not welcome and tries to punch people’s problems to death.”
“Master Draco, you is not being fair to Harry Potter,” Dobby chided him, but there was a gentle note in his voice that sent Harry’s Guilt Meter another notch higher.

“I was only trying to help,” he mumbled, more into his tea than at his companions. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the other elves starting to edge out of their hiding places. He spotted Winky in a corner on the far side of the room, glaring suspiciously at their little group, but he had no time for more than a tiny wave, which was not returned.

“Well done, Potter, you managed to make everything a hundred times worse,” Malfoy said. “If this is your idea of helping, I’d really rather you stopped.”

“Oh, shut up,” Harry said wearily. “I’m working on it, okay?” He took a sip of his tea in lieu of having to actually propose a solution immediately.

“Harry Potter does not have to solve all your problems tonight, Master Draco,” said Dobby staunchly. “While Master Draco is at school, Master Draco is safe. We has time to make a plan to keep Master Draco away from—” Dobby stopped talking abruptly, and Harry glanced up to find the elf shuddering. Whatever Malfoy Junior had suffered at the hands of his father, Harry would have bet all the gold in his Gringotts vault that Dobby had suffered far worse. And yet here he was, trying to help Malfoy. What had it really been like, in that house? Harry had always assumed Draco Malfoy was as bad as his father when it came to house elves, but perhaps he’d been mistaken.

“Potter isn’t going to solve any of my problems, Dobby,” Malfoy said, avoiding the elf’s gaze. “I’m not going to do anything.”

“Malfoy—” Harry objected, but Malfoy glared at him and he stopped talking. Why me? he thought resentfully. Why can’t someone else deal with this shit for a change? He sighed again and took a sip of his tea. Of course, if he were honest with himself, he didn’t really have to deal with it alone. McGonagall would almost certainly step in to help. He wasn’t so sure about Dumbledore these days, but perhaps if there was enough evidence…? Remus would be here soon, as well, but after everything, Harry was reluctant to go running to him for help as soon as he arrived.

“Tell me something, Malfoy,” he said slowly. “Why don’t you want help? Are they that bad? Are you that scared of them?”

“I’m not scared, Potter,” Malfoy spat. Harry wondered if it counted as a lie if everyone present knew it was a lie.
“What then?” Harry pressed. “I mean, I wasn’t keen on leaving the Dursleys, but it was because I…” He trailed off, his mouth hanging open, as realisation hit him.

“You’re trying to do the right thing, aren’t you?” he asked, picking his way through what felt like a verbal minefield as carefully as a fifteen-year-old with the emotional range of a teaspoon was able. It wasn’t nearly enough. “All that my father will hear about this shit, that’s about them, isn’t it? I heard him once, getting on your case about Hermione getting better grades than you. All that pure blood bollocks, you’re trying to be a good son, aren’t you? Maybe you believe it, I dunno, you’re a big enough prat, but I reckon half of it’s because of them. And no matter what you do, you can’t get it right, and that’s why they-”

“Shut up, Potter! You don’t know what you’re talking about, so just- Just shut up!”

“I just want to understand!”

Dobby patted Malfoy’s arm comfortingly and tucked the blanket more tightly around his shoulders. Malfoy seemed lost for words, almost on the verge of tears again. Harry felt a twinge of guilt in his chest and looked down at the table. Maybe Malfoy was right, maybe he should let it go. He wasn’t exactly helping, prodding at all Malfoy’s sorest spots.

“Harry Potter is right,” Dobby said after a moment. “Master Lucius expects much of his only son, and Mistress Narcissa can say little against him.”

“He hurts your mum, too?” Harry asked, his gut clenching a little.

“No,” Malfoy mumbled. “She never does anything to deserve it.”

Later, Harry would remember this as the moment he stopped hating Draco Malfoy, although he wasn’t aware of it right now. He was only aware of a sinking feeling in his stomach and a faint roar in his ears. It was like looking at himself before he came to Hogwarts, when he still believed the Dursleys hated him because he was a failure, because of his messy hair and his scrawny limbs and his questions and his inexplicably unloveable personality. Somewhere inside, he knew that feeling had never really gone away, that no matter how many people said they loved him, proved it over and over again, he would still carry some of that unloveable little boy with him forever. And here he was, sitting opposite another boy whose family had failed him, failed at the one thing they should have been able to promise him, failed to teach him that he was worth loving, no matter who he was.
“This isn’t your fault,” Harry said to the table. “You don’t deserve it either.”

“Says the dickhead who called me a prat not three minutes ago,” Malfoy said, with a rather pathetic attempt at a sneer. He didn’t even bother to wipe away the tears slowly trailing down his face again. Dobby was still patting his arm, but for now, he seemed content to let Harry do the talking.

“Doesn’t matter how much of a prat you are,” Harry said stubbornly. “Nobody should do that to you.”

“You don’t even know what they did!” Malfoy sniffled.

“Like I said, I can guess.”

“Merlin, you’re an annoying git, Potter.”

“Takes one to know one.”

The two boys stared at each other for a long moment, not at all sure what had just happened, and even less sure about where to go from here.

“I still don’t want your help,” Malfoy said eventually.

“Yeah, I got that,” Harry replied dryly. “But you know me, I’m an annoying git, so you’re probably going to get it anyway.”

Malfoy stared at him for another uncomfortably long moment.

“Why?” he asked. Harry shrugged.

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said. When Malfoy’s lip started to curl, he held up his hand. “Look, I dunno, I just can’t let you keep going through that. I know what it’s like, okay? I wouldn’t leave my worst enemy to deal with that on their own.”
Malfoy blinked, then threw his head back and laughed, laughed until his throat was raw and Dobby was looking at him in alarm.

“Well, fuck me, then, I guess,” Harry said when Malfoy had calmed down enough to hear him. Malfoy hiccupped and reached for the tea Dobby had cast a Heating Charm on some time ago. He was still grinning, and he somehow looked slightly better. He still looked terrible to Harry’s eyes, but at least he no longer looked like a zombie.

“You really wouldn’t let your worst enemy go through it,” Malfoy snorted. “Here you are, sitting with him, annoying the ever-living fuck out of him. Merlin, you really are Saint Potter, friend to the bereft and lonely, Hero of the Wizarding World, and all round total prick.” Malfoy raised his mug of tea in salute and finally took a sip. Dobby looked pleased at this positive sign and turned a small smile on Harry.

“Don’t be so fucking dramatic, Malfoy,” Harry scoffed. “You’re not even in the top 5 of my worst enemies.”

“Rude.”

“What, you think you’re worse than Voldemort, do you?”

“Okay, I’ll give you that, but surely number 2, come on.”

“Umbridge.”

“Right, right, the one you just got fired in your dreams. That old bat has nothing on me, come on.”

“I’m serious, you never got off on cutting my hand open with an enchanted quill.”

“She what? No, don’t tell me, I’m still not convinced. But I’ll give you that, number 3 then. I’m already very offended, Potty.”
“Oh, shut up, Malfoy…”

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose
Hi all! Thank you for all your lovely comments on the last chapter, I've missed you guys so much! You are all wonderful and I love you. <3 <3 <3
Cam.

“What the bloody hell happened to you?” Ron demanded the moment Harry hauled himself through the portrait hole. Harry flinched and glanced guiltily at his watch. It was after midnight. Ron and Hermione were the only two left in the common room, and they did not look pleased about it.

“Dean came back two hours ago, Harry, where on earth have you been?” Hermione asked.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered, crossing the room and collapsing onto the couch next to Ron, stretching his feet toward the smouldering remains of the fire. “I went to get some tea, but then Malfoy was there, and-”

“Oh good grief,” Hermione sighed.

“Oi!”

“No sentence starting with and Malfoy was there has ever ended well,” she said wearily.

“She’s got a point, mate,” Ron said.

“Fine, if you don’t want to hear about it, I won’t tell you,” Harry snapped, folding his arms crossly. After everything he’d just been through this evening, he thought he was entitled to at least some sympathy, perhaps even a judicious well done. But here he was, getting told off.

“Give us a break, we’ve been worried sick here, Harry!” Ron said. “We thought Umbridge’d done something else to you.”
“Yes, another fifteen minutes and we were going to go to McGonagall,” Hermione said. Ron threw her an alarmed glance and she sighed. “Well, I was.”

Harry looked up at them guiltily. It seemed guilt was a running theme this evening, and he was not enjoying it.

“Sorry,” he said again. “I didn’t mean to worry you. It’s just…” He took a deep breath and started to tell them everything that had happened that evening from the moment he’d been called to McGonagall’s office. It appeared that Dean had given the entire Gryffindor House a rather exaggerated version of the Firing of Umbridge, but Hermione and Ron sat patiently through every repeated detail and gasped outrageously in all the right places. They even managed to keep their groans to a minimum when he got to the part about finding Malfoy in the kitchens and forcing him to admit what was going on.

“So then he kind of collapsed and started crying and-”

“Wait, did you say Malfoy was crying?” Ron interrupted. If anyone in human history had ever had their Flabber well and truly Gasted, it was Ron at this very moment. His mouth was hanging open so wide that Harry thought he could have shoved at least 3 cupcakes in there without any trouble. Hermione said nothing, merely stared at Harry.

“Well, yeah, I had to catch him so he didn’t crack his knees on the floor, he was pretty messed up,” said Harry, shifting uncomfortably. Hermione’s stare was getting a little unnerving.

“You what?” spluttered Ron.

“He sort of… fell down,” muttered Harry, suddenly wishing he was asleep upstairs and not here having to relate this ridiculously awkward moment to his friends. The only thing that could have made it worse was-

Crack!

“Harry Potter, you is still awake!”

“Oh fuck,” Harry muttered.
“Hello, Dobby,” Hermione said, finally breaking her stare so she could smile at the elf. “Hello, Winky,” she added, as a second crack announced Winky’s arrival. “How are you?”

“Dobby and Winky is well, Miss!” Dobby said happily, smiling toothily at Hermione. Winky sniffed as though she had Opinions about this statement, but she turned away and started picking up the rubbish scattered around the common room.

“Dobby was hoping he would run into Harry Potter,” Dobby continued. “Although he is always very happy to see you, Miss, and Harry Potter’s Wheezy, as well.” Ron turned beet red and raised a hand to cover a suspiciously-timed coughing fit. Winky glanced over at the little group and glared at them.

“Hey, Dobby,” Harry said, schooling his expression to one he hoped was friendly, rather than fucking-over-it. “What’s up?”

“Dobby wanted to tell you, sir, that Dobby and Winky took Master Draco back to his dormitory and made sure he is safely asleep, sir,” said the elf cheerily, as though he hadn’t just witnessed the complete mental breakdown of one of his old masters, and someone who was indelibly linked to his own abuse.

“Oh, okay,” said Harry awkwardly. “Thanks, Dobby.” He absolutely refused to look at Ron, and he wasn’t altogether happy about the way Winky was looking at him either. But Dobby’s smiling, total-faith-in-Harry expression was somehow worse than both. Harry had the creeping suspicion he’d just made everything in Malfoy’s life - not to mention his own - about a hundred times more complicated and possibly more dangerous, and he wasn’t entirely sure he should have.

“Is Malfoy okay?” Hermione asked tentatively. Harry glanced at her in surprise. Only twelve hours ago, she’d been lecturing him to leave Malfoy alone. Not to mention Malfoy was an absolutely appalling bully toward Hermione in particular. Ron seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“Who gives a shit?” he snorted. Hermione shot him a Look, but he ignored it.

“Master Draco has had a very trying night,” Dobby said, his ears drooping slightly and his voice lowering. “He is not very good at showing it, but he is very frightened and sad.” He shook his small head and sighed heavily before brightening suddenly, his ears flicking upward again. “But now Harry Potter is his friend, I is sure Master Draco will be alright. Harry Potter is the best friend anyone could hope for!”
There was a sudden, deafening silence, save for a loud snort from Winky.

“Erm, thanks, Dobby,” Harry said eventually. Dobby grinned happily.

“Wait, you didn’t tell us you’re friends with that git now,” Ron said indignantly.

“I mean, I’m not really,” Harry said, shifting guiltily under Dobby’s surprisingly sharp gaze. “I just said I was going to help him, that’s not really, um…”

“What do you mean, help?” Hermione asked, frowning. “What do you think you can do, if you’re not friends?”

Harry felt his face growing hot and he threw his hands in the air.

“I don’t know, okay?” he said, his voice rising. “I just don’t want anyone to have to go through what I went through, even if it’s Malfoy! I’m sorry, I know you don’t get it! I just can’t do it!”

There was another silence, but this time Winky didn’t break it. Instead she seemed to be shuffling closer.

“Master Draco isn’t as bad as Master Wheezy thinks,” Dobby said earnestly, leaning forward.

“Dobby is too generous,” Winky snapped. The three humans jumped in surprise. This Winky might not be any happier than the Winky they’d encountered last year, but she certainly seemed more fiery. “The Malfoy boy is a very bad boy, Winky has seen it.”

“Winky knows Master Draco didn’t mean those things,” Dobby protested. “Master Draco is just a boy, he is just trying to please his father!” Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Ron laid a hand on her arm and she closed it again. This in itself was surprising enough to keep Harry silent as well.

“Master Draco is nearly a man,” Winky said angrily. “He must make his own choices now.”
“Winky should-”

“Dobby, Winky is right,” Hermione said loudly. Harry was impressed that she’d managed to stay quiet this long. “Malfoy is old enough to take responsibility for his choices. Harry was treated just as badly, but he’s a very good person.” Harry felt himself blushing to the roots of his hair and dropped his eyes to the ground.

“Perhaps things are different for Harry Potter,” Dobby suggested gently. Harry wanted to argue, wanted to tell Dobby that Malfoy could do better if he wanted, that he’d had just the same chances as Harry, but it wasn’t true. He’d been thinking it himself for some time. He didn’t like it, but he knew there was something to it.

“I think you’re both right,” he said slowly. Merlin, he was too fucking tired to be dealing with this bullshit right now, but he knew if he didn’t say it now, he’d find a way to gloss over it by morning.

“Hermione and Winky are right, Dobby, he has to take responsibility for the shitty things he’s done.”

“Language, Harry Potter!”

“Sorry,” Harry muttered, blushing again. “But they are right. Malfoy can’t just pretend he didn’t do all those things just because his dad’s a- a- a horrible person,” he finished lamely.

“That’s right,” Winky said, nodding so vigorously that her ears flapped back and forth.

“But Harry Potter, you know you is being unfair,” Dobby started, and Harry held up a weary hand.

“I’m not finished,” he said. He ignored the astonished look Hermione sent his way, and the amused snort from Ron. Instead he focused on Dobby. Somehow it was easier. “I agree with you, as well,” he said slowly. “I think I have for a while now. All the Slytherins come here from their shi- from their crappy families and we put them all in together and none of the other houses like them and they just… Maybe they’d do better if they had a chance, that’s all.”

Ron and Hermione stared at him. Harry couldn’t tell if they were more horrified or afraid for his sanity.
“Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?” Ron asked faintly.

“Oh, shut up,” said Harry. “I’m not about to go make friends with all the Slytherins, I’m just saying maybe we could do some things differently, that’s all.”

“Harry Potter is right,” Dobby said approvingly.

“As long as you is not letting them get away with their naughtiness,” Winky said suspiciously, glaring at Harry as though he’d somehow betrayed her.

“Wasn’t your old master a Death Eater?” Ron muttered, frowning. If Winky heard him, she gave no indication, merely turning her back on the group and beginning her cleaning again.

“So, what are you going to do, then?” Hermione asked. She was staring at him again. Harry wished she wouldn’t.

“I don’t want to go to McGonagall yet,” he said slowly. “I reckon that would just make things worse. Plus, Malfoy is already pissed off with me, he’d probably curse my ears off or something.”

“Harry Potter,” Dobby said warningly.

“Yeah, yeah, you know he would,” Harry said. “Anyway, I guess if we can keep him away from his dad for now that would be best, right? Mister Malfoy can’t hurt him if he can’t get to him.”

“Oh, no, you are not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting,” Ron said. This expression was definitely horrified and questioning Harry’s sanity. Harry held out his hands apologetically.

“I dunno what else to do,” he said. “He can’t stay at Hogwarts over the summer, and Sirius is like his cousin or something, I saw it on the family tree before we ripped it down.” When Ron continued to stare at him, he shrugged defensively. “Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Yeah, leave him alone!” Ron said.
“Ron,” Hermione said. “I don’t like it either, but I think perhaps Harry might have a point.” Her mouth twisted as though she’d just drunk straight lemon juice.

“You mean we have to make nice with Draco Malfoy?” Ron asked. Harry stared back at him as the full enormity of what he was suggesting washed over him.

“I think so, yeah,” he said. “Shit.”

“Language!”

“Sorry.”

There was a long silence, during which nobody said anything.

“You know this will be very dangerous, don’t you Harry?” Hermione asked. “Lucius Malfoy won’t let go of Draco easily.” Harry’s lip curled. Rather than putting him off, the thought of Lucius Malfoy stalking his son and forcing him back home brought back all his former determination. If he didn’t help Draco, who would?

“No one else is going to help him,” he said out loud. Hermione sighed.

“You’re probably right,” she said sadly. Ron muttered something that sounded like “for good reason”, but the others ignored him. Dobby, by contrast, clapped his hands together happily, as though something wonderful had happened.

“Now, Harry Potter, you is also going to bed,” he said firmly. “You has had a very stressful night and you is needing your sleep.”

“Yeah, alright,” Harry agreed, surprised by how tired he suddenly felt. It was nearly two in the morning, and he had, indeed, had a very stressful night. He thought he might need a week in bed just to recover, but for now he’d settle for sleeping until lunch time.
The three Gryffindors gathered their things and headed for the stairs.

“You know we’ll help you, Harry, even if we don’t really like it,” said Hermione, pausing at the foot of the girl’s dormitory stairs.

“Just for the record, we really don’t like it,” Ron said. Harry snorted.

“I don’t much either, if it comes to it,” he said. “But thanks.” Hermione surprised him by hugging him tight.

“You’re a good person, Harry,” she said. “Now get some sleep.”

The last thing Harry saw as he ascended the stairs to his dormitory was Dobby, smiling to himself as he swept the ash out of the grate.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 36

So I found some writer friends and we're working together. It's proving very productive and I'm loving it! I hope you're enjoying too! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry managed to completely miss breakfast the next morning, and as a burst of warm weather had tempted most of the school outside, he found the common room empty when he came down. Munching on an apple he’d snagged from lunch yesterday ‘just in case’, he wandered vaguely toward the library, assuming that something as frivolous as sunshine wouldn’t stop Hermione’s plan to begin their O.W.L revision program today. Harry supposed he should be grateful she’d allowed him to sleep in at all.

_one week in and she’s already got us on a schedule_, he thought glumly, although there was a certain amount of affection as well. No matter what was going on, Hermione would always be the same, a wonderful, caring, admittedly-obsessive constant, and honestly the only reason Harry and Ron had even made it to the age of fifteen. At least one of them knew how to think things through before doing them.

“Oi, Potter!”

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“Oi, Potter!”

_Maybe I should give that a try_, Harry thought with a sigh. He turned to see Malfoy glaring at him from the doorway of an empty classroom. Harry had spent at least an hour wracking his brain after he’d gone to bed, trying to figure out the best way to help Malfoy now that he’d forced the pointy git to admit what was happening. He hadn’t got any further than _stop it happening again_, and he didn’t think that was going to be good enough for Malfoy.

“Malfoy,” he said aloud, sticking his hands in his pockets and shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

“Get in here, you prat, before someone sees us talking,” Malfoy hissed, stepping back and disappearing into the room. Harry hesitated, fervently wishing he’d never seen Malfoy’s bruises in the first place, and feeling like the shittiest person on earth for wishing it.

“Shut the door,” Malfoy ordered as Harry stepped through. He was sitting on the teacher’s desk, legs swinging idly as he glowered at Harry.
“Alright, alright, no need to be so damn bossy,” Harry grumbled, pushing the door closed. He didn’t recognise the room they were in, although it was clearly being used for something. Judging by the complicated calculations scrawled across the blackboard, probably something of interest only to some very dedicated seventh years.

“You forced me into this ridiculous situation, Potter, I’ll be as bossy as I like,” Malfoy said. Harry snorted in response.

“Yeah, like you’d be anything else even if I hadn’t.”

“That’s neither here nor there,” Malfoy sniffed. “We need to talk. Or rather, I need to talk, and you need to listen.”

Harry stiffened. Was Malfoy going to actually tell him what had happened now? Did Harry really want to hear it if he did? What if it was worse than he’d imagined? What if I can’t handle it? Harry wondered, his heart suddenly hammering against his ribs. Since moving to Grimmauld Place, he’d avoided thinking about what had happened at the Dursleys as much as possible. He’d managed to believe the details were starting to fade, but the idea of someone else describing… that… made his gut churn and a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

“You need to drop this daft bloody crusade,” Malfoy said. It took a moment for Harry to register his words through his sudden panic. When he did, his stomach somehow managed to sink even further. This was worse than what he’d feared.

“No,” he said stubbornly. He wished Hermione were here. She would no doubt have a list of ten research-backed reasons why Harry wasn’t going to let Draco Malfoy go back to being abused. Harry just had stubbornness and the knowledge that he was Bloody Well Right. Draco sighed dramatically and covered his face with his hands, and Harry was suddenly struck by just how truly bizarre this was.

“Do you have any idea what would happen to me if people found out Saint Fucking Potter had taken pity on me?” Malfoy demanded.

“I’m not taking pity on you,” Harry objected.

“We’ve already been over this, Potter, so just shut up and listen, for once in your pitiful life,” Malfoy
snapped. “I don’t care what happened to you, I don’t care why you’re doing this, I’m not going to make my life in this place worse so you can feel like a bloody hero.”

Harry gaped at him, wishing he could address all the Wrong Things in that sentence at once and failing to address any of them. Malfoy watched him in silence for a moment, then nodded.

“I’ll take your silence for agreement, shall I?” he said, sliding off the desk and reaching for his bag.

“No, you bloody won’t!” Harry exclaimed. “I told you last night-”

“I’m not talking to you about that!” Malfoy snapped, colour rising in his cheeks. “It never happened. I don’t want your help.”

Harry grit his teeth and glared right back at his rival. The stubborn git was planning to keep putting himself in danger, and for what? Harry couldn’t understand it, even after the epiphany he’d had last night.

“Fine, don’t take my help,” he said. “But there has to be someone else. Why would you keep going back there?” Malfoy laughed, a hollow sound that sent a shiver down Harry’s spine.

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Malfoy said, his mouth twisting.

“Explain then.”

Malfoy hauled himself back onto the desk and sat in silence for a moment, staring down at his swinging feet.

“I have expectations on me, Potter. We all do. Your fleabitten godfather should be able to explain that to you,” he added spitefully. Harry’s stomach clenched again and he glared at Malfoy. Malfoy ignored him, however, and continued. “I have responsibilities.”

“Bullshit,” said Harry. “Responsibilities to do what? Be as big a git as possible? Bully as many Muggle-borns as you can? Make life as shit as you can for as many people as you can? That’s what you can’t walk away from?”
“Don’t pretend for a second that you understand my life, Potter,” Malfoy spat, sliding off the desk again and drawing his wand from his pocket. Harry whipped his out as well, but it seemed Malfoy was content to keep ranting for now. “It’s fucking ironic, isn’t it? Harry Potter, hero of the wizarding world, only heir of the Potter family, completely fucking clueless about any of his heritage. You’re an ignorant git, Potter. Don’t try and make me one.”

“*I’m* ignorant?” Harry said, his voice rising uncontrollably. A couple of red sparks shot out the end of his wand. “You’re the one who thinks some people are better because they happened to have two wizard parents, talk about fucking ignorant! What do you owe them, why do you believe that bullshit? Are you really that fucking stupid!”

“I owe them everything!” Malfoy shouted, face flushed bright red now, hair falling out of its usually-smooth arrangement into his eyes. “My name, my allegiance, my honour, my life!”

The last word echoed in the empty room as Harry stared at Malfoy in shock. *My name, my allegiance, my honour, my life.* It was like a mantra, something that had been repeated to Malfoy until he’d learned it by heart, until it was an automatic response. And Harry knew. Malfoy couldn’t accept his help because it would mean he’d have to become a different person. Hermione had said something similar when Harry had first come to Grimmauld Place, and he’d admitted in a letter to her that he was afraid he’d made the wrong decision. You’re allowed to imagine the possibility of being another person, Harry. A person who accepts the love and care of others. It’s not a bad thing.

Harry stared at Malfoy, his wand hand trembling. He had no idea what to do, no idea how to help, no idea how to get it through Malfoy’s thick skull that what he’d been taught was just controlling bullshit.

“Not wanting to get beaten up isn’t dishonourable,” he said in a low voice.

“Depends who you ask,” Malfoy replied. His voice was still humming with anger, but Harry sensed that the worst had passed, at least for now.

“What now, then?” he asked flatly. Part of him hoped Malfoy would just walk away, that he could tell himself he’d tried and failed, and it wasn’t his problem any more. The other part of him hated that thought.

“I already told you, just leave me alone.”
“Fine, but what about your friends, can’t they do something? Can’t you at least stay with them
during break, keep away so he can’t hurt you?”

Malfoy laughed humourlessly.

“That’s not exactly the kind of thing my friends do,” he sneered. “We’re not Hufflepuffs, Potter.”

“Oh, that’s right, only Hufflepuffs can actually care about people,” Harry snorted. “Why do you
even have friends, then, if you don’t actually give a shit about each other?”

“Don’t give me that holier-than-thou bullshit, Potter, I’m not in the mood.” Malfoy turned and
picked up his bag again. “And if you so much as look at me in a way that makes any of my terrible,
awful, no good, very bad friends suspicious, I will hex your ridiculous hair off.”

“Wow, I’m so scared,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “You know I’m not going to let it go.”

Malfoy stopped, his bag halfway to his shoulder and stared at Harry as though he couldn’t really
believe his senses. Harry squared his shoulders stubbornly and braced for another onslaught. Or a
curse.

“Why?” Malfoy asked. Harry remembered him asking the same question last night. He looked just
as strangely vulnerable now as he had then. “We hate each other! After everything we’ve done, why
do you want to help me? Is this some kind of Gryffindor torture?”

“If it is, the person being tortured is me,” Harry muttered. “And I don’t hate you,” he added,
surprised to find that this was true. He didn’t like Malfoy, not even a little bit. But he didn’t hate
him, not any more. Malfoy stared at him some more.

“You’ve actually lost it,” he said. “You’ve gone stark raving mad.”

“No, listen, I don’t know how to help you, but I’m going to keep working on it,” Harry said, taking
advantage of Malfoy’s shock to get a word in without shouting. “But I was thinking…” he was
interrupted by a disbelieving snort, and he glowered at Malfoy, but continued: “I was thinking that
maybe things wouldn’t be so bad, you know, for you, or, like, the other Slytherins, I mean, I guess I
was just thinking we, I mean the other Houses, are a bit, well, not as nice as we could be and maybe if we got on better then it might not be so bad, not that I’m saying Slytherins don’t deserve some of the things, but at least we could try—"

“For the love of Salazar, Potter, could you at least attempt to make sense?” Malfoy snapped.

“Merlin, you’re an arse!”

“A fabulously attractive arse,” Malfoy replied, and immediately blushed. Harry stared at him in astonishment, wondering if he’d heard him correctly. It seemed like Malfoy’s response had been almost automatic. *What is he like when he’s not trying to curse people?* Harry pushed the thought aside and tried to form a coherent sentence.

“I just thought, maybe, if all the Houses were a bit less… prejudiced, I guess, maybe things wouldn’t be so shit,” he said lamely. Malfoy raised an eyebrow.

“Your genius is a thing of legend,” he said dryly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m leaving.”

“Wait, what if there was something, an all-Houses kind of thing?” Harry asked hurriedly. “Would you at least come to that? Maybe make some Hufflepuff friends?”

Malfoy turned and looked at Harry strangely, clearly not sure what to make of him.

“I’ll consider it,” he said stiffly, almost as if the words were trying to stick in his throat. “But remember, Potty, any suspicious attention and your hair is gone. I will not get cursed by my own House because of you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry said, waving Malfoy out of the classroom. He slumped into a chair and stared at the incomprehensible garbage on the board, his mind whirling. *What the fuck am I doing?* he thought. He sat a few moments more, before deciding that, unlike Malfoy, he did have friends who could help him, and that now was a good time to go and talk to them. Harry had a Plan.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose (personal/fandom blog) and
@cambreyopayne (music/original work etc)
Sirius felt as though Harry’s first week at Hogwarts had aged him as much as all twelve years in Azkaban, and then some. The Marauders had always made sure they kept themselves entertained at Hogwarts - well, Sirius and James had, at least - but accusing a teacher of planning to attack them, getting tortured for it, and then getting said teacher fired, thereby infuriating the Minister for Magic and possibly endangering the secret organisation their gay foster dads worked for had never quite factored in, somehow.

Sirius had to admit it, he was very proud of his godson.

“Why are you looking so smug, and should I be worried?” Remus asked, leaning against the doorframe of Sirius’s room, which no longer looked like a bedroom, but rather as though it had been struck by a parchment blizzard. Remus had obviously been standing there a few minutes. He had that fond little smile on his face that made Sirius’s heart skip, the one that said *you’re unbelievably cute and I can’t believe how in love with you I am*. Sirius really liked that smile.

“You’ll worry about me regardless of what I’m up to,” Sirius said aloud, stretching back in his chair until his back cracked in the most satisfying manner. Remus chuckled.

“You have a point,” he said. “Are you nearly done? Thom and the others will be here soon.”

Sirius glanced back at the scatter of papers on his desk, lit dimly by the silver glow of the nearby Pensieve, and shook his head. His conscience gave a guilty twinge as he attempted to push the papers into a neater pile, but he tamped it down. After days of leafing through Riddle’s old notes - Morgana only knew how Dumbledore had come to have them - Sirius felt that he was on the verge of understanding something important, of gaining a real clue as to the location of any other Horcruxes, yet it remained tantalisingly out of reach. He knew he should keep working on it, but there was more to life than Tom Riddle. Thank Merlin.

The lycans were now settled into their new home, which they’d named Lycan’s Rest (although Sirius would always think of it as the Commune), and with Remus’s new post as DADA teacher,
they were coming today to celebrate with Sunday lunch, and to organise a new schedule for the lycans’ education.

“I’m not going to get anywhere else this morning,” he said, groaning as he pushed himself to his feet. “And I couldn’t miss your celebration,” he added, crossing the room and wrapping his arms around Remus’s waist.

“It’s only a temporary position,” Remus said, for what felt like the hundredth time. Sirius grinned up at him and shrugged.

“For now,” he said. “You should never have left in the first place, and we all know it. Dumbledore would be a fool to let you leave again.”

A shadow crossed Remus’s face and he shook his head seriously.

“You know why I left,” he said quietly. “But that aside, if the parents find out I’m there in anything more than a short term position, there will be trouble, particularly in this political environment.”

Sirius’s expression darkened. They’d been treated yesterday morning to The Daily Prophet’s warped version of Umbridge’s firing. They’d been expecting it, of course, but the speed at which the article had been written indicated that Fudge had not taken the most direct route home. For the Minister to be engaging in such blatant manipulation of the media was concerning, to say the least. Not surprising, at least not to any of the Order, but it seemed Fudge was rapidly discarding any pretence at subtlety in his attempt to gain control over the opinion of the wizarding population. The only thing that surprised Sirius was how easy it had been for Fudge to get away with it.

The Prophet had run a front-page article suggesting Hogwarts was attempting to brainwash its students to believe “paranoid propaganda and faux-progressive rhetoric”, although the Prophet wasn’t very clear on what this propaganda was, or what they hoped to achieve. The article had been clear on one thing, however, and that was the assertion that the Governors had been “hoodwinked by Dumbledore in order to oust an eminently qualified and respectable candidate, and replace her with an untrained, potentially dangerous stooge”.

Remus had tried not to be upset by the article, but Sirius knew it had weighed on him. Sirius wished he knew the right words to take the weight off Remus’s shoulders, but the truth was, it was always going to be a messy, painful thing, even at the best of times. If he, Sirius Black, couldn’t understand that, then nobody could. There were some things wizards just weren’t ready to accept yet - and never would be, if people like Remus weren’t brave enough to force them into it. No matter how much Sirius wished otherwise, what should have been a pure, happy moment was always going to be
tarnished by fear and distrust.

Sirius sighed and rested his head on Remus’s chest for a moment, concentrating on the smell of Remus’s woollen jumper and sandalwood soap, the hint of rosemary rising from his hands where he’d been collecting herbs to go with lunch.

“You deserve to be there,” Sirius said. He didn’t raise his voice, but it thrummed with emotion. “You’re a great teacher, and a good man. You deserve better than this.”

Remus wrapped his arms a little tighter around Sirius and rested his chin on the top of Sirius’s head. If Sirius hadn’t known better, he might have thought he heard a slight sniff above him.

“We both do,” Remus said, and in spite of probably-not-really-there-sniffles, his voice was perfectly steady. Sirius squeezed Remus once more and stepped back, although he didn’t let go of Remus yet. He was suddenly overcome with immense gratitude for the man in front of him, and he was almost angry with himself for adding to the gloom that surrounded them. He’d almost forgotten the number one Rule of Queer: **the more they try to put you out, the brighter you burn**. Remus was right. They both deserved better, and by damn, he was going to be better.

“Quite right,” he said, nodding with a comical sense of gravitas. “Now then, Mr Lupin, that’s quite enough seriousness for today,” he added expansively, and Remus chuckled at the sudden change of tone.

“Is that so?” he asked, that beautiful little smile back in place. It had been some time since Fabulously Queer Sirius had been unleashed, but the glint in Sirius’s eye suggested this was about to change. Sirius thought he might never put Fabulous Queer away if it meant he got to see that smile all day.

“It is indeed, my darling, for today we celebrate the long-delayed righting of a great wrong!” Sirius stepped back and took one of Remus’s hands in his, bowing toward the hallway. “Now get your fabulous arse downstairs and pour me a drink,” he ordered with a rakish grin.

Sirius found it remarkably easy to maintain his outrageously good humour as their guests arrived, flirting shamelessly with Thom and the other lycans, some of whom were rather uncomfortable with their teacher’s boyfriend suddenly winking at them over his wine glass. McGonagall merely rolled her eyes at his antics, but Flitwick laughed along with enthusiasm. Even Dumbledore’s indulgent smile didn’t grate on Sirius’s nerves quite as much as usual. All was very far from right with the world, but every time he looked over at Remus, he found him smiling and content, and for now, that was more than enough.
Sirius was rather pleasantly tipsy when he found himself leaning against the bench next to Dumbledore, who seemed rather more sober and was nursing a cup of tea.

“It seems young Harry has surpassed even your antics this year,” Dumbledore observed good-humouredly as they watched Thom trying to teach Moody to play poker. It wasn’t going very well, at least for Moody. For someone who spent their life chasing Dark wizards, Moody had a truly appalling poker face.

“I’m not sure you can blame that entirely on him, Headmaster,” Sirius replied easily. His cheeks were pleasantly warm from the wine he was drinking, and he wasn’t in the mood to pick a fight today.

“No, I suppose not,” Dumbledore said, more seriously. He paused and sipped his tea, before appearing to brighten. “However, his newfound interest in your young cousin can hardly be blamed upon somebody else.”

“In who now?” Sirius asked, frowning as he tried to force his rather floaty brain cells to list his far-too-many-cousins and remind him who Harry could possibly be interested in.

“Narcissa’s boy,” Dumbledore continued. “I believe they had a rather interesting meeting on Friday night.” When Sirius merely stared at him in befuddlement, he held up a hand. “I apologise, I presumed he would have told you about it already.”

“I think he had other things on his mind,” Sirius said. He wasn’t sure if he was more annoyed that Dumbledore knew something about Harry’s life that he didn’t, or that the Headmaster was being so damn coy about it, or that these two annoyances had managed to somewhat puncture his good mood when he’d really rather stay tipsily happy, thank you very much. He caught Remus’s concerned gaze and stiffened his spine. *Sirius Orion Black does not allow anyone to ruin his mood if he does not so wish*, he thought, and even inside his head, the overly dramatic declaration made him grin. He raised his glass in Remus’s direction and determined to be happy once more.

“Thom tells me you’ve been enjoying quite the philosophy debate,” Sirius said, turning back to Dumbledore as though nothing had happened. Dumbledore appeared to have completely missed Sirius’s moment of gloom, and smiled happily at mention of Thom.

“Quite so,” he said. “Young Thom has an excellent mind, and some rather unusual views. He can be very forthright, which is always an enjoyable trait in a debate partner, would you not agree?”
Dumbledore looked down at Sirius with twinkling eyes and Sirius bowed grandly in acknowledgement.

“I rather think that depends on how much one enjoys debating in general,” Sirius chuckled.

“Fortunately, I enjoy it very much,” Dumbledore said, and there was something in his tone that suggested he was not merely talking about Thom’s philosophy.

“Do you get to enjoy it with any of your other new residents?” Sirius asked with a rakish grin. Dumbledore the Unabashable merely laughed again.

“Indeed, there are several who are quite voracious in their appetites,” he replied, and Sirius snorted wine through his nose as he burst into laughter.

“Good thing we’re not relying on you to finish the last of the building,” Thom observed over the resulting tumult of laughter. “Seven more of us comin’ in next week and we’ll be full up.”

It was like a switch was suddenly flipped in Sirius’s brain, and all of his floating brain cells coalesced like moths around the resulting burst of illumination.

“SEVEN!” he yelled, hardly noticing that his glass had dropped out of his hands, or that Arthur had managed to prevent it breaking with a hasty Immobulus. Nothing mattered at that moment because he finally grasped it, finally understood. Tom Riddle had been obsessed with magical numerology, with calculations and equations and codes, and Thom’s mention of seven had finally made the pattern clear. Riddle hadn’t merely been trying to understand individual spells, he’d been searching for a pattern. Seven. Seven for luck, seven for power, seven at the heart of all the brightest and darkest magics ever made.

Sirius realised everyone was staring at him and came back to reality with a resounding thud.

“Sorry,” he croaked. “I just realised something absolutely horrifying.”

“He made seven,” Dumbledore said gravely, laying his teacup on the bench behind him and staring at Sirius. Sirius could see the Headmaster was feeling the same way he did. How did it take me so long to see it? It had been there all along, in the scribbles and margins. But there was more, Sirius knew it, it was right on the edge of his comprehension…
“Home,” he said softly, afraid that if he spoke too loudly it would break the spell and he’d lose the trail he was following. “Seven Horcruxes, seven homes. He made them homes. And the only home he ever knew…”

Sirius raised his gaze until he met Remus’s. Remus was standing stock still, the smile gone, replaced with ashen horror. Around them, their guests were exclaiming, gasping, muttering with shock and disbelief. *Seven Horcruxes, seven pieces of soul, seven evil things to find, seven, seven, seven ...*

“Hogwarts,” Remus croaked.

“Merlin’s beard,” Moody said. Of all the guests, only he and Dumbledore looked even remotely calm. “I think it’s time to wrap up this little shindig. Seems like it’s time for a proper meeting.”

Sirius felt his stomach sink. Today, of all days, was supposed to be Remus’s day. And Riddle couldn’t even let them have that.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Hi! Uni is finished for the semester, so I'll hopefully have some better writing time now, wooh! Thank you so much for all your comments, I'm going to try and get back to replying to comments, but I can't promise anything. Please know I really super appreciate them, and they help keep me going when things are difficult. You are all so beautiful and I love you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mood in the Grimmauld Place kitchen could not have been more different from what it had been a mere hour earlier. Almost all the Order sat around the long table, ignoring the tea and scones Molly had arranged in the middle. Dumbledore sat in his usual place at the head of the table, his eyes cast down toward his folded hands. Sirius wished he could tell what he was thinking.

He never wanted us to know about this, he thought. What would have happened if we hadn't found that locket? Would he have simply kept quiet forever? Who would have gone after them? How much longer would we have gone on, trying to kill a man who can't be killed?

Sirius felt warm fingers wrap around his, and he looked up to find Remus watching him.

“Sorry,” he murmured softly. No one was speaking above a mutter. It was like being in a library. Or a morgue. “Just thinking.”

“I know exactly what you were just thinking,” Remus replied, leaning closer, so his breath brushed against Sirius’s cheek. “And I know it won’t help. We’re here now. Let’s do what we can with it.”

Sirius cast him a bitter smile, but nodded reassuringly. Remus was right, as usual. He looked up to find Dumbledore watching the pair of them, his blue eyes as piercing as ever. The Headmaster nodded, and forced himself to his feet. Once again, his age was painfully obvious. Only this morning, he’d been ageless. Now, he was an old man again. This is what Horcruxes do to us, Sirius thought. How could anyone make even one? What if we’re wrong? What if I’m about to send us on an eternal chase that never goes anywhere?

Remus’s fingers tightened around his, and he forced himself back to the present. There was nothing they could do now except work on their best guess. And their best guesser was, somehow, Sirius.

“As you all know,” Dumbledore began, “Voldemort has made at least one Horcrux. We have
already found and destroyed two. Sirius has been attempting to find any more Horcruxes. We hoped it would not be too great a task, but alas, it appears fortune has not favoured the brave.” Dumbledore paused and smiled, a thin, transparent little thing. It seemed as though he didn’t want to continue, and Sirius knew how he felt. Perhaps, if they didn’t say it aloud, perhaps if they hoped hard enough, if they pretended he hadn’t thought it, it wouldn’t be true. But… “Sirius, if you would.”

Coward, Sirius thought, glaring at Dumbledore as he stood. He should have known he’d be thrown under the bus like this. He glanced around at the assembled faces, all staring at him, dreading what he was about to say. His throat tightened and he cleared his throat nervously. Remus laid a comforting hand on the back of his leg, and his nerves calmed a little.

“I believe Riddle made six Horcruxes,” he said bluntly. After so much time spent reading Riddle’s words, he refused to call him by any other name.

“Bull shit!” exclaimed Tonks from Dumbledore’s left side. A horrified wave of protestations and exclamations washed down the table, but Sirius felt strangely disconnected from all of it. Good old dissociation, he thought vaguely, from a spot an inch or so above his right shoulder. He waited calmly until the resulting hubbub had died away, but this time he couldn’t bring himself to meet anyone’s eye. The fear and dread were magnified a hundredfold now, the magnitude of their task finally dawning.

“Riddle was obsessed with magical numerology,” Sirius said, “particularly the number seven.”

“I thought you said six,” objected Mundungus from somewhere behind Bill.

“The seventh part of Riddle’s soul is the part still residing in his body,” Sirius replied, repressing a shudder. “As Albus already said, we’ve destroyed two of the six already, the locket we found over the summer, and a diary Riddle kept as a teenager.”

“What diary?” Moody asked sharply.

“It came into my possession three years ago,” Dumbledore said. “I was aware of its origins, but unaware of its true nature until very recently. It had already been destroyed before it came to me.”

“How?” Moody demanded.
Sirius looked sharply in Dumbledore’s direction. Even now, after all these weeks of study, he still didn’t know precisely how Dumbledore had destroyed the locket. It was one more of those secrets that Sirius sometimes felt Dumbledore only kept to drive him slowly mad. Minerva seemed to sense the sudden increase in tension and leaned forward.

“How is rather secondary to where at this point, Alastor,” she interjected. Despite her words, there was an edge to her tone that suggested to Sirius that she and the Headmaster were going to have words once the meeting was over, and if he was any judge, they would not be very much to Dumbledore’s taste. Sirius had the same intention.

“The where is still something of a mystery,” Sirius admitted. “But I’ve spent the last several weeks buried in Riddle’s old notes and memories, and there’s one thing that stands out.” He paused, and his gaze rested on Snape for a long moment. Snape’s black gaze was as impassive as ever. He could have been thinking about his dinner for all Sirius could have known, and it pissed him off. “Hogwarts was central to everything Riddle ever did. It was where he was first successful, first powerful, first recognised. He even wanted to teach there after he left, but he was turned down.”

“Sweet Merlin, imagine that monster teaching,” Molly muttered, pressing a hand dramatically to her bosom.

“The locket Reg-” Sirius was forced to pause as he almost choked on the old nickname. Snape’s look of disdain was enough to make him continue, however. “The locket Regulus stole originally belonged to Salazar Slytherin,” he said. “I believe the other Horcruxes will have similar ties to Hogwarts and the founders. There are two possible relics he may have tried to track down. A cup belonging to Helga Hufflepuff, and a diadem belonging to Rowena Ravenclaw. Beyond that, we still know very little, but at least we have something to go on.”

“A very little something indeed,” Snape said dryly. Sirius tensed, ready for a fight, but Remus’s fingers tightened on the back of his leg and he forced himself to remain quiet.

“It is, alas, not the news we hoped for,” Dumbledore said, getting to his feet once more. “I fear we find ourselves at the beginning of a dark and dangerous road. Yet we cannot allow ourselves to be discouraged. This is the greatest chance we have ever had of defeating Voldemort once and for all.”

“Aye, well said,” Moody growled. “But how about we get down to figuring out exactly what we do about it, and maybe the Ministry while we’re at it, or would you like to sing a song first?” This was unusually rude, even for Moody, but Sirius found himself smiling a little. There was something strangely comforting in the old Auror’s pragmatism, something that gave him hope that perhaps, if they were very lucky, they might have a chance.
The meeting came to very few conclusions, other than the rather infuriating instruction that Sirius and Dumbledore should fill Snape in on as many details as possible so he would know what to look for during his… whatever it was he did with the Death Eaters. If Sirius hadn’t already been occupied with worry about Harry, fear about the Horcruxes, and concern about Remus’s new job, he would probably have been even less pleased. He was tempted to let Dumbledore do the honours, but the more he learned about the Horcruxes, the less he trusted Dumbledore to tell them the whole truth.

“I’ll talk to him,” Minerva muttered to Sirius and Remus as she swept past them in the doorway of the kitchen, the last of the group to file out toward the front door. Sirius looked after her in surprise. Minerva had always been one of the most loyal of Dumbledore’s followers, even more so than James and Lily had been. She rarely questioned, merely trusted. Since discovering the truth about Harry’s old home, however, something had changed. In Sirius’s opinion, for the better.

“I will as well,” Remus said quietly, watching the Order members leave carefully in ones and twos, some walking to nearby Apparition points, some to places they could Floo from without arousing suspicion.

Sirius turned back to the kitchen and started levitating the half-empty cups and plates over to the sink, his earlier good mood nothing but a distant memory. He’d been desperately searching for a breakthrough in his research for weeks, but now he almost wished he’d never had it. Everything seemed tainted by the thought of it, the shadows in the corners of the kitchen a little longer, the air a little colder. He felt long arms wrap around him from behind and leaned back into Remus’s embrace with a sigh.

“Why does it feel like everything just got worse?” Remus murmured into Sirius’s neck, his face buried in the hair that was falling down from its usual messy bun. Sirius closed his eyes and covered Remus’s arms with his own. The wind was picking up, rattling the first fallen leaves of autumn across the unseen street outside.

“Because it did,” he said. “How long do you suppose we have before Riddle realises we’re going after them?” Remus pressed his face closer into Sirius’s neck.

“He may already know,” he said, and his voice was hollow. “It’s only a matter of time, assuming we can even find the others.” Sirius shivered where he stood and turned so he could rest his head against Remus’s chest. Had it been only this morning that they’d been so happy? The oncoming autumn seemed to bring something darker with it now, dirty, as though the world itself were tainted by what Riddle had done.
“Do you think he’ll come after Harry again?” Sirius asked. The question almost choked him. It was the thing he’d feared most in the hours since his realisation. If Riddle discovered what they were doing, Harry would surely be his first and most vulnerable target.

“I have no doubt he’s never stopped,” Remus said. “Would he tell us if the dreams had started again?” Sirius’s lips thinned.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. It hurt to say the words aloud. But Harry was an abuse victim, he was used to dealing with things alone. Perhaps he was learning, but even under the best circumstances, you couldn’t change that kind of conditioning overnight. And we’re not his real parents. Sirius tightened his arms around Remus, seeking the warmth that seemed to have been suddenly stolen from the world. They stood together for long minutes, the clock ticking away on the wall behind them as though nothing momentous had happened, as though the end of the world wasn’t rushing toward them, all hope crumbling around their feet.

“It’s like last time,” Remus whispered hoarsely, and Sirius could feel him trembling. “I never thought we’d be here again.” Sirius couldn’t bring himself to reply, knew there was nothing he could say.

“I shouldn’t go tomorrow,” Remus said. “I can’t run off and teach while all this is going on.” Sirius leaned back abruptly and glared at him, even while Remus’s words broke his heart a little more.

“Don’t you dare,” Sirius said roughly. “There are more ways to win this war than you running into danger at every given opportunity.”

“There are few enough of us already,” Remus objected, frowning at Sirius as though he were being unreasonable.

“Which is why you need to be where Harry is, and where we know the Ministry is aiming,” Sirius said. “They need you. Harry needs you.” Remus held his gaze, clearly torn. Sirius sighed and reached up to tug on a stray curl. “You don’t have to be making yourself miserable to be doing the right thing, Moons,” he said softly.

Remus swallowed hard and dropped his gaze. Sirius ran his hand through Remus’s hair and sighed again.

“Whatever happens,” he said, “we’ll never stop fighting, not until Riddle is gone for good.” Remus
looked down at him, his eyes glistening.

“I’m afraid, Pads,” he said simply. Sirius smiled wryly, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

“You and me both.” He took a deep breath and this time his smile was a little warmer, a little softer. “When this is over, we’ll get a little house together, just outside of Hogsmeade. We can grow those herbs you want, and I’ll let you choose the curtains. You’ll be able to walk to work when it’s fine, and Harry won’t have to stay in the dormitories if he doesn’t want to.”

Remus sniffed loudly, but he smiled a watery smile.

“And what will you be doing while I’m slaving away in this magical world where I’m somehow allowed to teach again?” he asked.

“I will be tremendously busy being gorgeous, alluring, and altogether fabulous,” Sirius replied, with a decent approximation of his more Move I’m Gay attitude. Remus laughed, a strange little cough that still had tears behind it.

“Perhaps I’ll make you work for your keep,” he said, resting his forehead against Sirius’s. Sirius pressed a brief kiss to Remus’s lips.

“I certainly hope so,” he said.

The silence swelled around them again, the shadows just as dark, the air just as cold, and Sirius knew in his heart that the cottage and the job and the herb garden would never happen. They had never been meant to survive the first war. They wouldn’t see the end of this one.

“Tell me it’s going to be okay,” Remus whispered, and Sirius felt the breath of his plea brush over his lips like a ghost.

*It’s never going to be okay. Not for us.*

He smiled softly and squeezed Remus a little tighter.
“We’re going to be okay,” he said. “I promise.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Once again I'm back to my old habits of writing too many words and having to divide a chapter into two. I hope there's enough in this chapter to keep you entertained! Don't worry, our second-favourite drama queen will be back in the next one. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a sudden drop in noise when Remus entered the Great Hall on Monday morning half an hour before class, followed by several joyful whoops from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, including the four Weasleys and Harry, although Hermione contented herself with a broad smile. Remus acknowledged his fans with a slight smile and a nod before taking his place at the top table next to Minerva and pouring himself a cup of tea.

Down at the Gryffindor table, Harry could hardly contain his grin at seeing Remus back where he belonged, and looking far healthier, and less shabby than during their third year. The Gryffindors were talking excitedly on either side of Harry, celebrating the confirmation of the hopes Harry and Dean had raised on Friday night. The nightmare of a teacher was gone, and their favourite was back.

Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table, which was as subdued as expected. He and Malfoy hadn’t spoken since their meeting on Saturday. Harry figured Malfoy needed some time to cool down, and he’d be lying to himself if he said he didn’t want a break from the drama. He wasn’t Sirius, after all. Yet he couldn’t help searching out the pale head, currently bowed over a plate of toast, the pale eyes fixed on a book that was open in front of him. Pansy Parkinson was sitting next to him, both of them paler than usual, as though they hadn’t slept. Harry found himself wondering what life was really like down in the Slytherin dungeons. It also occurred to him that the absence of Crabbe and Goyle was strange. Their looming forms were further down the table, digging into great piles of sausage, egg, and bacon that rivaled even Ron’s usual fare. Harry frowned, wondering if he’d had anything to do with the sudden change, before he was distracted by the Gryffindors who were still celebrating around him.

“Ha! I can’t believe old McGonagall actually pulled it off!” Seamus crowed a few spots down, banging his knife on the table and splattering Dean with egg yolk. “Umbridge gets fired for insulting Lupin and he’s the one who replaces her!”

Harry snorted. It wasn’t strictly what had happened, but it amounted to almost the same thing, and he was admittedly feeling pretty good about the whole affair.
“Good riddance,” Fred agreed, slathering jam on his toast with a pleased expression. The end of the Gryffindor table closest to the staff table was rapidly becoming the territory of the Order’s offspring, and it felt to Harry as though he were sitting with family, more than it ever had before. Ginny was practicing Summoning Charms by stealing all the salt and pepper shakers from further down the table. Fred and George were talking about some new product, although it was hard to tell because of all the technical terms like cellular transfigurative properties and long term photosympathetic backlash. (Harry wondered for the hundredth time how Fred and George had managed to avoid getting Outstanding in every O.W.L.) Hermione was muttering to herself as she reviewed her notes from last week’s Potions class, and Ron was debating the merits of a proposed broomstick ban over urban areas with Dean and Seamus, all three of them talking with their mouths full and at twice their normal volume, even though they appeared to all agree with each other.

Now that Remus was here, reading through notes at the staff table and occasionally smiling down at them, the only thing missing was Sirius’s bark-like laugh and snide comments about Ron’s appalling manners as the redhead shovel ed entire rashers of bacon into his mouth. Harry grinned to himself again as he imagined what Sirius would say if he could see Ron at this moment, and reached for a dish of fried tomatoes.

His warm glow of contentment, however, lasted only as long as it took for an owl to arrive with their copy of The Daily Prophet, which had been complaining vociferously about Umbridge’s sacking all weekend.

POTTER’S PERILOUS PERJURY shouted the front page, visible even before Hermione unfolded it and paid the owl its fee. Harry sighed and cut viciously into the bacon on his plate. He should have known.

“Those motherf—” Ron hissed angrily, his third sausage halfway to his mouth as he leaned over Hermione’s shoulder to read the article. Hermione waved him away, mostly in order to avoid the sauce that was threatening to drip onto the paper, and cleared her throat.

“This journalist learned only last night that the controversial firing of Dolores Umbridge from her position as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts also involved none other than The Boy Who Lived, about whom this paper has frequently reported over the summer,” she read, her nose crinkled in distaste. She paused to take a sip of her pumpkin juice to fortify herself.

“Reported over the summer,” Harry growled. “Yeah, reporting that I was insane, then kidnapped, then being sexually manipulated by a famous Quidditch player, that’s great reporting.” Hermione frowned at him and he fell silent again, waiting for the inevitable.

“This reporter previously believed Mr. Potter to be the victim of Albus Dumbledore’s ambition to disrupt the Ministry, and the wizarding world. Perhaps that is still the case. However, whether Mr.
“Potter is cooperating with Dumbledore willingly, or against his better judgement, it is clear that this young wizard was instrumental in convincing the aging Governors to remove Ms. Umbridge from her well-deserved teaching post.”

“Fucking hell, make it stop,” Ginny groaned from across the table. “What a bunch of arseholes.” She reached over her collection of salt and pepper shakers and tugged the paper from Hermione’s hands, ignoring her squeak of protest.

“We all knew it was coming,” Harry said darkly, determined not to let it ruin his Monday. He glanced toward the teachers and found Remus looking down at him with concern. He shrugged slightly, and Remus frowned a little, but made no other move to draw attention to their exchange. No doubt they’d have a chance to speak later in the day, and the thought cheered Harry significantly. Perhaps the Prophet was run by a bunch of sycophantic arseholes, but at least one of his parentish figures was here to keep an eye on things. How bad could it be, really?

“MINISTRY TO INTRODUCE NEW MONITORING OF MUGGLE PARENTS,” Fred read aloud, twisting his head sideways to catch the headline they’d missed when Ginny had pulled the paper away.

“What?” Hermione, Harry, and Ron exclaimed at the same time. Harry’s knife and fork clattered onto his nearly-empty plate, but he ignored them. He’d thought he couldn’t be shocked any more by what the Ministry was prepared to do to maintain power, but it turned out he was wrong. Monitoring Muggles? What did that even mean?

Hermione leaned across the table, her face white, and snatched back the paper.

“Ministry officials … blah blah … stated that Muggle parents were one of the greatest threats to the Statute of Secrecy … blah de blah … shocking that someone hasn’t made more effort … blah blah … cannot be left to untrained teachers under poor guidance …” She trailed off and swallowed hard. “Holy shit.”

Harry and all four Weasleys present stared at her, then at one another as the true horror of what the Ministry was proposing occurred to them.

“They can’t do that,” George said flatly.

“Bet they can,” Ginny replied, sounding thoroughly depressed.
“They could just be trying to scare people into doing what they want,” Fred suggested, although he didn’t sound like he really believed it.

“Or trying to get back at Dumbledore,” George said. “Shut him out of another part of the school stuff.”

“Or Voldemort’s got more people in the Ministry than we thought,” Harry said in a low voice. “If he knows the parents of every Muggle-born at Hogwarts, he could use them as hostages, right?” He immediately felt guilty for saying it, as every face around him grew several shades paler.

“What does that even mean, *monitoring*?” Ron asked, pushing his unfinished breakfast away as though sickened by it.

“Tracking, magical bugging, who knows?” Hermione said quietly. “It might mean they’re planning to arrest people they think might risk the Statute. The Statute technically gives them the power to arrest if there’s even the suspicion of risk or intent to reveal, so...” She trailed off with a shrug, her lower lip trembling. She looked very small and young all of a sudden.

Harry glanced around the Hall again. In several places along each House table, small groups of students were muttering over their own papers. Most of those looking worried were students Harry knew had Muggle families. Up at the staff table, every face was grim. *What a first day*, Harry thought, his eyes shifting to Remus again. Remus looked incredibly sad as he looked down at Hermione. He would know better than anyone what that kind of prejudice felt like. He knew what it was like to fear for those you loved.

“Don’t worry about your parents, Hermione,” Harry murmured fiercely, wishing he could offer her more than absurd assurances. “Sirius and Remus will keep an eye on them.”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Ron echoed. “Dad loves your parents, he won’t let anything happen to them.” Hermione smiled faintly at them.

“I know,” she said. “But what about the others?” The six of them simply stared at one another. None of them knew how to answer that.
None of them had a chance to talk to Remus during the rest of the day, although they certainly discussed *The Daily Prophet* article at length whenever they had a chance. After their first DADA lesson - a review of basic defence spells and counter-curses, which much of the class was sadly behind on - they were forced to wait in line while half the class congratulated Remus on his return and expressed their hope that he would be staying.

“I’m only here until the Governors can find a suitable replacement,” Remus said, over and over again, but it seemed his students weren’t willing to listen to him.

“But you’re the best Defence teacher we’ve ever had!” Parvati Patil said, standing on her tiptoes so she could speak to Remus over Lavender Brown’s shoulder.

“I learned heaps with you,” Neville said firmly. “My gran said you should’ve stayed on.”

“Yeah!” Seamus half-yelled, nodding vigorously. “You should’ve stayed after our third year, no one cared about the, you know, the thing…” He trailed off awkwardly, but Remus simply smiled at him.

“Thank you, Mr Finnigan,” he said. “I appreciate your support, all of you, but these decisions are in the hands of the Governors. I’m afraid you’ll have to take it up with them. Now, off to dinner, all of you!”

There was a wave of disappointed mutters as the class filed out into the hallway, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione behind. Remus was shaking his head with a fond smile, but Harry was with his classmates on this one. The Governors would never find a better teacher than Remus Lupin.

“That was a really good lesson, Professor,” Hermione said, as soon as the door had closed behind the last student. Remus’s smile widened.

“I think we can dispense with ‘Professor’ when it’s just the four of us, don’t you?” he said. “How are you all? It’s been quite a dramatic few days.”

The three exchanged glances, not quite knowing where to start.

“That article this morning,” Hermione said slowly, then paused. Her hands were clenched by her sides, and Harry thought he could see them trembling slightly. She took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice was quite steady. “Do you think the Ministry really will begin monitoring Muggle
Remus’s expression grew grave, as though a shadow had passed across his face. He bit his lip, considering his words carefully as he packed his books back into the leather satchel Sirius had bought him.

“There have been whispers about similar projects for some months now,” he said. “We hoped nothing would come of it, but I fear The Daily Prophet’s article is the final step before formally introducing it. If the public doesn’t protest too loudly, then yes, they will follow through.”

“But how the f- Sorry, I mean, how is that even legal?” Harry protested. “That’s like racism, isn’t it?”

Remus sighed heavily and snapped his bag shut, rounding the desk so he could lean against it, and waving them into seats nearby.

“I’m afraid the wizarding community still very much runs on its prejudices, Harry,” he said. “You have only to look at how wizards treat lycans, vampires, hags, half-giants like Hagrid. It’s nearly impossible to gain a senior Ministry position without family connections, or some wizarding history. And these are the people making decisions.” His matter-of-fact tone was what struck Harry the most. It was almost as though he’d accepted that the wizarding world was broken, and that there was nothing he could do about it. Harry felt his stomach roiling, and not from hunger.

“Surely they get how dangerous it is, though?” Ron said angrily. His ears were bright red, the quill he had yet to put away clenched so tightly Harry suspected he’d need a new one very soon.

“They fear very different things, Ron,” said Remus gently. “Change, a loss of power, a loss of privilege. Everything Dumbledore and his supporters represent.”

“So they’d rather bug Muggle houses than deal with Dark wizards?” Harry exclaimed furiously. He felt hot all over, his skin prickling as it had when Umbridge had insulted Remus. This was how they’d got stuck with her, this bullshit was why Remus had lived for years in poverty, why Thom and his friends could never find jobs, why Hermione had to deal with half the school thinking they were better than her just because of her parents.

“Of course they would, Harry,” Hermione said bleakly. “Half of them come from families with Dark histories. Muggles are an enemy they’ve been fighting for centuries, their traditions will win
“That’s shit,” said Ron. His quill snapped in his hand, but he ignored it.

“Eloquently put,” Remus said dryly. He stepped forward and laid a large hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “I’m afraid I have very little to offer in the way of comfort, but I promise you, Hermione, your parents are already under Order protection. I wish I could offer you more, but they, at least, are safe.”

Hermione nodded, and offered Remus a small, pale smile. Harry felt like his skin was several sizes too small, as though he was vibrating with the force of his helpless anger.

“I just wish we could do something!” he burst out.

“We are doing something,” Remus said, turning to Harry. “The Order is working hard to prevent the worst measures being enforced, and we’re attempting to sway public opinion where possible. And, of course, there is the work Dumbledore is doing here, teaching the next generation to be more tolerant,” he added, gesturing at the three students. Harry frowned.

“Not that tolerant,” he said. “Just chucking all the pure bloods in Slytherin and telling everyone to hate them isn’t doing much good. And half the rest of the school still buy into all that rot, too.” Remus studied his godson with narrowed eyes, tapping his lip thoughtfully.

“You might have a point,” he conceded. “Perhaps that is where you can do something.” His tone had changed. Now it was his Teacher Voice, the one Harry recognised from so many DADA lessons. He was clearly hoping to set Harry a challenge, little knowing that Harry already had an idea, and one that he’d raised with Ron and Hermione over the weekend.

“I actually had an idea about that,” he said slowly. “I was thinking maybe we could start some kind of club thing, invite all the Houses, maybe like that Duelling Club Lockhart started in second year, only not shit. Maybe if everyone knew each other better, they’d start thinking different? I dunno, it was just a thought…” He trailed off, feeling slightly embarrassed under Remus’s piercing gaze.

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” Remus said. “Although I would advise caution when choosing whom you invite to this club,” he added. “Families with ties to the Ministry might be willing to spy on you, or Dumbledore, and the same for those with ties to Riddle.” Harry’s stomach sank. That wasn’t what he wanted it to be at all.
“That kind of defeats the purpose, though, doesn’t it?” Ron asked, voicing Harry’s feelings. Remus pursed his lips. 

“I’m afraid it does dampen it somewhat,” he admitted. “But these are dangerous times.” Harry scowled. 

“What can anyone get from a school club, though?” he asked sulkily. “It’s not like we’re going to be plotting against the Ministry or anything.” Remus chuckled at Harry’s tone, but his reply was serious. 

“You’re going to be spreading the one thing the Ministry is terrified of: tolerance,” he said. “They’ll be very unhappy about it, and it will reflect rather badly on the school I’m afraid.” 

“So you’re saying we shouldn’t do it?” Hermione asked sadly. 

“On the contrary,” Remus said. “I’m merely suggesting you do it carefully. I’m sure you, Hermione, can assess new members adequately.” Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair and tried not to look too pleased with herself. 

“There’s only one problem,” Ron said, and Harry’s stomach twinged nervously. He thought he knew where this was going. 

“Harry wants to invite Draco Malfoy,” said Ron, proving Harry correct. 

“Whatever for?” Remus asked, obviously surprised. “I thought you hated one another!” 

“We do,” Harry replied quickly. “I mean, we did. He still does, but something happened last week, and, well…” And once again, Harry found himself relating everything that had happened with Malfoy. Remus’s expression grew darker with every passing moment, until he resembled nothing so much as a thundercloud about to spit lightning onto an unsuspecting golfer. 

“So that’s when I thought of starting the club, and if Malfoy and some of the Slytherins don’t come, it’ll kind of be pointless, won’t it?” Harry finished, feeling decidedly awkward and wondering if he’d managed to justify his interference in Malfoy’s life or just made himself look like a nosy git. It wasn’t so bad telling Ron and Hermione, but Remus was, for all intents and purposes, his parent.
And now his teacher. There was a chance Harry might actually have to consider thinking about maybe listening to him if Remus said to leave Malfoy alone.

“I think you and I are going to have to discuss this situation with young Mr. Malfoy in more detail quite soon,” Remus said gravely. “But for now, you’re quite right, and I fear my caution may be quite wrong.” He sighed, his expression mirroring Harry’s own feelings. The world really was far too dark and messy for his liking.

“I’m sure we can find a balance between caution and inclusion,” Hermione said, her tone practical, as though she were already planning the required sign-up sheets and schedules and who-knew-what-else that would no doubt be absolutely necessary for running a small social club. Harry’s head was already spinning and he wondered if this really was a good idea after all. How was everything so damn complicated all the time?!

“I’m sure you can,” Remus smiled. “Now, have you considered what you will actually do in this club?” Harry and Ron glanced at each other and shrugged. They’d got no further yesterday than “definitely not a book club, no Hermione, we are not starting a book club”.

“I had an idea,” Hermione started.

“No,” Ron interjected loudly.

“It’s not the book club!” Hermione snapped, crossing her arms and glaring at him. “I thought maybe it would be a good idea for us all to practice Defence, since half the class is already behind, and it’s O.W.L. year after all. Even if the Ministry got suspicious, it’s just a study group.” Harry and Ron exchanged surprised glances. Whatever they’d expected Hermione to suggest, that hadn’t been it. But it definitely sounded appealing. Shooting hexes at Slytherins? Good intentions or not, it was very tempting.

“I think that is a very good idea,” Remus said. “Although perhaps not without its risks. Who would lead the group?”

“Um, well, I thought perhaps Harry could teach us.”

“Wait, what?”
“Well, you are the best at Defence in the year.”

“Hermione, no.”

“Someone’s going to have to do it, and it *was* your idea.”

“But I’m not-”

“*Harry.*”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“*Language.*”

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose for personal/fandom stuff  
@cambreyopayne for original work
Chapter Notes

I know this story is going really slowly, I keep intending to pick up the pace but then shit like this happens and I end up not. So I hope you darlings are happy to be in this for the long haul, cos this little fuckers keep giving me feels and doing whatever they want. Enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione announced the news to the other Weasleys over dinner, and they spent the whole meal discussing who they should invite, and what sort of things they should learn. Much to Harry’s surprise, the others were rather enthusiastic about the prospect of learning from him.

“But I don’t really know any more than you do,” he objected half-heartedly.

“Oh, shut up, Harry,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. There was a certain note of fond frustration in her voice that was very familiar.

“Well, I don’t!” Harry said defensively. He knew he was fighting a losing battle. He wasn’t even sure why he was still protesting. It was clear that Hermione was determined to make it happen, and when Hermione was in that kind of mood you didn’t argue unless you wanted to start growing leeks from your ears. And Harry had to admit, he did have some ideas of where to start. The lesson with Remus that day had shown him how far behind the class was. Perhaps he could find out what was going to be in the O.W.L.s, so he could help everyone prepare for their examinations.

“I think it’s a fab idea,” George said, happily loading his fork with mashed potato and lamb. “Who better to teach Defence than the one person who’s faced old No Nose twice and survived?” Harry flinched at George’s flippant reference to last June, and for a moment his skin crawled, almost as though Riddle could somehow see them where they sat, planning their pitiful defences against him. He caught Ron’s concerned glance and smiled briefly and reassuringly. Breathe, focus, build the wall, Harry reminded himself, Tonks’s calming voice echoing in his mind in place of Riddle’s cold one. You’re not alone.

“D’you really think anyone else will want to join though?” Harry asked skeptically. He mostly tried to ignore it, but there was no denying the sideways looks he was getting as he walked the halls. Most of the Gryffindors seemed to have decided he was okay, particularly after the Umbridge Incident, but the rest of the school seemed to have a lot more time for The Daily Prophet. It was almost like second year all over again, although at least then there hadn’t been an army of reporters
making shit up about him.

“Join what?”

The group looked up to find Luna hovering behind Ginny’s seat, looking as though she’d just wandered into the hall by mistake. She was wearing dangly earrings that looked like tiny radishes for some reason, her dirty blonde hair had been corralled in a messy bun that looked like it could fall out at any time, barely held in place by her wand.

“We’re thinking of starting a defence group,” Ginny said, shuffling up the bench so there was room for Luna. “You want to sit?”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” Luna said, smiling dreamily and remaining where she was. “Who’s going to teach it?”

“Harry is,” replied Ron, looking as though he wanted to laugh at Luna’s odd manner. Ginny’s fierce expression seemed to be enough to keep him quiet, however.

“What an excellent idea,” said Luna. “I would love to learn Defence from you, Harry Potter.” Harry smiled awkwardly. Despite her vague expression, there was something very intense about Luna. But her apparent faith in him did help raise his confidence a little.

“I wanna learn how to cast a Patronus,” said Fred eagerly, leaning forward. “I bet mine’s something huge with fangs.” Ron and Ginny snorted.

“If yours is anything other than a weasel, I’ll buy you new robes for every day of the year,” said Ron. Fred raised an eyebrow at his brother.

“You’re on,” he said. “You’re gonna need to take out a loan for that one, little bro. I have very expensive taste.” Ginny snorted again, before clambering off the bench and picking up her bag.

“I’ll see you lot later,” she said. “Luna and I are heading up to the Astronomy Tower to look for Andromeda Imps.” The pair departed, Luna apparently drawing Ginny into a lecture about said Imps and their magical healing properties.
“What the hell is an Andromeda Imp?” George asked, brow furrowed.

“It doesn’t exist,” Hermione said brusquely.

“Why’s Ginny going to look for them then?” asked Ron.

Hermione simply gave him a long look and rolled her eyes.

“What?” Ron said.

“I think Hermione is implying that our little sister just wanted to spend time with the lovely Lovegood,” Fred leered, winking at Harry with a grin.

“For fuck’s sake, is everyone gay around here?” Ron asked, eyes widening.

“Welcome to the new millennium, Ronald!” said George. “I wish we could stay and explain these things to you, but we have things to see and people to do. Laters!”

Ron watched them leave with a vaguely affronted expression before turning to Harry and Hermione. Before he had a chance to say anything else, however, Hermione began berating him.

“Ronald Weasley, you are the most insensitive wart I have ever had the misfortune to come across,” she said. When he opened his mouth to protest, she pointed an angry-looking finger into his face and he shut it again. “I realise you’ve lived a very sheltered life, but that is no excuse to go parading your ignorance, particularly when there are several people at this table who might be hurt by it!” Harry realised she was talking about him and flushed to the roots of his hair.

“It’s fine, Hermione, really,” he muttered.

“No it is not,” she snapped. “Ron needs to learn to think before he speaks!”

“You know what, I’m gonna go get that book for Herbology,” Harry said loudly, before Ron could protest. He could sense an Evening Argument coming on, and he didn’t fancy getting caught in the
middle of it. Hermione waved at him and turned back to Ron, who looked pleadingly at Harry.

Harry pretended not to notice and headed out of the hall, ignoring the stares that were directed at him. He wasn’t even overly bothered by the wave of mutters that seemed to follow him out of the hall. He was getting used to it.

Once he reached the relative peace of the Entrance Hall, Harry paused and debated just heading upstairs and hiding in his dormitory until Hermione calmed down. Then he remembered that Remus was a teacher now, and would probably be checking up on his progress with disturbing regularity - he had been keen on them studying during the summer, after all. With a long-suffering sigh, he turned his feet towards the library.

Harry didn’t pay much attention to the other students in the library as he wandered slowly down the row of shelves, checking the numbers on the spines as he searched for the book Professor Sprout had recommended. He was mostly just enjoying the peace and the lack of stares when a sudden flash of blond hair drew his attention, and he saw Malfoy ducked away between the shelves. At first, he wasn’t at all inclined to follow him. He’d left the other two because they were arguing, and he wasn’t really in the mood to get into another one. But on the other hand, he would have to tell Malfoy about the group at some point, and as it was always so difficult to track him down without literally stalking him…

“He followed Malfoy around several more corners, moving further into the more arcane - or more dull - areas of the library, frequented mainly by sixth and seventh years who were already looking remarkably stressed about N.E.W.T.s for people who’d been back at school for barely a week. Harry rounded yet another corner and paused. He couldn’t see Malfoy anywhere down the long row, or anybody else for that matter.

“Would you leave off already?”

Harry jumped at the angry hiss behind him, then tried to look like he hadn’t jumped, and instead glared at Malfoy. If the git didn’t keep running away from him like a child, he wouldn’t have to keep chasing him.

“I just wanted to talk to you,” Harry said, keeping his voice low for reasons which currently escaped him.
“Did it never occur to you that I don’t want to be talked to?” Malfoy snapped. Harry glanced at the book in Malfoy’s hands. It was the same title he’d just grabbed off the shelf. It seemed they were both taking their Herbology remarkably seriously this semester. Although, it occurred to Harry, he didn’t actually know what kind of student Malfoy was. For all he knew, the Slytherin could work as hard as Hermione. He frowned and forced himself to concentrate on what he actually wanted to say.

“I’m not going to bug you about the… the other thing,” he said, trying not to sound sulky and failing impressively. “I just wanted to tell you we’re starting a Defence Against the Dark Arts group, for anyone who wants to practice. I thought maybe you and some of the other Slytherins might be interested.” Harry knew before he’d finished his sentence that it was pointless.

“You thought wrong,” Malfoy said. “I have better things to do than to chum it up with a bunch of soft-headed wankers who think shooting curses at each other is a fun way to spend an evening.”

“Malfoy-”

“Leave me the bloody hell alone, Potter.”

Harry watched Malfoy stalk off without another word. Well, I did the best I could, he thought. He couldn’t force Malfoy to accept his help, just like he couldn’t force the Slytherins to join the rest of the school. He heaved a sigh and headed off to borrow his book.

Remus had agreed to stay at Hogwarts for dinner as well during his first week, although he was feeling decidedly guilty for abandoning both Sirius and Lycan’s Rest. He soothed his conscience by reminding himself that it was only temporary, while the Governors found a permanent replacement. This shockingly did very little to make him feel better.

Sitting at the staff table was strangely soothing, however. Flitwick chattered away next to him, Minera occasionally dropping in a word or two in between calling out warnings to the students below. Remus smiled as he slowly ate his corned beef and watched Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys discussing the group. He had many concerns, but they looked so enthusiastic, so serious, so determined, that he couldn’t bring himself to feel too bad about it. He knew how hard it was for them, stuck here in school, being told not to get involved, to play it safe, when they were as invested in the outcome as anyone - particularly since the announcement of the Muggle monitoring program that morning. He hoped something like this would keep them focused on school, rather than getting into trouble. Although with James Potter’s son, he wasn’t sure he should feel too secure about that.
Once Harry had left the hall, Remus decided it was time to head home to Sirius - *my boyfriend* - and said his goodbyes. He was almost out the front door when he realised he’d left his favourite quill in the classroom. He debated for a moment whether or not to just leave it for the morning, but quills had a habit of disappearing in a school, and he’d had it since his student days.

Ten minutes later, quill in hand, he was locking the classroom door when he heard a strange noise from the room next to his. He paused for a moment, wondering if he’d imagined it, but it came again, and his heart sank. It was the noise no teacher ever wished to hear. A student was in there, clearly crying.

Remus took the few steps toward the next door and paused, hand outstretched toward the handle, unsure. He’d been that student, many times, and he knew that there were times when the last thing he needed was company - particularly that of a teacher, who would only try and “fix” things. But it didn’t matter right now. He was the teacher now, and he had to try and help, even if the student in question didn’t want it. That was his job. He raised his hand and knocked softly. The crying stopped abruptly, but there was no reply from the other side. Whoever it was was clearly hoping Remus would decide he’d imagined it and leave them alone. Instead, he opened the door and stepped inside.

The classroom was almost as dark as the one he’d just left, a single lamp burning low on the teacher’s desk, while a pale form sat huddled on the floor below it. Remus couldn’t help his eyes widening in surprise.

“Mr. Malfoy?” he asked gently.

Draco Malfoy turned his head away so Remus couldn’t see his expression, but he was clearly in great distress. He was scrunched into a ball, his arms wrapped tightly around his legs, which were drawn up to his chest. Even in the dim light, Remus could see that his hair was far messier than usual, as though he’d been clutching at it while he cried. Now that he thought about it, he didn’t remember seeing Malfoy at dinner.

“Go away,” Malfoy said finally, his voice hoarse. Remus sighed and pointed his wand at the lamp, turning it up just enough so that he could see properly. He moved further into the room, shutting the door behind him, and took a seat a little way from Malfoy, giving the boy space.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to do that,” he said. “I heard you from next door. May I ask what’s wrong?”

“No you bloody can’t,” Malfoy sniffed, his voice cracking on the last word. Remus raised an eyebrow. He really was distressed, to be talking to a teacher like that. Malfoy had never been
exactly polite to Remus. He’d made it clear that he thought him a second-class citizen, and that werewolves were very much not to his taste, but he’d never quite crossed the line like this. Whatever had happened was clearly serious. Remus wondered how many times Malfoy had come here to cry, alone, and if anyone knew about it.

“Very well,” Remus said aloud. “Is there someone I can get for you? A friend?”

Malfoy snorted loudly, the sniffed again and rubbed his face on his sleeve. Another sign of distress. Someone like Malfoy, who was usually so neat and put-together, would never think of wiping their face on their sleeve on a normal day.

“Like who?” Malfoy said. “Your golden boy Potter?” Remus frowned. Harry had said he was trying to befriend Malfoy. Clearly it wasn’t going well.

“I meant someone less… Well, perhaps someone from your own house?” Remus suggested. Malfoy sniffed again and shook his head, still keeping his face half-hidden behind his hair, turned away from Remus.

“Draco, you’re clearly very upset,” Remus said softly. “I understand if you don’t want to talk to me, but I cannot just leave you like this.”

Malfoy finally turned to face him, his pale eyes wide with anger and anguish. It was such a different Draco Malfoy that Remus almost leaned backward in shock. Normally composed and sneering, this Draco was broken and bleeding. Remus could see someone else in that face, a young man who thought he could never be whole, who thought he’d always be a freak. The family resemblance made it all the more painful. Remus had found Sirius crying like this one night in fourth year, after a letter from his mother. Perhaps Lucius was the cause?

“Why?” Draco asked. “Why do you care? You and Potter, you’re not supposed to care!” His voice rose hysterically, and tears leaked out of his eyes once more. “Everything was fine, it was fine, I had it all under control, and then perfect bloody Potter had to poke his nose in, and now you’re here too, and I can’t.” This tirade was apparently too much for Draco, who collapsed in on himself again, shuddering with great, heaving sobs.

Remus would have thought it impossible only a few weeks ago to feel anything for this spoiled little shit, but his heart broke as he watched Draco self-destruct in front of him. He sighed and moved from his place to kneel beside Draco, laying a single hand on his shoulder. Had it been Harry or Ron or Hermione, he would have hugged them, but Draco would certainly not appreciate such a gesture.
“Harry is worried about you,” Remus said quietly, as Draco sobbed beside him. “Just as we were worried about him. Nobody should have to go through what you two have suffered.” Draco didn’t respond. Remus doubted he could respond. “I can’t force you to accept Harry’s help, or mine, but rest assured that if there is anything we can do to protect you or to make your life better, we will do it.”

Draco continued to cry for several long minutes, and Remus knelt beside him, his knees and feet going numb where they were folded under him. After a while, he remembered that Sirius was expecting him home, and he sent a Patronus London-ward and remained where he was, one hand still resting on Draco’s shoulder.

“There’s nothing you can do,” Draco whispered, once his sobs had subsided. He was leaning against the desk, shoulders slumped, exhausted. A single tear trickled slowly down his cheek.

“For someone who despises Harry so very much, you certainly sound very alike sometimes,” Remus observed, with a small, sad smile. Draco snorted wetly, and wiped his nose on his sleeve again. Remus delicately chose not to notice this.

“What do you want from me?” Draco asked. He was at the end of his tether, so broken by whatever had been happening to him that Remus was surprised the boy was even functioning at all. If Remus had anything to do with it, Draco would be spending the night in the Hospital Wing under the pretence of a sudden illness.

“We don’t want anything,” Remus said. “We don’t want you to spy for us, we don’t want you to even like us. We just don’t want you to continue allowing yourself to be hurt. You don’t deserve it.”

Malfoy closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the desk, not speaking for a long moment.

“You’re all bonkers,” he said at last, and Remus found himself chuckling.

“That is almost certainly true,” he replied. “But that doesn’t mean we’re wrong. Let us help you, Draco. At least let me help you tonight, let me take you to the Hospital Wing for some rest.”

Draco kept his eyes closed and remained silent for an even longer time, before nodding.
“All right,” he said, so quietly Remus almost couldn’t hear him.

They didn’t speak again until Poppy had settled him into a bed behind some privacy screens in the corner and given him a Calming Draught. Remus watched from a distance as Draco began to drift off, some of the awful tension finally draining from his pinched, thin features.

“Professor Lupin,” he said, his voice slurred with sleep, his eyes already closed.

“Yes?”

“Tell Potter I’ll join his bloody club,” said Draco. And then he was asleep. Remus smiled, let himself out of the Hospital Wing, and headed for home.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose for personal and fandom stuff, @cambreyopayne for original work and writing stuff
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

OMG you guys are so amazing! I've been loving reading all these comments, I can't believe how much I missed you all! For those who don't follow me on Tumblr, I've been having some fun with the fic this week. I started recording an audiobook version which you can find on SoundCloud (link at the end of the chapter) and I also started making a dreamcast board on Pinterest if anyone is interested in seeing how I pictured the characters (link also after the chapter). The ages are all wrong, but I don't care. XD This chapter is dedicated to @parmelde who is a fantastic human being! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sirius!” Remus called as he hung his cloak on the hook by the door and shucked off his neat brown leather brogues, shuffling instead into his comfortable slippers. He noticed a new tear on the left slipper near the toe and frowned. It looked almost as though a dog had been at them. He sighed and headed towards the kitchen, his stomach growling loudly.

“Sirius!” he shouted again as he passed the staircase. “If you’ve been chewing my slippers again, we’re going to have words!” There was the sound of a door being flung open upstairs and a thunder of feet on the stairs. A moment later, the man himself came into view, his shirt untucked, his feet bare, his hair flying in all directions, and an inexplicable ink stain on the side of his nose.

“I thought you were never going to come home!” Sirius said, taking the last flight two steps at a time and jumping at Remus, who had to drop his bag in order to catch him.

“Oof, you impatient bugger, I wish you wouldn’t do that!”

“No you don’t,” Sirius grinned, leaning forward and kissing him. His hair fell around their faces like a curtain and Remus smiled into their kiss, breathing in the familiar scent of parchment and ink and dog and tea.

“What kept you so long?” Sirius demanded when they broke apart. Remus lowered him so that he could stand again and rubbed a weary hand over his eyes.

“A complication,” he said. “Let me get some dinner and I’ll explain.”
When they were seated in the warm kitchen, Remus with a plate of reheated shepherd’s pie and Sirius with a fresh mug of tea, Remus told Sirius everything that had happened with Harry and Draco. When he related what he knew of Draco’s situation, Sirius dropped his gaze and shifted uncomfortably.

“How bad is it?” Sirius asked shortly. Remus narrowed his eyes and examined him carefully. He thought he knew what was bothering Sirius.

“I don’t know for sure,” he said. “Given his reaction to Harry’s offer of assistance, however, I think you can imagine.” Sirius cringed openly, seeming to shrink in his chair. One hand stole unconsciously toward his chest, rubbing at the scars and the memory of cracked ribs. Remus reached across the table and took Sirius’s other hand, saying nothing, anchoring him to the present with his mere presence. Sirius cleared his throat gruffly.


“No. I don’t think Harry wanted to make things more difficult for Draco by involving people who could force him to do something about it.” Sirius smiled sadly.

“He’s smarter than half the adults I know,” he said. He chewed absently on a strand of hair, thinking. “We have to do something, though, don’t we?”

“Quite,” said Remus. “Fortunately, we have a few months to work on it before Christmas holidays. But whatever happens, we cannot abandon the boy to his fate.”

“How did Harry even get him to talk about it in the first place?” Sirius asked after another long pause. “I thought they hated each other. He’s mentioned him before, he seemed to despise him.” Remus smiled sadly.

“If you’d seen Draco looking the way I did tonight, you would have done the same,” he said.

“I think you’re giving me too much credit,” Sirius snorted. “But since Harry is a better man than I, what do you suggest we do?”

Remus chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip, toying with the cutlery on his now-empty plate. The haunted look on Draco’s face swam before him. He’d looked so young, and so broken, but there was
no telling how he’d feel in the morning. There was at least half a chance he’d regret telling them anything, and would keep them at arm’s length. They could hardly force him to accept their help. And Lucius Malfoy held too much power over too many at the Ministry for them to go there for help.

“Harry and the others have invited him to join the group they’re starting, I believe Harry mentioned it in his letter yesterday?” Remus said. When Sirius nodded, he continued, “They’ve decided to turn it into a Defence study group. Harry will help them learn new techniques and a study group shouldn’t draw too much attention from any Ministry spies.” Sirius laughed his bark-like laugh.

“So Harry’s going to be a teacher,” he said. “Like godfather, like godson!” Remus smiled, and Sirius was sure he blushed a little.

“Draco said he’d join,” Remus said, pretending not to be as pleased at Sirius’s observation as he was. “For now, I suggest we let Harry take the lead. Hopefully he can convince him to avoid going home in the break, at the very least.”

“I agree,” said Sirius, nodding thoughtfully. “And while Harry does that, we’ll figure out what to do with him after that.” They exchanged glances. For all their talk of ‘figuring out what to do’, they already knew where this would lead. There really were no other options. It seemed, despite their staggering lack of qualifications, they would soon be adding another wayward soul to their little family. At some point they might figure out how they actually felt about that...

Draco became aware that he wasn’t in his dormitory before he opened his eyes, but for a few minutes he couldn’t quite remember why. When the memory of the night before started to emerge, he groaned softly and covered his face with both hands. Bloody Potter and his bloody fan club! Why couldn’t they have left well enough alone?

He opened his eyes and found the sun well and truly up, shining brightly through the window next to his bed. Lessons would have started some hours ago. It seemed he wouldn’t be going to class today.

Madam Pomfrey was bustling around on the other side of the privacy screen, talking to someone about ingredients and herbs. The someone had a rather squeaky voice. It sounded like a house elf. Draco groaned again and closed his eyes, wishing he could pretend the last week hadn’t happened. Bloody Potter, he thought again. Bloody Lupin. How had they managed to see something that nobody else, in four years, had managed to spot? And, more importantly, why did it matter?
He rolled onto his side and curled up, letting his hair fall across his face, filtering the sunlight so it was more bearable. The skin around his eyes still felt tight and swollen from crying. Normally he would have performed a basic healing charm before anyone could have seen the redness, but he hadn’t even thought of it in the disaster of last night. How many more disaster nights were there going to be? he wondered miserably.

He’d come to school just over a week ago as usual, relieved to be here, guilty for being relieved when he knew what his mother was living with while he was gone, ashamed for not being stronger. He shouldn’t be so glad to get away from home. He should have been better, tougher, nobler. Instead he was here, a pathetic disaster of a human being, so weak that a few people trying to be nice to him had landed him in the hospital wing.

In truth, it felt like fifteen years of threats and blows and insults and fear had landed on him, all at once, as if somehow Potter’s clumsy attempts at kindness had broken down the barriers Draco had so carefully erected to protect himself and forced him to feel every single awful moment all over again. Draco had known he was fragile, too sensitive. The other men in his family had been through the same, or worse. It was simply how things were. He’d worked so hard to push down his hurt, to be the man his family, his name, his father needed him to be.

He’d failed.

What happened now? Here, in this slightly lumpy bed smelling of cleaning spells and lavender, there was no hiding from the truth. He couldn’t go back. He wanted to, quite desperately, wanted to go back to where things were familiar, where he understood how things worked. Whatever came next was quite foreign, frightening. He wasn’t sure he would like what it was. But something in him was broken, Potter had broken it. Father broke it, whispered a voice he wished he couldn’t hear. Potter just showed you the pieces.

Bloody fucking arseing wanking shitting Harry sodding Potter and his interfering.

Draco sniffed loudly and wiped his damp face on the sleeve of the pyjamas he only vaguely remembered getting into.

“Oh bugger,” he said aloud. Another memory had resurfaced. He’d actually told Lupin he’d go to Potter’s ruddy club thing. He groaned and covered his face with both arms. Perhaps he’d simply go back to sleep for a few months, until everyone forgot about him and he could just pretend none of this had happened.
Unfortunately, Madam Pomfrey had heard his muttering and now popped her head around the curtains.

“Good morning, Mr. Malfoy,” she said brightly. “I see you’re finally back in the land of the living.” Draco resisted the urge to make a sarcastic remark about stating the obvious.

“What time is it?” he asked instead, raising himself on his elbows.

“Nearly midday,” Madam Pomfrey replied, straightening the blanket on the end of the bed. “You’ll be staying here until at least supper, or tomorrow morning if I’m not sure you’re up to company.” Draco scowled and sat up properly, accidentally on purpose kicking the blanket Pomfrey had just folded onto the floor. She tutted and picked it up, folding it neatly once more with the air of someone who refused to be baited. This did not make Draco feel any less annoyed.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he said sulkily. “Professor Lupin overreacted.” Madam Pomfrey put the blanket on the shelf on the bedside table, where it couldn’t be ‘accidentally’ knocked onto the floor again.

“Of course he did, dear,” she said. “And I plan to continue doing so as well.”

Draco didn’t bother replying to this, merely attempted his usual sneer. He suspected it didn’t have quite its usual derisive force behind it. Truth be told, he was still exhausted. He hadn’t slept well in some time, and two meltdowns in a week had used up what little reserves he had left.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley were here before class. They left you those.” Pomfrey gestured to the bedside table, and he noticed for the first time the selection of Honeydukes sweets arranged like the most bizarre bouquet Draco had ever seen. It was as if someone had attempted to make a bunch of flowers out of chocolate. He frowned. It was something that he’d normally despise, as inelegant and strange as it was. Yet he could feel an uncomfortable and most unwelcome warmth between his shoulder blades, almost as though he were… grateful. He really did sneer now. How much worse could things get?

Madam Pomfrey finished fussing with his covers, checked his temperature, and retreated to the other side of the privacy screens, promising to return in an hour with lunch. Draco glared after her for a few minutes, running through all the swear words he knew in his head at the indignity of being told to *take a nap, dear*, as though he were a toddler. His body, however, hadn’t got the memo that he was nearly an adult, and soon insisted that he lie down again and close his eyes.
As he fussed with his covers, Draco glanced at the ridiculous arrangement on the bedside table. What did it mean? How was he supposed to feel about this? Who had even thought of it? He couldn’t imagine Potter coming up with something like that on his own, the insensitive clod. Granger, perhaps? There was another thought designed to make him uncomfortable. He scowled half-heartedly at the arrangement as though his confusion was all its fault, and his eyes slid slowly shut again. His last thought before he fell asleep again was, *at least they had enough sense to include the strawberry mousse Chocoballs.*

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose for fandom and personal @cambreyopayne for original content

The audio version of ATT is here: https://soundcloud.com/user-90199558/sets/after-the-tournament-audiobook

And the Pinterest board is here: https://www.pinterest.com.au/cambreyopayne/after-the-tournament/
Howdy all! Thanks for everyone who headed over to SoundCloud to hear the audio version. I am going to record more chapters (the first ten are up now) but I have kids home on school holidays, so getting quiet time to record is kind of... impossible... But I'll get there soon! If you haven't already, you can find the link to the audio version of ATT at the end of the chapter, as well as the link to my dream cast for this story on Pinterest. Also come say hi on Tumblr if you like, I love hearing from you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the hell is that?”

Draco looked up to see Pansy Parkinson staring at his chocolate bouquet in open disgust.

“Nice of you to show up,” he said dryly. He wasn’t really upset, and they both knew it. She knew how much he hated being fussed over. The note she’d sent him around lunch time had been enough to let him know she was truly worried about him. It seemed Madam Pomfrey had merely informed her that he was unwell, but almost certainly knew what was really going on. She’d been the only one he felt safe to confide in about the whole Potter saga. She might laugh at him over it, but she, at least, understood why he hadn’t just hexed Potter into the next century. The others would view it as, at best, weakness; at worst, the basest treachery.

He hadn’t expected to hear from anyone else. Vince and Greg wouldn’t have bothered about him once they knew where he was; they’d be content simply to wait until he got back. Blaise and Millicent were the only other people who might have even been slightly interested in the occurrence as anything other than gossip. The Slytherin fifth years hadn’t gone in much for the type of affectionate friendship so favoured by the Gryffindors currently torturing Draco.

“I’m serious,” Pansy said, shoving his legs aside and sitting on the edge of his bed. “Which abysmally tasteless person sent you that monstrosity?” Draco grimaced and shifted uncomfortably. He was dressed in his robes again, waiting only for Madam Pomfrey’s say so before he headed down to join the rest of the school for dinner.

“It was Potter and his groupies,” he admitted. Pansy snorted.

“Of course it was,” she said. “Only a Gryffindor could be so tacky. I take it they know why you’re
Draco folded his arms as though he could protect himself from her disturbingly insightful gaze and leaned back against the pillows.

“It was Lupin who brought me in last night, so I presume so, yes.”

“Lupin?” Pansy asked, astonished. “All right, go back to the beginning and explain.”

Draco couldn’t bring himself to look at her as he explained, as briefly as humanly possible, what had happened the night before. When he finished, they both sat in silence for a while. Pansy reached out and rested her hand on his arm, but otherwise made little attempt to comfort him. It was a reality they were both painfully aware of, although Pansy’s parents tended to content themselves with cutting words rather than cutting curses. Small mercies, Draco thought disdainfully. He knew there was less difference between the two than some would have thought.

“What are you going to do?” Pansy asked eventually, her voice calm, as though enquiring about the weather. Draco sighed and stared down at his knees.

“If I thought Potter would accept pretending nothing ever happened as a reasonable option, I’d go with that,” he sighed. “But they won’t leave me alone, the bastards.” Pansy smiled humourlessly.

“You know I’ve got your back no matter what,” she said. “But they might have a point.”

Draco made an exasperated noise and chewed at his thumbnail in frustration. It was a habit he’d been trying to break for over a decade, but he somehow couldn’t stop it resurfacing when he was under stress.

“I said I’d go to their bloody club meeting,” he confessed, glancing up at Pansy through his eyelashes. Her eyes widened in astonishment.

“You really aren’t well,” she observed. “I know I said you should let them help you, but we’re one week into term and you’re already making play dates? Maybe Blaise had a point about you and-”
“Oh, shut up,” Draco snapped. Pansy sniggered. “I’m only going so they’ll leave me alone and you know it.”

“No you’re not,” she argued serenely. Draco didn’t bother replying. He knew she was right and he hated it.

“You’re coming with me,” he declared. Pansy’s smirk vanished.

“I bloody well am not,” she retorted. “You might be happy to go native, but I still have some pride.”

Draco merely raised an eyebrow at her. They’d shared too much with each other to be fooled by her defensiveness, but one had to go through the motions nonetheless. For the first time, Draco found himself wondering why they couldn’t just be honest with one another. Watch out, there, you’re starting to sound like a Hufflepuff, he thought.

“If you don’t come willingly, I’ll set Potter and his gang on you,” he said flatly. “If I have to suffer, so do you.” Pansy shuddered.

“Fine, fine,” she said. “I’ll go to your damn meeting, there’s no need to get dramatic.”

“When am I ever anything but?” he smirked. Draco sat back against the pillows as Madam Pomfrey came to give him one finally check over. He might not be happy about how things were going, but at least he would have someone slightly bearable to talk to while he rode this rollercoaster of ridiculous.

Hermione somehow convinced Harry and Ron to accompany her to the library after dinner for some books that were apparently absolutely essential to their Charms essay.

“We can pick up that guide to substitutions Snape mentioned yesterday while we’re there. You two should be working on improving your Potions grades this year,” Hermione observed as they climbed the stairs from the Entrance Hall. “Just because Snape is a bit-”
“Evil,” interjected Ron.

“A total cockwomble,” added Harry. Hermione looked down her nose at both of them.

“I was going to say prejudiced,” she said sternly. “But that’s no reason for you not to do as well as possible in your OWLs, they’ll affect your whole future! Snape only takes NEWT students with Outstandings!”

Ron and Harry groaned in unison. Each and every one of their teachers had already given them this speech, and they were tired of hearing about it. Harry thought he’d take the exams tomorrow, prepared or not, if it meant he wouldn’t have to listen to McGonagall lecturing them about the Principles of Whatever that she expected them to learn by the end of the week in order to avoid becoming utter failures who would end up homeless and miserable. This rather depressing train of thought was thankfully interrupted as Angelina Johnson bounded up the stairs behind them, calling Harry’s name.

“Hey, Angelina,” Harry said, stopping so she could catch up to them. “Nice work on getting Captain,” he added, grinning at the Quidditch Captain’s badge pinned to her robes.

“Thanks,” she said brusquely. “I wanted to let you know, tryouts for Wood’s replacement are Monday. I want the whole team there, so maybe try not to get any more teachers fired between now and then.” Ron snorted behind Harry.

“It’s not like I was planning on making a habit of it,” Harry protested half-heartedly, and Angelina grinned.

“Glad to hear it,” she said. “See you down at the pitch, straight after classes on Monday.”

“See you then,” Harry said. She smiled at him again, waved to the other two and strode off. Harry watched her round the corner, feeling the first flutters of excitement at the thought of being able to fly again. It had been far too long.

“She’s not wasting any time then,” said Ron, and for some reason he sounded a bit put out. “Didn’t think the try outs would be for another few weeks.”

“The season starts in October, she can’t exactly wait about,” replied Harry, wondering why Ron was
frowning so hard.

“D’you know anyone who’s going for it?” Ron asked, chewing his bottom lip, his ears starting to go a little red. Harry was even more puzzled about this, but decided this was not the time to ask questions.

“Dunno,” Harry said. “But it’ll be hard to replace Wood, he was a great Keeper.”

“Can we perhaps talk about it and walk at the same time?” Hermione suggested, somewhat acerbically. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who grinned in reply as soon as Hermione’s back was turned, and they continued discussing the upcoming season all the way to the library. By the time they reached their destination, whatever momentary emotion had afflicted Ron seemed to have passed.

They lowered their voices to whispers as they passed Madam Pince, who glared at them suspiciously, as though students looking for books in a library was somehow an unusual occurrence. As they passed the section on Potions and Herbology, Harry noticed a flash of white blond hair bent over next to a dark brown head. Malfoy glanced up, his eyes meeting Harry’s briefly over Pansy Parkinson’s head as Hermione led them toward the Charms and Enchantments aisles.

Harry nodded slightly and looked away, not wanting to disturb Malfoy more than he had the previous night. He felt an uncomfortable twinge of guilt in his lower intestine. He really wasn’t trying to keep upsetting Malfoy, but it seemed like his help was doing more harm than good. It was very strange, this uncomfortable feeling. He’d never felt guilty for upsetting Malfoy before. Malfoy certainly hadn’t changed much, although he admittedly hadn’t tried to hex Harry for at least a week, which was different. But Harry knew that, prat or not, what he knew about Malfoy’s family, what he’d learned about Sirius’s family, had changed everything, even if only for him. He didn’t like Malfoy, that would have been asking too much. But after the truly bizarre evening in the kitchen, he had a sneaking, rather disturbing suspicion that, if Malfoy were given the right chance, he might actually turn out to be someone Harry could like. Or, at the very least, tolerate.

Harry wondered if there was a point at which his brain would simply explode from all these uncomfortable new revelations, or if he’d just develop a permanently confused expression instead.

“Harry, have you been listening to a word I’ve said?” Hermione hissed, interrupting his train of thought. Harry shrugged uncomfortably, and Hermione handed him a stack of heavy books to hold while she searched for the rest of the titles on the list he now noticed in her hand. He supposed he and Ron could count themselves lucky she was only inflicting two books on them, as she seemed to have about a dozen she wanted for herself.
“Sorry,” he said, adjusting his grip as another tome was added to the pile. “Was just thinking.” Ron snorted.

“About Malfoy?” he asked disdainfully. “I saw the git look at you when we came in, I dunno why you’re still bothering about him.”

“Your concern is touching, Weasley,” came a drawling voice from behind them. Harry and Ron turned to find Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson leaning against the shelves. Harry noticed Malfoy still looked tired, and paler than usual, although he mustn’t have that much wrong with him, if Madam Pomfrey had allowed him out of her Hospital Wing. Harry noticed Hermione stiffen slightly beside him, as though steeling herself for a confrontation, but when she spoke, her tone was polite.

“Malfoy,” she said, nodding. “Pansy.” Pansy nodded in return and Harry was struck with a sudden urge to laugh. They looked ridiculous.

“I was going to thank you for that truly absurd arrangement you sent,” Malfoy said, and Ron sniffed dubiously, “but I wouldn’t want to be a bother.” Pansy covered a smirk with her hand, completely failing to hide her amusement.

“Don’t be a prat, Malfoy,” Harry said. “We were just trying to be nice. We won’t bother next time if it’s such a hardship for you.”

“As it requires me to speak to you, I don’t think hardship adequately covers it,” Malfoy sniffed, but the corner of his mouth was twitching. Harry was reminded again of their argument in the kitchen. Surely number two, come on . Did Malfoy actually like arguing with him?

“What d’you want, Malfoy?” Ron asked wearily, clearly not interested in watching the usual exchange of insults, but not willing to start insulting anyone himself with Hermione glaring at him from close range.

Malfoy and Pansy exchanged glances.

“I suppose Lupin told you I said I’d join your study group?” Malfoy said, somehow managing to make study group sound like a dirty word. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged surprised glances. Remus had been the one to tell them Malfoy was in the hospital wing, but he’d never mentioned that particular tidbit.
“I guess not,” Pansy sighed, looking thoroughly bored now that no one was insulting anyone. “Well, here we are, and we’re in, for what good it’ll do.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked, smiling in spite of himself. It was against his better judgement to let Malfoy think he might actually enjoy his company, but he’d assumed that his attempts at inter-house unity were basically pointless after last night’s debacle.

“That’s great,” Hermione said, smiling as well, even if she did look rather unsure about the whole affair. Ron remained silent, which Harry thought was rather fortunate, because he did not look even a little bit pleased. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“We have conditions,” he said, pushing himself off the shelf and stepping closer so they could speak without being overheard.


“Go on, then,” he said. Pansy crossed her arms and glared at them.

“This isn’t easy for us either, you know,” she snapped in a near whisper, obviously not willing to incur the wrath of Madam Pince, even for the sake of being rude. “For all we know this is some ridiculous set up to make our lives even harder.”

“If you don’t want to come, we’re not going to make you,” Hermione said quietly, frowning.

“You don’t get it, do you, Granger?” Malfoy drawled. His tone was as relaxed as ever, but Harry could now see the tension in the muscles around his eyes, in the way he held his shoulders.

“Explain it, then,” Harry said shortly. He was thoroughly sick of having to guess what was going on in Malfoy’s head just so he could help the stubborn bastard. Pansy rolled her eyes, but Malfoy seemed take the question seriously - or, at least, more seriously than usual.

“You’re asking us, Slytherins, to come to a meeting, a Defense Against the Dark Arts group no less, with a bunch of people who mostly hate us just because of our names,” he said. “And even supposing you somehow convince them to not behave like heathens and jinx us the second we arrive, if certain others from our House discovered we were fraternising with you lot, we’d be jinxed as soon as we got back to the common room.” Harry frowned as he tried to absorb this new, and
rather depressing observation. Hermione, however, looked less perturbed. (Ron looked as though he’d quite like to start with that jinxing right now, thank you very much.)

“There are plenty of people in this group who would have every right to hate you,” Hermione said firmly. “Myself included. I can’t promise it will be easy, but I can promise that everyone we’ve invited is trustworthy and will be there for the same reason we are - to try and make things better for everyone.”

Malfoy looked as though he wanted to make a scathing reply to her statement, but he remained quiet. Pansy chewed on her bottom lip, eyes narrowed as she surveyed Hermione.

“Why?” she asked. Harry felt unexpectedly sad as he recognised the same question Malfoy had asked him, more than once. The sadness turned almost immediately to anger, as he considered how many of their teachers, and their parents’ teachers, had simply allowed things to happen this way, to get to the point where people were convinced that Voldemort, a mass-murderer, was in the right, simply because they couldn’t even consider the fact that their fellow classmates might be worth knowing.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” he said flatly. “I’m sick of all this inter-House fighting bullshit. It’s been going on for centuries and all it does is make people act like prats and grow up to be prats.” He paused, trying to control his anger so he didn’t attract Pince’s attention. “I bet half the people poncing around in Death Eater masks last June wouldn’t’ve been there if all this crap hadn’t happened.”

He glanced at Malfoy, who had grown even more pale, although his face remained an impassive mask. It was a long moment before any of them spoke.

“You don’t think you can win this war with a feel-good study group?” Pansy asked scathingly. “Sing a few songs around a campfire, cast a few counter-curses, and we’re all friends now, is that it?”

Harry snorted.

“Maybe not,” Ron said, unexpectedly. “But it’s better than nothing, isn’t it? D’you really like the way things are?” Hermione shot him a look of surprised approval, and Malfoy and Pansy shifted uncomfortably.
“As long as you know what we’re dealing with,” Malfoy said stiffly.

“We do,” said Hermione. “I’ll find a way to let you know when the first meeting will be so that you
don’t have to explain yourselves to anyone who might have a problem with it.”

“That’s all we ask,” Pansy said shortly. Both Slytherins nodded and turned abruptly, disappearing
around the end of the shelf.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked at one another and released the breaths they hadn’t known they
were holding.

“I know we’ve seen some shit,” said Ron, “but that has to be the weirdest bloody thing that’s
happened since we started at Hogwarts.” Hermione chuckled, more out of relief than amusement,
but Harry remained quiet. It certainly had been bizarre, but there was a strange warmth behind his
breastbone as he realised what Pansy and Malfoy had actually been saying. They were willing to
trust them, not just with their reputations, but with their safety. It might not sound like much, but
Harry knew it was the start of something better.

Chapter End Notes

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tournament-audiobook

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Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

I have been so excited about this chapter, I can't wait to see what you guys think. Finally, some more action! (For those who love ships and fluff don't worry, there will still be loads more of that but it's been too long!) Hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius paced back and forth across the living room rug, tapping his latest letter from Harry against his leg without realising what he was doing. For once, his godson wasn’t the source of his restlessness. Harry seemed to be doing well so far.

No, what was occupying his mind late on a Saturday afternoon was Tom Riddle’s wretched splintered soul. Sirius only wished he could have been focusing on Harry’s problems instead.

“You’re going to wear a hole in that rug if you keep that up,” observed Remus behind him. Sirius turned sharply, almost tripping over his own feet, and dropped Harry’s letter on the table.

“I’ve been waiting for you to get back, I need to send Dumbledore a message,” he said urgently, not bothering with the usual niceties of hello or even wotcher. “I think I know where another one is.” Too late, he spotted Thom behind Remus.

“Oh,” he said. Thom glanced at Sirius’s flushed cheeks and wild eyes, then back at Remus’s far more guarded expression.

“I’m gonna take a stab this is one o’ them things the Headmaster’s been after,” he said dryly.

“No offense taken, Siri,” Thom said, waving a hand. “We know how things are. But I’ll give yer both a heads up before yeh tell himself up at the school.” He paused and licked his lips nervously. “I don’t mean ter speak outta school, but Alby i’nt always given to doin’ things the most sens’ble way, if yer get me. I reckon you might wanna send someone wiv ‘im, ‘case ‘e comes down wiv a case o’ the secrets again.” He shrugged his shoulders a few times, a nervous tic Sirius had noticed before. “Or ‘e might get ‘imself inter summink ‘e can’t get out’v.”
Sirius frowned as he considered Thom’s advice. It wasn’t far off what he’d already thought himself, but it certainly came from an odd source.

“I thought you and Dumbledore got on,” he observed. Thom chuckled wryly.

“Y’can like a fella, admire ‘im even, an’ still see that ‘e ‘as faults,” he said. “I reckon your lot might ’ave a tendency to forget that with Alby sometimes. Tho p’raps not you so much.” Sirius couldn’t help but laugh. The more he got to know Thom, the more he liked him. He exchanged a thoughtful look with Remus.

“We were going to have a cup of tea before heading back to the Rest,” said Remus. “I’ll see if Dumbledore would care to join us.”

When Thom opened his mouth to offer to leave, Sirius held up his hand.

“I can’t promise anything, Thom, but I think it might be time that you, at least, knew more about what was going on.”

It was a strange, spur-of-the-moment decision, the kind of instinctual trust that he’d always criticised in James. But Thom had been helping the Order in all sorts of small ways since he and the other lycans had arrived, taking messages, collecting gossip in the seedier areas, getting the word out about the Rest to other lycans and part-humans, so they’d think twice about joining the Death Eaters. If he hadn’t proven himself trustworthy yet, he never would.

None of them spoke during the tense wait for Dumbledore except to request milk in their tea or for someone to pass the chocolate wafers. Sirius was privately grateful. He’d been circling this realisation for days, going over and over Riddle’s sordid family history - what little of it they knew - until he was sure he’d located the next horcrux. In former days, he would already be out there, searching for it himself. *Older and wiser, are we, Black?* he thought derisively. If he were honest with himself, he was mostly waiting for Dumbledore to arrive so he could blackmail him into taking Sirius along with him.

It was a great relief when the front door clicked open and Dumbledore made his way down the hall to the kitchen. Behind his usual serene smile, he was clearly as excited as Sirius was himself. He paused for the briefest instant on the threshold when he saw Thom. Sirius knew what he was thinking, king of secrets as he was.
“I hear you have news for me,” he said, accepting a cup of tea from Remus and seating himself. There was an unmistakable note of caution in his voice, and Sirius caught the look he shot toward Thom. Thom himself seemed content to ignore this, and took another sip of tea.

“I know where the next one is,” Sirius said without preamble. Dumbledore frowned at him.

“Am I to understand that we have inducted Thomas here into our membership?” he asked delicately, surveying Sirius over the tops of his glasses. The sound of Kreacher muttering to himself as he pottered about in the room next door seemed suddenly very loud in the ensuing pause.

“We haven’t told him anything, Albus,” Remus said, quietly but with the faintest note of resentment. “But I think it might be time, don’t you?”

“That is hardly a decision for us to make alone, I think,” Dumbledore replied. “The Order will meet tomorrow night, surely it can wait until then.”

“Thom’s sitting right there,” Sirius said sharply. “And no, this can’t wait, not if you want to go after it tonight. I tell you, I know where it is.” Dumbledore frowned, clearly gathering his thoughts to argue with Sirius in that infuriatingly calm manner he had, but Thom had other ideas.

“Yer right, Alby,” he said. “I don’t mind waitin’ ‘til tomorrow night to put my case to the Order.” Remus opened his mouth to object, and Thom shook his head stubbornly, his greying hair flopping back and forth. It needed a trim, although it was certainly cleaner and healthier than it had been when he’d first visited Grimmauld Place only, what, a month ago? It felt like years.

“I don’t mind waitin’ ter know what it is yer all lookin’ for,” Thom continued, his voice growing stern. “But I know it ain’t safe, and yer might be all fine lords and gennelmen, but I ain’t gonna let yer go off on yer lonesome tonight Alby. Yer don’t have ter tell me what it is yer lookin’ for, or why, but I’m comin’ with yer, like it or not.” He sat back as though the issue were completely resolved and crossed his arms. Dumbledore looked half amused, half annoyed. Sirius found himself entirely amused, if only because he enjoyed watching Dumbledore being wrong-footed so much.

“Are you sure, Thom?” Remus asked softly, concerned.

“Yer don’t need ter ask me that, surely, Wolfy,” Thom said, pursing his lips. Remus smiled reluctantly.
“You’re right, of course,” he said. “Thank you.”

“I ain’t doin’ it for you lot,” Thom said staunchly. “I’m doin’ it fer my lot. I ain’t gonna get to the end o’ this war and have anyone say we didn’ do our bit, right?”

Dumbledore gazed at him over the tops of his glasses as though studying a very interesting beetle, and then nodded.

“Very well, I am honoured to accept your offer,” he said. “Our task tonight is, as you say, a daunting one.”

“I’m coming too,” announced Sirius abruptly. As he’d expected, Remus immediately informed him why that was a bloody daft idea, but for once, he wasn’t looking at his boyfriend. He was glaring at the Headmaster, who merely gazed back inscrutably.

“I expected no less,” he said, after a noticeable pause. “Very well, where are we going, and do we have any idea what to expect when we arrive?”

“We’re going to the Gaunt shack,” said Sirius. “And I think I might know what we’ll be facing.”

Sirius sat in the square next to Thom at precisely nine o’clock that evening, his currently-canine insides squirming with excitement and guilt. Remus wasn’t happy to be left behind, and was even less happy that Sirius was going. It was bad enough that they were facing unknown protection magic that would no doubt be surrounding something as valuable as a piece of Riddle’s soul. That Sirius was wanted by both the Ministry and Riddle’s lackies made things even worse. Sirius, however, was absolutely delighted to be out of the house, finally doing something other than ruining his eyesight.

“Your research is one of the most important things we’re doing right now,” Remus had said. His face had taken on a greyish tint, the muscles around his eyes drawn tight, the lines across his forehead etched a little deeper than usual. Sirius had sighed and hugged him from behind, resting his head on Remus’s shoulder.
“You understand why I have to do this,” he’d said. Remus had sighed heavily.

“That doesn’t mean I have to like it.” He’d turned and tied Sirius’s hair back up in the bun that had somehow fallen out during the afternoon, and then it had been busy-ness and organisation and sending messages to others in the Order and to Lycan’s Rest just in case something went wrong until Sirius was kissing Remus goodbye, Thom was nodding his own farewell, and they were crossing the street to their agreed-upon meeting place.

Dumbledore arrived at precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds past nine, ambling idly down Grimmauld Place with his hands in his pockets. He was dressed in impeccably muggle style, although his rather flamboyant style still drew the eyes of the few people still on the street at this hour. He wore grey trousers and matching waistcoat, a dark pink dress shirt, a blue and white spotted cravat, all under a maroon velvet jacket that had surely been called up straight from the 1970s. He’d tucked his luxurious beard away neatly under the cravat, and his long hair had been plaits and curled into a bun at the nape of his neck. All in all, Sirius was somewhat discomfited to find that Dumbledore was the very image of how he’d imagined his own future. He glanced up at Thom to see what he thought of this rather different Dumbledore, but Thom’s expression was as stoic as ever.

“What a remarkably fine evening it is,” Dumbledore remarked as he drew level with them.

“Aye,” said Thom simply. Sirius’s doggy hearing was rather better than his human, or perhaps he simply had less distractions when in dog form, because he could hear a note of tolerant affection in Thom’s voice that he hadn’t really noticed before. *How much time have these two been spending together,* Sirius wondered, his nose wrinkling in the equivalent of a canine frown.

“Shall we walk?” Dumbledore suggested above him. Sirius huffed impatiently at the charade. Nobody was watching them, he could have told them that. But instead the two men wandered lazily further into the small wooded park that made up most of the square opposite Grimmauld Place, taking their time and clearly checking every few steps that they weren’t being followed. Sirius whined irritably, drawing a chuckle from Dumbledore.

“My apologies, Mr. Black,” he said. “I assure you, we will be on our way as soon as possible.”

*As soon as possible* turned out to be *not bloody soon enough,* but after some interminable meandering about in circles and criss-crossing through the quiet streets of muggle London, Dumbledore finally decided they weren’t being followed. He Apparated the three of them to the quiet village of Little Hangleton, landing in a dusty, hedgerow-lined lane just past the last house in the village. Sirius snuffed up the country air happily, relishing the warm, rich scent of fresh-cut hay,
and of dew settling on the chrysanthemums and the briars in the hedgerows. It was so different to London, so much more alive, and yet so much sleepier. He lowered his head to the dirty lane and sniffed around, amusing himself for a moment by tracing the path of a mouse that had scurried across the road not ten minutes earlier.

“‘R you gonna chase yer tail all night, or are yeh gonner ‘elp us wiv this woteveritis wot we’re s’posed ter be findin’?” Thom asked, quietly amused but his voice carrying a certain alertness that drew Sirius’s attention back to the task at hand.

He trotted back to where Dumbledore and Thom waited and looked about them. He could see reasonably well in the dark, particularly aided by the lights still shining from the windows of houses nearby. About a hundred metres away, a woman washed dishes in front of her kitchen window, her eyes cast down, completely unaware that three strangers had suddenly appeared just down the lane. A cat sat on a stone fence nearby, watching them curiously, but not interested enough to investigate. Sirius twitched his ears. He could hear a television close by, a murder mystery by the sound of it, one of the ones where everyone was either a poncy Lord or a hard-bitten farmer. The choice seemed amusingly appropriate, given their location.

He turned his gaze away from the village. Where the lane turned ahead of them, a gap in the hedge allowed Sirius to see the large, dark shape of a manor house. He knew it must be the old Riddle house, the one Riddle himself had stayed in last year. The one he’d taken Harry to only a few months ago. Where Harry had almost died…

“Our path is this way,” Dumbledore murmured. His rather fabulous outfit seemed even less appropriate here than it had in Grimmauld Place, but he seemed not to notice, striding away up the lane for about fifty metres and disappearing through an almost non-existent gap in the wild hedge.

Sirius found it significantly easier to slip through the hedge than either of his companions, both of whom were scratched rather badly by the hawthorn and the briars that were now intermingled with the older plants. No one had cared for this boundary in some time.

As it turned out, no one had cared for the garden, or the house, on the other side of it for some time either.

“Blimey, I thort we’d lived in some shit ‘oles,” Thom muttered to himself, picking his way through the thigh-high nettles toward the house itself. It looked as though it were one windy day away from collapsing completely. The walls were coated in moss and mildew, half the roof tiles missing and several of the timbers rotting and broken. Almost all the windows were broken, whether by human or nature, Sirius couldn’t tell.
Sirius had intended to return to human form once away from prying eyes, but one glance around him changed his mind. The trees grew so close together that there was almost no light. Thom had the assistance of his lycan night vision to aid him, but Sirius had no inkling of how Dumbledore could step so confidently through the tangle of plants as he led them toward the front door.

The front door which was no longer there. Or, rather, no longer hanging. A storm had evidently blown it off its hinges at some point, for it lay mournfully on the front step, its timbers half rotted away. Leaves and dirt had blown into the room, which, by the looks of things, had already been quite dirty enough before it had been abandoned.

Sirius stepped over the threshold behind Thom and Dumbledore, raising his nose to snuff at the dank, mildewed air. The crumbling house smelled like what it was, a ruin, but there was something underlying the decay and death, something that set Sirius’s hackles raising even as he tried to discern what it was. Thom summoned two orbs of light with his wand and set them to floating ahead of them, although they did little more than accentuate the darkness.

“I believe you were right, Sirius,” Dumbledore murmured, picking his way delicately across the floor, avoiding the plates and mouldering furniture that had been left where they fell many years earlier. “There is certainly some powerful enchantment here. Sirius growled softly in acknowledgement. Dark magic always had a smell of its own, and it was never pleasant. There was an acidic edge to the air, surrounding them, making Sirius’s skin prickle. Thom grunted, moving past Dumbledore and poking his head through the only door in the room to investigate what had probably been a bedroom when there were still people here who slept. Sirius knew he’d smell it as well.

Sirius stepped cautiously toward the centre of the room, his claws clicking softly on the splintering floorboards as he sought the source of the enchantment, forcing himself to push forward, despite the fact that all his senses were screaming at him, telling him to turn and run. He shivered, his fur prickling. Thom knocked something aside in his exploring, an old walking stick clattering to the floor and making both Sirius and Dumbledore jump. Sirius growled at him and Thom grinned apologetically. The noise had startled him as much as it had his companions.

Sirius stretched out his neck as he passed a pile of pots and a sink that had once been the kitchen, approaching a dark, vaguely chair-shaped object. The foul stench of Dark magic overpowered even the yellow fungus that was releasing pungent spores from its seat in the old chair. Sirius sneezed twice and whined. The smell was too strong to tolerate in his current form - he felt a pang of sympathy for Thom, who couldn’t dial down his sense of smell the same way. Sirius changed back to human, resisting the urge to scratch at his nose in an attempt to rid himself of the horrid odour.

“It’s here,” he rasped. Dumbledore, who had been muttering to himself near the rear wall, crossed the room in two strides, pulling his wand as he came. Sirius took out his own wand and muttered a few exploratory charms, checking for traces of magic, attempting to discern the source of it. They
were charms he’d once used in his studies, before he’d had to adjust them for more unpleasant investigations. It had been some time since he’d had to use them like this. He shuddered as the readings traced themselves in gold shapes before him, shapes that would be meaningless to those who had not studied as he had. Dumbledore glanced at Sirius’s work and nodded grimly.

While the two were working, Thom had returned from his search of the other room, remaining a few steps back, his face twisted in a grimace. He clearly wasn’t willing to come any closer to the source of the magic.

“Don’t need no spell t’tell me that ain’t summink youse wanna mess with,” he muttered, more to himself than the others.

“It’s under the floorboards,” Dumbledore observed calmly, letting Thom’s criticism pass.

“A blind puppy could’ve told you that,” Sirius replied, somewhat shortly. The scent still lingered in his throat, grating on his already stretched nerves. The enormity of their task was just dawning on him. The horcrux itself was bad enough. The defensive magic he could now sense surrounding it was terrifying.

“How’re y’gonna geddit out?” Thom asked, leaning forward just far enough to peer at the spot of blank, apparently normal floor upon which their focus rested.

“With some difficulty, I fear,” Dumbledore replied calmly. Sirius could feel his heart beating in his throat and his chest itching. The hairs that had escaped his bun tickled his neck in an almost unbearable manner. He was losing control, panicking at the feel of the Darkness pressing in on him. But he couldn’t panic, he needed to see this through, needed to prove he was just as capable as before. He wasn’t going to let Azkaban ruin him, damn it.

He took as deep a breath as he could in the dank house, vaguely aware that Dumbledore was still muttering to himself about how to break the spell. He remembered what Tonks had said while she was teaching Harry Occlumency. You’re allowed to feel it, just don’t let it control you. He breathed in again, letting his fear drift away into the back of his mind. He didn’t have time for it now. He turned his attention back to the task, ignoring the nausea building in his stomach.

“We need some kind of sink to drain the worst of the curse into,” Sirius said aloud. Dumbledore’s muttering paused, and he looked up at Sirius in surprise.
“My dear boy, what an unusual approach,” he said. Thom glanced between the two of them.

“Pretend I don’t have a clue wotchore talkin’ about and mebbe explain,” he said tensely. Sirius chuckled ruefully and rubbed absentlly at his chest.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was thinking we could drain the majority of the power of the curse into another object, turn its focus somewhere else so we can get to whatever it’s protecting.” He felt his shoulders relax a little more. When he said it like that, it sounded less threatening, more like an academic problem to be solved than a life-or-death battle.

“I din’t know it were that easy to git rid’f a curse,” Thom said, taking a small step closer.

“It’s not getting rid of it, dear man,” Dumbledore said, twiddling his wand in a circle so it outlined the centre of the curse with a faintly-glowing gold line. “We merely shift it temporarily so we might gain access to what it guards. No mean feat, I might add, although certainly easier than breaking it.” Sirius squatted down on his haunches, eyes narrowed as he examined Dumbledore’s barrier, attempting to sense what was inside it. All he could feel was the curse, acrid and deadly.

“So what’ll ‘appen if yer fuck it up?” Thom asked bluntly, leaning back again and crossing his arms. He had a mulish look on his face, as though he fully expected Dumbledore to do something stupid and heroic and was determined not to allow it. In a less serious situation, Sirius would have found this dynamic quite amusing.

“We will all die quite slowly and horribly, and so will many of the people in the charming little village through we just passed,” Dumbledore said serenely. “But to refuse to attempt it would ultimately have the same result, do you not agree?”

Thom and Sirius both snorted in reply, and Sirius stood up, groaning as his knees and back protested. *I’m far too old for this shit.*

“No time like the present,” he said aloud. “Do you have any suggestions, Albus?” Dumbledore smiled faintly.

“I presume you intend to hold back the curse while I retrieve our goal?” he asked. Sirius nodded shortly. “In that case, I suggest you use the stones in the front wall. They’re the only option sturdy enough for a curse this powerful.” Sirius nodded again, his stomach crawling up toward his throat and making him distrust his ability to speak.
“Bloody wizard nobs,” Thom muttered to himself, clutching his wand tighter in his left hand. “Yer all bonkers.”

Sirius remembered very little of the actual spell-work afterwards. He remembered the sudden surge of Dark magic as he tugged on the curse, his hand sweating where he clung to his wand for dear life, knowing that one wrong move would set off the curse and he would die. He could feel the vicious, ice-cold poison of it, longed to let it go, wanted nothing more than to turn and flee, but he didn’t. He closed his eyes and kept working, forcing the curse into the stones of the front wall, hearing them creak and groan under the strain. The house wouldn’t last much longer after tonight.

And then Dumbledore was speaking and it was all clear and he allowed the curse to funnel, little by little, back into the floorboards until it had settled into its former position, almost seeming to mutter to itself as it calmed, the floor appearing exactly as it had before.

Sirius took an awkward step back and panted wildly, feeling as though he hadn’t breathed for several minutes. He was vaguely aware of Dumbledore holding something gold-coloured as he crossed the room to the kitchen counter, or what was left of it, but the task of moving the curse had turned his legs to jelly and he staggered. Thom seemed to sense he was about to collapse and stepped quickly over to him, taking some of his weight on his narrow shoulders.

“All righ’, there, Dogbreath?” he muttered, and Sirius chuckled weakly.

“I’ve been better,” he replied. “But then,” he added thoughtfully, “I have also been worse.” Thom chuckled harshly and they both turned their attention to Dumbledore. The gold item turned out to be a box, which he had placed carefully on the counter in front of him.

“My thanks, Sirius,” he said, smiling slightly at him as Thom helped him closer. “This task would have been significantly more difficult without your assistance.” Thom’s light orbs drifted closer, reflecting eerily off the box’s lid. It looked, to Sirius, like a small, ornate casket.

“All the in there?” Sirius asked hoarsely, although he already knew the answer. The curse wasn’t the only thing in the room making the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Dumbledore didn’t bother to reply, but instead pointed his wand at the box. The lid swung silently open, revealing an ugly old ring with a black stone the only ornament. Sirius and Thom leaned forward, breath held, all eyes in the room on the small, far-too-significant ring. The stone seemed scratched or damaged somehow, and it wasn’t an ordinary gemstone.
“I wonder why he chose—”

But Sirius got no further, because Dumbledore had reached into the casket, Thom had yelled, “DON’T”, but it was too late, and an unearthly screeching, wailing, howling wind had filled the room. Thom and Sirius ducked as the orbs of light winked out and darkness fell with a clang. But that wailing, the wailing went on and on, like the cries of a thousand tortured souls.

“Alby!” Thom shouted, still crouching beside the counter, trying to reach Dumbledore without stepping into the wild, screaming wind that seemed to funnel straight out of the casket, spinning around Dumbledore in a cloud of Dark magic.

“Don’t touch him!” Sirius yelled, holding Thom back, his skin on fire at the force of the magic.

Then the room went silent, and Dumbledore crumpled to the ground, the ring still clutched in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

I am having So Much Fun with these chapters, not gonna lie. I love my feels and I love my action yeeeee! Thanks for sticking through this with me. :D We're back to Harry and the gang next chapter, so don't worry, I haven't forgotten you drarry fans! (Still, slow burn, so don't get too impatient ;) )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus had been waiting for their return, and was already running toward them down the hallway as Sirius and Thom hauled Dumbledore’s half-conscious figure through the front door. Sirius had somehow managed to apparate them directly onto the front doorstep, just inside the boundary of the Fidelius Charm. He shuddered to think how they would’ve got Dumbledore inside without being noticed otherwise.

“What happened?” Remus demanded, flattening himself against the wall as Thom and Sirius dragged their burden toward the sitting room.

“Bloody twit touched whatever it was youse was lookin’ for,” Thom panted. Sirius knew he wasn’t as angry as he sounded, but he didn’t have the breath to offer comfort as they turned sideways so they could get through the door. They lowered Dumbledore onto the couch, where he lay, trembling and groaning occasionally.

Sirius was already pulling his wand out again, running it over Dumbledore’s body, searching for a clue as to what had happened. He would have attempted more at the Gaunt shack, but whatever Dumbledore had done had been the last straw for the old ruin, which had started to disintegrate the moment he’d collapsed. Sirius and Thom had managed to levitate the ring back into the golden box, grab both it and Dumbledore, and apparate away before any of them were injured by the falling rubble. As it was, they were all covered in a fine layer of plaster dust and other detritus, and Sirius couldn’t shake the smell of Dark magic. From the look on Remus’s face, he could smell it just as clearly as Sirius could.

“Where is it?” Remus asked. Thom pulled the casket from his jacket pocket and handed it over, his mouth twisted in distaste.

“Don’t touch it wiv yer bare hands,” he warned. Remus nodded, already opening the casket carefully, as though he expected it to explode in his hands. As with Sirius, he began to mutter detection charms, waving his wand over it in elegant shapes, his expression growing darker with
each smoky shape that emerged, telling him what Dumbledore had touched.

Sirius had barely paid attention to this exchange, focused on his own task. The curse, which had first been activated barely five minutes previously, was already ravaging Dumbledore’s body. He could follow its Dark passage from the burned, blackened fingers that had first clasped the ring, tracing it through the man’s veins, feeling it bleeding out into his organs, his flesh, burning and freezing at the same time, reaching sharp fingers into the legendary mind and beginning to pick it apart. He’d only seen curses this powerful in his theory books, had never had to use these spells on something this deadly before. If they didn’t act soon, he would certainly die.

“What the hell was he thinking?” Remus muttered behind him. “He just picked this up?” Sirius privately agreed with Remus’s astonishment, but he had more pressing concerns.

“If we act fast, we might be able to force it back to its entry point,” he said. “Do you have a neutraliser in your kit?” He glanced up at Remus, who nodded, and without waiting for further instructions, turned and pelted upstairs to fetch his emergency kit, stocked with potions, antidotes, and counter-charms.

“Wot c’n I do?” Thom asked. His face, which often carried a slightly grey tinge, was now deathly pale, his eyes large with fear. Sirius’s heart clenched, even in the midst of his panic. He felt for Thom. Dumbledore was probably the first person who’d ever treated him as a true equal, aside from other part-humans. He hadn’t just accepted Thom as a fellow person, but as an intellectual equal, something incredibly valuable to a man whose education had been spotty at best, who had never been given the opportunity to stretch his mind before. Now that man was lying, shaking and dying, on the couch before them. If they lost Dumbledore now, Thom would be beyond devastated.

“Hold him down,” Sirius said shortly, hearing Remus thundering back down the stairs again. “What I’m about to do is going to hurt him, I’m afraid.”

Thom might have looked like he was about to faint, but there was no sign of it in his movements. He darted around the couch and laid two strong hands on Dumbledore’s shoulders. He leaned over so his face was closer to Dumbledore’s, one hand coming up briefly to smooth stray hairs away from Dumbledore’s eyes, smoothing some of the cold sweat and plaster dust from his brow. Even during the mere minutes they’d been in the house, the blackness that had begun in Dumbledore’s hand had begun to creepy up his arm. What it was doing inside his body was worse, Sirius knew.

“Don’choo worry, Alby, ’s Lordship’s gotcher,” Thom whispered. Dumbledore muttered to himself, his eyelids flickering, but he didn’t wake. Sirius looked away, even as he finished his diagnostic spells, almost embarrassed at the affectionate note in Thom’s voice. He shook himself. He had a job to do, he had no business getting distracted.
“Before or after?” Remus asked brusquely, striding back into the room, his kit under one arm and the neutralising potion already open and in his other hand. It would help negate some of the damage being done even now by the curse, drawing out some of its power and neutralising it. It was difficult to make, and couldn’t rid a body of a curse; without a powerful countercurse, all it would do was slow the spread. But with something this dangerous, they needed all the help they could get.

“Before,” Sirius replied shortly. “Help me with the counter-curse, you’re always better at those.” They were talking in short, clipped syllables, neither wanting to waste time on words. Another wave of agony wracked Dumbledore’s body and he arched off the couch, groaning.

“There’s no time,” Remus said, thrusting the potion at Sirius. “You pour, I’ll lead.”

The next fifteen minutes felt like years. Remus murmured the strange, almost musical counter-curse over and over again, like a chant, resolutely drawing the curse back from Dumbledore’s body, forcing it back into the hand that had first touched the ring. Sirius aided where he could, adding the force of his own counter-curse to Remus’s when it threatened to fight. If they’d had no neutralising potion, they would have had no chance against this demon of a curse, but the golden liquid was doing its job, robbing it of some of its strength, giving them a chance.

Dumbledore didn’t make their task easier. He thrashed and moaned, arms flinging out when Thom lost his grip on them, feet digging into the end of the couch when his back arched, muttering and cursing and weeping and, sometimes, screaming to himself as they drew him back from the brink of death. Sweat stood out on his brown until it began to run into his hair, dampening it to a darker grey around his temples and in his beard. Thom had already ripped open the pink shirt and cast the cravat aside.

Sirius felt sick to his stomach as he watched the curse writhe and stir under the old man’s ribcage, but it was as though he were feeling from a distance, as though that disgust was happening to someone else. He had a job to do, he had to help Remus.

Finally, when everyone was covered in sweat and grime from the Gaunt shack, when they were exhausted and ready to collapse, the curse gave in and allowed itself to be trapped. It was cornered now in Dumbledore’s right hand, which was left ruined, blackened and burned, like a corpse that had died in a fire. He was finally calm, however, his breathing more even than before, his eyes properly closed. His muttering had ceased.

Remus, his hair sticking out at various strange angles, his lips white, and his breath coming in gasps, raised his wand to begin healing the damage the curse had done to Dumbledore’s organs, but Thom raised a hand.
“Yer know I c’n do this part,” he said gruffly. “Youse sit, before yer fall.” Remus looked up at him, as though almost surprised to find him still there. He had been so focused on his task that the rest of the world had all but disappeared.

“Very well,” he said eventually. He staggered to the nearest armchair and collapsed into it, pulling open the top buttons of his own shirt as he tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Sirius didn’t bother with a chair, merely slumping onto the floor with a groan. Thom ignored them both, shifting to where Remus had been standing and beginning to wave his wand wordlessly over Dumbledore’s torso. Sirius watched him for several more long minutes, his mind feeling as though it had jammed, not able to produce any more thoughts for the present. He could hardly believe what had just happened.

Dumbledore had once been his hero. Lately, he’d been infuriating, someone Sirius wasn’t sure how to feel about. And yet, through all of that, he’d still seemed somehow immortal, infallible. To see him like this, injured to the point of death, and to know it was through an act of the most staggering carelessness, was one of the most shocking things Sirius had ever faced. Of all the fears he’d ever had since the first war, losing Dumbledore had never been one of them.

“How long does ‘e ‘ave?” Thom asked quietly, finally standing up and putting his hands in the small of his back as though it pained him. He looked stoic now, but there was something dark and painful flickering behind his eyes. Sirius wished he could pretend not to have heard the question so he wouldn’t have to make that pain worse.

“Perhaps a year,” Remus answered for him. His voice was thin and hoarse, the way it sounded after a bad full moon, the way it hadn’t sounded for many years. What he’d just done had taken every bit of skill and strength he’d had.

“Can’t yer just get rid’v the hand?” Thom asked. Sirius almost blanched at how calmly he suggested cutting off someone’s limb. Whatever Thom might be feeling, his voice gave no clues. He forced himself to answer so Remus didn’t have to.

“If we do anything to threaten it, it will reactivate,” he said, his throat aching and scratchy with dust and weariness. “There’s no getting him back a second time. I’m sorry, Thom.”

Thom shook his head, his expression closed, and he sank down beside the couch, settling himself on the floor by Dumbledore’s feet.
“It’s ‘is own fault,” he said softly. “Daft bugger.” The blackened hand twitched at this, and they all turned their eyes abruptly toward their charge. Dumbledore’s eyes flickered, but he couldn’t quite open them.

“I’m not sure Minerva would approve of that kind of language,” he said, his voice as thin and raspy as any of them. Thom snorted as Remus got to his feet to examine their patient.

“Minnie knows worse’n that an’ I bet she’d use it, too, if she saw yer right now,” he replied, but Sirius could see the relief in his face. He felt it himself, as though he’d been wearing a binder one size too small and had just taken it off, allowing him to breathe properly again.

“You may have a point,” Dumbledore said. The words were slightly slurred, as though he were drifting off again. Sirius was surprised he was able to speak at all, after what he’d been through.

“What on earth were you thinking, Albus?” Remus muttered, more to himself than Dumbledore, but it seemed the Headmaster had heard him as well.

“Wasn’t thinking,” he said slowly, his tongue almost tripping over the words. “Sorely tempted.” He paused, his breathing slowing, and licked his lips. For a moment, Sirius thought he’d fallen asleep again. “The Stone… It was the Stone… I wanted to talk to them so badly.”

Then he really was asleep, leaving Thom, Remus, and Sirius all looking at one another, wondering what secrets Dumbledore was still keeping from them, and how long they had left to find out.

Once they’d sufficiently recovered their strength, Sirius helped Thom levitate the sleeping Dumbledore to one of the spare beds, while Remus sent a short message to Minerva.

“How long ‘til ‘e wakes up, y’reckon?” Thom whispered as he pulled a blanket over Dumbledore, who was now clean and wearing a set of Remus’s old pyjamas. In the dimness of the room, lit only by the lamp on the landing outside, the lines on Dumbledore’s face looked as though they’d been carved in stone, deep and shadowy. Sirius shrugged, wrapping his arms around his ribcage, trying to ease the aches of his old scars. They were always worse when he was tired, and after tonight, he hadn’t the strength to shrug them off.
“There’s no way of knowing,” he replied softly. “I’ll sit with him tonight, to make sure he doesn’t relapse.” His joints were aching and his eyes were sandy with exhaustion, but he knew they weren’t out of danger yet. Dumbledore might appear deceptively strong, but he was an old man, and he was lucky to be alive.

“I’ll keep yer comp’ny,” Thom said, and even in a whisper, his tone brooked no argument. Besides, Sirius had to admit that he probably needed someone there to make sure he didn’t nod off.

Thom pulled the single seat up beside Dumbledore’s bed, and Sirius seated himself on the other bed in the room, tugging the hair-tie from his hair and running his fingers through the tangled mass in a fruitless attempt to return it to some form of order. He’d just about managed to wrangle two thirds of it into a ponytail when he heard Remus’s slow footsteps coming up the stairs. He paused in the doorway, his shadow falling across Dumbledore’s feet.

“Minerva will keep things running for now,” he said. Even his voice was pale. “We just have to hope he’s well enough to return soon, before the Ministry discovers his absence.”

“If he makes it through tonight, he should recover quickly,” Sirius replied, leaning back against the wall and fighting the temptation to close his eyes. He didn’t say the words “for now”, but they hung heavy in the air. They would look for cures, of course they would, but Sirius and Remus knew in their hearts that there was no recovering from a curse like that. Even magic had its limits.

“Really, such a fuss over a minor curse.”

Sirius jumped from his place on the other bed as soon as Dumbledore spoke. He sounded weak still, but far more aware than he had downstairs. As Sirius leaned over the bed, examining his patient, Dumbledore managed to push himself up onto his elbows. If Sirius hadn’t suddenly found himself incredibly angry with the Headmaster, he might have admired the sheer stubborn bloody-mindedness that was surely the only thing fueling such a recovery. However, he found he was rather pissed off with the man who had nearly killed himself retrieving a piece of Voldemort’s soul, and had then muttered some secretive nonsense while half-conscious. He was vaguely aware that he was mostly angry because he’d been worried, but that didn’t make him feel any better. Any concern for Dumbledore was a touchy topic at the best of times, and it was most unwelcome now.

Remus moved forward as well, watching closely as Sirius performed his diagnostic charms, lighting the lamps with his wand without looking at them. Thom pushed his chair back into the shadows, saying nothing, his expression unreadable.

“You’re a twit,” Sirius said aloud, when he’d reassured himself that Dumbledore wasn’t damaging
“I’m afraid you are right,” Dumbledore said, with chagrined expression. “I must apologise to all of you, and thank you.” He raised his right hand and examined it as though it were an interesting beetle or a fascinating new specimen of plant, rather than the festering remains of his own body. And his death sentence.

“It won’t last,” Remus said. There was little expression in his voice, but Sirius could sense his helpless anger, his grief. Whatever had happened between them in the past, he was still the man who had given Remus his first chance, who had first believed that he could be more than a monster. Sirius stepped back so he was standing beside Remus and slipped an arm around his waist, offering what little support he could.

“I’m aware of it,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Well, well, I presume our operation was successful?” The dismissal of his own death sentence grated on Sirius’s nerves, but for once he forced himself to remain silent. How would he have reacted in the same circumstances, after all? Perhaps Dumbledore knew of a way out, perhaps he was already planning a cure. He was the greatest wizard in Britain, after all.

“We retrieved it, yes,” Remus said, and this time the irritation was noticeable. As usual, however, Dumbledore ignored it.

“Excellent. When I have rested, I will ensure it is destroyed.” He paused, and Sirius saw him sway a little. Will power could only take you so far, it seemed. He picked up a spare pillow from the end of the bed (why did Molly insist on having so many extra pillows everywhere?) and stepped forward to place it behind Dumbledore’s back without saying a word.

“Why did you touch it?” Remus asked quietly when Sirius had stepped back again, and had once again wrapped an arm around him. Dumbledore waved his blackened hand airily.

“Pure carelessness, I’m afraid,” he declared. “I quite failed to spot the curse upon it and presumed it would be safe to examine.” Sirius felt the balance of his emotions tip decidedly towards anger. It had been more than carelessness he’d seen in that shack. And he wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“That’s bull, Alby, an’ we all knows it,” said Thom, finally standing up and stepping into the light. His eyes were flashing in an almost frightening manner, and for a moment, Sirius caught a glimpse of the wolf he sometimes saw in Remus, a part of Thom so well hidden that he’d managed to forget it existed at all.
“My dear Thom,” Dumbledore began, but Thom, it seemed, had reached the end of his patience.

“Cut the crap,” he said shortly. “Whaddidya mean when yer said “the Stone”? Wot’s that ring? I knows it ain’t just’ wot youse was lookin’ fer, cos Wolfy an’ ‘is Lordship din’t gett’d it either. An’ I’m sick’v these bloody secrets all the bloody time, so jus’ be straight wiv me, fer once.”

Dumbledore frowned at him in silence.

“I presume I mentioned it during my delirium,” he said slowly, more a statement than a question. Sirius exchanged a look with Remus. Neither dared interrupt whatever was going on between Thom and Dumbledore, although it was clear that they were far closer than previously suspected.

“Yer did,” Thom said shortly. “Yer said yer was tempted ter pick up th’ring. Yer wanted ter see ‘em agin, or summink like tha’. Yer mentioned “the Stone”.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. He sighed heavily, his good hand running over his beard, smoothing it down in an unusual display of discomfort.

“It was not relevant to our search, I assure you,” he said, looking up at Remus and Sirius almost beseechingly, as though asking them to understand. They returned his look stonily. After the way they’d spent their evening, they weren’t feeling particularly understanding. Dumbledore sighed again and shifted uncomfortably in the bed.

“Very well,” he said, indicating that they should sit. They did so, Sirius and Remus sitting on the edge of the other bed with their fingers entwined, Thom returning to his seat.

“The Order’s reason for locating the ring you already know, Sirius, Remus. Thom, you may as well be told the truth, Order or not, given how much you have seen.” Dumbledore paused, and Thom leaned forward, frowning deeply. “The ring was indeed a Horcrux, created by Voldemort to ensure his immortality.” Thom sucked in a harsh breath and sat back.

“The bugger,” he said. “Explains a lot, though.” He shook his head, apparently marvelling at the amount of evil in the world.
“What I had begun to suspect about the ring, although I had no way of confirming it, was that it also contained another legendary magical object, one rather less Dark, but rather more mysterious,” Dumbledore continued. “I wonder, are you all familiar with the tale of The Three Brothers?” When his companions nodded, he continued. “I believe that myth to be less fantastic than it might at first appear. I believe the brothers were, at one time, powerful and very real wizards, who created the objects mentioned in the story. Oh,” he added, holding up a hand to prevent Sirius’s disbelieving objections. “I do not mean to say they control Death, but a powerful wizard can achieve much. A cloak of invisibility, a powerful wand, these are not out of the realm of possibility. Why not a stone that can draw up the image of a loved one, a ghost, a memory? We have such pale imitations through Priori Incantatem and similar spells. Why not a stone that does the same?”

Sirius turned the idea over in his mind. At first glance, it seemed ridiculous. At second glance, even more so. Dumbledore, the famous genius, risking his life because of a stone that may or may not have come out of a fairytale, a stone that could bring back the dead? But then he remembered what Dumbledore had said, down in the living room. I wanted to see them again. He shuddered. Remus clenched his fingers tighter around Sirius’s, his mouth drawn into a thin, tight line. Thom’s face remained expressionless, but he leaned forward, eyes fixed on Dumbledore’s face as he spoke.

“The identity of the brothers has been, at various times, linked to the Peverell family, and through them, to the Gaunts,” Dumbledore continued, ignoring Sirius’s shiver. “The stone set into that ring was one passed down through the generations, proof of their pure blood and nothing more. Or so they thought. But I caught a glimpse of it in some of the memories from Riddle’s childhood. I am certain it is something more.”

“You think you can raise the dead?” Remus asked, and he sounded ill. Dumbledore shook his head, his usual benign smile gone.

“Alas, no spell can reawaken those who are lost to us,” he said, and his voice was thinner and weaker than ever. “They may return for a time, they may speak to us, but they do not belong here, and their presence does us more harm than good.”

There was a long silence. No one dared to ask who Dumbledore thought of when spoke of the dead with such longing. Sirius wondered if he would ever have the courage to ask. But now he had a more pressing question.

“If you are correct,” he said, “it may help us after all.”

Dumbledore looked up sharply, and Thom let out a horrified hiss.
“You ain’t raisin’ no dead people ‘round ‘ere!” he objected. Sirius shook his head gravely.

“I promise you, I’ve no intention of raising the dead,” he said. “But if we could speak to some of Riddle’s victims, even just for a few minutes, we might get the information we need.”

Dumbledore looked up at him, shocked, for once in his life. This man, this genius, hadn’t even considered the possibility. Sirius’s stomach squirmed uneasily. Whoever Dumbledore had lost, under whatever circumstances, had been so painful that he’d overlooked this chance. That the stone might not be what Dumbledore claimed hadn’t really occurred to him. He was far too used to the man being right, at least about magic, if not people. In any case, they would lose nothing by testing the thing.

“I am ashamed to say that such a thing never occurred to me,” Dumbledore admitted eventually, with a self-deprecating smile. “Alas, even a genius must admit to failure sometimes, and it appears this is the night for it.”

“It is hardly an important discussion until we can ascertain the true nature of the Stone,” said Remus. “But it is certainly a timely reminder of why we keep insisting on not keeping secrets from one another.” There was an edge to his tone that Sirius was tempted to flinch away from, but he tightened his grip on Remus’s hand instead.

“Of course,” said Dumbledore. “We will examine it in the morning. Now, however, I fear I am in dire need of more rest.”

“Oh, I ain’t done wiv you, yet, Alby,” Thom said, standing up, the shadows falling threateningly over his eyes. Remus stood as well, one hand reaching out placatingly.

“Perhaps now is not the time,” he suggested. Thom glowered at him.

“Maybe not, but I’m gonner ‘av my say, and it ain’t fer yeh t’hear, so clear off and lemme talk ter Alby.”

Sirius stared at Thom, the small, grey-toned man who shrugged nervously when confronted by too many people, but who, when tested, would jump into a magical storm to rescue someone he’d known for less than a few weeks, and who’d risk falling rubble to save their life. He truly was extraordinary, and Sirius felt somewhat guilty for not having fully realised it sooner.
“Come on,” he said softly to Remus, who still looked inclined to object. “Thom can keep an eye on our patient tonight. You have classes in a few hours, you need your rest.”

Remus allowed Sirius to guide him from the room, glancing back one last time at the strange scene within as he pulled the door closed behind him. The last thing Sirius saw was Thom pulling his chair closer to the bed, his head bowed. If he hadn’t just seem the anger in Thom’s eyes, he would have sworn the lamplight reflected off tear tracks on Thom’s pale face, but it was surely just a trick of the light.

Chapter End Notes

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The audio version of ATT is here: http://soundcloud.com/user-90199558/sets/after-the-tournament-audiobook

And the Pinterest board with my dreamcast is here: http://www.pinterest.com.au/cambreyopayne/after-the-tournament/
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

WARNING: NSFW! I finally wrote some smut. I hate it. I am never doing it again. Literally the only reason this chapter is so late (and half the length of a usual chapter) is because I had so much trouble writing it. Also Sirius refused to do what I told him, the horny bugger. Anyhoo, if you're not up on trans stuff please read the notes in italics at the beginning of the chapter. Otherwise, enjoy...? I guess? I don't even care at this point, I'm so bad at writing smut I just want it over now. <3

P.S: Drarry fans who want to know when their turn will be, you don't get any smut (even if I intended to write more ever, which I don't, I'm in hell), they're both 15 and that would be child porn, fictional characters or not, and that is just several levels of wrong in my head, so no smut for you.

P.P.S: If you don't like smut, feel free to skip this chapter, it's not needed to understand anything about the plot. I'm already working on the next chapter so hopefully it won't be too far away!

Just a quick note for people who aren't familiar with trans stuff (CW: mention of genitalia etc, this is smut, so goes without saying): a lot of trans men refer to their clitoris as their dick, even if we haven’t/don’t have surgery to change our genitalia. Once you’ve been on testosterone for any length of time, your clitoris grows until you essentially have a tiny dick, and also we’re guys, so for a bunch of us, it just feels better to refer to that part of ourselves that way. Some trans men also refer to their prosthetics as “my dick”, so there are a lot of different ways to interpret that phrase. Also some trans mlm have anal sex, some still enjoy vaginal sex, and I haven’t specified because honestly, it doesn’t matter either way.

I haven’t wanted to go into a huge spiel about what surgery/treatment my Sirius has or hasn’t had, because I think that shit already gets WAY too much attention from cis people. All trans people go through different experiences and transition in different ways and have sex in different ways, and in the end, it doesn’t really matter to this story. I also felt it would be great for a variety of trans men to be able to identify with him, and I figured the fewer details the better in that respect. But for those who are wondering “wait, how does he have a dick?!”, the answer is: either he had surgery to “build” one the way a lot of trans men do, or he refers to his clitoris as a dick. And yes, surgery or not, even garden-variety clitorises get erections, and these become quite noticeable once you’ve been on testosterone for a while. I hope that clears up any confusion!

Sirius couldn’t stop his hands from shaking as he followed Remus up the stairs to what was now really their room. He could still feel the taint of Dark magic like grime on his skin, could smell it
mingled with his own terror sweat. As it always did, such confrontations took their toll, more so since he’d left Azkaban. He wasn’t the same brash young man he’d once been, determined to outrun his fear, outfight his emotions. The horror of the night settled around his shoulders like a blanket, familiar in all the wrong ways. He reached forward and slipped his hand into Remus’s, winding their fingers together, desperate to remind himself he wasn’t alone.

“I need a shower,” Remus said softly as they reached the landing. “I can’t sleep after that.” He paused and pulled Sirius nearer, closing his eyes and resting their foreheads together. “Keep me company?” he asked. Sirius didn’t reply, simply led the way to the bathroom opposite their room and opened the door, flicking his wand at the lanterns so they lit up. He made them brighter than usual, the flames reflecting off the white tiles and glass. He couldn’t stand any more darkness.

He turned to look at Remus as the door closed behind them, and his breath caught in his throat. For all the darkness, for all the fear and pain that wove through the fabric of their lives, he never failed to be amazed by this man. Even now, with shadows dark under his eyes, his hair tousled every which way, and that haggard expression, he was nothing short of beautiful. Sirius pulled him close again and rested a gentle hand against Remus’s cheek.

“I love you so much, Moony,” he murmured. Remus smiled and leaned down to press their lips together. Sirius sighed against Remus’s mouth and slid his arms around his neck, pushing up on his toes to deepen the kiss and pressing Remus up against the sink. Remus wrapped his arms tight around Sirius’s waist, pulling him as close as possible. It wasn’t nearly close enough, particularly not with all these clothes getting in the way.

There were some nights when one or other of them would Vanish their clothing, eager and impatient. But tonight they took their time. It reminded Sirius of the morning when they had finally stopped fighting the inevitable and had returned to one another. He kissed his way gently along Remus’s jaw, the stubble scratching his lips slightly in a way that set heat curling in his belly. Remus tilted his head, the ghost of a sigh escaping his parted lips as Sirius moved his lips slowly down his neck, pausing on just that spot to suck the flesh between his teeth. Sirius’s lips curled into a smile as he kissed his way down and along Remus’s collarbone, fingers pushing Remus’s favourite old sweater aside. He clicked his tongue impatiently when it refused to yield as much as he wanted. Remus chuckled and scooped the offending garment over his head, taking his scrappy old T-shirt with it.

“Much better,” Sirius murmured with satisfaction, picking up where he’d left off. He ran his hands down Remus’s sides, relishing the warmth of all that bare skin.

“This isn’t fair,” Remus complained, somewhat breathlessly, as Sirius kissed his way along his collarbone, and then lower, teasing at one of his nipples with his teeth. “Why are you still dressed?”

Sirius grinned wickedly up at him and dropped to his knees on the cold tiles, fingers already tugging
at the fastenings of Remus’s trousers. Remus gasped as Sirius’s hands brushed against his growing erection, so Sirius did it again.

“I’m a horrible tease,” he replied, slipping his fingers inside the waistband of Remus’s trousers and pants and tugging them down. Sirius felt his own cock swelling as Remus’s sprang free, brushing against his cheek as he finished undressing his boyfriend. Remus lifted his hips away from the sink to allow his trousers to slide down his legs, before kicking them off. Sirius proved his point about teasing by ducking his head to the side, kissing slowly and tauntingly up one thigh, across Remus’s lower belly, and then down the other. His hair had escaped its confines completely now, and he could feel Remus shiver as it brushed over his length. Remus groaned and leaned his head back.

“Remind me why I put up with you,” he said, tangling his fingers in Sirius’s hair. Sirius felt another jolt in his belly. Remus knew full well that having his hair pulled was one of his weaknesses.

“Because I can do this,” he said, fixing his eyes on Remus’s face as he turned his head and took Remus into his mouth. He loved seeing Remus like this, eyes fluttering closed, lips parted, breath coming short and shallow, a flush creeping along his cheekbones and down across his chest as he slowly came undone under Sirius’s touch. The rest of the world faded into insignificance, shrinking down to just the two of them, the twist of Remus’s fingers in his hair, the cold of the tiles biting into his knees, the hot ache between his thighs, the heavy, musky taste of Remus on his tongue. The only sound was Remus’s shallow breathing and the filthy suckling of Sirius’s mouth around his dick.

Sirius was almost unbearably hard already, his clothes feeling one size too small and about a million degrees too hot, but he was in no hurry. He moved his head slowly, one hand massaging the base of Remus’s cock where his mouth couldn’t quite reach, the other gripping his hip as though it were an anchor to reality. He could see the fingers of Remus’s free hand clutching at the sink out of the corner of his eye, flexing and clenching as Sirius drew him closer to the edge. The only sound was Remus’s shallow breathing and the filthy suckling of Sirius’s mouth around his dick.

“Stop,” Remus gasped hoarsely, tugging hard on Sirius’s hair and sending another jolt straight to Sirius’s cock. “Not tonight, I want-” He didn’t have to finish his sentence, which was fortunate, because he wouldn’t have been able to, what with the way Sirius was kissing him again. There were several moments of impatient wrestling with shirts and trousers and pants and (finally) Sirius was naked as well. Remus snatched his wand from his trousers and tugged Sirius toward the shower, a muttered charm setting the water running at just the right temperature.

The air whooshed from Sirius’s lungs as Remus pushed him up against the wall of the shower, the cold tiles against his back a sharp contrast to the warm body pressed against his front. Sirius closed his eyes, tangling his fingers in Remus’s wet hair, even the mist of water against his face feeling unbearably sensual. All his patience was gone now, his mind foggy with desire as he ground urgently against Remus, desperate for release, for any kind of friction. Remus chuckled again, running his hands down Sirius’s sides with infuriating slowness. Sirius whimpered a little as one of Remus’s thumbs found his nipple, circling it slowly, teasingly.
“Moony,” he begged (yes, begged), thrusting forward with his hips again, groaning a little as Remus’s cock slid against his, the warm water making everything moist and slippery.

“My god, you’re beautiful,” Remus murmured, and Sirius shivered at the reverence in his tone, and at the way his hand brushed against the old scars on his chest. No one but Remus could make him feel like this, as though even the marks of those bad memories, of the parts of him that had never fit, could be made beautiful. He tugged him down for a kiss, wrapping both arms around him and pulling him as close as possible.

When they broke apart, Remus placed a hand on Sirius’s hip, turning him gently. Sirius allowed himself to be guided so he was facing the wall, leaning forward against one arm, forehead resting on the damp tiles as water slid down his face. For a moment, he felt bereft, missing the solid warmth of Remus’s body against his, but then Remus was leaning over him, one arm slipping around his waist, the other opening him gently. Sirius gave up on thinking entirely and surrendered himself to the sensations building as Remus slipped first one finger, then another, inside him. He rocked back against him with a groan, his dick aching, wanting more. Remus pressed a kiss to his spine and withdrew his fingers, sliding his hand around Sirius’s hip and pulling him back, lining him up. Sirius arched his back to allow him a better angle, not bothering to smother his relieved moan when Remus thrust himself inside. From the sounds that fell from Remus’s mouth, Sirius could tell he couldn’t have waited any longer either.

No matter how many times they did this, no matter how long they were together, there was still something magical about the way they moved together. Even in the beginning, when they still had no idea what they were doing and didn’t know each others’ bodies, and spent half the time laughing at how hopeless they were, it had still been magical.

Now they were older and (debatably) wiser, they knew one another better, knew how to move just there, knew that gasp meant Remus’s fingers had found just the right angle on Sirius’s cock, knew the clench of Sirius’s fingers as he reached back to grasp Remus’s hip meant to go deeper, knew that when Remus groaned like that, deep in his throat, almost a growl, he was so close. Sirius shuddered uncontrollably as he came, his knees going weak even as he continued to thrust his hips back in time with Remus’s. He felt Remus’s rhythm falter and the arm around his waist tighten, even as the hand on his dick kept moving, drawing the last of his orgasm from him. He knew he was babbling utter nonsense as Remus half-collapsed over his back, warm against the skin that had been cooling under the spray of the shower.

They stayed that way for a time, the water running over both of them as they basked in the closeness, the rest of the world feeling very far away, as though Dark magic and curses and Tom Riddle were only a dream. At last, Sirius’s knees began to ache, and he pulled away enough to separate them, before turning and pulling Remus close again.
“Love you, Moony,” he murmured against Remus’s damp chest, closing his eyes as water dripped into his face.

“Love you, Pads,” Remus replied. And really, Sirius thought wearily, aching and tired and, for now at least, utterly content, what more could a man ask for?

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr! @bluewerewolfprose for fandom and personal @cambreyopayne for original content

The audio version of ATT is here: http://soundcloud.com/user-90199558/sets/after-the-tournament-audiobook

And the Pinterest board with my dreamcast is here:
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Guess who's finished for the semester and is now doing NaNoWriMo?! This gay disaster! So fingers crossed we'll be back to roughly-weekly updates. I need to get this fic finished over the summer because I'm doing Honours next year and I will have no time for fun things lol.

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments while I've been on break, I super appreciate all of you, and I'll try and reply to as many as I can soon. Come say hi on Tumblr as well @bluewerewolfprose, I absolutely love hearing from you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry was quite glad to get back to classes on Monday for the semblance of normality that came with them. He'd woken his dorm-mates three times over the weekend with his nightmares, the only good thing about this being that they were merely garden-variety night terrors, rather than the glimpses into Riddle’s mind he still feared.

“'S all right, Harry,” Dean had muttered sleepily, waving away Harry’s apologies after the third time. “We get it.” When Harry tried to protest, Seamus threw a pillow at him and told him to “shut up and stop worrying, ye daft bugger, we’d all be just as bad”. Harry, still rather overwrought from reliving Cedric’s death, was glad the room was dark enough to hide the tears in his eyes at this (admittedly very Seamus) expression of support.

The constant Draco drama had left him more fragile than he’d realised, and even Occlumency could only hold back so many bad dreams. Barely a word had passed between the Slytherins and Gryffindors since Wednesday, but the tension was still there. Every time Draco’s owl flew into the Great Hall to deliver a letter from his parents, Harry couldn’t help wondering what it said. Draco seemed to be aware that he was being watched on these occasions, and vacillated between pretending Harry didn’t exist and throwing glances across the Hall at him to gauge his reaction. Whatever the letters said, Harry gained no clue from Draco’s uniformly dull expression, and he wasn’t about to try and have another personal conversation with the tosser, not when things seemed to be so finely balanced.

Malfoys notwithstanding, Harry awoke on Monday feeling remarkably chipper. He wasn’t being tortured by teachers, no one had cried on him for at least a week, and he had Quidditch that evening. Even Dumbledore’s absence didn’t bother him as much as it might otherwise have done, although Remus’s steadfast refusal to answer any of their questions about it was still rather infuriating.

“You know I can’t talk about it,” Remus said to them sternly after DADA on Monday afternoon.
“And as your guardian, Harry, I suggest you spend more time on your studies and less on investigating your Headmaster.”

“That’s what I keep saying,” Hermione said. Harry scowled, although he could see the twinkle in Remus’s eye as he packed away his things. Being away from the centre of things, concerned only with school, was severely testing his patience, and the constant reminders in letters from Molly that they ought to be concentrating all their efforts on their OWL revision were not helping. At least, they were not helping Harry or Ron. Hermione seemed more determined than ever to turn them into O level students, despite all the available evidence that this was a fruitless endeavour. Normally, Ron would have complained about being kept in the dark yet again, but he clearly had other things on his mind this afternoon.

“C’mon, Harry,” he said. “Quidditch, remember? You can bug Moony later.”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry grumbled, hauling his bag onto his back and waving goodbye to Remus as they headed out into the corridor. “You coming, Hermione?”

“Of course,” she said. Ron and Harry stared at her in surprise and she flushed slightly, standing straighter and adopting a dignified tone. “I’m just doing what you said, Harry. I’m trying to understand the perspectives of other students.” Her tone suggested Quidditch training was akin to a necessary but rather burdensome research project. Ron snorted and exchanged a bemused look with Harry, but they offered no further comment. “Besides,” she added. “I thought Ron might like some moral support.”

“Wait, what?”

“Um…”

Harry turned to look at Ron, whose ears were roughly the colour of strawberry jam for some reason.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going in for it?” Harry demanded, feeling quite put out that his own best mate hadn’t thought to mention such a momentous fact. Ron shrugged and suddenly became very interested in his feet as they jogged up the steps from the Entrance Hall, heading towards Gryffindor tower so they could pick up their brooms and Quidditch kit.

“Well, you were kind of distracted,” Ron muttered. Harry instantly felt like a horrible friend. He had been rather absorbed in his own business since… probably forever, if he was honest about it.
“He was embarrassed,” Hermione interjected, and Ron glared at her. “Well, it’s true!”

“Why?” Harry asked, mystified. He and Ron had played together at The Burrow loads of times, and he’d never been embarrassed then. “I think it’s great, I hope you get it!” Ron glowed even more brightly scarlet.

“Yeah, well, I dunno if I’m good enough,” he mumbled, but Harry thought he looked pleased.

“Don’t be daft, you’ll do great,” he said staunchly, shooting Ron an encouraging grin.

The Quidditch pitch when they reached it was rather more crowded than Harry was used to, considering there was only one position available on the team. Not only were there several Gryffindors waiting to try out, but there were at least two dozen spectators from all four houses lining the stands. Harry couldn’t imagine why their tryouts were so interesting all of a sudden, but he didn’t have time to think about it as Angelina called him over to join the team. She’d already been wrangling the crowd of Gryffindors for some time, if her exasperated expression was anything to go by, and she greeted Harry with relief.

“Thank Merlin,” she said. “There’s more people than I thought, so we’re going to be here a while.” Harry and the rest of the team groaned and eyed the waiting hopefuls. Angelina frowned at them.

“It’s important we get someone who’s a good fit for the team, as well as a good flyer,” she said sternly. “So we’ll keep at this as long as we need to.”

Harry was determined to remain positive for Ron’s sake, since his friend was looking decidedly green at the prospect of trying out in front of all these people, but as the tryouts ground on it became more and more difficult. There were a few potentials who weren’t totally rubbish, but most couldn’t have kept up with Oliver Wood even if he’d been flying a Cleansweep Two blindfolded and with a broken arm. Ron’s closest competition ended up being a large sixth year named McLaggen, who was rather under the impression that he was doing the team a favour simply by showing up to the trials, and who the rest of the team clearly hoped was a horrible flyer. Fortunately, once McLaggen muffed the final save of his try out and Ron managed to save all five, Angelina announced Ron the new Gryffindor Keeper and McLaggen was left to rail to a group of frightened-looking third years about the rampant nepotism in his own house team.

Ron, on the other hand, was absolutely delighted as they walked slowly back to the castle. Harry and Hermione exchanged amused glances as he rambled excitedly about his own brilliance and the
threat he would surely pose in the coming season.

“And did you see that fourth save?” he demanded eagerly. “Tough one from Ginny, thought I was going to miss it.”

“Yes, yes, you were wonderful,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes fondly. Harry stifled a snort at her patronising tone, but Ron didn’t appear to notice. He was saved the trouble of replying himself when the twins appeared suddenly behind them, elbowing Harry and Hermione out of the way so they could each put an arm around Ron’s shoulders.

“Well done, brother ours,” Fred cried expansively.

“We owe you an apology, ol’ bean,” George added. Ron tried to shrug them off, but found their grip was too tight.

“What did you do now?” he asked, grimacing.

“Well, we were talking before,” said George.

“And we knew you were gonna try for it,” said Fred.

“And we’ve seen you fly,” continued George.

“And frankly, we thought you might be a bit-”

“Pants,” supplied George.

“Crap,” added Fred.

“Total garbage,” finished George, nodding seriously.
“Oh, shove off,” growled Ron, shrugging off their arms with an enormous heave of his shoulders. Fred and George sniggered, before Fred turned to link his arm through Harry’s.

“So tell us, Harry, ol’ mate,” he said. “When’s our first Defence meeting?” Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

“Dunno yet,” he said. “We haven’t even figured out who might be interested in coming.” Hermione coughed stiffly from the other side of the twins, and Harry could just make out a blush stealing across her face in the light from the castle windows they were now passing.

“I might have mentioned it to a few people,” she said. Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

“How many is a few?” he asked suspiciously.

“Just a few people from our year, and Luna.”

“And there was that Ravenclaw bloke Ginny was seeing before everyone caught The Gay,” George added helpfully. Hermione frowned at him. “And a couple of his mates.”

“And then Cho heard us talking to them, and she convinced her friend to come with her,” Ron chimed in.

“We weren’t going to leave Angelina and Alicia out,” said Fred.

“Hannah Abbott and the Hufflepuffs are in too,” George reminded him. Harry was now glaring at Hermione, who looked rather uncomfortable.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“Well, there might be a few others,” Hermione admitted. She caught his furious gaze and raised a defensive hand. “Okay, so there were more people interested than I thought! But isn’t this what you wanted? All the Houses working together?” Harry felt as though his insides, perfectly normal a moment ago, had suddenly been filled with very active worms. Wasn’t he supposed to be teaching this group? Wasn’t it bad enough that he’d have to stand up in front of Draco Sodding Malfoy and
pretend like he had something worthwhile to say? Now Hermione had told half the bloody school.

“It’ll be fine, Harry,” Ron said robustly. “You’re better at this stuff than most of the seventh years, you’ll have no trouble!” Harry offered Ron a half-grin, although he couldn’t bring himself to share Ron’s confidence.

“Fine,” he said reluctantly. “Since you’re so organised, then, when’s the first meeting?”

“I told everyone to meet us in the Defence classroom on Wednesday after dinner,” said Hermione.

“What?!”

Harry sat slumped in his favourite armchair late Monday night, staring into the dying embers of the fire. Ron and Hermione had gone to bed some time before, but Harry’s nerves wouldn’t let him sleep. It wasn’t just the prospect of teaching a group of classmates, some of whom were older than him. He also couldn’t shake the fear that Malfoy and Parkinson had raised the other day. What if the other Slytherins found out and started trouble because of it? Would that put the group in danger? Should they put off their first meeting until they could find somewhere less obvious than the DADA classroom to meet? The idea he’d championed so vociferously only a few days earlier now seemed utterly bonkers and he cursed himself for ever thinking of it. Then he cursed Draco Malfoy for making him think of it, since this was obviously somehow Malfoy’s fault and not Harry’s hero-complex at all.

“Bloody Malfoy,” Harry muttered to himself.

“Master Malfoy isn’t at all bloody any more!” chirped a high voice at Harry’s elbow. Harry almost fell out of his chair and swore loudly several times before he realised it was just Dobby.

“Damn it, Dobby!” he hissed, sitting back in his chair and trying to calm his racing heart. “Don’t sneak up on people like that!”

“Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter, sir,” said the elf, looking crestfallen. Harry immediately felt guilty for swearing so much.
“It’s fine, Dobby,” he sighed. “I was just thinking.” A small snort emanated from the gloom across the common room, where Harry could just make out Winky collecting rubbish and dirty tea cups.

“Thinking about Master Malfoy?” asked Dobby, apparently delighted. Harry frowned at him suspiciously.

“Not really,” he said. “That was just- Never mind.” Dobby bowed slightly and moved to clear the table in front of Harry. When Harry sighed heavily again, however, the elf paused and looked up at him.

“Harry Potter is upset by something that is not Master Malfoy?” he asked. Harry chuckled reluctantly.

“Malfoy’s not even close to my biggest problem these days,” he said.

“Can Dobby assist Harry Potter?” the elf asked, standing up straighter, his ears pricking up hopefully. Harry shrugged.

“Can you stop the Houses being dicks to each other?” he asked glumly. Dobby waggled his ears disapprovingly.

“Harry Potter knows that isn’t a kind thing to say.”

“Sorry, Dobby,” Harry replied, trying not to be annoyed that the elf could make him feel guilty so easily. It wasn’t Harry’s fault the Slytherins were curse-happy jerks, after all. “I’m just worried about what will happen if certain people find out about this group we’re planning.”

“Harry Potter means the group he is starting with Master Malfoy?” When Harry nodded, Dobby scrunched up his face as though deep in thought. “Why doesn’t Harry Potter meet his friends in secret, if he is worried?” The elf asked. Harry tried not to roll his eyes.

“I thought of that already,” he said. “But I don’t know anywhere big enough. Hermione’s told so many people, the secret passages are all too small.”
Dobby’s ears perked up again and he clapped his hands in delight.

“But Dobby knows of somewhere!” he declared. Harry narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” he asked. Three years of being on the receiving end of Dobby’s “help” had left Harry with a healthy sense of caution.

“Absolutely, Harry Potter, sir!” said the elf happily. Harry leaned forward.

“Where?”

Draco heartily regretted ever hearing the name Potter by Wednesday evening. He was more than a little tempted to simply stay where he was in the Slytherin common room, pretending to research his Potions essay, but Pansy was having none of it. Much as she disliked, well, anyone and everyone, if he was honest, she was clearly determined that he should follow through on the promise he’d made Lupin.

“He caught me in a moment of weakness,” Draco hissed, as Pansy marched up a flight of stairs, following the directions Luna Lovegood had delivered earlier in the day. He trailed after her reluctantly, cursing his lack of backbone as he did. His father was obviously right, he had the strength of will of a waterbeetle, or he wouldn’t be in this ridiculous predicament.

“Your entire life is a moment of weakness,” Pansy snapped, although she kept her voice low. She knew as well as he did what they were risking by consorting with the Dork Who Lived these days. Draco sighed at her confirmation of his deepest shame.

“That doesn’t mean you have to make it worse,” he grumbled, mostly to himself. Pansy paused at the intersection of two corridors and glanced around, checking the sketched map in her hand.

“This way,” she decided, striding off again. “Merlin only knows what kind of place these Gryffindors are going to have us working in,” she added, choosing to ignore Draco’s moaning. “I
wouldn’t trust Granger to arrange an orgy in a brothel.”

“Charming imagery,” Draco replied, glancing nervously around. They hadn’t understated things when they’d informed the Gryffindors of the risk they were taking. There might be some Slytherins who would welcome some inter-House unity, but too many were descended from Voldemort’s followers and hangers-on to welcome any attempts to Lighten up their reputation. To willingly associate oneself with Harry Potter was tantamount to treachery, and would not be tolerated. Whatever Potter might think, he couldn’t protect Draco or Pansy in their own common room, and Draco didn’t fancy being tortured in his sleep, thank you so very much.

His caution turned to curiosity as they approached a familiar tapestry on the seventh floor.

“Maybe Granger has more sense than you give her credit for,” he said, nodding to the portrait Barnabas the Barmy, who poked his tongue out at them and sidled out of his frame. “This is the Room of Hidden Things I told you about last year, remember?”

“I vaguely recall you being overly excited about something or other,” Pansy replied carelessly, but Draco could see the spark of curiosity behind her eyes. “Didn’t you say it was full of stuff though?” Draco began walking up and down in front of the blank wall behind which, presumably, were several people they’d be better staying away from.

“It’s not an ordinary room,” Draco replied. Despite his even tone, and his curiosity to see the room, he felt his gut clench most unpleasantly as he realised just what they were about to do. What if this was a trick? What if this was a trap? What if they were about to get themselves cursed, or-

“Come on, let’s get it over with,” said Pansy. Draco looked up to see an ornate wooden door where there had been no door before. He paused, chewing his lip anxiously.

“This is a mistake,” he said quietly. “We were mad to think this would be a good idea.” Pansy sighed exasperatedly.

“It was your bloody idea,” she snapped. “And you’re right, it’s stark raving mad. But if you don’t get through that door right the hell now, I will kick your arse through it myself. We’re not going back to pretending everything is fine when it’s not.” She glared at him, daring him to contradict her.

“I liked pretending everything was fine,” Draco muttered, which earned him a thump on the arm. “Ow.”
“Serves you right,” said Pansy loftily, and she reached for the door handle.

The crowded, cavernous junk-room Draco remembered from his last visit had been replaced by a large, neat classroom lined with bookshelves. There was a pile of cushions in one corner, and a large, clear space in the middle where there would be plenty of room for everyone to practice their spellwork. Draco felt his fingers itching as he glanced briefly at the books lining the walls. He would definitely be taking some of these with him to read afterwards. He was distracted from the books as he realised just how many people were already present, however.

It took a moment for their presence to register with the roughly thirty students already present. As people noticed who had entered, they stopped talking, silence spreading in a rolling wave through the room. They were the only Slytherins. *A small group, Potter said,* Draco thought, panicking immediately. He and Pansy remained just inside the door, and Draco had to fight the sudden, embarrassing urge to grab Pansy’s hand, as though they were children again.

“If you say this was a bad idea one more time…” Pansy muttered, meeting the rather hostile stares with haughty composure. Draco hoped he’d managed to maintain a neutral expression, but he wasn’t sure of his success, not when his heart was thumping that hard against his ribs. He was afraid the watching students would be able to see each pulse in his trembling hands.

“Hey, Malfoy,” said Potter, clearly aiming for nonchalant and missing. “Parkinson. Glad you could make it.” Draco frowned slightly, trying to detect a note of sarcasm or criticism in Potter’s tone, but there was none. Granger and Weasley The Worst nodded tensely, and one of the twin Weasleys waved at them to come closer. A suspicious mutter passed between several of the others, but Potter’s inner circle seemed determined to ignore it. Draco fought the urge to curl his lip disdainfully. *Ignoring problems won’t make them go away,* he thought, steadfastly refusing to listen to his own brain reminding him what he’d said to Pansy not two minutes earlier.

“That’s everyone,” Granger announced briskly, clapping her hands together. As she spoke, several wooden chairs appeared in a semi-circle around Potter. Apparently the Room had sensed they were ready to begin. Still muttering to one another, the other students took their seats, watching Harry expectantly, while throwing the occasional suspicious glance toward Draco and Pansy. Granger cleared her throat again, the only one left standing, and everyone turned to look at her.

“Hi, everyone,” she said nervously, clutching a sheaf of parchment in front of her like a shield. “Thanks for coming. I know we’re all working hard on our O.W.Ls right now-” She was interrupted by a loud cough from one of the twin Weasels. “Sorry, and N.E.W.Ts,” she added. The Weaslette tapped her foot loudly on the floor. “Oh, fine,” Granger snapped irritably, her nervousness falling away in the face of the interminably annoying Weasleys. Draco forced himself not to smirk. *Merlin forbid the red-headed monstrosities think he found them amusing.*
“As I was saying,” Granger began again, “thank you all for coming. I think we can all agree that the way things are going outside Hogwarts at the moment is an absolute disgrace, and it’s time someone did something to fight back against the fear-mongering and prejudice out there.”

“So what’re these two doing here, then?” demanded a curly-headed Hufflepuff whose name Draco had never bothered to learn. He had a pugnacious expression and the air of someone whose few remaining brain cells rarely had the opportunity to get together for a chat.

“Shut up, Smith,” said one of the twins easily. Draco and Pansy both turned to stare at him in surprise. Smith’s stubborn expression darkened and his face flushed red.

“She said prejudice,” Smith said mulishly. “They’re Slytherins, they’re all about prejudice. We all know who their parents are.” A ripple of murmurs ran around the circle, although whether they were agreeing with Smith or Freaky Twin#1, Draco couldn’t tell.

“This is precisely what I’m talking about,” Granger snapped. “Draco and Pansy are here because they agree with us that it’s time for this ridiculous infighting to stop.” Pansy sniffed suspiciously, but didn’t object to this assertion. Draco fought the urge to kick her in the ankle. He didn’t need her making this more awkward.

“They’re the ones who start most of the fights!” objected one of the Patils, the Ravenclaw. Draco sighed.

“I told you this was a bad idea, Potter,” he drawled, getting up to leave. Pansy grabbed hold of his sleeve, but he ignored her. He tried to pretend he couldn’t see the look of triumph on Smith’s annoying face.

“Oh, sit down, you bloody drama queen,” Potter said wearily. “You knew you were going to have to go through this, so let’s just get it over with.” Draco paused, unsure whether it would be more satisfying to stalk out or have a go at Potter. His rather rusty conscience prodded him weakly and suggested that either choice would leave him feeling worse in the end.

“Fine,” he muttered, and took his seat again. He knew his sulky expression wasn’t helping, but he couldn’t bring himself to wipe it off. This was all bloody Potter’s fault. Why couldn’t the fucker leave well enough alone?
“Right,” said Granger firmly. “Let’s get one thing clear. We’re here to learn Defence, because we all
know that V-Voldemort’s back, and we want to be able to defend ourselves and the people we care
about.” Her voice got stronger as she spoke, and Draco found himself momentarily caught by her
determined passion. He couldn’t help but flinch when she spoke the Dark Lord’s name, however,
and he wasn’t the only one.

“How do we know You Know Who is really back, though?” asked a Ravenclaw fourth-year. She-
Weasel glared at him.

“Because Harry bloody says so,” she replied sharply. The Ravenclaw shrugged uncomfortably, and
Draco found himself feeling just as uncomfortable. This was the second time today he’d found
himself agreeing with a Weasley. Things were becoming truly dire.

“Not just because Potter says so, actually,” Pansy said. Draco turned to look at her in surprise.

“You’d know, I suppose,” sneered Smith.

“Yes, we would,” Pansy replied coldly. Draco leaned back a little. He knew that tone. Pansy had
reached the end of her admittedly short tether and was about to give Smith a right Telling Off.
“You’re right,” Pansy continued, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. “Our families have
been involved with the Dark Lord, and all the rest of that shit, for generations. So yeah, we’re not all
sweetness and light, and yeah, we’ve treated all of you pretty badly in the past. No one’s trying to
pretend that Draco and I are angels. But we’re here, just like the rest of you, because we’re sick of
the whole shitty business. We know better than any of you what it’s like to be involved with Dark
magic and the Dark Lord and we’ve decided it’s going to end with us, all of it. No more Dark Lord,
no more House hating crap, no more pointless prejudice. So you can either accept that V-” Pansy
paused and took a deep breath, glancing at Granger as though seeking reassurance. “You can accept
that Voldemort’s back and face it, or you can fuck off and keep playing silly little school kid games
and pretending like everything’s fine until he comes for your families.” She nodded fiercely and sat
down again. Draco stared at her admiringly in the ringing silence that followed.

“She really is a far better person than I am,” he thought.

“Well fucking said,” declared Lee Jordan, thumping a fist down on his knee. “Anyone who’s
against old Mouldy Farts is okay in my book.”

“Same here,” agreed Neville Longbottom with surprising fervour. Draco stared at him as though
seeing him for the first time. He’d always treated Longbottom appallingly, he knew. The smaller
boy had never done anything to deserve it, he’d just been an easy target. Yet here he was, standing
up for Draco and Pansy. Draco’s stomach squirmed uncomfortably again. A few more flakes of rust
fell from his conscience as it stirred again.
“For what it’s worth,” he said aloud, aware that his tone was rather too abrupt and lofty for what he was about to say and helpless to do anything about it. “For what it’s worth, we’re both…” He took a deep breath. “We apologise for the way we have previously behaved. We take full responsibility for our actions.” There was another silence.

“Well, that was unexpected,” said Worst Weasley. He caught Draco’s glare and grinned unrepentantly. “But good on you, mate.” Draco tried to convince himself this didn’t make him feel slightly better.

“Is that sufficient for everyone else?” Granger asked, sounding somewhat impatient that her meeting had been so thoroughly derailed. There was another wave of mutters, most of which seemed to indicate assent.

“That’s good, then,” said Granger. “Now, moving on. First order of business, we need to discuss security. You all know the Ministry and several of our fellow students would… disapprove of what we’re doing here. I don’t think we should advertise this group except to those who we can trust, particularly as Draco and Pansy have advised us that they might be in danger if certain of their House-mates found out what they were doing.” Smith snorted suspiciously, but subsided under the joint glares of all four Weasleys, Potter, Granger, and Lee Jordan. “I also think it would promote a sense of team solidarity if we were to record our names on this sheet of paper. We’re an official study group, after all, and we ought to act like it.” Her gaze swept over the gathered students as though expecting objections, but everyone seemed happy to pass around the sheet of parchment she handed to Worst Weasley - Draco was going to have to start calling the Weasleys by their first names, this really was getting silly - and sign their names. Draco caught Granger watching him as he signed his name and felt a tingle of suspicion on the back of his neck. Unbearably self-righteous as she might be, Granger was no fool. He glanced down at his signature as Pansy added her name to the bottom of the list. He was going to make sure he was particularly careful about whom he mentioned this group to, just in case…

“Now that’s all settled, I’ll hand over to Harry,” said Granger brightly. Draco settled back in his seat and relaxed a little. The worst seemed to be over, at least for now.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr @bluewerewolfprose for fandom and personal stuff,
@cambreyopayne for NaNoWriMo and other writing stuff
Hey y'all! Merry Christmas, in case I don't get another chapter up before then! I hope everyone's going well. I've finally finished my Bachelor's degree (provided I can sort out the awkward admin nonsense that comes with combining two degrees and changing your name just before the end of semester...) and I'm on summer break now. Here's hoping work doesn't kill me and I can get more chapters up. Love to all of you! Thanks for sticking with me. Cam.

Hermione shot Harry an encouraging smile as he stood, nervously rubbing his hands together.

"Hey, everyone," he said, wondering when his limbs had got so oversized and awkward.

"You said that already," Fred offered helpfully.

"Shut up, Fred," Harry said, grinning and rolling his eyes. Somehow, Fred’s teasing seemed to help settle the butterflies in his stomach. He still wasn’t planning to forgive Hermione any time soon for gathering such a large group, regardless of the fact that it was actually sort of possibly maybe what he’d had in mind when he came up with the idea. I just didn’t expect to be teaching everyone …

"So, yeah, like Hermione said, Voldemort’s back-"

"Could you not say that name?" interrupted Lavender Brown, glaring at Harry as though he’d just said a nasty swear word. Harry sighed. At this rate they weren’t going to get anywhere near a lesson tonight. He fought back the urge to snap at Lavender - this teaching lark was already harder than Remus made it look, between Malfoy and Smith and now Lavender - and tried to keep his voice calm.

"Why not?" he asked, in what he hoped was an inoffensive term. Lavender blinked at him, as though she was only just realising how stupid Harry was.

"Well, you can’t just say it," she sputtered indignantly. "It’s all right for you, maybe, and Dumbledore, but the rest of us don’t want to hear it."
“But why not?” Harry looked over at Parkinson in surprise as she repeated his question for him. Her eyes were narrowed as she stared at Lavender, almost as though she were trying to figure out the answer to her own question. Lavender crossed her arms and huffed irritably. Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes at her.

“I mean, you just can’t go around saying it. You Know Who was— He might—” Her mouth opened and shut a few times as she desperately tried to find a reasonable answer and failed. Parkinson raised a questioning eyebrow at her, and Harry tried to smother a grin. Lavender’s face twitched uneasily for a moment, before settling into an expression of equal embarrassment and thoughtfulness. She shrugged helplessly. “I guess I just don’t like it.”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “Everyone was so scared of Voldemort before that they stopped using his name, and we all just assumed there was a good reason for it.” He paused, and took a deep breath. He could feel thirty pairs of eyes fixed on him. It was a little like standing under a bright spotlight. Naked. Only worse. I regret everything I’ve ever done that led up to this. He took another breath and ploughed onward.

“I met him last summer.” The strength of those gazes seemed to intensify, and he thought he saw a few people twitching, as though they wanted to say something, but no one spoke. Harry kept his eyes trained over the heads of the watching group, refusing to even glance towards Malfoy or Parkinson. He wasn’t sure he could handle them right now. “I met Voldemort, and his Death Eaters. I fought them, and I got away from them.” He looked down in surprise as a cool hand was slipped into his. Hermione looked up at him and smiled, her eyes both sad and encouraging. He smiled tightly in return. He wished he were anywhere else, but he knew he had to get through this.

“I was shit scared,” he said. “But it’d be even worse if I acted like they were gods or something, as if Voldemort could hear me if I just said his name, no matter where I was.” He tried not to think about how easy it would be for Voldemort to actually hear him if Tonks wasn’t such a good teacher. “He’s just a man. A really fucked up man, with really fucked up ideas, but he’s just a man. And so are the people who follow him, and I’m not going to treat them like— like they’re demons, or some shit.” He stopped and finally looked around at everyone. To his surprise, they all looked serious and thoughtful, as though he’d said something worth thinking about, instead of spouting a bunch of total nonsense.

Harry risked a glance at Malfoy. The grey eyes were narrowed, thin lips pressed together as he considered Harry, and Harry was struck once more by the truly bizarre turn of events that had led them here. The son of a Death Eater, of a man who, only a few months ago, had tried to murder Harry, was here to learn how to defend himself - and hopefully others - against Death Eaters. And perhaps even make some friends. Better not push things too far, Harry thought, fighting back a smirk at the idea of Malfoy making friends with Luna, or Ron.
“So I’m going to keep using his name,” Harry finished firmly. “You don’t have to if you don’t want, but I’m sick of being afraid, and not saying his name just makes it worse.” Hermione gave his hand an encouraging squeeze, and he breathed out for what felt like the first time since he’d stood up. The others seemed to be thinking still, avoiding each other’s eyes.

“The Death Eaters avoid saying the name.” Thirty heads turned towards Malfoy in shock. The tension, already high, reached a new and uncomfortable pitch. He pushed out his chin as he met their collective gaze, his grey eyes narrowing. “In case you needed another reason to say it.” Harry frowned. He hadn’t even considered that.

“They’re just as scared of V-Voldemort as you are, and he likes it that way,” Malfoy continued, and although his fingers were clenched tightly into fists, as though he were trying to force them not to tremble, his tone was as lazy and confident as ever. “Voldemort wants you to be afraid. If you want a sure way of pissing the fucker off, this is it.”

A wave of nervous chuckles passed around the circle.

“I second that,” said George. “I can’t think of a finer ambition than pissing off ol’ Mouldy Voldy.”

Another thought occurred to Harry.

“There is one better way of pissing him off,” he said. “His real name is Tom Riddle. He was named after his muggle father.” Silence fell like a hammer at this revelation, although the Weasleys and Hermione had already known. They might not have managed to find out much about the Order meetings, but they hadn’t been kept completely in the dark.

Harry risked another glance at Malfoy and Parkinson. Both of them were even paler than usual, and seemed at least as shocked by this information as anyone.

“But- But that doesn’t make sense,” Seamus objected. “If his da’ was a muggle, why’s he hate muggle-borns so much?” Harry shrugged. Remus or Tonks would probably have some long-winded explanation, but he didn’t go in much for that kind of psychoanalysis.

“Internalised shame is very common among marginalised groups,” Hermione said earnestly. This explanation didn’t seem to help Seamus - or anyone else - much. Ron and Harry exchanged a look, and both rolled their eyes.
“It doesn’t really matter much why he does it,” Harry said. “We just want to be able to defend ourselves if we need to.” He took a breath. “And maybe stop some other fucked up kid going the same way.”

“What, you reckon a school club is gonna stop someone becoming a Dark wizard?” scoffed Susan Bones, blushing when everyone turned to look at her. Harry shrugged again.

“Probably not, but I don’t have any better ideas at the moment. What about you?” Susan shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “All right, let’s get started then. Professor Lupin reckons we should start with the basics and see where everyone’s at. We don’t have much time left, so let’s just focus on Expelliarmus for tonight.” Harry started to pull out his wand to demonstrate, when he was interrupted yet again. *I should have predicted this*, he thought.

“You reckon Expelliarmus is going to help against V- Volde- thingy?” asked Michael Corner doubtfully. Harry sighed heavily.

“I used it against him in June,” he said. He could sense Cho’s eyes burning into him, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at her. His stomach twisted uncomfortably. He hadn’t thought much about what it would mean to her to be here, had thought more about Malfoy even, if he were honest. But it must’ve hurt her to hear him talk about that night. He pressed his lips together and stared around the room.

“Anything else?” he asked, somewhat more harshly than he’d intended. A few people shifted slightly in their seats, but the rest looked ready to start. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s see what you can do.”

“Well that didn’t completely suck,” Pansy observed as they made their way slowly back to the common room.

“Just mostly,” Draco replied. He felt as though he’d run a marathon, even though he and Pansy had hardly struggled with the spellwork they’d just done. Hearing Potter speak so bluntly about *that night*, knowing he was remembering Draco’s father as he did so, knowing Draco was betraying that same father simply by being in the same room as Potter… It had been harder than even he’d expected.
And then Potter had, of course, made it worse.

“Draco, you’re with me,” Potter announced as their classmates paired up around them. Draco glared at him.

“I’m quite happy with Pansy,” he replied coldly. It was bad enough that he was here, damn it all. Willingly working with Potter would surely destroy what few shreds of dignity he had left.

“Yeah, but the whole point is to work with other people,” Potter said wearily. “Cooperation and all that shit.” Draco’s glare intensified and Potter grinned suddenly. “Scared, Malfoy?”

“You wish.” The words were out before he could stop them, and Draco knew Potter had won. Damn it. Pansy snorted behind him, adding insult to, well, insult. He sighed. “Let’s just get it over with.”

To his surprise, working with Potter hadn’t been the worst thing to ever happen. At least he was semi-competent - although his total lack of poker face meant Draco always knew when an attack was coming. By the end of the first ten minutes of practice, Draco had managed to disarm Potter almost as many times as Potter had him.

“It was at least five, Potter, don’t be immature,” Draco snapped, a wave of excited chatter rising around them as Potter called a short break. Potter simply chuckled and left him standing there as he went to check on the other students.

“It was only four, Draco, and you know it,” Pansy said, stepping up beside him. Draco crossed his arms and refused to speak to her for the next ten minutes.

He forced himself back to the present as Pansy led the way down a narrow flight of stairs, a back way to the dungeons that few of the students knew about. It wasn’t directly on their way from the Room of Requirements, and the other students had all headed off in different directions, so Pansy and Draco hoped it would look as though they’d simply gone for a late night stroll towards the Astronomy Tower, as they sometimes did.

“Where, oh where have you lovebirds been hiding?” The mocking voice emerged from the shadows at the bottom of the stairs, followed by its owner. Of course it was Blaise. Only Blaise Zabini would be so gauche as to hang about hiding in shadows for the sole purpose of a sinister aesthetic.
Draco found this observation didn’t do very much to still his suddenly-racing heart.

“Telling you where we were would rather negate the point of hiding, don’t you think?” Pansy replied. Draco could feel the tension radiating from her, in spite of her cool voice. This was precisely what they’d been trying to avoid. Blaise had always been a friend, as far as that went, but friendship wasn’t worth a knut these days. Voldemort had that effect on people.

“Fine, don’t tell me then,” Blaise said, raising a perfectly-sculpted eyebrow. “You know that won’t help your case.” Pansy matched his eyebrow raise and crossed her arms. Draco rolled his eyes obviously.

“And what case is that, Zabini?” he drawled, affecting boredom. Never let them see you blink. Potter might wear his emotions on his sleeve, but Draco knew how to play this game. Stop thinking about Potter, that would help, he scolded himself. His hand toyed with his wand in his pocket, hardly aware of what he was doing. Blaise, however, was fully aware.

“We’ve noticed you,” he said, stepping forward so he stood over them, his six feet enough to render him intimidating to those with weaker wills than Draco Malfoy.

“That’s hardly noteworthy,” Draco replied. “People notice Pans and I constantly, we’re very noticeable people.”

“Being noticed is rather a side effect of being this gorgeous,” Pansy added, flipping her hair lazily. She and Draco sidestepped Blaise and continued down the stone-flagged corridor. Blaise sighed and strode after them.

“You were seen, Malfoy,” he said. The note of warning was unmistakable this time, sending goosebumps rippling down Draco’s spine. The goosebumps spread down his arms as the doorway in front of them suddenly became very full of Crabbe and Goyle, both looking as grim as Draco had ever seen them. One meeting, he thought furiously. One fucking meeting and we’re already here. He wouldn’t be Draco Malfoy if he knew how to surrender, though.

He turned on his heel and stared Blaise down, pulling his wand from his pocket and crossing his arms. He wasn’t ready to challenge Blaise, but he’d make sure Blaise was in no doubt of his ability to defend himself. Beside him, Pansy did the same, turned sideways so she could keep an eye on Blaise and the two thugs behind them. Draco felt a slight twinge of guilt at the thought - they were supposed to be his friends, after all, and the best ones than he’d had, aside from Pansy. But here they were, looming at him, accusing him of… okay, of things he’d definitely done, but that was hardly the point. They were supposed to take his side, not be here with bloody Blaise, making him feel guilty
when he had no reason to feel guilty about anything.  *Not a damn thing*.

“Say what you want to say and get it over with, Zabini,” Draco said shortly.  Blaise’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, his sneering facade cracked just a little.  Draco felt a slight stab of triumph.  Perhaps this straight-forward nonsense Potter was so fond of had its uses.  Blaise recovered himself quickly, however, pulling himself up to his full height and pulling his own wand from his pocket, twirling it over his fingers with a show of nonchalance.

“Very well,” he said.  “You were seen with Potter.”  It was what Draco had expected, but that didn’t stop the stab of fear and anger in his gut.  All of this was Potter’s fault.  If the git had left well enough alone, he wouldn’t be here, being threatened by his friends, feeling guilty for keeping secrets from them, and feeling guilty for what he and Pansy were about to say.  *Damn it Potter, I really do despise you, you absolute git*.

“So?” Pansy answered before Draco could speak.  “You know Potter’s always following Draco around.”  Not for the first time, Draco admired Pansy’s ability to keep cool in the face of danger.  Blaise seemed uncomfortable, but he clearly wasn’t about to back down.

“*So* Draco didn’t exactly seem upset by the attention,” he said.  A hot flush threatened to rise up Draco’s neck but he refused to allow his body to betray him.  “For someone whose family is supposed to want Potter dead, you were looking pretty chummy.”

“You’ve heard the rumours, Blaise, you know what he’s saying about my father,” he snapped.  “I’m not going to make things worse by attacking the bastard in the open, am I?  You think getting myself arrested is going to help my family?  You think dragging my name through the mud will help the Dark Lord?  Is that what you’re suggesting I do?”  Blaise narrowed his eyes, but Draco could hear Crabbe and Goyle shifting uncomfortably in the doorway.  Whatever Blaise had said to convince them to help him clearly wasn’t strong enough to withstand an ounce of logic.

“What were you and Potter talking about?” Blaise pressed.  Draco rolled his eyes dramatically, his mind working frantically behind the facade.  There were several quite believable things that Potter could have wanted to say to him, but he’d never been one to justify himself before.  It would look suspicious if he did so now.

“He wanted my Yorkshire pudding recipe, you great dragon's testicle,” Draco snapped.  “Now, if you’re quite done wasting our time, I’m going to bed.”

“This isn’t finished,” Blaise said as Draco turned back towards the doorway.
“Yes it is,” Pansy replied, without turning back. Crabbe and Goyle hesitated, but moved aside to let them pass. They didn’t follow them, however, and Draco could hear their low voices questioning Blaise as he and Pansy headed toward the common room.

“That’s not a good sign,” Pansy muttered. Draco snorted, but didn’t bother to reply. Pansy laid a hand on his arm, pulling him to a stop.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. Draco looked down into her worried face and sighed.

“I don’t know.”

Chapter End Notes

Usually I say come see me on Tumblr, but I'm not sure how much longer I'll be there. Nevertheless, my Tumblr is @bluewerewolfprose and @cambreyopayne. You can also find me on Insta and Twitter @cambreypayne
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Well this fic just keeps getting longer and longer while I wonder how that happened. I never intended to reach 150k words, yet here we are! Merry Christmas, y'all! We're going to have to do some time jumps soon. I hope I'll be able to work them into the text naturally, so it doesn't feel like we've gone from reading about every day to missing chunks, but we'll see how we go. I hope you all had a great Christmas/public holiday/Saturnalia/Yuletide/Hannukkah/Kwanzaa etc. Love to you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry awoke on Thursday morning feeling rather pleased with himself. The memory of last night’s meeting made his morning Occlumency practice seem almost easy, and the regular note he sent to Sirius, with the details of school life and reassurances that he was staying out of trouble, was rather longer and more cheerful than it had been for a while.

His good mood was only increased as various members of the Defence Association waved cheerily to him, Ron, and Hermione as they entered the Hall for breakfast. He couldn’t help grinning as he remembered their work the previous night. It hadn’t been perfect, by any means. Draco and Pansy had been something of a sticking point, but they’d been more civil and had joined in more willingly than Harry had expected - and the support of the Weasleys and Hermione had gone a long way to helping the others accept them into their group. Perhaps there was hope for the Slytherins after all. Of course, they would all need to work quite hard in order to get the whole class to O.W.L level, but if he could get some of the more skilled students to help the less, they could-

“What?” he hissed, rubbing his side as they sat down next to Ginny, who was already halfway through a bowl of cereal. Hermione tilted her head sharply toward the staff table, with a long-suffering expression.

“He’s back,” she hissed, keeping her voice low so as not to attract attention. Harry looked up, and saw Dumbledore seated in his usual place. He couldn’t help thinking that Hermione could have saved herself the effort of not looking too interested. Dumbledore was conversing as energetically as ever with Professor McGonagall, but his skin was pale and somehow papery-looking, and his eyes were so sunken as to appear bruised. But far more noteworthy was when he waved his hand to emphasise some point or other and revealed a black, burned, withered-looking thing, more resembling the claws of a large, dead bird than a human hand. Harry felt the acid rise in his throat at the sight of it, and he wasn’t the only one to have noticed. A wave of mutters were running back and
forth across the Hall as more and more students noticed his injury.

“What d’you reckon happened to him?” Fred asked, appearing behind Ron and shoving him unceremoniously further up the bench so he could sit down.

“Git,” Ron muttered resentfully, making sure to bump Fred with his shoulder as he reached for the bacon. Harry glanced up at Dumbledore again, while trying to look as though he was concentrating on buttering his toast. The headmaster seemed completely unconcerned about the stir his appearance was causing, and was eating and drinking as though he didn’t have a dead claw for a hand all of a sudden. Harry glanced further down the table at Remus, who was studiously ignoring the mutterings of the students and concentrating on his eggs. Every now and then, however, he would glance down the table at Dumbledore, a slight crease between his brows. Harry thought he looked worried. Whatever had caused the change in Dumbledore’s appearance was more serious than the headmaster seemed to want people to believe.

“Must’ve been something pretty bad,” Ginny said, frowning thoughtfully up at Dumbledore. “Duel, maybe?” George sat down beside her and yawned hugely.

“They’d have a job hushing that up from the *Prophet* and the Ministry,” he said. “But who knows what’s going on while we’re stuck here?” Harry scowled along with the rest of them.

“Think they’ll ever tell us anything?” he asked, moodily stabbing at a sausage with his fork. Hermione sighed impatiently, and he could tell she was about to launch into some kind of interminable lecture on responsibility that nobody in their right mind would want to hear before at least 11am, but fortunately, she was interrupted by the arrival of the post before she could begin.

“Maybe there’ll be something in here,” she said brusquely, unfolding the *Daily Prophet*. It was immediately sprayed with bits of toast and juice as she choked on her mouthful.

“That’ll be a yes then,” Fred observed. Hermione coughed loudly as Ginny patted her on the back, then brushed the crumbs impatiently onto the table so she could see the paper properly.

“It’s not that,” she wheezed, and breathless as she was, Harry immediately caught a thrill of foreboding in her tone. “It’s worse.” They all leant forward to hear better, those on the same side of the table as Hermione trying to get a look at the headline. Hermione cleared her throat again, took a deep breath, and read:
“Those bastards,” hissed Fred, his face turning an ugly shade of puce. Harry could feel the colour rising into his cheeks, and he looked up at Remus again. His expression was still neutral, but Harry could read the tension in his shoulders as he looked down at the paper. As Harry watched, Remus folded the front page over with a sharp, almost rough movement, and began to read whatever was on the second page, as though determined to ignore his place in the headlines. Harry turned his attention back to Hermione as she continued to read:

Following the controversial sacking of Ministry official Dolores Umbridge, as reported by this publication earlier this term, Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore appears to have returned to his former eccentric staff choices. The Prophet has just learned from reliable sources that Remus Lupin, a known lycanthrope and previous teacher at Hogwarts School, has been selected to replace Ms. Umbridge. Mr. Lupin previously resigned his position as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher under a cloud of suspicion and parental objection, when he was outed as a lycanthrope one and a half years ago. The decision to rehire him is, at the very least, deliberately controversial, or at worst, dangerous.

Here, Hermione was interrupted by several hisses of outrage, and her voice shook a little. Her expression was thunderous, and Harry wouldn’t have been surprised to see electricity crackling from the ends of her hair simply from the force of her rage. He would be surprised if his own wasn’t standing even more on end than usual. But he forced himself to take a breath and remain silent, bracing himself for whatever total garbage was coming next.

When contacted for comment, the Hogwarts Board of Governors released a joint statement declaring that Mr. Lupin’s rehiring had been at the behest of the Governors themselves. They also stated that, while Mr. Lupin had initially only been contracted temporarily while they sought other candidates, they are so far impressed with his results that they will be offering him a permanent position forthwith.

Mr. Lupin, however, should be advised against any hasty acceptance of such an offer. While it is certainly more than most lycanthropes could hope for to be offered such a role not only once, but twice, as their well-documented difficulties and the understandable fears of parents create obvious difficulties, Mr. Lupin must consider the needs of the students and the reputation of the school to which he currently owes his allegiance. This reporter hopes that Mr. Lupin will think carefully before he acts.

Whether this hiring decision really has been the free choice of the Governors, or whether they were influenced (as many suspect) by the Headmaster, it is certain to create fresh difficulties for a school whose reputation and methods are already suspect. This reporter recommends the Ministry continue with its efforts to monitor the activities of Professor Dumbledore and his unique staff, in
But in order to ensure the safety and education of the next generation are protected at all costs.

Harry became aware that several students were now, just like them, directing their attention from Dumbledore to Remus. Some were curious, some confused, and some were clearly angry about the article - but there were also some who looked afraid and mistrustful, as though inclined to believe the absolute drivel in the paper. Remus glanced once in their direction and shook his head ever so slightly, as though instructing them to keep quiet. Harry felt his stomach turn over, and felt sicker than he had when he’d first seen Dumbledore’s ruined hand. Any trace of good mood was gone.

“Isn’t it bad enough that we have to fight Doledrum Drooblepants?” Ginny growled. “Why do we have to fight the Ministry’s bullshit as well?” Fred started to reply, but his voice was drowned out by a wall of sound coming from the staff table.

“HOW DARE YOU DARKEN THE DOOR OF THAT HALLOWED SCHOOL, YOU MONSTER?! IF YOU HAD ANY SHAME YOU WOULD LEAVE THIS INSTANT! GO HANG YOURSELF, YOU FILTHY ANIMAL, YOU ARE AN ABOMINATION!”

Silence fell over the Hall, and Harry’s insides, so sick a moment ago, seemed to have disappeared. Remus’s face showed no emotion as he flicked his wand and vanished the offending Howler even as it tore itself to pieces. Its place was immediately taken, however, by another four Howlers and several letters, the delivery owls all fighting for space on the table and knocking food all over the place. The roar of the Howlers as they went off was deafening, shaking dust from the ceiling and leaving half the students with their hands over their ears. When the noise finally stopped, several students looked decidedly shaken. Fred was half-standing, as though he intended to walk right up to the staff table and do something, but what, even he didn’t seem to know. The breakfasting students simply sat in stunned silence for a long moment, staring up at the table as though waiting for instructions. Dumbledore stood up and waved for silence, although it was rather unnecessary.

“I know most of you are aware that there are those who hold rather outdated opinions about people like our good Professor Lupin here,” he said. “I hope that none of you hold such ignorant and hurtful ideas yourselves, and that you will offer Professor Lupin every support in the face of any difficulties he might encounter over the next few days. I’m sure each and every one of you will make it your first priority to make this school a safe and welcoming place for everyone, both staff and students.” Dumbledore smiled around at everyone, who simply looked stunned. “That is all, please continue.” And he sat down.

“Hear, hear!” yelled George suddenly. “They can stick their prejudice up their arse!”

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley,” called Professor McGonagall calmly, although Harry could see her mouth twitching even from where he sat.
“Yeah, Professor Lupin’s the best Defence teacher we’ve ever had!” shouted someone from the Ravenclaw table. Harry felt his stomach returning, and with it, perhaps a sliver of his good mood, as three Hufflepuffs, including Ernie Macmillan, stood and shouted similar sentiments, followed by several Gryffindors, and a group of tiny Slytherin first-years. At this point, breakfast dissolved into a tumult of people yelling randomly encouraging things in Remus’s direction, and Harry, looking up at the staff table with a wide grin on his face, saw Remus blushing a deep crimson and waving his hand as though attempting to fend off the compliments. Professor McGonagall stood up and waved her hand for silence. This time, it took several seconds to achieve anything even approaching it.

“Thank you, all,” she said. “I’m sure Professor Lupin appreciates your sentiment, but this is hardly appropriate breakfast time behaviour. I hope I need not add that any students found contributing to an unhappy work environment for any teachers or students will be punished as severely as I can manage it. Now, if you please, finish your meals and get to class!” There was a wave of chatter and laughter, one or two final shouts that were lost in the general noise, and the Hall returned to something resembling its usual state. Harry could see Professor Flitwick vanishing the pile of letters in front of Remus, and McGonagall leaning over to say something in his ear that made him smile. Although Harry was still boiling with rage at the Prophet, the Ministry, and at anyone else who had ever thought anything bad about Remus, it was comforting to see how much support Remus had now. He tried not to be sad at how surprised Remus seemed to be at receiving it.

“We can’t let those dickheads get away with this,” Ginny declared, her face still crimson with fury as she scowled at the newspaper still lying on the table. “Remus already feels shit enough about himself, he doesn’t need this crap as well.”

“Wait ‘til Sirius hears about it,” Ron said darkly. “I hope someone else is at headquarters to stop him doing something daft.” Harry’s gut, still determined to be unhelpful, twisted uncomfortably. They all exchanged worried glances, but there was nothing they could do from here. Hopefully Thom, or one of the other more sensible Order members would remember Sirius’s penchant for pointless heroics and stop by to check on him.

“I have an idea about how we can help,” said George thoughtfully. “We’ll stop by the Owlery on the way to Transfiguration and send a note to Sirius, he might be able to help us.” Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the twins.

“What are you thinking?” she asked. “If it’s anything illegal…”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head, Granger,” Fred said, waving a hand. “We know what we’re doing.” Hermione snorted, but offered no further comment. She was still angry enough about the article that her usual burning need to lecture everyone around her had apparently been quashed for the moment.
“Let us know what we can do to help,” Ginny said, standing up as Luna waltzed into the Hall and preparing to join her at the Ravenclaw table. “You know I’m up for whatever.” The twins winked at her and grinned.

“Oh, we know, little sis.” Ginny snorted and waved goodbye, leaving the rest of them discussing the various grisly death scenarios that would best suit the Prophet reporter who had written the report.

As he, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the twins got up to go to class, Harry couldn’t stop his gaze from resting on the Slytherin table. Several fifth years were talking together, many wearing sneers that Harry immediately distrusted. Draco and Pansy, however, seemed to be intent on keeping their heads down, and were both concentrating on what appeared to be homework while they ate. Harry frowned. He didn’t know what to make of it. Part of him wished Draco could have done something, anything, to show some support for Remus, especially after Remus had looked after him the other night, but given that, not so long ago, Draco would have been leading the anti-Remus brigade, he supposed this was progress of a kind. Not everyone can be a hero, Potter. Draco had said something along those lines that night in the kitchen. He sighed. He didn’t agree, but he had no idea how to make Draco see things differently.

“Come on, Harry, we’re going to be late,” Ron called from the door to the Entrance Hall. Harry realised he’d slowed down, so deep in thought was he. He shook his head to clear it and followed his friends from the Hall, determined to concentrate on lessons for the rest of the morning.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom for their double lesson that afternoon, they immediately saw just what Fred and George had meant by “helping”. Remus was standing, as usual, at the front of the classroom, apparently completely unconcerned by the dozen or so tiny flying monkeys fluttering over his head.

The gathered students were glancing frequently up at the strange additions, muttering to one another, but clearly not willing to outright ask Remus about them. Ron had no such qualms.

“What the hell are those things?” he blurted out as soon as they stepped into the room. “Professor,” he added hastily, as Remus raised an eyebrow at him. Remus smiled wryly.

“One of your fellow students apparently feels I require protection,” he said dryly, and Harry could hear the amusement behind the words. “As Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, I am clearly quite unable to defend myself against the ignorance of a few reporters.” Several of their classmates
tittered, and Harry found himself grinning. Remus didn’t appear to be suffering unduly from the Prophet’s article. On the contrary, something of the pleased surprise of this morning hung about him still, as though he’d expected to merely pretend it hadn’t happened, rather than be supported through the ensuing drama. About time people stood up against that shite, Harry thought, remembering Hermione’s trials the previous year. He didn’t know what was different about this year, but something seemed to be shifting among the students - or some of them, at least.

“What do they do?” Seamus asked Remus as Harry took his seat between Hermione and Ron. The suspicion of a blush rose up Remus’s neck, and he suddenly found himself quite preoccupied with the papers on his desk. The monkeys chittered shrilly, as though pleased at finding themselves the centre of attention, and one of them did a flip in midair above Remus’s head.

“I have every hope I won’t need to find out,” he replied. Harry and Ron exchanged glances. They both knew for sure that Remus had already found out what the monkeys did, and knowing Fred and George, it involved something both uncomfortable and hilariously embarrassing. Harry didn’t want anyone to do anything to hurt Remus, but he felt almost sorry he hadn’t witnessed it.

The lesson was almost over, and the monkeys’ presence had somehow faded into the background, when the class was suddenly startled by an outbreak of high-pitched, squeaky, and horribly out-of-tune singing from the little creatures.

Oh Remus, oh Remus, oh Remus, my lad, we wanted to tell you you’re really not bad. You’re our favouritest teacher, your chocolate’s the best, your hair is fantastic, and we quite like your chest.

Judging by Remus’s weary expression, this was not the first terrible song he’d had to endure, nor the first class who had been reduced to helpless laughter by his new companions. He cast a wordless Silencio with a heavy sigh and, finding they had only five minutes left of the lesson, let the gasping class go to dinner early.

As usual, Ron, Harry, and Hermione remained behind, Ron and Harry still red-faced and chuckling as they approached Remus’s desk.

“Fred and George, I suppose?” Hermione asked, attempting to remain dignified even in the face of such overwhelming ridiculousness. Remus snorted, but his eyes sparkled.

“And Sirius, and Arthur, although don’t tell Molly about that last,” he added with a wink.
“Tell me the first song didn’t mention your arse,” Harry choked through a fresh wave of laughter. Remus sighed again.

“Of course it did,” he said. “This is Sirius we’re talking about.” Even Hermione couldn’t restrain a giggle at this. “Right in front of Minerva, as well,” Remus added regretfully. “I didn’t know where to put my face.”

“I bet Sirius has some suggestions,” Ron snorted. Harry shoved him roughly and made a face, but he was still laughing. His heart felt about three sizes larger than usual at the thought of all Remus’s friends rallying around him, somehow finding the most perfect way to make him feel better about the shitstorm that was no doubt even now raging outside the school. Reassurances only went so far, Harry knew. This kind of embarrassing-yet-hilarious prank, however, showed without a doubt that Remus had friends who were willing to stick their necks out for him (and other parts of themselves - oh gods, that’s not an image I ever want in my head! ) and who believed fully and firmly that Remus was worth defending and loving and was not, in any respect, a dangerous monster.

“So is that all they do, sing daft songs?” Harry asked, once he could breathe properly again. Remus’s lips twisted, fighting between a smile and a scowl.

“Unfortunately not,” he replied. “They take a rather different approach when someone insults me.”

“Oh no,” said Hermione, clearly preparing herself for the worst.

“‘Oh no’ is right,” Remus said. “You can ask Mr. Turpin of Ravenclaw whether his remarks on the trustworthiness of lycanthropes were worth a faceful of miniature monkey faeces. I suspect he would, in hindsight, consider it decidedly not.” Hermione fought valiantly to keep her face straight, but Harry and Ron howled with laughter at the mental image of Henry Turpin, a fourth year and the most irritating member of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, being pelted with monkey shit. The monkeys in question twittered proudly, swooping and flipping in the air around them. Harry regarded them fondly.

“That’s not very helpful in the long run,” Hermione observed, and Ron rolled his eyes so hard Harry was afraid he might strain something.

“Turpin deserved it if he was talking shit about Remus,” he said. Harry glanced at him and mouthed ‘talking shit’, and they were both off again. Hermione and Remus both sighed heavily, but Harry knew they were only keeping themselves from laughing through enormous heapings of willpower.
“Professor Flitwick would have dealt with the situation rather more efficiently, I feel,” Remus said. “But I suppose I am rather… touched by the gesture.” He paused. “If you could see your way clear to getting Fred and George to lift the enchantment, however, I really would prefer *not* to have to meet the Governors with this little fanclub tomorrow morning.” Harry and Ron immediately stopped laughing.

“They’re not firing you?” Harry asked, suppressing a hiccup anxiously. Remus smiled warmly.

“No,” he said. “I’m signing my permanent contract to remain at Hogwarts as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another and whooped loudly in celebration. Harry thought the top of his head might fall off from smiling. Finally, *finally*, Remus was getting the chance he deserved. And, while it wouldn’t be easy, his secret was already out. It seemed strange that, in the middle of a war, he would finally get to begin truly living.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Yay, I've moved house, I've graduated, I'm enrolled in Honours, it's been a busy time! Hope you're all having a good January and that most of you aren't suffering from the heat the way we are over here. Australian summers are The Worst. Love you all! Cam.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CW: description of dissociation

Remus’s official teaching position was the only ray of light for the Order in an increasingly dark time. They had tried to celebrate the signing of his contract with Arthur, Molly, Moody, Thom, and Tonks on Friday evening, but the mood had been rather soured by the news that, completely unremarked by The Daily Prophet, the monitoring of muggle parents was now official Ministry policy.

“They’re not messing about, either,” said Tonks, taking a great swig from her glass of white wine. The seven of them were gathered in the downstairs living room by the fire, all nursing drinks of varying strengths. Sirius was of the opinion that no drink on earth was strong enough for the depth of sheer bullshit going on in the Ministry. “The Aurors’ve been given a list of ‘High Priority Targets’,“ Tonks continued, “as though a bunch of dentists and architects are more of a threat to wizarding safety than Lord Fucking Voldedoodoo.” Moody’s scowl was as fierce as Tonks’s as he took a sharp pull on his flask.

“We should’ve seen it coming, I s’pose,” he growled. He shook his grizzled head and eased his wooden leg into a more comfortable position with a stifled groan. “I never thought Fudge would have the balls, though, let alone that the Wizengamot would back him up.” Thom spat into the crackling fire.

“No different t’what they’ve been doin’ t’us fer years,” he said grimly. “F they can convince ‘emselves them muggles aren’t quite ‘s human ‘s the rest’v yer, they c’n do whatever they like.” He leaned against the mantelpiece and stared gloomily into the fire. Where the other wizards were still in the early stages of Utter Outrage, Thom seemed more resigned, a veteran of the Us and Them wars in a sea of new recruits. Sirius glanced sideways at Remus, and thought he could see some traces of the same emotion. Where Sirius was burning, actually twitching with the need to do something, anything to fight against this latest travesty, Remus looked sad. Sad and weary.
“I’m afraid you’re right,” Arthur said to Thom. “We’ve underestimated the lengths Fudge will go to to remain in power. Albus warned us, back in June, but I still couldn’t bring myself to… Well, it doesn’t matter now.” Molly reached over and took Arthur’s hand. Sirius saw the grim look that passed between them, but there was something else there too. To those who didn’t know them, and even to some who did, Molly and Arthur seemed thoroughly good-natured, a trifle silly perhaps, and entirely unthreatening. But there was steel under the smiles, and a fiery determination in the look they exchanged that went far deeper than any angry rant Molly had ever directed at her children. There was a reason they’d both survived the first war.

“Kingsley said they sent some MLE lads to interview those Dursleys this morning,” Moody said. Sirius’s stomach clenched and he leaned forward in his seat, tensed for action, although what action he hardly knew. “Didn’t get anything, of course. Couldn’t have picked a more useless pair of nitwits if they’d tried. Sounds like Vernon Dursley said they were well shot of Harry and didn’t want to talk to any more wizards for the rest of their lives, thank you very much and good day to you sir.” Sirius sighed. At least they hadn’t got anything useful, but that didn’t mean much if the Ministry decided to make something of it. Oh Circe, does this mean we’re going to have to protect those fuckers as well as the Grangers? he thought, vaguely nauseous at the thought. His lip curled and he pushed the thought aside. Abusers could fend for themselves.

“I suppose the Grangers are on the priority list?” Remus asked. Moody nodded.

“Good thing we got ahead of that one,” he replied. “Sturgis saw the buggers coming and Confunded them. They went back to the office with a fake interview transcript, so we’re good for a week or so, I reckon. We’ll keep an eye on them, though, make sure nobody tries anything.” Sirius narrowed his eyes at the old Auror. He was shifting restlessly, jiggling his leg so that the wooden stump tapped roughly against the side of the coffee table. More bad news, Sirius thought, recognising the signs, but this time the fear couldn’t quite get a hold. It seemed he’d reached his limit on shitty things for the day, and was now floating a little behind his right ear. Good old dissociation, he thought mildly. It used to scare him - hell, it sometimes still scared him. It reminded him too much of how it felt to be in Azkaban, to feel all the light, the joy, the love, the good in you drained away, to be left near empty. Except instead of leaving the pain behind, dissociation left him numb.

I reckon I’m about due some numb, he thought. Between Dumbledore’s curse, the public attacks on Remus, worrying about Harry, and now the muggle monitoring bullshit, he was full up on fuckery for the week. Possibly the year. Hell, write off the next decade, while you were at it. No more feelings for this queer, thank you very much.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” Molly sighed. She turned to Remus. “This was supposed to be a celebration. I’m sorry, Remus dear, we owe you a few uninterrupted parties by now I think.” Remus smiled gently.

“They’ll keep,” he said. “Once this is over, though, I’ll hold you to that.” Sirius tried to smile, but it
was hard to direct his facial muscles when he wasn’t exactly sitting inside his own head.

“Get it over with, Moody,” he said, and was almost surprised when his mouth said the words. He was vaguely aware that Remus had taken his hand. He knew, rather than felt, that he was comforted by it.

“I’m being tracked,” Moody said. “Well, I say tracked, they’re ruddy useless at it.” He held up a hand to forestall their responses. “It’s not just me. Anyone close to Albus is under surveillance. Kingsley and Tonks’re in the clear at the moment by the sound of things, though I reckon if they knew how good Tonks is they’d be keeping a closer eye on her. Arthur, you and Molly are being watched. They’re monitoring your Floo as of this evening, and you’re being tailed whenever MLE have a spare man. Remus, you too, though they can’t do as much to you, since they haven’t found a way to get someone back into Hogwarts yet.”

Sirius sat very still and let the news wash over him. Even if he and his body had been communicating properly, he doubted he’d have reacted much. They’d known it was coming. Publicly tracking innocent muggles was a very unpleasant shock, but secretly tracking his enemies was pure Fudge. Still, it was a blow to hear it. Molly’s lips paled a few shades, the freckles across her nose showing more clearly than usual, but she sat as straight as ever, her hand still in her husband’s. Arthur nodded gravely.

“Well, we knew it would happen,” he said. “Fudge has never liked me much. I’ve been careful, just in case.” Moody nodded approvingly. The grumpy bugger had a soft spot for Arthur, Sirius knew. He respected him more than most of the other Order members, although he’d probably curse someone before admitting it.

“I’ve been taken off Sirius’s case, too,” Tonks said with a sigh. “They think I’m too junior and useless for it now, especially since Fudge has decided all this shit stirring is your fault, cous.”

Sirius’s body snorted a derisive laugh, and he felt the dry, angry amusement tugging at the string connecting him to himself. His moment of numbness was coming to an end, it seemed.

“Dumbledore’s going to love that,” his mouth said. \textit{Funny how my body seems to know what to say, even when I’m not in it}, he observed vaguely. \textit{Just more reason} - he could feel the air going into his lungs again - \textit{for him to keep me} - now the blood was thudding in his temples - \textit{locked up in this bloody place} - there should have been a solid \textit{thud} as he reseated himself in his body, but instead his mouth finished his sentence as though nothing had happened - \textit{when we need every bloody wizard we can get!”}
He felt a sharp pressure on his hand, and looked down to find Remus squeezing it so tightly that it was turning white. He realised his voice had risen until he was shouting. He took a shuddering breath.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “It’s just…”

“We know, dear,” said Molly. “As it happens, I agree with you.” Sirius looked up at her sharply and she smiled at his surprise. “There aren’t enough of us to take on the Ministry and Vol- Vol- oh sod it, vol au vent. I know your studies –” here she glanced apologetically at Thom for keeping him out of the loop - “are important, but there are other ways we need your help.”

“I don’t like it, but I agree,” Remus said quietly. Sirius looked up at him and saw the fear and determination behind his eyes. He knew all too well how Remus was feeling, but he couldn’t bring himself to be sorry. Aside from the catastrophic journey to get the Horcrux, he hadn’t left the house in far too long. He wasn’t sure he could take much longer, watching a war rage in secret just outside the door, helpless to do anything about it.

“I think most of us agree,” Tonks said, swallowing the last of her wine. “Dumbledore might not like it, but he has to know it’s for the best.”

“Bugger what Alby thinks,” Thom grunted, turning back to face them. “‘E’s a genius, yeah, but ‘e ain’t the only one wiv a say in this group, is ‘e? Las’ I checked this was a democracy, not a bunch’v slimy Death Eaters.” Sirius looked up at him in surprise. Thom was clearly more angry about Dumbledore’s misadventure than they’d realised. He desperately wished he knew how things stood between the two men.

“You’re right, lad,” Moody said. “It won’t be the first time I’ve gone up against him. We’ll put it to the meeting tomorrow night.” Sirius tried not to grin at such a near prospect of freedom. It would probably confirm all Remus’s worst fears, to be jubilant over the prospect of being allowed out to fight a fucking war. He sighed. Why are feelings so complicated? He just wanted to not be locked in a house, was that really so much to ask?

The others took their leave shortly afterwards, bidding them a subdued farewell, and congratulating Remus on his new job as they left. Thom remained behind, still standing by the fire as though needing the extra warmth. Kreacher pottered in, entirely unprompted, with a tray of tea things and began to pour for them. Sirius was almost used to Kreacher’s quiet, respectful presence these days, and he only had to pinch himself twice as he accepted his cup of completely poison-free tea from the elf.
There was silence once Kreacher left, as they each stared into their cups, lost in their thoughts. Sirius stirred his cup slowly, although all the sugar had dissolved, waiting for Thom to speak. He was tense, sitting on the edge of an armchair like a skittish animal, ready to flee at the slightest movement.

“How’s Alby doin’?” he asked softly, after several minutes. Sirius wished he could hug him, but though they were friends now, of a sort, there was too much in the way still.

“He’s pretending nothing happened,” Remus replied, leaning forward and putting his tea down on the coffee table. “I’ve made sure he’s taking his potion, and he seems to be recovering as well as can be expected.” Thom nodded, his expression giving little away, but said nothing more. Sirius glanced at Remus helplessly. Thom radiated grief like the fire gave of heat, a palpable wave of sorrow that brought a lump to Sirius’s throat. He’d lived a life that even Remus could barely understand, of cruelty, of hunger, of rejection, and yet he got up every day and tried again. More, he fought for himself, for his fellows. And now for the Order, for some of the very people who had made his life hell. It was the ultimate fuck you from the universe for him to finally find someone he could connect with, only to have them snatched away because of a single moment of poor judgement.

“Thom, I don’t- I mean, I know it’s not our business, but if you want to talk about anything…” Sirius trailed off, and saw a tiny spark of amusement in Thom’s eyes at his discomfort. His voice was gentle as he asked the question he’d once dreaded from James, when it had been his and Remus’s friendship in focus. “Is there- What is there between you and Albus?”

Thom sighed and shook his head, but there was a slight quirk to his lip.

“Wish I could tell yer,” he said. “Never met anyone like ‘im. ‘E’s a genius, fer all ‘e’s a bloody idjit sometimes. ‘E finks fings I’ve never ‘eard anyone else talk about, and ‘e sees fings in people, more’n wot they see sometimes, I reckon. ‘S not, y’know, physical or nothin’,” he added, glancing up at them and rolling his eyes. “I know youse were wonderin’, and mebbe I’d be offended by yer askin’, ‘cept I reckon you two get it, yeah?” Sirius smiled sadly. If anyone could, surely it would be them.

Thom sighed again, and the slight smile faded, the twinkle in his eye going out. “Mebbe if fings wuz different, if we’d met earlier or summink. I never fort I’d find someone like ‘im, always jus’ bin me, really. But nah, there’s too much in the way, y’know? I don’ mean the age fing, werl, not jus’ that, but everyfing. Different lives, all of it. But, I dunno, I fort once it was over, we’d have some time at least. Just some time ter be togever.” Thom’s lip twitched again, contorting in a mighty effort to keep himself calm, and Sirius’s heart broke with an almost audible crack. He and Remus darted across the room and pulled Thom into their arms at the same time, and Thom’s dam of self control broke, a storm of pain pouring out of him as Sirius and Remus held him. Their eyes met over his grey head, and behind the grief was something stronger. “I’m so fucking grateful for you, Remus Lupin. Whatever time is left to us, I’m grateful for all of it.”
Draco was annoyed. As Pansy pointed out, this was his usual state of being, but he was rather more annoyed than usual, and he was annoyed about being so annoyed.

Absolutely nothing in his life made sense any more. Everything had been so clear only six months ago. Not wonderful, perhaps, not all the time, but clear. He understood his place in the world, and everyone else’s, and it made sense. Now, thanks to Saint bloody sodding arse-ing bollocksing Potter, not one, single, solitary thing made sense.

Six months ago, for example, he would have happily sniggered at the Howlers Professor Lupin had received last week, would have relished knowing that such a thing could never happen to him. Last Thursday’s article had brought no such sense of security, merely a seeping discomfort, like the brush of an insect against his leg in the middle of the night. There was no longer a right answer, or rather, no simple answer, because he knew damn well what the damned Gryffindors would say if he’d voiced that particular opinion in their hearing. Lupin had been nice to him.

Of all the humiliations he’d had to deal with lately, that might possibly be the worst. It made no fucking sense that Lupin would be nice to someone whose family hated him, someone who’d happily explained to people only months before that anyone with inhuman blood was no better than an animal. Hell, he still felt itchy thinking about what that awful-jumper-wearing nerd of a man really was. Potter could lecture all he wanted, but for a couple of days a month - just three days earlier, in fact - Remus Lupin was a fully fledged monster who would eat a child if he wasn’t magically sedated. But he was in the wrong for not pretending like that wasn’t a problem?

There was that uncomfortable sensation again. It was like he was walking around in an outfit infested with tiny crawling Things that liked to brush up against him whenever he had such a thought. Merlin’s beard, it was annoying. He was so annoyed he almost decided to chuck it all in and go back to being normal. Sod the sodding DA and the sodding Gryffindors and this sodding feeling like his brain was trying to fit three times more stuff into it than normal. Sod the nightmares and the panic attacks and the mounting fear of his father’s next letter and the straight up terror of what was going to happen when the Dark Lord actually started fighting this war properly. Sod the guilty knot in his stomach every time he did or said something to betray his family name and the society they’d worked so hard to build. Sod the suspicion that Potter and his lot would abandon him the moment they realised he was actually, genuinely a posh git who thought werewolves were a threat to society. Sod all of it.

So it was as much a surprise to him as to anyone when he showed up with Pansy at the second DA meeting. It was especially a surprise to him when nobody seemed to have a problem with it this time. They simply got on with the class as though this was completely normal when it really fucking wasn’t.
Draco wasn’t sure how long one could run on pure, unadulterated annoyance, but he was pretty sure he was reaching his limit.

It was for this reason that he made sure he avoided Potter at every opportunity. If there was one person who could send his annoyed-o-meter over its limit, it was Potter. The one person who didn’t seem to realise this, or didn’t seem to care, was, alas, also Potter.

“Hey, Malfoy.”

Draco groaned and closed his eyes as Potter shut the door to the empty classroom behind him. He should have known. He’d carefully chosen a different empty classroom from last time, in a completely different part of the castle, but Potter seemed to take a perverse delight in stalking him, no matter where he went.

“What do you want, Potter?” Draco asked. He meant to sound imperious, but his voice came out tired, and not a little whiny. He felt somewhat justified in whining, of course. It wasn’t his fault Potter had decided to comprehensively ruin his life.

Potter meandered into the room like he hadn’t a care in the world, which, Draco reflected, was ridiculous but also infuriatingly Potter. Perhaps he’s just too dense to realise how many cares he ought to have, he thought viciously, and another insect immediately skittered across his spine. Ugh.

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay,” Potter said, dumping his bag carelessly on the floor and himself onto a desk, ignoring the perfectly serviceable chair next to it.

“I’m perfectly okay, job done, have a pleasant evening,” Draco replied coolly, looking pointedly down at the book he’d been enjoying before Sir Spoils Everything had shown up. Potter, incapable of taking a hint, swung his legs absent-mindedly and frowned at Draco.

“Sure you are,” he said. “You’re ignoring the rest of the DA except in meetings, and you look like you’ve lost about a stone in the last couple weeks, not to mention you definitely aren’t sleeping, so…” He trailed off and raised an eyebrow, clearly waiting for some kind of response. Draco scowled heavily at him.

“Well, you sure know how to make a guy feel special,” he drawled. “Perhaps I should forgive you your lack of manners, considering the abysmal upbringing you told me about, but it’s generally
considered impolite to comment on someone’s appearance like that.” Draco wasn’t really surprised when Potter snorted derisively at this. Not surprising that Potter wouldn’t be interested in etiquette.

“When you start being polite to me, maybe I’ll be polite to you,” Harry said. “But until I can make a snowman in hell, I’m just gonna keep being honest, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Or even if it’s not all the same to me, I imagine,” Draco sniffed. “You really are the most irritating git I’ve ever had the misfortune to share a planet with.” Harry snorted again.

“I’m inspired by your incredible politeness,” he said. He stretched out a leg and nudged Draco’s desk with the toe of his scrappy trainer. “Come on, give over being a prat for two minutes and just talk like a normal person, would you?”

“What would you know about normal ?”

“For fuck’s sake, Malfoy!”

“All right, all right, if it’ll get you out of here faster.” Draco glared up at Potter and put his bookmark back in his book very deliberately. Potter grinned at him as though he’d just won some kind of victory. Git.

“You know you can talk to other people from the DA outside meetings,” Potter said after a short pause. “Even if you don’t want to talk to us, I know there are Slytherins with friends in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. And making new friends was, you know, kind of the point of this whole thing.”

“Oh yes, it’s just as simple as talking,” Draco sneered. Potter frowned at him, still swinging his legs in a most childish and irritating manner. Draco fought the temptation to reach out with a foot and kick him in the shins just to get him to stop.

“Kind of hard to make friends if you don’t talk to anyone,” Potter replied, apparently determined not to rise to the bait. Spoilsport. Draco sighed and pulled himself more upright in his chair. Potter really was the densest, most ignorant…

“What about me says ‘friendly’ to you, Potter?” he asked. “Why on earth would anyone want to be friends with me?” Draco snapped his mouth shut on the last sentence and wished the earth could swallow him whole. That wasn’t what he’d meant to ask. Why would I want to be friends with these
Potter continued to frown down at him, and Draco could practically hear the cogs whirring in his brain. He hoped like hell he wasn’t blushing, and contented himself with glaring back at Potter. Some people might have tried to correct themselves, but that would only make it worse. Better to just ride it out and try and retain a modicum of dignity.

“What the fuck do you think we’ve all been trying to do, you prickly sod?” Potter asked quietly. “If you didn’t have your head shoved so far up your arse, you might accidentally give people a reason to be friends with you.” Draco scowled, and the lump in his throat did nothing to help the heaping mounds of annoyance that were building up around him.

“I don’t need people to feel sorry for me,” he spat. “That’s not friendship, that’s pity.” Potter sighed.

“Have it your way, then,” he said. “But if I can believe, against all common bloody sense, that you’re not all git, you can bet other people will, too.” He slid off the desk and yanked his bag up from the floor. “Enjoy your bloody book.”

Potter paused where he stood, but when Draco merely glared at him some more, he shook his head and turned to leave. Three spiders promptly crawled across Draco’s stomach. How come other people get consciences and I get fucking insects, fuck."

“Potter, wait,” he said dully. “It’s not just, you know, all that shit. Zabini thinks we’re up to something. He knows something’s different, but he doesn’t know what, so he’s watching us. His family isn’t right in the- in the Dark Lord’s inner circle, but they have connections. And he’s got Crabbe and Goyle convinced I’m doing something as well. They saw me talking to you, and then there was last week, and Pansy and I didn’t- Well. It looks suspicious to them.”

Potter had turned and was watching Draco thoughtfully as the explanation spilled awkwardly out of his mouth. Draco refused to blush under the scrutiny.

“What could they possibly tell the Dark Lord?” Potter asked slowly. “That you’ve joined a study group? That you’re making new friends? I know we said we were worried about what other people would find out, but maybe it’s time to just say ‘fuck it’ and worry about the consequences later. This secrecy shit isn’t doing anyone any good.” Draco stared at him. Potter had clearly lost what was left of his senses.
“What good will it do when my father turns up at the school and demands I leave with him because he thinks I’m being influenced by Dumbledore’s favourite stooges?” he demanded shrilly. “Or worse, when he tries to get me to spy on you all?”

“That’s worse?” Harry asked. Draco threw up his hands in frustration.

“You are so bloody infuriating, Potter! You want me to do the right thing, then you’re surprised if I do, I can’t bloody win with you, can I?”

“I’m sorry, I just- Look, you’ve been a complete arse for four years, this was never going to be easy, but as long as you try and have things both ways, it’s not going to work!”

“I already picked a bloody side, Potter! I’ve betrayed my family to join your damn group, and more by telling you my secrets. What more do you want?!” Potter sighed and tugged at his hair as though reaching the end of his patience.

“You say you’ve picked a side, Malfoy, but we both know you’ve still got one foot in your family’s camp. I know it won’t be easy for you, but you’re going to have to decide, one way or another.”

“You don’t know what will happen to me.” Draco’s voice was flat. He was suddenly beyond annoyed. Acid burned in his stomach, and his knuckles itched. How could Potter ask that of him? How could he stand there, looking so calm, and ask Draco to ruin his life?

“I know exactly what will happen to you,” Potter said bluntly. “And we both know what’ll happen to you if you don’t.”

And he turned on his heel and left the room, slamming the door behind him. Draco slammed his fist down on the desk next to him. It didn’t make him feel any better.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Guess who's been WRITING?! This gay! OMG you guys, I'm so pleased to have some time to get some words down! I hope you like where things are going. More action is coming, I'm excited, I want to write ALL THE THINGS (but also Honours prep is starting so we'll see how we go, I know, I'm trash). Love you all! Cam.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Pads,

I hope you're okay and that Moony is feeling better. I couldn't speak to him after class today because Seamus was messing around while we were duelling and he accidentally hexed Ron's ear onto his forehead. We had to take him to the Hospital Wing while Moony told Seamus off. Madam Pomfrey stuck it back in the right place, but Ron's still pretty annoyed.

I spoke to M on Friday after class and he's being a dick again. I don't know what to say to him. I know he doesn't want to go back home, and I know it's complicated with the Slytherins and everything. He said some of his friends are suspicious, which isn't making anything easier. But I think if we don't do something he's going to give up on all this and go back to how he was, even though the DA has been really good about letting him and Pansy join. If there was anyone else who could help him it'd be easier, but no one else seems to give a shit, and I don't blame them. He really has been an utter prick to pretty much everyone. I don't know why I still care, he's such a prat. But I figured if anyone knew what to say to a snotty pureblood ponce it'd be you. (I'm joking. Mostly.)

Enough about that dickhead, though. Quidditch training is going great, I think we're in with a chance for the Cup again this year. Angelina’s put together a great team, although she’s nearly as bossy as Wood was, which is saying something! I wish you could come see me play sometime. Hermione’s going to take some pictures at the first match for you. Sorry, I guess that’s not really the same. I know you wish you could be here, too.

Moons is doing great, and you can tell him all of us think that. F and G are still sending him Howlers every breakfast still, although don’t tell Mrs. W. I think McG is going to give them detention for the rest of the term if they don’t stop, but it’s pretty funny. The lyrics are getting worse, though. Did you have anything to do with this morning’s? ‘Not’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘butt’, you need to work on your songwriting. Also, stop making us all think about Moony’s butt, it’s weird.

I have to go, Hermione’s glaring at me because I’m supposed to be doing my Potions homework,
and I’m not sticking to her timetable. Also Flitwick said he could take my letter to you tonight and I need to get to his office before curfew. Hope you’re doing okay.

Miss you,

Harry.

Sirius sat back in his chair and smiled, although it was tinged with sadness. Letters from Harry were always bittersweet, although this year they tended to contain fewer horrific tales of near-death and more descriptions of what could have passed for the life of a normal teenage boy. It was hard being separated, wishing he could be there for Harry more. In another life they would have met up on Hogsmeade weekends, he would have gone to see Quidditch matches; hell, he probably would have shown up just because he felt like it, on the off chance that he could embarrass Harry in front of his friends.

But at least Harry’s letters now were more… open. Only a few months ago, Harry would have avoided any topic that might make Sirius resent being in hiding, out of a (fully justified) fear that Sirius would do something reckless. Sirius was glad things had changed. He was disappointed that he couldn’t see Harry until Christmas, but Harry’s growing trust in him was more than compensation.

“He’s right about your songwriting skills, you know,” Remus observed, leaning over the back of Sirius’s chair and perusing the letter. “And he’s definitely right about your obsession with my arse.” Sirius grinned and tipped his head back so he could look up at Remus.

“But it’s such a delicious arse,” he observed. “How could I not be obsessed?” Remus rolled his eyes and dropped a kiss on Sirius’s nose.

“What do you think about our Draco problem?” he asked, becoming serious. “I don’t think we can let Draco alone and hope for the best. He’s too indoctrinated.”

Sirius ran his eyes over that part of the letter again and frowned. He didn’t know much about the Malfoy house specifically, but he could imagine what Draco was going through. Hell, he wouldn’t be the only kid at Hogwarts dealing with it, and pureblood families seemed to be the worst for it. He sighed and chewed absently on a hank of hair that had fallen, as usual, out of its confines.

“I suppose it would help if he knew he had somewhere to go,” he said slowly. He worried some more at his hair, frowning down at the letter without seeing it. “It’s really going to be down to us, isn’t it?” Remus sighed as well, and leaned forward, resting his chin lightly on the top of Sirius’s
“We did talk about it,” he said. “There’s not really another option, unless Andromeda wants to take him in.” Sirius pondered this option.

“I don’t know if I could ask that of her,” he said slowly. “I can’t imagine living with a muggle would be a great idea while His Highness is adjusting. From what you and Harry have said, he’s still a right dickhead a lot of the time.” Remus chuckled.

“’Snotty pureblood ponce’ is an excellent descriptor,” he said. Sirius scowled and straightened the letter impatiently.

“I don’t know why Harry thinks I’d have more expertise there than anyone else,” he said, sticking out his bottom lip. He could sense Remus raising his eyebrow above him, but he refused to rise to the bait. He’d never been as bad as Draco Malfoy, that was for sure. He hadn’t needed a Harry to convince him not to hate muggleborns, or to help him realise that wealth and blood status weren’t worth shit. Sure, he’d ended up in Gryffindor mostly because he and James had made friends on the train, and he didn’t want to be put with his cousins; and he had thought some daft things during his first year - first few years, really - but that was… That was… That was entirely the same, wasn’t it? He’d just got lucky and found his Harry on the train to Hogwarts, rather than in his fifth year. It was pure luck, and not character, that had dropped in into a group of genuinely good people rather than shitty blood supremacists, and that was the biggest reason he was even a slightly decent person today. Damn it.

He sighed heavily.

“You bastards are right, aren’t you? I’m going to have to talk to him myself,” he said. Remus slipped his arms around him and hummed consideringly.

“I’ve been trying to think of another way around this, but I really can’t,” he said. His tone was deadly serious. “I just don’t know who else he would listen to, who could understand him as well as you.”

“It’s one hell of a risk,” Sirius mused, chewing on a fingernail this time. “Given what he’s no doubt heard about me, he might not want to listen. It might be completely pointless. Or worse.” He didn’t really care about the risk to his personal safety, but with the Ministry on the warpath, there was no telling what would happen if young Malfoy told his father he’d been talking to Sirius Black.
“I think it might be worth it,” Remus said softly, nuzzling into Sirius’s disaster of a man-bun. “He’s a smart kid. If he’s not too far gone, he’ll recognise it as a symbol of trust.” He paused. “And we cannot, in good conscience, leave him where he is.” Sirius smiled and laid a hand over Remus’s where it rested on his chest.

“You’re such a teacher,” he said fondly. “If there were more of you, the world would be a much better place.” Remus made a noise that might have indicated disagreement.

“You just want more arses to ogle,” he said. Sirius laughed.

“Like I said, a much better place.” Sirius flicked Harry’s letter onto the table and tapped thoughtfully at his chin. “All right, I’ll write to the little bugger and see if I can get through to him. You can give him the letter in person, so we can bypass the monitoring shit.”

“That’s the best place to start,” Remus said approvingly, standing upright and groaning as his back objected. “And there’s a chance he’ll feel like he can talk to me about it, if I’m the one to give it to him. Or at least he might think twice about breaking your confidence, after the incident the other week. Even pureblood ponces feel bad about breaking the trust of someone who’s helped them.”

Sirius turned in his seat and looked up at Remus, his expression grave.

“Are we sure about this?” he asked. “Can we really do this? Lucius will have a fit, and that’s presuming the kid even wants to come.” Remus reached for his hand, and Sirius took it.

“I don’t know,” Remus said simply. “But I didn’t know how we could adopt Harry, and look how that turned out.” Sirius smiled. Harry was almost unrecognisable now. He was already happier, healthier, and if nothing else, he was definitely safer. How could they withhold that from another child, if it was in their power to help? Poor kid really is fucked, if we’re his best option.

“Well then,” he said. “I guess I’d better write that letter.”

Remus sat behind the desk in his office and tapped the thick parchment envelope on the worn timber surface nervously. No matter what he’d said to Sirius the previous evening, he was seriously concerned they were making a huge mistake. It wouldn’t just be his arse on the line if Draco decided to betray them. The whole Order could be put at risk. He’d been distracted in his classes all day...
worrying about it. He knew Harry had noticed, but he hadn’t had time to speak to him, trusting instead that Sirius’s letter would answer any of his queries.

Too late to turn back now, he thought, as a soft knock sounded at his door. Attuned to the vagaries of his various students as he was, Remus sensed the reluctance in that knock. He was frankly surprised Draco had shown up at all.

“Enter,” he called, laying the letter in front of him and forcing his hands to lay still against the desk. Fidgeting was a nervous habit he’d been trying to break for three and a half decades, but he was still working on it.

Draco slipped through the door, and Remus caught him glancing at the corridor behind him, as though ensuring he hadn’t been followed. For half a second, Remus caught a glimpse of the fear the young man carried with him every day, always wondering who was watching, always looking over his shoulder, never knowing where an attack might come from - or even if it was coming. Remus knew the sensation all too well. No wonder Draco had such dark circles under his eyes, such papery pale skin.

“Thank you for coming, Draco,” he said, trying to keep his tone light and warm, although no doubt Draco wouldn’t appreciate it very much. Rather than improving Draco’s opinion of him, the fact that Remus had witnessed his moment of weakness had probably only increased Draco’s distaste. “Please, have a seat. May I offer you some tea?” Remus heard himself speaking the words out of habit, as though he weren’t about to hand a potential metaphorical land mine to the son of one of their most powerful enemies.

“Thank you,” Draco replied tensely, and dropped his bag on the floor before folding himself neatly into one of the cushioned chairs in front of Remus’s desk. He sat ramrod straight, his face an impassive mask, as though waiting for some kind of lecture.

“While I make tea, perhaps you would read this,” he said simply, deciding the straightforward route was probably the best. He held the envelope he and Sirius had sealed around one o’clock that morning. He’d had a small preparatory speech planned, but now that he was faced with this pale, formal figure, it felt stilted and patronising.

Draco reached slowly across the desk, almost cautiously, as though afraid the letter might explode the moment he touched it. The impassive mask broke for a moment, one eyebrow twitching questioninglly, his shadowed eyes narrowing as he searched for clues as to what this meeting was really about. Remus knew he’d never really thought this meeting was about Draco’s last homework assignment.
Remus forced himself to turn away as Draco slowly tore the letter open. If it had been Harry, or one of the others, he would have been tempted to read it over their shoulder. But Draco was fragile in more ways than one. He was far too used to being watched. What he needed now was a moment without it, a moment to breathe, to think. Remus knew well enough what was in the letter. There would be time enough to discuss it with Draco once he’d had a moment to consider it.

Dear Draco,

We have never met, but no doubt you’ve heard of me before. I’m Sirius Black, and I’m your (sort of) cousin. I’m writing to you because Harry and Professor Lupin are worried about you, and they both thought I might better understand what you’re going through than they do. I know you might not want to hear from me. I’m sure you’ve heard all kinds of nonsense about me from the Prophet and maybe your family. Perhaps you don’t want the help of a convicted murderer who didn’t even have the balls to commit the murder he was convicted of. Perhaps you don’t believe I can help. I hope you can at least read this letter before you make up your mind. I apologise for its length, but I’m afraid there is a lot of ground to cover. I hope you will find it helpful.

I was born into a family that believed in the supremacy and nobility of pure wizarding blood over all else. I suppose you know your family tree well enough to know that there are very few muggleborns there. Those of us who chose to associate with muggles or muggleborns were disowned pretty quickly, your Aunt Andromeda being just such a one. I grew up believing their nonsense, even though I didn’t like my parents very much. It just didn’t occur to me that there was any other way to think. It made sense to me, then, that pureblood wizards would be “better”. Muggles had no magic, and were therefore less capable. It wasn’t cruel to say so, it was just a fact. Wizards who mixed with muggles were risking diluting our magical powers. This is what I believed before coming to Hogwarts, and what my parents tried to force me to embody, long after it had become clear that I could not.

But I was taught more than pureblood supremacy, as is no doubt familiar to you. I was taught of the importance of family above all else. Family, and name, and the bloodline. One could not disgrace the family. Sadly, for my parents at least, I was particularly talented at being a disgrace. Perhaps some of what I am about to tell you will not seem relevant to your situation, but I think it is important to include it.

My parents believed I was a girl when I was born. I believed it myself, for some time, and couldn’t understand why it felt so wrong. But my parents were the only reference point I had for reality, so I believed what they told me about myself. I was a pureblood witch, destined to grow up and marry a powerful, pureblood wizard, and have lots of nice, pureblood babies. Because that’s what good pureblood girls do. As I got older, however, it became clear this wasn’t going to work out. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t manage to fit my family’s definition of how a good pureblood child should behave. Perhaps, looking back, there was no way for any child to fit that. My brother, Regulus, was far better at doing what they wanted than I was, but he didn’t have it much easier.
By the time I was ready to go to Hogwarts, it was pretty clear I was a failure. As a daughter, I couldn’t do anything right. As a son, well, I wasn’t much better, and they definitely didn’t want me to be their son. As soon as I got on the train for school, I became Sirius. Somehow, Professor Dumbledore knew in advance. Not one of my teachers ever called me by my given name, or referred to me as a girl. I still don’t know how he knew, but I will always be grateful for it. During the holidays, I lived as a girl, at least to begin with. I don’t know if you can understand how incredibly painful that was. I think you might know better than some. Perhaps you think I ought to have tried harder to do what they wanted, that I was an undutiful child. I thought so too, at the time. I felt guilty about it every day. And yet, to live the life they wanted me to live was even more unbearable.

I was fortunate in one thing, however. On the train to Hogwarts, I met another first year, by the name of James Potter. He was an annoying git, but he was also the first person to ever look, really look, beyond my name and family and blood status, to be interested in who I was underneath. I don’t know how he didn’t write me off immediately. I was a walking disaster (Professor Lupin would no doubt claim I still am). I was confused, indoctrinated with my parents’ erroneous beliefs, ashamed of who I was, and generally a mess. But James and I somehow became friends on that first day, and it was almost entirely because of him that I was sorted into Gryffindor, where I was protected, cared for, and taught better ways of being than I had been in the past.

I tell you this, not because I want to make you feel guilty, or ashamed, or sad, but to show you how easy it is to be influenced - for better or worse - by those around us. There is no shame, no matter what I might have thought as a fifth year, in being in Slytherin. Harry has told me about your friend Pansy, for example, and he seems to admire her for her loyalty, courage, and intelligence - although don’t tell her that, I’m sure he’d never forgive me for revealing his shameful secret.

There is no denying, however, that in recent years, Slytherin House has been home to some dangerous ideas. The first generation of Death Eaters, and now their children, have gravitated towards your House. You have fed one another’s fears and hatreds. Or, rather, your parents’ fears and hatreds. You have already shown immense courage and strength in standing up, even in a small way, against that by attending the DA meetings. It might seem strange to say this to someone I’ve never met, but cousin, I am proud of you. I’m not sure I would have had the same fortitude were I in your position.

But I have skirted around what we both know is the real issue here. I talk of values, of family pride, of Houses, instead of what I fear was most similar in our childhoods. I know you will want to avoid it, to make light of it. When I was first forced to recognise the truth about what my parents were doing to me, I almost couldn’t bear it.

I know your parents, your father, hurt you. I know they tell you it is for your own good. Perhaps, in their way, they love you. They have grown up as we have, in pain, in fear, and in hate. Perhaps it is for this reason that you feel guilty for even considering leaving them. I promise you, you have nothing for which to feel guilty. No matter where they come from, what they are doing is wrong. They had the same opportunities we have had to learn better, and they chose not to.
I must tell you the rest of my story, I suppose.

In my family, it was my mother. My father sat in the corner and, for the most part, did nothing. When he acted, it was because I had done something truly horrendous, or because he was tired of my mother screaming at him. Mostly it was small curses, bruises, pain, cuts where people wouldn’t see them. One of the house elves would often heal it later, once Walburga had calmed down. One mustn’t allow one’s children out with obvious injuries, even though half the kids I knew before Hogwarts went through the same thing.

I would be punished for anything when I was little. Talking to loudly, putting my elbows on the table, using the wrong fork. But the punishments were smaller too. As I got older, it was the bigger things that mattered. And the punishments were bigger, too. What mattered then was who I spoke to, and how. Who I was friends with. What I wore, where I went, what name I used. When my parents discovered I was dressing as a boy in private, I was beaten until I was nearly unconscious. They said they were doing it for my own good.

The worst part is that, even when I hated them with every fibre of my being, on some level, I thought they were right. I thought I really was a freak. I thought I was a terrible, selfish person, who needed to try harder to be a proper wizard - or, rather, a witch. I even thought it was normal, to the point where I never really spoke about it to my friends. I assumed they dealt with the same thing. Until I mentioned it casually to James once, in my fourth year, and he exploded. Two years later, I finally found the courage to leave, and I went to stay with James and his family. I will always be grateful for the support they gave me.

What I want you to know, Draco, is that it is not normal for parents to hurt their children. It is not right, or fair, or deserved. It is not your fault. You may resent me for saying it, I know, but you are still a child in the eyes of the world and the law. You have the right to be safe, and although you are now old enough to begin taking responsibility for your beliefs and actions, you are still far too young to know the kind of pain and shame and cruelty you have seen in the name of “discipline”.

It is for this reason that I offer you a home with me. It might not seem like much, I know. But while I cannot promise fame, fortune, or glory, I can promise safety and the support of people who have your best interests at heart. Harry will be coming to us at Christmas. I hope you will consider coming, too, if only to test the waters. We will never force you to stay if you do not wish to. But my home is yours whenever you wish it.

I know more than most the enormity of the decision before you. It will never be easy. But it can be better.
Yours,

Sirius Black.

After several minutes, when there was no possible way to delay the tea any further, Remus turned around to find Draco staring down at the last page of the letter with an unreadable expression. It was the kind of blankness that seemed to overtake Sirius sometimes, when whatever he was feeling was too much to deal with all at once. It was like an emotional punch to the arm, it sent his mind slightly numb, the pain shrouded under the shock.

“Are you all right?” Remus asked gently, setting a mug of tea in front of Draco, along with the sugar basin and milk jug. Draco started, and looked up as though surprised to see Remus still there.

“Is this a joke?” he asked hoarsely, ignoring the tea. He didn’t demand, or shout. He didn’t wave the letter, or accuse Remus of fabrication. It was a simple question.

“No,” Remus replied. “We’re quite serious.” He fought back a smile at the inadvertent pun. It really wasn’t the right time. Draco’s gaze dropped back to the letter.

“You just handed me a letter from Sirius Black,” he said dumbly. “You actually know where he is. And he’s admitted Harry’s staying with him. And he just straight up admitted he’s- he’s queer.” Remus watched Draco closely, but there didn’t seem to be any sign of exultation there, merely blank surprise. Draco looked up again. “Why?”

“Because we felt it was the right thing to do,” Remus said, stirring sugar into his tea. Draco laughed wildly, sounding slightly hysterical.

“This is a dream, isn’t it?” he asked. “I fell asleep in History of Magic and I’m dreaming this whole thing.” Remus smiled.

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “Although your suspicion is entirely reasonable. History of Magic is terribly exhausting.” He glanced up at Draco with a twinkle in his eye and Draco laughed again, a sharp bark that seemed to take him by surprise.

“I think,” he swallowed hard and looked back down at the parchment that was slowly being crumpled in his hand. “I need time to think,” he murmured. “This is mental.” Remus took a breath. This was a crucial moment. If he asked for the letter back now, it would be clear they didn’t trust Draco, and it could drive him away. Thom might have been understanding about people not
automatically trusting him, but Thom wasn’t a spoiled fifteen-year-old pureblood wizard. Draco Malfoy would almost certainly be offended. But if he allowed him to take the letter with him, and Draco *proved* he was untrustworthy…

Remus sighed. Why was life so bloody complicated all the bloody time?

“I understand,” he said aloud. “Take all the time you need. There is no need to rush this. But,” he added, “if you should need to talk, or if you wish to write back to Sirius, you know where to find me.”

Draco stood abruptly, his chair skidding back a few inches and leaving a scratch in the floorboards.

“Right,” he said. “Thanks for the tea.” He flung his bag over his shoulder and practically fled the room before Remus could answer him.

Remus sat back and looked at the still-steaming cup of tea on the other side of his desk. All they could do now was hope they’d made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Insta and Twitter @cambreypayne
Also, would anyone be interested in knowing what music I’m listening to while I’m writing each chapter?
Draco sat wedged into a corner where two of the thick, stone walls met at the top of the Astronomy Tower. The letter Lupin had given him was still crumpled in his fist, but he’d read it through so many times now that he could probably recite it by heart.

How could they have just given this to him? Were they insane? Were they stupid? Well, Potter had never been particularly gifted with intelligence, but, much as it pained him to admit it, Lupin seemed to be… an above average thinker. Perhaps he’d been mistaken. Maybe all Gryffindors went through life the same way Potter did, just barging their way through problems without stopping to consider what new problem they might be causing.

I offer you a home with me . What did that even mean? How could a convicted murderer have a home? Potter had vaguely mentioned his holidays once during a DA meeting. He’d clearly been staying with the Red Menaces, but Draco had assumed the papers were right when they said the Weasels and Potter had been on holiday together, away from the public spotlight. Clearly, this was not the case.

It is not normal for parents to hurt their children . Ha. You couldn’t prove that by his friends. Each family had their own special way of doing things, of course. Pansy’s mother was particularly gifted at psychological torture, whereas Blaise had run the full gamut as each new stepfather brought a different method into the house. Theo’s father was a quieter version of Draco’s, quick with the back of a hand or a sharp curse when he felt it was needed - although his generally came with fewer lectures on the nobility of wizardkind, the lucky bastard. Bulstrode dealt with something, he knew, but she never talked about it. There were scars on her back, Pansy said. Granted, Crabbe and Goyle seemed to do all right. The occasional smack on the hand when they were younger was all they’d had to deal with, although one only had to look at them to see how that had worked out.
Even when I hated them, I thought they were right.

Draco stared blankly at the heavy stone slabs on which he was sitting, the heavy dew glinting dully in the light from his wand. It was well past curfew. He knew he’d regret staying out so late tomorrow, when he had twice as much homework to do, and awkward questions from Blaise to answer, but his mind hadn’t stopped whirling from the moment he’d read Black’s letter.

Part of him still suspected this was some kind of elaborate trick, a snare to test his loyalties. And they’d been right not to trust him, hadn’t they? He scowled at the prickly little voice in the back of his mind. It was hardly unreasonable that his first thought had been to send the letter to his father. Black was the Ministry’s main suspect for all the unrest, the supposed rallying point of any dissent against Fudge. If the Malfoys could hand him a solid lead, their position would become almost unassailable.

Exactly what the Dark Lord wants …

Draco shivered, his stomach clenching with sudden nausea. It was more than the thought of the inhuman monster he’d seen through an upper window one night late in July. It was more than the instinctive, bone-deep, crawling horror that high, cold voice had inspired in him. He was ashamed. Ashamed that his father, his proud father, who spoke at length of the nobility of magical blood, the wisdom of tradition, and the right of wizards to rule, could have fallen prey to the petty parlour-tricks of- of- him.

Because there was nothing special about the Dark Lord, Draco could see it now. Oh yes, he was magically powerful, no doubt. But he held sway over his minions through mere amateur dramatics, through aesthetics for Morgana’s sake, lording that pitiful power over them like a spoilt child, thinking he was superior because he knew things they didn’t, because of his name, the way… The way you have, for the past four years, over Crabbe and Goyle and Millie and Theo and Blaise, over everyone. You still think you’re special, don’t you.

For a moment, he thought he’d actually be sick. Merlin, it hurt, to think these things. He desperately wished Potter had never spoken to him, that things could be like they were before. He desperately wished Potter had seen what James Potter had seen in Sirius Black, on that first train ride, that he’d given Draco that chance. He wished he could just go to bed and sleep until all of this was over and forgotten, maybe forever.

I don’t want to choose.

They’d offered him the worst possible gift. They’d offered him a choice. As he stared down at the
parchment in his hand, he was tempted, for the first time ever, to simply run away. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Hogwarts was more his home than any place he’d ever known. Even now, he knew he didn’t have the strength - or the weakness - to leave.

Instead, he reached into his bag, his shaking fingers fumbling, and slowly pulled out his parchment, ink, and quill, and began to write.

“Hey, Potter!”

Harry turned around for the third time since they’d left History of Magic ten minutes ago, trying not to look too annoyed. A Hufflepuff sixth year was jogging down the corridor toward them, his expression a mix of determination and nervousness. Hermione sighed heavily beside him, and Ron clicked his tongue irritably. Beside them, a portrait of a giant squid wrestled a miniscule rowing boat in the middle of a stormy ocean. Harry thought he understood how the boat’s occupants felt as the squid’s tentacles enveloped them, although in fairness, he hadn’t done anything as monumentally daft as rowing out into the middle of the fucking ocean. They just wanted to get to lunch, for Merlin’s sake, but people kept stopping Harry to “have a chat”. Harry would bet any money he knew what this was about.

“Are you going to ask me about Voldemort, too?” he asked shortly, as the sixth year stopped in front of them, panting through his slightly smaller-than-average teeth. He looked taken aback, both by Voldemort’s name, and by Harry’s blunt question.

“Well, yeah, I guess,” he said slowly. “How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Harry said heavily. “And I’m not going to tell you what happened in the graveyard, Dumbledore already told you everything you need to know. He’s back, and the Ministry is too thick to do anything about it.” He paused beside the painting, now showing a stormy ocean with a few scraps of wreckage floating on the surface, before turning back to his latest tormentor. (Well, perhaps tormentor wasn’t fair. Irritator, perhaps.) “You’ve got ketchup on your shirt, by the way.”

All three of them turned and left the hapless Hufflepuff cursing his dirty shirt, and headed down the stairs to the Entrance Hall.

“What’s set them off?” Ron asked grumpily, over the sound of his stomach growling. Harry shrugged.
“Who knows?” he replied. “Something in the water?” Hermione tsked beside them, making Harry and Ron exchange grins. After four years, it was a very familiar, and characteristically Hermione noise, and it generally meant they were about to be lectured in her How On Earth Are You Two So Dense voice.

“Didn’t you read the *Prophet* this morning?” she asked brusquely, leading them past the other House tables and taking their seats at the near end of Gryffindor’s. Harry and Ron waved to Neville, Luna, and Ginny, who were sitting further down the table, and Ron helped himself to a giant slab of ham, which he slathered with mustard and slapped between two slices of bread.

“Of course we didn’t read it,” Harry said, eyeing Ron’s enthusiastic mustard application with a wary eye, in case it exceeded its usual boundaries and ended up on Harry’s robes. “It’s all shit anyway, isn’t it? I dunno why you’re still getting it.”

“As I told you last year,” Hermione said severely, “it’s best to know what the enemy is thinking.” Ron rolled his eyes and took an enormous bite of his sandwich.

“G’ ‘n th’n,” he said thickly. “W’t ‘t s’y?” Hermione levelled a glare at him, before pulling a dish of pickles toward her and starting to make her own sandwich, albeit rather more delicately.

“There was another article about how Dumbledore and Harry are trying to stir up trouble against the Ministry, *of course,*” she said. “But that’s not what everyone is worried about. Two muggleborns in Kent went missing yesterday. Their apothecary was broken into, and the *Prophet* didn’t go into details, but there are rumours going around that the Dark Mark was left over it.”

The three of them exchanged dark glances, and Harry found his appetite had suddenly vanished. Things were getting worse every day, it seemed. These two weren’t the first to disappear, and if the Ministry continued the way it was, they certainly wouldn’t be the last. What did those fuckers need before they believed that Voldemort was back, an illuminated fucking billboard? Would Voldemort have to march right into the Ministry and give Fudge a lap dance?

Harry immediately regretted this train of thought, as it made him feel more than a little sick. At least Tonks’s training seemed to be holding. If Hermione hadn’t still looked like she was in Lecture Mode, he would have felt faintly proud about that. Instead, he just felt worried. What else had gone wrong?

“I heard Lavender talking to one of her Ravenclaw friends in the bathroom earlier, too,” said Hermione, lowering her voice a little, although nobody seemed to be paying them much attention at
the moment - at least at the Gryffindor table. Harry could see several heads turning towards them all over the Hall, as though more people were considering coming to bother him.

“She said the Ministry is having trouble with the Dementors,” Hermione continued, dropping her voice even more, so Harry and Ron had to lean forward to hear her. “It sounds like they’ve gone completely rogue. The girl Lavender was talking to, Elise, has parents who work near Azkaban. They think all the Dementors are gone, but the Ministry’s trying to keep it quiet. A lot of the school will have heard about it by now, though, knowing Lavender.”

Ron gave a low whistle.

“Dumbledore told Fudge he needed to take the Dementors off the island,” he said. “Wonder where they’ve all got to.” Harry shivered involuntarily. There was something else he didn’t need to worry about. Wasn’t it bad enough that Voldemort was out there, now they had to worry about monsters who were the literal embodiment of fear and sadness as well? Wonderful.

“No wonder everyone wants to hear Harry’s side all of a sudden, though,” Ron said, reaching for another slice of bread and beginning to construct a second sandwich. It looked like this one would be multi-storey, and would therefore be built with rather more care, Harry noted with relief.

“The Ministry’s story no longer makes sense,” said Hermione, not without satisfaction. “Suddenly Dumbledore and Harry don’t sound so crazy after all.” Harry snorted derisively and speared a small cake from a plate further down the table with his wand, which resulted in Hermione giving him a disapproving look that he ignored, as usual.

“I wish they’d sodding well leave me alone, though,” he said, brushing the crumbs off his wand and wiping it on his sleeve to clean it. “I don’t want to go through it all again just because they’ve finally realised Fudge is a prat.”

For some reason, Hermione looked suddenly nervous. Harry narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. He knew that look.

“What?” he asked. Hermione picked at the crust of her sandwich, avoiding Harry’s eye.

“Well, I just thought, maybe that would be a good idea,” she said, shooting him an apprehensive glance. Harry stared at her.
“You want me to go through what happened in June every time someone asks me about it?” he demanded, his voice rising slightly. Some nearby third years looked at him curiously and he forced himself to calm down. Some things were better not shared with the entire school.

“Of course not,” said Hermione, dropping her voice again and leaning closer. She had the good grace to look apologetic. “I mean, perhaps you should tell it once, to a reporter, and then everyone can hear your side of it. I mean, they don’t know any of the details we do. Maybe it would help.”

Harry raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

“You reckon the Prophet will report my side of the story?” he scoffed. Hermione waved a hand as if to dismiss the idea.

“No, I don’t,” she said primly. “I wouldn’t call what they do journalism, either. No, we’ll have to go with a slightly less orthodox publication, but in this case, I think the benefits will outweigh the risks.” She glanced down the table to where Luna was busy plaiting some kind of white flower into Ginny’s hair.

“You want Harry to tell his story to the Quibbler?” Ron asked incredulously. “No one’s gonna take that seriously, Hermione, it’s all made up monsters and fake celebrity gossip!” Hermione shrugged. Harry recognised this expression, too. It was her I Know I’m Right face. He and Ron had seen it a lot over the years, for some reason.

“Some won’t take it seriously,” she said. “But the Ministry’s version doesn’t make sense. Harry’s does.” She leaned forward and looked earnestly at Harry. “I really think this is worth a try.”

Harry chewed on his lip, his fingers crumbling his cake to pieces without his really being aware of it.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll talk to Pads about it, and if he thinks it’s a good idea, we’ll do it.”

Hermione sat back, looking pleased.

“Good,” she said. “Just make sure you do it this afternoon, because if you’re up for it, I think I know someone who can do the interview tomorrow while we’re in Hogsmeade.”
Dear cousin,

I hardly know where to begin this letter, so I will simply begin at the beginning. I do not remember a time when my father did not use physical discipline to punish my mistakes. Like you, I thought it was normal. Nothing I had seen at Hogwarts, until the past few weeks, ever showed me otherwise. Potter - Harry - was the first to suggest that the way I have lived is not something I deserved, or something that all parents did in order to raise respectful children...

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Insta and Twitter @cambreypayne
Yay, we survived the 47 degree day and more writing happened somehow! Summer in Australia is terrible! Someone come kidnap me to a cold place! *cries in Australian* Thank you again for your lovely comments, they make my heart so happy. I love you all! Cam xo

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear cousin,

I hardly know where to begin, so I will simply begin at the beginning. I do not remember a time when my father did not use physical discipline to punish my mistakes. Like you, I thought it was normal. Nothing I had seen at Hogwarts, until the past few weeks, ever showed me otherwise. Potter - Harry - was the first to suggest that the way I have lived is not something I deserved, or something that all parents did in order to raise respectful children.

I do not know if I will send this letter. I may be writing this simply to relieve the painful emotions yours inspired. I wonder how you would have reacted, cousin, had you received such a missive had you found yourself in my situation.

It is difficult not to resent your assumptions. First, you speak of despising your parents, and it is clear you despise mine. I cannot bring myself to do so, for I know they are not truly evil people. At least, my mother is not. She is gullible weak, perhaps, but she is what you were afraid of becoming. Not everyone has your strength courage, or P Harry’s, and I am afraid you both forget this. I know Harry judges me for my choices. Perhaps he is right. But what he does not realise is just how many more choices he has than I. Now is not a time for simple choices.

My father says I have inherited my mother’s weakness, and I fear he is correct. Whether furthering my family’s cause, or joining yours, I seem to fail at the first moment of fear. You will find it strange to hear me quoting your hero Dumbledore, perhaps, but he spoke of choosing an easy path, or a right one, at the end of last term. I have never yet been able to determine what a right path might look like, let alone be in a position to choose it. The events of the past year have only made this task more difficult. Should one protect one’s family? One’s race? One’s species? Only those who make decisions of which one approves?

Ah, what Potter Harry would say if he could read this, the nosy git. This is another reason to avoid sending it, as I struggle to believe you would not share it with him. You have clearly discussed my situation between yourselves. Another resentment. It is hard not to feel like a naughty toddler, whose behaviour is being monitored by his frustrated teachers, under such circumstances.

And yet… I am ashamed to admit such a thing, but I am deeply touched by the concern of those from whom I have no right to expect the most basic of politeness. I am uncomf sad unwil shamed to realise that, while I have been taught that such caring, such openness, such willingness to trust is to be despised, you and yours have continued to do so regardless of the risk. If nothing else, it certainly shows a truly Gryffindor disregard for your own safety.

It is, certainly, your greatest weakness, as such emotion leaves you open to manipulation by the
Dark Lord and his minions. It is what leaves you open to spies, to blackmail; it distracts you from your true cause should those you love be in danger. When I spoke of such love and friendships as a child, my father showed me clearly that these connections were a vulnerability we could ill afford. He taught me to view connection in the most pragmatic sense, and to expect others to do the same. The Dark Lord certainly maintains the most practical and unemotional relationships with his followers, for all those followers (hypocritically perhaps) each fancy themselves his true friend.

I digress. Where I once saw a weakness, I begin to see it may also be a strength. I cannot deny the strength Pansy’s friendship has given me, in its own way, free of the pragmatism and manipulation I have been taught to expect. She and I have sustained one another through our fears and considerable difficulties. I also must admit that it is a pleasure to hear Harry speak well of her. Please, for Circe’s sake, do not tell Harry I said as much. It would be tantamount to admitting I value his opinion, and I can barely admit such to myself.

It is late, and I must return to my dormitory soon, before someone comes looking for me. I will wait until tomorrow before deciding whether to send or destroy this letter, although my instincts at present are to destroy it. That being the case, there can be no harm in admitting this one, last thing.

You said you thought I might understand the pain of living as someone you are not. How you could have suspected this, given Potter’s utter lack of observational skills beyond the most blatant clues, I cannot tell. Perhaps Professor Lupin sees more than I have given him credit for. But you are right. I am gay. I am attracted to men. I am gay. Pansy knows, not through any confession of mine, but because she guessed it. It is my deepest shame, that I have never yet found a way to turn away from these feelings. (My weakness, once again. I am conquered by mere emotions.) No doubt you are horrified by this confession, but I never asked for this. I have already strayed too far into this part of my nature in the last year, allowed myself to feel too comfortable in it. I can never tell my parents. My father would... I do not know what he would do. My mother would do nothing, and perhaps that is, after all, what I fear most.

But here I will end. I have indulged enough in this impractical nonsense. I will burn this letter tomorrow morning before class. But one last. Thank you for your letter. What difference it or you will make to my life I cannot yet perceive. That I could leave my parents is unthinkable. They are still my family. If nothing else, I cannot leave my mother. But I almost wish I could spend Christmas wherever you are, as unbearable as your other guests would no doubt be.

Your cousin,

Draco Malfoy.

Dear Harry,

M and I talked it over, and while we’re both worried for you, you have our support. You know what the consequences will be, and if you think it will be worth it, we have your back. We trust you. Write me again this evening and let us know how it goes.

Lots of love, P and M

P.S: No, I haven’t heard back from D, but I didn’t expect to yet. Be patient.
Harry had awoken to find an owl outside his window that morning, bearing Sirius’s letter. While he was more pleased than he cared to admit that Sirius and Remus trusted him to make this kind of decision, but he was rather less pleased about the decision itself. Hermione had told him they’d meet a journalist she knew at lunch time in the Three Broomsticks, where they could spend a few hours going over what Harry wanted to say. He was already wishing he’d just said “no”. The thought of going over everything again had his hands sweating even while he sat in bed, hidden behind the red drapes. The thought of allowing the Ministry to keep lying to everyone, however, was worse.

Fortunately, Harry had Hogsmeade to look forward to before the interview, and he forced his nerves aside as he, Ron, and Hermione headed out through the gates.

He almost forgot about it completely once they reached the village. They met up with the other Weasleys and plundered Honeydukes, went to the Post Office to send an owl to Tonks just for the fun of it. The Post Office was celebrating the anniversary of the death of Clary St. John Parker, a historical figure of whom Ron and Harry knew absolutely nothing and cared even less, and all the owls had been charmed yellow for the occasion. Once Hermione had finished lecturing them about the unprecedented advances to magical theory Parker had made, they’d spent a very happy half hour piling up the falling leaves on the green and jumping into them. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had felt a bit awkward at first, behaving like five-year-olds where everyone could see them. But Fred had pointed out that it was no different from having a snowball fight, George had told them not to be pillocks, and Ginny, who was passing on her way to Zonko’s with Luna, offered to remove the broomsticks from their arses, so they’d joined in without further complaint.

Harry found himself at the door of the Three Broomsticks at midday with red cheeks, a growling stomach, and a feeling of supreme contentment. Which was abruptly destroyed when Rita Skeeter appeared in the street, Luna and Ginny trailing after her. Luna could have simply been wandering past by accident, but Ginny’s eyes were fixed on the back of Rita’s head with a fierce glare, as though hoping to burn a hole through the helmet of blonde curls.

“What’re you doing here?” Ron demanded roughly, when Rita stopped in front of them.

“Excuse me, I was invited,” Rita replied, staring over the top of her horn-rimmed glasses at them. Harry stared at her, a sense of impending doom falling on him from a great height.

“Hermione, no,” he said.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, too, Harry,” Rita said with a sickening smile. Hermione sighed and pushed past all of them and into the pub.

“At least let’s talk it over inside,” she said over her shoulder. “We’re blocking the door.” She disappeared inside, followed by Rita and Luna. Ginny gave Harry an apologetic look as she passed, and Harry briefly considered just walking away. Instead, he sighed heavily and followed her.

Hermione had told them what she’d done to Rita in the summer, and Harry had to admit, he still hadn’t got over the sense of slightly terrified awe he’d felt upon finding out one of his best friends had trapped a human woman in a jar for a whole month, forcing her to live on leaves, in order to punish her for spreading lies.

People tended to think of Hermione as a fussy, rule-obsessed, know-it-all. Harry and Ron had been aware for some time that she was a fussy, ruthless, intensely determined, know-it-all. Once she had decided something was wrong, there wasn’t much that could stop her doing something about it. It was, frankly, terrifying sometimes.

It was also extremely impressive. Rita Skeeter, head bullshitter for The Daily Prophet, was now
sitting opposite Hermione in a relatively quiet corner of the Three Broomsticks, glaring at Hermione over the table as though she’d quite like to stab her with her own quill. Hermione, for her part, looked entirely unconcerned. When Harry and Ron sat down next to Hermione, Rita’s loathing glare slid instantly into an expression of predatory delight that had Harry’s stomach rolling. Rita didn’t look very different from the last time they’d seen her. She was still sharp-nailed, blonde-curved, and diamante-studded, as though she hadn’t spent her summer in a jar. But there was an air of desperation about her that she hadn’t had back then. Being a witch meant you could cover up a lot of depredations, but it was clear that unemployment wasn’t treating her well. It wasn’t much comfort.

Harry’s thoughts were briefly interrupted when Madam Rosmerta came over to take their orders, and they sat in awkward silence as they waited for their drinks to arrive. Only Luna appeared truly relaxed, staring around at the other people in the pub as though they were the most fascinating thing she could ever hope to see.

“Right,” Hermione began, once their drinks had been delivered and Rosmerta had retreated. “We all know why we’re here.”

“I don’t know why they’re here,” Rita interrupted, raising an eyebrow at Luna and the two Weasleys. Ginny, who’d been glaring at her since the moment they’d sat down, made a small, angry noise in her throat. Ron’s arm twitched next to Harry, as though he’d like to reach for his wand. Luna didn’t appear to notice at all.

“They’re here because I invited them,” Hermione said coldly. “As are you. If you’d like to return to your job search, however, you’re quite welcome. I hear the Hog’s Head is looking for a part time cleaner.” Rita aimed a Look at Hermione that should, by rights, have left her nothing but an ashy shadow on the wall behind her. Hermione ignored it.

“As I was saying,” she continued, “we’re here because the Prophet has been reporting utter shite for the last several months, and we want to set the record straight.” Harry privately thought he’d rather someone else could set the record straight, or at the very least, that someone who wasn’t Rita Rita could be the one recording the straightened out record, but it was a little late for regrets now. When will I learn not to trust Hermione’s ideas, he thought miserably.

“If you think the Prophet will print anything he has to say, you’re sadly mistaken,” Rita laughed bitterly. “It won’t sell. People don’t want to hear about You Know Who, or Death Eaters, or any of that nonsense.”

Harry scowled.

“It’s not nonsense,” he snapped.

“Irrelevant,” Rita replied, waving a hand airily. “You might think what people want to read about is the truth, but what they really want is to know that the world is pretty much how they think it is.” Hermione frowned.

“So The Daily Prophet exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?” she said.

“‘The Daily Prophet exists to sell itself, you silly little girl,” sneered Rita.

“So much for journalistic integrity,” Ginny muttered disgustedly. Rita rolled her eyes obviously and didn’t reply.

“Back to the point,” said Hermione brusquely. “We don’t want you to write the story for the Prophet. We have another publication in mind.” Rita narrowed her eyes suspiciously.
“I’m not writing for some self-righteous student newspaper,” she said, pursing her lips in disdain. It was Hermione’s turn to roll her eyes, and Harry could tell she was hanging onto her self control by its last thread.

“Luna’s father, Xenophilius Lovegood, runs an… alternative publication.”

Rita narrowed her eyes for a moment, before bursting into disbelieving laughter, sharp as shattering glass.

“Xenophilius Lovegood? You expect people to take you seriously in the Quibbler?!” She threw back her head and laughed even harder, although Harry suspected she was simply putting on a show to try and annoy Hermione further. Luna seemed to return to earth, or as close to it as she ever got, and frowned at Rita.

“At least he doesn’t print things he knows are lies,” she said. Ginny took her hand comfortingly and surreptitiously prodded Rita in the ribs with her elbow as she shifted on her seat. Rita straightened herself in her seat, hiccuping slightly, and wiped her eyes theatrically.

“If you say so,” she sniggered. “All right, Miss Know It All, say I do this. What do I get out of it?” Hermione smiled primly.

“The satisfaction of a job well done,” she said. “And a chance to write something meaningful in an otherwise very uncreative year.”

Rita tensed, a muscle in her jaw twitching as she examined Hermione through narrowed eyes.

“Blackmail is a very nasty word.”

“So is Azkaban,” Hermione replied, lowering her voice. “Which of us do you think would be hearing that at our trial?” Rita paled and fell silent. Harry could have cheered at Hermione’s victory, until he remembered what they were actually here for.

“Right, now that’s settled, let’s get on, shall we? Harry?”

Harry watched as Rita slowly pulled her Quick Quotes Quill and notebook from her bag, and sighed heavily. This had better be sodding worth it.

Harry took a deep breath as they stepped out into the High Street at 3 o’clock, relishing the chill in the autumn air. It had been unspeakably difficult going over the events of last June, and the details that had followed - the ones he could talk publicly about, at least. He knew he’d have nightmares again tonight. But it was also immensely satisfying, telling his story to someone Official, putting it all down on the record.

The Ministry had never even taken his statement about what had happened. They’d decided it was an accident and had left him alone. The Prophet had invented their own version of events. Dumbledore had known the details, of course, but he hadn’t told anyone exactly what that graveyard had been like, what it had felt like to stare into those red eyes, to know you were a millimetre from death, to be Crucioed, to watched Cedric die…

“Hey, Granger!”
Harry was startled from this dangerous train of thought by Pansy Parkinson’s voice as she hailed them from across the street. He looked up to find her and Malfoy emerging from Next Chapter Books, the secondhand bookstore Hermione visited almost every Hogsmeade weekend.

“Pansy, Draco,” Hermione replied with a polite nod. She managed to hide her surprise at being publicly noticed like this, although Ron was rather less successful. He continued staring at the two Slytherins as though they’d grown extra heads until Harry elbowed him sharply in the ribs. *But seriously, since when was he Draco*?!

“Are you heading back?” Pansy asked as they paused next to them.

“Yes, we have to finish working on the Charms questions.” It seemed Pansy and Hermione were going to have to do most of the conversational heavy lifting. Harry had no idea what to say in such a casual setting. There was no drama to discuss, no deep and meaningful life histories to share. They were just a bunch of people who knew and apparently didn’t utterly despise one another, having a chat in the middle of the High Street. You know, like people did.

Ron and Malfoy seemed to feel the same way. Harry found himself walking between the two of them, falling in behind Hermione and Pansy as they started walking again.

“Was that Rita Skeeter I saw with you earlier?” Pansy asked. Harry immediately tensed for some sinister motive, but she merely seemed curious. Hermione’s expression darkened a little.

“Yes,” she replied. “Harry have her an interview about last June.” Pansy’s mouth fell open in shock, and she actually stopped in the middle of the path. Harry, Ron, and Malfoy were forced to stop as well.

“Are you insane?” she demanded, putting her hands on her hips. “I thought you wanted more people to know the truth, not give them more ammunition to use against you!” Hermione snorted and shook her head, the golden afternoon light glinting off her dark curls.

“She’s not writing for the *Prophet,*” she replied, with a satisfied smirk. “Don’t you worry, she’s going to tell the story exactly as we want her to.” Pansy didn’t move, although one eyebrow raised noticeably.

“How on earth did you manage that?” she asked. Harry got the impression she was reconsidering her entire conception of Hermione in that moment. Hermione didn’t even try not to look pleased with herself, clearly seeing the same thing.

“You don’t have a monopoly on getting what you want,” she said with a smirk. All three boys were staring now as well.

“Remind me not to get any further on your bad side, Granger,” Malfoy said slowly. Ron chuckled.

“Good plan,” he said. Now Harry was staring like an idiot. He wondered if it would save time for them all to say one surprising thing about themselves and stare at each other for a minute to get it over with. This was all making his head ache.

“You’re absolutely right about the *Prophet,* of course,” Hermione said, turning back and beginning to walk again. Pansy shook her head and caught up with her, the boys following once again in silence. “They’re essentially the propaganda arm of the Ministry now.”

“Which plays right into V—, well, into his hands, of course,” Pansy said, scowling. “I thought it was funny last year, you know, but, well…” She trailed off, and while she certainly wouldn’t do anything as human as sound apologetic, she certainly seemed willing to imply that she might possibly
maybe at some point have considered changing her stance.

“We might have thought the same in your position,” Hermione said graciously. Pansy snorted, clearly of a different opinion, but she didn’t voice it.

“I wonder if that paper ever reported anything accurately,” she said instead.

“I wish they’d report accurately on Cannon’s games,” Ron grumbled next to Harry. Harry fought back a snort. Ron was still stewing about the article Seamus had cut out and stuck to his bed last week, recounting the Chudley Cannon’s truly abysmal performance against the Tutshill Tornadoes in a pre-season friendly. Harry, who supported the Cannons as well, had been annoyed on Ron’s behalf, but had secretly felt the article itself had probably been entirely accurate. The Cannons were not a team you supported if you wanted to be constantly celebrating wins.

“I’m afraid I actually agree with you, Weasley,” Malfoy said, to everyone’s surprise. “The Prophet is far too kind to the Cannons.” This time, Harry couldn’t quite choke back his laughter at the outraged look on Ron’s face.

“Oh yeah?” Ron retorted. “Who’d you support then? I s’pose you’re a Tornadoes fan? Did you jump on the bandwagon like everyone else?”

“Ron!” Hermione admonished him, but Malfoy didn’t seem in the least offended.

“On the contrary, Weasley, I’ve supported the Falcons since I was born. I have some national pride, after all.” Harry got the impression Malfoy was making an effort not to be disagreeable, even in the face of Ron’s passionate defense of the Cannons. It was enough to keep Harry silent. Ron, however, scowled heavily and turned to Harry.

“You know that reporting was unfair,” he said. “They always make us look worse than we really are!” Harry winced under Ron’s angry glare.

“I mean, we haven’t won a match in three years,” he said tentatively, hating himself just a little bit for such a display of unloyalty - and in support of Draco Malfoy, of all bloody people. Ron spluttered incoherently at this betrayal.

“Sorry, Weasley,” Malfoy grinned. “Even Potter agrees with me.”

“I think the world might come to end,” Pansy observed to Hermione, who rolled her eyes and turned away from the three boys, who were now arguing over the relative merits of the Falcons versus the Tornadoes versus every other team they could think of.

“I never could understand the appeal of Quidditch,” Hermione confessed.

“I have,” replied Pansy, “but I’m pants at it. So let’s talk about something else. Did you understand what Flitwick was saying about the molecular aggravation in a misapplied Shrinking Charm?”

Harry, meanwhile, was growing increasingly amused at Ron’s mounting aggravation in the face of Malfoy’s determined calm. In the ten minutes it took them to leave Hogsmeade behind, and for the castle gates to appear ahead of them, they managed to disagree on the inclusion of Taffy Greenwich in the English national side, the right of the Appleby Arrows to demand an examination of an unfair penalty in one of last season’s matches, and whether or not the Cannons would have a chance to win at least one match with the crop of new recruits they were considering for this season’s team. Harry joined in on each side as he felt appropriate, and somewhat redeemed himself in Ron’s eyes when he agreed that several of the Cannons’ new recruits weren’t totally shit.
“At least I know one match you’ll lose,” Ron said, sounding severely disgruntled.

“Please tell me you’re not talking about the first Hogwarts match,” Malfoy replied, his studied calm twitching just a little.

“What else?” Ron asked, clearly pleased to have hit a nerve. “You haven’t beaten Harry yet, and you aren’t going to.” Harry grinned unabashedly at Malfoy. That much, at least, was true, and he wasn’t going to let Malfoy forget it anytime soon - no matter how close they got to being friends. Malfoy’s sneer was almost comfortingly familiar after the last fifteen minutes of somehow-being-not-a-totally-shit-person.

“Just because Potter’s had some good luck,” he began.

“He caught the snitch from right next to your head while he was being chased by a cursed bludger,” sniggered Ron, quite cheered up all of a sudden.

“Are you seriously going to bring up second year, Weasley?”

“I still caught it when you tried to sabotage me,” Harry pointed out gleefully.

“Not when there were real Dementors,” Malfoy pointed out, frowning.

“Irrelevant,” Harry said, waving his hand airily and trying to pretend this didn’t still sting. “You weren’t trying to beat me that day, so it doesn’t count.”

“Oh, so it only counts if I’m there, does it, Potter?” asked Malfoy, smirking dangerously and raising an eyebrow. Harry refused to acknowledge that he was blushing and rolled his eyes.

“For the purposes of this argument, yes, you annoying git.” Malfoy chuckled.

“You’d know all about annoying gits,” he replied. Harry stuck his tongue out at him and the argument devolved from there.

“Look who’s back.”

Draco’s shoulders tensed, and his hand clenched around his wand inside his pocket. He could sense Pansy doing the same beside him. We should have known.

“Had a nice, cosy chat with Potter and pals, did we?” Blaise sneered, pushing himself off the couch in front of the Slytherin common room fireplace and stalking toward them. Too late, Draco became aware of Crabbe and Goyle closing off their escape route through the main entrance behind them. There was no going back now. Draco had known they were screwed from the moment Pansy had decided to talk to Granger. In public. Worse, Potter and Weasley had decided to be almost likeable for once, even if their opinions on Quidditch were nonsense…

Draco tried to summon up some sense of regret, or even a decent semblance of fear about what was about to happen, but he found he just couldn’t be bothered. Perhaps this was what it felt like to be Potter all the time, he mused, just not giving a single fuck.

“Who we talk to, or don’t talk to, is none of your damn business,” Draco said, and he was almost as calm as his voice sounded for once. Blaise wasn’t impressed. Draco glanced to the side to see Theo
and Millicent watching the show. The few others in the common room were studiously pretending not to notice what was happening.

“I’m making it my business,” Blaise said, pulling out his wand. Draco matched his movement, stepping forward and slightly to the right to shield Pansy as much as possible. She could almost certainly take care of Crabbe and Goyle, but she didn’t deserve to be hurt by Blaise just for being a good friend.

*Like I said, Black, this kind of thing never ends well.*

“This is a move you’ll regret,” Draco warned Blaise, raising his wand. It was almost a relief to reach the crisis point, even if it was a lot earlier than he and Pansy had hoped. *You’ve made your choice.* He just hoped it would turn out to be the right one.

“We’ll see about that,” said Blaise, and he raised his wand.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Insta and Twitter @cambreypayne, or the hellsite (aka Tumblr) @bluwerewolfprose
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Hey all! I'm not happy with this chapter, but I'm posting it anyway because I can't get it working properly. Hopefully I can get the next one to do what I want lol. Thanks for your love and comments, as always! You are all beautiful humans and I love you. Cam xo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luna had told them she wasn’t sure when Harry’s interview would be printed, as her father was expecting some important articles on Crumple Horned Snorkacks, which would of course take precedence. Monday morning brought a surprise, therefore, in the form of a special issue Quibbler containing Rita’s article - and a giant picture of Harry’s face on the cover.

HARRY POTTER SPEAKS AT LAST! Shocking revelations: Death Eaters in our midst, Ministry incompetence, and You Know Who’s return!

Harry squirmed a little as he regarded the copy Luna handed him at breakfast. He could already see several students studying their own copies, frowns on their faces, friends and neighbours leaning over their shoulders to read as well. Regardless of Ron and Hermione’s reassurances, Harry thought his picture looked as awkward as he’d felt while being photographed, blinking out at the readers as though he’d just been hit with a Confundus Charm.

“Don’t be silly, Harry,” Luna said cheerily. “I think it’s a lovely picture. That’s how your face always looks.” Ginny had to stuff her fist into her mouth to stop herself from laughing as Luna bounced off to distribute more copies around the Great Hall.

“Yeah, don’t be silly, Harry,” grinned Neville from a couple of seats down. “It’s just how your face looks.” Seamus and Dean, who had just bought a copy each from Luna, both sniggered into their bacon. Harry was somehow not very comforted.

As breakfast progressed, he glanced toward the Slytherin table. Several of its members had also bought Quibblers, and judging from the looks on some of their faces - Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle in particular - the contents were not much to their taste. Harry chewed at his bottom lip and wondered how Malfoy and Pansy were taking the news. Despite the trouble he knew it might cause with them, Harry hadn’t shied away from naming the Death Eaters who had been present in the graveyard. He’d hoped Malfoy had come far enough that he could at least acknowledge the necessity, even if he didn’t like it. The fact that Malfoy wasn’t sitting in his usual place was not a good sign.

“Do you think they’ve read the article?” Ron asked quietly, following Harry’s gaze. Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

“When was the last time they missed breakfast?” he replied. Hermione made a sad little ‘hmm’ in her throat, but neither of them seemed about to offer comfort. Harry sighed and prodded at his egg with a fork. It had gone cold while they were talking.

“D’you know if he wrote back to Pads?” Ginny asked, glancing up the table to check nobody was eavesdropping. Several people were shooting covert looks at them - well, at Harry - but nobody
appeared to be within hearing range.

“He hasn’t written back since I told him how the interview went,” Harry said glumly. “He said he hadn’t heard anything Saturday morning, but he only sent his letter to Malfoy a couple of days ago.”

“Malfoy had to have got it before Hogsmeade though, right?” said Ron. “He didn’t say anything to us about it.” Harry had already wondered about this. Surely Malfoy would have at least mentioned that he’d heard from Sirius, at least if he was planning to do anything about it. Hermione, however, gave her best Oh Ronald You Poor Simpleton ‘tsk’, and Ron rolled his eyes.

“Of course he didn’t say anything,” Hermione said. “It’s a bit personal, don’t you think?” Harry frowned. He supposed she had a point. Were he in Malfoy’s position, he might have avoided the topic as well. Of course, Harry had no idea what had actually been in the letter, but he assumed it had mentioned some of the worse ways Sirius and Malfoy were similar.

“And don’t go asking him about it when you see him, either,” Hermione added severely. Harry and Ron both shot her offended looks.

“We’re not total neanderthals,” Ron muttered, reaching for more sausages. Hermione made a noise that could have been a sneeze or a derisive snort. Harry chose to give her the benefit of the doubt and turned his attention back to worrying about Malfoy.

As Harry had (sadly) predicted, the attention he received after the interview was even worse than it had been before. At least this time some of the people bothering him seemed to have a grasp of some of the facts. A pinch, perhaps. Even a good handful, sometimes. In the corridors between classes, on the way down to the Quidditch pitch before training, and even in the Great Hall during meals, Harry was suddenly inundated with questions and declarations of loyalty and often just rants about how bad the Ministry was. Of course, there were still plenty of students from all Houses prepared to explain in great detail exactly why they thought Harry was barmy - or straight up evil. But it became clear that they were an ever-shrinking minority.

By the end of Tuesday, Professor McGonagall was forced to tell students to leave Harry alone so he could get where he needed to be - and get his homework done. Harry was grateful for the instruction, even if he was embarrassed by it, as he had a Potions essay to write, and he still hadn’t managed to make it as far as the library. Hermione had to collect the books he needed, and even she had attracted some attention, simply because people knew she was Harry’s friend. Two second years had asked for autographs. Harry had thought they were joking, until one of them handed him a quill. Fortunately for Harry’s sanity, there were some genuinely touching moments, such as Seamus clattering into the common room on Monday evening, clutching a letter in his hand and beaming from ear to ear.

“Me mam wrote back already,” he announced. “I sent her that interview, Harry, and she says it’s changed her mind!” Harry grinned back, a comfortable warmth blooming in his chest. Seamus had come around completely after the Umbridge Affair, but Harry knew he’d had a hell of a time with his mother since then. She still read the Prophet.

“My parents believed Harry before, but now they’re planning to leave the country,” said Lavender gloomily. “They say it’s not safe here, not with Umbridge and everything.” Parvati put her arm
around her friend and sighed.

“They’re not wrong,” she said sadly. “But at least they know you’re safe at Hogwarts. Dumbledore’s still the only one You Know Who’s scared of, he won’t come here.” Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchanged grim looks.

Not so long ago, they would have shared Parvati’s unquestioning faith in the Headmaster, but they’d had too much time to think things through while staying with the Order, and it was clear Dumbledore’s PR was a lot better than his reality. First year, Riddle had ridden Quirrel around for months, while Dumbledore suspected and did nothing. Second year, Voldemort’s diary had possessed Ginny, while Dumbledore knew Riddle had been the Heir of Slytherin and did… more nothing. Fourth year, Riddle had sent an imposter into the school, although at least this time Dumbledore hadn’t actually known about it while doing nothing. He just… let Harry deal with the Tournament. While suspicious stuff happened. And did nothing.

Needless to say, Harry could no longer quite understand how Dumbledore had maintained his reputation for infallibility. Still, he had to admit, Hogwarts did feel safer than most other places, even after all that. Which makes about zero sense, he thought gloomily.

This sense of gloom followed him about for the next few days, like a drizzly grey cloud. To make matters worse, Pansy and Draco rarely appeared at mealtimes, showing up to classes at the last minute and rushing off as soon as they were allowed. Even Ron and Hermione had adopted Harry’s habit of tracking the Slytherins through the school - “It’s not stalking, Ron, we’re concerned about their wellbeing,” Hermione said - but they’d had no luck actually talking to them so far. They were left hoping their two elusive compatriots would still show up to the DA meeting on Wednesday, so they could find out what was going on.

They didn’t have to wait that long, however. On their way to lunch on Wednesday, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Seamus rounded a corner on the second floor and found themselves face-to-face with a bunch of fifth year Slytherins they hadn’t been looking for.

“Shit,” muttered Seamus under his breath, and Harry agreed. He reached one hand into his pocket, clenching his fingers around his wand, even though Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott looked utterly relaxed. They were slouching easily in the middle of the corridor, in a manner that might give the casual observer the impression that they’d just happened to wander this way and completely block the Gryffindors’ path by accident.

Harry immediately sensed Neville and Hermione tense behind him, and Ron’s ears flushed a deep red as he, too, stuck his hand in the pocket holding his wand. Despite the clear danger, however, the Gryffindor group continued walking. There was a tightness around Zabini’s eyes, and a muscle clenching in Nott’s jaw, that hinted at an unpleasant purpose, the public setting and hour notwithstanding.

“Potter,” Zabini sneered as they approached. “Minions,” he added, his lip curling as he addressed the other Gryffindors.

“Zabini,” Harry said shortly, now close enough to see the cat hair on Nott’s robes. He reached one hand into his pocket, clenching his fingers around his wand, even though Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott looked utterly relaxed. They were slouching easily in the middle of the corridor, in a manner that might give the casual observer the impression that they’d just happened to wander this way and completely block the Gryffindors’ path by accident.

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“Potter,” Zabini sneered as they approached. “Minions,” he added, his lip curling as he addressed the other Gryffindors.

“Zabini,” Harry said shortly, now close enough to see the cat hair on Nott’s robes. Harry tried to keep walking, but he was forced to stop as the Slytherins remained blocking the corridor.

“What d’you want, Zabini?” Seamus asked, hoisting his rucksack higher on his shoulder and glaring balefully up at him.

“I knew you were thick, Finnigan,” Nott said, “but I thought even you could have figured that out.” Nott’s voice was still high, as though puberty hadn’t quite caught up with him yet. He was shorter
than the others, too, as short even as Harry, and his face twitched constantly around the eyes, as though he had an itch. He seemed to want to imitate Malfoy and Zabini’s effortless sneer, but he never quite managed it. He reminded Harry of a Jack Russell terrier, a small dog trying to pretend he was a Doberman.

“Harry’s only signing autographs every fifth Friday between the hours of eight and 8:15pm,” Ron drawled. Harry rolled his eyes, and Neville sniggered behind him. “Now shove off.” Zabini’s casual manner dissolved and he drew himself up to his admittedly impressive height.

“I wouldn’t even be breathing the same air as Potter if I didn’t have to,” he said, wrinkling his nose as if detecting a foul odour.

“No one’s forcing you to,” Harry pointed out. “The sooner you let us pass, the sooner you can go back to sniffing purebloods. Although I dunno why you’d want to,” he muttered. Crabbe shifted restlessly behind Zabini, and Goyle cracked his knuckles loudly. Harry eyed the wand in Crabbe’s beefy hand cautiously. Zabini glanced back at his hulking colleagues and shook his head slightly, before turning back to Harry.

“We know what you’re up to,” he said, narrowing his eyes and stepping forward. His hand was in his pocket, and Harry knew he was holding his wand ready.

“Great,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant, even while he fought the urge to cast a Body Bind Curse. “If you figure it out, can you let me know? Because honestly, I’m just making this shit up as I go along.” Hermione laughed dryly, although Harry suspected she was laughing at him rather than with him. Zabini didn’t seem so amused.

“Whatever you and Draco and Pansy are doing, you’re messing with the wrong crowd,” he said. His expression was cold and threatening now, all attempts at seeming casual cast aside. “You might think you’re untouchable, Potter, but getting rid of one pathetic teacher doesn’t mean anything. Not now he’s back.”

A chill ran down Harry’s spine. He’d known this was coming, but it didn’t make it easier to hear. The air in the corridor seemed to thicken, the Gryffindors around him pulling their wands out even as he fought against the wave of nausea Zabini’s words had triggered. Breathe, focus, let it flow out of you into the floor. Tonks’s voice whispered in the back of his mind, calming him, grounding him just enough that Zabini wouldn’t notice the effect he’d had.

“No shit,” Harry said shortly. “I reckon beating your precious Dark Lord once already might count for something, though. How’s your dad, Nott?” he added viciously. He remembered Theodore Nott’s father, eyes glinting behind a mask, laughing as Riddle tortured Harry…

He fought the memory, forcing himself to focus as Nott tried to step forward. Once again, however, Zabini shook his head, a strange smile hovering about his mouth.

“Big words, Potter,” he said. “They won’t protect Draco, or Pansy. We know how to handle traitors in Slytherin.” It was a different type of fear that stomped along Harry’s spine this time, and he felt his friends shifting anxiously around him.

“Hands off them, Zabini,” Hermione said fiercely, surprising Harry, and apparently the Slytherins as well. “You’re still at Hogwarts. Last time I checked, we had rules about that sort of thing.” Zabini snorted disdainfully.

“Sod your rules, Granger,” he said. “If you think we can’t work around them, you’re even stupider than you look.” Hermione wasn’t impressed.
“If you want to torture people so badly, I’m sure Voldemort could use another pathetic lackey to lick his boots,” she said. “Especially once the Aurors start arresting his Death Eaters.” Seamus ’oo’ed softly behind Harry, as though he was watching a boxing match and had just seen one of the fighters score a solid hit. Zabini, however, didn’t share Seamus’s admiration.

“The Ministry as good as useless,” he said, smiling coldly. “And so is your hero Dumbledore. Things are changing. Get used to it, Granger. Stay away from our House, or your new pets will suffer for it.”

“Is that all?” Harry snapped, impatient with what was, in the end, a pointless display. He had no intention of being scared away from Malfoy, or Parkinson. Although he was definitely worried about them now.

“Just watch your step,” Nott scowled. “You’re due a fall, Potter, and your fan club, too.” Harry rolled his eyes, and, finally Done with the whole situation, stepped forward and shouldered Zabini out of the way. It was clear they were more interested in being threatening than in actually doing anything - although they would definitely have to watch their backs from now on.

The whole group was silent as they made their way downstairs, and Harry could feel his back itching all the way to the Entrance Hall, although the Slytherins made no attempt to follow them. By seemingly mutual agreement, they came to a stop before heading into the Great Hall.

“What d’you reckon they’ve done to Malfoy and Parkinson?” Neville asked quietly.

“Nothing good,” said Hermione, her lips a thin line. Ron shrugged uncomfortably.

“You don’t think they’d really hurt Malfoy, do you?” he asked. “He’s been their golden boy for years, a couple conversations with Harry aren’t going to get him in that much trouble, surely?”

“I’m not saying he isn’t different now, but he might deserve it,” said Seamus. When Neville and Hermione glared at him, he lifted a shoulder defiantly. “Just a bit,” he said. They continued glaring. “Fine, we should do something,” he said heavily.

Harry shifted awkwardly, a guilty weight settling in his stomach. Maybe he should have listened to Malfoy when he told Harry to leave him alone. But he couldn’t just leave him like that. Could he?

“Sod this,” he declared suddenly. “Zabini can jump off the Astronomy Tower. I’m going to find Malfoy.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to you, Harry,” Hermione said. “Besides, I don’t think this is something we can solve on our own. Maybe you should talk to Professor Lupin instead.”

Harry bounced restlessly on the soles of his feet. Every instinct said he should get out the Marauder’s Map and tear through the castle until he found Malfoy and Parkinson and… And what, exactly? Damn, Malfoy was right, wasn’t he, the prick? Harry really did just go through life trying to punch problems out of the way. He sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “But I still think we should try and talk to them, at least let them know they can come to us for help.” Neville snorted.

“Have you met Malfoy?” he asked.

“I’m sure you’re the best person to teach someone about asking for help,” she said. Ron sniggered, looking away innocently when Harry turned to glare at him.

“I take it back,” he said. “Nobody needs real friends.” Seamus and Neville’s laughter followed him into the Great Hall.

Wednesday evening found Draco and Pansy at a small table in the kitchen, which they’d taken to frequenting after the confrontation with Blaise and the others. Dobby had been only too happy to welcome them, and he and the others kept up a steady supply of food and drinks while they talked and studied. Dobby’s tendency to pop up at random and try to convince Draco to go to Dumbledore was a small price to pay for the shelter from both Blaise and Potter.

Draco and Pansy had spent several hours discussing their predicament, and were no closer to a solution. Just what Blaise was aiming for was still a mystery. His mother and various step-fathers had only ever hovered around the edges of the Dark Lord’s machinations. They attended society functions and made nice with their fellow rich snobs, before disappearing overseas the moment things got sticky. It was strange that Blaise was even still at Hogwarts this year, considering everything that had happened.

Draco wasn’t sure why, but the thought of Blaise falling for the Dark L- for Riddle’s bullshit left him feeling empty and somehow sad. That Crabbe and Goyle had so easily been swayed to Blaise’s cause was an extra kick in the pants, made no more comfortable by the knowledge that the way Draco had treated them over the years meant he had no right to their loyalty.

“We’ve come too far to back down now,” Pansy said on Sunday evening, when Draco suggested they just forget the last few weeks and try to get things back to normal. “And do you really want to go back to that?” Draco opened his mouth to declare that, yes, he really would prefer not to be attacked by his own House-mates, thank you very much, but he found the words sticking in his throat. Because there was a part of him, a much larger part than he wanted to admit, that didn’t want to go back.

Something had shifted, had changed the balance inside him. Potter, Dobby - hell, all those do-gooders in the DA as well - had forced him to look long and hard at himself. He knew he was never going to be nice, or noble, he’d always known that. He’d believed that the only other choice was the path his father had mapped out for him. But what if there was a third way? What if he could be more than his father, a man who bought his way into people’s favours, who clung to the robes of more powerful men? What if he could use his wit and strong will for something more?

He’d looked back at Pansy then, and had seen the same question in her eyes. He wanted to be angry about it - he was angry about it - but underneath that, there was a tiny, honest voice reminding him that Potter, Dobby, Sirius Black of all people, they were the ones who had looked at Draco and Pansy and seen something better. Not necessarily good, or moral, or noble, or any of those other things Draco had spent his life sneering at. But potential to be stronger, and smarter, to make more of their lives than their parents had. To be more than a follower. To be someone who could choose their own way, whatever that might be.

It was terrifying.

Neither of them really knew what to do with this intensely uncomfortable realisation, or the trouble it
had got them into. They returned to their common room long after dark, shrouded in protective spells, sleeping fitfully in case they were attacked during the night. Blaise had done nothing more yet, but they knew it wouldn’t be long. The rest of the time, they studied. If this kept up, they would at least come out of it all with the highest grades in the year. Draco thought they might even have a chance against Granger this time around. He didn’t like to admit that it was only because they were finally working as hard as she did, and not because of some natural talent.

Thus, by Wednesday, their little table was scattered with parchment and books, Draco scribbling notes for his Transfiguration homework while he nibbled a ham sandwich, and Pansy glaring at her Ancient Runes translation as though it had personally offended her. Which, Draco reflected, it almost certainly had. Even inanimate objects could offend Pansy when she was in a mood like this.

“Just go and ask Professor Vector if you’re having so much trouble,” he said, lip twitching slightly as Pansy transferred her anger to him. If looks could kill, he would have been ash on the floor.

“I already asked her,” she admitted furiously. “She said I had to learn to find the information for myself, the old cow.” Draco pursed his lips and reflected that there really were a lot of downsides when people expected things of you. Professor Vector thought Pansy was one of her best students, and pushed her constantly. Pansy hated it, and yet Draco could see that flash of triumph in her eyes every time she succeeded, could see her confidence growing, and it made him feel a little less shitty as well. *Bloody hell, I’m turning into a Hufflepuff*, he thought bitterly.

“What about Granger?” he asked, mostly to prove to himself that he could still be a total dickhead if he put his mind to it. Pansy’s expression went beyond an angry glare into some peaceful, dead-eyed region beyond.

“I hate you.”

“I hate you, too,” Draco grinned, throwing down his quill and stretching painfully. So many hours spent studying was turning his spine into a question mark, as well as his brain to mush. Pansy rolled her eyes.

“What we actually need to do is figure out how to deal with Blaise,” she said. “I wasn’t going to suggest running to Potter,” she added, when Draco opened his mouth. “I’m not his greatest fan either, if you recall.” Draco scowled.

“Could’ve fooled me,” he muttered. “If you hadn’t been so eager to chat to those gits, we wouldn’t be in this mess.” Pansy sat back in her seat and sighed.

“Yes we would,” she said. “The only way we didn’t end up in this mess was if we kept doing what we were doing. And the only reason we wouldn’t be in this mess is because we’d end up in a bigger one. Probably one where you end up with a shiny new tattoo and a death sentence hanging over you.” Draco shuddered at the thought, his stomach churning. There had been a time when he would’ve been proud to take the Mark, at least he would have told himself he was proud. He would have served his family, his people, his blood. He would have been a brainwashed slave to a megalomaniac with daddy issues. It made him want to throw up. The thought of *not* doing it made him want to throw up. It was pure madness to think he could just… quit the family somehow. Black was bonkers. Potter was bonkers. This whole thing was… ugh, he needed a thesaurus, but the kitchen was surprisingly light on helpful literature.

His maudlin brooding was interrupted by a sudden outcry amongst the elves. Draco looked up to see them bowing to the last person he would have expected to see in the kitchens.

“Professor Snape!” Pansy exclaimed, standing respectfully. Draco followed suit, nodding his head
politely to his godfather.

“Mr. Malfoy, Miss Parkinson,” Snape said, striding through the elves without acknowledging their greetings. “Mr. Potter informed me you would be here.”

Draco blinked. He wasn’t sure he could unpack all the strangeness of that sentence in one go, so he gave up.

“I hope we haven’t caused any problems, Professor,” he said. Snape reached their table and took in the scattered papers with a sweeping glance.

“I’m pleased to see your difficulties have had such a positive effect on your studies,” he said, lifting his eyes and examining Draco carefully. Even after all this time, Draco still found Snape impossible to read.

“Our difficulties, sir?” Pansy asked. Draco couldn’t help but roll his eyes. He was as much in favour of fighting his own battles as the next Slytherin, but there was no point trying to hide things from Snape. Especially if that twat Potter has been tattling, he thought gloomily.

“I have assured Mr. Zabini and Mr. Nott that their concerns about your loyalty, while certainly admirable, are unwarranted,” Snape continued, as though Pansy hadn’t spoken. “You are quite welcome to return to the common room whenever you wish.” Draco raised an eyebrow. He was dying to know what Snape had actually said - and why Snape wasn’t asking them any difficult questions now. Snape’s reaction to Draco’s new… friendships… had been almost as great a worry as Lucius’s. But he never did seem to do what people expected.

“What did you tell them, Professor?” Draco asked.

“Simply that there is more than one explanation for your new friendships, and he should think more carefully about whom he chooses to harass.” Draco really did hate how vague and pretentious Snape was sometimes.

“You told him we’re spying on Potter?” Pansy asked, with all the delicacy of a blunt instrument.

“I told Mr. Zabini no such thing,” Snape said, frowning at her. “I merely suggested that he had overlooked other possible motives.”

“Thank you, sir,” Draco cut in, before Pansy could say anything else.

“Your thanks are unnecessary,” Snape replied coldly. “While Mr. Zabini will no doubt tone down his attentions now that he is aware of my interest, do not for a moment think your problem is solved.”

“I wouldn’t make such a foolish assumption,” Draco replied, stung. How could his own godfather think he’d be so naive as to assume one interview with a teacher would put Blaise off his campaign of harassment? Thank Circe I burned that letter from Black before he could find it.

“Still, thank you, Professor,” Pansy said, curiosity still very evident on her face. Just why Snape, of all people, was looking out for them, they had no idea.

“I would advise you to be careful in your letters home, both of you,” Snape said, his dark eyes glinting with some hidden emotion. “Word of your new habits will no doubt reach your parents soon, particularly your father, Draco. He will not be as understanding as I.” Draco couldn’t help himself.

“And how understanding is that, sir?” he asked. Snape’s lip twitched, as though amused by Draco’s
“More than you would expect,” he said. “All else aside, I am your godfather. I am concerned with your safety and wellbeing above any other consideration.”

Draco simply stared at him. Was this some alternate universe, where Severus No-Feelings Snape admitted to some kind of personal connection? Some kind of, Merlin forbid, humanity?

“Gather your things and return to your common room,” said Snape, his expression closing off once more. *And there it goes.* “Be more careful in future. There are some luxuries we cannot afford.”

With one more inscrutable glance at both of them, Snape turned and swept from the kitchen, robes swishing behind him. Draco and Pansy exchanged looks.

“What the fucking fuck did that mean?” Pansy asked in a low voice, as though afraid Snape was listening to them from the other side of the door.

“I’m not sure,” said Draco. He set his lips in a grim line. “But I have some serious questions for Potter next time I see him.”

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Dear Draco,

_I am glad you chose to reply to my letter. I was afraid you would burn it without even reading it. First, let me assure you that Harry has not seen either the letter I sent you, or your reply. You do me a disservice by implying that I could not understand the need for trust and privacy under such circumstances. Unless I have your express instructions, or if you are in danger due to my silence, any communication between us on these subjects will remain strictly confidential._

_I fear your resentment at my opinion of your parents is entirely warranted. I view my parents, and yours also, through the eyes of someone far removed from their ill treatment. I had forgotten, until your letter reminded me, that there was a time where I desired their good opinion, perhaps loved them even, at least loved my father. If you felt I meant to shame you for these feelings, I apologise. I mean no such thing, but only to tell you that no matter how much you love someone, it is not fair to yourself to make such a sacrifice for them._

_Please, however, if you are correct in your assessment of your mother’s nature, she is not as invested in your father’s cause as he is. Is there a possibility that, rather than leaving her with Lucius, you might both be freed of his influence - and, by extension, the influence of Tom Riddle. I may not know my cousin well, or understand her choices, but if I can offer such a thing, I will do it. I believe you have an aunt who would suffer much to help, as well. But there is time to make such decisions. You do not have to choose now. So much has changed for you in so short a time. Allow yourself time to process before you make any decisions, one way or another._

_I must thank you particularly for trusting me with your last confession. I know only too well how difficult it must have been, especially believing, as you did, that I would share the information with others. The pain those words inspired in me is, I know, nothing compared to the pain it cost you to write them, but please know that you have nothing to be ashamed of. The shame must fall elsewhere, on the parents who taught you that your very self, your thoughts, your feelings, were_
somehow wrong or dirty. Or perhaps on a society that teaches us to hide these things, to deny their existence, their naturalness. What surprised me most, when I began to embrace my true self, was just how unremarkable it truly is to be this. We are merely humans, with human desires, human thoughts, human emotions. Perhaps you have been taught to hate that as well. I hope that, more than anything, you will come to see that it can be a beautiful thing. And I hope that you can see that anyone who tells you to be ashamed of the most beautiful feelings is merely selling a far uglier set of emotions for you to experience.

I’m afraid I’ve strayed too far into the formal speech of my student days. I promise I’m not this much of a pretentious prat all the time. But after so long in prison, alone with only my darkest memories, and then on the run, with no one to trust, I’m more than a little rusty at this, and seem to have fallen back into old habits. My friends used to laugh at my letters, particularly given the contrast between my paper self and my true, rather disastrously messy self. I’m not sure I was much good at being human to begin with, but these days I’m afraid I’m even worse. I wish I could offer you more than the overly verbose meanderings of a broken old queer, but I’m afraid this is the best I’ve got.

I hope to hear from you again. We don’t have to keep discussing these heavy topics. I would like to get to know my cousin. Tell me about your classes. Which is your favourite? Which is your worst? Are you an academic like me, or an insufferable jock like Harry? (You can tell him I said that, too.) I’m sure there are things you would like to ask about me, that you are perhaps too well-bred to put in writing. Forget your etiquette classes and ask away.

Until next time, I remain your cousin,

Sirius Black.

Chapter End Notes

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