Fog and Fire

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Summary

It was their last and final year at Hogwarts. They would spend their days not only studying for the grueling N.E.W.Ts exam that awaited them, but also enjoying and creating memories that would last a lifetime in a place they called home. But, on the very first day back, a whirlwind decides to sweep through the halls of Hogwarts and force two very different people together. A story of a witch born into pureblood supremacy and a wizard who had his life changed at four years old. Will they be able to look past their differences, to find that they aren't quite as different as they once imagined? Will she be able to let go of her family's legacy, and seek friendship in the unlikeliest of creatures?

Slow-burning Remus/OC story.

Notes

Hello everyone! Big thank you for clicking on my work! I hope you enjoy my story.
For anyone who had been looking, although none were, they would find groups of reunited students donning tanned skin and bright smiles as they embraced and greeted one another after a long summer away. They did their best to crowd into too small compartments, some taking to the floor, others sitting on the laps of those they secretly admired, trying to brush away the blush that had crept up their necks and onto their cheeks as they were held in place by their hips.

And though a familiar warmth and ardor filled that grand red train, one would also find nearly-empty compartments, holding only a student or two as they sat faraway from one another, books pressed into their noses as they pretended to read, hoping that the person who had intruded into their personal space didn't judge them, or worse, speak to them—as one young boy did.

With his forehead pressed against the cool glass, he stared in awe at the colossal brick factories that passed into the blue collar neighborhoods of Greater London. Alone, thus not yet jittery with the anxiety that newfound friendships so often brought, he was able to delve deeper through those streets that faded all too quickly before him. Pubs, crooked houses, broken windows that were shoddily patched up with newspapers and cardboard. It was wonderful and commiserable all at the same time, and he was enthralled by it.

"Filthy city," his father had scowled as soon as they had stepped outside the magical pub sitting across the bustling train station. Sure, the boy had easily agreed with him, but slowly, a peculiar fondness of the graffiti-stained surfaces and still-chained bikes with missing wheels matured within him; a liking to the things that had been long abandoned by their once-owners, left to rot by the side, forgotten, and yet only adding to the atmosphere of laisser aller and, ultimately, freedom.

"Are they wizards?" the boy had asked his father, as two men with emerald green hair and leather jackets with the word 'punk' written in white across their backs passed them. No reply had come, and instead he had been pulled along faster as the pair hurried into the train station. If chaos had a name, it was King's Cross Station. Hundreds of people exited and entered at the same time, their eyes glossed over and peering over into a far distance, barely stepping away from the boy's path as he almost went tumbling into their chests and brief cases.

And it was lovely, overwhelming, and sent a shot of adrenaline up his spine and into every fiber of his being.

"Your neck is gonna hurt if you keep lookin' up like that," his father had muttered to him, half a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. The young wizard hadn't listened, for it was the first time he had seen such massive structures—walls that reached the sky, pillars as thick as a centennial oak tree; he'd engrained the images into his head, to save for a lonely moment where he would salivate over the novel architecture.

And, later on, as he sat in the train compartment by himself, he decided that he didn't care one bit about the cleanliness of it all. It could be dirty and filthy, the street could be filled with rubble, and it'd still be one of the nine wonders of the world to him. The messier, the better, the more chaotic, the better. Because what it gave him, what he made him feel was an indescribable sentiment that made his heart burst and his mind turn faster than it ever had before. Words couldn't even begin to describe the enigma of emotions that tore through him. And the one that stood out the most? Inclusion.

For a child that had grow up lonely, with only his parents to keep him company and fill his day, this was the universe—vast, mysterious, transcendental. There seemed to be enough space for everyone, those of all shapes and sizes, of all backgrounds and life paths came together on those streets. No one
looked twice, no one turned around when they saw a deformity or someone who may have been out of place. Cold? Maybe, but accepting of those who were different and recognizing that they, too, were allowed to walk side by side the other? Yes, certainly, or at least, that's what he had gathered.

His differences did not matter to their eyes, they barely even gazed upon him as they pushed and shoved to their work. And knowing that no one would reject him, that no one had the time to, that was liberating, it truly was.

But the truth never did stay hidden for long, and soon enough the young boy had to come to term with the facts— he was not staying in London. Where he was going, there were no busy streets where walking over a homeless man was the status quo. It was an unknown place where he didn't know a name. Even thinking about it made his stomach turn, feeling faint and uncomfortable, but very little could distract him from the needles that climbed their way out from his knees, turning his legs into jelly.

He now understood that he had left the security that only a home and a family could provide. Though he had no friends, no company, he had grown to love his world for its comfort. He loved the summer picnics in the backyard, birds chirping as him and his mother munched away on their lunch. He loved the fireplace that crackled during the winter, the pine of the Christmas tree mixing with his father's cigarette as he attempted to blow it out the window.

"Can we go tomorrow?" he had begged his father as soon as his eager green eyes had ran over the supply list. His father had sighed deeply, looking down at his only son as he took a sip from their afternoon tea. Though he would never let on, in fear of destroying his son's renewed spirits, the older wizard had been, and still is, scared senseless for his little boy. He loved him, and he did not want to see him hurt any more than he had already been. But where he was going, anything could happen; though, seeing his son's eager, pleading eyes made his heart soften, wondering how it was possible to gift someone something when they really deserved the world.

"Tomorrow," he had agreed, and the boy threw his arms around his father's seated body and to thank him.

Once he returned home from Holyhead, the humble Wizarding Welsh Capital, the boy had had thrown himself onto his bed, laying out all the new books and spending every waking hour reading, studying, memorizing the lines. There were demonstrations galore in his Defense against the Dark Arts textbook, and perplexing equations that made his mind spin in the Transfiguration one. And though he cherished each and every one of them, the best was the wand.

"Ten and a quarter inch, pliable Cypress with a Unicorn Tail core," he recalled the wizard with the hennaed-orange beard and the bronze skin saying. But it didn't matter, he would have gladly taken any and celebrated as if it was the finest creation in the entire world— for it was.

"Mammy, look! I have a wand like Tad now!" he had cheered and jumped up and down as he presented the wooden stick to his mother, who had been just as excited and had baked a decadent chocolate cake for her jovial son.

And though he had counted down the days eagerly, spending most nights awake as he read away at the books, the day had arrived quicker than he had expected. Now, he found himself along with just his books, his wand, and one of his father's owls. A tumor grew in his throat, making it harder and harder to swallow, and a sense of despair began to settle deep within a hole in his stomach, and despite all of that, he knew he couldn't turn back now. Remus Lupin had made a promise, and he never broke a promise, not to his parents, not to himself. And with the knowledge that they believed in him, he trusted himself to do the utmost best— to make them proud.
"It's time for your own adventure, darling," his mother had cried the night before as she held him close, and he knew it was.

He thought that his adventure began as soon as he had stepped out of that pub on Pancras Road, but little did he know that it most certainly wasn't.

Because, just in that moment, as he took a deep breath and reminded himself that he was strong enough for this, the compartment door slid open and the boy's eyes grew as wide as tea saucers. He scrutinized her, a young girl wearing olive-colored robes and brown riding boots, as she plopped down into the corner farthest from him. Her breath heavy, as if she was panting, and her chest heaving. Eyes opened and she twisted, pressing her own forehead to the compartment window as she investigated the hallway, her head swiveling back and forth. The young wizard wondered what she was searching for, if she was hiding or running from someone, or something.

But soon enough, her shoulders fell, leaning her back against the cushion as she closed her eyes. Long, dark hair fell onto her face, her lips slightly parted as she took deep and slow inhales.

He wondered if he should say something, and what he would say if he decided to. But before he could open his mouth, her eyes popped open and she stared at him with her head still tilted back. It made Remus jolt, as if someone had come up to scare him from behind. They both fixated on one another, her stare curious, his own startled. And though it was more innocent that it wasn't, it still made his neck redden and his gaze fall down to the floor.

"What's your name?" she spoke up first, breaking the tense silence. It sounded funny to him, her letters off and her words tinted like stained glass, but his heartbeat drummed into his ears, and he wrote it off as his own mistake. "Have you read all three books?"

There it was— he caught it this time, her r was off. Guttural, but not harsh.

He looked up, meeting her gaze, but he was no longer intimidated— he was curious.

"Yeah, I own the full trilogy," he responded, his words coming out surer than he had expected them to be.

"Me too." She nodded her head pleasantly, as if they had just shook hands and agreed to be apart of some clandestine club. He couldn't help but smile, his shoulders growing less tense as he found her presence calming, nothing threatening or malicious about her soft stare or her friendly composition.

"So, what's your name?" he finally asked.

"You didn't tell me yours," she reminded him. He blushed a little bit, having forgotten that she had asked.

"I'm Re-"

"Merde!" the girl inhaled sharply before he could respond. Her eyes grew wide as she detected someone coming down the hall, someone Remus couldn't see from his position. Quickly, and without warning, she pushed open the door and scurried off. The boy flinched his head back in surprise, completely bewildered as he let the second process.

One moment she had been there, the next she had gone.

For a while, he watched the corridor, but he didn't see anyone particularly menacing passing, and he began to fret that maybe he had been the one to scare her off.
His scars, she'd seen them.

"What will they think about my scars?" he had confided to his mother, who had simply told him to pay attention to his studies and not worry about what anyone else had to say of him. They didn't matter.

No, that's rubbish, he rationalized internally, blinking away from her now empty spot as he looked out the window. The girl had been kind, a gentle touch and words just as melodious that had made him feel welcomed, that had made him feel as if they had known each other for a very long time.

Yes, it had been something else. Remus let the thought grow, causing the tremors from earlier to dissipate as a new puzzle for him to solve laid out in front of him.

Though seemingly insignificant, the young witch had given him hope. She had given him hope, and if it hadn't been for whatever she was running from, she just may have been his very first friend at Hogwarts. But, of course, life was a mysterious, pesky little thing which didn't quite make a lot of sense to a lot of people, if anyone at all.

And the next thing he knew, there was a small tap on the glass window, causing Remus to look up.

A small boy — round on the edges with curly dirty blonde hair and bright blue eyes — slid open the door.

"H-hi," he stuttered, "d'you mind if I sit here? I got kick, I got kic-kicked out."

"Okay."

"Manasse, Eva."

The rest of the burgundy painted table grinned and welcomed their next member as Remus took his seat next to a redheaded young witch, who had been sorted not a short while before him. She shared and joined their enthusiasm, her green-eyes a stark contrast against her porcelain skin and flaming curls. Terribly pretty, the boy immediately felt shy, averting his gaze to the stool as a body pushed through the first year crowd to reach the heightened platform.

A low whistle came out from the handsome, young wizard sitting across from him. Grey-eyes squinted and compelling as they all redirected themselves to watch the next sorting. All thoughts of pretty boys and girls escaped Remus' mind as the hall fell silent. His eyes growing wide, his chin tilting upwards as he attempted to get a better look at the mass of dark hair that swung back and forth against her robes. Oddly enough, she now shared a similar air to the boy who had positioned himself across from him and the redhead. A sense of pride and magnetism that he had and, most likely, would never possess. Her back was a light pole, defined and firm; her eyes shined impishly, smirking as her lips rested neutral. But what stuck out the most to him was how she perched on that stool like it was her coronation, as if she had been born for this exact moment.

"Is that—"

"The French Ambassador's daughter? Yep," Remus heard from one of his housemates, who spoke in hushed whispers to his neighbor further down the table.

"What's she doing here?"

"Beats me, but they paid, didn't they? Godric knows why."
There was a pause, a full minute having already passed and the Sorting Hat not showing any indication as it mused over her mind.

"All I know is that I met her cousin two summers ago— the entire family shits gold."

"Blimey," awed the other.

"She looks like she's fighting the Hat," came a bemused voice from next to him. This time, Remus dared a glimpse over at the redhead, who stared curiously at the witch. He returned his gaze, blinking and beginning to catch on to the slight clench in her jaw, and the way her pride had turned into entitlement— as if she was doing the Sorting Hat a favor.

His brows scrunched together, and a snort could be heard from across the table. Both the redhead and the boy looked up at the grey-eyed boy with the shaggy, black curls.

"She's a royal bitch, she'll go where the rest of 'em go— I'll bet a galleon on it," was all the other wizard said. The redhead's brows nearly shot off her forehead, her cheeks turning an indignant shade of rose as he directed his icy stare over to her. "Oh," he said with acid dripping off his tongue, "good to see you here. How's your friend Snivellus doing?"

"That's not his name," the young witch scowled, grimacing as she turned back up to the ceremony. Remus lifted his gaze from her to the wizard, who now graced them with a small smirk, keeping his eyes on the fury that had crept up her neck and hooded her ears.

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the Sorting Hat after two full minutes of stalling.

The young wizard's heart fell as the table to the far right wall erupted— students in green standing up for the ovation; hooting and whistling as the stoic witch left her place in order to gain a new one by their side.

"Did I call it or did I call it?" asked the grey-eyed wizard, looking at the pair across from him as if he were waiting for some sort of applause.

"You called it," Remus responded distractedly, not paying all that much attention as he continued to watch her.

How were they supposed to be friends if they weren't in the same House? Would they even see one other again? She had been so gentle and curious on the train, and now she had been sorted into the supposed House of Royal Bitches. He frowned, looking down to the marbled, wooden table.

"McKinnon, Marlene."

They all watched an odd-looking witch — long legs with bright blue eyes and dirty blonde hair — walk up to the stool. She had freckles dotted all over her face and neck, which only added to her intrigue instead of removing from it. But as everyone else stared, Remus couldn't help but feel that she wasn't nearly as interesting as the stranger that had sat with him just hours ago. No, not half as interesting, and not quite as disappointing either. And it had nothing to do with her sorting, but the fact that the person he'd met on the train was a drastic difference to the one who had walked away to the far side of the hall. She had so easily gone from deep warm to brittle cold like it had taken the faintest of efforts. Her eyes glazed over and mocking of the rest of them, her nose pointed to the sky and her eyes barely giving them a second glance. Any trace of humility had long gone as soon as she had sped off from that compartment, leaving it behind as only a memory to him.

"RAVENCLAW!"
Another round of claps and boisterous shouts came from the table in blue, welcoming their next newest member.

"Meadowes, Dorcas."

He looked up through his eyelashes to find a Black witch nervously twiddling her thumbs as she took a seat on the over-used stool. A kinder persona than the previous two girls, her eyes soft and cat-like which made her just as pretty as the redhead—if not prettier.

"I'm Lily, Lily Evans, by the way," he the familiar, but cheerful voice come from next to him. He turned, surveying the dainty hand that she held out to him.

"Remus, Remus Lupin," he replied, returning her shy, yet friendly, smile as he took her hand into his own.

"I have a feeling we're going to be good friends, Re—"

"And I'm Sirius, Sirius Black," boasted the grey-eyed wizard, who Remus now knew to be Sirius, Sirius Black. Lily shook her head, scoffing as the witch with the deep, almond-shaped eyes giggled at something the Sorting Hat had just told her.

And then came the shouting: "GRYFFINDOR!"

And finally, it was Remus' chance to stand and clap for their next newest member.

"Here, sit next to me," Lily called out to the girl, both her and Remus making space as she smiled shyly to them.

"Thank you," Dorcas said, brushing a strand of her braided hair behind her ear and lifting one leg to put it over the bench.

"You don't want to be friends with her," came Sirius' voice from across the table. His eyes darted over to Lily before coming back to Dorcas, a callous grin on his face. "She's got a wand up her bunghole."

Lily gasped, her chin jutting forward as she stared, open-mouthed, at her housemate.

And despite himself, Remus curled his lips into his mouth, biting down on the lower flesh as he stared between the two, trying his hardest not to break out into an obnoxious snicker.

He didn't know what to expect, and all he had really planned was to get through the year as best as he could. And, of course, no one was sure what the end would look like, who would be there, what would remain; but one thing was for sure—this was going to be one hell of a ride.
Tobacco and Jasmine

"Well, here we are."

It was exactly a half hour before the New Year of 1976; and somewhere near the village of Greve de Lecq, on the island of Jersey, stood four teenage wizards gazing up at two, seemingly, infinite wooden doors in the middle of the briny winter wind.

"Is that gold?" awed Peter Pettigrew, a round-faced boy with two strikingly beautiful blue eyes.

"What? Where do you see gold?" inquired James Potter, leaning forward and peering through his thick-rimmed, rectangular spectacles.

"There," Peter pointed with his stubby fingers towards the intricate vine molding that ran on the outer edges of the doorway. All four boys squinted together in the darkness, stepping forward to get a better look.

"In their pastime, the Rosiers like to see how many gold bricks they can stick up their arses," snorted Sirius Black, a handsome wizard with striking grey-eyes.

"Actually?" Peter turned to his friend, who was leering in the background, tossing a cigarette onto the spotless pathway.

"You heard it from me first," he confirmed. However, despite the callous bite, there was no fooling them. Their friend was crawling and itching at the bugs that infested his insides. His method for panicking was usually turning to a bottle and staying out all night, but this time, he had to go in with a sound mind. Sirius needed to do this, for himself.

His eyes darted over to the door, his arms crossed over his chest, deep breaths escaping and refilling his lungs. Remus noticed his clenched jaw, tight and filled with an ugly mix of anxiety and fury.

"Padfoot, you sure about this?"

"You know we'll say nothing if you want to turn back," added James, also turning around to observe his best friend.

"Oh no, there's no way I'm turning back now," Sirius told them. "I made it this far."

"All right, let us know when you're ready," James said as Remus stuck his nose into the thick wrapping of his scarf.

"Not like we're going to freeze or anything," chimed in Peter. Both Remus and James gave him a pointed look. He gaped in return, kicking at the frozen water that had iced over the steps of the mansion.

"Here, have a shot," Sirius said, pulling out a flask from his dress robes and handing it to Peter. He didn't hesitate, unscrewing the metal cap and throwing his head back. The liquor instantly warmed him, toffee, coffee, and everything good hinting and twirling over his taste buds.

A few deep breaths later, and Sirius was strolling right up to the door, tapping the wood with jellied knees. He hated admitting it, and would never out loud, but he reckoned he'd go numb from the nerve-wrecking seconds that passed. All four of them waited, and then they waited some where, until, finally, a house-elf with a missing eye opened the door and peered out from it.
"And who may you be?" The door opened a little wider, its ears flapping as the sea's wind came knocking into the home.

"I'm Regulus Black," Sirius lied, "Orion Black's son."

"Black," mumbled the house-elf, sniffing into the air as if it were blind. "The young master has travelled without his family."

Something churned tighter within Sirius' gut. The back of his hand lifting to rub at his nose as he stared down at the creature. His mind ran through a thousand possible answers, worried that the servant was familiar with the Black brothers.

"I don't have to answer to the likes of you," he scowled, a slight hesitation that, if caught, would have them turning back into frosted wind.

It worked, all four of them sighing in relief as the house-elf stepped aside and let the wizards through. They entered the golden halls of the Rosier Manor, or Chateau de Rosier. Immediately upon entering, there was a grande, white marble staircase with two statues of Celtic heroes at its base. A red carpet lined the steps, leading up to stained-glass windows that continued the story of the heroes sitting below them.

"Blimey," whispered Peter, gawking at the wealth before him.

"To your left, young Master Black and company," the house-elf directed, gesturing towards an open archway that led to two white doors.

Sirius was the first to set off, leading his friends as they passed by portrait after portrait of snobby looking lords and ladies. Remus felt on edge, his fingers tingling as he took off his scarf and let it hang over his forearm.

When they happened upon the doorway, a house-elf popped up and opened them, allowing them entrance into the ballroom. Blasts of violins and notes of piano-playing greeted their ears. The music was loud, and the chatter even louder. Hundreds of people dancing and conversed as they wore gowns and robes of velvet, embezzled with gems and diamonds.

"Bloody hell," muttered Remus under his breath.

Only a few who lingered by the doorway had noticed their entrance. At first, they looked up with toothy grins, wondering who the newest invitee was, but those grins quickly faltered. They turned into scowls and curled lips, haughtily looking away as they recognized the leader of the pack. Whispers and confusion spread like wildfire. James eyes a young girl who ran from the front and through the crowd, pulling at a man's robes and having him bend down so she could whisper in his ear. The man paused, turning around and narrowing his eyes on Sirius.

"Nervous?" asked James from behind him.

"Not anymore," replied Sirius, grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing caterer. He gulped it down in one go, wiping away at the dribble falling down his chin with the back of his hand. "Here, hold that for me, would you?" He handed the empty glass to a short, regal-looking man with hazel eyes and turquoise robes. The older wizard refused to oblige Sirius, instead letting the flute drop and crash onto the marble tiles.

"Sirius," Remus hissed.

"How dare you, insolent child!"
"Enjoy yourselves," Sirius said, ignoring the short man and grabbing a second glass of champagne. His eyes scanned the room, focusing on his mother, who pushed through the crowd as one of his aunts led her to him. She eyed him, sneering as she stayed paused on the elevated platform, his entire family now surrounding her.

Sirius smirked, holding up his flute. "Go to hell," he lipped to her, nodding tightly before consuming the contents of the glass.

"Where do you reckon he went?" James asked, standing on his tiptoes to scan the crowd for Sirius. He had disappeared a short while after their ungodly entrance, and despite not having been invited, no one had come to bother them. Occasionally, Remus caught on to a passing snide, or a fleeting glower, from one of his own peers, but other than that, it was much less tense that what they'd thought it would be.

"You're so cute," they heard someone coax to their side. Both turned from their hunt, watching Peter as he found himself the company of some German pureblood witch. Remus had to hand it to him, she had been feeding Peter drink after drink, laughing and twirling her finger through his dirty blonde hair all night long. He was enjoying himself, and that was a hell of a lot more than he could say for himself.

"At least one of us is having fun," James said, as if reading Remus’ mind. He snorted, nodding as his green-eyes travelled back out to the crowd.

"Why don't you go on and find someone," Remus encouraged, jutting his chin out to the dancers.

"Absolutely not, I'm here for Sirius," James countered.

"Well, I'm going to head out for a smoke, care to join?"

"And leave Wormtail alone?" Remus turned to eye his friend. Nothing had changed, Peter was still shamelessly flirting with the German blonde.

"I don't think we have to worry about him," commented Remus with a small smirk.

"No, you go ahead. I'll stay here."

"You sure?"

"Positive, just don't take too long or I'll start to worry."

"Okay, dad," Remus quipped, rolling his eyes and turning to investigate the exits. He concluded that the easiest way in and out was where they had come in from, and followed a narrow path back over to the white wooden doors.

As soon as the doors closed behind him, the music ceased. There was no one in the rest of the house, no wanderers or roamers, not like they did at one of James' parties. Surreal, and Remus couldn't help but wonder just how he ended up here, for never in his life would he have imagined it.

There was no clear path to the outside, so he took the first corridor he found and followed it until the crystal chandelier from the main hall disappeared. It was too dark to see, a handful of portraits and landscape paintings hanging over the walls, not dusty like the ones at Hogwarts, but shining with pride.

He strolled about aimlessly, biting on his bottom lip as he opened doors and looked inside rooms;
hoping, praying that he wouldn't open one to find someone's parents shagging. The halls were dead quiet, the wind strong outside that it banged against the windows through the rooms. He pursed his lips as he came to the end of the hall, a stained glass window donning the finale.

Though it was dark, the colors stood out, and the intricate detail amazed him with what he figured to be the Celtic myth of Cuchulainn carrying Ferdiad across the river. His eyes followed every curve and line, tracing down muscled legs and thick boulders. Remus' brows furrowed, leaning in closer and reaching out his hand to observe what looked much like a door handle. He tested it, wrapping his fingers around it.

It's a door, he realized, a small laugh lifting up and out of him.

Willing to take the chance, he checked the hallway twice to make sure no one would notice his exit, and when he was sure to be the only one there, he pressed down on the handle. It screeched against the rust, telling him that it had possibly been years since the last time someone had used it. Pushing it further down and eventually cracking it open, a chilling current tore through it and into the heated house. Despite the cold, he stepped out onto an immense, all-white marble terrace.

Just like everything in the house, from the wooden door at the entrance, to the secret stained door, it was breathtakingly beautiful. Like the moon, the marble seemed to cast light into the darkness. It boasted banisters with columns as thick as a century old oak tree. As he advanced towards the edge, he could begin to make out the garden below. It was winter, so there wasn't much left of it, but he could make out a few snow covered benches and inoperative fountains and statues like those in the entrance hall. His breath caught in his throat as his eyes continued to follow into the horizon, gawking at how the snow stretched out for leagues underneath him, infinitely.

He allowed his thigh to lean against the marble, enjoying the sharp iciness that penetrated his skin through his trousers. His fingers reached into the pocket of his borrowed robes and pulled out a cigarette. Though there wasn't much feeling left in them, he managed to light it quickly with the snap of his fingers, a trick Sirius had taught him only that year. He inhaled deeply, relishing in the first drag of that endless night.

He had needed this, not necessarily the cigarette, but the peace and quiet. Just for a moment, he could forget about everything; and he regretted it because he knew he owed it to them. He loved his friends to the death, and would do absolutely anything for them, but it had already been a crazy first semester. So much had changed for him. He was no longer a little boy, and he was starting to come to terms with that, as were his friends, which only complicated things between them and everyone else.

He let out a sigh and relished in another long drag, growing amused with the way the smoke mixed with his winter's breath only to create an even larger cloud of it.

"Make sure to ash it on the marble when you're done." Remus' heart jumped at the abrupt interruption. He hadn't expected anyone to meander outside with below freezing temperatures. He felt himself freeze, wanting nothing more than to toss the cigarette and make a run for it.

"Wait-" he thought over what he had just heard, "what!?" He turned around to the intruder, his eyebrows scrunched as he couldn't believe they had just told him to defile such beautiful property. But he couldn't tell who it was. It was too dark out, and the light only hit the person from behind, making it harder to make out their identity.

"Oh, they won't notice," she added, approaching him slowly like a ballerina dancing to the softest tunes.
"But I'm a guest, I wouldn't do that," he countered, his tone still touched with shock.

"No you're not."

"Pardon?"

"You're not a guest," she clarified. He paused.

She knows who I am, he thought to himself, still concentrating on her silhouette as it came closer.

"Do I know you?"

"Not really," she responded.

"Not really? Do we go to school together?"

"Do we go to school together?" she repeated, teasing him with a slight smugness to her voice. But he froze.

The r is off, he realized, pulling his eyes up from the ground to the whites that glowed from her own.

"I know who you are," he mentioned in an undertone, as if it were some secret that had to keep between the two of them.

"Do you know now?"

"You're-"

"Do you really though? Think about it," she whispered to him. She continued her slow and calculated steps towards him. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought she was completely drunk to be swaying back and forth like that. Her movements not linear, but rather jolty. Never in his life had he seen her walking like that, she was a glider, graceful like a swan in water.

Remus gulped and lifted his chin as her image became clearer. She was thin, more so than she seemed when wearing the school uniform and the bulky cloak to match, but nevertheless, the dress she wore clung to her body delicately and intimately. It showed off her structure, her curves and then disappeared down into the ground. He looked up to meet her gaze, a glimmer sparkling in her eyes as she watched him gawking at her. He cleared his throat.

"Um."

"Don't say anything you don't mean," she instructed him.

"Little random, don't you think?" He watched her warily as she grew closer and closer. He could smell her now, some sort of flowery scent that he had the name of on the tip of his tongue. He could see her hair neatly grouped behind both her hairs, slick and straight and running down her back without a thread out of place. "D-do you want my cloak?" he asked her, realizing that she must be freezing with nothing but the dress to keep her warm.

You have a girlfriend, you sodding git, he reminded himself, uncomfortably shifting as he was now looking down at her. She was really close.

"No." And that's when his words caught in his mouth. She was now pressed up against him, the border of her breasts against his own chest. His head flinched forward as she let one finger play with the tie around his neck, fixing it so that it was no longer crooked.
"W-what are you doing?" he stuttered. She looked up at him through her long, thick eyelashes.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Could you stop answering every question with another question?" he hastily requested. She smirked, he was mesmerized by her eyes. "Please, stop."

"Stop what?"

"This," he whispered to her.

"This?" she teased.

"Are you drunk?" he tried to figure out, searching for some sort of answer because there was no other rational explanation. She giggled, and that answered his question. "Of course," he pursed his lips and watched as she fingered the tie she had just sought to correct.

She turned away from the tie and looked up to him with curious eyes. Her teeth bit into her lower lip and Remus found himself in a very dangerous position. Her hands were both sitting just below his ribs, the heat from her palms warming him up, and the blood coursing through his body warming up the rest of it. His breath staggered, heavy, as they looked at one another with suspense, something hanging between the two of them.

But it was all over sooner than he knew, and he lurched forward to breathe again as she pushed off of him, gliding over to the edge of the balcony and standing next to him. He turned with an incredulous expression to look at her as she looked out to the garden. She brought a cigarette up to her lips, inhaling and causing the end of the stick to glow orange in the dark.

Remus gaped.

"That's mine," he marveled. She exhaled.

"I suppose it is."

"You know you could have just asked."

"Where's the fun in that?" she wondered, taking another drag.

"Honestly, most normal people don't try to seduce someone in order to steal their fag."

"Did I seduce you?" He blinked like she had just asked him if he happened to have a lion for a pet or something along those lines.

"Are you having a laugh?"

"I'm not laughing, are you?"

"You do understand how annoying you are with those questions," he bit back. His palm leaned against the bannister and he was now facing her as she continued to look out.

"I didn't come out here to be insulted," she teased.

"Why did you come out here?" She answered by holding up the cigarette. "You know that's a muggle invention, right?" he reminded her.

"And I'm the annoying one," she muttered under her breath.
"You smoke often?" he wondered. That would be a story to tell Sirius later on that night, he'd have a blast hearing about it.

"Do you?"

*Bloody hell*, he sighed.

"Yeah, this year has been a little stressful. Helps me deal with... everything," he played along with her, not letting her cryptic questions get the best of him.

"What are you stressed about?"

"Do you actually care?"

"Maybe." There was a silent pause.

"I don't know. I guess between everything with Sirius and his family, and then there's the O.W.L.s at the end of the year," he sighed again, running a hand through his hair.

"Black," she whispered out into the darkness. He eyed her, his best mate's name ringing through his ears.

"What about him?"

"He's going to be disowned."

"I know that, we all know that. Your lot keeps reminding us," he commented defensively, suddenly miffed with the witch. She turned to him and eyed him up and down.

"Oops, you've ruined all the fun," she finished, placing the cigarette on the marble railing between them.

"Wait, you're leaving?" he called out to her, suddenly missing the warmth that her body had given him. But she didn't entertain him with a response, instead she pushed open the door he had come out of, and disappeared back into the manor. He pursed his lips and sat against the cool railing, picking up the lipstick stained cigarette. He twirled it back and forth in his fingers, letting out a half-snort, half-chuckle.

"Oh, whatever," he surrendered, and brought the shared cigarette to his lips, closing his eyes and taking a long drag as the scent of tobacco and jasmine filled the crisp air.
Blue and Purple Rivers

It had been a long time since she had the pleasure of watching grey skies circle above her, prickling her skin with cool, transparent pearls. For the past two months, she had lolled about lazily in the dry, barren, Mediterranean heat. It blistered and choked, waking up with a dry throat that took water hours to replenish. Skin begun to crack, ocean salt sticking to it after a day's swim; and the sullen faces that walked through a winter's wind had turned into bright, white smiles against olive complexions and dark hair.

She could count the amount of times it had rained: three. Twice, pathetically. But the third time, well, the third time had been a great storm which had caused their rivers to overflow and windows to crack and smash right into their dining rooms. And they had yelled to their servants to shut all the windows, to make sure that the water didn't come pouring in and flooding their marble floors, but she had defied those rules. It had been two months of nothing but dry air, and suddenly something worthwhile had turned her mundane afternoon into pure excitement. One dance in the rain, spinning and turning until she fell from dizziness, that was all she had asked for. And she'd thought herself safe, out there in the middle of nowhere, no one around to denounce her and her blasphemy. Oh, but she had been wrong.

Some pulled hair and a good smack across the cheek kept her inside reading for the rest of the summer. They went to fetch her books for her, her trunk was done by the servants, and it wasn't until that very moment, when the droplets graced that train's widow, that she was relieved to no longer suffer under the ruthless sun.

La vie c'est drôle, she marveled to herself.

"Manasse," a fruity voice interrupted her thoughts, causing Eva to flicker her gaze over the reflection of a burgundy-haired witch in the window.

"Flint," she acknowledged in return.

The Slytherin witch, Aphrodite, furrowed her brows, tilting her head as she leaned against the dining cart table. Her eyes trailed an invisible line from where her housemate was looking, but she couldn't find anything that could possibly be more interesting than herself. A small pout appeared on berry lips, suddenly feeling awkward as she continued to go ignored, wondering just what she had done to deserve such treatment.

"Would you care to sit?" came Eva's impassive voice from somewhere in the distance, and just like that, Aphrodite's entire face lit up. Everything turned upwards, her head nodding enthusiastically as she slid into the seat across from her, leaning back and absentmindedly bringing her nails to her teeth.

She tried her best to stifle a sudden urge to roll her eyes, but focused back onto the English midlands that rolled by. They were far gone from the London ghettos, and no where near the thick forests and swampy bogs of the North. Here, there existed oceans of green that stretched out past what the eye could see, not a being in site except for the odd English cottage every so often.

And how wonderful it was to be in the midst of silence and nothingness.

"So, Eva, your summer all right?" attempted Aphrodite, cautiously peering from behind her neatly chopped bangs. Eva sighed deeply, lifting her chin and leaning forward in her seat as she gazed upon the Welsh pureblood princess. Her eyes searched every corner, knowing that she sought validation, afraid that her housemate wouldn't oblige.
Eva smiled, "just fine, and yours?"

But pleasantries were pleasantries, and eventually small talk would lead to a prayer.

"Do you mind moving, Flint?"

Never did she think that prayer would have arrived in the form of Evan Rosier.

"Was that a question, Rosier?" Aphrodite retorted wryly, not meeting his eye as she found a charm on her wrist particularly interesting. His hand pulsed, his left eye twitching as he stared down the defiant witch.

"Your brother's a little bitch, my father's little bitch," he hissed as he leaned over, a palm placed firmly on the table, "and you will be mine, too, if you don't move over."

"Rosier," Eva interrupted, twisting the jade ring on her finger as she eyed the pair with great discomfort, suddenly finding the width of the cart too small to accommodate such grand personalities. His icy eyes immediately darted over to her warm, cognac ones, and his entire demeanor softened. "Sit here."

"Brown nose," Aphrodite breathed out, twirling a strand of her straight hair as she averted her gaze to the outside. Eva pursed her lips, her eyes wary as she stared the the witch, wondering just when she would decide that enough was enough and suddenly act as she should. She understood, of course, being pushed into a corner as someone insulted one's family was not a good place to be, but there was no reason to instigate and push on and on until Evan Rosier felt the need to make a scene in front of everyone.

And oh, did the boy like to make a scene.

"What'd you just say? You filthy little who—" Eva's hand darted out, placed comfortably on his thigh as he turned and held her gaze. His loins were ablaze, his blood kerosene, so easy to ignite. What an angry, angry little boy who had absolutely nothing to give this world but insults and disdain. And here she was, the object of all his desires — obedience, beauty, and purity — pushed together, brought into one being, and her hand was on his thigh.

He sat back down, lifting his chin proudly as he turned back to Aphrodite.

"What?" she asked innocently, darting her gaze between both of them. One moment he had been fire, and now he was sizzling out to zero.

"Go back to playing with your toys," the wizard sneered, doing a once over of the witch before fully turning to face the girl that sat next to him. She wasn't looking at him, but she could feel his stare boring down into her, causing her to retreat her fingers and bring them politely onto her lap. One moment she had been alone, wondering just how many sheep she could count before they arrived, and now she was making sure that they could pass Hadrian's Wall before someone got hung.

"Hey," she heard him say, finally glimpsing up at him. "How are you?"

Suave, smoldering, so unlike the person who had just been there moments ago. Unbelievable, really, possibly even extraordinary. Each and every person that filled that cart, every single one — no matter their last name, no matter the town they had been born in — was a collector of masques. Not Venetian or Chinese, something much darker, much more malicious for those who were supposed to be children. No one really looked the way they seemed to look, and it had been so long that they all played dress up that Eva had forgotten what they actually looked like, what she was actually supposed to look like. Were they all cold beings, walking around with steel armor as they attempted
to embrace one another? What hid underneath? Was it frightening? Was that why they all voluntarily participated in this sick joke, one moment flaming fiendfyre into someone's face, the next gulping down as blood rushed to their faces and a girl had her hand placed savagely close to carnality?

Her eyes blinked away from the silver chain that hung around his neck and back to his eyes. They waited patiently, respecting of her silence.

Increased thirst, slowed down time, irrational fears. All too familiar, she knew what this was and she wanted out, out, out.

But all there was, was in, in, in.

Either curl back into her thoughts, nod whenever someone asked questions, pretend to be listening and care. Or focus in and fall into this child of the winter sea, sunken cheeks at the age of eleven, the only color on his face the porcelain that rivaled castle walls, and diamonds for eyes. Not blue, not grey, but stormy, replicating thunder clouds as they rolled in from the ocean, ominous and powerful, electricity floating through the air as it vibrated and shook bones. An ethereal beauty, just like mommy-dear, and yet terribly rough around the edges, appealing, interesting.

She'd grown up with him; spending much time on the shores just beyond his castle home on that dreary island. He had been cruel, yanking at her wrist whenever she didn't want to play his games in the mud, preferring her clean linen skirts to dirt-scraped knees. Everything had been a competition, everything had been about getting the last word in, and she had let him, obliged him. When everyone else spoke over him, when he felt aggravated and ignored, he'd grab a small Eva and pull her into a empty closet, scold her, make himself feel powerful. And because she had been the only one to pay him the slightest attention, she was the only one who knew what he was made of, and the only one who knew how to stop him.

And he'd broken her heart when she found out that his first kiss had been with Rosalia Selwyn. When he had bragged about getting the blonde to stick her hands down his pants and touch him where Eva had been taught never to touch anyone until she was married. And after that, at thirteen years old, Eva had decided that nothing hurt worse than a clenched stomach, that she'd rather be known as the icily quiet, submissive daughter than the foolish witch who had fallen in love with a scrawny, indignant little boy who thought himself a man.

In four years, the witch could count the amount of times they had spoken on one hand. And yet, here he was, sitting next to her and acting as if they didn't have the entire English Channel dividing them.

"What? You're not going to speak to me?" he continued, urging and pushing, borderline desperate. 

_Odd_, she concluded internally.

"Oh, come on, Eva," his breath was on her now, his words so low that not even Aphrodite could register them, "what happened to us? We used to be friends."

"My only friend," she corrected him inside her head. He had been her only friend, not thinking she'd ever need anyone else but the boy who had persuaded her to turn her uncle's hair green. The boy who would constantly poke her in the ribs, forced her to race him in his gardens, who had stood next to her before she got sorted, convincing her that she belonged in the house of his forefathers— the righteous path. The boy who had so easily abandoned her as soon as he realized that there were, indeed, witches who would be more than willing to do the job that his right hand had done for him for so long. The same one who had called her boring when she had confronted him; who told her not to worry, for one day she would make a good wife; who had used her for her last name, betrayed her...
And yet, she could thank him, for without him, she would have never realized that the mind was so much more superior than the heart. She never had to feel pain, she never had to wonder why her loyalty hadn't been enough, no, never again. Alone, estranged, and respected—and now here he was, looking to her like she was his mother's wet dream.

"We still are, Evan," the witch cooed, tilting her head as she gave him a delicate smile.

Because everyone else might be good, but when it came to the masquerade, Eva sported the winning mask.

He searched her, her face, her eyes, but all he received was a blank statement.

"Well," he began, forcing a smile, "I'm glad to hear that."

"Rosier, Flint," someone behind the winter boy interrupted, "Manasse."

They all turned to look up at him—sharp jaw and a five o'clock shadow, there was only one who fit that description.

"Dolohov," Rosier drawled dryly, "I was in the middle of a conversation."

Antonin ran a hand through his choppy, shoulder-length brown hair as he scrutinized the wizard before him.

"I don't fucking care."

Her eyes found their way to the veins that lined his hands, running up and across his arms like blue and purple tributaries. Right from the beginning, she had understood that he was different from the rest of them. Rougher, both in personality and looks, reckless, hair always left unkempt and never combed back; between every word, he managed to squeeze in a profanity. Be it a mask, be it his weapon of choice, but his image stood out amongst the others in their house, and it was more a comfort than a nuisance.

A breath of fresh air, that was what Eva would use to describe the rugged boy if anyone ever cared to ask.

"Why are you here?" asked Evan, the sparks already coming off his body.

"I couldn't fucking stand the likes of Farley and Crabbe," he scowled, looking down the aisle to the pair of beaters sitting by the cart's door. "They bicker like little girls. Another fucking second, and I would've dropped them in front of the fucking train."

From across the table, Aphrodite nearly gasped. Eva's eyes glimpsed over to the witch, and she had to bite into her gums before she began to smile at her innocence, truly shocked by Antonin's barbarity.

"And here I thought you enjoyed their brutish company," Rosier commented.

"I'm the Captain of the fucking Quidditch team, Evan," the foreign wizard scowled in return. And before one of them got up, wand pointed into the other's neck, Aphrodite burst out: "You're captain!?"

He turned to her, nodding with an impish grin. She clasped her painted fingernails together, bringing them up to her beaming lips as she stared at him from over the top.
"What! You're kidding!? That's so great," the witch cheered.

"Yeah, yeah," thrummed Evan, wringing his fingers as he toured the entire cart, "have you see Avery and Mulciber?"

"Having fun with some fourth years." Evan's stormy eyes looked up to the wizard, both of them growing a grin on their faces as they shared something short of cruelty. "What? Thinkin' of joining?"

Evan snorted, nodding, before darting his eyes quickly to the left. Barely noticeable for any one of them to notice, glancing back up to Antonin before the questioned his own silence.

"Eh," the wizard's voice came booming back down, "we'll have some fun tonight, won't we?"

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes and pinching their corners.

"Is that all, Dolohov?"

"James Potter is Head Boy," came Alexander Sykes' voice from the entrance. And never had an entire train cart turned dead silent in a matter of heartbeats, the only sound being that of the wheels rolling beneath them.

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" slandered Antonin, his eyes ablaze as he stepped closer to the curly-haired prefect. Eva pursed her lips, everyone watching, convinced that the bearer of bad news would be pushed up against the wall, choking in a matter of seconds.

"Fuck off, Dolohov," came Sofia Mustaq's voice from behind her partner, eyeing the wizard with complete disdain as he backed down. "And yes, it's true— James Potter is Head Boy, now, let's not —"

"HOW!?" someone shouted.

"WHY!?" screeched Melisende Gamp, standing up, Chocolate Frog cards folded into her hand.

"The fucking blood traitor," Antonin spat out, running a hand through his hair as he pulled on its ends.

"Despicable," Eva heard Evan spew under his breath, shaking his head as he curled his fingers into his palm.

"My father did say that Dumbledore was too old; should just find a nice chateau somewhere," mentioned Aphrodite, pursing her lips as she looked from Evan to Sofia Mustaq.

"I don't give a fucking left bollock," snarled Antonin, everyone's eyes moving from their prefects to him, "I won't listen to a thing he says. I'll fuck 'IM right up the arse if he tries to give me a fucking detention; I'll fuck his mother right up—"

"Yeah, you fucking do that, Dolohov— and then I'll have to clean up your shit," countered Sofia, hands on her hips as she leaned all her weight into one of her heels, "like always."

"Shut the fuck up— I don't fucking listen to carpet munchers—" and, before anyone could blink, Sofia's fist came flying in, landing smack dab right into the Captain's jaw as everyone else gasped, covering their mouths with their hands, staring wide-eyed at the pair.

"Open that dirty mouth again, Dolohov, and I'll make sure you're scrubbing the girl's loo for the next month," Sofia threatened, reaching behind his head to grab at his hair.
Eva inhaled deeply, shaking her head as she turned away from the mess. Everything a mess, so chaotic, one little mention of some silly child holding a superior position and suddenly it was topsy-turvy day and no one had any qualms about black eyes.

*Ridiculous,* she thought to herself, blinking away from everyone else and back to her Midlands. The world was just as she had left it, pure and large and free. Raindrops continued to race one other on the window, and she continued to wonder how much longer it would be until she could feel them against her skin.

"Regulus," Evan called out to his cousin as he saw the boy walk past them. The dark-haired wizard turned, a brow cocked as he searched for the voice that had so easily called for him. "Sit."

He blinked, his grey eyes calculating and judging the scene before him. And before he could decline, before he came up with some excuse that put distance between his rule-breaking blood, his eyes fell upon the quiet girl seated next to him.

A twist of the heart, a weight dropped in to the stomach; his eyes blinked a little wider and his hand reached up to his hair as he made sure there wasn't a stray piece hanging out from his crown. And then, with bated breath, he stepped forward and slid into the seat just diagonal from the witch.

"What is it, Evan?" Regulus did his best to keep his gaze on his cousin, but the silent magnetic force of the body sitting next to him was unbearable. He wanted to look at her, to watch her as she did what she always did when on the train—looked out the window, blatantly ignoring everyone around her.

"Is it true? Potter is Head Boy?"

He did his best to stifle a snort; his mouth gaping for mere seconds before he closed it back up again. It seemed to be all that anyone could talk about, the gossip from the holidays already old news.

"Yes."

Evan's white knuckles came to press to his lips, his eyes frozen nitrogen as he stared out the faraway window.

"How could something like that happen? He's broken every rule in the book, reeks—"

"No one knows. There's a plethora of theories, but, honestly, Evan, what does it matter? Everyone has to follow the rules, even him, and if he breaks them— he has the same—"

"You always were slow, you know that?" Evan cut him off, looking back to his cousin.

Eva blinked over to Regulus, eyeing him up and down as he seemed stunned, his brows furrowed as he took in the sudden interruption. Her heart went out to him—she knew what that felt like, that sting.

The wizard leaned forward, his once startled expression turning into pure malice as he bared his teeth and leaned over the table. Eva stood straighter, lifting up her head as she watched the two boys as they circled around the fire pit.

"You're nothing compared to me," Regulus hissed to Evan, "you can go fuck your whores, drink yourself into a stupor, while I'm here doing important things, things that none of you would ever—"

He stopped, frozen as his gaze left Evan's and connected with Eva's. His entire demeanor went still,
looking down to the table as if ashamed, a slight color developing in his face as he sought out his footing and held firm.

"Get out of my sight," scowled Evan, flicking his gaze to the aisle.

Regulus didn't need much convincing before he slammed his palm to the table, glanced once again over to Eva — who still watched him — and left their company.

"Excuse him, Eva, he doesn't—"

"He's right," she spoke up, still watching the wizard's retreating back as he moved down the cart and found his place amongst Edmund Nott and Cyrus Baddok.

"What?"

And as the grey eyed wizard comfortably repositioned himself in a friendlier environment, he looked back over to Eva. But, this time, unlike the past five years, she was looking back.

He felt his neck burn, quickly averting his gaze to his friends before anyone could notice.

"No one is above the law."

It was still raining as the students jumped out from the carriages and ran to take cover in the cloisters, some others were even daring enough to speed through the chilly bullets and make their way straight into the Entrance Hall. Eva wasn't a daring person, so she petite footfalls brought her just underneath one of those gothic arches, looking out into the courtyard as everyone else descended and tried to make a hasty, last-minute decision of which direction they would pursue.

Most ended up alongside herself.

Turning around, she could see the first-years crossing and arriving on the boats, the little lanterns shining bright as they fell awe-struck with the castle's pull. A large, magnificent work of art that stood high on a hill, a lake that glimmered even without a moon, and a deep forest that held so many secrets. It was magical, and not just in a wizarding sense, but in a poetic one.

"Eh, Black!"

She glimpsed out of the corner of her eye, finding Regulus Black and Beon Shafiq standing an arch away from her. Both of them had their hoods placed over their heads, shadowing every one of their features and making it hard to see who was who, and who looked like what, in the darkening day. They greeted one another like young men were supposed to— shaking hands and nodding firmly as they looked one another in the eye.

Except no one ever did that.

"I heard they made you co-captain."

"Then you heard correctly," grinned the silver-eyed boy. The latter laughed, throwing his head back as he left Regulus to his own with a pat on his upper arm. He continued to smile, lifting his eyes up from the ground only to find that she was looking at him. Four years of pining and wanting, and she had looked at him twice in a matter of hours. "Excuse me," he muttered when he realized that he had been staring, his eyes falling to the ground.

"You don't have to apologize," she told him, her voice calmer than the lake in the morning. And he
was anything but. His heart thumped irregularly, and he was suddenly hyper-aware of how he looked and what he was wearing, no one besides her really existed around him and it was all a little bit silly, but it was a novel feeling. Acceptable, as long as he didn't pounce on it. "And Rosier," Rosier? he repeated in his head, realizing that she had used his first name, "don't listen to him, he's an overactive amygdala."

Regulus didn't know what words like amygdala meant, or why Eva had called Evan by his last name, but her tone was composed and borderline comforting. He took a deep breath, daring himself to look up as he folded his hands politely behind his back. Finally lifting his chin, he caught sight of her slightly crooked neck and the way she was surveying every facet and angle of his body. Hands, legs, the slight drop of a shoulder— to her, it all meant something.

"I'll keep that in mind," he responded, nodding tightly, but not being able to look anywhere else.

"Good," she concluded, lifting the corners of her pressed lips up at him; a glassy curtain seated over her eyes, "congratulations on making co-captain."

*Thanks,* he wanted to say, *what are you doing later tonight?* was what really interested him, more than his blasted cousin, more than the Quidditch team.

And like that, she was off, walking alone into the Great Hall as he was left a dumbstruck toddler with a thumb in his mouth. He inhaled deeply, gazing after her as she made soft strides over and into the castle, leaving him to his own misery. Regulus had a million and one things he wanted to ask her, things he'd noticed from looking at her over the years. He remembered when she had come over one winter evening, dressed in pastel purple with her hair pinned to the back of her head and curls falling from a messy do. It had been too much. He had wanted to kiss her— it was the first time, and after that he'd thought of kissing her over and over and over again. He'd fall asleep to the thought of his lips to her, of his arms around her, of being inside her. It was awful. They hardly spoke, the only reason being her friendship with Evan that had left him with a handful of phrases to remember her by. He had thought that love didn't really exist, not really, not if he was using his parents as an example, but that pastel purple and some flowery perfume had made him think otherwise.

"Cat got your tongue, mate?" chuckled Cyrus as he passed Regulus, placing a hand onto his friend's shoulder blade as he shook his friend out of the stupor.

"No," he forced a laugh, pulling his fingers up to his temple.

"Come on, then, we're going to miss the feast."
Queen of England

September 2nd was always the most chaotic day at Hogwarts, unless September 1st fell on a Friday, that is.

From the dungeons to the Astronomy Tower, all students, professors, and ghosts rushed around to find where exactly they were supposed to be. First years paled, for the second time since arriving at the school, as the immensity of the castle dawned on them. The upperclassmen wandered around aimlessly with friends, that they may or may have not been with all summer, teasing the younger years as they scuttled past against the walls. Though the halls were teeming, making it impossible to see end to end, a group of four boys managed to sashay and strut effortlessly down the center, joking and seemingly oblivious to the chaos around them.

"Did I mention how much I'm enjoying myself?" the boy with the rectangular spectacles, James, asked. He had an air of nonchalance and yet complete control, always at the center of his friends as he led them on last minute adventures. Unruly black hair that stuck up in every direction, hazel eyes that always challenged anyone before they even got in his way, and a jaw so sharp that it could cut through steak as if it were butter.

"Yes, once or twice," replied Peter. Though the smallest of the group, he had striking blue eyes that sat on his still round face like jewels beaded into a knight's sword. His intimidation stemmed from the company he kept, feeding off their power as they made and shaped him into whatever they had wanted him to become. Once a shy child, with the help of his three best friends, he had become snarky and sly. He knew how to manipulate better than the rest of them, usually getting his way when it came to weaseling out of detentions and into a witch's knickers.

"More like a billion," quipped the grey-eyed one. His name was Sirius, and boy was he a force to be reckoned with. Just like his features, he was an enigma, a rebel with a cause, extremely energetic while poised at the same time. He had a magnetic vibe that drew others to him, both in a bad and good way; and he was well aware of it, knowing that his stare alone could make someone's knees shake in a matter of seconds.

"Well, I'm really enjoying myself," he repeated, the rest of them shaking their head and half laughing as they attempted to be annoyed. "I have a really good feeling that this year is going to be my year."

"You said that last year," Remus reminded him. He was both the mind and the conscious of the group, and yet, no one could mistake the permanent half-smile on his face as he walked down the halls beside the others. Many would say he always had his nose in a book, but that was only because he was planning, reading and organizing their next prank, their next attack on someone who had wronged them. The green-eyed wizard with the sandy brown hair had read all the rules so that he knew what to break.

And though each one of them very different from the one next to them, they all had at least one thing in common: they loved each other with everything they had.

"He says it every year," Peter chimed in.

"Yes, but this year I mean it."

"Where are we going?" Sirius inquired when his eyes met with the upturned nose of a man wearing a powdered wig. He realized that they had made a full circle around the courtyard, so immersed with one another that they hadn't seen the repeating portraits.
"I haven't a clue," James admitted, running his hand through his hair as he jutted his chin up to greet Ralph Bowers, a Ravenclaw prefect, as he passed by, waving at his Head Boy. "Moony?"

"We just received our schedules," answered Remus with one eye squinting at his friends, not entirely sure if they were sincere or simply trying to play dumb on their first day back.

"Exactly, that's why we're asking you."

"Merlin," he snorted in a breath, reaching into his bag as he pulled out his own schedule. "I have N.E.W.T.s Potions now, so I guess that's where we're going." Remus looked back up at James, both boys nodding at each other.

"What? You took Potions again?" Peter puzzled, his eyebrows furrowing as he looked up into Remus' green eyes. The prefect sighed, running his hands through his hair as he grimaced.

"Yeah, I know..." he paused, licking his parched lips and checking back and forth for any eavesdroppers, "but I need to take everything if I want a chance at a career."

They all understood what he meant. The school, his professors, were willing to use their connections to help him, but on the premise that he took five N.E.W.T.s and excelled at them as well. He had to admit, it was hard, it was blood curdling hard, but if he had done it last year, he reckoned he would survive them yet.

"That still doesn't answer my original question- where am I going?" Sirius exasperated, stopping mid-tracks as they loitered smack-dab in the center of one of the busiest corridors in the entire castle. Younger years scurried around them while their own peers pushed past them, knocking into Peter's elbow as he turned to look at a group of fifth year Hufflepuffs throw the Marauders dirty looks. He winked at them with a slight smirk on his face, causing them to turn back around, but not without a lingering glance from a pasty, chestnut-haired witch.

"Bloody hell," Remus huffed, holding out his hand to Sirius, "where's your schedule?"

"Here," Sirius placed the rolled parchment into his friend's hand. Remus rolled it open and skimmed over it, his face scrunching up in bewilderment.

"You're barely taking anything," Remus commented as he read over the schedule: N.E.W.T.s Transfiguration, N.E.W.T.s Defense, Divination, and Astronomy.

"I have plans for this year." All three of them turned to look up at him from where they had gathered on each of Remus' sides.

"Like what? Beating your own personal record for how many birds fancy you in one single moment?" Peter snorted at Remus' remark. Sirius rolled his eyes.

"I'll have you know that the Quag nearly beat me last year," he pointed out to them, now it was Remus' turn to roll his eyes. But before anyone could slide in another sly remark, the first bell drilled throughout the entire school, causing Remus to look up and over the heads of the helter-skelter that surrounded him. "So, is anyone going to tell me where exactly I'm supposed to be?"

"I can't believe you don't know your own sodding schedule," commented Remus as he gave the parchment back to Sirius.

"That's not the answer I wanted."

"You actually have a free hour right now," piped Peter, "but then we have Divination."
"Really? Blimey!" cheered Sirius, patting Peter on his shoulder.

"I guess Wormtail and I are-"

"I have Arithmancy, actually."

"What?"

"You take Arithmancy?" James questioned.

"Wormtail is actually bloody brilliant with numbers," butted in Remus.

"Birds like blokes who do numbers," the blue-eyed wizard grinned sheepishly, his eyes glazed over like he had taken a sip of gillywater at breakfast.

"What? And why aren't you taking Arithmancy?" James turned to ask his green-eyed friend.

"Because I don't have time for it, and I already took it for six years. There is only so much you can learn and do with it."

"So, you're all just going to ditch me?"

"Sign up for Arithmancy," shrugged Peter.

"I'd rather stick a broom up-"

"Okay, we're going to get going now," interrupted Remus before Sirius could finish his statement, grabbing James by his forearm and pulling him towards the staircase. They were already running late, and even though professors were usually lenient with tardiness during the first week, if the boys were hoping for some sort of recommendation letter, which Remus would need five of, it would begin with showing up when they needed to.

"Traitors," called out Sirius, chuckling as James threw him the bird over his shoulder.

"I guess I'll walk you," said Sirius as he wrapped an arm over Peter's shoulders.

"Is it the same room as last year?"

"Yeah, all N.E.W.T.s. students share the same room," answered Remus, turning up with furrowed brows at James, "but you knew that."

"I know, just sort of came out," grinned James. Remus scoffed, shaking his head and allowing the two of them to continue their trek into the dungeons.

Soon enough, their leisurely pace brought them to a familiar door. It was open, and inside there was a bustle of students all about the room. Though all potions called resided in the dungeons, the classroom used for the N.E.W.T.s students was rather special. Indeed, it did look like something out of an abandoned Scottish castle, but there was a prestigious air to it, a sort of dignity that none of the other rooms held. The cupboards were organized more neatly, the cauldrons were always spotless and never filled with residue, and not once had it smelled like burnt dragon dung due to the mistakes of the younger years.

It was almost like walking into some special, clandestine club.

And for Remus, it was borderline torture. Not only was it his worst subject, but the atmosphere irked him. The entire group reeked of privilege, crying pureblood and wealth. Despite the fact that their
professor, Slughorn, was not necessarily prejudice against muggleborns - although Remus had his own theories on the matter - he still salivated over those who came from influential and popular families. The only two exceptions were Dirk Cresswell and Lily Evans, who the potions professor most likely saw as investments instead of teenagers to teach.

And then there was the Slug Club.

Remus internally gagged at the Slug Club, having decided long ago that he would never attend even if he was invited.

But, despite his aversion to Slughorn and his fancy dinners, the room presented to both Gryffindors many familiar faces.

"James, Remus!" Gideon greeted them.

"So good to see you two," Fabian added.

"Everything all right?" James replied, returning their bright grins and enthusiastic salutes.

"Yeah, mate, all good. Summer, the usual, you know?"

"Too much family, all the bloody time," whined Fabian after his brother.

"Oh yeah, that blows. I hate when that happens," James returned with a nod. A light snort escaped from Remus, knowing that James would love nothing more than to have a big family.

"LILY EVANS! How was your summer?" their teacher bellowed from behind Remus, sending the Gryffindor prefect jolting towards the cupboard to his right. The incessant buzzing stopped immediately as they all turned to watch their professor. It was quiet, very quiet, but their professor hadn't seemed to notice. Actually, their professor hadn't seemed to notice anything besides the red-haired witch sitting in the center first row.

"Very well, sir, and yours? I reckon that it went well?" she responded with a toothy smile.

"Oh yes, very well indeed. We must discuss during my free time, of which I'm afraid I have very little this year. You know, Lily-" somewhere towards the darker side of the room, someone had cleared their throat. Both Remus and James turned to look their way, eyeing a chortling Alexander Sykes and a lip-biting Sofia Mustaq.

"Oh! You're all here, how splendid. Everyone settle with their partners, I'll explain this year's program," he announced enthusiastically.

On that note, Remus turned to walk towards his usual spot next to Lily.

"Yeah, good morning to you too, Potter," Lily grumbled with a slight roll in her eyes.

"Lily," Remus butted in.

"Remus," Lily's once wry expression immediately warmed up, returning his smile and lifting up the bag that had blocked any one else from sitting on the stool next to her's.

"You're a bloody traitor, Moony," James mocked playfully as he took the seat directly behind Lily.

"Everyone find their partners all right?" Their potions professor's beady eyes toured the room, his face slowly become more contorted as they flowed to the back. "No, this doesn't seem right," he muttered. "Where is the sheet?" He pulled up his briefcase onto his desk, opening it up and
rummaging through all the papers. Everyone else sat in silence, Remus' leg tapping against the
ground, Lily's eyebrows slightly furrowed as she watched her professor babble to himself.

"I wonder what that's all about," commented Gideon from behind Remus.

"I'm sure it's some epiphany he just had," Remus looked over his shoulder and whispered.

"A-HA!" cried their professor excitedly, smiling at a small sheet of parchment. "All righty, here we
are." Slughorn walked towards the splintered, wooden door and charmed the parchment so that it
stayed put at eye-level. The writing was too faint against the enamel colored parchment and the font
too cursive. "Partners," mentioned Slughorn, pointing towards the paper.

"Partners?" repeated Melisende Gamp, a sickly looking girl from Slytherin.

"Why yes, right there," he pointed again to the door. The students all shared looks with one another,
Remus' leg stopped bouncing.

"Like, pre-assigned partners?" interrogated Flora Sawbridge, a Ravenclaw with choppy, dark brown
hair cut to her ears and bangs to match.

"Why yes, right there," Slughorn repeated himself without realizing that he had.

"What an oaf," one of the Slytherins chuckled in the back.

All though everyone had assumed that their professor had gone bonkers, Lily was the first to stand
up and head over to the sheet. No one said a word, no one dared speak as they watched their Head
Girl's finger scroll down the list of names. Slughorn had never before assigned partners, he had never
even cared if partnerships changed mid-year. Remus dared a look around the room, realizing that the
majority of the participants were from Slytherin. He gulped, hoping that he didn't get stuck with one
of them. As he caught sight of Avery and Snape sitting together in the back, Remus tilted his stool
backwards towards James, leaning against his friend's wooden table.

"What are the chances of convincing Slughorn to change his mind?" whispered Remus, his eyes still
focused on the front of the room.

"Pretty good, I'd reckon," muttered James, also watching as Harold Skively, a Ravenclaw, stood up
and followed in their Head Girl's path.

"The Snakes outnumber us," Remus informed him, pushing himself forward and landing with a light
thump against the ground. James turned around, his eyes roaming over the green ties as he counted
them out. He turned back around, sitting a little bit straighter as Lily walked back on over to them.

"Good luck," she muttered to Remus with a pursed smile. Almost instinctively, Remus turned back
and met James' gaze, his eyes wide.

"What do you mean?" he turned back to Lily.

"Don't worry, it's in alphabetical order," she responded, gesturing with her chin towards the door. He
promptly slid out of his seat and stalked over, not taking long before he held a finger against the
paper.

*Lupin, Remus,* he said to himself and slid his finger horizontally across, *Manasse, Eva.*

*Bloody hell,* he thought. He turned back towards the room, noticing that in his slight stupor, a swarm
of students had begun lining up and pushing their way towards the list.
"Bloody hell," he repeated as he picked up his things from the floor.

"I'm sorry, Remus," Lily looked on sympathetically, "at least she's good, I'd reckon even better than me."

"She's going to light me on fire," he stated dryly. Lily chuckled lightly and shook her head.

"She's rather discreet, I wouldn't worry so much about fires."

"You're right, she's going to poison me." Lily continued to chuckle, daring a glance past Remus' arm as she tracked down the infamous Slytherin witch. She was alone, sitting with Cedric Avery and Severus Snape right behind her. None of them spoke amongst themselves, none of them had even bothered to get up as they waited for everyone else to sort themselves. Lily shook her head, looking back up at Remus with a sorry smile.

"Oi!" Both Gryffindors heard James holler from the door, his face beaming. "Oi, Fab-o! Ready to be partners?"

Fabian Prewett looked up from his conversation with his housemate, Agnes Clearwater, and nodded his head with a smile at the Head Boy. He quickly saluted the mousy brown haired witch, giving her a small shoulder squeeze as he collected his stuff to walk over to the table behind Lily's.

James approached them, placing his hand on Remus' forearm and looking down at the redhead witch. She sighed deeply, turning away from him and reaching into her bag, trying to organize herself and wait for her partner to join her.

And despite her great efforts, James continued, "How 'bout you, Evans? Glad that E is far enough from S?

"Aife Erskine," lamented Lily, not even bothering to hush him up. James let out a low whistle.

Aife Erskine was the only other Hufflepuff in the room besides Dirk Cresswell. She had naturally bleached blonde hair cut shorter than Remus' own hair, and she had a long face; she constantly paraded about fighting for a cause that seemed to change depending on her mood and the weather. Her mouth was too big for her size and it had no filter, no matter how many detentions she served for hexing Slughorn because he was being a misogynistic arsehole.

And yet, Remus didn't find any of that irritating. The most annoying aspect of the eccentric blonde was how she refused to follow the dress code, constantly sporting an obnoxious, puffy, hot pink jacket.

"Remus? Who're you with?" Remus fell out of his stupor, his eyes darting over to James'. The Gryffindor prefect sighed, copying his friend and running a hand through his hair.

"Manasse," commented Lily, her eyes still focused downwards at the book she had placed in her lap. She had her hair over her face, purposefully having placed it like that in the hopes that it would deter the Gryffindor chaser. Naturally, it had done no such thing, but the news of Remus' partner did. James immediately stood straight, his hand resting on the table as he looked Remus up and down, searching for the end of the joke.

It never came.

"That's bloody bollocks," James blurted.

"She's friends with Avery and Mulciber," Lily added offhandedly.
"Don't worry, I'll fix this," James claimed, walking over and placing a hand on Remus' shoulder. "Professor!"

"No, Prongs, just-" but before Remus could convince his friend to not play the hero, James had already marched over to their crapulent professor.

"Professor." Slughorn looked up from where he was seated, eyes widening at the angry, disheveled student in front of him.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?" Slughorn inquired.

"This," James pointed accusingly towards the parchment on the door, "is ludicrous."

"I don't believe I grasp-"

"We, since first year, have always chosen who we wanted to be partners with. Not due to popularity, but because us, students, know who we work well with and who we do not. Thus, this system," he waved a hand towards the list, "is ludicrous. As Head Boy," Remus rolled his eyes as he eavesdropped, "I suggest that we go back to the previous system."

"Well," Slughorn cleared his throat, "Mr. Potter, I do very much respect your position as Head Boy, however, I saw it best this way. There are too many talents in this classroom being wasted due to failing partnerships," the professor finished matter-of-factly as he glanced over at the Slytherins. James paused, following his professor's gaze as they fell upon the Slytherin prefects cackling in the corner.

"Are you saying we have to suffer because some snakes forgot to hand in their potions assignments?" James countered incredulously, his mouth slightly agape as the realization hit him.

Remus, too, had followed both their gazes, noticing that the majority of the Slytherins had miraculously been paired with someone from their own house. He shook his head, his knuckles nervously knocking against the desk as he secretly hoped James would be able to resolve the issue. His hand went up to his nose, rubbing it as he turned around to look over at his own partner. She was sitting quietly, her back straight as an iron-rod and her hands placed neatly on her lap.

_Bloody hell_, Remus cried internally, turning back to James' hunched over back as he tried to negotiate with their potions professor.

"You can't pair Remus with Manasse," James inserted firmly, finally giving up and admitting the plain truth. "Everyone knows that Slytherins only work well with their own-"

"What's wrong now, Potter? Your mud-blood get placed with a better looking blighter than you? " Cedric Avery's voice resonated throughout the dungeon classroom. Both Gryffindors turned to eye the culprit, his face smug and smirking as he leaned over and tilted his head to mock the Head Boy. James' face, although already red, had grown redder and his teeth were visibly grinding against each other.

"Now, I will have none of that-" Slughorn began.

"Say that again, Avery, I bloody dare you," James snarled, releasing himself from his leaned over position over Slughorn's desk and approaching Remus' side. The Slytherin shrugged, nudging Severus, who had been reading a book placed out in front of him. He wasn't interested at all in whatever games his housemate wanted to play, throwing him a scowl as he shifted closer to the edge of the table and continued on reading.
"Five points from Slytherin for prejudice," Lily interrupted all of them, her voice stern and steady as she looked Cedric straight into his eye. His own twitched, squinting as she spun back around.

"Could everyone find their seats?" pleaded Slughorn, stretching his neck out as he eyed the lingerers who refused to take a seat. "Mr. Avery, Mr. Snape, I reckon you're both in the wrong posts."

"Could you move? Or do you men always have to take up all the space?" she derided. Remus couldn't help clenching his teeth as the pygmy puff pushed past him, smacking her bedazzled canvas bag onto the table he had once occupied. He lifted up a hand, doing his best to calm himself and not entertain her.

"My bad," he bit back, forcing a smile as he grabbed his bag and turned towards his partner. He exhaled, pursing his lips as he made his way over to her.

"Woah, where do you think you're going?" asked Cedric as he slid in front of Remus, placing a hand to his chest to stop the Gryffindor in his tracks. The Slytherin half-laughed, turning to his housemates as they all watched Remus with furrowed brows and bewildered eyes.

"Don't fucking think about it, Avery," warned James from the other side of the room.

"Now, what seems to be the problem again?" attempted Slughorn. Melisende Gamp spared a look at her Head of House, scowling at him as he stared at them with a slightly gaped mouth.

"To my partner?" Remus replied, turning back to Cedric and raising his eyebrows as if it were obvious. "What else would I be doing?" he asked himself, wanting to scoff and smirk but holding himself back. "What're you on about, Lupin?"

"My partner," he gestured down towards Eva, who was still not looking up at him, somehow ignoring everything around her. But that was no surprise to the Gryffindor, he knew how she was, they all knew how she was. He reckoned she could stick her nose up and walk around a dead, bleeding body if it ever were to occur.

"And who may that be?"

"She's sitting right there, Avery," sighed Remus, turning away from her and back to Cedric's gray eyes. They searched green, darting back and forth before the smirk turned into a curled lip. "What?" Avery snarled.

"It's not a difficult concept, even someone of your intelligence could probably figure it out," quipped Remus, shoving his shoulder back so that Avery was no longer touching him.

"Absolutely not. Professor," Avery called out to his teacher, his eyes still on Remus as he held him in place. Remus rolled his eyes and leaned against the table, waiting for this entire show to be over and done with. "Slughorn," barked Avery a second time.

He looked up.

"How dare you put Manasse with this filthy half-blood," Avery stated bluntly, no shame in his voice.

"I said to fucking watch it," bit James. Fabian placed a hand on his partner's shoulder, holding him back as the redhead Ravenclaw watched the other side of the room with caution.
"James, please," pleaded Remus.

"Mr. Avery, I beseech you to take a seat, or else I will be forced to take away house points and assign detention to all who delayed the lesson," Slughorn threatened.

"Drop it," said Severus to Cedric, grabbing his items and disappearing further into the room. The gray-eyed Slytherin huffed, looking over his shoulder at his retreating housemate. Without another beat, he bent over the table to get a better look at Eva. Though her body did not move, she gazed over at him.

"Are you okay with this?" he whispered to her. Remus lifted his hand and dropped it again, turning around and leaning, once again, against the table with hands crossed over his chest. There was absolutely nothing he could do to convince the Slytherins to be anything other than dramatic, leave it to them to turn a molehill into a mountain.

"It'll be okay," she assured him, a small smirk in her eyes. Unbeknownst to him, Eva, too, couldn't believe all the chaos over such a puny, minute detail. She would have never caused such a ruckus, accepting their fate and moving on with her life as they accomplished whatever they had to. She knew next to nothing of the boy, and whatever she know was because of bare sentences that she had picked up whenever she had pretended to care.

_I'm a Queen_, she jeered internally, blinking towards the ceiling and back down as Cedric continued to pant into her ear.

"I'll be right behind you, if he bothers you-"

"Thank you," she cut him off.

The Slytherin nodded once and leaned back up, scowling at Remus as he walked past him and took a seat directly behind the Gryffindor prefect.

"Are you finally finished with your spectacle?" Remus chimed, placing his books on the table.

"Watch yourself, Lupin," Avery growled lowly.

"Are you finished?" questioned Slughorn, looking over all the now-seated heads.

"Get on with it," snarled Sofia Mustaq from behind Avery.

"Very well, as I was saying..." Slughorn began introducing the first semester's curriculum.

From behind Remus, Cedric eyed the back of Remus' neck like it was something juicy to bite into. Remus could feel his breath on his skin, shaking and shivering as his body burst out into goosebumps from the draft. He took a deep breath, shooting at James who was glaring daggers at the Slytherin behind him. He shook his head, running another hand through his hair and letting his knee jump aggressively against the wooden bar on his stool. Already he disliked the subject, and this new arrangement just gave him another reason to dread mornings.

As Slughorn drawled on, he took a chance and glanced over at his new partner. She did not looked fazed at all. Her leg wasn't tapping like his own and she didn't have any nervous tick that he could catch. He was searching for some sort of indication of how she felt, but he saw absolutely nothing.

And as he looked back towards the front, he realized that they had never formally met. She did not looked fazed at all. Her leg wasn't tapping like his own and she didn't have any nervous tick that he could catch. He was searching for some sort of indication of how she felt, but he saw absolutely nothing.

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And as he looked back towards the front, he realized that they had never formally met. Once upon a time, he had eyed her as she passed him in the hall, he had admired her thin arm when she would perform a water-inducing spell in first year charms, and he would sometimes catch her lingering a
little longer in the Herbology greenhouses. But after that year, he had quickly learned where he stood in the life of someone like herself—and it most definitely wasn't anything closer than classmate.

"Can we not be friends with them?" Remus had asked his new friend as they walked together to their next class. He held a book to his side and she clutched two against her chest. She followed his gaze to the group of Slytherins that sat in the courtyard—three boys who were much older than the two of them. He found them regal looking, perfectly coiffed hair with creaseless robes and shiny, black leather shoes. They looked nothing like him—a scrawny boy with about six strands of hair flopping against his forehead, a wand that hung lazily out of his pocket, and dirty red converse with broken laces.

"No, my best mate is a Slytherin."

"He is?"

"Yeah, Severus, remember I told you about him?"

"With the black hair?"

"Yeah," she smiled.

"He doesn't like me very much," he recalled.

"He just needs time to warm up to people, don't worry," she assured him.

"So how come they never talk to us?" he brought her back to the original question. She shrugged.

"Because they're rich."

"So?"

"Well, they do things differently," she clarified.

"Like how?"

"You know Aphrodite Flint? She's in our Herbology and Potions classes," she turned to look at him nod. "I tried talking to her once, and the first thing she did was ask what my father does for a living and I told her that he's an accountant for a research company, but she hadn't a clue what I was on about; then she never spoke to me again. You see? She's a pureblood. We're different."

"But you said it didn't matter what sort of blood someone had, that we were all magical in the same way."

"Yes, what I mean, though, is that for some, it is more important. They give more value to it," she explained.

"But that just makes them mean."

"It makes them prejudice, Remus. And I agree, it's complete shite," the small red haired witch concluded.

That night, around a low burning fire, the four boys sat discussing the events of their first day. The common room had died down from its early evening bustle. James and Remus had gotten back an hour ago from their meeting with the Gryffindor first years to make sure they were happy with their
schedules and classes. Remus hadn't realized how tired he was until a pain that started in his shoulders, spread up his neck and turned into a massive migraine. That's how he found himself slumped, taking deep breaths on the red armchair as he waited for Lily to come back down from her room with her stress-induced headache elixir.

"Slughorn has gone completely mad," Sirius mused. It had been the only thing he could say throughout lunch, dinner, and beyond. Every few seconds they would change the topic, talk briefly about some Quidditch match James and him had gone to over the summer, or about some girl who had magically transformed and became one of Sirius' or Peter's new conquests. But once their conversations ended, and the boys fell into silence, being that Remus wasn't in a talkative mood, Sirius would dictate once again those insulting words.

"Eva Manasse," here we go again, Remus said to himself, "Eva Manasse," Sirius said once again, poison dripping off his tongue, "out of all people, Rosier's slag."

"Mmhmm," Remus grumbled, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"And why does Avery have to relentlessly prove to everyone how much of a sodding twat he is?" added Sirius.

"I don't see what the problem is. She hasn't ever bothered us," Peter piped. Sirius shot him a reprimanding look.

"Am I the only one that recalls her striding down the halls with my cousin? Or did I imagine that?"

"You mean Bellatrix?" asked James.

"Who else?"

"Wormtail does have a point, she-"

"Have you lot seen her? She walks around acting like my mother. She thinks she's the bloody Queen of England."

"Well," James hesitated, scratching his neck and scrunching half his face as he got lost in thought, "your mother tends to screech a lot, Manasse, at least, does us the favor of keeping quiet ."

"Does us the favor of never speaking, as in ever," reiterated Peter.

"Thanks for the help, mate," Sirius scoffed.

"What? I agree with you. I hate Slytherins just as much as you do."

"Then why are you defending her?"

James choked, completely surprised by his friend's accusation, " I'm going with Moony tomorrow to talk to Slughorn and McGonagall, you'e just sitting here complaining about some bloody lass we haven't thought twice about until today."

"It doesn't sound like you had such a big problem with it," grumbled Sirius, sliding further down into the couch.

"It's really not that big of a deal. Can we stop fighting?" Remus butted in, massaging the back of his neck as the pain rung through him. He went completely ignored.

"You really have never thought about her?" asked Peter, raising his eyebrows.
"Pardon?" Peter shrugged in response to James, looking back down at his assignment.

"Wormtail," sat up Sirius, "do you fancy Manasse?"

"No," snorted Peter, "just wanna shag 'er."

All three of them stared in disbelief, even Remus picked up his head threw Peter a reprimanding scoff.

"She's too skinny for me," muttered Sirius.

"So you have thought about her?" Peter smirked.

"Sod off. I'm not touching any one of Bellatrix's bitches."

"It could have been worse, could you imagine Avery and Moony?" exclaimed James. Remus frowned as he recalled the Slytherin's hot breath against the nape of his neck.

"He already breathes down my neck for the entire lesson," mentioned Remus, all of them turning to look at him. "It's not much of a difference."

"I hate that fucking little git, I swear-" James began.

"This is what I meant," interrupted Sirius, "you see, she's not just little ol' Eva who never talks. They're going to make his life a living hell. I mean... how daft is Slughorn? Does he not know what goes on in his own house?"

"He never goes down to the dungeons if he doesn't have to," Remus reminded him.

"Are they really going to make Moony's life a living hell?" Peter inquired.

"Oh yeah," chuckled Sirius dryly, "you havin' a laugh, mate? This was the perfect excuse. Slughorn handed Moony's balls to them on a silver platter," Remus' stomach churned at the thought, "If Moony so much as places the knife on the table in her direction, they will hex him. I guarantee it, I call it from now. I'll bet a galleon on it."

Remus listened to Sirius' words and rubbed his eyebrow, sighing deeply. He really didn't need this to become a mess, he really didn't want any drama when he didn't need it. He already had a pile of rubbish he had to sort through, he didn't need her added on top.

"Well," they all turned to Remus, "at least she didn't seem all that perturbed by the arrangement." The green eyed wizard tugged absentmindedly at his eyebrow hair.

"What'd you expect?" Sirius scoffed. "Of course she didn't. She's been prepped and primed to be the perfect pure-blood daughter, she's too well-bred for those sorts of mannerisms. Just like my cousin, the lovely Narcissa. They think you're undeserving of even their irritation, can you believe that? They're so full of themselves that they don't even think you're worthy of being angry at."

"Works for me," mumbled Remus.

"Avery doesn't follow that line of thought, does he?" asked James as he sat down with his legs folded in front of the table, facing Sirius on the couch.

Remus took a moment to ponder. It dawned on him that wasn't used to Slytherins like Eva Manasse, like Narcissa Black, like Lucius Malfoy; he was used to the ones that would outwardly demonstrate their distaste towards those like him. They hurt, insulted, and harassed him, his friends, and anyone
else they deemed fit, but at least he could fight back, stand up for himself; though hateful and
despicable, it was easier to navigate. This was different, and he had no idea how everything would
play out.

"I hate that fucking twat," repeated Sirius, sneering at the thought of Cedric Avery.
All she could see was green.

When she closed her eyes, she saw green. When she dreamed, she dreamed in green. She swore that her blood ran green, that it was impossible for any other color to flow out of her. Green: the color she absentmindedly picked when buying a new quill, a new notebook, a new cloak. There was a splash of green in her eyes, and sometimes she could swear that her skin was tinted green. As a young girl, she had loved lavender, the same color as the fields of her father's family home, but her too-sharped nose cousin told her that the pastel purple made her look pasty and meek, so she switched to the olives of her grandmother's mansion, not realizing that she had foreshadowed her future.

Eva stared up at the canopy- green. After two days of continuously looking at it, she had allowed it to reach out and grab her into its grasp. A forest had grown around her, and she was sinking down into the earth, becoming one with the undergrowth, with the roots and the dirt.

As her peers sunbathed on the lawns and made small talk, the Slytherin witch had locked herself up behind those heavy velvet curtains. There wasn't a think she regretted about it. The ability to turn blind for two days was better than fresh Iranian Beluga caviar. She could disappear into the darkness, into the silence when everyone had aborted the sinister dormitories for a more pleasurable atmosphere.

Where had the time gone? she wondered to herself.

Once again, Monday morning arrived. An odd feeling of numbing emptiness grew from deep within the caves of her body. She could feel it spread through her nerves, her bones. Showers, thunderstorms, tsunamis wouldn't be able to cleanse her off this feeling.

She took a deep breath.

Stretching her arms upwards, towards the canopy, her fingers danced with each other, casting shadows against the emergents. How amazing it was that her body could create something bigger than herself. So seemingly petite, and yet the shadow against the emerald cloth looked as if it belonged to a giant. That shadow did not need help, it was strong enough to jump into the air and fly away. It could push itself through an ocean, it could run up a mountain.

And that was exactly her game: she didn't actually need to be any of that, strong, powerful, big... All she had to do was pretend; be something she wasn't.

But lying was a tiring little thing. It exhausted her, bones aching incessantly and her head throbbing along with it.

She understood, she understood a lot of things. She understood laws and numbers, she understood why certain ingredients didn't fit well with others, she understood what it meant to be politically correct and why it was important. Thus, she was mature enough to sit next to her inferiors, not once allowing it to affect her pride as she kept her head held high. The others had been subconsciously hurt by it, the audacity of that greedy potioneer stinging at them like a brother's betrayal. Everyone around her had been convinced of the little bubble they had created for themselves, convinced that no one would ever pop it, and yet, they all stood there naked...

And the bubble had been popped.

But the bubble popping was rather dull. What bothered Eva most was the collateral that came with it;
the chaos it created and it would create. Overnight, everyone had become a journalist, a politician, a commentator. The empathetic looks from her own housemates, to the wary ones of everyone else, made her want to grab her hair by its ends and rip out strand by strand by strand.

It's time to get up, she reminded herself. She exhaled the breath she had been holding, discreetly pulling aside the bed hangings to peek out. But the morning was still early, too early, and so the beds were still vacated and their inhabitants soundly slept in a world of dreams.

Tiptoeing out of bed, she walked over to her trunk and pulled out the mundane uniform fitted and personalized with her house's colors. Before she entered the bathroom, she glanced once again to make sure the curtains were still drawn.

She closed the door with the agility of a vixen. Like always, she turned on the water to allow it time to get scalding hot. Her showers ran from Arctic cold to Sahara heat and nothing in between. She had to feel cleansed, she had to feel purified. Lately, the feeling seemed to be harder and harder to achieve. No matter how hard she scrubbed, what type of salts she dug into her skin, the dirt seemed to constantly be on her, stuck there like a pesky leech. She had convinced herself that she was contaminated, tainted, and it made her want to rip her skin off.

She pressed her palms against the edges of the cool, ceramic sink, her eyes fixated on the person looking back at her. The mirror was getting foggy and the image became blurrier and blurrier, but she already knew what was behind it. Of course, she could see the image, but she didn't know what her name was or who she was. She didn't know if she would be okay, stuck in that little mirror of hers, but she had memorized the curves and arcs of her face, the degrees of her eyebrows, the length between her chin and her chest. Everything embedded so perfectly, so detailed into her mind. Sometimes she would speak with her, even though she never replied. It made Eva feel a drop of loneliness absorb into her heart, but that drop didn't matter anymore, the heart was no longer there. It had been taken and turned into ash, no one had time to repair the damages.

She stripped herself of her undergarments and let herself slip under the boiling water. As she let the heat bubble her blood, she wondered if normal people thought like she did.

What would it be like to not have an existential crisis every morning? Is this what they talk about while frolicking about with their friends? she pondered, tilting her head as she felt the shower release daggers onto her scalp.

Arrêt, she stopped herself, she always had to stop herself. She had been given a gift when she had been born a Manasse. There was wealth, power, respect that came with her name. Laughter and friendships were not included in that packaged, but one had to check their priorities before assuming that they could have everything want in life. In order to win, some would have to die, and she had come to peace with that realization a very long time ago.

Then, why do you try to convince yourself otherwise? a small voice spoke to her.

Oh, then there were the voices. They were worse than the pretending, worse than the wary stares and the sorry smiles. Voices of everyone, and yet no one, spoke around her, even when they had all gone to sleep. They made her spend endless nights wondering where they were coming from, who they were coming from, but there were never any answers, no matter how many times she asked them.

Arrêt, she repeated internally, she was going to drive herself mad.

Eva stared at the small scratch on the otherwise perfect shower wall. And just like the green canopy, she allowed herself to get lost in it.
"He's a fucking blood traitor, the fucking fat drunk," Antonin Dolohov cursed through a mouthful of sausage.

If it hadn't been for the fatigue, Eva would have thrown him a reprimanding look, but she was completely drained from Antonin's threats and insults. Besides, it wasn't as if everyone had the same words on the tip of their tongues. All morning, Eva had to avert her gaze from the fifth year that sent her a reassuring, *it's-going-to-be-okay* smile. She knew it was going to be okay, of course it was going to be okay- Remus Lupin wasn't going to grab the scalpel and stick it into her jugular.

She had hoped the weekend spent in isolation would have made everything disappear, but she sighed as she realized how wrong she had been.

"The whole lot of them are," Eoin added gruffly, "this school is falling apart with mudbloods and blood traitors, and no one is doing a thing about it."

Cedric Avery threw a knowing glance at Evan Rosier.

"Their time will come soon," he confessed in an undertone, lowering his head so only they could hear.

Eva glanced sideways at Cedric. His eyes fixated on the wizards surrounding him, Severus Snape looking downwards at his friend with a cup covering his mouth and then over at Eva. She looked away immediately, realizing that he hadn't meant for her to hear those words, but she wasn't daft. She understood better than anyone what he meant, she had spent many haunted nights eavesdropping on her father's bitter whispers. He irked over the dirty blood that overran the system, too many pureblood families had become lenient and submissive, the definition of pureblood was changing.

"*What will happen to our family?*" she had heard him fret to his brothers, her uncles. They spent many evenings musing over foreign wine and betting theories on what they could do to stop it. But, unlike the boys seated around her, they used their political power and the law to get what they wanted. And in the end, they were the ones sitting on the top. So, these words coming out of the wizards sitting around her made them seem weak, causing Eva to internally scowl at them as they pawed at one another, seeing who had the key to get in.

Eva knew what power was. They didn't have a clue.

Goosebumps erupted over the back of her neck as she heard Eoin's fork scrape against the silver plate. She eyed the metal cutlery, wanting nothing more than to send it into Cedric Avery's eye. But instead, the Slytherin witch grimaced and looked down at her own uneaten, and yet, full plate.

*Everything looks green,* she noted with disgust. The eggs looked green, the sausages looked green, even the tomatoes looked green. She pushed her plate forward. *Why in Merlin's name is everything green?* she wanted to cry.

Refusing to linger a moment longer with boys who thought her as just a potential wife, Eva swiftly went to stand.

"Wait, where are you going?" Evan protested.

"To class," Eva replied quietly.

"So early?"

"I'm not hungry," she stated firmly, not even bothering to look at him.
She put one foot in front of the other, and eventually made her way out of the Great Hall.

Eva hadn't realized how early she had left breakfast until she happened upon an empty classroom. Her eyes roamed the walls, searching for a clock but finding none. It didn't matter, she would accept this slice of silence with much appreciation. After the headache from breakfast, she felt relieved with a barren room.

Her hand lingered on the door frame, absorbing the image in front of her. Much like the Slytherin common room, this room was fitted with beautifully black-stained cabinets, silver handles curling placed at their centers so that it gave off an air of prestigiousness and specialty. The walls sitting behind the furniture were stained with smog and smoke, the scent of grape flavored tobacco and burnt autumn leaves, that only centuries of potion brewing could create, filled the room, immediately dissipating after a handful of inhales.

She allowed her finger to run over every surface as she made way to her post. The cabinet that sat next to the entrance, the pitch black cauldrons stained by ashy fingers, and the blistering wooden tables that stood lazily in two rows.

But her daydreaming came to a rude halt, interrupted by raucous laughter that echoed throughout the dungeons. It was further than it was near, that much she could deduct, however, no one could ever be entirely sure. In these parts of the castle, the surroundings were much like a snake slithering in the shadows, tricky and hard to detect. Everything tended to echo, even a kitten's pattering could be heard from the other side, making it seem larger and more fearsome that it actually was.

With a bated breath, Eva straightened her back and slipped hastily onto her seat. She patted down her skirt, even though there were no wrinkles, and placed her bag neatly at the edge of the table. By the time she heard them at the end of the hall, she had her books placed in a neat pile in front of her, opening one up to a random page and placing a finger on the word clockwise.

But her mind was thinking everything but how to brew a cure for boils. Instead, her head was slightly tilted, her ear ready and attentive for the laughing that steadily grew louder and louder and louder and louder...

Until.

Well, she didn't dare look up, but, by their reaction, she could only guess that they weren't very chummy with her.

Their laughter had immediately ceased once their eyes laid upon the sole occupier of the room.

Sirius placed two hands on both Peter and Remus' necks, making sure the two of them didn't continue their retreat back into the hall.

"Don't be pansies," he warned them, pushing them into the room and rolling his eyes.

"She's studying," whispered Peter, looking from James to Sirius. James shrugged his shoulders, pushing past his friends and moving over to his own desk. Remus, who lingered by the door as Sirius and Peter followed James' path, dared a glance her way. She was reading, obviously not bothered by their presence. He pursed his lips, averting his gaze and looking back over at his friends.

Without a care in the world, Sirius smacked his bag onto the floor, hopping onto the dilapidated table and letting it groaned under his weight. Both Peter and James remained standing, their items placed by the edge of the table. Remus stood at the opposite end of the table, pulling his own satchel up onto the table, bending down and allowing himself to be free of its strap.
His back was turned to her, but he couldn't help but think that she was watching them.

Even if she wasn't.

"What's wrong with you?" Sirius inquired Remus, noticing his friend's rather skittish composure.

"Nothing, why?" Remus responded, his eyebrows scrunching and his head shaking as if the notion of anything being wrong was too ridiculous to fathom. Sirius raised his eyebrows, flicking his chin towards the girl sitting diagonally behind them. His friend's green eyes didn't bend for a moment, keeping them firmly on his own grey ones.

"Make sure it's nothing." Sirius warned him, turning back to James. "So, Prongs, five galleons Puddlemere United wins by 20 points via surrender?"

"Five galleons?" spat out Peter, his eyes widening at the sum.

James scoffed, "you're going to lose."

"You sure 'bout that, Prongs?"

"You have never won a quidditch bet, Padfoot," James retorted matter-of-factly.

"You've wounded me," Sirius feigned hurt by placing a hand over his heart. Remus shook his head and chuckled as the boys continued to bicker between themselves.

"A-are you really just going to give away five whole galleons?" Peter continued.

"Either way, we're going to spend it on hooch for the four of us," replied Sirius, shrugging his shoulders.

"What are you buying that costs five galleons?" snorted Remus.

"Can you please stop using the word hooch," commented James.

"Do you always have to be so punctilious?"

"Big word there, Padfoot," teased Remus, shaking his head again.

"I'll remind you that my beloved mother did gift me with a world class education. I don't understand why everyone thinks I'm a blithering idiot."

They all paused, sharing looks with one another before James and Remus burst out into a deep chuckle. Remus' hand covered his stomach, leaning backward as Sirius' frown slowly lifted upwards, eventually turning into a prolonged chuckle.

But their smiles and chuckles were quieted when a new addition stepped through from the dark halls and into the classroom.

"Snivellus," Sirius hissed, jumping down from the table.

"You're an hour early for potions, Black," quickly belittled Severus Snape.

Sirius' nose flared, but James, much to everyone's surprise, placed a hand on his friend's forearm, holding him back. The former's fingers twitched towards his wand, wrapping around the edge that stuck out of his trouser's pocket.
Severus didn't hesitate, pulling his out immediately and with much ease. His chin was pointed up, his body on its side as he stared down the Gryffindor wizard.

Finally, Eva had decided to glance their way. Her eyes slightly widened at the brawl unfurling around her. Once moment she had been listening to a Quidditch bet, and seconds later there were two boys with hair as black as coal challenging one another.

Albeit the amusement, she began to feel her lungs constrict. The air was getting heavy, the whispers dancing back and forth like the irritating sound of self-knitting needles.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, but before she could decide whether she was going to faint or voluntarily sit on the floor, a voice bursted into the room.

Cedric Avery bursted through the door, his eyes darting back and forth between the two wizards, faltering on the girl sitting in the back. His eyebrows furrowed, pushing past the two of them and making his way towards a rather pale looking Eva. He placed a hand on her shoulder, causing the girl to wake up from whatever stupor she had been in.

"Have you been here the entire time?" All five boys looked her way, surprised that the Slytherin hadn't gone immediately to his friend's aide. Remus tilted his head, leaning back and past Cedric Avery to catch a glimpse of his partner. The Gryffindor couldn't help a twinge of guilt as he realized that they had probably disturbed her, all she had been trying to do was catch up on some reading and they had gone off and started a fight.

Naturally.

But before anyone could react, their professor walked in wearing a rather daring lime-green and purpled striped suit.

"Now, what is going on in here?" Slughorn exasperated, Severus immediately lowering his wand and pocketing the potential weapon. He muttered something, turning away and pulling Cedric by his robes as they continued onto the back.

Eva was glad her professor had walked in when he had, Avery scared Eva the most out of all her housemates. If he had any morals, Eva didn't know about them. She had seen him do cruel things, and she had heard even worse from the girls who shared her dorm. His dark, grey-eyed stare almost made her shiver. If she hadn't been focusing on the commotion in front of her, she just may have.

"Mr. Black, Pettigrew, do you have somewhere to be?" Slughorn turned to ask them as more students began filing into the class. Sirius grimaced at the potions professor as Peter went back over to the desk to receive their belongings. The blue-eyed wizard held both bags on opposite shoulders, walking back over to Sirius who had now turned toward Severus.

"We aren't finished," Sirius sneered at the black-haired boy sitting in the far back. The Ravenclaws looked between the two awkwardly, slowing taking their seats as to not put themselves in the middle of the conflict.

Eva, out of curiosity, looked over at her own partner. He was nonchalantly leaning against the front desk, periodically looking over his shoulder at the redhead girl with he shiny new badge and the bullhorn voice. They were animatedly speaking of something, his hands flailing about as he explained or sermonized something. Eva pursed her lips, looking back down at the book spread out in front of her before turning back up.

He had now turned around, placing a light hand on his friend's dainty shoulder.
How could he permit himself? she wondered. No one would ever dare touch Eva; no one had ever even smiled at her in that way before. They looked happy together, comfortable, calm.

What was that like? To not feel like there was always something to prove?

"We'll talk about it later, Lily," Eva heard him salute his friend. And despite herself, she continued to watch him. He leaned over and grabbed his items, looking up and slightly flinching back as his eyes caught her own.

And, if he wasn't mistaken, he could swear the corners of her eyes slightly uplifted. But before he could get a really good look, she had turned back around and watched their professor with a patient expression. He lifted his eyebrows slightly, pushing his lips out as he stood there, observing the rather odd gesture that had just passed between the two of them.

He wondered if it was because she had been caught looking at him... But she wasn't blushing, she didn't look humiliated by the fact that he had.

The Gryffindor shook his head, waking himself up from the altered reality that had just occurred and continued over to her.

From beside her, she could hear wooden pegs screeching against the bumpy stone floor. Remus grimaced at the sound, not expecting it to be so loud. He glanced briefly at his partner to see if she had noticed, but she wasn't looking. Her fingers were on her lap and not a single body part moved her, not even her eyelashes. If Remus hadn't bothered to look, he wouldn't have even thought her there.

He looked around, watching as the last of the group trailed into the room with hurried expressions. Remus' fingers tapped on the desk, his leg bouncing up and down as he decided whether he should greet the girl or not. On one hand, he didn't want to disturb her, but he also felt incomplete if he didn't at least salute her a good morning.

"Good morning," he spat out, not turning to look at her but watching from the corner of his eye.

She didn't reply.

"I hope everyone enjoyed their weekend," their professor toured the room as his students replied in groans and nods, "and that everyone had a chance to review Golpalott's Third Law, which we went over and discussed in our last class?"

From beside her, she heard Remus snort. She couldn't help struggle against a smile threatening the corners of her lips. Sure, she had understood the law, easily understanding the words of older men that thought they could decide for everyone else, but she rather enjoyed his rash and heedless honesty, probably not even realizing it himself. It was a refreshing change in her life, where most everything had to be calculated, including risk percentages, before acted upon.

"In a simple sentence, could anyone explain Golpalott's Third Law?" He scanned the students' faces again. "Anyone?" he repeated pathetically when no one bothered to offer up their hand.

"Miss Evans?" The entire room turned to Lily, surprised that she hadn't spat out the answer already. Eva tilted her head slightly, eyeing the Head Girl with much curiosity. Remus looked away from his friend for a moment, noticing his partner's head that lightly brushed against his forearm. His eyes widened, surprised to see the expression on her face- the same one an enemy used when waiting for their foe to fail, expecting them to fail.

"Um," she fumbled, trying her best to collect her thoughts, "I don't know how simply my response
would be, professor."

"Hmph," Eva smirked, her head remaining in the same position but her eyes glancing over to their professor.

"That's okay, my dear, try your best," Slughorn pushed on, but Lily's only response was the blush that bloomed slowly across her cheeks. "Ah, Miss Clearwater!" A chestnut haired Ravenclaw sitting in the back of the classroom apprehensively raised her hand. Her lips were turned downward, her feet shuffled against the ground and she cleared her throat before speaking.

"Uh, okay, so one must find the single ingredient which, when added to a blend of antidotes, transforms them alchemically into a combined whole which will counteract the entire blended poison?" Remus noted that her response had sounded more like a question than a secure answer. From two tables behind them, both the Gryffindor and the Slytherin could hear Melisende Gamp and Leo Jacknife cackle over their peer's timidness.

Remus couldn't help a scowl, throwing a glance over his shoulder as he eyed the two of them. Melisende caught the prefect's eye, waving her fingers at him and biting seductively down on her lip. His eyes narrowed and the girl broke out into a rather ominous giggle as she whispered something to her partner.

"She wants the applause, you're giving it to her," he heard the words escape his partner's lips, having to look twice at her before realizing she had actually spoken. Her words had sounded so faraway, so airy and intangible that he couldn't be sure. His mouth opened to say something, but he couldn't get it out before a whine erupted through the classroom.

"That makes no sense," cried Aife Erksine.

"I couldn't have said it better myself, five points to Ravenclaw," grinned Slughorn, ignoring the frustrated Hufflepuff.

"Since this is a difficult task, you will be working with your partner to find the antidote to a blended poison. Along with your discovery, there must be two rolls of parchment, per group, on how you solved it. This includes the steps that you used, books that you used, different theories, and anything else you can think of that helped you and your partner. Due by the end of the week."

There was a collection of gasps and groans, but he held his palm up to silence everyone. "You will have your time both outside and inside of class. Additionally, all these poisons have names and studies, it is not until next week that you will be doing the same task but with random poisons. You all are capable of this on your own, with a partner it should feel like a summer's breeze," he finished to a silent classroom.

Though the last part of his instructions left Eva rather uneasy, she couldn't deny that she had been expecting it. And though she didn't think relations outside of the classroom necessary, she knew how to play the diplomat.

*Always playing, always a bloody play,* she thought.

"You may start," Slughorn announced, and the class immediately erupted into a low buzz. Only she and her partner sat in silence as everyone else discussed and complained about the week's task.

"Uh," Remus cleared his throat. As he turned towards her, his professor placed a bottle at the edge of the table.

"Thank you, professor." Slughorn smiled weakly in response. He hadn't bothered much with Remus
over the years, the only reason he had even approved him for his N.E.W.T.s class was because his father worked with the Ministry of Magic, and because he had miraculously received an E on his O.W.L.s.

He reached for the little vile to his far left. It felt so delicate between his long and calloused fingers. Wrapped around the cork, he noticed a modest-looking, handwritten note. He placed his index finger behind it to bring it up in order to read it better.

"Blended furux," sighed Remus. He looked from the burgundy vile back to his partner. She hadn't been fazed in the slightest by his comment, instead she continued to stare at whatever was in front of her. Out of curiosity, he permitted himself to follow her gaze, but all he saw were his peers flipping through ancient books and observing their own viles. "Um," he attempted again to catch her attention. Finally, there was a small movement coming from his right. She had turned slightly to look at him from the corner of her eye.

"Um?" She raised her eyebrows.

"We've got blended furux," he held up the vile to show her. She observed his movements, looking from the little glass bottle and back to him. "Are you familiar with it?" he continued when she didn't respond. Remus began to wonder if the witch was mute.

"Are you?" she played back at him, tilting her head slightly.

"Not really," he admitted, looking down at it.

"Well, it's in the book," she stated guilelessly, looking at him as he nodded shortly and placed the bottle back down in order to pull out his books. Before he could, she placed a finger on her own, sliding it along the table and over to him. He raised his eyebrows, slightly taken aback by her offer.

"Uh, yeah, thanks," he said, reaching forward for the book and running through the pages. His eyes caught sight of perfectly cursive notes written into the sides, small stars placed on certain words and their corrections sitting below them. Though she was observing him, Remus noted that only those with a passion for the subject could take so much time and put in so much effort. He hadn't known that about her, he had just assumed she was interested in whatever witches like her were interested in.

Eva was amused, to say the least. She enjoyed surveying him as he paused on certain pages, his fingers absentmindedly running over whatever she had scribbled into the sidelines that day. Remus' eyes darted over the book and over at her, his neck slowly going red as he realized that she had been watching him ogling her work.

"My bad, just checking the titles," he gulped, grabbing a handful of the pages and flipping through them hastily as he searched for the poison. The Slytherin witch didn't reply, growing rather bored and unimpressed with the way he fretted under her gaze. She had thought him different, a refreshing novice to the game, and yet, he wasn't. He was just a little boy like all other little boys.

Eva looked away.

"Here we go: blended furux," he began, his eyes scanning over the page, "a mixture of poisons from a variety of lizard bloods," he continued scrolling down the page with scrunched eyebrows, "which causes the skeleton of the consumer to dissolve, leaving the organism limp."

"Delightful," she drawled, Remus looking up to find that she was no longer watching him.

"We should probably find the ingredients for the poison," he continued, looking back down to the
"We?" she countered instinctively. Her own mind had shut off for a second and the man that armed her wall had responded for her. She watched him closely as he froze from reading, his gaze slowly turning upward to her once again. She almost wanted to take it back, to apologize and tell him she hadn't meant for it to come out that way, but she wasn't used to working with anyone.

But she couldn't apologize, she knew better than that.

"What's wrong with *we*?" he spat out, the question lingering heavily between the two of them for a few beat. When she didn't reply, Remus scoffed and shook his head, adding: "How else were you going to go about this project?"

"I'll manage just fine," she replied, her voice matching his own.

Remus' eyes narrowed, his eyebrows knitted together. One moment he had been frozen, and the next he could feel a deep fire igniting his veins. He didn't understand why she wanted to make things difficult. They could have a peaceful partnership, one where they didn't bother each other. Instead, she wanted to taunt and tease. She wanted to continue to wave her supremacy in his face, but Remus was no longer a little boy. He wasn't going to let her step all over him.

"You're such a coward," he hissed, the whisper sending shivers down her spine. "You're too scared to stand next to a filthy mutt for one simple brewing project, cheers."

Remus was shocked at his sudden boost of adrenaline. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest, pumping faster than times when he'd almost been caught during a prank. His narrowed eyes widened, but he had turned around before Eva could notice. In order to distract himself, he shakily reached for a roll of parchment, but he could not bring himself to grab a quill and ink. He couldn't make himself to do anything but listen to the blood rushing in his ears.

He inhaled and exhaled as he began making a list of the ingredients, noting to himself to pick up a book on their counters. But really, he was just trying to get rid of the wolf that had come to surface for a few moments. Though rare, and though he had a good handle on it, this girl, this terribly offensive girl sitting next to him, had brought it out. But he knew better than that, he knew he had to be and do better.

From next to him, Eva blinked and looked unto him with a glassy expression. Her mind had travelled off somewhere far, his words ringing back into her head like the bells of Notre Dame at noon. On one hand, the words were false, she didn't really care who stood next to her as she brewed, as long as they didn't bother her in the process. But she also couldn't help the slight impression he had just made, never in her life had anyone spoken to her like that. No one had the audacity to call her out for what she was, for what they all were. It was almost endearing, and maybe she would have been endeared, except she couldn't be.

"Watch your mouth," she threatened coldly, but no where near what she had hoped for. His gaze lifted up from the page to her knee, but the Gryffindor decided to play her at her own game and ignore her.

Unbeknownst to her, Remus instantly regretted what he had said. Sure, she was bigoted and prejudice and everything he despised in the world, but that didn't mean he had to erupt into the hellhound on her. Especially since, well, she didn't really seem like the sort to get irrationally irate and hold him at wand-point as Bellatrix had often done with anyone who got in her way.

Eva smirked as she reached out and carefully clasped her hold around the glass vile. She flipped it
upside down, watching as the poison ran to the other side.

Maybe she was a coward, maybe she should have said more, threatened him more, told him that she'd release the four horsemen on his head if he didn't apologize.

But she didn't.

And she should have known better than to listen to that Eva.

"What's wrong, Remus?" Lily whispered motherly to her friend sitting beside her. She bowed her head down and placed a supportive hand on his forearm, a slight wrinkle between her brows indicated that she was worried.

He shook his head slightly, "don't worry about it, it's nothing."

Lily pursed her lips, not moving from her position.

"Then how come you haven't touched your food?" she urged on. Remus sighed for the millionth time that day. Lily stayed silent as she watched his hand lift up to run through his hair.

"Come on," she tugged playfully at his sweater, "you know me. I'm not going to stop pestering you until you tell me."

Remus smiled lightly, his eyes still turned downward as he traced the outline of his leather loafers. He placed his mouth against the forearm, shifting his gaze upwards to Lily's. He watched her for a moment, thinking whether it was wise to burden her with yet another problem of his.

"It's really okay," he assured her, his words muffled against his arm.

"Really?" she reprimanded him.

"Lily, I really don't-"

"Want to bother me, yeah, yeah," she swatted his words away like a fly. "Remus, you know that's not me."

Remus glanced around the table, wondering if any unwanted ears were eavesdropping on the conversation. James, who was one seat over on the bench, was discussing fiercely with Emmeline Vance about something Quidditch related. Peter, who sat across from James, stared at the two chasers with great interest, but never dared interrupt because he knew better than to interrupt James during one of his rants. Remus then shifted his eyes over to Sirius, flinching his head back as he met with his friend's icy grey eyes boring into his own.

"So? You gonna tell us or not?" Sirius said as he chewed rather obnoxiously on the piece of cheese he just shoved into his mouth.

"I'm really okay," he repeated.

"Mate," Sirius chewed, "everyone knows you're not okay. I know it, she knows it, and that first year, that's been staring at you since we got here, knows it," he continued eating and chewing.

"It's just... It's just so pathetic, that's why. It's really not that big of a deal and I'm turning it into one," he confessed in an undertone.

"So if it's not that big of a deal, then you can tell us?" observed Lily, trying to sneak her way into
getting him to tell her.

"You two aren't going to quit, are you?"

"Nope," they both said at the same time. Remus sighed.

"Fine, but it's really not that significant. Don't expect anything."

"Mate, just bloody spit it out already."

"I called her a coward. I called Manasse a coward." There was a pause, Lily looked at Remus, Sirius looked at Remus, Remus looked down at his hands. Then, Sirius burst out laughing, everyone in their vicinity turning to see what the commotion was.

"Bloody hell," grumbled Remus, throwing his head into his hands.

"That's it?" asked Lily, ignoring the tittering wizard across from them. Remus nodded.

"She said she didn't want to work with me," he continued to Lily.

"She can't do that."

"Well, apparently she can."

"She can't because Slughorn won't allow it. I'm sure she knows that," Lily assured him.

"Can you bloody stop?" growled Remus as Sirius pressed his forehead down onto the table.

"Mate, the way you said it- you should have seen your face. Blimey, you looked like you were going to pass out."

"It's really not that funny," commented Lily.

"Evans, go shag James or something. I'm having my moment."

"That's gross," Lily bit back with a wry face.

"Blimey, I didn't know you had it in you, mate," barked Sirius as he attempted to calm himself down.

"Hey, what's going on?" butted in James, turning to look at the three of them.

"Here we go," mumbled Remus under his breath.

"This kid is just too bloody funny. I need to take a walk," Sirius told them, getting up with tears threatening the corners of his eyes.

"It really wasn't that funny," countered Remus to James, who just looked between the two of his friends with an expression of vast bewilderment.

"What? Are you actually taking a walk?" piped Peter as he watched Sirius walking away.

"Remus?" James asked his friend.

"It's nothing, I just had a disagreement with my potions partner." James face fell.

"What do you mean by disagreement?" Remus wanted to knock his friend's head onto the table. He knew this was going to happen. He knew that James was going to get defensive, and that Sirius was
going to end up rolling on the floor. That's why he had wanted to avoid it.

"Like I have said a billion times- it's nothing. It is really nothing," he reiterated, the side of his hand banging down on the table between every word.

"Remus," Lily's soft voice came from next to him, her hand squeezing his forearm. He sighed, calming himself down.

"Oh... Okay," James said. They all were interrupted and turned as they heard another round of Sirius' laughter ring throughout the entire Great Hall. They saw him bent over, leaning over the doorway as he clutched his stomach, tears running down his face.

"Someone should go get him," mentioned Lily, half amused, half displeased.

"Yeah," agreed James.

"I'll go," grumbled Peter, pushing himself up and walking over to get Sirius. Once James turned back to his conversation with his fellow chaser, Lily wrapped her arm around Remus' and laid her head on his shoulder. He placed the side of his cheek on her soft hair.

"Don't worry about her."

"I know."

"And don't let her intimidate you, if she does anything that's out of place- call her out on it. Okay?"

"Okay."

Lily lifted her head and shifted so that they were looking at each other face-to-face. She searched his expression.

"Despite whatever you may believe, no one should be treated as lesser than the other. You stand up for yourself, okay?"

"Yes, Lily," he chuckled.

"Promise me."

"I promise," he smiled.

Remus had spent the better part of his late afternoon in the library trying to figure out the potions project. For the first hour or two, he had scurried through the library picking up various books from the potions section. After his adventure throughout the infinite shelves of books, he finally settled upon the few he could get his hands on and began running through them. Before he knew it, the library had lit up with torches and his back had begun to ache.

That's how she found him, hunched over and in the dark. It wasn't like she had been looking for him, but there he was. She imagined that he was too lost in the studies of past potioneers to even notice her standing there, but she didn't want to bother him. Instead, she took the time to admire him, to really get a good look at who she would be spending a lot of her time with.

At least he looks like a hard worker, she said to herself. All she knew about him was the company he kept, a rowdy lot of four boys that took pleasure in pranking and squandering everyone else's time.

He lifted his hands above his head, stretched out, and yawned like a cat.
"Lupin," she announced softly. He jolted in his seat, quickly turning to see who it was. Without much thought, his eyebrows furrowed and he stared at the witch without greeting her. He wondered if he was dreaming, if he had been in the library for so long that he had begun to hallucinate.

*Yes, that must be it*, he concluded. Her voice had been foreign to both him and herself. It was tied with daintiness, caution, and apology, very unlike the person they both knew.

She began to feel uncomfortable standing while he gawked at her.

*Where are his manners?* she asked herself. He should have greeted her and offered her the chair next to him. Anyone else would have gotten up to pull that same chair out for her, but her partner seemed lost to the etiquettes of her world. *He's not from your world, ma belle,* a voice reminded her.

Without wasting another minute, she wrapped her hand around the top of the chair and pulled it from underneath the table. Remus watched carefully, not once taking his eyes off of her. He followed every move, from the way her fingers grasped the wood to how she made sure her skirt was folded properly beneath her. He still believed he was hallucinating.

His constant staring had surpassed rude, but she still didn't make mention of it. Instead, she pursed her lips and began reading over the many titles scattered in front of her. From different dragon species, which had nothing to do with their project, to books on voodoo potions used in Haiti.

"Where did you find these?" she asked, running a finger over the dusty titles.

"In the library." She bit down on the inside of her cheek in order to keep herself from bursting out into a laugh.

"Well," she paused, turning to look up at him, "I suppose that's a correct answer."

"It is."

She glanced at him through the strands of hair that had fallen over her shoulder, blinding her side view. Since her arrival, he hadn't once taken his eyes off of her. She noted how hazy they were, nearly bloodshot. She toured the rest of him, his body bent over the table, supporting his temple on his knuckle and elbow. This was an unfamiliar encounter for her. There was barely a time she could recall where a man had let her see him like this. Not even her father would dare let her see him tired, weak. They never crouched over tables from fatigue or ran their fingers through their hair with impatience. Everything in her life was always numbered, poised, and practiced. There was nothing practiced about the situation she currently found herself in.

"I take it you started," she commented.

"What are you doing?" Remus could swear he saw a flicker of hurt in her eyes, but before he could really look closer, she had recomposed herself- the icy stare had returned.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she challenged, an all too familiar glimmer in her eyes. It didn't do anything but irritate him even more, she was the last person he wanted to see.

"If I knew, I wouldn't have asked you."

*Is he always this sarcastic?* she thought to herself. Coming to the conclusion that he most likely wanted to be left alone, she reached for her bag. Remus' furrowed eyebrows deepened as she rummaged through her books. Soon enough, she had pulled out about two feet of rolled parchment.

"What is that?" he blurted out, the fatigue getting the best of him.
"Here," she held it out to him, "what are we waiting for?" she bowed her head down and whispered like they were two kids planning some sort of prank.

"We're not waiting for anything, I'm waiting for you to scoot on out of here," he snorted cruelly, still staring into her eyes. She blinked, dropping the parchment between them on the table as if it were unspeakably dirty. He had this bored expression on his face as if he would rather be anywhere else in the world besides right there with her, and Eva really wanted to wipe it off of his face.

*Calm yourself,* she demanded.

Lazily, he reached out and rolled open the parchment. His eyebrows steadily raised and shot up into his hairline as he scanned over the words.

"Is this the dissertation?" he baffled. Everything seemed to be there: cited books, names of the potioneers, all the ingredients, theories, everything. It had only been two days since the project was assigned, and she had finished it.

*How is that possible?* he asked himself. He had spent hours upon hours and had come no closer to a conclusion.

"You cheated," he accused bluntly.

"Excuse you."

"No need, you cheated."

"That's rather harsh. I would never," she countered.

"Please, stop pretending to be offended. You're so bloody bad at it." She held herself back from gaping, her stoic expression remaining firm and steady on her face as she watched him carefully.

"Have you gone mad?" she feigned a small laugh, as if this were some sort of practical joke.

"No, but you have."

"I did the entire assignment-"

"No, you cheated. I don't know how, but I am certain you cheated."

"You're such a waste of my time."

"Likewise," he lifted his eyebrows with a forceful smile painted on his lips.

"I can't believe how much of a prat you are," she mentioned with a mix of amusement and bitterness on the tip of her tongue.

"Please, save your crocodile tears for someone who cares, or for when you get expelled," he taunted, shaking his head and going back to his work. She didn't move, but continued to survey him. She raised one eyebrow.

"Is this how your muggle parents raised you? To be rude and disrespectful when someone does you a favor?"

"Don't fucking speak about my parents," he demanded heatedly. Remus Lupin was a very understanding bloke, but anyone who spoke about his family or his friends in a negative way would have their tongue ripped out before they could finish their sentence.
"Obviously something went wrong." She stopped speaking when he leaned into her.

"I don't want to hear another fucking word from your snake mouth," he sneered. The shelves hid them from any onlookers, his voice was low and hot and his eyes were full of fury. But if he thought that he was scaring her, or intimidating her, he was dead wrong. There was very little that could successfully scare Eva, and angry little boys was not one of them. She smirked at his face, offense filling his green eyes as he observed her smugness.

They stayed like that for quite some time. Neither one of them wanting, nor knowing what, to say.

_You messed up_, a voice told Eva. She sat there in disbelief. She knew that she should have taken the parchment and go on her merry way. Actually, she should have never even bothered showing up in the first place. _Why did you?_ another voice screeched in her head. Right then and there, Eva felt a massive regret sit on her shoulders. She didn't really feel this way often, but she realized she had made several mistakes in the past quarter of an hour, mistakes that most likely would follow her down the trail for quite sometime. _Merde_, she said to herself.

"What are you still doing here?" he broke the silence.

"You should look it over."

"I'm not going to do that."

"Not my problem."

"Not mine either."

"Great, neither one of us has any problems then," she concluded.

"Please," he scoffed. "You know you owe me an explanation."

"Oh?"

"If you didn't cheat, how in Godric's name did you finish this bloody assignment in two days?"

"Why do I owe you an explanation?" she brought him back to his first question.

"Because we're partners."

"Oh?" she smirked again. He narrowed his eyes.

"Sodding shit, Sirius was right. You're just like his mother," he scoffed, a dry chuckle leaving his lips.

"You don't know me and you never will." Her tone didn't match her voice, rather it was oddly serene. Remus almost felt like it belonged in some sort of monastery than in a heated argument.

"You know, you're not as bloody mysterious as you think you are."

"Oh?"

"Actually, I don't think you're mysterious at all. I think you're an anti-social, elitist rich girl with nothing to worry about except how to make life difficult for everyone else," he said in one breath. She lifted both her eyebrows as she nodded.

"What a brave, little Gryffindor you are," she whispered ominously. "Congratulations, you must be
so proud of yourself," she continued, her eyes thin and almost seductive as she watched him. Remus didn't recline, he simply watched her from his hunched over position. His face felt sticky, his palms needed to be washed, and there was this thickness to the air that just made the entire situation that much more uncomfortable. Something changed in his expression, and for a couple seconds it all felt like deja-vu to him, recalling a time nearly two years ago when she had been close, too close, to him. It reminded him of the blissful heat that had radiated off her body in the icy wind. 

"Jasmines," he thought, the scent filling the air between them. It had been so long that he had forgotten, and yet, here they were.

*Remus,* a voice tried to rationalize. He brought himself back to the present, eyes refocusing on the witch next to him. She had pressed her back into the chair, but her knee was still pressing against his leg. *Does she notice?* he wondered. He didn't really know if he minded all that much.

"I'm taking this to McGonagall to get it verified for plagiarism," he informed her, picking up the parchment to indicate that's what he was referring to.

"Okay," she muttered, not really caring all that much.

"Okay?" he repeated.

"Yes, okay."

"That means I'm taking it, right now," he continued, his words slow as they rolled off his tongue. She looked at him as if this were some sort of riddle she was supposed to figure out.

"Okay, I'm done here," she announced, abruptly lifting herself up and grabbing her things. She really didn't want to waste another minute with this boy. He had already snapped about fifty of her nerves, she really didn't need double that.

"Bye," he saluted her coldly. Eva didn't even bother replying to him. She couldn't believe she had tried to do them a favor, and instead, he had treated her like she was some sort of decrepit who had tried to rob him of his money. Eva didn't mind. Despite the respect that her name demanded, it wasn't past her to mingle with the desolates, as long as they left her to herself. She was a quiet one, sticking to the shadows as they gave her a cover. She didn't want to be bothered, she didn't want to be touched, all she wanted was her peace. She didn't care whether someone was poor, muggle, pureblood, wealthy, or brainless- if they gave her what she wanted, she would leave them be.

Remus Lupin did not give her what she wanted, actually, he did the exact opposite and gave her hell. And now she had to decide whether it was worth her time to do the same to him, or to just let him go with the river.

*We'll figure it out, we always do,* she said to the voices inside her head as she exited the library, finally out of that crowded mess of a place.

Remus looked over his shoulder as she retreated into the distant, but was met with only the empty paths between the wooden bookcases. He looked down at the library floor with glossy eyes, trying his best to will himself into reading the parchment that he held, but all he felt was limbo.

On another note, Remus could confidently concur that that had been the most Eva Manasse had ever said to anyone. She had the notorious reputation of being exaggeratedly silent, never bothering to greet nor salute anyone. Often times, she would have others introduce her to strangers, and only then might she speak to them.

Remus rubbed his temples, not even sure what he was thinking of anymore. Not sure of anything...
really.

Did that actually happen? he wondered to himself, thinking over the conversation he had just had. One moment she was here, then she had been gone. Like the wind, he thought to himself. You need to sleep, mate, he snorted and nodded to himself. He did need to sleep.
The Hazel Wand

The morning of September 9th greeted Hogwarts with a wind that swung around like a drunken ballerina, every corridor ringing with the whistles of the air. Eva felt a surge of power every time it ripped through her hair, blinding her and scratching at her neck. There was nothing she wanted more than to lift herself up and fly away with it.

She was loitering on a dusty dirt pathway that wrapped from the school down to the lake. It was quite hidden, and no one really ever used it unless they were hiding from someone, which was exactly why she was there.

The skies were cloudy, as they always were in Scotland, and it made the lake look awfully dreary. However, she enjoyed the way the wind caused the waves to undulate back and forth, almost making her dizzy as she focused in on them. It was her solace, the lake. Silent, dark, and full of secrets, a lot like herself. Sometimes, she wondered about making it her home, jumping into it from the high cliffs on the northern side. Maybe they'd make me their queen, she entertained the idea. What a silly thought from a silly little girl, another voice whispered. She had to silence that one, it was the worst out of all of them.

Luckily, her thoughts were interrupted when she heard someone clearing their voice. She looked up, eyeing them stoically.

"Hello my beauty," the wizard greeted with a mischievous, toothy smile that showed off his one golden replacement.

"Great to see you again," she drawled, shifting her gaze from him back out to the lake. She crossed her arms over chest, clearly conveying her disinterest in his giddiness.

"You really should smile more, you look so wonderful when you do," he commented, stepping further down the path so that they were now standing in front of each other. She rolled her eyes.

"Get on with it," she told him. Now it was his turn to roll his eyes. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small pouch, though inside contained several different items. He handed it over to her and she gladly accepted it, in return she placed in his hand several gold coins. He spread them out in his palm and counted them.

"You are my favorite customer," he grinned impishly.

"Fletcher," she forced a smile, "I don't pay you for conversation." His grin faltered immediately.

"Do try to be happier, my dear. You're going to get wrinkles with all that scowling you do." She ignored him, reaching into the pouch and juggling around for something rectangular. She pulled out the glossy little container, twirling it in her hands, and ripping it open as she pulled out one of the thin sticks. She placed it between her lips.

Incendio, she thought to herself, the tip of the cigarette lighting up and dying out into a light glow.

"You purebloods really are something else," he snorted amusingly. She continued to puff on the cigarette without saying anything. "But you can't live off of cigarettes and coca leaves, Eva."

"Don't call me that."

"I was testing the waters."
"Don't."

"Whatever, I've got another sale to make," the Ravenclaw wizard informed her. He bent down and stretched out his hands, "your highness."

"Just leave." And he did just that, turning around and heading back up the sandy path, disappearing beyond the curves and the stalagmites. The cigarette was half way done, but she had enough time to enjoy a second without any rush. She took in a deep, tobacco-filled breath and then exhaled everything from her body.

"Where is this class?" a voice shrilled from somewhere behind her. Eva didn't want to pay attention though, she never really did.

The descent from the castle to the green border between the lake and the Forbidden Forest was a steep one. It wasn't easy, and she had seen several of her peers slipping and dirtying their bottoms. Eva had no intention of joining them, so she walked slowly and kept her eyes on the dried path in front of her. From where she was, she could see everything. She could make out her professor standing atop of a boulder, speaking enthusiasmly to the three students, presumably Ravenclaws, that had arrived early. Although commonly teased amongst students and staff members alike, Eva never saw his peculiarities as eccentric. He knew so much about different things from every corner of the world, he could answer any question, any thought.

Unfortunately, no one else seemed to appreciate that. Most of the students in the class only attended because of his philosophy; which included no examination and no out of class assignments.

"Why welcome!" She could hear him greet the students who had just flocked below him. Others ran past Eva, consequently tripping over the steep hill and falling into the mud. She quietly strolled past them, not worrying about tardiness. Besides, their professor wasn't one to fret over time. He believed that everything happened exactly when it was meant to happen.

"Thank you, thank you everyone. First and foremost, I deeply apologize for this week's unfortunate weather, and the delay it created for our class. Remind you, I am not responsible!" A few students chuckled as he held his ends up innocently. "However, thank Hermes, we have rather decent weather today, and we will absolutely use it to our full advantage!" he beamed down at them.

"Everyone ready? Is everyone here?" he stretched his chin out, looking over the students.

"I can do a head count, professor," offered Lily Evans.

"No, no, whoever wants to be here, will be here," he assured her with a scarred smile. "Now, everyone follow me!" He jumped off the rock and headed towards the Great Lake. Most of the students complied and followed with curious eyes, laughing at the way their teacher skipped to their destination like an excited little girl on her birthday. Rosalia Selwyn, one of Eva's housemates, groaned at the thought of having to walk anymore through the wind. Especially near the lake, which Eva had already witnessed the waves that came up and sprayed the banks.

Kettleburn stopped at a watered down log, on which he hopped up on.

"Everyone, circle time!" he instructed them. As they gathered in the formation, their professor kept spinning around to look at all the familiar faces. He had always mentioned how the seventh year was his favorite year. No one in seventh year took a class that they didn't need or that they didn't really want to be in. The seventh year class was only comprised of those that had been with him since the very beginning, no student would find an unfamiliar face.
With clasped hands and a radiating grin that could put the light from the lake to shame, he addressed his students, "could anyone guess what we're doing here today?"

"Giant squid!"

"Grindylows!" Many different answers, names were shout out into the open, hoping that something stuck. This was the worst part of the class, the part that Eva disliked; one of Kettleburn's famous rules was no raised hands. He wanted to have an open, conversational-sort of atmosphere, as if they were a club rather than a class.

"Merpeople?" a Hufflepuff named Medea de Lacey, with bronze skin and a thin brown ponytail, guessed unsurely from the opposite side of the circle.

"EXACTLY!" Kettleburn cried excitedly, causing the girl to jolt in her own clothes, her eyes wider than plates. From behind her, Eva could hear Melisende gagging with a snickering Rosalia.

"Didn't we study them in fifth year?" Harold Skively, a rather short Ravneclaw, cried out.

"Yes, yes, but a little review never hurt nobody," quipped Kettleburn. "Now, who could tell me what the three sub-species are? Does anyone remember?"

"Siren, Selkie, and Merrow, sir," he spun around quickly, pointing his finger at the redhead. Eva raised her eyebrows at the witch, surprised that she had forgotten their professor's second rule: never address him by sir.

"Oh gosh, she's in this class?" squealed Rosalia, taking the attention off Lily Evans and refocusing it on the small corner of Slytherins who had broken out in cackles and shortles. Eva eyed the onlookers carefully, taking note of who smirked, grinned, and chuckled; and who grimaced, scowled, and cursed under their breaths. She deducted that quite a few Ravenclaws held a particular dislike towards their Head Girl, as she eyed the grinning blue breasted students.

*Understandably,* deduced Eva. From across the circle, she noticed the color raising in Lily's face, causing even her placid self to smirk.

"Shut it Selwyn! No one wants to listen to your squawking," barked Marlene McKinnon from across the circle, a hand firmly placed on her friend's shoulder. The blonde girl was seething, her face just as red as her best friend's, which made the Slytherins laugh even louder.

"Hey, hey, let's not ruin a beautiful day, girls," their teacher interrupted the impending brawl with a wide smile and arms pointed up to the sky. He was right, it was a beautiful day and there was no reason to spend it on Lily Evans. Even though the mean looks continued across the circle, Kettleburn continued on with his review of the merpeople. Though nobody ever wanted to, Kettleburn's third rule was to stop him when he got too lost in his words.

"You're rambling," droned Melisende Gamp after ten minutes. Of course, no one from the other houses had the courage to interrupt him, not even the Gryffindors for all their brawn and brainlessness.

"Yes, indeed, you are right," Kettleburn agreed, apologizing with a smile, sending his students off to observe and take notes on the habitat of the merpeople. As they grouped themselves and parted ways, a good handful decided to ditch the class and head back up to the castle.

"What do you say we do something a little more exciting?" Eva turned around to see that she had been followed by both her housemates, Rosalia Selwyn and Melisende Gamp. She had been sure that they would have been the first to follow the exodus, but something in Rosalia's eyes glimmered
with mischief. She was planning something, and Eva knew her peaceful walk was about to be disrupted.

When Eva turned back around, she caught a shimmer of silky, curly red hair that was scavenging the muddier portions of the lake. She knew exactly what her housemates meant, and she couldn't believe she was being dragged into it.

"Why is her hair always so... bedraggled?" commented Melisende.

"I know, she's absolutely repulsive," the blonde Slytherin taunted, her hand reaching out to squeeze Eva's wrist. Immediately, Eva pulled it back.

"What's wrong with you?" Rosalia scrunched her face at the black haired beauty, but she received no reply. Eva didn't have time to feed into her housemate's faults and vices. She knew better than to mingle with those that sought fun in the unnecessary torture and strife of others. Nothing would be gained from this, nothing would be taught or learnt. It was a waste of time and she could not believe how stupid the blonde bat behind her was to not realize it. "Whatever," Rosalia rolled her eyes as Eva continued to ignore her. She grabbed Melisende's upper arm and pulled her in front of Eva, making their way toward the redheaded witch.

Eva, on the other hand, walked idly behind. A good enough pace so that no one would think her alone, but far enough to keep the distance between herself and her housemates' antics.

"So, which Merpeople species would you reckon Evans to be?" Rosalia made sure to shrill loud enough so that the group of witches ahead of her would be able to hear.

"A selkie, most definitely!" The two witches broke out into a fit of giggles.

"I'd definitely be a siren," Rosalia continued.

"I honestly don't get what Potter sees in Evans. If I were him, I'd be all over you, Selwyn," Melisende jeered with her friend.

"All right, you've had your fun, now bugger off," McKinnon was now standing, a grimace painted on her face.

In a matter of seconds, Melisende's laugh died down into a sneer. They had stopped marching towards the opposed group. Eva imperceptibly shook her head. This was exactly what the Slytherins wanted, and they were playing right into their little game. It was an unfair game, Eva had to admit. The rival side would not be allowed to decide whether they wanted to join in, they were forced to. McKinnon and Evans could not just walk away, for Selwyn and Gamp would follow; they would follow and taunt until they got what they came for.

"Aw, look at McKinnon protecting her little mudblood," cooed Rosalia, twirling her wand playfully through her fingers. A wave of nostalgia hit Eva, but she couldn't quite pinpoint why.

Maybe it was the way Rosalia sounded, or the wand dancing between her fingers, it all felt oddly familiar. It was frightful, serene, and malicious. It was the voice of someone who had nothing to fear, nothing to lose.

Bellatrix, Eva grasped at the faint name floating within her head.

She had been in her second year when Bellatrix was just finishing school. She was the Queen, or rather King, of Hogwarts. There wasn't a thing, a person, or a force that could stop her from doing whatever she liked. Just like Melisende Gamp, she picked her fights because she could, and because
she was bored. Unlike Gamp, Bellatrix didn't think twice about the people she hurt; anyone from innocent first years, who had lived on farms their entire lives, to her own betrothed, Rodolphus Lestrange, were potential victims to her games.

Fortunately, she had taken a particular liking to Eva, and it had nothing to do with her last name. Bellatrix liked Eva because she never talked. She could do, say, tell her anything and no one would ever find out.

"You're better than a diary," the thick, curly black haired witch had coaxed as she ran a finger over Eva's soft cheek.

"I said, look at the blood traitor and her little mudblood whore," Rosalia spat back through an insincere smile. The sudden profanity awoke Eva from her nostalgia. Focusing her attention back to the situation that unfolded in front of her. She noticed that McKinnon had a cut on her upper lip, and Lily was trying her best to get her friend to surrender.

"CALVARIO!" the Ravenclaw shrieked, but Melisende managed to block it with a weak, yet effective enough shield. The failed attempt made Rosalia cackle, just like Bellatrix. It followed the Northern winds past Eva's ears to lands far away, far enough that they would dissipate so that no one else had to suffer such a sound.

"Please, she's no better at magic than the mudblood!" This time, Rosalia made an attack on the seething witch. The hex sent the freckled, golden haired Ravenclaw backwards onto her back.

"Enough!" Evans retaliated. Up until now, the girl had stayed quiet, protesting the Ravenclaw's actions. However, seeing her friend hexed and hurt, anger had replaced her worried eyes. Her face grew red from frustration. Unbeknownst to her, the anger would not help her in this case, for it only fed the Slytherin witches who cackled and giggled. This was what made the balance tip for Eva, making her feel almost guilty. What Rosalia and Melisende were doing was not because someone had hurt their honor or insulted their family, it was out of their own insecurities, and they were too childish to deal with it in any other way.

"Merlin, you're absolutely pathetic!" Another shot of color flew out of Melisende's wand and across the beach.

"Right? I can't believe I had expected more. She's like a squib!"

"Squib? Ha! I know squibs with more magic than her—" Melisende was cut off, clearly impressed with herself as her friend bent over, nearly dying from laughter.

"You deserve to be thrown into the pits," Melisende continued, feeling more empowered than before. "You don't merit all of this," she gestured towards the castle sitting proudly above them. "Our parents pay for our education so that the likes of you can attend for free. You deserve the same fate as the werewolves. You don't deserve our schooling, our hospitals, our blood. You're just as dirty as them, and yet you're still here," Melisende finished with a snarl. Everyone had gone quiet, even Rosalia who had been laughing had stopped, staring wide-eyed as her friend finished the confession.

Eva wished she hadn't heard the words. She wished she had walked away when it was the right time, then she wouldn't have been witness to all of the cruelty coming out of Melisende Gamp's mouth. Her sneers and growls pierced Eva's ears like a thousand arrows. She felt like someone had drowned her insides with alcohol, and then threw a match to ignite her heart on fire. She couldn't hear how Lily responded, or what hex Rosalia sent. All she could feel was a swirling tube of confusion, and then, in the midst of the cackles and curses, something snapped.
What ensued was dead silence. The dust cloud cleared from the beach and Eva noticed that the four girls had been thrown to the ground.

What happened? she questioned, looking from one head to another. She looked down, but her wand wasn't in her hand so it couldn't have been her. Then why are you still standing? her inner voice inquired.

Slowly, the dust dissipated and the girls took in their surroundings. They rubbed their hurt shoulders and heads as they tried to make sense of what had just occurred.

Eva didn't know what happened next, if they had gone their own ways or if they had continued fighting. Out of confusion, she had backed out of the scene before anyone could piece together the puzzle. She wasn't sure if it had been her own fault, but she knew it must have had something to do with her, and that scared her. She had always been in control of her own magic. Her father had spent good money to hire the wisest, most talented tutors from every sea, every land before she had even known what Hogwarts was.

But nothing seemed certain anymore. Not even her own magic could be controlled.

What is happening to me? she cried to herself. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

Remus and the rest of the Marauders had been enjoying a peaceful, Friday afternoon over a game of Exploding Snaps when a crack broke through the Gryffindor common room. Looking up in curiosity, four pairs of eyes fell upon a raging Marlene McKinnon. Her palms were placed firmly against the now crooked table, her back heaved up and down, and her face was completely covered by hair.

"Oy, what'd the poor table ever do to you?" cried Sirius.

Before turning to get a better look, James shared a wary glance with Remus. Usually, when Marlene was like this, it was because Sirius had done something; and their fights often involved violence and magic. However, Remus was certain that they hadn't spoken to each other since the summer, so, unlike James, he was prepared for something other than a string of insults directed at their best mate.

"I'll kill that bitch," the blonde hissed threw her teeth. This time, Sirius turned to share an inquisitive look with the boys. Marlene hadn't left her position over the broken table, taking deep breaths as she was debating whether to break the other leg or not.

Just as James begun to stand up, a pale, soaking wet Lily Evans walked through the archway.

"Lily? What happened?" His words came out as a fusion between confused and shocked. James' eyebrows were furrowed together as he looked Lily up and down.

"You want to know what happened? I'll tell you what happened," Marlene interrupted lividly, pushing herself off the table. As she marched towards James, who stood lamely by the fireplace, she pointed a finger at him. She had a wild and malicious expression as if it were James she was angry with. Sirius sat up straight from his sprawled out position, allowing himself to sit on the edge of the couch. He looked attentively and cautiously up at the witch, waiting patiently for the next few words to come out of her mouth. Remus, on the other hand, had backed himself into the armchair. His hands growing damp.

She knows, he concluded to himself. It was obvious. She knew about them. That's why she was blaming James. She had always been cold towards them because she believed that they had stolen James from her. The two of them had been friends since birth, their fathers worked together. Then,
when they came to Hogwarts, they began to drift. He spent more time with them, the Marauders, sharing his secrets with them, talking about girls with them. Though she had always been a friend to all four of the boys, it wasn't like what James and her used to have. And then it really turned to shit when Sirius and her got involved with one another.

"What happened is that Eva Manasse and Melisende Gamp," the blonde heaved as she tried to spit out the names all too quickly, "and Rosalia Selwyn are the three biggest shites that've ever graced this bloody school."

_Oh, Remus said internally, _absolutely lovely._
Il fait froid, Eva thought to herself as the heels of her boots echoed against the courtyard's wet cobblestones.

Unlike the crisp air that she usually anticipated during early autumn, she was met with a damp mist that could make even the driest of bones moldy. Compared to the first two weeks of the semester, the weather had changed drastically from constant sunshine to relentless gray. There wasn't a thing in sight that wasn't stained with water, even her hair felt wet under her fingers. It was the type of weather that inspired Victorian poets to write love sonnets about widowed brides and dishonest men.

A paradox, she thought. A terrible paradox. And yet, it was precisely that feeling that sparked deep within Eva during that damp, misty dawn.

She found something indefinably romantic about the entire setting. The castle seemed so tranquil, as if one of Scotland's old kings had abandoned it ages ago and not a soul had set foot since. There wasn't a soul on the school grounds, it was too early and too thick of a fog for morning wanderers. It threaded and waltzed throughout the land while simultaneously kissing the Black Lake.

This was everything she had wanted, and yet she could not believe it was her first time experiencing a Scottish dawn. All this time caged within those walls, sulking from one class to another, and there had been an entire world waiting for her to discover. Truth be told, she was disappointed with herself. If it hadn't been for Antonin inviting her to the Quidditch tryouts, this would still have been a secret to her.

Unfortunately, the serenity did not last very long. There was a humming in the distance that Eva believed belonged to the Slytherin players. They threw their curses and grunts against the wind, allowing them to travel towards her. She began to make out the figures that zigzagged and disappeared into the fog, just to reappear a few seconds later. Eva had to admit to herself that it was breathtaking, though she had little care for the sport itself.

She had never gone to a game.

But, out of pride, Antonin had invited her to watch the Slytherin team's tryouts. And she hadn't really been too keen on attending, but then, and much to her own surprise, Regulus Black had extended an equivalent invitation. He had left her to wonder if the majority of the Slytherin house had received such, but with the lack of attendees matched with the ungodly hour, she could only assume that they'd hadn't. But that was the entire appeal, there would be no one there. She could finally show an ounce of pride and still enjoy the silence of early morning dew

Desperate, crazy, crazy girl, searching for silence, a voice cackled. Eva shook her head, they were only growing more and more annoying by the day. And though she knew hearing voices was not normal, she thought ignoring them would be the best way to go about it.

But they weren't going away.

They began to keep her up all night.

She couldn't eat anything anymore.

Eva shook herself out of the stupor, ignoring the whispers and looked back to the pitch that was just a few paces away. She enjoyed this, watching a very raw, chaotic version of the actual sport. They would be no crying and chanting for the fittest players. There would be no awards nor metals for
those who won; anyone who had showed up, came on pure ambition. This was the moment to prove who was the best, the cream of the crop. They would spit blood if that is what it took to prove to their captain that they were worthy enough to fight alongside him. It would be admirable, and Eva had never been so excited for quidditch in her entire life.

Soon enough, she found herself climbing the rickety stairs which would take her up into the lower levels of the pitch. Like everything else, they were wet, and the wind made threatening noises throughout the columns and rows of wood that kept the structure standing. When she finally exited the staircase, she found herself nearly equal with the players hovering just slightly above her. Once again, she was breathless.

*Is this how it is?* she asked herself. She wondered how it would be fly on a broomstick, to feel free to travel far away. Far enough that there would be no one left to recognize, no language that she could understand.

*Fly away from who?* a different whisper taunted.

*Surely not from us?* another continued. Eva took in a sharp inhale of fresh air, exhaling as she took her seat. She didn't mind that it was damp, or that if it began to rain there would be nowhere for her to take shelter. The clean air made her forget the past week's worries, freeing her from those burdens that she carried so heavily.

*We're still here, dearie,* she smiled tautly, tilting her head and trying her best to push them out of her head.

"Manasse, you came," she turned around to catch a pair of icy grey eyes looking at her with curiosity and awe.

She really hoped he hadn't seen her smiling like a manic freak just seconds ago.

"Evidently," she spared the boy a weak smile. She watched him as he returned the gesture, allowing herself to roam over his neat onyx curls to the bruises that covered his knuckles.

"May I sit? If you wouldn't mind," he asked politely, waiting patiently for her response.

"Now, why would I mind," he asked politely, waiting patiently for her response.

"No, why would I mind such a thing?" she smiled briefly at him again, moving over to free the space next to hers as he took his seat.

They kept silent, both watching the bodies dizzily flying back and forth. Every so often, Eva would steal a glance at the boy sitting next to her. She spotted a scar running from the bottom of his ear to the corner of his eyebrow. It was light, barely there, but her proximity allowed her to run over it. He was much paler than she had thought, but not the typical British pale that she had grown accustomed to; he looked sick, as if he were dying.

"How come you aren't on the field?"

Eva's gaze was now fixed on his face. She had never noticed how peaceful he was to look at, so different from the others. Quiet and calm, both sharing an appreciation for the silence around them. He was polite but not pretentious, odd for a Slytherin boy.

"Already made the team." She could see his cheeks raising in a smile.

With one last glance at the players, he turned around to meet her eyes. They caught each other's gazes, and the silence fell between them again. She knew of him, but had never sought him out for conversation or company. And yet, oddly enough, Eva felt a connection with this boy sitting next to
her. It wasn't a romantic one, but rather that she wanted to reach out, cup his face, and tell him everything was going to be all right. Even if he didn't believe it, he would allow himself to surrender to her words because that's all he had left. She knew he would, she was certain of it because it was exactly how she felt.

"Everything okay, Manasse?" He let himself gaze over at her, watching as she looked up at all the players. Her eyes were wide, darting back and forth with their bodies as they tried to reach for quaffles and hit others with bludgers. The wind blew and strands of her hair flew into her face, covering her mouth. She reached up, pulling it away, causing Regulus to smile for he had thought of it so many times. He wondered how his fingertips would feel as he brushed them against her cheek, how she might blush or smile or ignore his imprisoned eyes.

"You like quidditch?" he asked her, gulping down his pride and pushing himself to talk to her, finally.

"Not particularly," she admitted, looking down to his knee and then up to his own eyes. "I just wonder how it'd be to fly, to see the world from so high up."

"What? You've never flown?" His head turned from the pitch and back to her, his body leaning forward as if it was the most interesting conversation that he had ever participated in. She shook her head, toothlessly smiling for seconds before squinting her eyes and looking to the distance. "Not even in your first year?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but that was three feet off the ground— hardly counts," she scoffed, mocking herself for how fearful she had been off those lessons— having skipped more than once to avoid the humiliation it had caused her.

"How come?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you fly? Is it because you're scared or just don't have time?"

A small scrunch between her brows as she glanced up to the skies, wondering what his sudden interest was, but not really put off by it, either.

"Not great with a broom," she said quietly.

"Really?" he blurted out, more to himself than to her. Over the years, he'd just assumed that she was good at everything. And here she was, flaws and all, and he still wanted to gather her into his arms and press her cheek into his chest and kiss the top of her forehead. "I could take you."

Immediately, he averted his gaze to the wooden planks, boring holes into them as he realized what he had just said. A blush crept up his neck, a cold sweat breaking out as the wind blew against it, causing a headache to form somewhere behind his own irrationality.

"Oh no, it's okay," she laughed shortly, nonetheless intrigued.

"Of course, I don't know why I— it was, excuse me, it's so early," he played off, shaking his head as he let out his own self-reprimanding scoff.

Silence ensued, moments of it passing as he continued to look over at her for brief moments, wondering if he could be anymore daft. And then around the tenth time that he had glimpsed over at her, a convulsing body caught his eye.
"Fuck me," he muttered under his breath before she could reply. Curious, she turned her head around to see four boys sitting at one of the benches on the higher stands. They were laughing and joking, shoving one another just as boys did when they did something stupid.

Her eyes carefully roamed over each face, landing on one in particular. He was trying hard to hold back a chuckle, but failed to do so. She couldn't help but think how happy he looked, how it made her want to get up and walk over there to feel his happiness. It was such a stark contrast to herself and Regulus, a pair of shadows crying under the sun.

She couldn't help but admit that he looked rather handsome. The wind made his hair blow in every direction, and his toothy grin shone brightly despite the lack of sun. His brown jumper and tan suede jacket made him look careless in the most beautiful way possible.

Stop it, she demanded. She knew she had been peering for too long. Thankfully, Regulus hadn't yet turned around, but still looked over her shoulder to eye the boys. He was no longer the gentle boy that had once sat before her, but a rattlesnake in the desert. She could tell that he was suspicious, and somewhere in his glacial eyes, she could spot a glimmer of sadness.

It'll all be okay, she repeated to herself, hoping that he could hear her. She knew he couldn't, but it was still a hope.

"Everything okay, Black?" she repeated his words to him. Her words hadn't been as gentle than his, but she had tried her best, she wasn't used to caring about others. She watched him turn back to her, his eyes stopping to watch the marbled wood go from light to dark. His mouth was slightly ajar as if he wanted to reply, but couldn't find the right words to express his sentiments.

"In time, Eva," he whispered surely. Their eyes met again for a second and she held him there. Those three words resounded more than anything else anyone had ever told her. She understood him, his struggles, and his strife.

"I know," she whispered back.

Something susurrated. Eva turned back around to look over her shoulder, wondering if someone was whispering into her ear, but there was nothing.

It was just the wind, she assured herself.

It wasn't the wind, the voices all jeered together.

"Someone get me whiskey," Sirius muttered as the laughter from his friends began to die down. He had caught sight of his brother sitting just a few yards to the left of them, and the sight alone had already ruined his morning.

"Padfoot, we haven't even had breakfast yet," Remus retorted, a smile still on his life. Sirius rolled his eyes in response.

"Fine, bring me toast with that would you, mate? Thanks."

"What'd you expect? It's the Slytherin team," Peter pointed out, wondering whether Sirius' requests for booze was for real or not.

"Bloody genius you are, Wormtail. Since you're so fucking brilliant, you care to explain to me what he's doing frolicking in the stands with her?" Sirius distastefully spat the last word, and the small boy opened his mouth to reply, but quickly shut it under the heavy gaze of his friend's stare. Remus' hand
reached out to comfort his shoulder, assuring him that Sirius was just in a bad mood, like he usually was at such events. "Who bloody cares," Sirius cursed in an undertone.

"Fucking hell," muttered James as they watched Niger Seacole, a Slytherin fifth year, fall off his broom and smack into the ground. Dolohov blew his whistle, signaling to the other players to continue their try out as he flew over to his injured housemate.

"It was only a couple of feet," Sirius commented, brushing off the accident.

"He fell right on his back, Padfoot," James added airily, not even fully paying attention to what he was saying. Instead, he looked intently as two younger years carried the dark skinned pureblood off to the infirmary.

"Whatever," Sirius snorted rashly. Remus rolled his eyes. His friend may have been able to fool everyone else, but he failed when it came to this friends. His offhanded comments were his way of lamenting and hurting. He would never show his wounds, but he sure had no problem complaining about them.

Bored, his eyes went back to the couple sitting just below them. He looked at the black waves that ran down her back. As always, her back was stick straight and her legs crossed underneath each other like a proper lady. He nearly smirked at the sight. She was growing on him, he couldn't help but admit. Maybe, it was her mystery, how she was nearly impossible to figure out; so many little traps aligned her walls, the moment he thought he was getting somewhere, something popped out and opened a new door for him.

"Moony!" He turned back to his friends who were all staring at him. Sirius' eyebrows were raised, and James side-eyed him curiously.

"Yeah?"

"You were gawking, mate," James mentioned, turning back to watch the players in front of him.

"No, I wasn't."

"Don't fall in love now," Sirius teased.

"I am not falling in love," Remus scoffed, shoving his friend with one hand.

"Just warning you," Sirius held up his hands in surrender, chuckling and grinning at his own jokes.

"I reckon your brother is though," Peter commented, still surveying the Slytherins.

"Yeah, that's old news."

"Really?"

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He came out of the bathroom, his bathrobe swung tight around his growing, but still lanky, body. At the same exact moment, Sirius walked out of his own room, just about ready to head down the stairs before something fluttering to the floor from behind Regulus caught his eye.

"Dropped something," he told his little brother. Regulus turned to look at the floor behind him, his eyes going wide as he scrambled to reach for it. But Sirius was quick, and before he knew it, the photography was plucked right from his hands.

"What the fuck were you doing with this in the bathroom?" Sirius asked, a grin on his face as he
looked over it. A girl with round, almond-eyes and neat, wavy brown hair, a pretty cream summer
dress that fell to the floor as she stood next to their cousin, Evan. A line that cracked right down the
middle told him that it had been folded, time and time again as it wouldn’t take much for it to come
apart in half.

Sirius lifted his brows, looking back up to Regulus, who stared at the floor with the thickest blush he
had ever seen on anyone.

"Please tell me you were wanking off to Manasse and not Evan," he began, his voice low but the
mischievous hint still there, "not that I’m against you liking boys—"

"—I don’t like boys—"

"—just the incest thing is a complete no-go."

Regulus shook his head, his teeth grinding as he tried to reach out and take the photograph back.
But Sirius wouldn’t let up, having too much fun making his little brother feel uncomfortable as he
held it high up and above his head. Regulus jumped and hopped, and Sirius continued to push
further and further back, nearly leaning over the railing, chuckling. In the end, the younger wizard
quit, scowling, as he stalked back off to his room.

Sirius followed him, taking the liberty to open up his brother’s door and waltz right in.

"Get out of my room, Sirius!"

He didn’t listen, instead walking right over to the plush, green-themed bed and plopping down on it.
His feet kicked up, soiling the clean duvet with dirt-ridden sneakers.

"So? You fancy her?"

"I said get out," Regulus repeated through gritted teeth, opening up his wardrobe as he rummaged
through the clothes.

"Didn’t know you fancied her," Sirius continued, looking a the photo. "The blokes in my year think
she’s quite fit; never saw the appeal myself, but to each their own."

"You’re annoying."

"She’s kind of a prude, you know?" Sirius paused, looking over to his brother. "A little like you,
actually."

"She’s nice. Unlike you, actually."

"Nice?" repeated Sirius under his breath, turning back to the picture, "blimey, you do fancy her."

"I do not."

The older wizard snorted, shaking his head.

"It’s not a crime to fancy someone, Reg. And everyone wanks, even if they say they don’t—they do,
trust me."

Regulus paused for a moment as he closed his wardrobe door, holding his hand against the handle
as he stared down at it. Sirius noticed, placing the photo on his chest as he looked over at his
brother.
“Bugger off,” Regulus grumbled after a pause.

“You should ask her to Hogsmeade.”

“No.”

“Why not? Thought you fancied her.”

“You know why,” he muttered under his breath. Sirius frowned, looking to the door.

“So what? No one has to know. I do plenty of things that they don’t know—”

“I’m not you.”

“Whatever,” Sirius gave up, “just do what mummy and daddy want you to do, never let yourself have any fun.”

“Can you leave now?”

He did, without another word, scoffing as he tossed the photograph to the floor and walked out, slamming the door behind him. Regulus walked back over to the photo, picking it up as he sat on the floor, leaning against his bed post. He folded it in half, looking down at her as she smiled up at him, even if it was forced for the camera.

“He’s been wanking off to her since his second year.”

“I didn’t need to know that,” responded Remus, his face turning sour at the comment.

“Me neither,” added Peter.

“The more you know,” chuckled Sirius, holding up an imaginary goblet to Remus who disapprovingly shook his head.

As Sirius leaned back into the stands, listening intently to James’ commentary, Remus found himself thinking about what they’d just said.

Fall in love? he repeated in his head, the idea seeming so outlandish and foreign to him just as it was, much less with someone like her. The idea had never even occurred to him. She was not what he was used to, not what he had craved for over the years. She was cruel and cold, completely lost in her own world. He could never be with someone like her. They were from two different planets, two different universes.

No, never.
She waited with folded hands and an iron-rod back against the dilapidated, splintering chair. Her eyes darted over to the north wall to seek out the sloppily hung clock, for what seemed like the umpteenth time. She had been there for a total of twenty minutes— twenty-one and forty-three seconds, to be exact. Twenty minutes that could have been used to put away and package summer linens, to begin her Herbology thesis, to do anything else besides wait. Idle hands were the devil's work, or at least that's what her grandmother always used to remind her. Which, in a way, was quite peculiar, Eva hadn't seen her grandmother get up once from her bergere chair in the past fifteen years.

It wasn't so much the waiting that perturbed her, but where she was waiting. Apart from the mustiness of the library, the constant unrelenting wetness that plagued that part of the world so terribly often, it was the atmosphere. It made her skin crawl; her body temperature always rose five degrees, and even when no one seemed to be paying attention to her, she felt as if they were. Nothing about it sat right with her: from the heaven-reaching shelves that made her feel smaller than she already was, to the bustling of flipping pages, and the scratching of quill against parchment.

She pressed an elbow into the wooden table and held her head up using the back of her mouth. Her eyes roamed back over to the clock— twenty-nine minutes. Eva didn't know what the correct etiquette was for such a situation. She wasn't used to waiting, never had a real need to until recently, and she had never kept someone waiting. She showed up exactly when it had been requested of her — never late, never early.

If he were to come, he would have come by now, she reasoned with herself. Her tongue ran over her teeth, eyes narrowing as she hooked her gaze onto the window's frame. Nerve, that's what Remus Lupin had for making her wait. She understood that it might be difficult for him to follow the same manners as herself —him being raised in a completely different environment — but she was certain that had to exist some form of mutual respect. How do they accomplish anything otherwise? she wondered, a small scrunch between her brows as she tried to decipher a world she understood so little about.

Though Remus' mannerisms and societal norms were entirely lost on her, she concluded that she wouldn't humiliate herself and waste another second on the Gryffindor half-blood. She gathered her bag, swiftly making way to exit the library without raising attention. Eva shook her head in disappointment— she had even sat by the very front, thinking that if he had bothered to show up, he wouldn't have to look very far. But he hadn't, leaving Eva to feel like a complete fool as she exited through the heavy oak doors and into the irriguous halls.

A handful of unrecognizable faces lingered in the library's periphery, some of them puffing on a cigarette, others exchanging knuts for black-market assignment trading.

She smirked as she caught the widening eye of an underclassman hastily palming the knotgrass in his hand and shoving it into his pocket. Her eyebrow cocked his way, her head shaking as she turned to look forward into the torch-lit hall. But just as she did, a heavy force drove into her, and the next thing she knew— she was stumbling backwards onto the cold, stone ground. Someone lurched forward in an attempt to grab her, but it had been in vain, for she ended up landing bum-first with a sharp pain shooting up her tailbone and into her spine.

Remus stared with bulging eyes at the fallen girl. Her own were closed, her entire face pinched as she took in the force of the attack. In a clumsy, ill-thought out plan, he had made an attempt to reach out for her, but everything had happened too quick, and before he knew who and what, a low,
primal groan had erupted from her very own chest.

"Fuck," he cursed under his breath, his entire face flushing as he jostled his thoughts together. "Fuck, here let me help you—"

Her eyes opened, filled with an indignant mixture of discomfort and vexation. Remus gulped, sighing deeply as they continued to stare one another down. She was searching for something, her teeth grinding against top and bottom, one eye twitching as she tried to figure out just what the best course of action would be for such a circumstance.

"You," she began, but instead closed her eyes. Her entire chest puffed upwards in one deep, long breath, before faltering back down. Then, with one good push, she stood up on her two feet, rearranging the black strap on her shoulder, her palms pressing over the mussed up skirt.

Remus frowned as he caught sight of a strand of her hair that had fallen out of its pinned bun and fell over her eyes. Her tie hung crookedly, and her tucked in jumper was now unevenly bunched up around the waistband of her skirt.

"I'm so sorry about that. I wasn't looking— "

"Obviously," she cut him off.

"Er," was all he managed as Eva's fingers wrapped and pulled at her emerald-green tie. He ran his own through his hair, biting on the inside of his cheek as he gazed at her from the corner of his eye. "I suppose, yeah, it was quite obvious."

Remus was certain that his face resembled that of a phoenix's tail, and if not, then Merlin truly had blessed him on that unfortunate day.

"I waited a half hour," she mentioned curtly, once again standing straight and peering up at him with a stern expression.

He crossed his arms over his chest, his neck bending forward as he looked to the floor for a solution.

"Yes," he agreed begrudgingly, "I am sorry about that, as well. My nap, I was taking a nap, and well, well it seems that I didn't get up when it was time for me—" Remus' voice faltered as he glanced up at her through his eyelashes, her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized him.

"That can't happen again," she told him, giving him a once-over. He nodded, pressing his lips into a thin line. "I have better things to do than wait for you to finish your late afternoon slumber."

"Don't doubt that," he muttered.

"Well," she exclaimed, eyes widening as her impatience thinned out. "What are we waiting for? Get on with it."

"Right, of course, after you," he gestured with his palm towards the library. Eva stared down that part of the hall, frowning as she recalled the library's gumminess, her heart falling into her gut with the thought that she'd have to return.

"No, this way," she directed him, taking off in the opposite direction of the their intended meeting space.

"No?" Remus repeated, bewildered as he swiveled about to watch her retreat. "Wait, Manasse!?”
Remus huffed, running a hand through his rumpled bed-head before following in her footsteps. Her sudden abruptness had thrown him off, and all he could catch was her now-miniature head in the far distance, crawling through the bodies and the pre-dinner bustle. First years and seventh years alike bumped into him, some scowling, others smiling, but he didn't notice. Eva was fast, moving through the halls with such agility that it astounded him, and if he didn't keep track, he'd be sure to lose her.

*Perks of being an imp,* he quipped internally.

His hand ran over his forehead, his brows lifted up into his hairline as he walked right into an empty, window-less passage. He looked back and forth, glimpsing around but finding nothing unusual. There were no loitering bodies at this time, too early and the castle teeming with students returning to drop of their books and assignments in their dorms. He bit on his lower lip, entire face scrunched together as he searched for the fugitive.

"Manasse?" he called out into the dark.

From behind him, he heard something shift and turned around to catch it. Her head popped out of the doorway, only her neck and up visible to him.

*What the fuck?* he asked himself.

"I don't have all day, Lupin," she said, disappearing into the room, once again. He had to stifle a laugh, a dry, nervous one that reminded him of just how ludicrous the scenario was revealing itself to be. But what could he do? It was his grade at stake, too.

He followed, coming to a momentary halt outside the ajar door. Eva was fumbling about by the professor's desk, causing Remus' chin to jut out as he stepped in to get a better look.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, his brows coming together.

She looked up at him, widened pupils caused by the lack of light in the room.

"Waiting for you, as if I've been doing for the past three quarters of an hour," she retorted, shrugging her shoulders as she hopped down from the heightened platform and back towards him. He stared her down as she approached, her fingers pressing down onto the top of one of the spare desks.

With the constant reminder of how bothersome his tardiness had been, Remus took a seat, placing his bag on the table in front of him. He waited for Eva to do the same, but she quickly shifted about and returned to the front desk.

"It's against the rules to look through a professor's items," he warned her, sitting upright in his seat. Her eyes lifted, fluttering over him for a brief second before returning.

"I'm not doing what you think I'm doing," Eva riddled, going back to running her fingers of the desk. There was a strange buzzing noise coming from somewhere, a light thrumming that originated right from the object in front of her. She bent down, opening up drawers and filing through papers that she found absolutely useless.

"Then... what are you doing?"

"I'll only be a moment."

"I'm a prefect."

"You're annoying, that's what you are," she snorted. Remus' jaw slackened, sitting back in his seat
with his arms crossed over his chest as he stifled a need to groan. Growing impatient, his knee began to jerk up and down, a hand scrubbing over his face as he listened to the droning sound of Eva's light pattering while she moved about the classroom. There was a single torch available. It gave off a heated, orange-glow which, soon enough, caused his eyes to droop down and flutter closed.

Minutes passed and there wasn't a squeak from the other being in the room. The torch crackled louder than his breaths, so Eva couldn't even make out those. Although, she hadn't really been paying much mind to them.

She spared a glance his way, wondering if he had left as she had been inspecting the room for that godawful buzzing sound. But, alas, he was where she had left him: bunched up in one of the chairs, chin to his chest, his breaths evened and slowed. Eva found him tall and oafish in that position, especially with his legs stretched out and folded over one another underneath the table. She frowned, then pressed her lips together as she took the seat across from him.

With her face now lower than his, Evan could see that he was sleeping, a small, soft snore trailing out of him every time he inhaled. A usual fretfulness finally found peaceful amongst her presence, so unlike the hand-wringing, finger-tapping boy she had grown accustomed to deriding and slandering.

She had to fight against that part that wanted to scurry on out of there, leave him to his repose— of which the darkness circling his eyes conveyed to her he lacked dearly.

"Lupin?" she beckoned in an undertone, her voice soft and her eyes even more as she waited for his rousing. Eva sighed deeply, wondering how much time had passed. Sure enough it was minutes to supper, and though it seemed useless now, she knew they couldn't squander a moment more because her conscious battled black and white.

"Lupin," she tried again, continuing to receive no response.

She puckered her lips to the left, beginning to reach out a hand to his forearm before a hearty snore lifted up from and filled the silence. Despite herself, Eva couldn't help the giggle that fled past her lips, quickly covering it up with a palm over her mouth as she casted her eyes to the ground. She implored herself to stop, but simply lacked the ability to do so.

"Huh," he mumbled, awakening from his momentary intermission.

A tinkering sound travelled throughout the empty room and into his ears. It gradually became clearer every time he blinked, his eyes un-fogging themselves from the glossiness that covered them. He grimaced, the world around him coming back into focus as he tried to figure how Eva got to the seat in front of him, and why he hadn't noticed.

"What's happened?" he croaked, completely aware of the dryness that coated his throat. He smacked his lips several times to stimulate saliva, but failed miserably. "Wha— What's funny?" He looked over the girl whose giggles had now turned into an embarrassed grin. Her eyes were on the far right corner, behind him. Instinctively, Remus turned to look, wondering if it would give him an answer, but it only resulted in him being more puzzled than before.

"Manasse?"

"Um," she let out, regaining her composure. Her hand fell from her mouth, rubbing down her thighs as she looked anywhere but him. "You fell asleep."

"Fuck, actually?"

"Yes."
"Oh... was I out for long? Sorry 'bout that," he apologized, the rosiness from before rising up his
neck and staining his cheeks for the second time that evening.

"No, but we really should get on with the work," she explained, the grin on her cheeks faltering as
she finally met his gaze. "You reviewed the dissertation then, yes?"

"Yes."

They held one another's gaze for two heart beats before Eva inquired, "well, where is it?"

"It's in my bag," he teased, a corner of his lips turning up as he caught her forehead scrunching up.

"Okay," she said slowly, her eyes darting from the corner to him, "would you like to show me?"

"Would you like me to show you?"

Whether it be the remnants of his drowsiness, or the fact that he still laid heavily in his stupor; Remus
had found the perfect opportunity to take Eva for a spin. All out of good fun, but also pleasuring as
he saw her eyes narrow, surveying him, trying to read him as he laid back with a boyish expression.

"Enjoying yourself, Lupin?"

"Mmph, that's debatable."

"Of course you're the sort to get off on wasting my time," she slighted, reaching forward to grab his
bag. The once playful demeanor had rapidly disappeared as he shot forward to grab his personal
belongings out of her hands. His eyes were on fire, his jaw stern and clenched as his nostrils flared,
clutching his bag to his chest.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he nearly growled.

"I'm getting on with what we're meant to be doing," she sneered in return, leaning over the table.

"You can't just go about opening up and looking through other people's stuff!"

"You're wasting time by mocking me, all I want is to see the edits you've made to the assignment!"

They stared at one another, both expressions equally heavy and intense as their eyes darted all over
the other's face.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" Remus asked her, his brows furrowing. Her mouth gaped, all
five fingers pointing towards his leather bag.

"I'm only trying to do what we came here to do," she explained, her shoulders drooping. "I wasn't
trying to pry into—"

"You reached for my bag with the intention of opening it up and looking through it," he countered.
Remus hadn't relented the grasp on his bag at all, still astounded by her audacity.

"I," Eva faltered, her lips parting as she lost track of her excuses. There really was none, she was at
fault here, and she knew that. "We're wasting time, Lupin!"

He shook his head, averting his gaze from her. A million thoughts ran through his head, not knowing
which one made more sense, which would be the most efficient in getting through her thick head.

"Lupin," she snapped.
"No," he cut her off, "if the roles had been switched—you would have cursed me up and down and then sent me off with a bill for a nose. This is on you—"

She bit down on her tongue, looking to the floor.

"I mean, you do see the problem, right?" Remus asked her, bending his face so that he could get a better look at her's.

"I think you're being ridiculous."

He scoffed, his eyes bulging as he leaned forward, causing his bag to drop to the floor.

"Ridiculous? The only ridiculous one here is you, Manasse," Remus retaliated. "You had no hesitation to what? To simply look through my personal belongings; I'll do the same to you, see how much you like it."

"You—"

"You what? What do you have to say to me?" A dry chuckle came out of him, causing Eva to wince as she crossed her arms over her chest. She couldn't let this maniacal fool get the best of her, and so she lifted her chin and stared him down. "You think it's okay to reach for my things as if they're yours, don't you? You think the entire world beckons to your call, don't you?"

"Don't act like you know me, please, you sound pathetic—"

"No, you sound pathetic, Manasse. You're the one who refuses to work with me based off some archaic principle, you're the one who goes around hexing people into the lake because—"

"—What?—"

"—you attack my friends, never bothered to apologize, and now you go and grab my things because you feel entitled to because of some bloody last name," he finished, his entire face scrunched up as he looked off into the distance.

"Are you satisfied?" she scowled.

"You're not special," he responded, ignoring her question. "You're a bitch, that's it."

Eva froze, her muscles turning rigid as the words sunk in. Never in her life had someone dared to use such derogatory words when referencing her. Her breath hitched in her throat when she realized that he wasn't entirely at fault, either. She had gone after his things, and she hadn't thought twice about it until it was too late. The realization turned her mouth dry, sighing as she replayed the moment in her head.

"What? Don't have anything to say, for the first time in your life?"

"You are not the bigger person because you insult me and call me names," she managed, her voice low as to not cause any further conflict. All she wanted was for him to leave, or, at the least, stop talking.

"Oh okay, yeah," he agreed callously, "how 'bout this? You treat everyone like they're your subordinates, but when it comes to it, you're just as faulty and powerless as the rest of us. You're not any different, and you're not anything special."

He leaned down to grab the strap of his leather bag, reaching into it and pulling out the flimsy piece
of parchment. Remus threw it onto the table, getting up as he did so and hiking his bag over his head and onto his shoulder.

"There, your dissertation," he mumbled, shaking his head and departing from the room. Remus didn't care if she needed him to stay, he didn't care if she went crying to Slughorn that he hadn't participated in the assignment— he wanted out. Out of the partnership, out from having to meet with her whenever she thought it best, especially after her stunt with Lily at the lake.

Everyone had a limit, even Remus Lupin.
"Moony! What are you doing tomorrow?" Remus jolted as the dormitory door banged back into its door pane. Up until then he had been alone in the room and hadn't expected company for the next hour. From what he could remember, his entire dorm, besides himself, was supposed to be in class. Hence, seeing Sirius entering the room, grinning strongly at him, bewildered Remus.

"Uh, I don't know. Having my day ruined with whatever you're about to ask me to do," Remus answered slyly. Sirius furrowed his eyebrows, debating whether to be insulted or not.

"Well," Sirius continued, choosing to ignore Remus, "I was asking because I didn't know whether you had a date with our favorite enchantress," Sirius joked, plopping himself onto his bed. He had tossed his bag carelessly by the door and hadn't even bothered to take off his shoes. Remus grimaced at the sight, wondering how Sirius managed to sleep peacefully at night.

"And who would that be?"

"Really, Moony?" Sirius swiveled his head to the left, the two boys now blinking quizzically at each other. He was contemplating whether Remus was taking the piss or not. To him, it had been so obvious, and he wasn't used to Remus not being able to figure out his thoughts. "Manasse," Sirius flustered, throwing Remus a wasn't-that-obvious? look.

"Ah," Remus faltered. He looked down at the book on his lap, the tawny edges suddenly more interesting than the words on the pages. It had been two weeks since they had last spoken to each other. She refused to look at him during classes, much less acknowledge his presence. He was grateful that they didn't have any group projects assigned for the near future, but there definitely was a strain, and it distracted him from nearly everything he did. However, it wasn't that simple. Remus had battled with himself all week, finding the situation easier to deal with if he could blame one of the two, but not knowing whom to blame. With a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, he couldn't come to a final conclusion. It was killing him, the guilt and the regret continuously stabbing him mercilessly. Nearly every night since their altercation, he had tossed and turned, trying to come up with some sort of solution. He had even stolen a pack of Sirius' cigarettes and snuck out in the middle of the night to smoke them. Luckily, he hadn't been caught, but his friends would, sooner or later, realize that something wasn't sitting well with Remus. No matter how hard he tried, they couldn't keep a secret from each other, not even to save their lives. Nevertheless, he had settled on the fact that maybe the perfect fix didn't exist. Not everything has to be fixed, he recalled his mother counseled as she stroked his bleeding cheek. He regretted his words and at the same time he didn't. He wanted to apologize, knowing it was the right thing to do, but he also didn't want to justify her behavior. She had wronged him and she deserved to know that. Doesn't she? he asked doubtfully. Two steps forward, three steps back, he sighed.

"Wonderful," Sirius remarked enthusiastically, interrupting Remus from his thoughts.

"Why? What's happening?" Remus peeked up at his friend, who had moved his gaze to the red canopy hanging thickly above him.

"I'll let you know tomorrow." Remus furrowed his eyebrows, wondering why Sirius was being so secretive. Had he forgotten a birthday, some special event? But nothing came to mind. Especially
since Saturdays were usually passed drinking fire whiskey and playing either Snitch Snatcher or Exploding Snaps. Sometimes, they'd throw a small get-together with several of their friends from the other houses, where Sirius would take the opportunity to invite one too many birds, but it was never anything crazy. Whatever, Remus surrendered. He had other things to worry about besides Sirius and his antics.

"Wait," Remus began, "aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"Yeah, maybe," Sirius admitted nonchalantly, not really minding that someone had caught him. Remus rolled his eyes. Yet, he couldn't help and wonder if there was something deeper occurring. Sirius had a tendency to skip classes, drink, and smoke excessively when an idea ate away at his brain. Remus mulled over what it could possibly be. He knew that Sirius only acted out like this when he fought with his friends, or when he had had family issues.

Then, Remus recalled how over the summer he had sporadically mentioned about going out and fighting. Fight what? Remus had inquired. His friend's answers ranged from vague to heavily detailed, often calling out the newspapers for lying and censoring the truth. Sirius believed in what many accused were just conspiracy theories, but he was so certain. We need to be prepared, he had warned them at their annual beach bonfire. Something's coming that no one will be able to run from, and Remus couldn't help but begin to believe him.

He couldn't take it anymore. The tension radiated like a nuclear bomb throughout the room, burning down the stones of the dungeon, polluting the entire air so that Remus struggled to breathe. He wouldn't be able to last through another week of this torture. Without believing it, Eva Manasse, even without opening her mouth once, was going to win. He had convinced himself that there was no other option, that he had to go through with it. She would get the apology that she didn't deserve and they would both move on with their lives. At least, that's what he was hoping. For all he knew, she may have something else in mind.

"...I must advise, baneberry is extremely poisonous and must not be ingested," Slughorn drawled on. They had been promised that today they would finally commence the infamous baneberry potion, but without realizing it, their professor had lectured for the entire two hour period. The majority of which hadn't even been useful to them. Slughorn had simply recounted to them a series of anecdotes of the countlessly ridiculous amount of times he had tussled with the potion. Although Remus had done his best to keep his groans mental, others, namely the Slytherins, had become more vocal with their indignation. Leo Jacknife, a Slytherin chaser, had mentioned several times that he had better shut up before I blow his brains out, and Avery, after one hour of sitting through his head of house's absurd idea of teaching, had gotten up and stormed out of the room. I got better things to do then listen to this bollocks, Avery spat directly at Slughorn.

Though Remus loathed the bloke, he had to admit that he had the right idea. There was no way he could sit another minute without getting up to follow in his rival's footsteps. Between the hostility emanating from Eva Manasse's presence, to the drabness of the day's lesson, he could not endure any longer. His hands hurt from the anxiety and he had an oddly strong need to run. Merlin's beard could I use a cigarette just about now, he confessed to himself, noting himself to ask Sirius for one later.

"Professor." Remus' looked over to where Lily sat with her hand raised.

"Yes, Miss Evans," Slughorn replied attentively.

"Please excuse me for the interruption, but I would like to note that the hour ends in two minutes," Lily pointed out hesitantly. One never knew whether to interrupt Slughorn or to let him talk until he...
put himself to sleep. His temper varied depending on the weather, his breakfast, and what type of socks he was wearing. At least, that's what Remus had overheard his own beloved head of house gossip once.

Granted, Lily had no reason to excuse herself. Nearly everyone, save Snape, was on the verge of cheering and thanking the redheaded witch. As soon as she had announced the time, everyone had begun packing away their supplies, Remus included.

"My golly, how time goes!" Slughorn blurted out. "I suppose," he continued, "with the extensive amount of information I have given you, you should all be able to complete the potion as an out-of-class assignment. One potion per group." Everyone groaned simultaneously, Remus doing his best to hold himself back. Though content to find that he wasn't the only one who found the new partner system a failure, he couldn't help but silently curse his professor to oblivion. He hadn't planned on interacting with his partner for a good while, hoping that the tension would first dissipate before having to forcefully speak to each other once again. But the past three weeks of peace had seemed too good to be true, and here he was again wondering what in Merlin's name he was going to do.

"What about the baneberries?" inquired Harold Skively, a lanky Ravenclaw who always refused to raise his hand and speak in turn.

"What about them, m'boy?" Slughorn replied, seeming perplexed by the question.

"Are they in the supply cabinet?" the freckled Ravenclaw prepositioned again.

"Oh no m'boy," chuckled Slughorn, "why, haven't you been listening? They must be picked fresh for the potion to work, but don't worry, you'll find them all about the forest."

Another groan erupted through the class, including Remus this time. He couldn't believe his luck, not only did he have to interact with her, but they also had to go berry picking together! He felt like taking a cauldron and begging Sirius to drop it on his head. He could hear several Ravenclaws flipping through their calendar diaries, looking desperately for any free time they didn't have to go scavenge for poisonous fruit. The Slytherins, completely fed up with their professor and completely blasé about the time, were already heading out the door, cursing Slughorn under their breaths as they passed by him.

"Oh, use human hair! I will be collecting them one week from today!" he cried out hastily. Remus made a mental note to himself, but was certain that with Manasse as his partner there was no need. *She probably already has the berries,* he joked spiritlessly to himself.

Remus saw more and more people filter out through the door, and he too began to shove his supplies into his bag. Remus chose to not bother with scheduling a time with his partner, knowing that she would disregard anything he recommended to go off and do what she preferred. Throwing the strap of his shoulder lazily, he went to go join James and Fabian who were already waiting for him in the hallway.

However, he had been completely oblivious to Eva who had been patiently waiting for him to discuss and decide what their plan was. Now the last one left in the dreary room, she let out a small sigh. In her own way, she was trying her best to repair relations with her partner. She realized that she was failing incredibly, believing that not bothering him with words would be the best approach. But they hadn't exchanged anything in three weeks, not even a glance. This was not the person she had been raised to be. She was supposed to be stronger, better, but admittedly there was nothing left in her to fight. She felt like a sparrow with a broken wing, and what good was a sparrow with a broken wing?
What are you doing? a voice screeched in her head, but she just waved it off like she would a mosquito. The voice, although once powerful, had now become a minor annoyance, another character inside her head. Every once in a while it would cajole, shrilling to grab her attention, but she was determined to beat it this time.

Her fingers ran over the cool stones of the great halls that mazed throughout the castle. She was alone, it was the hour before dinner and everyone was either in their dorms or in the library. So predictable, she mused to herself. Her plan had been slightly impulsive, but it had been put together meticulously. She knew where everyone would be, what they would be doing, who they would be with, all because that was how it always was. Eva didn't want to be like them though. She wanted to keep people guessing, no one was to know her next step, but she would always know theirs. This way, she would be ready for everything, even if the Earth stopped spinning and she had to jump off the edge of the world into the unknown, she would be ready.

And just like clockwork, a door creaked open around the bend, and she knew that her plan had played out just as she had thought. She waited apprehensively, a slight jitter maturing in her hands. She brought her attention back to the sounds rebounding off the walls. Singular, she noted on the footsteps.

"Hi!" she yelped abruptly, surprising Remus to a halt. His eyes momentarily went wide with shock, and he furrowed his eyebrows. Eva, too, had caught herself by surprise. She hadn't meant to sound so ardent, but the impatience had fried her nerves and let itself out that way.

Remus stood completely bewildered. He looked around as if he was searching for a jester to come out and yell SURPRISE, but no such thing happened. There were no Slytherins there to attack him, there was no one else but him and her.

"Hello," he straightened himself, still looking around the hall warily. "Is something wrong?" he added.

"No," they looked each other in the eyes. "I came to ask when you wanted to go picking for the baneberries?"

Remus turned his gaze for a moment, looking down at the floor pensively. His thoughts were all over the place. At times Sirius would wait for him after his tutoring session with the first years, but usually he would walk through this part of the castle alone. His mind had fluttered away and suddenly it had been brought back forcefully. He knew he probably looked stupid just standing there, but the fatigue had taken over and he really couldn't bring himself to think cohesively.

"Um, I don't know," he admitted. "No, wait just a moment. I'm- I can't- I mean-, ugh," he brought his wrist up to his temple and rubbed it. "Excuse me, I'm really tired."

Eva's stance softened just slightly. He did look tired, eyes red and heavy bags sitting under them. Unlike her, his back was hunched and he was leaning on one leg.

"No," she spoke lowly. He looked up from the ground confused.

"No?"

"It is I who must be excused, I alarmed you without warning." Remus' eyebrows knitted together once again. He cocked his head slightly to the right, pulling his gaze away from her to look back at the ground. What is happening today? He asked. They hadn't talked in weeks, not even a glance. He had ignored her and she had sought him out. She had come to him, even though he had thought that it was him who had to go to her. She raised the white flag and now wanted to negotiate.
"So, baneberries?" he chuckled tensely. He watched her hair raise and fall as she nodded. "Very well, I suppose we should get done with it as soon as possible. I'm available both tomorrow in the late afternoon and Sunday all day."

"Sunday morning?" she asked faintly.

"So no one can see us?" Remus retorted, there was no way he would get up early on a Sunday morning, not even if it meant certain diplomacy between him and Eva Manasse.

"No," she paused, scrunching her face for just mere seconds. Remus wouldn't have even noticed if he hadn't been observing her so keenly. He wasn't used to her like this, she looked small. Well, she was small, definitely smaller than him, but she looked as if she could turn herself into a ball and let him hold her for the entire winter. Like a kitten, he noted. But she was no kitten, and he knew that better than anyone. She was a lioness who would protect her pride before she let anyone come near her. "It's because in the morning the sun is to the east. The baneberries are on the eastern side of the forest, it will be easier to find them if they're reaching towards the sunlight."

"Oh, you were paying attention in class," Remus joked.

"No, actually, he hadn't even mentioned it." Of course, Remus quipped sarcastically to himself. He smirked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Is there something you don't know?"

"Plenty," she replied, slightly offended.

"That'll be the day," Remus scoffed. "Very well, Sunday morning at 10. Where?"

"Vegetable gardens," she affirmed, not letting his amusement bother her.

"Vegetable gardens it is."

"I guess that's done then."

"I guess it is," Remus repeated her words, lifting his eyebrows.

"Okay," she turned around, "goodbye-"

"If you salute me now, it will be awkward in the next minute when we end up walking back down side by side," he wisecracked once again.

"Stop it," she bit back, letting herself go for just a second. Immediately, however, she composed herself and took a deep breath. He was playing with her and she was letting him win. This was exactly the reaction he wanted out of her, and his smirks and chuckles only confirmed it further. She could sneer and walk away without looking back, she didn't have to waste her time trying to do the right thing. I told you so, the voice hissed at her.

"What? You scared they'll see us?"

"It's not that-"

"Yes, it is," he asserted.

"Fine, walk with me," she spun on her feet to begin the trail back to the Great Hall. She didn't even bother to look at him. He was making her blood boil and she allowed him to continue. Just like he did weeks ago. She let him and his smart remarks get the best of her, even though she was better than
him. She didn't need to be his little joke. They didn't need to be peaceful with each other. She didn't need him.

Remus wrapped a hand around the leather strap of his bag. He stared on at her, watching as she walked away from him. His eyes were narrowed and he wasn't smirking anymore. Instead, he was trying to figure this enigma out. He was good with riddles, he was good with puzzles, and he could read most people, but not her. No, she wasn't going to let it be easy for him.

Now, it was Remus who stood alone in the great stone halls. Eva had just turned the bend, not even bothering once to see if he had followed her. She knew quite well that he wasn't going to take her up on her invitation, even though he had been tempted. He was determined to find out what was hidden underneath that thick, steel armor. He knew that if he wanted to resolve the cryptogram that was Eva Manasse, he would not only have to play her at her own game, but also beat her at it.

Sirius paced back and forth in front of the barren fireplace. His footsteps echoed vociferously off every surface and into every crevice. With only his thoughts and nothing else to occupy him in the dreary room, his mind cranked and reeled as it scrambled to organize itself. The silence, though welcomed with open arms, would end up driving him into a place where it rained ash and acid. What's wrong with you? What are you doing? before he could turn to a bottle of whiskey, he shook the question out of his head. It had been plaguing him for weeks, and he was trying his best not to let it get the best of him. Unfortunately, he had noticed a down spiral in his behavior, booze and cigarettes becoming the only thing he would consume for days, denying that it was a slow suicide when anyone mentioned it.

Still pacing, he reached into his trousers' pocket to pull out his wand. He absentmindedly rolled it between his hands, allowing the engravings to press against his skin. The sensation taking him back to the moment that he had first held it.

It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then. Sirius grimaced as he remembered the person he used to be. He had haughtily walked into that old man's shop, not even bothering to announce himself. Him and his brother arrogantly assuming that the wizard would already know who they were. As they had expected, he had indeed known.

All those wands, Sirius let out a small chuckle, teasing himself as he recalled how long they had been in that shop. He had been so sure that it wouldn't have occupied longer than the late morning. Boy, was I wrong, he remarked.

Garrick Ollivander, one of the best wandmakers in the world, had patiently worked with Sirius. With any pureblood, Ollivander had a base plan that would work most of the time. He always made his new customers begin their journey with the most well suited and commonly used wands for their blood type, stature, and occupation. Thus, he went through all the typical woods and cores he believed to suit someone like Sirius best; walnut like his cousin Bellatrix, hornbeam like his Uncle Cygnus, but nothing had worked yet.

Don't worry little man, there is something here for you, he remembered the old wizard's encouraging words. He had been completely heartbroken when his father's elm wand had backfired and set one of the record keeping books on fire. Back then, his one goal was to make his parents proud of him. All of them had been so sure that they would share a wand, but alas fate had played its funny tricks long before he saw the rolled dice.

How the tables turned, he snorted, filling the silence in the grey room.

Then, Ollivander surrendered the chase for a pureblood wand and went in alphabetical order. They
began with acacia, then alder, next was apple, and so on until finally there it was.

*Blackthorn with a unicorn tail core*, he thought to himself as he squeezed the wand. It had been love at first sight. When he had first held the dark wood, a warmth washed over him like a dry summer's breeze.

*It seems we have a warrior in our midst*, Ollivander had sung to him. In that moment, Sirius hadn't a clue what the old man was on about, but he hadn't cared. All he wanted to do was show off his new prize, brag about it to his younger brother. He had ignored the old wizard as he explained how loyal the wand would be, and how it would only grow with Sirius. They would become best friends, and there would be no wizard or witch who could pull them apart. It was all too soon until he understood what both the wandmaker and the wand had already known.

"There you are," cried Peter from the entrance. Though he had a small voice, the room multiplied it by ten, causing it to boomerang against every corner. Sirius nearly chuckled watching Peter turn red as he realized how loud he had been.

"Careful there, Wormtail, don't want to make us go deaf," Sirius teased as a corner of his mouth lifted up.

"Why weren't you at breakfast?" James asked as the boys approached each other.

"I had to prepare for you lovely lot," Sirius answered playfully.

"Why? What's today's plan?" Remus stepped forward from behind James, causing the four of them to create a circle. He rubbed his temple as he inspected the bleak, sunless space.

"The Light Bringer and its counter," he informed them determinedly, all jokes aside. Remus raised his eyebrows. He was familiar with the spell, but only through what reading he had done on it. He had never practiced it nor used it, for he had no reason to; and, to his knowledge, Sirius hadn't either.

"What?" blurted out Peter.

"Unofficially, it's called the Blinder. It's one of the strongest lights you can conjure, and it has the ability to temporarily blind anyone who doesn't shut their eyes in time," Remus clarified for him.

"You could be blind for months," James added.

"A- and we're practicing that today?" Peter croaked meekly, his face going cold at the idea of what could happen if only he blinked too slow. Remus pursed his lips as he empathized with Peter's fear.

"Don't you think it's a little risky?" Remus questioned Sirius, mostly out of worry for their smaller, less courageous friend.

"When the war arrives, which will be sooner than later, they will not use the child's play that trench coat wearing pansy teaches us. They will use the unforgivable curses, they will use hexes that you couldn't even imagine in your worst nightmares, and as you suffer, they will watch and laugh. It is a risk, but we're all going to be making decisions we never thought we'd have to," Sirius spat out in one breath, inhaling deeply as he finished.

"Woah, we understood the first time. There's no need to get your panties in a bunch," James defended them, not understanding who his friend was angrier at—them or their imaginary enemy.

"They're not in a bunch. I've just come to my senses while you're all still playing with your peckers," Sirius growled, roughly pocketing his wand.
"We're here, aren't we? You asked for our help, we came without second guessing you. We could have easily called you bonkers and left you to your crusade, but we didn't. We're not against you, Padfoot," Remus asserted firmly, scrutinizing Sirius' clenched jaw.

"My bad, I just want everything to work out is all," Sirius surrendered after what seemed like an eternity, pulling his eyes from Remus' stare.

"We care about you, mate. We just don't want to be accused when we're doing everything we can to help you," James admitted, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I mean, I'm head boy and I snuck into the restricted section to find your precious spell books," he furthered.

"How scary," Sirius teased weakly, still not bring his gaze back up to meet theirs.

"It's all going to be fine as long as we're together," Remus assured, placing his own hand on Sirius' shoulder blade, sharing a look with James.

"Stronger together," chimed in Peter, smiling as he stood in front of Sirius.

"Stronger together," Sirius nodded, reminding himself of the words they had chanted to one another so many times over the past seven years.

"Now, show us this bloody spell already," James grinned. His words, no matter what, never failed to be strong and unyielding. He was sure of them even when he hadn't a clue of what he was talking about. Just like his speech, he had always been a rock for all three of them— like a true leader.

"You just want Evans to think you're a fucking wizard god," Sirius gibed lightly.

"That reminds me," he chuckled, teasing himself to lighten the mood.

"There's about an hour," Peter mentioned as he turned his wrist to look at the small golden watch wrapped around it.

"Show us how this is done, Padfoot," urged Remus, his head held high as he looked unto his friend with an expression of admiration, much like how a student would look to their instructor.

"Okay, I was thinking that we practice the counter first, and then the actual spell. This way, when I demonstrate for the first time, you three will and must conjure the counter immediately. Once the others have arrived, we will split them up into groups, and teach them what I'm about to show you lot," Sirius instructed fervently, surprising all of his friends. It wasn't often that they saw Sirius take initiative like this. Usually, it was James who told them what to do, and Remus to come up with all the details. Sirius enjoyed the experience more than the preparation, but not this time.

_He must be really serious about this war_, Remus came to realize, suddenly breaking out into goosebumps.

"Remember, when you're conjuring the spell, you have to lift your dominant arm all the way back and then forward again. Imagine that you're throwing your wand onto the ground," Remus instructed Marjory Bones, his prefect partner and housemate.

Lines formed between her eyebrows, her wand pressing against her rosy white cheek as she scratched it.

"No worries. Here, let me show you," he ushered encouragingly, edging closer to the witch's side in order to place a delicate hand on her forearm. "You want to keep your arm straight," he began
advising as he palmed her elbow to guide it straight. "Then, lift it all the way up so that it's pointing straight to the sky," he paused momentarily, "in this case, the ceiling." He felt a twinge of pride when he saw his stumped housemate's eyes finally lighten up at the realization of what she had been doing wrong.

"As you say the spell, bring your entire arm, still straight, back down to about here," Remus gently pulled her entire arm towards the ground, stopping when it reached just past a quarter of a circle. "Got that?" he kept his hand on her forearm, observing her face. He could see her hesitating to respond as if she was still processing his instructions.

"I think so," she declared, her voice lightly sprinkled with doubt.

"As long as you follow my tips, you'll see an improvement," he assured her. "And you, Abbott? All good?" Remus let go of her arm and turned to address her Hufflepuff partner.

"All good here, Remus," he replied with a toothy grin, adding in a thumbs up for good measure. *Good kid,* Remus smiled. Him and Flynn had been in many classes together since they had begun Hogwarts. He had tried several times to invite him out to try and make his acquaintance, but unlike Remus, he had more interest in wizard's chess than books and beer. Nonetheless, Remus admired the short, curly haired boy's innocence. Everyone around him had grown up so fast, and yet he had managed to hold onto his youth.

Remus left the pair to practice, and turned around to investigate the others. He observed and took mental notes of who needed improvements in their movements. Most seemed to have gotten the hang of it, while others were more reluctant, afraid of potentially blinding their friends and partners. As his eyes roamed over the many different faces, he couldn't help but feel a sort of joy maturing within him. Seeing what he could do, teaching others as they looked to him for aide and counsel, made him feel purposeful. All his life, Remus had kept his opinions to himself, only sharing with his closest friends. He never bragged or tattled about his achievements because he didn't think it mattered, but in this moment he couldn't help it. Never before had he realized how much he could enjoy helping and teaching others.

"What is wrong with you?" Remus quickly shifted his attention to where the deafening shrill had just erupted. In the far right corner from where he stood, he could see Marlene McKinnon tightly palming both her eyes, and her housemate, Lorenzo Quaglieri, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. His eyes were wide and his mouth ajar as he ferreted around looking for someone to assist him.

Without hesitation, Remus traversed the room to where they were.

"What happened?" Remus shouted at Lorenzo as Marlene let out another cringing sob.

"I didn't mean to, I-I messed up," the Ravenclaw stuttered as Remus approached them.

"She was on defense?" Remus inquired, bringing himself to stand in front of Marlene so that he could get a better understanding of what had happened. From the corner of his eye, he watched Lorenzo nod. His eyes still wide like saucers, and his body shaking dangerously as he held onto his housemate.

"I can't open my eyes," she groaned with pain as Remus attempted to wrap his hands around her wrists. He pursed his lips at her defiance, but refused to push her in fear of messing things even further.

"Marly!" James called out, rushing to Remus' side. "What's wrong? Are your eyes burning?" James looked at Remus, his friend's eyes mimicking that of his Ravenclaw counterpart. Though he had
been worried before, a heavy anxiety shook in Remus' hands. He felt himself clenching them into fists as a million thoughts ran through his mind.

*What to do,* he repeated over and over again, desperately climbing through all his years of learning and reading for an answer.

"Yes," the blonde grumbled through a barred mouth, her own hair and hands covering it.

"Move, move out of my way!" they heard Sirius bellowing from behind them.

"Oh, Marlene, it's all going to be okay," Lily comforted in an alarmed tone as she flocked to her best friend's side, consequently blocking Sirius' from approaching. Not realizing what she had done as Sirius looked on incredulously, the witch ran a motherly hand through Marlene's wispy blonde hair, shushing her to stop crying.

"Let me see," they heard Sirius demand from behind them. Without waiting for an answer, he pushed Lorenzo and James out of his way in order to bow his head and get a better look at Marlene's covered face. "I knew it was going to be you," he scowled.

"Fuck off, you bloody bastard," she cursed back through her tears.

"This bloody bastard is going to make you all better, but first you need to move your fucking hands," Sirius beseeched aggressively. Remus kept an eye on his friend as he noticed his back beginning to tremble.

"Marlene," he said more harshly, no longer asking her to listen to him. Just like Remus had attempted before, Sirius wrapped his hands around the girl's wrist. At first, she wouldn't give in, crying and snarling like a pregnant dog as he ripped her hands away from her face. Remus had to commend his friend for the effort. He had tried before and he knew that she would not give up easily. Eventually, the blonde relented and let him guide her hands to where he wanted them.

Everyone else had created a circle around the scene, waiting with held breaths and wide eyes. Even Remus could feel the suspense weighing down his lungs. As he watched her eye lids slowly open, a sound that could be heard all the way from London until the Highlands ripped out from between Marlene's lips. She howled and bawled as Sirius used all his strength to press down her hands, pulling them behind her back.

"James, I need you to hold her down," he shouted. Immediately, James lurched to stand behind Marlene and hold down her hands, freeing Sirius from the burden.

"Woah," James blurted as he confronted Marlene's strength. His eyes widened and his forehead crinkled as he used all the arm muscle he had to keep her hands in place. From the other side, Sirius began to back up, standing straight once again.

"Fucking hell," Remus heard Sirius curse under his breath. He watched as he sized up the situation at hand, calculating his chances of success. However, knowing Sirius, Remus knew that there was nothing that would stop him from at least trying once. He would never be able to live on if he didn't, no matter whether he failed or not.

"Stop fucking moving, McKinnon," Sirius cursed a little more loudly. He had straightened his arm, and the wand's tip pointed to where the Ravenclaw's eyes were supposed to be. Remus bit his lip as his eyes darted between his friend and the blonde, wondering how in Merlin's world would he would be able to do it.

"Just bloody go, Sirius!" yelled James through gritted teeth. Sirius pursed his lips, twirling his wand
in between his fingers, trying his best to keep a steady hand.

"Fuck it," Sirius refocused on his target, his back growing firmer and his eyes narrowing. He felt the adrenaline pump through his veins as the fear dissipated somewhere into the background. The wand was now held surely between his hand, pointing directly at his ex-lover.

"Apero Fos," Sirius announced mightily, the words flowing out of his mouth like a whisper but strong enough to take down anything in its path. From the tip of his wand, Remus could detect a shadow-like force extracting itself in a cloud in the path that Sirius was pointing in. As it approached Marlene's face, her screams began to turn into soft mews. Then, her deadly jerks turned into barely noticeable spasms.

"Say something," Sirius commanded quietly, not letting himself to let go of the shadow.

Instead of speaking, Marlene blinked multiple times as she took in the image in front of her. There were over a dozen of her peers staring back at her, wide eyed and patiently waiting for her to announce her recovery. She began to laugh hysterically as she registered all the horrified faces.

"Fuck me," she began to giggle uncontrollably through her tears.

"Oh my goodness," Lily cried out, clasping her hands together and bringing them up to her nose. She never once took her eyes off her friend, a glimmer shining in them as she, too, began to break out into a shaky laugh.

"You gave us a right good scare there, Marly," James exhaled, cautiously relinquishing his grasp on her wrists. Over Marlene's shoulder, he glimpsed at his friend who was no longer looking at the pair. Instead, he had his wand pointed down whilst repeating words that retreated the shadow back into his wooden weapon. As he finished, he glanced back up and met with James' gaze. Sirius winked as he looked over his friend's ashen face, making light of what had just occurred.

"Well, if not me then who, James?" she teased, patting his head and fluffing up his thick hair so that it stood on edge. Though he laughed, it was quick and high-pitched.

From the corner of his eye, Remus noticed a figure shoving itself past their peers that were rushing towards Marlene. He followed the coal curls until they were on the other side, where no one else was looking. Someone shoved against Remus, but he didn't bother to look down. Instead, he focused in and squinted his eyes as his friend was now heading out the slim doorway. Curious and worried as to why he had fled the scene so quickly, Remus also began to push past those that had so eagerly wanted to see what the popular Ravenclaw witch.

When he got to the far end of the room, the rectangular stones began to move aside much like they did at Diagon Alley. The only difference was that here he only needed to think about wanting it, and the exit would suddenly appear. After a few seconds of listening to the concerns and the shifting bricks, the all too familiar arches and columns of the castle came into his view. Remus poked his head out, looking back and forth down in the hallway searching for his friend.

Just a little way from the doorway, Sirius was leaning against the wall, a hand in his pocket and a foot hiked up so it was sitting firmly against the masonry. Though he had heard him, Sirius didn't
bother to look up as the footsteps ricocheted off the floor.

"You did good, Padfoot," Remus commended, breaking the eerie silence. Sirius snorted and brought the cigarette he was holding back up to his lips. He squinted as he inhaled, trying his best, yet failing miserably, to release himself of the shrills that had rung his ears just moments before. He could swear that they were still echoing throughout the halls, haunting him.

"Yeah, beginner's luck," he finally spoke as the smoke exhaled from his lungs and swirled around them. Remus, too, leaned his back against the wall next to his friend, watching the smoke as it waltzed and spun.

"You think so?" he picked at his words. Inhaling once again, Sirius pulled out the pack of cigarettes from his pocket, flipping it open with his index finger, and offering it up to the only person that had ever noticed his absence. "Thanks," Remus crooned, helping himself. Just as he was about to ask for a light, Sirius handed him over his own cigarette. Putting one end to the other, Remus rapidly puffed in through the filter until the end of his cigarette glowed like a fire at in the early morning. "Here," he handed it back to Sirius, both boys leaning back silently as they savored the moment.

"I just can't help but think what would have happened if we were actually at war," he confessed, whispering just in case someone was hiding around the corner. Though he knew there wasn't anyone, he didn't want to take the chance of someone seeing him so vulnerable. It was rare for others to see this side of him, doubtful, scared, and nervous. Even Remus was surprised with his friend's self-doubt, especially when anyone else would have be gloating at their success.

"But we aren't," Remus objected, attempting to shine some light on his friend's fears.

"Not yet," muttered Sirius, exhaling and encircling them once again with the thick fog.
The Japanese kabocha squash grew in nicely, Eva noted as she paced around the vegetable gardens with her arms crossed behind her back. She remembered when Professor Sprout had asked her best student what she thought about harvesting the imported autumn vegetable. Eva had listened intently as her professor went on listing the difficulties that it would face, but if she did happen to be successful, they would not only have a very scrumptious Halloween feast, but also be one of the first to attempt and prosper at growing the plant so far away from its homeland.

"It doesn't hurt to try," Eva had urged her furtively. Though initially she had doubted its ability to succeed in the Scottish soil, it seemed that it had done perfectly fine. They were now plump and round just like their gardener. She smiled lightly at the thought.

"Am I late?" Eva looked up from where she had been bending down, her fingers pausing momentarily over the prickly peppermint plant's leaves. She had planted it herself just over two years ago, and it had grown to be her most prized possession at Hogwarts. Starting off as just a seed, it now stood over a foot tall, overshadowing the bird eye's chili.

"I don't know, are you?" she responded faintly, not bothering to pay him any mind. Truthfully, she hadn't been keeping track of the time, for once in her life, she had intentionally arrived early. She loved the vegetable garden, just like she loved the green houses, and could spend all day there if they would have allowed her.

"I think so." Remus' breath was short and heavy. He was hunching over slightly, his hands placed on the slopes of his ribs, attempting his best to keep his lungs inside his chest. He learned his lesson, she observed, curious enough to spare another glance his way.

"You shouldn't have run," she said passingly, beginning to stand up. She looked down at her dirt-stained hands and clapped them together to brush the soil off.

"Yeah, thanks," he retorted in a huff. Eva looked up through her eyelashes to watch him as he coughed into a hand.

"You should drink some water," she suggested, ignoring his biting tone. But he wasn't watching her anymore, instead his eyes flittered around the grounds, darting from the whomping willow, to the greenhouses, and all the way down to the trees lining the edge of the forest.

He brought his hand back up to his mouth and let out another dry cough. Maybe some water wouldn't hurt, he told himself, promptly sliding his wand out of his pocket. Leaning his head back, he placed the pointed wooden edge so that it laid gently against the corner of his lips.

"Aguamenti infirmi," Remus conjured as best as he could with an open mouth. A quiet trickle of water suddenly sputtered out of his wand, destroying the desert in his throat. When was the last time you drank water, you bloody git? he reprimanded himself while relishing in a lake of the cooling liquid.

Eva blinked and silently gazed on from the opposite side of the herb patch. He had pulled the wand from his mouth, extinguishing the spell, as a jumper-laden arm reached up and rubbed off the few water droplets running down his chin. She couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at his desperation, and how shamelessly he pranced it around. Eva was unsure of whether she felt disgusted, offended or amused by his grunginess.
Remus licked his lips and straightened his back. He brought himself to meet his partner's gaze, roaming over the scene played out in front of him. Her icy stare and the cold water caused a shiver to run up his spine, his head shaking as it dinged at the top.

"Excuse me," he apologized nonchalantly.

"No worries, I have all day."

"Really?"

"No," she firmly quipped, her voice matching her stare.

"Ah," he hesitated, searching for the right words, "well, I suppose we should get going then. Not going to get any younger." He tried his best to jest, and even forced a helpless smile, but it faltered as she responded by discontentedly crossing her arms. "Right," he muttered in an undertone. He looked around for a bit, awkwardly distracting himself from anywhere but her face. Beginning to feel horribly naked in his current position, he turned away from her and initiated the descent.

_She's either going to follow me or not_, he concluded rationally, convincing himself that he had chosen wisely.

She didn't move, but instead shifted her eyes to where his head bobbed up and down the hill. Eva had never witnessed such insouciance before, not even her drunk uncles could shine a light to the boy. Everything he did, from his words to his actions, was a risk. He thought about nothing before he acted on it, and it made her wonder if he even had to. _Is he so privileged that he can live so freely, and without consequences?_ she asked herself. She had been raised to believe that she was the one who with all the advantages, and maybe she was, but after this unexpected introduction into a completely different mind, willingly or not, she riskily began to doubt those circumstances.

_And which is better?_ she continued, setting her foot forward to finally follow in his path.

Admittedly, she had expected him to continue without her. But she had been wronged, for there he was watching as she jolted and bounced down the hill. His eyes were glazed, and though he had them placed right on her, she knew that he couldn't really see her. _Either a daydreamer or an over thinker_, she observed, removing her gaze from him as quickly as she had put it there.

Remus heard the dirt and pebbles crumble and shift as she climbed down, alerting him and shaking him back into focus. His eyes re-concentrated on the witch approaching him. For the first time, he surprisingly found that she was a great deal shorter than him, nearly an entire head so. He had always thought her to be amongst the taller girls of Hogwarts, but it seemed that her perfect posture and high chin did indeed work its magic.

"It's rude to stare, Lupin," she scolded him.

"My bad," he responded insincerely. Eva quickly turned to look at him, rapidly blinking as she found herself at a loss for words. _How does he permit himself?_ she sneered at him in her head. Eva knew a lot of things about a lot people, things that people would pay good money to keep locked away. She was a good listener, and over the years she had grown smart enough to realize that listening intently may one day save her. But no matter how many conversations she had eavesdropped, or how many times some random witch rambled to her meaningless gossip, not once had she heard a peep about this wizard and his terribleness. She had been convinced when they had named him charitable and good willed, but he was nothing of the sort. He was rude and disgraceful, and he had no sense of manners nor respect. _He's just a half-blood bottom feeder_, she reminded herself.
"So, these berries," he clapped his hands together, waking Eva back into reality.

She relentlessly continued to fixate her cold gaze on the shifty young wizard. All he could do was watch as she scrutinized him, and eventually began to wonder if his scars had suddenly come to surface. *Did I forget?* he nervously attempted to recall, suddenly doubting a religious routine he had kept since the days Lily had taught him it.

Completely ignoring him, she swirled about on one foot so that she faced the Forbidden Forest. She carefully came to approach its border, pausing as she looked along it, left and right. Without another thought, she climbed through the dense shrubbery that lined its edge. As she pushed herself through the thickness of it, she became mesmerized with the colors. It was the color of the world under her feet, of the living monuments that had withstood so many of man's wars, never surrendering. They always said that red was the color of passion, of fire, but the color of the earth beneath their very fingertips merited so much more than what it had been given.

From behind her, Remus noticed her momentary pause, and assumed that she had been hesitant about going into the forest. *She isn't wrong,* he thought. There were intimidating creatures hidden within the forest walls. Ancient beings and mischievous critters that would reek havoc if they could get their hands on her. Remus, however, knew that nothing would be bothering her today. Unlike his peers, the beings sheltered in the forest recognized who he was, what he was. They could smell it in his blood, in his sweat, and because of that, most of them kept their distance. *No need to worry today, dear Eva,* he jested in his head, snorting quietly enough so that she'd mistake it for the crackling of the branches underneath her feet.

"They should be around here," she mumbled offhandedly, just loud enough for him to catch it as they trampled throughout the outer edges of the forest.

She came to a sudden halt, throwing Remus off and causing his chest to bump into her back. Eva jerked forward, but managed to balance herself as the boy behind her instinctively reached out to grab her waist.

"Let go of me, Lupin," she growled through her teeth.

"Sorry about that," he replied meekly, a red shadow climbing up his neck.

"You are by far the clumsiest human being that I have ever met," she hissed through her teeth.

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm the clumsiest, but I'm sure not the most graceful," he chuckled nervously, trying his best to make light of the situation. He stretched his hand back and clamped it around his neck, rubbing it as he waited for his partner's response.

"Just, look over there," she dismissed him, her voice unmistakably thick with frustration and impatience.

Though he had heard her instructions, he couldn't help but stall and take the time to observe her. She had moved over to the various moss carpeted stones scattered on the forest's bottom. She had a set jaw and an alert gaze, taking her time to look carefully behind, around, and under everything that stood in her path as if it was her first time seeing such things. However, unbeknownst to him, Eva actually did know exactly what she was looking at. She could recall the name, family name, and latin name for everything her eyes fell upon. Nature was her home, and like a home, she knew exactly where all her possessions sat.

"It's a low plant, no?" Remus eventually broke the silence. Though he already knew what he was supposed to be looking for, he had taken the opportunity to jab at a conversation with his newest
"Like poison ivy, not blueberries," she brushed him off, continuing her search through the undergrowth. *All to pot for that plan,* he frowned.

"Okay, I'll just look over here then," he announced, still watching her as she walked around a tree. He was testing her, seeing how far he could go before she bothered to look his way. *I could pass out cold right now and she wouldn't even notice,* he betted with himself. However, unlike their previous encounters, this time she wasn't belittling him, and for Remus that was a point in the success department.

"We may have to go deeper," she sighed, still observing a small clump of moss sitting contently on the grey rock. *Winter moss,* she noted to herself, nearly smiling as she watched the little sprouts dancing in the light breeze that swung by. They reminded her of little children playing and dancing during the summer festivals. *So innocent,* a delicate sadness pricked at her heart as she remembered when they once let her dance lazily and foolishly with her cousins.

"That's a scary bunch in there," Remus responded, cocking his head smugly as she turned to look at him over her shoulder. He raised his eyebrows as their eyes met. "What? You don't know about the nymphs?" Remus bit down on the inside of his cheeks to stop himself from chuckling. Her face didn't help a bit as she looked on incredulously, unsure to take him seriously or not.

"Dryades," she mentioned flatly, relaxing her neck so that she could still see him out of the corner of her eye, but that she wasn't straining herself to meet his gaze.

"What?"

"They're called dryades. The ones that live in the forest, they're a different branch of nymph."

Remus knew exactly what the difference was, and he knew exactly who they were. He had met them on several occasions, and the Marauders had told him that sometimes, during the warmer months, they would come out and join him on one of their escapades. As a thank you, he had sometimes sought them out and given them some of his chocolate, and though he declined every time, they never failed to repay him with flower crowns and bee pollen.

"They're irritating, but far from dangerous," she finished.

"I wouldn't know," he teased.

"Of course," she mumbled lowly.

"What are we waiting for then?" he began to hike over the thick tree roots and travel further east. In these parts of the woods, the forest was deep and dark. There were still leaves tied to the branches, and so the sun could just barely reach into these parts. A dampness overtook his body the further he dove, his skin began to feel wet even though it was chilly outside. He looked back to his partner who was watching the ground and the plants she passed intently, somehow gracefully skipping over all the obstacles that he didn't notice until too late.

"You do this often?" he called out to her, growing bewildered by her calmness. She showed no signs of fear or agitation as the castle began to disappear behind them. Even some of the bravest wizards he knew wouldn't dare wander into these parts of the forest.

She looked up momentarily from her spree, but then decided to ignore him. She didn't understand why he was asking, and why it was important to their task. In reality, Eva did not come to these parts often. Once in third year she had wandered off during a Care of Magical Creatures class, and had
come upon a herd of unicorns that had been drinking water by a stream. She sat there all day, hidden from them as she awed at the ethereal beings. When they had picked themselves up again to travel on, the sun had begun to set. She remembered the sky being a light purple, and how not even the impending darkness could scare her. Remarkably, she had found herself back, and no one had even noticed that she'd been gone. As if they ever, she thought.

Remus looked over his shoulder again when he didn't hear anything from behind him. A loud sigh left his body as he watched her blatantly write him off. Though they had probably been walking for a few minutes, he felt as if time flowed like cement. As he trudged, he continuously gazed upwards to the small patches of sky that peeked every so often through the branches. There was nothing else he could do to make the experience more interesting. I have a partner who can't be bothered, I visit these woods monthly, he began listing off. There was nothing new or exciting for him, and he wouldn't have minded a bit of conversation, he didn't despise the girl like she did him.

"Here," Eva finally announced. They came to a halt at a modest clearing where trees danced around early fallen leaves and pine needles caught in clumps of moss. Both couldn't help but notice how unsightly it was. There were wood beetles bumbling across fallen logs and branches, and a certain gray cast that made everything look damp.

"Look by those trees over there," she advised him.

Remus turned to see where the witch was gesturing, and followed her gaze to the edge of the circle where the trees leaned drunkenly against each other. By the time he had looked back to her, she had already turned around and was making her way to the insect infested wood. He shrugged his shoulders and ambled around the circumference. He walked around trees, cracked twigs in half, all while lazily searching for the berries. Where are my friends? he thought as he yawned. He knew for a fact that if they had been there, this would have been a memory of a life time. Instead, he was stuck with what seemed to be the most frigid witch in all of Europe.

As the thought passed through his mind, he leaned just past the tree trunk to discretionally watch the witch who was now bending down, her knees deep in the dry mud. She was lifting up the logs without a care in the world about what crawled over her, simply swatting it off as a second thought. What in Godric's good will, he cursed to himself.

"They're not going to be under the logs," he informed her. She looked up with wide eyes, and though he regretted interrupting her from something that seemed quite important, he couldn't help but grin at the sight. He had never seen her caught off guard, and he wasn't all too sure what he had expected her to be, but her almond eyes emphasized her surprise and made her look like a startled owl.

To his bewilderment, she had begun to stand up, brushing off the dirt that had accumulated on her covered knees. Her lips were pursed, and a barely noticeable pout was beginning to mature on them. She looked around where she had been searching with a disappointment that he only saw on James a week after he'd lost a quidditch game. For the first time, Remus saw a human within that frozen coffin, and something began to churn deep in his heart.

"Yes, I know, but they're newly fallen, and I thought they may have been squashed underneath," she sighed, warily looking around her.

He continued to watch her. His eyes ran over her high cheekbones, the braid that ran down her spine like a shiny black rope, and the velvet emerald cloak that sat elegantly across her shoulders. She looked foreign to him, like she didn't belong here, in this school, in this country. She belonged somewhere warm, somewhere where she could sit out on a terrace all day and drink wine and eat
fresh cheese. Her bones were too small for their heavy woolen dresses, and her body too delicate for their strong whiskies.

"Hey, I think I found them." Remus' eyes caught something red waving in the distance. It stood mischievously behind Eva, only visible when the wind pushed it out from behind the massive yew.

Eva quickly looked up and followed his gaze. He had begun advancing towards her, stopping when they stood next to one another. A breeze cut through and rustled the leaves above them. From the other side of the trunk, Eva could now see the red bells swinging with the air.

He watched her braided hair bounce against her body as she pressed down against the forest floor. She had nearly pranced towards the hidden twigs, and Remus could swear he had briefly seen a smile threaten the corners of her mouth before she had set off.

"Will these be enough?" he asked as he came up behind her.

"We'll need enough for two viles," she answered as she plucked them off their thin stems. "Here, hold this would you?" She twisted her body around and offered him, with cupped hands, what she had been able to pick. Without hesitation, he immediately cupped his own hands and let her drop the berries into his palms. His eyes followed her hands as they reached into her cloak's pocket, procuring a little green velvet pouch.

"Put them in here," she gently directed him, nothing forceful about her tone. She watched the berries like they were children as he tilted his hand to let them fall into the sac.

"Why two? I thought we only needed one." Remus pulled his eyes away from her fingers, which were now pulling the silver string to close the pouch.

"Just in case the first one goes bad," she replied absentmindedly, seemingly lost within their new treasure. Remus went to respond, his mouth left ajar as he pondered her words. Good point, he realized, closing his mouth before she noticed.

"Here, collect whatever you find and put them in the pouch," she said to him as she turned back around to pick off more clusters.

"I'll be on this side," he informed her, crossing over to her left so that he could have access to whatever remained. Imitating his partner's position, Remus bent down and began thumbing the round red berries, pulling them as delicately as possible from their stems. Though poisonous, they seemed harmless. He let one roll around in his empty hand, tilting and lifting it every so often as to measure it. Lighter than a feather, he noticed.

"Are there anymore on that side?" he heard her pipe up after a short while. He looked up and their eyes met. For a brief moment, he couldn't help but notice how much greener they looked amidst all that surrounded them.

"Uh, no, I think I've got them all." His eyes followed her head as she slowly nodded. "They're more than enough," he assured her, obvious that she had expected to find more.

Stretching upward, he felt his legs ache and groan. He continued to stretch until they were content once again, even though the sticks and branches were so abundant that they poked and pricked at his ankles. He made his way back over to his partner, and reached down to pick up the pouch sitting pristinely next to her. He thought that she would have turned around to see who the intruder was, but he had been wrong. She continued to pick at the remaining berries, the ones that had initially resisted joining the rest of their cluster. He plopped the berries into the sac and mesmerized himself with the
way her hands danced between the leaves, swiftly and daintily plucking the fruit.

"Make sure you gathered all of them."

"I did."

"We don't want the others to find them," she justified. Remus' eyebrows lowered and pinched together. He had never been the competitive type, that was something he often left to James and Sirius, but even they weren't so extreme as to deprive others of a natural resource. Remus found himself, once again, dumbstruck and irritated with her words.

"We don't need all of them," he countered sharply, watching her furtively.

"You don't know that," she bit back, mimicking his tone.

*Ridiculous*, he wanted to cry out, but decided to save himself the trouble. He had already wasted too much energy on the girl, and it was obvious that no matter how convincing his argument, he would always lose in her eyes.

"Okay, I think we're done here," she deduced, standing up and taking a few paces backwards to observe the plant from afar. It looked so different now. Once it had been a piece of artwork splattered with red, now it stood just like everything else around it, nothing to set it apart from all the other millions of stems and twigs that climbed and waltzed around it.

Remus ran a hand through his hair, the pouch drooping lamely against the side of his leg. He realized that he had been too long in the witch's presence, and it was beginning to itch at him. His neck ached, and all he wanted was to lay down on his bed and enjoy the warmth of his dormitory. The forest was a dark reminder of what he was, and the days were only growing darker and colder. Usually, it wouldn't have bothered him so much, especially if his friends were here, but Eva Manasse was an ominous fog that had now entered for whatever reason. No matter how hard he tried, there she was, impossible to ignore. He didn't know who was to blame. He had tried to blame it on his weakness, on his neediness to please everyone else, but it was also his curiosity which kept him coming back to her. She was a magnet that pulled everything to her. He had even heard first years gossip about her, not even aware of what her name was but already attracted to her force. *How is that possible?* he had asked himself. There was only one other person he knew that matched her in that way- his best friend Sirius Black.

As he watched her move towards him, he lifted the pouch up to her and held it open. Without thanking him, she pushed the spare berries so that they sat with the others. Once they were placed safely inside, Remus shook the bag lightly to make sure there were no air pockets, and then pulled the silver string to close it.

"Here." He held it out to her, hanging it by his index finger so that it swung like an unwanted outcast between them.

"You'll be responsible for them," she stated bluntly. Remus tilted his head and furrowed his eyebrows. "You must, they need to stay in the sun until we brew them. Seeing as you have actual windows, you will place them on a clean cloth by it in your dorm," she added when she saw him struggling to understand her decision.

"Uh sure," he fumbled, bringing the pouch and his hand back to his side. He hadn't expected her to trust him with the task, or with any task. *It's because we have windows*, he reminded himself, realizing that she would never if the circumstances were different. Nevertheless, he took the small gesture as a victory, as a step towards a more trustworthy partnership. *Don't kid yourself*, an internal
"Right," Eva nodded tightly, brushing past him to begin their return back to castle grounds. Though she
couldn't see the castle for the trees in these parts brushed the sky, she could read the sun. It had
been something her geography tutor had once taught her years ago. When she was ten years old, he
had dropped her off in the middle of a field, tasking her to find her way back home.

"When there's nothing else, when they have taken everything from you, you will always have your
mind," her father would sermonize. Those words had gotten her out of those fields, and those words
were what kept her going all these years.

However, she didn't know that Remus also knew his way around the forest. Though he wasn't adept
at survival training, he had familiarized himself with the different areas. He knew exactly where the
oak grew and where the pines bred. He knew where there would be chipmunks and where there
would be beaver burrows. That's why it was no surprise when they eventually happened upon the
humble groundskeeper's, Hagrid's, garden.

Unlike Remus who had momentarily paused to smile upon the homely sight, she continued on hiking
up the hill. At this point, she didn't care if he followed or if he went off his own way. Remus looked
back and forth twice, surprised by how fast she had managed to scurry off. Deciding that he would
come back another day to visit his friend, he set off to follow in her footsteps.

The all too familiar hill was devastating to his lungs as his breath grew heavier. The dangerous
dryness from before clung to his throat. *It'll all be over soon,* he encouraged himself, pushing himself
to continue. She was a good feet ahead of him, but from behind he couldn't tell if she was struggling
the same way he was. He never took her to be an athlete, but then again there was nothing about her
that could surprise him anymore. He realized that there were no expectations with her, that
everything was possible.

Though the hike seemed endless, it eventually came to a stop as the ground began to level out. From
up top, he could turn around and see everything. He could see the woods stretched out for miles
below him, and the lake that looked black and gloomy because of the scarce sun. He was thankful,
however, when the grass turned into cobblestone, the ascent officially marking its end.

"Is that it then?" he nearly croaked, attempting to hide his heaving. They had now entered the
entrance hall, where several different hall tributaries and staircases led to different parts of the castle.
She turned around to look at him.

"Yes, for today that is. The potions lab is reserved for us on Thursday at five," she informed him,
pursing her lips as she eyed him up and down. He tried his best to compose himself. *Get on with it,
will you?* he pleaded her, wanting more than anything to pass out on the stairs, but knowing that he
would have to wait until she left.

"Fine, yes, whatever," he rushed.

"You're available then?"

"Huh?"

"You aren't engaged?"


"Very well," she nodded again. After what seemed like a lifetime, but really had only been a handful
of seconds, she gracefully turned back around to make her way towards the main staircase leading
into the dungeons. He watched on for a while, forgetting about his body’s needs as he watched that same braid bounce and tumble against her small back.

_Thirsty, mate, you're thirsty_, he reminded himself. As soon as he saw her emerald cloak disappear down into the darkness, he pulled out his wand like a madman, sat down on the nearest step he could find and replenished his thirst. _Thank Merlin she left_, he thought to himself as the water trickled down his throat, gifting him with the nectar of the gods for the second time that day.

"What are those?" Peter inquired, completely muddled by the red marbles that lined the western window of his dorm.

"What is what?" chimed in Sirius who had just swaggered through the door. The boys had just returned from the Gryffindor quidditch practice, where they had had a banging time making fun of the fourth years tumble and fall as bludgers whizzed just past their ears. Sirius had managed to sneak some cold ale and butterbeer popcorn past James, who, despite Peter's protests, he knew wouldn't have even bothered to look over at the stands.

As Sirius approached Peter's side, his forehead began to wrinkle. He watched his friend curiously run his stubby fingers over the fruit, rolling them about like a child would when they had just found a perfectly round stone to throw into the ocean, or rather, chew on.

"Are they berries?" he awed, picking one up and bringing it closer to his eyes so both him and Sirius could wonder at it.

"I don't know, why not try it?" Sirius shrugged his shoulders and went to grab one. As his mouth opened to plop it in, Remus ran into the room, causing the door to swing open and aggressively bang into the wall adjacent to it.

"DON'T EAT IT!" he yelled, reaching out one hand as the other held him up against the door pane, his chest dangerously puffing and billowing. Both Sirius and Peter turned around wide eyed at their flustered friend. "They're poisonous," Remus wheezed as he made his way over to his friends, plucking the berries from their hands and putting it back with the rest.

"What? Why in Merlin's name do you have poisonous berries?" Sirius huffed incredulously, slightly disappointed that he couldn't experiment with his friend's new find.

"It's for potions," Remus answered, running his hands over the red stones to make sure his friends hadn't destroyed them. _You should have put up a sign_, he told himself, knowing damn well that a sign would have only encouraged them to defy it.

"Hiya," they heard another one of their roommates walk through the completely open door. "What's everyone looking at?" Gideon Prewett approached them, his entire body damp through his quidditch uniform.

"Poisonous berries," casually replied Peter, as if it was everyday that he dealt with them. He shifted to his side to allow Gideon a better look as he got closer.

"Oh no, mate," he turned with wide eyes towards Remus, "where'd you find them?"

"Somewhere in the forest, east of Hagrid's place."

"Mate, you've got to spare me some," Gideon pleaded as he continued to look at the berries with desperate eyes. Remus pursed his lips. Under different circumstances, he would have been more than happy to accommodate his friend, but knowing his partner, she had probably counted every single
berry to make sure they returned to her all healthy and full. And, if you give to Gideon, you'll have to give to James, he realized, suddenly feeling stuck between two worlds.

"I don't know, mate," he replied weakly.

"Oh, don't give me that," Gideon continued, his eyes growing even larger.

"If it was up to me, I really would, but it's not," he tried to explain. From behind him, he could hear Sirius snort as the mattress squeaked beneath him.

"Darn, I'm really sorry you got stuck with someone so buggered," Gideon shook his head and patted Remus on the back. "Sod it, I'm going to hit the showers, if any of you birds would like to join me," he chuckled, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I'll be right there, sweet pea," sang Sirius, making all the boys laugh in unison.

"Oi! Why didn't you take a shower in the quidditch loo?" Peter questioned, still grinning.

"A shower you mean?" Gideon clarified, Peter's mother's Ulster accent being too foreign for the copper headed wizard. Peter nodded quickly, a red blush gracing his cheeks. "Privacy, mate," Gideon winked, closing the door to the bathroom. Sirius let out a hearty chuckle and Remus frowned at the thought.

He turned back around to the window, his eyes adjusting as the setting sun peeked behind the clouds and shone blindingly into their room. After what seemed to be the first time that day, Remus sat down with throbbing thighs onto his bed. As he rubbed his knees, he noticed how the room now had an orange tint to it, making it seem like Godric himself was going to appear from the sun's rays.

"So that's where you went today," Sirius intruded Remus' thoughts. He looked away from the sun, and squinted his eyes as they readjusted to the shadow.

"What?" Remus puzzled. His face dropped and became cold sober as he noticed Peter biting his nails, his eyes darting between the boys rapidly. "It was only for an hour or so," muttered Remus under his breath, relinquishing himself from Sirius' maliciously glacial stare. He could feel a heat crawl up his neck and onto his ears, and he hoped that the sunlight would help disguise it.

"You said you were going to the library," Sirius reminded him.

"I did."

"How do I know you're not lying to my face?" Sirius accused callously.

"Because you can ask the librarian."

"Fine, but you also went to trollop around the forest with her," he continued.

"You wouldn't have approved, and I really needed to get this done," Remus tried to explain.

"I wouldn't approve?" Sirius snorted. "I don't approve that you lied to me. Bloody right I wouldn't have liked it, you shouldn't be fannying about helping her. But you lied to me, you lied to us, ditched us, and went off with her," Sirius spat out, causing Remus to wince at his harsh accusations.

"I'm sorry, it was wrong of me," Remus admitted without hesitation. He knew lying to his friends was immoral, but there was no point in fighting for why. Sirius didn't see the world with so many colors, he was rather black and white when it came to things. To him, Remus had lied, he didn't care
why, all he knew was that he did and that was it. No matter what proof or argument Remus came up with, he would not win. *Sort of reminds me of someone,* he grimaced.

"Save it, obviously you didn't care enough before. Besides, it's not me you have to worry about," Sirius stated, flipping himself on his side so that his back faced Remus. From his own bed, Remus shot his eyes up at him, furrowing his eyebrows.

"What?"

"It just looks suspicious, that's all," Sirius finished.

"Sirius," called out Remus, trying to get his attention. He knew he wouldn't get anything out of his friend though. Once Sirius had decided to block someone off, they were blocked until he decided that they had served their due time. He reminded Remus of his father's grandmother in that sense, more stubborn than a goat they were.

Remus continued to stare at Sirius' back for the minutes that ensued. He didn't even bother to look back up as Peter awkwardly scuttled over to his own bed. That was the problem when one of them fought with the other, it resonated with the entire group.

Pursing his lips, Remus eventually gave up and lied down on his back. The tenderness of the comforter welcomed him, and he could feel his muscles relaxing after such a long day. He couldn't believe that after everything he could finally relax. *Well,* he glanced over at Sirius, but decided that he would deal with it later on. *For now,* he could feel himself struggling to keep his eyes open. Soon enough, he would leave that world to momentarily join another.
"You really should cut down on those," James frowned from across the lazy circle they had created in the paddock of mixed cloves and grasses. He had been pulling and tugging at the weeds while surveying his two best friends, who sat on opposite sides of a tree trunk, refusing to acknowledge one another's existence.

"Cut down on what?" Sirius played dumb. He brought the cigarette to his lips and took another pull, watching as the yellowing leaves fluttered above him like birds in the wind.

"That thing in your hand."

"Oh, you mean this?" Sirius stretched his arm out and pointed his middle finger directly at James. Peter, who sat between the two darker haired boys, couldn't help but snicker, biting down on his cheek when James threw him a look.

"Yeah, that too," James scowled, his eyes growing thin.

"You smoke too," Sirius reminded him bluntly.

"Only when I'm wankered," James pointed out.

"We're wankered every weekend."

"Well, right now, you're sort of ruining the ambience," he brushed off Sirius' pointless argument. James' jaw had become tight and a lone vein on his left temple began to throb. He couldn't believe that all three of his best friends were taking him for a fool.

"Sodding atmosphere, you can take it and shove it up your arse," Sirius cursed, his face going wry as the words came out of his mouth.

"Until one of you tell me what the bloody hell is going on, I won't be doing any such thing," James spat. His fingers reached up and grabbed the knot in his tie. "I don't understand why you lot won't tell me what's happening," James huffed, all the while pulling at his tie to loosen it until it sat unknotted around his neck. Remus briefly looked up from his book. He didn't speak, but instead watched as James threw daggers at Sirius, who was hidden from Remus' view.

It's all your fault, he told himself. He had messed up, and now they were all on the verge of brawling. Remus realized that he wasn't doing much to help things move along, if anything, he was only making things worse. He had not made an attempt to reconcile with Sirius, and he had not even bothered to discuss it with James, which resulted in him feeling hurt and left out.

"It's nothing," Sirius rehashed.

"Bollocks! He's sitting over there like an exile. He hasn't said a word," James bit back, gesturing to Remus with a flat hand, eyes wide when he couldn't believe that Sirius was actually lying to him through his teeth. The bloody scrotes should be ashamed, James scowled in his head.

"I'm right here," Remus muttered coldly. He tucked his arms behind his elbows and lied them along the tops of his bent knees, leaning over to place his head down so that he could become as compact as his body would let him. All he wanted was to disappear from this. He hated the feeling stuck inside his chest, and he would do anything to rip it out and burn it.
"Ask him if it bothers you so much," Sirius instructed callously, ignoring James' gaze as he continued to puff on his cigarette.

"Moony?" James nearly pleaded.

The worst part was that he couldn't even blame any of them. They were right for how they were acting. He had botched everything, and he knew that he had to suffer the consequences, whatever they may be. He had been dishonorable to his friends, who had given him no reason to lie to them. *They shouldn't even be your friends,* a voice hissed at him, making him fall even deeper into the grave he had dug for himself. He was convinced that this was it, this would be the end of their friendship. Remus had never lied to them before, he had always honored their pact to tell each other the truth— up until now, that is.

And yet, a voice even further down than the first one, wanted to blame her. He wanted to convince himself that she was the reason for all this turmoil. She was the poison which blackened him. No matter where he went, or who he was with, her misery would follow him mercilessly. He wanted to shake her and shout at her to stop it, to make her stop whatever curse she had cast on him. He wanted to believe that if she had never been introduced into his life, none of this would be happening.

*Okay, deep breaths, mate,* he tried to calm himself down, sighing and running a hand through his already tumbled hair.

"Wormtail?" James turned to their smallest friend when Remus remained silent.

"Padfoot told me not to," he replied so that only James could hear.

"Bloody hell." James shook his head. "We tell each other everything," he reminded them desperately. He looked between his friends, one by one, as they chose to ignore him. Sirius ate away at his cigarette, Peter held his ankles with his hands as he looked to the ground, and Remus had his forehead on his knees. *What in Godric's name is going on,* he thought to himself, a surge of fury pressing through him. He felt like he needed to hit something, and if someone didn't let up soon— it'd be one of them.

"It's about Manasse," Remus admitted under his breath, so low that James had to lean forward to hear.

"Are you bloody kidding me? Not again, this girl can't keep her wand in her pants, can she? What'd she do this time?" James puzzled, completely gobsmacked as to how she tied into all of this.

"I don't know, I shagged her," Remus mumbled dryly, cheerlessly shrugging his shoulders. Though the sarcasm dripped off his tongue in buckets, James' mouth hung open, his shoulders drooping down as the words sunk in. From the other side of the tree trunk, Remus could hear Sirius scoffing, choking on the smoke in his lungs.

"Wh-what?" James stuttered.

"Really?" Peter's eyebrows shot up into the sky as he looked up at Remus.

"No," Remus exclaimed. He threw his hands up in the air and brought them down onto his head, clenching and pulling at his hair. "Of course not, but Padfoot bloody acts like I did."

"I think I'm more confused now than I was before," James professed, watching as Remus' ears turned red from frustration.
"Aye," Peter agreed.

"Okay," Remus grumbled, not even bothering to look at his friends.

"He fucking ran off with her, this one here," Sirius began, jutting a thumb over his shoulder, in Remus' direction. "He ran off with her into the woods and lied to us about it."

"Oh," James paused momentarily, "what were you doing with her in the woods?"

"I was picking berries for that godawful potions class," Remus exasperated.

"When? I don't even remember you ever not being with us."

"During your practice, Sunday," Peter answered before Remus could even piece one letter with another. His hands were shaking uncontrollably and the back of his neck was breaking out into a cold sweat. He tried his best to keep himself at bay, not wanting to make it obvious to his friends just how anxious he was.

"You weren't at the pitch? Really?" James' eyebrows knitted together. He tried his best to remember Sunday's practice, but all he could remember was a hoarse throat and a lot of nose bleeds.

"That's not the bloody point," Sirius sneered, pulling James out of his thoughts.

"Padfoot, it was for the potions project. Are you really going to hold a grudge over that?" James defended Remus.

Remus' head shot up immediately, his entire face skewed for he hadn't expected James to react so calmly. Not once had he expected him to go against Sirius, and it was very rare that he ever did. He didn't even know what to think or say. His hands stopped shaking, and instead, an insane relief washed over him, flooding his entire being. He wanted to laugh and grab James so that he could hug him, thank him for being so understanding. Bloody hell, he thought to himself, breathing heavily with relief, a small smile pulling up the corners of his lips.

"Are you saying what he did was right?" Sirius' head swiveled dangerously fast to look at James.

"I'm not saying it was right, but it wasn't wrong either."

"He lied to us," Sirius accused, the lines between his brows growing deeper and deeper. James simply shrugged in response.

"Are you taking the bloody piss, mate?" Sirius lifted himself up from where he had been lying down, so that he was now sitting upright, his entire body facing James. "How do you know all they did was pick berries?" James' raised his eyebrows and shifted his eyes to Remus.

"Because he said that's all they did," he replied confidently.

"He lied to us about going with her, how can we trust him?" The words pierced Remus' heart as it dropped again into his stomach. He gulped to push the feeling away, but it wouldn't relent.

"Of course we can, are you bloody kidding? He's our best mate, and I would have done the same. Look how you're acting," James accused, jutting his chin towards Sirius to emphasize his words. The grey eyed wizard went to open his mouth, but hesitated to speak, completely at a loss. For the next two minutes, the two of them stared each other down, not one surrendering to the other. Remus wondered for how long they would go on for. Once, in third year, they had competed each other for an entire week. McGonagall had nearly torn their ears off as she continuously forced them to look to
the front of the classroom, but had failed to do so. They had received a week's worth of detention for that stunt.

"Listen," Sirius eventually gave in, his voice calmer but still on edge. "If anyone else suspects the two of them to be doing something they're not supposed to be doing, I'm talking about her people, he's fucked."

"We're not—"

"They're not," James repeated, cutting Remus off.

"I know that, we know that. If they suspect— even a gram of suspicion, they will make sure he never walks again," Sirius warned. James looked up at Remus, running his eyes over him as he pondered Sirius' words.

"He's right," James acknowledged, now addressing him.

"I don't even like her," Remus nearly cried, completely frustrated. Hogwarts had always been a place of tranquility, where he could be himself without worrying about the consequences, and yet his last year, which was supposed to be his best year, had started off on a bitter note. He didn't care about the Slytherins, or about who won the House Cup, all he wanted was to enjoy himself with his best friends. Seven years had gone before his very own eyes, and here they were, their last year and possibly the last moments they would have together, fighting one another.

"She's really pretty though," piped Peter in a small voice. All three pairs of eyes turned to him, scrutinizing his now blushing face.

"Shut up," Sirius demanded him, pinching his face in disgust.

"M'bad," mumbled Peter, looking back down to his shoes.

"I wish Slughorn had never put me with her. Besides, I bloody hate potions— I didn't even want to take it this year; and I wish I had a different last name— always have by the way. On top of everything that I have to bloody deal with, look what I'm bloody stuck with," he snapped, his voice growing thinner with every word he said. A pained expression painted his face, and he brought his fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose as a headache matured in the back of his head.

"Yeah, well, welcome to my life," Sirius snorted.

"We're not angry with you, Moony. We just want to know the truth, we can't protect you if we don't," James counseled, his voice fatherly and yet gentle. Remus nodded heavily and slowly, his fingers still pressed into the corners of his eyes.

When he didn't hear a thing coming from his friend, Sirius awkwardly twisted himself so that he could look around the trunk. He pursed his lips, his face softening, when he saw his friend bent over, curled up against the tree.

"Hey," Sirius tapped lightly against his friend's elbow. Remus shifted slightly so that he could look over his arm. "Here, mate," Sirius offered as he threw his tattered cigarette pack over to Remus who, in return, slowly broke out into a grin.

"You know I'm no good with words," Sirius explained, hoping that he would understand that this was the best way he knew to apologize to his friend. Sirius knew, as they all did, what their friendship meant to Remus, and how fighting and accusing only made him hate himself more than it made him want to fight back.
She approached the top of the steps, pausing momentarily so she could take in the image before her. There were several occupants sitting on the velvety emerald upholstery, and a low roaring fire that tinted the room with the same color. It made the faces of those sprawled out amongst the furniture look like their house's sigil, their scowls and grimaces only emphasizing it further. It was a familiar scene, one that had become attached to her definition of home—proud little boys who pretended and talked like big men, so much less powerful than they made themselves out to be.

"Remember, my dear, they know not the honor of words in the North," her father had warned her just before they moved to this desolate country.

She remembered the day the French Minister of Magic's owl had arrived on their breakfast table. It had been a rare occasion, all the family had gathered for a late morning meal. There were dishes from all over the world, a perfect representation of who they were. They had all been joking and laughing, but suddenly her mother had turned ashen as they watched the black and white spotted owl blink at her father, waiting for him to accept the sealed letter. With a grunt and a nod, he had excused himself to his study, a painful silence shadowing the entire table. Only Eva and her younger cousins hadn't an idea of what was happening, why everyone had suddenly grown so serious.

Releasing herself from the memories, she straightened her back and began to descend the steps. Her footfalls were quiet like a cat, not a shuffle as her foot pressed down against the plush carpet. She walked alongside the shadow, hiding herself from the others' eyes.

"Manasse!" Her name echoed throughout the room like an unwelcome church bell. She nearly jumped at the sound, halting immediately.

"Parfait," she thought to herself, and yet, found herself politely turning around with a forced smile on her lips.

"Rosier," she greeted back through slightly clenched teeth.

"Join us," he offered enthusiastically, oblivious to her vexation as he shifted over, and gestured to the space he had just freed for her.

"Merde," she gulped, dreading the offer. In another dimension, she may just have pleasantly accepted his offer; or she may have scowled at him, told him to bugger off, or just straight out ignore him. But that wasn't her world, in her world she would do the proper thing and take her place next to him. Though her legs were split between two river banks, she would have to suffer through it. It was the noble way, the righteous path.

"Of course," she replied, gliding her way over to where he sat. Rosier watched her every moment, the way her footsteps made no sound whatsoever, like she was trying not to wake up a three eyed dragon. Her eyes were corpse-like, staring past his shoulder and at a horizon that only she could see.

"We were just discussing the mudblood that they appointed as the department head for the M.M.L.E, and I was wondering what you had to say about it," Rosier broke the silence, all three pairs of eyes shifting towards him.

"You know that I don't bother myself with the affairs of your people," she responded cordially.
"Yes, but tell me- would the French ever do such a thing?" he urged on. His eagerness to pull something out of her made everything click in her mind. Her eyes darted around the group, suddenly very aware of what she had walked into.

"You know we would never," she played along, no longer cordial but indifferent to this little meeting. The entire atmosphere had flipped in a matter of mere seconds. She no longer felt like a friend, but a pawn in the great game that these boys didn't know what the first rule was. She felt used and threatened. Her eyes fluttered once again over the three of them, all three of them inspecting her. She was no hen, but a mouse in a lion's den.

"Hmph," grunted Nott from opposite her. "I suppose you have a point, Rosier." Even though the thin faced Slytherin had been addressing his friend, he continued to mull over her face. His fingers were rubbing at his chin, obviously pondering about the conversation that she had not been witness to.

"Bureaucratically, it's all possible. We just need to want it," advocated Evan. He shifted away from Eva and leaned over the silver-lined glass table, his elbows supporting his body weight on his thighs. The other two wizards now broke their stare to focus on their friend.

"Bureaucratically? You mean having people announce it?" Cyrus surveyed Evan, his eyes beginning to squint as he tried to understand his words.

"The separation of the blood types, making certain positions only available to those of purer bloodlines," he clarified.

"That'll never happen," scoffed Edmund.

"Yes, it will," aggressively countered Rosier, each word separated by a breath of air. Eva warily watched him flex his fingers from the corner of her eye.

"Not unless you kill anyone who opposes it," nervously chuckled Baddock, but immediately faltered, his face turning pallid as no one else made a sound. "What? You don't actually believe," he trailed off as Evan slowly nodded in response.

"There's people who believe in it," he began in an ominously low voice. "We need to take control again. They are stealing our jobs, taking our money. We will be left with nothing unless we react now."

Eva blinked and wondered how long they were going to repeat ancient tales, the same stories for centuries.

But, another part of her was denying the truth- that she had felt her blood curdle and stop. Eventually, she would have to admit that Evan Rosier had summoned her to a recruitment meeting. There had been rumors, whispers in the darkness that meant nothing to many people. Her own father, who worked in the British Ministry, denied them to her uncles when they inquired, calling them myths as old as the Epic of Gilgamesh. But what if they aren't just rumors? she asked herself, still observing the boys faces as they looked upon one another with smirks and nods.

"Excuse us, Manasse, we're being so rude. Did you have something else to attend to?" Edmund interrupted Eva's thinking. She refocused on him, blinking as she realized that they were now kicking her out. Evan had used her to get his means, to get the answer he wanted, and then she had become useless.

"I have a meeting," she smiled pathetically, the saddest sort of smile anyone could ever witness.

"With who?" Evan blurted out unattractively. All three of them turned with sour faces, completely
jarred by the unexpected roughness.

"Rosier," she addressed, looking him directly in the eyes. Though she continued to push the forceful grin, her eyes conveyed a different story. They were heartless and cruel, warning him that he had crossed a thick line.

"Right," he murmured.

"I must take my leave," she announced to them, standing up and not bothering to look at them anymore.

"Manasse," they saluted her, Rosier nodding his head. She had nothing left to say to them. They had used her for their little jokes, and they had treated her like some swine whose sole purpose was to be the bacon for their breakfast. She had wasted precious minutes of her life on them. *Never again,* she reviled to herself, completely disappointed that she hadn't brushed them off the moment they had hollered her name.

Rosier watched as she traversed the room and disappeared through the wall. He leaned against the arm rest, his elbow pressed against it as he rubbed his fingers over his lips.

"Where do you reckon she's going?" asked Cyrus, studying his friend as he watched him stare at the spot where she had last been.

"With that useless mutt," he muttered with a finger still on his lips.

"You suspect something?"

"No, never, Manasse would have his head. She's a proper witch."

"Then? Why do you look at her like she's parting for war?" Edmund tantalized, finding a sick amusement in Rosier's wasteful obsessions and childishness.

"She shouldn't be with him, at all."

"It's a potions class," Edmund reasoned.

"Yeah, well, I don't like it one bit," Evan retaliated.

"What's it got to do with you?" Cyrus' head flinched back slightly, puzzled with his friend's sudden agitation.

"I'm going to make her my wife," he announced proudly, as if it was a fact set in stone.

"You're going to make her your wife?" Cyrus repeated.

"You've put in the request for a betrothal consultation with her father?" Edmund inquired, his eyebrows knitting together.

"Not yet, I'm waiting for Christmas to discuss with my family."

"They don't know yet?"

"They won't reject, not a Manasse."

"I wouldn't be so certain," Edmund mused, a finger now tapping against his cheek.
"What do you mean you don't know?" scowled Evan.

"Regulus Black."

"Regulus?" Rosier spat out. "But he's a child."

"He's only a year younger than us, and it's not unheard of," Cyrus intervened.

"They wouldn't be married for another two years," Rosier growled, his entire jaw clenching as the thought dug further into his mind.

"Narcissa Black was already married to Malfoy in her seventh year."

"Yes, I know, she's my cousin for Merlin's sake," Rosier reminded him, throwing Cyrus a dark look. "I haven't heard a thing about this. Why is no one talking about it?"

"It's not official yet, but you know the Blacks have always wanted to marry one of their own to the French. Orion Black already had his foot through the door the moment he found out about Eva years ago. She was supposed to be betrothed to the blood traitor." Rosier grimaced as he thought about his cousin who had brought unspeakable shame to his mother's family name.

"It's not going to happen."

"They are a compatible and comparable family," drawled Edmund, turning away from Evan to look at the fire with a bored expression.

"What, and we're not?" Rosier flustered, throwing himself back against the couch.

"Well, your family is too social for their taste."

"Too social?" he repeated in a growl.

"You do host the New Year's party every year," Cyrus argued, regretting his words as Rosier's expression nearly turned him to stone. He gulped in air as he watched a vein popping on Evan's neck.

"Regulus," repeated Evan as he scratched his neck. "The little shit."

"He could always reject," Edmund shrugged.

"Or they find someone more suitable, more pure," Cyrus pointed out.

"Like who?" Evan hissed.

"A Gaunt or a Malfoy, or a foreign family with a purer claim," Cyrus shrugged.

"Enough," Evan demanded them, a dark silence ensuing his radiating words. He turned away from them and looked deep into the green licks of fire. The inside of his cheeks began to bleed as he bit down on them. The image of his cousin's head smashing against the fireplace's wide over mantle stained him. He couldn't get it out, and despite knowing better, he felt the corner of his lip begin to turn into an ominous half smile. His friends shared a look with one another as they watched a crazed, manic glimmer glow within the glaciers of Evan's eyes.

"What are you thinking about doing?" Edmund asked cautiously as Cyrus shifted in his seat.

"I'm just going to have a little chat with my cousin," Rosier whispered, winking at his friends before
turning back to the fire.

"Now is not the time to create rivals within your own house," Edmund warned his friend.

"Who said anything about rivals?"

Eva walked unusually brisk, as though she had stopped thinking and let her subconscious act on its own accord. She was in a complete stupor, younger years passing by looked at her with a mix of awe, fear, and confusion as she paid them no attention, commanding them with her force to move out of her way.

She blinked as the familiar portraits swiveled away from their late noon conversations to see why others were shuffling out of their way, and ultimately, bumping into the frames. Some of them murmured in contempt, others whispered, "that's her." It was the same old story everyday. She was the foreign jewel that had been placed within the confines of these walls for her own safety. Everyone knew she did not belong here, herself included, and thus they didn't know what to make of her. Fortunately, she would leave these halls soon enough, and the only memory of her would be nothing but gentle footsteps that pattered alongside the rain.

"That is Taurio Manasse's granddaughter, that is," some wizard with a scraggly, long, white beard and a smoking wooden pipe hanging lazily from the corner of his mouth mentioned to a purplish grey haired witch, who held a baby Herbidean Black dragon, on his left.

"She looks like one of those gypsies," the witch snipped tautly. Eva imagined her voice sounded like what an acid pop would sound like if it could talk.

"Yes, well, her mother is-" he began to drawl, but Eva had already turned the corner before she could hear the rest of his abrasive speech. She had no time to brawl and insult dead men whose legacies were gossiping about students from their portraits.

She continued her hasty pace until she passed the last strip of the talking fools. Eventually, she found herself at a dead end, an archway to her left indicated that she had arrived to where she had to be.

This staircase was hardly ever used, for anyone with the slightest amount of claustrophobia would find themselves in a precarious situation. It was so narrow that not two people could walk down or up it side by side, and it was tall enough that even someone as average as herself would have to bend down. As though that didn't suffice, the steps were made out of different sized boulders so that one step was never the same as the one before or after it. However, though the journey was cramped, it was one of the quickest routes from the third floor to the dungeons. There were no landings between them, and the staircase itself was nearly as steep as a ladder, dropping straight down through the walls and underneath the castle.

Without hesitation, Eva stepped into the darkness and began the familiar voyage back down. She had often preferred this way to the others, it was easier to hide from everyone else. Younger years scurried by it, believing the older years when they told them that a troll lived in it, and older years would only use it after hours in order to release their lustful desires. In here, she truly felt far away as the light disappeared from behind her, and she was left inside a tunnel of darkness.

She skipped down the steps, not afraid of tripping or falling for they were too familiar. Soon, she would come to the slight bend which indicated the change from the first floor to the dungeon. In her hand, she clutched tightly onto a heavy iron key, afraid that it would suddenly jump out of her hands if she fell onto the next step too quickly. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and she could see the cool white stones underneath her feet. One after the other, after the other, after another, until finally,
in the distance, she could faintly detect a veil of light.

The dungeons welcomed her with a dampness that did not come from the humidity surrounding the castle. It attacked her like a knight in heavy steel armor, completely covering her from head to toe in the thickness of it. The scarcity of flaming torches, which she could only make out two of, made it resemble the hours when no one knew the difference between night and morning, even though the sun still hadn't gone to sleep.

She set off again at the same pace she had had three stories up, making her way through the shadowed halls. To any other student, these twists and turns would have been an impossible labyrinth. There were no talking portraits, and there were no trophies or banners proudly gracing the walls. Down in the dungeons, there were only stones and the occasional door.

Eva took another left, and happened upon the lone door in a small stretch of corridor. There was one torch hanging opposite the scratched and dented wooden surface. It was nearly identical to all the other doors down here, save the silver colored key lock and door knob, indicating that it was a potions classroom.

She made her way over to it, and loosened her grasp on the iron key. As she turned it in her hand, she brought it so that it was even with the key lock and began to move it forward, but before it could even enter fully, the door faintly creaked. She looked up with wide eyes, her eyebrows furrowing just the slightest. Perturbed, she placed her palm against the splinters and gently pushed open the door.

Remus looked up from where he had been bent over his reading. His eyes were wide and innocent, and he was unconsciously biting on his lip. She blinked at him for a few seconds, not exactly knowing how to react.

"Hello," he eventually broke the tense silence.

"How'd you get in?" Eva continued to stand by the door, her eyes darting all over the room as she noticed the black cauldron, and various other potions accessories, placed neatly in front of the wizard. "Never mind, don't answer that," she interrupted him before he could even reply, leaving him to stare at her with a slightly ajar mouth.

"Okay," he uttered foggily.

"I must be late," she said out loud to herself as she stepped into the room, gently shutting the door behind her.

"It's fine," he replied.

"What?" she looked up from the ground. She pressed the back of her hand to her cheek, feeling overheated from the trek she had just made, not realizing how intense it had been until the moment she had finally stopped to breathe.

"I mean, it's all right that you're late and all," he fumbled with his words. As he observed her expression, his eyebrows began to squish together, no longer sure if he had a clue on what was happening.

"Right, well, I had to get the key from Slughorn," she retorted. Remus couldn't help but detect a slight blame on the tip of her tongue, as if it was his fault that she had been late. Of course it's your fault, it'll always be your fault, he caustically reminded himself.

"I just used an anti-locking spell." Remus shrugged nonchalantly, looking away from her to the
cauldron placed in front of him.

"This room is protected against most of them," she argued.

"Most," he cut her off as a mischievous smirk lined his lips.

Eva had always tried her best to follow the rules. Her father, being a diplomat, had always taught her the importance of the law, and what happened when someone didn't follow it— not only would there be repercussions, but that the balances that kept society serene would be muddled with. "It's of extreme importance that you keep this équilibre, ma cherie," she recalled her father's words.

"Well, some of us respect the rules." Remus' head turned back to her.

"And who would that be?" Remus scoffed.

Eva didn't respond, but instead narrowed her eyes to study him

"Whatever," he grumbled when he realized he wasn't going to get a response. He shook his head lightly and relinquished his defensive stance. He gazed awkwardly around the room and then back down to his book, sliding his fingers under the pages, and flipped them towards the left until the book eventually snapped close.

Her footsteps were nearly non-existent as she approached him. If it weren't for her robes shuffling against her legs as they moved, he would have thought that she was still waiting by the door. He didn't bother to look up as she placed a small hand on the table he had taken a seat at. They grazed the edge as she prowled around it, taking in the different materials he had already laid out for them. There were glass flasks and wooden pipets, an iron cauldron, a mortar and pestle. Impressive, she complimented his work to herself. He had done this all by himself, and no one had to tell him to do it. She had thought him lazy and incompetent, but this job he had done well. I may just be wrong about you, Lupin, she thought.

"Crush the baneberries, I'll set up the cauldron," she announced after a few seconds. He nodded once, completely unenthusiastic that he had to spend the next two hours with her. She grabbed the cauldron by its edges and nearly dropped it on the heating stone, never would she get used to the heaviness of the luxurious pot.

From across, Remus reached out and grabbed the green velvet pouch, dropping about half of the berries they had picked into the mortar. Eva paused a few moments to watch him through her eyelashes.

"It needs to be exactly 54 berries, roughly three clusters," she informed him.

"Oh," he let slip, awkwardly holding up the sac and looking back down to the berries. "Got it," he nodded, pursing his lips as he realized that he had already messed up. Just two hours, he pushed himself.

"Now, as I stir, you will slowly add the warm water. We need to make sure it doesn't cook and turn into film," she warned him as she strained the berries, allowing their liquid to trickle and flow into the glass sitting beneath it. She shook the strainer twice before leaving it to sit on the opposite side of the table. "But, you must not dilute it too much. It must remain sticky so that it can steep and become like blood," she added on. Remus watched with an unexpected admiration as she brought the glass up to her eyes and twirled around the liquid, making sure that there wasn't anything that might have fallen and contaminated it.
"Now?" Remus asked as she turned to look up at him, carefully placing down the glass next to the cauldron. She nodded and held one of the wooden pipets in between her fingers. Remus moved to stand next to her. His hand wrapped around the warm silver ladle, though the water wasn't boiling, steam still rose up and enveloped his face within its heat.

She turned so that she was equidistant between him and the glass flask. She followed his every move as his hand lifted up the small ladle, pausing momentarily to allow the water to drip from underneath. Once he was satisfied, he cautiously moved it over to the glass held between her hands. As he began to tilt the ladle and pour, she began to viciously stir.

"Okay," she announced as she continued to stir. She held the glass firmly against the table, minimizing the chances of an accident. Every so often, she would stop and lift the wooden stick up to check the consistency of the potion, and every time she would continue, not completely satisfied.

"Do you want me to?" he began, trailing off as he watched her eagerly stir and stir. She was too determined to think about anything. She knew that if even a second passed, there was a risk that the potion could turn into solid gunk.

"Here," she finally concluded as they both watched the potion sticking onto the pipet like honey.

"The hair," mentioned Remus, grabbing the miniature ceramic pod where, inside, lied a spiral of ash. Eva grabbed the dish from his hand and flipped it over into the liquid, mixing it in until it disappeared to nothing.

"We did it," Remus exhaled, plopping himself down onto the empty stool behind him. He watched her as she once again twirled the liquid inside the glass. He raised his eyebrows, impressed with her efficient work.

"Yes," she agreed, nodding as she continued to test the liquid.

"Remind me again why we needed two hours?"

"The water has to heat up gradually, extremely gradually, if not, the molecules inside become too excited," she replied to him, obviously distracted. Remus raised his eyebrows, surprised with how detailed her response had been. Usually, whenever he had asked her a question, she would find a way to respond with a one word answer, and that was only if he was lucky. Most of the time, she'd just not reply at all.

"You really enjoy this," he noted.

"Potions?" she asked, continuing to stir just in case she hadn't been mistaken. This time, however, she held the glass loosely, and shifted so that she was looking at Remus. He nodded. "No, what it can do and how- yes."

"So," he squinted his eyes, trying his best to understand her infamous ambiguity, "you enjoy the effects of the potions themselves, and the ingredients they're used with?"

"In a sense."

"Okay… Herology, then?" he queried, finally feeling like he might be getting somewhere with her. For whatever reason, she was opening up to him. Maybe it was the situation, the feeling of success, the pride from having finished something, but he didn't care. He would needle and probe until he found something out about her, anything, even her favorite color would suffice.

"Sure, but not only— all plants and things."
"All plants and things?" he repeated, his eyebrows scrunching together.

"Yes."

"Like cats or grindylows?"

"Like all things, all creatures, Lupin," she glanced at him. She didn't comprehend his sudden interest, but she felt herself growing weary with where the conversation was going. He sounded like a parrot repeating its owners words, and she didn't have time for a second pet.

"Manasse, if you don't mind me asking…" he paused, waiting for her answer.

"You might as well, you've already begun," she sighed, clearly miffed with him. He didn't care all that much though, and instead took his time to continue, fixating and tracing the curves and concaves of her face.

"What do you want to be? You know, later on," he finally asked, bringing himself back to reality. Eva's hand stopped fidgeting with the pipe for a brief second.

"That's none of your concern." She continued to stir absentmindedly.

"Come on," he urged, something within him telling him that if he really tried, he could get the witch talking. Unlike other times, today she looked fatigued, like her chainmail had been too heavy so she left it somewhere in the dungeons. She had walked into this room without it, and he was going to take advantage of that.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, just curious," he assured her, shrugging.

"A wife," she lied, giving him the easy and expected answer.

"Right," he nearly snorted. Though she was an excellent liar, Remus saw how she had handled the berries when they went picking. He had seen her looking over the plants, and how she had been gawking at the vegetables in the garden. If he was dense, he might not have thought anything about it, but he wasn't. He could tell that there was a passion hidden somewhere inside her, no matter how cold or dark she pretended to be, there was a fire burning in their somewhere and he wanted to find out what was fueling it.

"You can laugh and sneer all you want, but that is what I will be, not what I want to be. You'd be wise to remember that want is a weak action," she sneered.

"Well, we can all dream," he tried to hearten her.

"Of course, dreams. I doubt you and your type would ever comprehend something as sacred as duty, you have none. All you have are your dreams, that's why you lot are useless," she retaliated, pursing her lips. The words didn't hurt Remus, though. He felt as if she were reading them off of a script, like they weren't even hers to begin with. She said them like she was trying to remember where she had first heard them, and so, he didn't believe her act one bit.

"I have duties, just as you do. I have a duty to my friends, to my family, to myself. They may be different from yours, but that doesn't mean they don't exist," he argued, his words slow as he watched her rub her fingers up and down the sides of the glass.

"If so- then what good are dreams?"
"Because," he let out a large sigh, "without dreams, *life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly,*" he quoted Langston Hughes, one of his favorite American Muggle poets, though she wouldn't have known that or the revolutionary.

Eva finally looked up from the potion. They watched each other silently, neither one of them moving an eyelash as she pondered his words.

Remus noticed her face soften just the slightest, so discreet that not even he could be sure if it had actually happened. Her jaw's tautness dropped, and her eyes didn't look so alarmed. The icy wall that she had built so high around her had begun to melt.

"A healer," she finally admitted after an eternity of silence.

For the first time in her life, she had said it out loud. She didn't know why she had decided to say it now, or why she had decided that he was the person to whom she would. Either way, it would never happen for her. She had only one duty to follow, and she was going to do it well. No matter how many dreams, how many books she read, that was not her future. Her future had been written for her the day she had been born, and there was nothing in the world that could stop her from it. Many pureblood witches had tried before, and those who had prevailed were the ones that died young, poor, and alone.

_Ah_, he thought to himself as the words fell out of her mouth. He felt a sudden weight lift off his shoulders, a liberation once she finally said it. He didn't know exactly what he had expected, but he knew that he was satisfied. Not because of the answer, but because of the way she answered. There was no fibbing or sugarcoating, she had surrendered and told him the raw truth— which he had not expected, but was sure glad he had received.

"Of what?" he pressed on. She looked up to the ceiling, but a small smile betrayed her.

"Creature induced injuries, or poison."

"Really? How come? I'd think the other specializations would be more rewarding."

"Lupin, I refuse to play into this fantasy," she asserted.

"Why? We were just getting started," he teased lightly.

"Because I'm not a child."

"I never said you were." She pursed her lips as the two, once again, locked eyes on each other.

"Like I said," she paused, "I like plants and… other creatures." Though hesitant, she had decided to continue. She didn't trust him, but when she looked into his eyes she saw nothing malicious in them, and because they were filled with kindness, she did not want to play the villain. She didn't want to be what he said she was a few weeks ago. She realized that he had no expectations, he didn't want anything from her like everyone else did. He was asking her these questions out of pure curiosity, and she felt ashamed for assuming that there was some ulterior motive. _Not everyone is like you_, she told herself.

"What do you mean by creatures? You keep saying it."

"It's basic English vocabulary, even I knew it before I moved here," she quipped.

"I'm pretty sure it comes from French," he countered. "Anyway, I'm not trying to fight you. I'm just trying to understand. You're a little vague— don't know if you've noticed." She had to hold herself
back from rolling her eyes and laughing.

"Creatures, other types of beings besides human," she clarified.

"Like werewolves?" he questioned her, raising his chin just slightly as he watched her face carefully. *Have you gone mad?* his inner voice shrieked at him, but he brushed it aside. He knew he had taken a risk, but he had taken it willingly. He squinted his eyes as she wavered on an answer. He decided to help her out. "Let's say, someone comes in and they've been bitten. Would you treat them or let them die?"

"I would treat them," she replied quietly, her words trailing off.

"Really?" his head flinched back at her response, his entire face slightly pinched as he surveyed her.

"Would that be so bad?" she defended herself. He put his palms up to show her that there was no reason for her to rebuild the hole he had punched open.

"I never said that."

"You don't have to, everyone thinks it anyway," she muttered, her tone still maintaining a low volume. Remus didn't know how to respond, which was odd because it was usually him with all the bright answers. *She's just saying that, she doesn't actually mean it*, a voice told him, but he didn't believe it for one moment. *She would have never said it*, he realized. He had given her an option to answer for herself, and she had given him the truth. To put it plainly, Remus was shocked.

They fell into a mutual silence. Surprisingly, Eva did not fret much about what she had said. She simply focused on the task at hand, and ignored the words that floated between the two of them. From next to her, Remus watched her as she cautiously poured the thick liquid into a small flask, pressing down a cork to seal it.

"Here," she turned towards him, "you'll need to keep this in the moonlight to steep for at least six hours until tomorrow," she informed him, handing the delicate glass bottle over to him.

"Sure," his fingers wrapped around the flask, and he pulled it up out of her hands and placed it down on the table next to him. He continued to peer at her, watching as she organized the different materials, flicking her wand to clean out whatever needed to be cleaned.

"Hey," he addressed her gently, she looked up with her almond eyes, "I won't tell anyone." She blinked and stood in silence for a few seconds.

"Thank you," she hesitated but eventually whispered, as if the words itself would come back and choke her. One corner of his mouth lifted up in a genuine smile. She didn't know what to think, she wasn't used to this type of interaction. Just hours ago, they had been using her like she was some puppet, and now there was this boy, that she didn't particularly like all that much, treating her like an actual human. And she wanted nothing more but for him to leave. "You should go, dinner has probably already started."

"What about you?" With another flick of a wand, she placed the cauldron back into its place on the shelf next to the others.

"You ask too many questions," she replied indifferently. It was not so much that she was annoyed with him, she just wanted to be left alone to think. All day she had been surrounded by people. All day they had talked to her, prying and trying to get her attention. All she wanted was to sit down in the silence, in the dark with no one to bother her.
"You think so?" he grinned, but was met with only silence.

"Goodbye, Lupin." The words sounded more like a lullaby than a salute, and he almost wanted to ask her to repeat them, but he knew he'd seem like a madman. He pursed his lips, but eventually grabbed his book to pack it into his satchel, along with the flask that he gently tucked away.

"I guess I'll get going…"

She didn't reply, instead she picked through the destroyed berry mush that was left inside the strainer with one of the wooden pipets. He threw the strap over his shoulder and began towards the door. "See you later, then," he tried once again as he held the door open with a palm against the doorframe. He looked back over his shoulder, but she was still investigating the compote. He snorted quietly, but it wouldn't have mattered for she wasn't going to bother with him any longer. *You tried your best, just quit*, he advised himself.

He closed the door quietly behind him and set off towards dinner.

Something picked at his mind, like a parasite that he couldn't get rid of. He couldn't quite put his finger on the feeling— it was nothing he had ever really experienced before. It was an odd mix between disappointment and trepidation. He felt like he had made a grave mistake, but at the same didn't do enough.

*Why did you instigate?* he asked himself, wondering what drove him to this witch. He had complained time and time again how she irked him, how she danced and spun on his every nerve, and there he was encouraging her to share her dreams with him. *What the bloody hell is wrong with you?* he continued, his steps growing slow and his mind running faster.

In his opinion, there were only two solutions: continue to prod or drop everything. He didn't know which was the better choice, which would leave her calmer. He felt something drawing him towards her, but also an aversion that made him want to turn the other way. There was no rational explanation to what he felt, for it was not friendship nor sympathy, but it had also moved on from loathness and onto something completely different.

Remus began to grow frustrated with himself, displeased with what he had done. He had gone off looking for answers, and he left with more questions. It was a never ending cycle, he doubted he would ever be content with what she gave him— and knowing himself, he knew he wouldn't quit until he was.

*She's going to be the death of me*, he concluded, lifting his foot up on to the step, climbing up into the light.
Night Routines

They paced themselves just right so that their footsteps wouldn't resonate too loudly, and give off their location to anyone who lurked beyond the bend. However, no matter how slow they walked, their sounds were filling those endless corridors with nothing but crackling torches to counter them—no howling wind, no splattering rain. On a somber Friday night, they both knew where everyone was.

"What do you say? Are we going to nab them tonight?" a witch with stick-straight, auburn-brown hair questioned her partner.

"Eh, I'm not really feeling the vindictive thing, and even if we did kick them out, they'd just end up going back after we left. I say we just report that we passed, saw nothing," Remus replied.

"We're the worst prefects in the world," she snorted.

"Yeah, but James isn't going to care. For all I know, he's probably down there right now." The girl let out a light laugh, biting down on her lip as one of the portraits grunted in their sleep. He turned briefly to look at her, her reaction causing him to smirk at his own joke.

"Should I even bother?" the girl asked, looking with great disinterest at a broom closet door. Remus lazily lifted both his hands up, indicating that it was up to her. She huffed but decided to check just for the sake of it. The door creaked open as she pushed it forward, but the moment she realized that it was just a plain, empty closet, she sucked her teeth.

"Boring night," he commented as she backed out and closed the door.

"Tell me about it," she grumbled, re-joining his side as they continued their rounds. They fell back into a mutual silence, the girl turning side ways to look up at her partner. He was running a hand through his hair and there were black circles under his eyes. She noticed that he looked really tired, and if it wasn't for the insufficient lighting, she would even say pale.

"You feeling okay, Remus?" Remus shifted his gaze to look at her from the corner of his eyes. It was less than a week before the full moon, and when he had woken up today, he had felt a fatigue that began in his bones. His eyes had been glossed over and his thoughts all jumbled up. Luckily, Lily had cooked him up another batch of her own version of the Pepperup Potion, but it seemed that the effects were beginning to wear off.

"Yeah, too many N.E.W.T.S," he murmured, rubbing a hand over his face and yawning as the thought of a warm bed materialized in his head.

"Agreed, completely bonkers this week, wasn't it?" Remus nodded slowly in reply. "Between Marlene and the professors finally beginning new material, and not just review… How is Marlene?"

"She was in the common room just the other day complaining about something."

"She always is, isn't she? Did she end up going to the hospital wing?"

"You know, I'm not all too sure. I'm sure Lily insisted, but I think Sirius was able to fully cure her," he fumbled to reply, trying his best to collect his thoughts when he couldn't even recognize which part of the castle they were in.

"Yeah, that was pretty incredible, wasn't it?"
"Everyone seems to think so besides him."

"That's unusual— you know, for him," she puzzled.

"You'd be surprised, he has his moments too," Remus countered.

"I suppose," she considered. "Will she be able to play?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm pretty sure the Ravenclaws play in three weeks," she clarified.

"Ah," he scratched his forehead, "yeah, she'll be playing. I can't really think of why she wouldn't, and besides, not even a dragon could stop Marlene from getting on that broomstick." The short girl beside him let out another chuckle, chorusing their footsteps and the torches. Remus smiled, content that he could make someone laugh as much as he did with her. It was a nice feeling— to make others cheerful when he just wanted to pass out in one of the windows.

"Will you be taking anyone to the game?"

"No, I don't usually go to the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff games," he explained.

"Our game, silly!"

"Oh," he let slip, "but that's not for another fortnight."

"So?"

"So, I don't even know who I'm going to sit with tomorrow at breakfast, or if I'm even going to go to breakfast, because how things are currently looking, I reckon that I'll be waking up around afternoon tea," he quipped.

"Well, if it so happens that you want to take someone, but you don't know who, I know of someone who would be more than content to accompany you," she rhymed pleasantly, informing Remus that she hadn't taken to heart his sarcasm.

"What? You mean on a date?"

"Sure, why not? Or just as friends," she shrugged her shoulders.

"You're not talking about yourself… Are you, Marjory?" he wanted to insure that this wasn't going to end up in a blood-fest of tears. It had been on too many occasions that the hints from the fairer sex had whizzed completely passed his head, as if he were the worst seeker in the world, which he most likely was.

"No, Remus, I'm talking about a friend of mine," she reassured him. He sighed in relief, allowing himself once again to meander beside her as she led them on their journey.

"Wait, who's your friend then?"

"Hestia Eastoft— the sixth year Hufflepuff that apparently you've talked to once or twice," she began to recount. Remus raised his eyebrows. In all honesty, she was the last person he had thought about. Sure, they had talked, but barely. The only thing memorable about her was how overly charitable she had been, but that it hadn't come as shock to him for there were very few Hufflepuffs that weren't.
"Yeah, once or twice," he muttered, not interested anymore. It wasn't that he didn't fancy the girl. She was pretty in a plain sort of way. Her hair was curly and golden, and her face was round and she had very plump cheeks that matched the rest of her body. She had a warm smile and round eyes that reminded him of his mother.

"Well, what do you think of her?"

"She's nice," he managed unenthusiastically.

"Ah, I see. She's not really your cup of tea."

"It's not that," he began, sighing heavily. "I'm just not really looking right now, you know? I really want to focus on my studies," he confessed. Part of it was the truth, but part of it was that he didn't want to go through what he had the last time he had involved himself intimately with someone. It had been a roller coaster of emotion.

In the beginning, it was fun. He had enjoyed the chase and the handholding, the nose kisses, the hot chocolates at Hogsmeade. But as soon as things got serious—when she had begun telling him her darkest secrets, and he couldn't even bring himself to tell her his sweetest dreams, it rolled downhill.

The tipping point was when she began investigating his frequent absences. She had accused him of being dishonest with her—cheating and running off with other girls. It had pained him when she called him a lying bastard, and he had just stood there and taken it, truly believing that he deserved everything that she was saying. He didn't want her to think he was seeing other girls, but if that's what kept her from ignoring the other signs, such as the fatigue around the full moon or the odd food cravings, then he was going to let her.

He knew it had been too good to be true. He had wanted to believe that he had found someone for him, but in the end, he had built an entire relationship out of lies. Remus had wanted with all his heart and soul to trust her, but he just couldn't let himself go. Saving both of them from scrambling onto a dying moment, he had painfully ended things. Even to this day, to this moment, his heart clenched whenever he thought about the girl he had once cared for.

"Yeah, that's all right," she understood, nodding her head. They fell back into silence, Remus pondering over the thought. His friends had urged him to try to find someone, just someone to sit with and keep him warm for the winter. That's what they had told him the first time round, and he had listened to them, but he hadn't expected the feelings. He hadn't expected such intense emotions and experiences, and unfortunately, the girl had fallen in love with him before he even had the chance to realize what she was to him.

"Marjory," the girl turned to look up at her partner, "I say we call it a night."

"I was about to say the same thing," she snorted. They nodded in agreement, and instead of making a left, they turned right towards the staircase that would lead to their common room. They nearly ran towards it, Remus craving the warmth of the fireplace as he could feel his eyelids closing mid-walk. He had been known, especially a day or two before the full moon, to sleep standing, especially in potions. The entire school was convinced that he had the worst case of insomnia anyone had ever experienced, even the Bletchley twins had once come up to him recommending their grandfather's recipe for restless nights. He had smirked and thanked them in return. Little did they know that despite getting twelve hours of sleep, he would still be tired come the morning.

They waited at the third floor landing for the staircase to connect with it, allowing them to hike up two flights of stairs. From where he stood, he could see, and hear, the Fat Lady snoring up a storm.
"Must she be so obnoxiously loud," Marjory commented as they began to climb the steps towards her.

"Of course, how else would we keep away the Slytherins?"

"I reckon it's her wailing songs that keeps them away," she joked. Remus chuckled at that one, appreciating his housemate's dry sense of humor.

"Singspiele," announced Remus. The two prefects waited patiently, exchanging a look with each other as the Fat Lady went on snoring.

"Singspiele," tried Marjory a little louder. Another wheeze flew out of her mouth, causing Remus to take a deep breath in frustration.

"SINGSPIELE!" Remus hollered.

"Oy, some of us are sleepin'," a middle-aged wizard from high above their own portrait called out, grumbling as he turned his head the other way to continue his sleep. Remus rolled his eyes as the Fat Lady began to stir.

"Yes, yes, who is it?" she slowly opened her lids, letting out an exaggerated yawn.

"Singspiele," implored Marjory.

"My dear, if you can't say something correctly, don't say it at all," the Fat Lady insulted.

"Godric give me strength," mumbled Remus under his breath.

"It's not sing-spi-elle, it's zing-schpile," she corrected them, spit flying out of her mouth as she finished her sentence.

*I could give a flying rat's arse,* replied Remus in his head. He couldn't believe that, at this time of the night, he was stuck out here with some poor excuse of an opera singer, debating about some German word.

"Could you just let us in?" he asked as politely as he could, his distaste heavy on his tongue despite his efforts. She huffed, crossing her arms over her rather large bosom.

"And why should I let you in? I should leave the both of you out here until someone comes by to give you detention," she said haughtily, turning to her side and lifting her nose in the air.

"We're prefects, we were doing rounds," countered Marjory, her expression full of disbelief.

"And why should I believe you?"

"We have badges," the young witch replied, flipping her hair over her shoulder so that her badge shone proudly against her breast. Though the lady did not turn her head, she shifted her eyes to the side to observe where the girl was emphasizing.

"Hmph," she let out, but finally they heard the frame squeak and swing open.

"Bloody hell," exhaled Remus as he didn't waste a moment longer outside in the dark. He gestured to his partner to go first, and then followed her through into the hospitality of their common room.

"There he is!" Both prefects turned as they heard the offensively rambunctious greeting coming from the front of the fireplace. He turned to see James with his arms straight up, as if his favorite team had
just scored, and an oddly large grin to match his enthusiasm. *He's completely pissed,* Remus realized, snorting as his friend stumbled over Peter who was sprawled out on the floor, his back against the couch.

"Here I am," Remus replied unenthusiastically.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Marjory commented as she watched their drunken Head Boy make his way over to them. She shared a knowing look with Remus, smirking as she turned around to head up into the confines of her own dorm.

"Where have you been, Moony?" James patted him on the back once, then twice, and then another five times until Remus started chuckling.

"I was doing prefect rounds. The ones you assigned me—now that I think about it," he retorted.

"Oh," James' lips remained in that position for a few seconds. "Why would I ever? I mean- Friday night? Really?" he sounded astonished with himself, as if it was something unspeakable.

"Yeah, mate," Remus nodded, looking James right in the eye.

"Why did I do that?" It sounded like he was asking himself more than he was asking Remus, but he decided to play along.

"I don't know, I was actually wondering the same thing."

"Because we wanted to use him as our cover for the Halloween prank," shouted Sirius. Both the boys turned to look at the fireplace, but Remus squinted as he struggled to locate his friend. Suddenly, as if he had read his mind, he saw him pop his head over the hefty arm chair.

"Ah, that's right," James pointed a finger to Sirius, congratulating him on remembering their genius plan. Remus rolled his eyes and made his way over to the couches, plopping himself down where James had been sitting.

"Promise it's just for this month Moony, I'll give you first shift in November," James assured him as he leaned against the fireplace mantle.

"Great."

"Looks like someone needs a drink," mentioned Sirius as he eyed Remus up and down.

"I need to sleep," Remus yawned, stretching out his hands behind his back, a rather loud crack echoing into the room.

"Sleep? It's ten o'clock."

"It's midnight, Padfoot," Remus corrected him.

"Still early for a Friday," Sirius shrugged. Remus looked back and forth between his two friends.

"Why? What do we have?" he inquired. Sirius and James shared a smug look.

"Here." Sirius leaned over, passing the bottle to Remus. He grabbed it by its bottom and turned it over in his hands.

"Red Lion?" scoffed Remus, pinching his face as he looked over the foreign label. "Where in Merlin's beard did you find this?" he inquired, gazing up at them.
"It's some Portuguese hooch I discovered over the summer," Sirius enlightened Remus.

"Is it any good?"

"Guess you'll have to try it," James insisted.

"BURNS like hell, feels like heaven," Sirius added, nodding his head as he leaned forward to watch his friend. Remus sighed, but eventually gave in and unscrewed the cork from the top. He lifted the bottle to his lips and gulped down more than a shot of the liquid. Immediately, he felt something thick and spicy burn not only his throat, but his entire body. He felt his face grow hot and his tongue ignite. He sat up right away, wide eyed as he scowled at the bottle.

"It happened to all of us," Sirius managed as the two of them chuckled at his reaction.

"Blimey," breathed out Remus. He stared at the bottle, and then surprisingly brought it back to his lips to take another shot. Both James and Sirius raised their eyebrows, shocked that he had been so daring. "That's bloody swell," awed Remus as he wiped away whatever contents remained on his chin with the back of his hand.

"We know," Peter snickered from the floor.

"You're awake?" Remus bent down to get a better look at his friend's face.

"Nah, passed out is all," he burped, foggily looking into the fire.

On the bed closest to the door, four teenage witches sat two to each bed across from each other. Sitting in between them, on the lamp table, was a bottle of Quintin Black, a centuries old hard proof spirit that would give even the shiest souls a boost of confidence for the night.

"Why must it look like that?" A chestnut brown haired witch with neat bangs grimaced at the frosted bottle.

"What the skull?" Lily turned between the bottle and her friend, observing her displeased expression.

"No, black," she replied. "Who even chose this?"

"I did, Mary, so grow a pair," quipped Marlene from the other side of the table.

"Can we just start already?" whined a short haired, electric blonde to the Ravenclaw's left.

"Soon, we're waiting on Proudmore and Lundin," Lily whispered as she peeked over at the two girls by the mirror. Marlene twisted her upper body to look behind her.

"Fucking bints, look worse than my grandmother," Marlene commented, causing the girls to smirk and giggle. Mary clamped a hand over her mouth when she realized that her snort had been awfully blatant.

"Stop being so mean," hissed Dorcas, though she couldn't help the smile on her face.

"Sorry, I get like this when I'm sober," Marlene apologized in a dry tone. Lily snorted again, shaking her head as she pretended to disapprove of her friend's actions.

"We're drinking with the head girl," bedeviled Mary, nudging Lily with her elbow.

"I'm off duty tonight," Lily reminded them, but they immediately fell silent as they heard footsteps
approaching them.

"Goodbye, girls," sang Marlene, waving her fingers to salute them. Instead of replying, Chastity Proudmore grimaced at the blue eyed Ravenclaw as she opened the door and slid out of it. "Bitches," she continued in a high-pitched tone as the door shut behind them.

"Finally," huffed out Dorcas, shaking her shoulders as if she was about to fight a wrestling match.

"Let's do this," chanted Marlene, jumping off the bed with her two feet spread apart a meter wide. She grabbed the bottle off the bedside table and lifted it up into the air with two hands wrapped around its neck. "Rowena, I pray thee bless the drink we are about to receive, may we live to see another day," she prayed, closing her eyes for a dramatic effect.

"Finish already," cheered Mary. With one thumb, Marlene flicked the wooden cork out, and Lily followed it as it flung somewhere behind her bed.

"I'll get that later," she noted to herself, not really caring about particularities. It was one of their monthly Friday nights, where her and her best friends would get together and gossip, cry, and most of all, drink until all four them passed out on Lily and Dorcas' beds.

"Woo!" clapped Dorcas excitedly as she watched the ashy blonde place the bottle to her lips, lean her head back, and pour the alcohol down her throat. Marlene released the bottle and shook her head, goosebumps forming on her body as the liquid shook her awake.

"Bloody hell, I needed that," she exhaled, the smooth spirit now burning a hole from her lips all the way into her stomach.

"Stop hogging it," complained Mary, who reached forward and grabbed the frosted bottle from her friend's hands.

"And they call me the drunkard," she teased playfully. She took her seat next to Dorcas, watching as Mary finished taking her shot.

"Anyway, what should we talk about?" Marlene began.

"Wait, we haven't all taken a shot yet," Lily reminded her, grabbing the bottle as Mary passed it to her.

"Well, hurry up then, I have juicy gossip," Marlene mischievously informed them, bringing her two hands together and tapping her fingers against one another. Lily brought the edge of the bottle to her lips and poured the liquid into her mouth. She grimaced at the alcoholic burn. Though she enjoyed the feeling it offered her, she never understood how anyone could possibly enjoy the taste of the drink. Marlene would often even crave it in the same way that Dorcas craved pumpkin pasties.

"Here," Lily croaked, her friends laughing at her wry face as she reached diagonally to pass the bottle to Dorcas.

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"So what's the gossip?" asked Mary as Dorcas popped the bottle from her lips, her face mimicking Lily's from just moments ago.

"Well," Marlene drawled on, teasing the girls, "I found out that Prewet…" she teased them.

"Oh, come on! That's not fair— just say it!" Dorcas yearned.

"From somewhere through the grapevine, a darling Hufflepuff claims that he has a small," Marlene trailed off, indicating what she meant by holding up her thumb and her index finger.
"Which Prewett?"

"Your Prewett," she confirmed. Dorcas brought a hand to cover her mouth as she began giggling uncontrollably, and Lily tried, but failed, to hold back a laugh.

"That's what he gets for being such a wanker," Mary commented, taking the bottle from Dorcas and taking another shot.

"Who would have thought," mumbled Lily.

"Righteous git," Dorcas thought out loud to herself.

"I'm surprised he didn't end up in Potter's little boy band. He would fit in so perfectly," Mary wondered.

"Oh no, Gideon and James are too alike. I'd reckon they'd brawl every chance they got," Marlene corrected her.

"Gideon is kinder," mentioned Lily offhandedly.

"Still a pretentious arse— Wait, Marls, how do you know all this?" Mary piped up, promptly turning from Lily to Marlene with furrowed eyebrows.

"That's the best part," the blonde whispered, raising one eyebrow as she smirked.

"Oh, stop being such a tease all the time!" Dorcas pleaded, grabbing the Ravenclaw's blouse and pulling it like a child would when their parents took away their toys.

"Aife Erkskine."

"WHAT?" blurted out Mary. Lily's eyes went wide and she threw her head back as if her vision had suddenly gone blurry.

"No way," Dorcas let out.

"I don't believe it." Mary shook her head, keeping her eyes on Marlene.

"What and why?" asked Lily, more curious than shocked.

"That's the interesting part. I was in the loo, and I overheard some third or second year Hufflepuff saying that she saw the two of them on her way back to the dorms. The poor girl was absolutely traumatized, but of course I couldn't possibly let something like that just slip through my fingertips. So the next day, I went up to Erkskine, and I told her that I saw her, yeah? And she confessed to everything, she was begging me," she finished as Dorcas held out the bottle to her, mouth hanging open.

Marlene gladly accepted the bottle, lifting it up to salute Dorcas as she washed her throat down with the liquid.

"You should have been in Slytherin," eventually said Lily.

"Yeah, I know," agreed Marlene, taking another shot from the bottle. "Apparently she's been around though."

"What do you mean?" questioned Mary, leaning forward as if she had to hear her better.
"Name anyone in the school, she's probably done them."

"Sirius," chimed in Dorcas almost immediately. Marlene shifted her gaze to the side, eyeing her smallest friend, bringing the bottle for the third time in a row back up to her lips. She chugged a good amount down before answering the question.

"But of course," she finally replied. All of the girls shared a look, eyes wide.

"Potter," Mary mentioned.

"Uh huh," Marlene nodded. Lily reached out to her friend to grab the bottle.

"Lupin," Mary continued.

"I'm not sure, she didn't mention it."

"Remus would never," Lily added in as she heard Dorcas sighing in relief.

"What? She told you all of this?" Mary inquired, her nose scrunching up.

"The daft bint told me everything. I'm her best mate now." Marlene pointed to herself for emphasis.

"Pettigrew?" Lily asked.

"Yeah, uh-huh, several times as well," Marlene smirked when she saw her friend's jaw drop.

"Oh, well that just has to be a crime," remarked Mary.

"Why? He's not that bad looking, plenty of girls find him adorable," wondered Dorcas.

"Adorable," Marlene scoffed. "It's only because he's friends with them."

"That's not true," crooned Dorcas.

"I wonder what sound he makes," commented Mary. All three of the girls turned to look at their brown haired friend.

"What do you mean by what sound he makes?" hesitantly asked Lily, not entirely sure if she was prepared for the answer.

"You know, when he…" Mary bounced, cross legged, up and down on the bed in order to demonstrate to her friends what she meant.

"Now, that's a crime," scowled Marlene, grabbing the bottle from her side and taking another go at it.

"What about the Slytherins?" Dorcas refocused back to the original question.

"Oh yeah, plenty— Dolohov, Wilkes, Kneen," she listed off on her fingers.

"Boys really will stick it anywhere, won't they?" Lily grimaced.

"Unfortunately, Lilykins," sighed Marlene.

"Why would anyone let the Slytherins inside them?" Mary speculated, her tongue thick with abhorrence. By her growing vulgarity, it was obvious that the alcohol was getting the best of her. They tended to call her the secret slag of the group, for she only showed this side of her when she had too much to drink.
"Because they're desperate," Marlene answered plainly.

"Who the Slytherins or the person letting them?"

"Both, but Slytherins are the easiest. They'll stick their willies in anything besides their own."

"Why? Because their girls are so bloody ugly," Dorcas quipped. Lily grinned as she watched their most innocent friend sway back and forth, the alcohol now getting the best of her as well.

"Inbred freaks," snorted Marlene.

"Aren't you an inbred freak?" reminded Mary.

"To a lesser degree." Lily chuckled at her friend's response. Why is her voice so bloody funny? she wondered to herself, the laughter continuing and growing even stronger as she began to feel featherlight.

"Welp, guess someone's a little blitzed," teased Dorcas.

"Not all of them are ugly. I think Flint is pretty," Mary completely ignored the redhead next to her, who was clutching her sides from the laughter pains.

"She's thicker than a brick," argued Marlene.

"A pretty brick?" Marlene scoffed and rolled her eyes at her friend.

"Mustaq is also very pretty, and Manasse…" the short blonde trailed off, her eyes looking into the distance as the image of the girl with two emeralds and black silk came into her mind.

"What about her?" Lily chimed in, waking up from her stupor as soon as she heard the name. Before this year, the witch's name was only ever heard in passing, usually in forms of compliments or praise, and the occasional envious insult. Besides that, Lily had to admit that she had been rather discreet. Not in the way that a shy person was, but in that she kept to herself, extremely closed off from everyone and everything around her. Of course, Lily's opinion on the witch had spun like a dreidel when Remus had begun recounting to her the many difficulties and maltreatment he suffered at her hands. Suddenly, the witch, like many of her housemates, had gone onto Lily's special list of students to keep an eye on; in other words, Lily was suspicious of her.

"I don't know, I find her rather beautiful," Dorcas said meekly, shrugging and looking away from them.

"Oh gosh," Marlene grimaced. "You're cut off, you're becoming sentimental."

"Maybe, but she irritates me too much, so it kind of ruins whatever beauty she may have," responded Mary.

"Why? What'd she ever do to you?" Lily asked, turning to look at her friend.

"She's snobbier than a King's crown, no?"

"So? What's new? They all are," countered Lily.

"Selwyn gives her a good run for her money," Marlene mentioned, taking another shot from the bottle.

"Selwyn's biggest problem is her big mouth," added Mary.
“Yeah, could you imagine if Manasse had a mouth?” Marlene envisioned, feigning a shiver which caused Dorcas and Mary to laugh. Lily reached out to Marlene for the bottle, pausing a moment as she held it by her side, thumbing its neck.

“Doesn’t she remind you a little of Bellatrix?” Lily posed to them, her eyes foggy as she remembered the black beauty. She had been absolutely magnetizing, beautiful in the way that Sirius himself was beautiful. She had dark eyes, skin paler than snow with no imperfection to be seen, cheekbones sharper than a diamond’s edge, and thick hair blacker than coal. When she walked down the halls, people had quivered and nearly bent to her. She enjoyed cackling and hexing anyone who got in her way, and often times, anyone who just so happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“She was Bellatrix’s best friend,” Marlene reminded her.

“Oh my gosh, that’s right,” realized Dorcas.

“Right bitch that one,” commented Marlene. “Bellatrix was cruel through and through, Manasse is just pretentious. I think it’s like Black said, she’s a copy of Narcissa.”

“Why do you ask, Lily?” Dorcas looked up to her friend who was still lost in her thoughts.

“Yeah, why such a change of heart? You defended her after the lake incident,” Mary added.

“Because of Remus.”


“Really? You went there?” Marlene scowled at her. It wasn't rare for Dorcas, when drunk, to reminisce about her favorite ex-boyfriend. Though she always claimed to be interested in someone else, especially after a full year since their breakup, she couldn't help but remember how sweet and loving he had been before she had met his darker side. At times, she really missed him, and she couldn't help but think if he missed or thought about her.

“I'm just curious,” muttered Dorcas.

“Once or twice,” Lily replied cautiously. Marlene discreetly nodded to her, commending her for keeping the answer short and brief.

In reality, Remus actually sought out Lily's advice for that particular witch often. In the beginning, he had lamented over the fact that they had been partnered. He had been affected greatly by the attention he had received in the beginning, he wasn't one who enjoyed being the center of gossip. *Unlike that massive bucket-head he calls his friend,* thought Lily. But overtime, the conversations with him grew dim. She would see him aggressively bouncing his leg, or running his hand through his hair one too many times before a meeting with her. Sometimes, she even heard him asking Sirius if he should skip potions in order to avoid her. The witch was no longer innocent, she was a threat to her best friend in ways Lily hadn’t thought possible.

“I can't do it anymore, Lily,” Remus shook his head, placing it in-between his hands.

“Can't do what anymore?” rushed Lily, her eyes growing wide with concern.

“With her.”

“Why? Did something happen again?” Lily reached out a hand to lay on top of his own.
"Everything I do is wrong, nothing is ever right for her."

"Oh Remus, I'm so sorry. You're not doing anything wrong, it's her that sees you as less than what you are because she is indoctrinated with some irrational, outdated, and prejudiced belief. You mustn't listen to her, she really is not worth your worries," Lily assured him, encouraging him to move on from the witch that plagued his mind so often.

"I just wish I could get rid of her," he sighed.

"Do you want me to talk to Slughorn?"

"I already went with James, he just came up with some excuse as to why it wasn't possible."

"What'd he say?"

"That my grades have gotten significantly better since I've been partnered with her, and that he wasn't about to ruin such a successful pairing." She surveyed him, her eyes running over the edges of his air, the strands of it that hung lower on his forehead than the others, his eyebrows, his proportionate nose, and even the very faint, nearly invisible, shower of freckles over his cheeks.

"Can't you just ignore her?"

"I am, but she's just there, you know?" He looked up at her with his kind, amber eyes. "I can feel her energy, I can feel her distaste for me."

"Remus, don't take this the wrong way, but you're overthinking it," Lily admitted, squeezing his hand. "You worry too much about what the others think of you, just let it go. In ten months, she will be but a faint memory to you."

"Yeah, you're right," he breathed heavily, nodding his head in agreement. "You're right," he repeated to himself, convincing himself of her words.

"What does he say?" Lily shook herself back to reality, all her friends eyes on her.

Lily took a moment to collect her thoughts, "she's extremely problematic. They've barely exchanged more than two sentences to each other."

"That's it?" the small blonde piped up.

"What? What did you expect? That they were shagging?" Marlene accused her.

"No, I just thought... I thought maybe she seduced him or something, like with a potion," she confessed in a low voice.

"Are you that drunk or just overtly territorial?" Marlene tutted, looking around the group with an incredulous expression. "Besides, I don't think Manasse would need to use a love potion if she wanted to get into Lupin's pants."

"What?" gasped Dorcas. Mary's eyes went wide.

"Marlene," Lily nailed down in a firm tone, shocked and upset with how Marlene was talking to their friend.

"Oh, please, don't play stupid. You think he hasn't thought about it? You think our innocent, snuggly, little Lupin doesn't think about warming himself between her thighs? Bloody hell, I'm not
advocating it, but let's be bloody honest with one another," scoffed Marlene, defending herself. She hated the witch as much as anyone, but she was tired with the way they protected Dorcas like she was some lamb that couldn't protect herself from the wolf. Marlene was never one to hold back the truth, she was going to say what she meant whether that meant stomping on her best friend's heart or not— in the end, they'd all bloody thank her.

"You think they've done it?" Dorcas mumbled after a few beats of silence. Lily sighed as she looked empathetically at her.

"Blimey, Dorcas, honey, listen to me." Marlene twisted to face Dorcas, completely irritated on how the girl wouldn't let go of the one subject that could ruin their fun. "She is out of the realm of your concerns. They're partners, not married. I promise you, Manasse is the prime example of a pureblood highborn witch, and because of that, she will not be opening her legs for anyone but her husband on her wedding night, okay?"

"They're barely even partners," Lily snorted.

"I know that, it's just the way you made it sound… I just thought, maybe, she's really good in potions and you know—" she fumbled, not sure anymore where her thoughts or this conversation was going.

"I can't talk about this anymore. Can we please talk about fit boys?" Marlene begged them, leaning her head on one finger as she rolled her eyes at Dorcas' worries. The blonde blushed, embarrassed that she had taken the conversation too far.

"You know who became right fit this year," began Mary, she really had no time to fret over imaginary ghosts and haughty Slytherins.

"Who?" Lily pushed, bringing the bottle to her lips.

"Potter." Lily nearly choked on the liquid now stuck in the space between her tongue and her throat.

"What? Am I so pissed that I'm hearing things now? I can usually hold my drink a little better," Marlene mocked Mary.

"Why? Is it such a terrible thing?"

"Depends what that thing is," Lily responded. "Do you fancy James Potter?" she asked bewilderedly, not believing nor comprehending what her friend was saying.

"Possibly," the witch squeaked, curling up under the stare of her three friends.

" Bloody hell," Marlene exhaled, reaching over to pry the bottle from Lily.

"Please, Mary, I love you, but don't do this to me. You know how much I loathe that wanker," Lily whined, pleading with her.

"It's never going to happen, and you all know it," Mary reassured them. Lily couldn't help but detect a hint of sadness on her face. She wanted to reach out to her and comfort her, like she had done so many times before when one of her best friends faced rejection or heartbreak, but she absolutely clawed at the thought of that messy, black haired wizard. She shivered and felt nauseous whenever she heard his voice— which was quite hard to ignore because he talked so loudly. When she saw him walking down the halls, she quickly turned on one foot and ran the other way. She had done everything in her power to avoid him, and here they were, talking about how bloody fit James Potter was.
"Good, make it stay that way," Marlene demanded from her, putting the bottle to her lips whilst staring down at her.

As her friends began to chatter about other useless gossip, Lily couldn't help but stay stuck on her friend's words. *Mary fancies Potter?* she kept repeating in her head. She couldn't help but picture the two of them together, the sight of it not sitting well with her.

*Why does it bother you?* Lily asked herself. She hated James Potter, she knew she did with all her heart. He was a bully, and she absolutely despised anyone who took pleasure in the physical and emotional torture of others. Whenever he used to hex or jinx anyone who got into his way, or anyone who disagreed with him, she wanted to light his socks on fire. He was cruel, and she could not believe someone like him had merited the Head Boy position.

But still, thinking over Mary's words, she wanted to shake the girl and cry to her. *Why? Why do you fancy him?* over and over again until her eyes went red. Lily sat now with her shoulders slumped, sighing as she began to think about the boy who slept on the opposite end of the tower. *He's definitely not sleeping,* she corrected herself.

She would never admit it, but she could feel it. No matter how much she tried, it was different. The disgust she once felt for him was no longer as strong. With their new experiences together as Head Boy and Girl, she had seen another side to him. She saw him when he had to be the leader, how dominant and strong he could be without using his wand. People respected him, they looked up to him, and listened to what he had to say. There was a strength in his voice that she lacked, that many people lacked.

But she didn't want to think about him, about how strong or whatever he was. She wanted to hate him like she always had. He had been a nuisance to her since the moment she had walked into their first potions classroom together. And she knew that the prankster was still there, dormant and waiting for an earthquake.

Lily and her friends all turned to look up at the creaking door.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?" their housemate, Marjory Bones, asked with a wary tone, observing the four girls in front of her.

"No, we're just drunk and drinking," replied Marlene, holding up the bottle so that the witch could see. She grinned in response, letting out a light chuckle.

"Care to join?" Lily looked at the girl as she pondered the invitation.

"You sure? I don't want to interrupt."

"Yeah, there's plenty of drink for everyone," drunkenly trumpeted Marlene. Another laugh left the Gryffindor's thin lips as she shrugged and walked over to the girls. Mary moved over so that she was leaning against one of Lily's pillows, freeing up the spot for the newest member.

"To new friends," saluted Marlene, holding up the bottle and handing it over to Marjory.

"To new friends," they all sang out in harmony, falling into a fit of laughter that resonated and lit up the entire tower.

As the rest of the castle bustled and celebrated another Friday night, the Slytherin common room was completely silent. Not a mouse nor a breeze stirred the still air, even the fire crackled silently, only the flames lazily licking up into the air every so often. There was no one left, everyone had retired to
their rooms. Some of the boys may have gathered in one of the dormitories to bet or debate, but besides that, there was no movement.

Eva sat stiffly in one of the wooden chairs in the corner of the room. The shadows from the walls covered her entirely, the only light being from the fire that no longer could be called one. She sat there without moving, even though writing stationary was sprawled out in front of her— an odd sight indeed. But she couldn't bring herself to scribble, she was mesmerized by the shadows that the couches created against the ceiling, imagining in her head a quartet playing as they danced and waltzed away into the eery night.

She looked back down at the quill placed in front of her. Picking it up, she delicately dipped it into the ink, watching intently as the excess plopped back down into the rest of it. She dragged the quill over to the enamel colored paper, but hesitated and let the tip hover over it.

Querida Catarina,

_I expect you have been patiently waiting for my letter. As you well know, the Dark Night is once again upon us, and being that you have now consummated your marriage, the responsibility carries onto me. Please send me all that I will need. Do not bother with instructions for I have been well trained. I hope all is well, my greetings to Francesco._

_Tu prima,_

_Eva Manasse_

She curved the last e and paused a moment as she looked over the drying ink. The letter was short and to the point, she was never one to drawl on and on about her day and how much she missed her family. Indeed, family was very significant to her, but only by principal. She was sure that if it hadn't been for the consistent reminder, she would never have even thought twice about her great aunt's granddaughter, her second cousin.

_Quel bordel de merde,_ she thought to herself as she remembered what a mess her family actually was. They were spread all over the world, and no one really knew who was who, or who was married to who, or whose kids were whose when they all gathered together at weddings and funerals. Eva, herself, had often confused first cousins with second and fourth cousins. If it weren't for the enormous family tapestry they kept in their great hall, she would have not even remembered the names of her uncles, for she had an endless amount of them.

It was for duty and family tradition that she had to contact her cousin. _Duties_, she repeated in her head. They had been hammered into her since the day she opened her eyes. She already knew what her cousin was going to write back, and consequently, she didn't plan on reading her reply. Everything had been planned for years, for centuries, and it wasn't going to change now for anyone.

Eva pursed her lips and finally lied down the quill. She looked over into the fire, imagining once again the music swirling around her, lifting her up with the notes. _It could be so different,_ she thought. _Why did they put me here?_ she asked herself as she grimaced at the black marble. They could have afforded to send her anywhere, she could be in a warm place right now with the sun touching and gracing her skin. She could be by the mountains in France, or in the rain forest in Brazil. But instead, they had decided to stick her in the wettest, most dreariest of places.

"It's the best education a witch could ask for, ma fille," her father had assured her when he had broken the news to her that she would not follow her cousins to Beauxbatons. She had felt lost, completely betrayed and bewildered as to why her father would do such a thing. He would pull her away from her very own family and put her in a school where she knew nobody.
It wasn't until her fifth year she had gotten her answer. When she had overheard her father and another man with greying hair discussing marriage prospects. Her name had come up various times throughout their conversation, causing her to stay a little longer as she pried on a conversation that wasn't meant for her.

"After so many years, we think that a marriage between the British and the French would be most appropriate," her father's friend had shared with him. She had scrunched up her face, disgusted with everyone around her and how they were using her. No one had even bothered to inform her that she was going to be sold, that she was just an object used to their advantage. The worst part was that she knew that she had no say in who she would marry, but never had she thought that she would be taken away from her family, from her people, from her language and culture to be put with barbarians in the name of power and wealth.

But her time for being irate was over. She learned that in the greater scheme of things, either one plays or gets played, and Eva was not going to allow someone else to make the moves for her. She would use whatever power she had to make sure she came out on top.

Hey everyone! Another chapter up on Monday- just as I promised! Hope you enjoy this one, it's a little bit less eventful, just a little chapter to get to know our characters a little better. We see them in a calm, natural habitat with their friends, nothing too exciting! Next chapter will be a little more eventful so get ready for that. It's already written so it will be up in one week. If you liked it- favorite, follow, leave a review! They are always appreciated, I read every single one of the reviews and keep them close to my heart. They let me know that you all enjoy the story and want to see more. Thank you!
The light blinded him as it violently angled through the window and into the room, aching his still closed lids. He lifted a hand to cover the rays, slowly blinking himself awake from a deep sleep. He felt his throat dry, and his eyes glazed over with the remnants of his slumber. Not yet ready to get up, he flipped over on his side, the sun now warming his back. There was nothing better in life.

After a few minutes, Remus yawned and stretched out his legs, pulling the blanket closer to his neck. He gratefully accepted the warmth, especially before the full moon when the chills and cold sweat made him shake turbulently.

_You should probably get up, mate_, he told himself. Unwillingly, he reached up and pulled aside his curtain. Ten thirty-nine, he read off the bedside clock, sighing. He still had another twelve hours until the full moon.

His eyes darted around the sliver of the room he could see from where he laid. He groaned, irritated with his dorm mates when he saw lazily thrown and tossed clothes all over. Remus craved organization, with all the turmoil inside of him, having a clean space was of utter importance to him.

Remus turned back around to close the curtain around him, but something caught his eye mid-swivel and he looked back.

_Is that food?_ he cried excitedly to himself as he discovered two buttered and jammed scones with an apple sitting on his bedside table.

He grinned and sat up straight in his bed as he eagerly placed the food onto his lap.

_You must thank Wormtail_, Remus reminded himself as he bit into the pastry, delightfully absorbing the salt and sweetness that mixed on his tongue.

Remus tried his best not to skip classes, but it was difficult to attend them the day before a full moon; he often found himself going into a full on asthma attack after one flight of stairs, and he barely had the energy to conjure any sort of spell. Nonetheless, with whatever help his friends could offer him, and with sheer willpower to keep his secret hidden, he often forced himself to go.

Today, Remus had been lucky enough to find out that Slughorn was absent for some Anglo-Scandinavian potioneer event that was taking place at Durmstrang. So, he had seize the opportunity and decided to take this day off. He wouldn't be missing anything important, and he was certain that his partner wouldn't think twice about it, if anything, she would be glad that he hadn't shown.

He sighed as he thought about it— potions. He absolutely loathed it, but he could not lie and say he wasn't doing much better than previous years. He wasn't only succeeding in scoring points and good marks, but by having such a talented, methodical and stern partner, he actually was learning too. He didn't want to admit it, but his professor had indeed been right at least about one thing: Eva Manasse did make sure she was one of the top, not accepting anything less than what she considered a victory. No matter how terrible he was or how unnecessary she found him, she would write his name on the paper and potion and hand it in anyway— no complaints and no questions asked. Though it aggravated him that she left him out of her decisions because she didn't find his opinions to be of any value, he did have, at least, the paper evidence to thank her for.
As he finished one scone, he clapped his hands together to rid them of any crumbs. He bent over his bed and reached into his bag for the N.E.W.T.s Transfiguration reading. He grimaced at the heaviness of the book, an archaic artifact at that. The language was outdated, and most of the time, he found himself translating their meanings instead of comprehending what the author was trying to say.

Luckily, Remus had an innate talent for puzzles, and often found that when a part of missing, he had a better chance of understanding because he was forced to figure it out. That's why he was so awful with potions—he couldn't stand how straightforward everything was. He would rather have to experiment and figure out the process instead of reading it step by step by step.

His eyes hungrily scanned the pages, looking for what they had been assigned. He let all the pages drop and ran his finger of the title.

"The Faceless Man: Can We Transfigure into Other Humans?" Remus read out loud.

"Seems interesting enough," he concluded, reading on.

"Wake up, Sir Moony! The Soviets are attacking!" bellowed Sirius as he swung open the door, looking awkwardly into the room when no one replied. His pursed lips eventually turned into a pout when he realized his so well thought out idea had been for nothing.

Slightly disappointed, he walked over to Remus' bed and snatched open the curtains. He was met with a tilted over Remus, completely knocked out with their Transfiguration book on his lap, and scone crumbs all over the place.

"Is he alive?" James asked as he followed Sirius into the room, throwing his stuff onto the bed and looking over at his friend.

"He woke up to eat, but I reckon the Trans reading put him back to sleep," reported Sirius, eyeing Remus.

"Yeah, can't blame him— did that to me too," James snorted as he kicked off his shoes and sat down on his bed. James propped his elbows on his knees and took off his glasses. He laid them down next to him as he ran a hand over his face and through his hair.

"Should I poke him?" Sirius inquired, turning to face a nearly blind James with a mischievous glimmer. James didn't need to see though, the mischief was thick on his friend's tongue.

"No, don't poke him, Padfoot. Bloody hell," he replied, slightly annoyed.

"I'm going to poke him," Sirius ignored him and turned back around. He took out his wand from his pocket and began sticking it into Remus' legs.

Remus grumbled and flipped on his side, curling his body and pulling his legs into his chest. The book slid off his hip and landed with a thud on the wooden floor.

"He's not waking up," Sirius informed James.

"Padfoot, I don't bloody care if he isn't waking up," James bit back. Sirius raised his eyebrows, theatrically jutting his hip out and placing his hand on it.

"I know you're upset because Evans thinks you have a stupendously enormous arsehole, and despite your efforts to persuade her otherwise, I understand that you weren't successful. That is why, as your
best mate, I will ignore your bad attitude," Sirius retorted.

"You really need to stop bursting out of places, Prongs," heaved Peter as he leaned heavily against the door, distracting both boys.

"There you are!" cheered Sirius as he welcomed their friend.

"I didn't burst out of anywhere," scowled James.

"You kind of did," responded Sirius, turning back to look at him.

"Sod off," James muttered.

"Can you three shut the fuck up?" All three boys turned to look at where the voice had come from. Remus had pulled a blanket over his head to protect himself from the light that had intruded into his space.

"We brought you lunch, ungrateful twat," Sirius told him. Peter approached the bedpost, as if on cue, carrying whatever they had procured for their friend. Remus pulled the blankets back, peering up at Sirius with one eye.

"What'd you bring?" he investigated, suddenly interested.

"Get up, you lazy git," exclaimed Sirius. Remus frowned but slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes in order to rid himself of the second sleep.

"Okay, I'm awake," Remus croaked. Without asking, Sirius swung his wand and the curtains swished open around Remus, letting in a bout of light that he had not expected. His head flinched backwards, and his eyes squinted at the sudden brightness. "Bloody hell, Padfoot, was that necessary?"

"Yes, you were starting to look like a hermit," quipped Sirius.

"Do you even know what a hermit looks like?"

"No, but I reckon you'd look like one"

"Here, Moony, we brought you some cornish pasties," Peter butted in, approaching Remus' side and handing him over the blanketed food.

"We or you, Wormtail?"

"Well, I did, the others kind of forgot—"

"We did not forget," defended Sirius. Peter raised both eyebrows at his friend as he stared down at him. "Yeah, okay, we forgot but that's because we were kind of distracted."

"Thank you, Wormtail," Remus grinned at his friend as they laughed at their win. "Does this distraction have anything to do with why you lot aren't downstairs?" inquired Remus through a mouthful of minced beef and baker's pastry.

"What? It's not enough that we just wanted to see you?" Sirius pretended to be offended, lifting up a hand over his heart as if Remus had dealt him the greatest dishonor. Remus snorted. "Fine, Prongs got into a fight with the most luxurious red mop you've ever seen," Sirius gave up.

"She is not luxurious," scowled James in an undertone. "Nor is she a mop."
"May I ask why?"

"Yes, that's your cue— Prongsy," announced Sirius, gesturing to his friend to answer Remus' question. James huffed, looking longingly at Remus as if he'd rather be doing anything but explain and relive what happened with the luxurious red mop.

"Why can't you tell him?" James fought.

"I don't know if you want me to do that," advised Sirius with a smirk. James sighed and ran his hands through his hair again. He was right, if he left it to Sirius, he would only recount the insults that they had slung back and forth at each other down the table. Especially the ones about how ginormous Lily thought his arsehole was. His face went wry at the thought.

"I don't even know where to begin, I don't even remember what happened," he exasperated. "I told her that I think it'd be best if we moved the Slytherin prefects out from the dungeons to a different section of the castle, and then she..." he paused and looked up at his friends, "exploded."

"She just exploded? That's it?" Remus asked as he satisfied an inch on his neck, the corners of his lips threatening to pull up.

"Basically."

"Wonderful." Everyone except James burst out into a chuckle.

"What? Why are you lot laughing?" James flustered, looking back and forth between his friends for some sort of answer.

"Nothing, Prongs, if that's what happened," reassured Remus as he shook his head.

"That is what happened!"

"I believe you mate— exploding red mops and all." Peter let out another chuckle and Remus grinned. Despite how rubbish he felt, his friends never ceased to amuse him.

"Sod off," James muttered, laying down his bed, his long legs still hanging over the edge as he drummed his fingers against his chest.

"Come off it mate," Sirius told him, taking a seat on Remus' trunk.

"I am off it."

"Yeah, that much is obvious," teased Remus.

"Whatever, it seems it's everyone's time of the month," James wrote them off.

"Including yours," bit Remus in a cold tone. He put down his pastie, eyeing James. Though Sirius laughed at their antics, Remus found himself slightly irked with his friend's one-liner.

Relax, it was just light fun, he tried to tell himself, blaming his aggravation on the full moon.

Remus looked up to Peter who had sat down on the window sill next to Remus' bed. "They had some disagreements on the prefect rounds. It wasn't really anything important, but of course they both made it into a big deal," shrugged Peter.

"Wrong, she made it into a big deal," James firmly corrected him. Peter rolled his eyes and lifted his legs into the window sill.
"I will tell you something, that girl sure has an extraordinary imagination to come up with all of those names. I was actually thinking of writing some down," Sirius chuckled.

"Especially the one about James' broom," Peter added in.

"Ah, thank you for reminding me, Wormy. That was bloody gold," agreed Sirius.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," James informed them.

"Fine, let's talk about the fact that you need a good shag," Sirius changed the subject.

"Padfoot, not now," groaned James.

"The sexual tension between you and my favorite red mop is so intense that even I can feel it."

"What we have is not sexual tension," countered James.

"Then what would you call it?"

"Evans is a bitch who doesn't know how to admit she's wrong."

"Sounds an awful lot like you," Remus chimed in. James lifted up his head and threw him a reprimanding glance.

"I don't understand why we're having a row over this. The solution is very simple," counseled Sirius.

"Pray tell," James urged him sarcastically.

"Just shag some other bird," Sirius restated in an obvious and slightly bored tone.

"Yeah, you said it yourself on the train that you weren't interested in her anymore," Peter reminded him.

Oh, but was he wrong. James had only said that because he didn't want to be the desperate boy who pined after the same girl for his entire school career. He didn't want to be the running joke for rejection in the school, and even though no one would dare say it to his face, everyone felt bloody sorry for him. He decided to pretend he didn't think about the witch anymore, hoping, praying that just maybe he would grow into it and actually stop thinking about her.

But with their partnership as Head Boy and Girl, it had only gotten worse. Not only did he think about her all the time, now he often found himself alone with her as they went over detention slips, hogsmeade trips, and prefect rounds.

Fuck me, James cried to himself as he thought about it all. He really needed a cigarette. He knew he had promised himself he'd do it less often, if not at all, but he couldn't take it. He felt like such a wanker for being so love sick over the girl. He just wanted to rip her out of his mind, he wanted to hate her, and yet, he couldn't. He just could not.

"Yeah, I should probably start seeing somebody," James confessed lowly. All of them raised their eyebrows in shock.

"Finally," Sirius exhaled.

"You know what?" James sat up at his epiphany. "We should all have fun, who bloody cares? We're leaving in a couple of months. We should snog all the lasses we want, and drink to our heart's desires."
Oh no, Remus thought to himself.

"One hundred and one percent with you," agreed Sirius.

"You've already been doing that," Remus pointed out to him.

"You're right, but now I get company."

"I'm not shagging a girl with you in the same room, Padfoot," James warned him.

"I wasn't being so literal," Sirius scoffed. "And Wormtail?"

"I like it," chimed in Peter, shrugging his shoulders. He never had any problem with a chance to drink and maybe meet a girl or two.

All three of them looked over to Remus who sat there silently, half a cornish pastie in his mouth.

"Wha'?"

"Aren't you going to answer the call to arms?" Sirius questioned him.

"Uh," Remus put down his lunch, scratching his eyebrow. "Honestly, my goals for the year were to finish the year without killing someone, and to… finish the year," he concluded.

"It's been six bloody years and you haven't killed a fly," Sirius gibed at him.

"There was that bunny rabbit last year," Peter chimed in.

"That was my fault, actually," Sirius reminded him.

"What bunny?" blurted James.

"Back to the point," announced Sirius, turning to look at Remus.

"There's a first time for everything," Remus cautioned, well aware that he had only been lucky. His friends didn't understand his constant fear of what could go wrong, and the possibilities of it going wrong. They saw him as something innocent because of how he was when human, but they thought his lycanthropy was something to play with, and yes, it did irk Remus, but he couldn't say anything to them for they did do their best to help him. He just wish they took it more seriously.

"Oh, shut up, will ya? You're the most pathetic excuse for a werewolf I've ever seen."

"And I take it that you've seen a lot, have you?" Remus raised his eyebrows. "And could you not say it out loud," he added.

"Why? Who else is here?" Sirius looked around the room as if someone was supposed to jump out from the wardrobe. Remus shook his head and ignored him. He really did wish they didn't treat him like some sort of toy.

"You never know," Remus insisted.

"It's called paranoia." Sirius patted Remus on his leg.

"Come on, Moony. Wouldn't you like to find yourself a bonnie lass? Just for fun, nothing serious," James completely ignored their conversation, continuing on with his own day dreams.
He didn't answer right away. Remus thought about it, but it wasn't the first time he was thinking about it. To tell the truth, Remus thought about it quite often. He did like the idea of having someone special, someone that was his, and with whom he could share something unique with, but he couldn't let himself do that to them or to himself. There was too much at risk, he became too vulnerable and too open, just like the first time.

The one time he had tried, it had been because his friends had blindly set him up with Dorcas. He had been eyeing her for a while, especially because she was friends with Lily, and they often found themselves chatting and exchanging pleasantries, but nothing too serious. After a year and an endless amount of taunting, the Marauders had decided to trick him into a date.

They were in the carriages heading down to the village. Usually, the Marauders liked to stroll over, but today was bleak and inconsistently raining, so they decided that instead of risking it and getting soiled by the mud, they would save themselves the trouble and head on over with the carriages.

When they arrived just outside the village, they hopped off one by one. Visiting days from the Hogwarts students were always the best for the shopkeepers and the inhabitants of the small village. Bodies bustled around, whizzing in and out of shops as they made their way through it. Laughter and smiles brightened the grey day, and no one seemed perturbed by the weather.

"Home sweet home," stretched Sirius as he hopped out after Peter.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," agreed James. "Oh, Moony, look who it is."

"Reckon that's your date, over there mate," added Sirius.

Remus scrunched his eyebrows and laughed nervously. "Pardon?"

"No need, she's right there," Sirius gestured to the blonde that stood underneath the canopy for Dominic Maestro's music shop. Remus gulped and looked back to his friends.

"What in Godric's good will is going on?" he whispered to his friends.

"Mate, she's waiting for you."

"What do you mean she's waiting for me? I never even asked—" but he trailed off as he saw his friends exchange a look between them. "You bloody bastards," he scowled.

"Come on, go enjoy yourself," James urged him, pushing him towards the blonde who tried her best not to look his way. Instead, she swayed back and forth with her arms crossed as she attempted to look very interested in the dreary sky.

"Wh-what do I even say? Talk about?" Remus stuttered. "Does she even fancy me?"

"Yes, she does, or else she would have never agreed, now go!" Sirius shoved him into her direction, and though he fumbled, he stuck his hands deep into his pockets and trudged his way over. His heart was beating fast and his face was all red. He was a fifteen year old boy with low self-esteem and a crush, in other words, he was lucky he hadn't pissed himself.

But after her, he never could get himself to do it again. He couldn't put someone else through that sort of chaos, through the uncertainty that he created because of his own psychological and physical problems.
"I don't think so," Remus admitted.

"You're no fun," Sirius grumbled.

"Really?" James asked. Over the years, all three of them had been made aware of Remus' severe lack of self-confidence, but James had thought that with their reassurances, and the reassurances of many others, he had grown some sort of backbone. "What about the sixth year with the nice set of knockers?"

Remus rolled his eyes and scoffed.

"Don't you want to get laid?" Sirius questioned him, scrutinizing his friend's face. "We know how you get before a full moon, don't pretend to be innocent."

Peter snickered, and Remus looked around in complete shock, his face going red.

"Why do you know that?" Remus flustered.

"It was the only time you ever shagged Dorcas," Sirius stated bluntly.

"That's not true," countered Remus.

"Well, then, it's the only time we heard you," Sirius retorted. Remus' face blushed even harder, his neck and body growing hot under the thick layer of blankets. He looked down at the last, half-eaten cornish pastry in his lap, and suddenly found that he had no appetite.

"I don't know, I'll think about it," Remus sighed, wanting nothing more than to move on from the conversation.

"You do that," Sirius encouraged, getting up from the trunk. "Are you coming to Trans?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Well, Minnie will understand if you don't, but you know you're her favorite. She might miss you," Sirius teased.

"I guess I should, shouldn't I?" Remus wondered out loud, weighing the pros and cons.

"If you did come, you'd only be missing one class for today, right?" Peter began. Remus nodded. "And besides, Trans is on this floor, so you wouldn't have to walk up and down any stairs."

"Yeah, I know," Remus agreed, recognizing that Peter was right. He ran a hand through his hair and shoved the last piece of his pastie into his mouth.

"Does that mean you're coming?" puzzled Sirius, not yet sure what was occurring.

"Yes, Padfoot," Remus grumbled. He lifted up the sheets and crawled out of bed, stretching up towards the ceiling as he landed on his two feet.

"Atta' boy," grinned Sirius.

He grabbed his uniform that hung off the edge of the trunk and turned towards the bathroom. He left the door open as he stood at the doorway, looking at himself in the mirror.

"I have to do the bloody charms," Remus cursed.
"Fuck it, just go with them," goaded Sirius from his bed.

"Yeah, it gives you a Sid Vicious vibe," commented Peter.

"Sid Vicious doesn't have scars, you twat," Sirius informed him.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do, okay?"

Remus shook his head, and pushed the door back so that it closed. He continued to stare into the mirror, eyeing every visible scar that stained his face and neck. They made him crawl and cringe every time, a churning beginning in his gut and ending in his toes. He wanted to dig his nails into his jaw and lift up his skin until it was all gone. He had dreamed of it, nightmares that infested his mind. But he had been fortunate, the others didn’t have to suffer and be witness to his disfigurement, because he took the time every morning to gift them that privilege.

_How could anyone want me if they saw this?_ he asked himself, thinking back to their conversation from just moments ago.

He pulled his wand from the pants he had laid over the wash basin, and brought the wood up to the longest scar of the three.

"Cooperiunt," he whispered as he traced the wand along it, slowly disappearing as he continued over his nose until the jaw. He sighed; the first of many to go was completed. He brought his wand back to the second scar underneath.

"Cooperiunt," he repeated, and repeated, and repeated until he finally finished.

He had regretted it the moment he stepped out of the common room. Though he had been feeling dandy while laying down in bed, now, as he sat through his professor's drawls, he could feel his eyelids threatening to close. His head hung lazily against his palm, a completely bored expression painted on his face. Sirius and him were sitting behind a pillar, so luckily, the shadow partially covered him, but he knew that he would hear it from his professor if she were to catch him.

"Oi, Moony, you feeling okay?" whispered Sirius, who was leaning his chair all the way back.

"Huh," Remus replied, not really paying attention.

He had absolutely no energy, no ability to follow the lesson or to understand what was going on. His bones felt heavy, like they were dropping through his skin and falling to the ground. He could feel a chill crawl up his back; he was cold, always cold right before a transformation—the Pepperup Potion helped with those symptoms, but he had forgotten to take one. His concealment routine had taken more time than he had had, and all four boys had run as they left the common room with the sound of the warning bell.

He sighed, exhaling and inhaling to try and rid himself of the weakness that massaged his muscles. He felt like he could faint right there and then, even though he knew he wouldn't because it'd never happened before.

"For Monday, I expect all the theory questions on pages 87 through 97 to be answered," McGonagall assigned them, sternly looking over the room to make sure everyone they had been listening. "You may go," she dismissed them, all the students promptly getting up and pushing in their chairs as they filed out. Remus looked around the room, not even bothering to get up as he
couldn't muster up the energy.

"Moony?" James had gotten up and turned around from where he had been seated in front of him.

"Still alive," he muttered, "unfortunately."

James and Sirius shared a look. They both had more than once confessed to each other how sorry they felt for Remus, and how they hated seeing him like this. They loved their friend like a brother, and James had sworn that if there was a cure, or even a chance to a cure, he would give up his entire vault for it—Sirius, naturally, had agreed.

"Remus," he heard Lily call to him as she approached. She was smiling her usual white, toothy, perfect smile, and he couldn't help but grin crookedly in return. She looked around the room before asking, "how are you feeling?"

"It's a bad case of influenza, but not the worst we've seen," winked Sirius.

"There's no one here," muttered Remus.

"I know, I thought it was funny."

"It's not," Remus rejected.

James was looking down at the girl who was now standing between him, but didn't say a word as she completely wrote him off, her body slightly rigid as she felt him shift over closer to the pillar.

"Do you want a candy cane?" she asked him, that was code for Pepperup Potion. He thought it best that way, or else everyone would either suspect he had absolutely no immunity system, or that he was a werewolf.

He shook his head with a light smile, "no, I still have from the last time."

"Oh," she yelped as if she just remembered something, "this is for you." She slid him over a parchment that was rolled to perfection. He scrunched his eyebrows and opened it up, immediately recognizing the handwriting.

"Thanks," he pursed his lips and lifted the parchment as it rolled back into place.

"It's the baneberry essay," she informed him, but he already knew. He absolutely did not understand why his professor had decided to assign them an essay after they had already done the potion, usually, logically, it was the other way around.

"Yeah, I know. I'm surprised she gave this to you," wondered Remus out loud.

"No, she gave it to Mustaq who gave it to me." Both Remus and Sirius snorted at the same time.

Naturally, Remus thought to himself.

"It's already written," added Lily.

"You looked at it?" he questioned, not at all surprised.

"Yeah," she replied meekly, her cheeks turning bright red. "Sorry, I just thought it—"

"You thought it was some sort of poisoned parchment? Yeah, I would have too," scoffed Sirius.
"How come it's already written?" piped in Peter.

"Because my partner likes to play this little game where she reminds me how inadequate I am compared to her," responded Remus bitterly.

"Oh, that doesn't sound like a very fun game," faltered Peter.

"Please, you could write an essay ten times better," Lily assured him. "You're great at them."

"No, I'm too colloquial and biased," Remus quoted the only thing Manasse had said to him when they handed in their first essay.

"Really?"

"Apparently."

Lily stared at him sympathetically. She knew he already doubted his talents, even though he was one of the best wizards, if not the best, in the entire school. He had a talent that she craved after, and no matter who, both professors and students alike, told him, he still didn't believe it.

She placed a light hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "Ignore her," and she pecked him lightly on his temple as she made her way out of the room.

"Bye Evans," lullabied James as he waved to her. He wasn't loud enough for her to hear him, but he didn't want her to turn around. He made a sour face as she left, slightly irritated that she had ignored him, but also not over her little outburst from before.

"My golly, you're such a flirt, Moony," mocked Sirius as he pushed himself out from the desk.

"I was not flirting," he defended himself.

"You looked like the inferi before she came around," Sirius continued, but grinned smugly from behind Remus.

"You lot probably have somewhere to be," he mumbled, pressing down two hands onto the table and pushing himself up. Immediately, James reached out and held Remus from under his arms, stabilizing and supporting his weak body.

"It's all right. I got it, Prongs. Thank you," he reassured him. James nodded in response, and both him and Peter followed Remus out the classroom to where Sirius waited for them by the entrance.

"Anything else for today, Moony?" James laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"No, that's it."

"Very well, I need to run down to the lawn. Hooch won't be too pleased if I show up late to the demonstration today," he informed his friends. Remus nodded as James patted him on the back, saluting his friends and retreating towards the stairs.

"Wormtail and I have divination, can you get back all right?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about me."

"All right, we'll come get you later," Sirius placed a hand over Peter's shoulders and the two boys followed in James' direction, but instead of going down, they headed up.
Remus felt his feet trudge against the stone, as if he was walking through a swamp. Everyone who passed by him, passed by in shadows and ghosts, not even bothering to look to see if he knew anyone. Someone may have saluted him, another may have called for his attention, but all he wanted was to pass out onto something soft.

Will I even make it to the dorm? he asked himself, not really caring. He’d just fall asleep on the couch. No one should be there, he figured. When his friends came back, he knew they’d get him and nearly carry him like an amputated soldier up to his bed.

I love those bastards, he chuckled, despite the burden it put onto his muscles. No matter their curses, their insults, and their teases, he would always love them. They were his family, a family so strong that they could carry him when he couldn’t carry himself; and so, no matter how bad their mistakes, Remus Lupin would always forgive them.

"Come on, let's get you up," he heard some grunt as someone lifted him up from under his arms. Remus' eyes slowly opened, everything blurred in front of him. All he could feel were his arms stretched out over two entities as he mindlessly dragged and trudged up some stairs.

"Wha's goin' on?" he mumbled sleepily. They entered some sort of room. There were no torches crackling, just darkness. The stove in the middle of the room sat untouched, not yet warming the space. Remus felt his entire body burst into goosebumps as he squirmed in the cold.

He felt himself being released and slung onto warm sheets. He let himself crawl into them, blankets and sheep's wool heating up his body as he laid there, eyes closed.

"Moony, you need to wake up," he heard a voice say to him.

"What time is it?" he grumbled into the sheets.

"Nearly nine." Remus blinked himself awake, albeit forcefully and unwilling. In the next few minutes, he found himself looking up into the whites of someone's eyes. They were glasses, James, he thought to himself.

"You need to eat," James told him. Remus sat up straighter in his bed as he saw a small figure place something on his lap. He looked down— Peter had wrapped up and stolen a plate from the main hall. He tiredly pulled at the napkin, that Peter had most likely charmed to be some sort of rope, revealing nearly an entire chicken, some sausages, and roasted potatoes. Remus absentmindedly licked his lips as the meaty aromas whiffed into him.

He let his head hang against the wooden headboard as he picked up a chicken leg and bit into it. He frowned.

"What's wrong with it?" Peter worried.

"Nothing, it's just so... well done," mentioned Remus as he looked down at the chicken in contempt.

"Next time, we'll be sure to bring you a live one," teased Sirius, causing James to snort.

"I'm not complaining," Remus pointed out with a weak smile as he took another go at the leg.

How could I? he thought. They risked their own freedom for him, he would never even dare think of whining.

"How long does the full moon last night?" asked Peter as he stuffed a spare cloak into his bag.
"A little more than five hours," replied Sirius, earning a displeased huff from Remus. James sat down at the foot of Remus' bed.

With winter approaching fast, the nights grew longer and so did the full moon. This only meant that Remus would have to deal with more substantial, agonizing pains in the morning, as well as the stress and fear of a greater possibility that something went wrong.

"Eat faster, Moony. Dinner ends in a quarter of an hour," Sirius warned him. Remus glanced his way with a cold look, telling him that he really could not be bothered.

"I don't have to finish everything," he informed.

"Mate, you know you're calmer when you've eaten," James reminded him. Remus sighed and began to swallow larger bites. He was usually a slow eater, taking his time as he enjoyed the notes and flavors of everything he consumed, but he knew James was right. He had to make sure he ate until he was full, or else he would be extra ravenous during the wolf hours.

"Wormtail and I are going to head down," announced Sirius, pulling a second sweater over his shoulders as he placed his wand into his bed side drawer.

"I'll meet you by the Whomp," James replied as Remus threw down his second bone, picking up the sausage with his fingers and shoving it into his mouth.

Sirius and Peter snuck out from the dark room. They would transform themselves right in the hallway; a black dog and a rat were less likely to be seen. James had to wait until he was out on the grounds to transform, which is why he first accompanied Remus to his meeting spot with Madam Pomfrey under the protection of the invisibility cloak and the map.

Remus burped as he threw a potato into his mouth. James turned and both boys looked to at each other.

"Sorry," Remus grumbled through a mouthful of potato.

"No need," James chuckled, holding up his palms.

"All right, here we go," Remus yawned and lethargically swung his legs out of the blankets, the cold icing him from head to toe. All he wanted was to bask under the sun.

How nice that would be, he thought to himself, the warm sand under his body as the earth warmed him up. Instead, he walked over to his trunk and grabbed the two warmest sweaters he owned.

He would give anything, do anything to not have to go. So many times he wished he could just skip out on a full moon, stay and curl up in his bed and not have to worry about the frigidness, or the wind, or the possibility of murdering somebody. Alas, that was not his life. His life was about numbing fingertips and toes, about migraines that spread from the tip of his spine to the top of his head, and the constant anxiety that came with the package. His life was about knowing that he would inevitably suffer, but still wake up the next morning to live another day.

What a great life, he gibed internally.

"Why don't you wear your trainers?" James inquired, scrunching his eyebrows together as he watched Remus fit himself into his maple colored leather loafers.

"What's the difference?"
"It rained this morning, there may be mud."

"I'd end up cleaning them the same," he shrugged his shoulders, pulling the scarf from around the bedpost and wrapping it around his neck.

"I suppose we are wizards," James realized that Remus had a point. "Ready mate?" James asked, lifting himself up from the edge of Remus' bed. Remus nodded as he shook on his wool cloak as James walked over to his trunk and pulled out their most prized possession.

"Come on," he told Remus who made his way over to James and under the cloak. Remus turned to catch a glimpse in the mirror, but he saw nothing.

A ghastly wind chilled through the open arches as they stepped down one of the substitute staircases and into the corridor. Remus tried to warm up his blue hands with his breath, but found that the few seconds that he needed to inhale only worsened the sensation.

They continued on as they systematically checked the map for any lingering beings. They made two more turns, and eventually, they found themselves in the familiar arched hallway with one exit at the end. As they approached the castle's exterior, James turned around and with a wave of his hand, and a small incantation spelt on his lips, the last torch in the hallway extinguished— signaling to Sirius that he was arriving.

"Let's go," James whispered to Remus as the they shuffled outside and against the external part of the hallway they had just left. Remus turned and looked out, in front of him were boulders that mimicked the Callanish Stones, a holy place for wizards and witches that practiced ancient magic, and beneath that, a narrow and nearly collapsed path that led down to Hagrid's Hut. He could see smoke raising above the gatekeeper's small chimney and a faint light in the window.

Remus' thoughts were interrupted once he felt the cloak sliding off him, the wind biting ruthlessly at his vulnerable face.

"You all right?" James questioned as he lazily folded the cloak. Remus pursed his lips and nodded, he was far from all right but there wasn't much anyone could do about it. "I'll see you in a bit," James told him, placing a supportive hand on his shoulder.

James then stepped a few paces away from Remus, looked around to make sure no one as there, and suddenly he was bending on all fours. His limbs had transfigured into thin, tan colored sticks, and his upper body was now evening out. In a matter of seconds, James had disappeared and Prongs was now standing in front of Remus. The great stag turned once to look at him, and then galloped away into the distance to join the rest of the group. Remus slid down against the stone, his legs holding his body up as he crossed his arms over and waited.

He hated this wait, though relatively short, it was painstakingly dragged out. He wished he could just get on with it instead of writher in pain and depression as to what he would become. He hated thinking about it, and it was always there— he reckoned there wasn't a moment in his day that he didn't think about it, about what he was.

"There you are, m'boy," he heard someone croon, he looked up to find the kind eyes of one of his most beloved guardians looking down at him. She was dressed in all black so not to make herself seen in the dark. He smiled weakly in response, and she opened up one arm to welcome him under her wing. He joined her without hesitation, making their way down without another sound.

Once they approached the indignant tree, Madam Pomfrey walked over to the knot and pressed her
toe to it, once again paralyzing it.

"Hurry now," she ushered as she turned to look over her shoulder. Remus slipped into the dark tunnel, and continued the walk as he heard the nurse follow quietly behind him. "Lumos," the witch conjured, a weak light giving them the only guidance they would need.

Eventually, the tight space gave way to a run down, wooden step stool that sat underneath a trap door that was charmed to only be opened by humans.

"One could even incorporate baneberries into objects, bewitching them to keep out whatever creature one wishes," he remembered his professor lecturing them. He had only listened to half of what he had told them, but now that he knew, Remus reckoned that the trapdoor had been made with baneberries.

Where did Dumbledore find werewolf hair? Remus wondered as he climbed the steps which creaked awfully loud under his weight, shoving the door open above him. Using all the strength he could muster, he pushed himself up and crawled into the rickety space.

Still seated on the floor, he turned to see Madam Pomfrey's head poke up through the opening, placing her lit-up wand on the floor next to his feet.

"All well?" she asked him in a soft voice. Remus nodded, out of breath. "Here, take this for the pain," she placed one small vile filled with blue liquid onto the wooden boards, "and this as soon as you transform back, as usual," she informed him, placing a gunky forest green liquid next to the other.

"The blue one is new," he commented.

"Yes, it's something I wanted to try—my very own concoction," she instructed him with a proud little grin. He lightly chuckled in return at her youth.

"Thank you, this is brilliant," he told her, his words more than sincere. He was so grateful for all the help he received from the unlikeliest of people. Never had he ever expected a renowned healer to want to help something like himself, but here she was—the golden heart of the wizarding world. I'm so lucky, he thought to himself as he looked down to the two glass bottles. He was given a chance, so many had always informed him that he would not have to be a desolate. He might have a possibility, and a very good one, at a semi-normal life, and, at this point, that's all he could ask for.

"No worries, m'dear, I will see you in the morning," she replied, winking at him as he nodded. She grabbed the string of the trap door and pulled it down, disappearing underneath it.

From the other room in the shack, he heard hooves patter against the creaky floorboard, making their way towards him. In the dilapidated doorway, the great stag with strong legs and a proud body appeared, a rat sitting on its back.

"Came to see the show?" Remus laughed nervously, pulling the cork off the blue bottle and swallowing the contents of it. The taste was awfully sour, but not the sour like lemons or candy, the sour that numbed teeth and pained the brain. He nearly spat it out.

He threw a scowl as he heard the black dog bark. Remus turned to see him standing behind the stag. "It's not funny, Padfoot."

Remus used one foot to pull of the shoe from the other and vice versa. Then, he reached over to take off his socks, and that's when he looked to see that all three of his friends were still there, still
watching him. "A little privacy, yeah?" he exclaimed, grabbing his shoes and walking over to place them under the floorboards.

He heard hooves and paws patter against the floor as he shook off his cloak, and put two hands under the triple layer of clothes he was wearing to pull them over his head. He was now frigid, a glacier in the drafty room. He stood there, his torso bare as he looked out the boarded window and watched the moon as it grew to its full form. With one last sigh, he un buckled his belt and pulled down his pants, throwing them into the pile on the mattress.

All the clothes went underneath the floorboard. He heaved as he pushed the wooden log back into place, and then plopped himself onto the bed. He grabbed the tattered blanket, that they left for these moments, and wrapped it around himself as he waited for his doom.

Remus dropped to the ground, gasping for air, on his knees and hands. His stomach heaved in and out as he looked for a release from the pain he felt in his joints. He felt a need to vomit. He wanted someone to knock him out, to drop a boulder on his head so that he could be free of this pain.

Eventually, his limbs gave out and he found himself laying completely on the floor. He no longer felt cold or warm, he just felt numb. He knew there was a pain, but it seemed to be vibrating into him instead of resonating from him. He felt like he was in a lucid dream, watching himself from outside of his body as he crawled and writhed on the floor.

Ceiling, wall, window, he repeated to himself, looking around the room, forcing himself to get his human mind thinking and working once again.

The black dog pattered into the room, watching the body coil and open on the floor. He felt his heart ache as he watched Remus' eyes dart manically around the room, completely unaware of what was happening. He didn't quite understand what he was experiencing, though he had tried to more than once. He had even asked Remus, but his friend was rather reluctant to talk about what happened before and after his transformation. He tried to block it and ignore it for as long as he could.

The dog walked over to the tattered blanket and bit down on it, dragging it across the floor, and covering his friend's exposed body. From behind him, he could hear Peter scamper to the loose floorboard, James in tow as he bent his head down, and with his antlers, lifted and pushed it open.

As the dog walked over to meet them, it transformed out of a shaggy black animal and into a fully clothed human being. He reached into the dark gap, pulling out Remus' clothes and the vile that the nurse had given him. With it firmly placed in his hand, he walked back over to Remus, and turned his friend onto his back. Remus didn't seem to notice, he didn't seem to feel anything that was happening to him.

"Hey, Moony," Sirius said, pursing his lips as Remus hadn't seemed to gain his full conscious yet. He forcefully opened up Remus' mouth, which was easier said than done, and poured the contents of the bottle down it, shutting it firmly so that he didn't spit it back out. Under him, Remus coughed and sputtered as it trickled down his throat, not yet able to fully control his movements.

"Nothing happened," Sirius assured him, already knowing the question that plagued Remus' mind
every single time. Remus let out a huge sigh of relief, his head following back down onto the wood. His hand fell over his heart as he took deep breaths, allowing himself a moment to feel, just feel, everything.

Anger, hate, and sadness flowed back into him, followed by love, compassion, and gratitude. Feelings—both mental and physical—were what made him human, despite the monster that he became. This conscious, this heart that beat inside him meant that he was human, and there was nothing in the world that could take them from him.

*Thank you,* he thought to himself, *Thank you, thank you, thank you,* he repeated over and over again. He was alive, his friends weren't harmed, nothing had gone wrong this time.

"All good?" Sirius inquired, bowing his head slightly as he gazed at Remus. Remus immediately sat up, his hands holding his body up. The blanket fell and his scarred chest was bare to all, but he didn't mind anymore, not with them.

"Yeah, the potion," Remus croaked the first words after his transformation. They always came out so raspy, like he had smoked a cigar and then gone to sleep.

"Won't be long now," Sirius mentioned, looking over at the trap door, "you best get ready." Remus nodded as Sirius patted his knee once, lifting himself up as he gestured to his friends to conceal themselves in the neighboring room.

Though Remus would prefer just lying there on the floor, he knew that he had only a few minutes. He promptly got up and grabbed the clothes that Sirius had placed next to him.

A light tap on the door signaled that she was already here. Remus looked over to it and quickly finished shoving his feet into his shoes.

He walked over to it and tapped back three times, the agreed response for her to open it up.

"Why good mornin' my youngling, how'd it go?" Pomfrey asked as soon as she popped open the door.

"As well as it possibly could, just some substantial cuts and bruises like usual," he replied with a smile, pulling his cloak over his body. He was grateful that none of those cuts were self made anymore. With his friends available to keep his werewolf entertained, the only injuries he really received were from branches, stones, and James' antlers.

"Why, aren't you the chipper one this mornin'!"

"It's only the potion," he reminded her.

"Indeed it is, which won't last soon—you'll be ready to drop dead once the effects wear off, so we must get going," she told him.

He did a final look over to make sure that nothing was out of place, and then dropped his feet and the rest of him into the hole. Madam Pomfrey held out her lighted wand as she lend them back towards the castle grounds.

"It always does amaze me how you manage to keep yourself so clean," she mused.

"What do you mean?" he questioned, a slight nervousness maturing in his fingertips.

*Does she suspect us?* he wondered, glancing up at her blonde, grey-streaked chignon that sat neatly
at the nape of her neck.

"Well, I always expect significant wounds, but you only have minor nips and such!" she exclaimed happily.

"I used to be more aggressive… I suppose I got better with time," he attempted to lie, hoping he sounded convincing enough.

"I reckon it's got to do with that subconscious of yers. They do say that it reflects in the transformed. I suppose your life is just full of daisies, is that right?"

"Yeah, daisies all right," he muttered resentfully. 

*More like turmoil and burning oil*, he wanted to say.

"Besides, we have such little training on lycanthropy; if only we were better suited. I learned so much by being your healer, you wouldn't believe how much. I really did know nothing before you came along, for that I have only you to thank," she cheered with a large grin that he couldn't quite see from his angle, but he could hear it all right.

Remus stopped briefly in his tracks as she continued. His heart swelled up, and he could feel something stinging his eyes. He never believed that anything good could come out of his monstrosity, but it seemed that he was wrong. His condition was able to serve a greater purpose, and if that simply meant that maybe, for the next one who came along, that their lives would be easier because of what he had been able to offer, then so be it. It gave him hope that at least there was someone out there who was still looking, still searching for some sort of release.

"Well, come along now," she called out to him, for she had stopped hearing his movements behind her.

"Thank you," he eventually said to her.

"What for?"

"Everything."

"Oh, m'dear," she heartened, gently squeezing his shoulder as they exited the tunnel. He was so incredibly lucky.

Chapter End Notes

Remus-only chapter is up! I wanted to dedicate a full chapter to our beloved Remus Lupin, focusing both on his life and the struggles he has to surpass. I'm sorry to any Eva fans out there- I promise that she's in the next one. Anyway, the next chapter is already written and will be up next Monday (as usual!) If you liked and enjoyed this chapter, and the story, give it a review, favorite, follow! They are always appreciated, each and every single one of them.

Also, I'm a very visual person, and I'm certain that many of you are as well. I have created a blog dedicated to this story (and to its sequel that will follow it once it's
finished). It's basically just my fancast (great for anyone who was wandering how these characters are supposed to look like), as well as some inspirational quotes and what not.

This is the link to it: https://fogandfire.tumblr.com/

If you want to see any specific character: click on the little link below the description that says characters and it should direct you to.

Love you all, see you next week!

P.S. For my visual people- the hallway where Remus is waiting for Madam Pomfrey is the same one from Prisoner of Azkaban, when Hermione punched Draco in the nose- that hallway/archway/I'm not sure what the correct architectural term is for it.
Regulus was sulking through the halls as he returned from his last class of the day. His eyes stung, glazed over after a full day of lessons. His hand hurt from all the notes he had taken, and his brain pinched with the remnants of Flitwick's words. His books hung heavily in the bag that bounced off his thigh, and no matter how hard he tried to keep his back straight, he simply could not. All he wanted was a bed, and maybe something to eat.

It had never been this difficult for him, but ever since the summer holidays, the wizard couldn't seem to keep up with anything anymore. He had so many different tasks to remember: prefect duties, familial duties, quidditch duties and much more on the endless bill. During classes, partners could usually catch him writing down lists in the margins to remind him what came next; he couldn't keep it all together in his head. But he knew he had to stay focused, alert; no one could notice that he was drowning, it would ruin everything.

Consequently, he hadn't seen the person who had been tailing him since he had exited his D.A.D.A. class, waiting for the perfect moment to grab the Seeker by his collar and shove him against the wall in a dead-end hallway.

Until... it actually happened, that is.

"Evan," Regulus exhaled, his breaths coming out in gasps.

"Little cousin," Evan replied through bared teeth. Without another word, he pushed Regulus in front of him. "Walk," he ordered, leading him with a stiff hand on his shoulder further down the adjacent hall.

"Where are you taking me?" Regulus inquired, looking back at his cousin with furrowed eyebrows. He had never seen Evan as a threat.

Was I mistaken not to? he thought to himself, grunting in pain as the blonde wizard flipped the boy around and shoved him against the stone wall. The back of Regulus' head crashed into it, sending a ringing pain to his forehead.

"What the fuck?" Regulus cursed. He yanked against his cousin's pull like a trapped hound. "Don't touch me!" snarled Regulus, shoving his cousin back. "Have you gone mad?"

"She's mine," sneered Evan.

"What!?"

"Listen here, you pathetic twat." Evan approached Regulus, pointing a finger into his chest. "Manasse is mine. She has always been mine, are we clear?"

Regulus searched within his cousin's eyes for some sort of sanity. This was completely uncalled for, nothing about it made any sort of logical sense. Besides, Regulus had a thousand other things he had to worry about, he was too tired for this rubbish.

"Merlin's beard, Evan," Regulus scowled, finally coming to terms with the fact that Evan was talking about some witch. "At least have a more substantial excuse next time you want to break my skull."
"I've had it planned since fourth year— I am going to marry her. ARE WE CLEAR?" he continued, not giving up his anthem.

Regulus stared, his expression resembling that of a mother who had just witnessed their child crying from a bad mark on their exam. Regulus didn't know exactly how to handle this. He had never fought over his friends, or family, for a girl.

"You want to marry Manasse?" finally asked Regulus. His voice was tinged with curiosity.

"Don't play dumb with me, boy," Evan warned him.

"I'm not," Regulus scoffed. "I simply cannot fathom that you would attack me, in the dungeons, over some bird," he reiterated, hitting a nerve in Evan, who was growing impatient as Regulus refused to answer to his negotiation.

"Let me repeat my words a little clearer— Eva Manasse is going to be my wife; that's not just some bird," he bit back. Regulus nodded, taking into consideration what Evan was saying.

"Does she know about this little arrangement?"

"What?" Evan did a once over of Regulus as if he was contaminated with dragon pox. "Why would she have to know?"

"Are you having a laugh? Why shouldn't she know?" Regulus couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sure, he was more than aware of their customs, but that didn't mean the poor girl had to walk into the arranged marriage blindly. Regulus would never make someone marry him if he didn't have some sort of feeling, some sort of base on which they could build upon, so that one day they could learn to love each other. He didn't want to end up like his own mother and father, who could not even stand in the same room without insulting one another.

"It has to do with our families," Evan replied, though he didn't sound so sure any more.

"Yes, indeed. However, how can you be sure they will accept you? I'm sure better prospects are available for someone like herself," he proposed.

"Like who?" scoffed Evan. The two boys stared at each other, and that's when Evan's entire expression changed, and he realized, "you fancy her."

"What? Are you mad? I do not fancy her," flustered Regulus, flinching his head back and scoffing as if it was the most ridiculous notion in the entire world.

The truth was, Regulus did secretly hold a liking to the witch. Not in the way Evan was insinuating, but something close enough.

"Yes, you do. You're completely smitten. Are you blushing, little cousin?" mocked Evan in a taunting tone.

"I do not blush," Regulus sneered.

"Could have fooled me," Evan taunted, tilting his head and eyeing Regulus carefully. "So, what is it? Which part do you like the most? Is it her eyes? Or no... maybe the hair? You know, if you were to ask me, I always did like her plump, rosy lips, they would look so perfect suck—"

"Fuck off," Regulus spat at him. Evan raised his eyebrows, hearing Regulus curse was indeed gratifying for him.
"Sorry, cousin, does imagining your little bird sucking my cock bother you?" A satisfied smirk graced Evan's pale face.

"That's no way to talk about her," Regulus bit back.

*And yes, it does bother me, you detestable bastard,* he almost added on, but that's exactly what Evan wanted him to be- bothered.

"You reckon she'd be any good? I'm sure you've thought about it once or twice," Evan continued, enjoying the look in Regulus' eyes. The prefect's teeth were grinding against each other, his jaw tight and his fists clenched at his sides.

"You're disgraceful, have you no shame?"

"I reckon I'd take her from behind, pull on her soft, silky hair—"

" Shut the fuck up!" seethed Regulus, shoving his cousin away from him. "What is the bloody point of all this? What do you want from me?"

Evan tidied himself, patting down his disheveled robes as he took a deep breath, sighing as if he were a father disappointed in his son. Regulus knew the scene well, if there was a window, he would be willing to bet his life that in that moment, Evan would have looked out of it with squinted eyes. But there weren't any windows in the dungeons.

And Evan Rosier was not his father.

"She doesn't want you, never looks at you—I'm sure you've noticed."

"We've spoken more than once," Regulus countered.

"Formalities don't count," Evan snorted.

"I have bigger problems than you could ever imagine. I do not have the time for your childishness, or your heinous ideas of how you would bed Manasse," Regulus filled his cousin in, unknowingly giving him another weapon on a silver plate.

Evan's eyebrows shot into his hairline. He leaned his head back, getting a good look at his baby cousin.

"How could He have ever initiated you?" wondered Rosier, eyeing Regulus' left arm with a slight scowl.

"How do you know about that?" Regulus growled, pulling out his wand and pointing it at his cousin's neck.

"We're family," the blonde wizard reminded him, blatantly ignoring the stick jutting into his skin. "I wonder what she would think if she knew. Reckon she'd be scared?"

"I have not put as much thought into it, but obviously there was no need, you already have," Regulus gibed, twisting the edge of the wand in Rosier's pink-tinted skin.

"Oh, I reckon you've thought about it plenty," retorted his cousin, swatting away Regulus' wand with his hand.

"She's a pureblood witch who upholds our traditions."
"So, you have thought about it," Evan stated.

"I'm sure she's a supporter," Regulus rehashed.

"Really? Have you asked her?"

"No."

"No," repeated Evan firmly. "Exactly, you don't know a thing about her."

"And what? You do?" Regulus retorted. Evan simply shrugged, Regulus wasn't sure if that meant he did know her, or he didn't care whether he did. "You're a prick, you know that? She deserves better."

"She also deserves someone who doesn't murder people," he countered.

"I have not murdered anyone."

"Not yet."

"You are a supporter of the cause, I know you are. Why are you suddenly against us?"

"I'm not," Evan grinned wickedly. "I'm against you." He poked Regulus in the chest to emphasize the last word. "And I'm not marked yet, I could use that to my advantage."

"What if she's a supporter too?"

"I don't doubt she is, but no one wants a potential murderer in their bed. How could she sleep at night knowing you killed children, mothers?" Regulus had never thought about it like that.

_Am I a murderer?_ he questioned himself, suddenly doubting one of his strongest convictions. He hadn't killed anyone, but he would have to, eventually. Would someone as pure and innocent as Eva want someone as defiled and marked as him?

"Or," Evan continued, "you could swear to me that you'll reject any notion of a marriage proposal they offer you."

"What?"

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Evan drawled.

"No, I heard you just fine... you said marriage proposal."

"Wow, you really are the slowest one in the family," remarked Evan.

"It's your fault that he's such a half-wit," Orion Black, Regulus' father, had bellowed at his mother one night. He had been talking about Regulus, Sirius had already left at that point. He never knew what heartbreak felt like, but those words had hurt worse. Regulus tried so hard every day to impress and prove to his parents that he was better than their disowned eldest son, and yet, it never seemed to be enough. They were simply never happy.

"What marriage proposal, Evan?"

"I guess it's better if you don't know," realized the blonde Slytherin. If he hadn't opened his mouth, Regulus wouldn't have known that him and Eva were a possibility, a very plausible possibility. But now he did know, and that threatened him.
"There's a marriage proposal on the table for Manasse and I, isn't there?" he urged.

Evan began to back up, shaking his head as if denying everything that had just occurred. Regulus started to chuckle dryly, causing his cousin to immediately shove him back against the wall, albeit pathetically. Regulus simply pushed forward his elbow, shaking his wry written face. Evan, now anxious that his plan hadn't gone as he had hoped, defensively pointed his index finger to the center of Regulus' face.

"She's mine," he threatened, huffing once in his cousin's face, and then spinning away in order to take his leave.

"Coward," called out Regulus, watching his cousin's robes billow out behind him, his footsteps heavy and aggressive against the floor.

Regulus leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes to take in what he had discovered: Eva Manasse, the girl he had often awed at as she passed by him, could very possibly become his wife, and Regulus wasn't going to let his pompous, blonde cousin take that possibility away from him.

Regulus suddenly felt nervous with a tinge of giddiness. He had never thought of girls in that way. Sure, his gaze would linger on the ones he found attractive, but never beyond that. It simply wasn't possible for someone like him.

And now he could, now he could think about something more.

_This is are you can't. You don't have time to fret over some lass_, his conscious told him.

He wanted to ignore it, he wanted to say that it was wrong and that he could pursue her, but he had a duty to the cause now. It was of utmost priority. If he did give into his lust, into his feelings, Eva would become his responsibility, he would have to take care of her. How could he do that if he also had to make sure that their cause was successful?

His eyes blinked open— he decided that he would worry about it later.

"I'm not doing these rounds with you," Sofia Mustaq stated bluntly to the Ravenclaw prefect, Athena Gazi. Not only had the Slytherin arrived late, but Athena had already finished the rounds for the ground floor. However, instead of being upset, the dark, curly haired girl blinks, until out of no where, she burst out laughing.

"You never cease to amaze me, Musta," the Ravenclaw exhaled, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I'm glad I could provide you with some sort of entertainment," the Slytherin grimaced, not sure exactly what was so comical.

"I already did the ground floor."

"Gosh, you're so annoying when you do that thing," Sofia insulted her, flailing her hand in a circle around the Ravenclaw.

"What thing?"

"The thing," Sofia repeated, making the same circling movement, for a second time, with her hand. Athena scrunched her eyebrows, obviously not understanding. "When you show off your pathetic diligence to that hideous badge."
"You have the same badge." But when Athena went to point it out, she noticed that the Slytherin’s hair was covering it. She rolled her eyes.

"Unlike you, I have some pride in how I look," mentioned Sofia.

"Unlike you, that's not the only thing I have pride in," Athena retorted, crossing her hands over her chest.

_Ooh, I already dislike you_, Sofia jeered internally, her eyes widening slightly as she gave an annoyed little smile to the Ravenclaw. She could not understand why and how Alex took a liking to her, only imagining that it had to be the mutual distaste for their Head Girl which kept her in his good graces.

"Listen, Gazi, don't make this difficult for yourself," Sofia advised her.

"I'll take the fourth floor up," Athena finally surrendered, realizing that they could be there for hours. "I'm not coming back down, you can check in by yourself."

"Whatever," drawled Sofia, moving towards the staircase that led into the dungeons.

"I didn't do the grounds."

"You're really quite useless, aren't you?" muttered Sofia as she turned the opposite way, not even bothering to talk to her partner any longer.

Usually, Sofia was partnered with her fellow Slytherin prefect and best friend, Alexander Sykes, but for some reason, the Head Boy had changed their routines.

_I'm going to get you for that, specky git_, she threatened in her head. She absolutely loathed the kid and his little band of crooks, especially the fat one.

After an hour or so, she found herself still strolling about on the grounds. Really, at this point, she should have been on the second floor, but Sofia never actively searched for anything or anyone during her patrols, and if she did happen to find someone daft enough to cross her path, she would often let them off the hook with a point or two taken. She found that no one should be punished for wanting to leave their common rooms, especially the older years, it sucked seeing the same people after seven years— she understood that better than anyone.

She lazily looked this way and that for some sort of movement— it was dead silent and cold. She shrugged her shoulders, realizing there was nothing better to do and leaned against one of the pillars in the courtyard, pulling out a cigarette from her brasserie.

She smoked it in peace.

Until.

"Pst," she heard someone hiss. Sofia swiveled around, her wand already out and pointed in the direction she thought she heard the voice come from.

From the shadows of the castle, stepped out a boy wearing an all black jumper and all black pants, his hands up in surrender, a smirk lining his lips.

"Fletcher, you loathsome git," she sneered, tucking her wand back into her robes.

"I've been called worse," he commented.

"What are you doing here?"
"Paying a visit to one of my best customers," he joked.

"You say that to everyone," Sofia snorted. "Why are you really here?"

"You really don't trust me, do you?"

"On the contrary, I don't trust nor distrust you, but I do know that you're lying to me."

"At least you don't distrust me," he chuckled.

"Don't get too excited," she warned him. There were a few silent beats before he began to stride towards her.

"Walk with me," he instructed her.

She paused, thinking about it for a moment. On one hand, she was curious because Mundungus Fletcher was a cave creature, never coming out unless there was something important enough to merit it. On the other, she really didn't feel like taking a walk with Mundungus Fletcher.

"Couldn't we just stay here?"

"No," and he began to walk past her, out of the exterior hallway and onto the grassy grounds. She sighed, following him.

"I'm walking," she pointed out to him when he turned to look over his shoulder.

"Indeed," he smirked.

"I will hex you if you continue to be a sarcastic bitch," she warned him, quickly approaching his side with her long strides.

"Am I being sarcastic?" He was still smiling, and she couldn't help but think how much she wanted to hex it off his buggy looking face.

"I could easily report you and send you off to detention right this second," she informed him.

"But you're not going to do that."

"You bet your bony little arse I will," she countered.

"My arse is not bony, and besides," Mundungus paused, looking around the grounds, making sure they were completely alone. "You're a good person, Sofia."

"Says who?"

"Please, don't play tough. You're a good person, deep down, no matter how much you try to hide it."

"Fletcher, is this some sort of paid intervention? Get to the point," she demanded.

"You're not even going to deny it? Wow," he marveled.

"I could drown you in the lake and let the grindylows feed on you, but then again, I'm a good person," she mocked. He rolled his eyes.

"I really was hoping to have a nice chat."

"Really?"
"No, I'd rather be inside with my girlfriend and a spliff," he responded.

"You have a girlfriend?"

"We're polyamorous, but yes."

"My goodness, for a moment there, I thought I actually cared, but wait... I don't. Why the bloody hell are you bothering me?" She watched as Mundungus stopped and scratched the back of his neck, looking out towards the forest.

"Regulus Black is a death eater," he finally said out loud.

"I know." Much to Sofia's surprise, Mundungus remained very stoic.

"Sirius Black has some little defense club going on," he added, feeding her more information.

"Okay," she muttered. Her eyebrows knitted together and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"But for now, that's all we know," he finished.

"We?"

"Mm," was his only response. Sofia sighed, running a hand through her thick black hair.

"Wait— why aren't you surprised that I know?" She figured that her knowing would make her just as much as a suspect.

*Is that why he's here? To investigate me?* she wondered. She almost entered his mind before…

"I know what you can do," he replied, tapping on his head. Sofia's eyes grew wide, her mouth gaping open. "Dumbledore told me."

"Dumbledore told you?"

"Yeah."

"How could he possibly know?"

"Have you ever tried to get into his mind?" he joked.

"It was one of my only mistakes," she huffed. His eyes went wide.

"Actually?"

"Wait," her eyes darted to the right as she thought about something he had said. "Dumbledore knows about Black?"

"Which one?"

"You know which one, you dumb shit," she scowled.

"Don't you know? Haven't you already seen everything?" he countered, spinning his hands around his head to indicate what he meant.

"It doesn't exactly work like, and besides, I do respect people's need for privacy," she informed him.

"That's rather dull. You could know so much, surprise everyone with your secret skill," he argued.
She rolled her eyes. "Who taught you?"

"No one, just happened naturally," she shrugged.

"Shit," he awed.

"Enough of the ogling, you already have that creepy man stare as it is."

"I know," he snorted again. "Anyways, yeah, Dumbledore knows about Black, but he reckons that it wouldn't do much good to turn him in," Mundungus began again.

"What does he want with him?"

"For now, nothing in particular; he reckons that Regulus is rather low in priorities for the Dark Lord, but that may change. Black is more important in order to find out who else has joined," he explained.

"Is that where I come in?" All this time, Mundungus had been explaining to her top secret information that apparently he and Dumbledore shared. She could only assume this was some sort of recruitment to their cult.

And since when were Fletcher and Dumbledore such jolly mates? puzzled Sofia in her head. Of course, she could easily find out everything without a problem, but it could possibly lead to discoveries best left untouched, and Sofia did not like having baggage to carry.

"Dumbledore sent me for you. He needs you," he responded.

"Needs me? Needs my ability, you mean?" she clarified.

"Possibly, but also your position in Slytherin is very accommodating, to say the least," he added.

"My position?"

"Yes, you're universally liked by all," Sofia scoffed as she thought of what Alex had said a couple weeks ago, "and you're clever. You'd know what to look out for, you'd know how not to get caught, and they trust you."

"Why should you trust me?" she challenged him.

"I don't, but Dumbledore does."

"And what's in it for you, Fletcher?"

Mundungus stopped walking and stepped to face her. He placed his hand around her wrist, looked her dead in the eye. Sofia's own eyes widened, she had never seen Mundungus without the mischievous glint in his eyes.

"I will always fight for humanity," he swore to her, whispering it in the loudest way possible. The words and his stare made her break out into goosebumps. "That's the thing Sofia, this isn't going to be a war between who thinks who has the better claim. They aren't rivaling brothers — two kings who both think they should rule. This is a war based on morals and how this world should be. I will not stand by and see hate win, I would rather die before letting that happen."

She nodded once, conveying to him that she understood. His words left her silent, and they said nothing more to each other.

But just as they were about to re-enter the castle, Sofia placed her hand on his forearm.
"What do I have to do?" she whispered to him. Mundungus turned around with a grin.

(19 September 1977)

"Pixie Puffs," Mundungus said in a rather bored tone. The staircase revealed itself and he hiked up it. It certainly wasn't the first time he was doing so. Before the beginning of this year, he would usually find himself in that exact office with someone sent from the Ministry of Magic, who would interrogate him on certain peculiar activities that occurred in the school.

But that had been last year.

And they hadn't caught him, nor were they ever going to.

"Mundungus," he heard a soft voice greet. Mundungus nodded his head and crassly took a seat, not even bothering to wait for an invitation.

"You summoned, I came."

Any other professor would have reprimanded him for such casualness, but Dumbledore never did such thing. Instead, the old wizard simply smiled down at the young wizard with his eyes.

"I have some thoughts," Dumbledore began.

"Is there ever a moment you don't?" quipped the young Ravenclaw.

"You know as well as I that the mind never sleeps," Dumbledore reminded him. Mundungus snorted in agreement.

"All right then, what about?"

"Numbers are quite strong, but wouldn't you agree that those who know how to use those numbers are the strongest?" he riddled. Mundungus looked to the baby phoenix that was fluffing its feathers.

"You want to recruit more people."

"I see the Hat placed you well," Dumbledore noted. Mundungus scoffed.

In reality, the Hat hadn't placed him anywhere. The Hat had been absolutely useless, taking up to four minutes to decide where the boy fit best, both of them knowing that he didn't fit anywhere. At the end, Mundungus picked the table to the far left, because he liked the color blue, and that's how he ended up in Ravenclaw.

"So who?" he inquired. Dumbledore didn't respond right away, so Mundungus threw some guesses to the wind. "Lupin? Evans? I'd almost say Potter, but he's got a loud mouth, don't reckon he could keep a secret."

"James would surprise you," slyly countered the old wizard. "And yes, Remus is talented beyond his years, as is his friend, Lily, but they are still children. We must let them enjoy themselves for as long as they can."

"And what? I'm not?" Mundungus exasperated, pointing to himself and leaning forward in the seat. "I should also get the chance to have fun, no?"

"I don't doubt that you aren't," responded Dumbledore, eyeing the boy from above his spectacles. He was right, Mundungus had more conspiring with Dumbledore against the Dark Lord than he had had
in his entire life.

"Okay, so if not them, then who?"

"There is a certain Slytherin witch who will be of great use to us. She has powers beyond what we can imagine and has delved into the deepest parts of the mind," he explained.

"Slytherin?" repeated Mundungus. The wizard didn't reply. "Who from Slytherin would possibly want to help us?"

"I find it is easier to convince others when they have secrets, don't you?"

"They all have secrets, that's the bloody problem," Mundungus was now getting frustrated. He hated all this guessing and waiting. Dumbledore looked at him curiously.

"We'll start with the one that has the most to hide."

"Who would that be?"

"I find Sofia quite beautiful in the oddest of ways," he mentioned.

"Mustaq?" the boy's voice was thick with shock.

"You two know each other?"

"Yeah, she buys drugs and fags from me," he snorted, leaning back into the chair.

"Unfortunately, those with the greatest of minds find it a burden, often relishing in brief moments of forgetfulness."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's it," muttered Mundungus.

Sofia Mustaq repulsed Mundungus, and that was saying something. She often met him when wearing only lingerie and high heels, hanging drunkenly off the arm of her best friend, Alexander Sykes. He had even seen her sprawled out with some girl from a younger year between her legs, which she claimed that she would obliviate. That didn't bother him all that much, Mundungus had seen the worst sides of the human soul, what he hated was the fact that she only showed him that side of her because she viewed him as a cockroach, crawling around with nothing to worry about.

"Then I'm sure it won't be difficult," concluded Dumbledore.

"Difficult? I could always blackmail her, but that'll just make her untrustworthy."

"No, I have a feeling our Sofia is not of a darkness. Rather, she is a fire that burns silently."

"A fire that burns silently?"

"Indeed."

"She is a closeted lesbian that likes to drink and manipulate. She doesn't trust anyone who isn't Sykes, and I reckon she doesn't trust him either. She's not a fire, she's a bloody bitch," he exasperated.

"Do try to see the good in others," advised Dumbledore.

"They all think I'm dirt, that's how they treat me!"
"You needn't worry about her trusting you. She will be able to read your intentions," he informed him calmly, trying to change the topic so as to not further upset the Ravenclaw.

Mundungus paused, his mouth slightly agape.

"She's a…?" he trailed off.

"She's many things, and she is powerful. We need to make sure she is on the right side before it's too late."

Mundungus nodded. A Slytherin well versed in legilimency was a great weapon they could use in their artillery.

"I'll see what I can do," agreed Mundungus.

"She will be the first, but she will not be the last."

"I have to recruit more snakes?" he asked, but a twinkle in Dumbledore's eye answered his question. He sighed, getting up.

"Not all of them are snakes," Dumbledore assured him.

"Fine, whatever, but it'll take some time," Mundungus warned, walking out of the office. He had to devise some sort of plan, and right now, he was at a complete loss.

"Goodbye, Mundungus," Dumbledore's awfully pastoral voice saluted him. He had no intention of saluting him back.

"Did you read the Daily prophet this morning?" an usually high-pitched voice whispered from behind Eva.

Flitwick was going around examining each student on the three different blasting charms they had learned that week. As he did that, there was the usual low buzz filling the classroom while everyone chattered, despite their professor's wishes to keep silent.

But for Eva, today's communal buzzing was anything other than usual. As she scribbled nonsense on her alchemy assignment, there was an indescribable sound, almost like drums being badly played by some young child, banging into her ears. It was giving her a headache that began in her eyes, and thus, caused her vision to go blurry. Behind the drums, were indiscernible whispers that seemed to swing above her head.

Bang, bang, bang.

Though she tried to ignore them, swatting it away like some sort of insect, they didn't relinquish. In fact, it had gotten so loud that there was no way she could ignore it, and she didn't understand why no one else was making a fuss over it.

Bang, bang, bang.

It's only you, one of the voices informed her. Eva pursed her lips and looked up with worried eyes. Indeed, it seemed that no one else was hearing it; they all looked content and loose-lipped.

I'm afraid you're going crazy, my dear, one of the other voices taunted.

Hahaha, crazy girl, crazy girl, another voice cackled. She shooed all three of them away, it never did
any good to listen to them.

But how could she ignore them? With the drumming and the whispers that chanted behind them?

_Bang, bang, bang._

She was severely uncomfortable. Her palms were sweating, and she felt terribly warm on that rather cool day. One hand held the edge of her seat, her nails digging into the wood, and the other felt sticky against the marble of the quill. She needed to take a shower, to scrub herself clean.

_Hsstmanme_, she heard the voices hiss. Their chants and drumming were getting louder, stronger.

Eva looked up, darting her head around to see if someone was playing some sort of cruel prank on her, but no one was giving her any sort of attention. She bit on her lower lip nervously, her breathing turned choppy.

_Hsssmangehere_, they continued. She realized that it wasn't one single whisper, but several and many voices all saying different parts of what seemed to be one word, or one phrase. They were all speaking at the same time, and so, she couldn't make it out. It drove her absolutely mad. She pressed the inky tip of her quill into the paper, screwing it down so that it ripped a hole through the parchment.

_Bang, bang, bang._

_Her_, a voice whirred like a blast into her ear. She looked up again, her eyes wide. She caught site of Edmund Nott performing the confringo charm, whether he had done so successfully or not wasn't really on her mind.

_Bang, bang, bang._

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her rapid heart.

_Musahanaaaamaaaaa._

She could feel heat in her cheeks like she was sitting in front of a fire. When she raised her hands, she felt her underarms damp.

_Bang, bang, bang._

She felt like she was going to scream.

"I can't believe they've turned to the Dark Lord," the girl continued behind Eva. Her voice came out broken, like scratches on a record player. The words mismatched with the drumming, and so her sentences were choppy, uneven.

_Sussstaaaashissssssssu._

It made Eva realize.

_Bang, bang, bang._

The drumming was coming from her.

Eva dared a look over her shoulder. The witch sported yellow and black, with dirty blonde hair highlighted with brown strips that sat in a low, messy ponytail. She had a baby face which fit her smile perfectly. She looked too innocent to want to wreck havoc on Eva, but she was. She was the
reason for her discomfort, and Eva wanted to know why she insisted on torturing her.

Eva slowly turned back around in her seat, her eyes darting around the room.

_Hsssmannmeghereserrrhs._

"They should be quarantined, they're too much of a danger to the general population," the girl continued. It sent a pang into Eva's head, causing her to inhale sharply. Her fingertips clawed the edge of her desk. She was hunched over, looking over at the other side with blood-shot eyes.

_Bang, bang, bang._

_You're not going to die_, one of the regular voices said to her.

_Shut up, shut up, shut up_, Eva derided it, her nails digging into the splinters.

_Tick tock_, another one sang.

_Scream, Eva, scream!_ another voice demanded, shouting at her. She wanted to, she wanted to scream and let it all out, and as the drumming continued, the whispers got louder, and she wanted nothing more than to just scream.

_BANG, BANG, BANG._

"The Ministry just lets them roam free, it's ridiculous," Eva heard the girl say. "Lily said-" _BANG - eghereserr - BANG - taaaashisssss BANG._

"ASSEZ!" screeched Eva in French, her hands over her ears and her eyes shut closed as she hunched over the table. She was in unspeakable pain, tears threatening her closed lids.

Everyone in the room stopped to look at the bent over girl. She was rocking back and forth in her seat.

"Is she okay?" whispered Marjory to Remus, who was sitting in front of her. He watched his potions partner cautiously with squinted eyes and scrunched eyebrows, eyeing her back as it heaved up and down. Almost instinctively, he began to push his chair out from under the desk.

"Stop talking," Eva repeated, her breaths wheezed and static.

Eva was biting down on her tongue, on her cheeks, she could taste metal as she pierced them. There was blood.

"Is this a bloody joke?" nervously chuckled Victoria Cornfoot, a Hufflepuff prefect.

Sofia Mustaq leaned forward in her seat, swiveling her body to look upward one row. She eyed her cousin carefully, watching the writhing girl grasp the edge of the desk, her entire body bent over it.

"Sof," whispered Alex, turning from Eva to the Slytherin prefect with wide, frightened eyes.

"I can't hear anything!" Eva began to shout again. She really needed silence, or else she was going to bloody scream. "EVERYONE NEEDS TO STOP TALKING!"

"No one is fucking talking, Manasse," quipped Marlene, starring at the girl like she was some sort of stray animal. Sofia sat on the edge of her seat. Remus took deep breaths, waiting in suspense to see if anyone else was going to come to her aide.
And yet, everyone only stared.

"What the fuck?" muttered James under his breath to Remus— he got no response. With a final push, Remus began to move his feet so to give him clearance to get up, but James stopped him with a quick, firm hand on his forearm. "No, mate," he warned him, giving him a knowing look.

"She needs help," hissed Remus to James, pointing a hand towards Eva.

"Padfoot just forgave you— don't test him," James countered. Remus looked at him with a mix of disbelief and irritation. The two boys stared at each other until they heard a painful whimper tear out of the girl and into the room.

"This isn't bloody right, Prongs," Remus shook his head, pulling away from James' hold. "No one's bloody helping her."

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE! DO SOMETHING!" demanded Lily before Remus could even get up. She was bent over the table, looking with wide eyes at her professor, who just stood there in awe.

"O-oh, why yes," he fumbled, setting down his record keeping papers.

Edmund Nott looked over to see what marks he had received, making a satisfied expression when he saw them. Remus scoffed with disgust, he couldn't believe the Slytherin cared more about his grades than his own housemate who was squirming with pain.

Remus couldn't believe that no one had gotten up to help her.

But Eva wouldn't know; she couldn't hear them, she couldn't even feel them. She couldn't hear everyone whispering about her as she tried opening her eyes. Her face was in her own lap, and her lower spine began to hurt, but that wasn't her problem— her problem was that she was completely and utterly blind.

All she sensed were the voices, the drumming, the whispers chanting and chanting until they made her want to rip at her own throat. There was this sensation pulsating in her throat that pushed her to just let it all out.

And just as she began to open her mouth…

"My goodness," Sofia shouted loud enough for everyone to hear. She placed a hand on Eva's slight shoulder and another to her forehead. Her eyes went wide, "you're burning up!"

Remus raised his eyebrows.

Eva couldn't hear her, she couldn't even feel her.

"Professor, I must escort Miss Manasse to Madam Pomfrey. She's got an awful fever," Sofia warned, her voice thick with worry and slightly shaky. Her hands were now holding Eva on both her slight shoulders, feeling the girl trembling under her. She really knew that she had to place a hand over Eva's mouth, but that would be suspicious; and she was trying to get the witch out as soon as possible.

"Yes, yes, of course," Flitwick encouraged hastily, not even second guessing the prefect.

"Come on," whispered Sofia into her cousin's ear, lifting her up. She placed a forceful hand on Eva's neck, making sure that the witch did not look up. But she hadn't needed to, Eva kept her eyes closed.
the entire time as they walked out of the room. Everyone else followed them with their gazes.

"All that over a fever, really?" wondered James, leaning over to look at Remus. Remus shook his head and shrugged. He stared at the door, his chin slightly raised as he took everything in.

"It looked to me like a panic attack," muttered Lily from behind them.

"That can happen from a panic attack?" inquired Marjory, a little shocked from the fact. Remus almost wanted to laugh.

*You don't know the half of it*, he wanted to tell her.

"You feel like you're dying," Lily informed her, nodding.

"Blimey," the Gryffindor prefect said in an undertone.

"What the fuck is Manasse having a panic attack over?" commented James, snorting. From next to James, Ralph Bowers let out a short laugh.

"You shouldn't assume things about people you don't know," mumbled Lily under her breath, picking up her quill and going back to her work. Everyone else seemed to follow suit, and others decided that Eva's episode was more interesting.

"Now, where were we," Remus heard Flitwick muttering as he picked up his papers.

But Remus had little desire for chit chat, despite how him and his friends viewed her, he felt as if he had just seen an innocent animal being torn apart by a lion; Eva had seemed much smaller and fragile than he had ever seen her and had ever thought to see her.

And no one even bothered to help her, not even himself.

*Why didn't I help her?* he asked himself, looking down with guilt-torn eyes at his parchments.

Once in the security of the hall, Sofia released Eva's neck and placed it on her forearm, pushing her along into the adjacent hallway.

"Sit," Sofia told her, guiding her to the floor.

Sofia watched her cousin with cautious eyes, thinking of the next few steps she would take.

The drumming began to die down, and Eva could faintly hear the slight comments and instructions from a familiar voice. She blinked her eyes open, afraid that she wouldn't be able to see.

She could.

She exhaled deeply, trying to ignore the headache that pulsated behind her ears, and focusing on her cousin's eyes. Sofia was looking deep into Eva's, searching for something. But she couldn't find anything—it was all blank—confirming Sofia's suspicions.

"Eva, can you see me?" Sofia inquired. Eva nodded once, looking down into her lap. Sofia sighed deeply, collapsing against the wall next to Eva and looking upward.

"What's happening to me?" Eva asked.

"I think you know what's happening," her cousin commented coldly.
Eva paused, pursing her lips. There was still the faint taste of iron in her mouth, and with the headache, it almost made her want to vomit. But it wasn't only that which caused the nausea, it was also the fact that Eva knew exactly what was happening. All her life she had sort of known, the voices, the whispers they weren't knew, they just had never been so strong, and she had assumed that they were normal, that everyone had them.

"It's never been like this," she began in an undertone, turning to look at her cousin.

"You wanted to scream?"

"I still want to," she admitted after a few beats. Her cousin nodded, sighing again with a hand running through her hair.

"You can't, you know that? Whatever happens— you can't. You must do whatever you can: stupefy yourself, confund yourself, jump off the Astronomy Tower, do anything but scream. Do you understand?" she mandated, her eyes alert and stern.

"I know, my entire mouth is cut right now," Eva dry laughed, pulling her legs up to her chest and laying her head down on her knees.

"Good," Sofia stated.

"Sofia?" the Slytherin prefect looked up. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I had a hunch."

"I'm glad you acted on it."

"Don't thank me," the Slytherin prefect sneered.

"Then why'd you do it? Why'd you help me?" Eva asked in a small, breaking voice.

_All alone_, one voice shrieked.

_Lonely, lonely, girly_, another one hymned.

"I helped you because if they suspected you, if you had screamed and turned into—" Sofia grimaced as she looked Eva up and down, "into what you truly are, they would have come after me next— since we're blood related."

Eva nodded, understanding. There was nothing Eva could say to convince her otherwise. She felt something block in her throat, but not a scream, something thick and heavy that made her eyes warm.

_Monsters have no friends, dearie_, it continued, reminding Eva of how terrible she was.

_Chop her up and send her down the river_, another one sang.

"Sofia," Eva said again.

"Yeah?"

"That girl is going to die," she whispered to her. Sofia thought back to the blonde sitting behind Eva.

"That's not our problem," Sofia informed her.

"We can't tell her, can we?"
"No, Eva," Sofia shook her head. "You know you can't fucking tell anyone."

"I hope she dies soon then," confessed Eva.

"Eva."

"Yeah?"

"Don't talk to me," Sofia concluded, lifting herself up and walking down the hall, contrary to the charms classroom. Eva watched as she retreated, her body becoming small just as Eva's was. The Slytherin witch curled closer to her legs.

Kill her, one of the voices screeched.

Silly girl, you thought you had friends? the other mocked.

She's nothing compared to you, another told her.

And Eva listened to them, for the voices in her head were all she had. There were no friends, no one else was there to guide her differently. She had only those that resided within her, and so she obeyed them. What else was she going to do?

In a matter of seconds, the cold drew back into Eva. Her eyes no longer stung, and she no longer felt sad and weak. Something within her woke up again, and it put her armor back on. It laid thick on her petite back just as it had before.

She flipped her head and laid her other cheek on her knees so that she was now looking at the retreating witch.

"Cowardly bitch," she whispered to her.

"You wouldn't believe what I have," grinned a mischievous Marlene McKinnon, her perfect white teeth brightening up the lunch table. Sirius Black looked up, watching the girls as they sat down to finish their meals. Marlene took a seat next to Lily, Mary and Dorcas sat across from the redhead.

"The new Witch Weekly?" snorted Mary, forking a tomato.

"No."

"Marlene," said Mary firmly, placing a hand over the flap. "Just return it to her."

"Marlene," said Mary firmly, placing a hand over the flap. "Just return it to her."

"No, I want to see if I can find something."
"Like what exactly do you think you'll find?" Marlene shrugged at Mary's question.

"A kill list."

"Eva Manasse does not have a kill list," Lily reprimanded, rolling her eyes. "Why does everyone think she does?"

"I'm betting a sickle that Remus is the first on the list," joked Sirius. Remus threw him a scowl, but it went ignored.

"Do you always have to bet on everything?" derided Marlene, throwing a miffed glance over at him.

"Only if I know I'm gonna' win," he smirked in response.

"Maybe she has a diary," Marlene ignored him, turning back to her friends.

"If she does, it's going to be in French," stated Dorcas.

"Black knows French," countered Marlene.

"Oui, parfaitement," he showed off. Remus took a deep breath and tried his best not to roll his eyes.

"No one here is reading Manasse's private diary," forced Lily.

"If you find anything good, pass it over, McKinnon," jeered Sirius, ignoring the Head Girl who glared at him.


"What? Don't act like you aren't curious," Sirius snorted. "What are you so scared of? Reckon we'll find something dirty about your favorite Slytherin bird?" Sirius, for dramatic effect, opened his mouth and clasped his hands against the sides of his face, "Reckon she fancies you?"

"This is going to cause problems between me and her. I don't need anymore bloody problems."

"He's right, Padfoot," added Peter.

"How will she know?" Sirius inquired, letting go of his theatrics and dropping his shoulders with a bored expression.

Remus sighed, his knee jerking up and down underneath the table. She may not find out, but he wouldn't be able to look in her eye if she suspected and asked. Besides, she most certainly had to have wondered where her stuff was by now.

"This isn't right, and she doesn't fancy me," muttered Remus, going back to his food.

"You'd be surprised," commented James.

"No, I'm well certain," Remus asserted.

"There's nothing," concluded Marlene, her voice thick with disappointment. Remus felt a weight lift off his shoulders.

"Great, that means we can return this to her before she finds out that we've taken her stuff," scolded Lily, grabbing the leather strap. Marlene put a firm hand on her friend's wrist, stopping her.
"No, we still haven't looked through this notebook."

"Marly, those are her Charms notes," countered Dorcas, slightly exasperated with her friend.

All three girls were on edge. Mary continuously looked over at the Slytherin table to see if anyone had noticed the very exquisite bag, that none of them could afford. Even though they hadn't, she was sure that it would only be a matter of time before someone put two and two together.

Without a care in the world, Marlene laughed, opening up the notebook.

"Godric's goodwill, look at how she writes," Marlene taunted, lifting up the book to show them the perfect calligraphy. Almost too perfect, perfect cursive and perfect lines.

"Put it down," demanded Lily.

"Oh my gosh," edged Mary, jitters running through her body. "You can't just hold up Manasse's notebook like that!"

"Yeah, Mary, if you keep screaming her name, they're going to bloody know it's hers," bit back Marlene. Mary sat back in her seat, dropping her fork as her stomach churned with anxiety.

"This isn't right, Marly," repeated Dorcas, attempting to convince her friend.

"Let her do whatever she wants," responded Sirius, throwing a scowl at Remus' ex-girlfriend. Remus kicked his friend under the table. "Ow, what the bloody hell was that for?"

Remus shook his head disapprovingly, but even without an explanation, Sirius knew he had crossed a line when he had spoken to Dorcas in such a manner.

"What the fuck," they heard Marlene mutter, her face scrunching up as she reached one of the last pages. All of them looked over, trying to get a look. Lily briefly darted her gaze over Marlene's arm as she looked at the page. Immediately, she faltered, her eyes widening as she caught sight of an open-mouthed snake with fangs wrapped around a girl's face, drawn out with the words minuit over and over again. "What the fuck is this?"

"What?" inquired James, all seven pairs of eyes now looking at a panicked Marlene.

"This girl is a fucking freak," she claimed. "What the fuck does this mean?" she almost held the book up to all of them, but Lily snatched it out of her friend's hand before she could.

"That's enough," she scolded her friend, grabbing both Eva's bag and notebook and lifting herself up from the bench.

"She's fucking sick, Lily," restated Marlene.

"Sick?" repeated Peter. Marlene turned with her large blue eyes and nodded.

"Yeah, like completely off the tracks. You should report her for a psych test," she turned back and advised Lily.

"Eva Manasse is perfectly fine," Lily countered.

"Are you havin' a laugh? Did you see the drawing? Here, let me show you," the blonde said, reaching to Lily's side to grab the book, but Lily held it out of her reach.

"I want to see the drawing," muttered Sirius.
"Lily, you have to report her!" Marlene repeated.

"Why? What's wrong with her?" asked James.

"There's nothing wrong with her," Lily lied, but she wasn't going to report Eva Manasse. She knew reporting the Slytherin would lead to certain death, and she wasn't going to condemn an innocent girl.

"What?!" Marlene turned to look at James with wide, needing eyes. "James, do something!"

"What do you want me to do?!"

"Report the Slytherin freak!" His eyes darted between the Head Girl and his lifelong friend, uncertainty stricken in his hazel orbs. Marlene exhaled sharply, turning to Remus. "REMUS, DO SOMETHING!"

"I don't even know what's going on," Remus mentioned, trying his best to stay out of another blood bath.

"Shut up, Marlene!" shouted Lily. "Potter, Remus, don't you two dare do anything without consulting me first."

"Wouldn't dream of it," James grumbled.

"Don't worry about me," Remus assured her.

"Because I swear—" but Lily faltered, immediately shutting her mouth and flinching her head back. She hadn't expected James to agree with her, she had been prepared for another brawl.

"Blimey," Peter said under his breath, it wasn't often that he saw James give in to someone else's wishes. Peter pursed his lips and held back a chuckle, finding it rather inappropriate for the current situation.

"What's wrong with you?" hissed Marlene, causing Lily to release herself from her thoughts.

"Stop talking, Marlene," Lily pleaded, closing her eyes and holding a hand up to her. She was literally shaking from the fear that rid her bones, and the Ravenclaw simply wanted to argue.

"Or what?" the blonde challenged.

"Or, or," Lily desperately searched the Great Hall, "I'm going to take points from Ravenclaw for thievery."

Remus' eyebrows shot up. Sirius let out a low whistle.

"What the fuck?" Marlene scoffed nervously. "You wouldn't dare."

"If you were anyone else— I wouldn't have hesitated! What you did was wrong, and instead of listening to me and stopping, you deliberately continued to humiliate the witch for absolutely no reason."

"For no reason?" Marlene scoffed. "She torments Remus—"

"Do not involve me," firmly insisted Remus.

"I think that's between her and Remus then, wouldn't you say? She has given us no reason to suspect
"No reason, what?" but Lily didn't hear her the rest of her friend's argument. With the bag in tow, Lily sped off in search for the Slytherin witch.

"What the bloody hell?" flustered James, throwing his head into his hands. "Why does she always attack me?"

"I want to know what the bloody hell was on that page," added Sirius.

"I don't think that counts as an attack, Prongs, and I am so fucked," Remus blurted out louder than he had intended.

"Really? You reckon?" snorted Sirius, imagining someone as thin as the Slytherin witch coming after his best friend, who towered over her.

"Yes," Remus answered coldly.

"I'd pay good money to see that fight," Sirius joked.

"I wouldn't underestimate her," Remus replied.

"Oh, we don't, mate, but you are the best dueler in our year, and you know," paused Sirius, gesturing with a tilted head to his right. Remus scrunched his eyebrows, not having a clue what he was on about.

"Prongs?" inquired Remus, not sure where he fit in. Sirius sighed, rolling his eyes.

"No, Moony, you know— she's kind of short."

"No, she's not."

"Compared to you- yeah," snorted James. "The two of you in Potions is like Dumbledore and Flitwick." All three of them, except Remus, bursted out into a chuckle.

"Haha," mocked Remus dryly, shaking his head. "And I'm not the best, that's just ridiculous."

"Stop being so bloody modest," added Peter, rolling his eyes.

"Prongs is just as good as me, if not better."

"Moony," said James, "you're the best."

Remus blinked, looking at the three of them. They were all staring at him with sincere, knowing eyes. Sirius' had a slight glimmer, but nonetheless, conveyed to him that he, too, considered him one of the best out of the four of them.

His head flinched back with a shy smile.

His friends sure did know how to raise his spirits.

Back in the halls, Lily collapsed against a wall, the notebook in her hand. She flipped open to the page with the drawing. Her heart speeding up as she immediately snapped it shut.

She knew what this meant.
She wasn't worried about the monster that the Slytherin was. No, that was nothing to Lily. She knew that Eva was potentially lethal, and unlike Remus, it wouldn't take much to set her off— but she knew Eva, she knew that she had a very good grasp on her emotions, she wasn't going to worry about something that didn't exist.

Not yet, at least... not when there was something bigger.

The scene was burned into Lily’s mind perfectly. She remembered how odd she had found it when Eva had turned to look over her shoulder at Marlene and Dorcas, a crazed expression on her face. Then, a few moments later, Eva was clutching her ears, yelling at all of them to stop talking.

Lily had thought that it was a panic attack.

Lily now knew that it hadn't been a panic attack.

She closed her eyes and tried to stop the shaking in her hands, coming to terms with what this all meant: one of her best friends was going to die. She didn't know which of the two, and she wasn't going to ask the Slytherin for specifics, but she knew that one of them was going to die, or maybe both of them.

She took deep breaths, suddenly feeling nauseous and faint. She slid down to the ground, throwing the book next to her.

She'd have to protect them both.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh, this chapter is sort of Slytherin-focused, all though I threw in some Marauders in order to get their story lines moving along and what not. Anyway, this chapter is titled Weapons for a reason— we find out a lot, and I mean a lot, of secrets, don't we?

So because that was a long chapter with about four different story lines, here is a short re-cap of what happened:

-we now know that Dumbledore has established the Order of the Phoenix, and that Mundungus is his main scout and current mole for the school.

-We establish Regulus’ boyish crush for Eva, and he finds out about the marriage proposal! And also find out that he has been marked as a Deatheater.

-We also find out that Sofia Mustaq (her character profile is up on the blog, for those who are interested) is a very powerful witch who was born with legilimency (much like Queenie from Fantastic Beasts).

-Eva Manasse is a banshee, though untrained.

Woah, woah, woah.

Anyway, leave me a review or a comment on what you think about the story line. Was it too much? Would you prefer shorter chapters with less story lines? Did you like it? Do you like how they're written? How about Remus? Is he as cool and adorable as we all imagine him to be? Do you like Eva more? How do you all feel about her? (You're
supposed to have mixed feelings/not like her, it's okay if you can't stand her.)

Favorite or/and follow if you want to see more.

This is the link to the story's blog where you can find fancasts, inspo, and original character profiles etc, etc. or you can copy and paste the link from my bio on my profile page.

Link: fogandfire.tumblr.com

Next chapter will be up on Monday! Stay tuned! Love you all! See you next week! xx
(31 October 1977, Two Minutes to Midnight)

Blood magic was a temptingly powerful category of witchcraft; it could accomplish what no wand or brew could, and it wasn't a skill designed only for the accomplished wizard and witch. Rather, what made it so alluring was the simplicity of it all. But just as it was alluring, it was also dangerous. For those who delved into the art, one taste and they were taken by it, always wanting just a little bit more until things began to turn sour, and good things always turned sour.

The ritual was meant to make her stronger, to give her the powers of those who had come before her. But those were promises, promises that Eva didn't know whether she had the privilege to believe in or not. She didn't take chances, and she definitely did not believe in miracles, but she was desperate. She was desperate and had blindingly agreed to take on this task, a familial tradition dating back centuries.

And thus, in the name of family tradition and desperation, that's how Eva found herself sitting on the edge of the window sill in an abandoned classroom on the sixth floor. Her legs were swinging off into the night, her black stockings against the black sky covered in clouds that impeded the stars. They floated away slowly, the ever changing shapes traveling off to distant lands as she stayed put in the place they had left her.

Her eyes wandered over to the clock that sat below her in the Hospital Wing. The minute hand was still two minutes before midnight, nearly touching it with such suspense that Eva was tempted to flick it forward with her wand. Usually patient, this was killing her. She wanted to get it over with and see if it would work, if she would wake up cured and ordinary. She wanted to be Eva Manasse again, and though no one else had noticed, it wouldn't be long before they did. That didn't matter, even if they never did, even if they all had their heads so far up their own arses that they couldn't figure it out, Eva didn't feel comfortable with herself. She felt vulnerable and weak and she didn't like it one bit.

But in two minutes, it would all be over. She would be strong again, fierce like a lioness just as she was meant to be, just as they had trained her to be. There would be no more uncertainty, no more doubt. The voices, the whispers, the drumming—they would all disappear. Because they were still there, and nothing she did—the coca leaves, the peyote, the wine—none of it helped. The drumming, albeit low, crept behind her, stalking her and disappearing every time she looked back over her shoulder. The whispers surrounded her head like some sort of black cloud, and the voices, oh gosh, the voices were relentlessly cruel. They held no sort of mercy for the French witch and simply took pleasure in taunting her.

She had become so desperate that as her eyes wondered back over to the clock, she realized that all she had to do was simply push herself forward and everything would disappear. There would be no more voices, drumming, whispers, but complete silence. It could all end in a matter of seconds…

Eva took a deep breath, calming herself from her darker thoughts. She rubbed a hand on her forehead, the icy stickiness of the humidity making her skin tacky. Her only savior was the wind that blew, making the hairs on her arm stand on edge. Her fingers were beginning to turn purple, and her entire body shuddered from the lack of warmth. It felt good, it felt freeing. She wouldn't mind staying like that for the rest of eternity, the world beneath her, no one around to look at her.
That'd be nice, she thought to herself. But Eva didn't believe it was wise to play into day dreams. She sighed again, lifting up one of her hands to run it through her hair. There was only a minute left and so she swung herself back into the room. The sudden contrast from the glacial October wind to stale stone air made her wish she had chosen a spot by the lake.

Don't do it, one of the voices told her. For the first time in her life, they actually sounded worried. Instead of fearing it, Eva smiled a cheeky little smile, satisfied that this actually might be the answer to all her problems. She held the garnet goblet between her hands, shaking violently from the cold.

Eva, Eva, Eva, you are making a big mistake, another voice warned her as she brought the cup to her lips. There was complete darkness in the room, the only light coming from those illuminating underneath the tower. Slowly, and with complete delicacy, she tilted both her cup and head back until she felt the taste of warm, thick blood on her mouth. It had a discreet, metallic scent to it, stinging her tongue as she let it coat her lips, mouth, and throat. She took a deep breath as she gulped the first taste down.

What have you done? they all asked simultaneously.

Adieu, she told them, this time throwing her head back and taking in as much of the liquid as she could manage.

"Be careful," her cousin had written her. She had ignored it.

She could feel it, the blood. She could feel it as she dripped down her throat, sitting at the bottom of her empty stomach. There was a tear of it running down her chin and onto her breast. And despite it making her feel like she was eating acid, fighting the feeling to retch it all back up, she continued consuming it until the entire cup ran dry.

Because she needed to be cured, she needed to get rid of the demon inside of her.

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(Four Hours Earlier)

Though hard to imagine, Hogwarts' Great Hall became even more mystical on Halloween. Instead of torches to light up the dark, thousands of carved pumpkins, with all sorts of expressions, covered every corner and available space, floating above the students' heads and ominously lighting up their faces from underneath. There were bats which swooped down and covered the bewitched ceiling. Another table had been added in the front to host a numerous amount of ghosts and spirits who came to visit from all over the Highlands, and even the rest of Scotland, to commemorate and celebrate their temporary return over rotten food and good conversation.

As the last students trickled into the hall, Professor Flitwick composed and orchestrated the Frog Choir, which sang hymns and tales in both Gaelic and English alike. Their chants filled the halls while the bats squeaked and the owls hooted, everyone completely mesmerized with the festive spirit displayed out in front of them.

"Let ancestral dreams take flight," the first row of the choir sang as their toads croaked into the darkness.

"And hear your bone-song by its light," the second row chorused behind, harmonizing and putting the finishing touches to the song.

"Light," they all repeated at once, a wave of soft gold flying out the end of Flitwick's baton and around the pillars in the golden hall. The light reached up to the bewitched ceiling, filling the dark blackness with twinkling stars.
The entire Hall erupted into ahs and oos of surprise and awe. Lily giggled as a wave of golden stars circled around her and up into the ceiling, finding it utterly and wonderfully beautiful. James noticed as he turned to say something to Peter, and he decided that he was going to take whatever it took to learn that spell—even if it meant blackmailing his Charms professor. He chuckled to himself, slightly buzzed with the whiskey him and Sirius had been sipping on throughout the day, causing him to forget the pact he had made to himself to forget the redhead.

*Whatever, doesn't hurt to dream,* he shrugged, finally turning towards Peter to say what he had wanted to say.

(Except it does, it does heart to dream.)

But James Potter didn't know that because he was a boy made of steel and absolutely nothing could tear him down.

(Yet.)

"Well done, Filius," they Headmaster had stood up to commend the Ravenclaw Head of House. On that note, Flitwick waved his hand to dismiss his choir, the students splitting into two rows and walking down the sides of the hall where they would join their respective houses.

"And now, let us feast," boasted the grinning Headmaster as their clapping came to a slow halt. With a wave of his hand, he introduced golden dishes piled high with all the goods of Halloween. The Gryffindors eyed the various foods with great lust and grumbling stomachs. Halloween always meant a different menu—one so special that it was never offered during any other time of the year. Both dessert and dinner served side by side, one could find: candied apples, whole goat with roasted rustic and sweet potatoes, butternut squash soup, and a plethora of candy—all the candy a child could possibly imagine.

Everyone else, however, erupted into a mass hysteria of shrieks and cries. Students of all years and houses jumped up from their seats, hugging themselves as their eyes bugged out from the sight in front of them. Instead of the typical candy-stuffed pumpkins and fried chicken, they were met with vermin and insects of every kind, which crawled both fast and slow along the surface of their tables. Where there was supposed to be pie, there was a massive mound of ants, and where there was supposed to be a cauldron of lollipops, there was a cauldron of centipedes. The trays of sugar mice contained no sugar and the cockroach clusters were crawling off their plates and onto the laps of the students that shivered and shook at the sight.

A first year Ravenclaw wrapped his hands around himself, beginning to cry as he sprung out of the Great Hall, causing the Marauders to clutch their stomachs. Tears fell out of Sirius’ eyes as he felt Sona Ibrahimova, a Hufflepuff, bump into him, trying her best to find some sort of salvage. He turned to look up at her as she turned down to look at him with wide eyes. He couldn’t take it anymore, Sirius fell over his seat and landed with a thump onto the stone cold ground.

"I think I’m going to die," wheezed Peter from Remus’ side.

"D-d-do you see th-the-their faces?" managed James with his forehead down on the wooden table. His stomach felt weak and all he wanted was to lay down on the floor and cry.

The rest of the Gryffindors looked from their own table to the tables around them, completely perplexed as to why the sugar mice on their table weren’t scattering about. Others had put it together and had even begun laughing.

"It's them," Kyra Mattu, a Gryffindor chaser, whispered to Emmeline Vance.
"Of course it is, who else would it be?" Emmeline replied through a grin, throwing her hand over her teammate's shoulder as both girls tried to stifle their laughs.

"Oh my gosh," groaned Lily, throwing her face into her palms. "I'm embarrassed to be a Gryffindor."

"Oh come off it, it's bloody hilarious," said Marjory from her right side. The prefect was now staring at a grinning Lupin, her stomach fluttering just slightly at the sight. She couldn't help but find him rather handsome when he smiled like that.

From the front of the room, Dumbledore had gotten up to inspect the situation, but instead of anger, he surprised the room with a bout of laughter.

The Slytherins, once bewildered and disgusted with what was happening, all turned with shocked-turned-malicious gazes at their chuckling Headmaster. Edmund Nott's teeth gritted against top and bottom, and Antonin Dolohov felt himself reaching for his wand.

"They're going to get away with it," awed Melisende Gamp, staring up at the staff table with complete amazement.

"The fucking bastards," spat Antonin, his fist landing firmly onto the bug-infested table. Rosalia Selwyn grimaced at the sight of crushed up and dead beetles on her house mate's fist as he released it from the table.

"Just a harmless Halloween prank," Dumbledore assured them, and with a flip of his hand, the bug infested plates had been replaced with the same contents as that of the Gryffindor table.

The Slytherins all looked at one another, sharing knowing glances. Not one of them dared sit back down as the other houses did so hesitantly.

Remus stopped laughing, his eyebrows scrunching together as he eyed the Slytherins. He reached down to tap on Sirius, trying to get his friend's convulsing body to sit back onto the bench. There was an eerie silence as everyone began to slowly turn around and inspect why the table to the far right hadn't yet been occupied.

"Oh, that can't be good," muttered Peter, turning around to watch what Remus was eyeing. As Remus toured the length of the table, he caught Avery's eye twitching right into his own, and Remus had never thought a look could make him go so cold.

"Sirius," hissed Remus. Sirius looked up from where he had rolled underneath the bench, his laugh faltering as he met Remus' stern gaze. The grey-eyed wizard immediately sat up, peering over the top of the wooden table to watch what was happening.

"I will rape every single one of them with the end of my broom," sneered Antonin. Rosalia flinched at his threat as Melisende sent him a reprimanding glance, but he hadn't noticed for he was staring too intently at those who dared stare back at him.

No one was eating, no one touched their food.

"Fuck this," muttered Eoin Mulciber under his breath. He stood up on the table, his shoes landing right on top of the mashed potatoes and roasted parsnips. There was a collected gasp from the other houses, but the Slytherins paid no mind to it. Then, as if it hadn't been enough, the tip of Eoin's shiny leather shoes came into direct contact with the roasted goat, sending it flying off the table and crashing onto the floor.
“THAT’S ENOUGH!” bellowed McGonagall, promptly getting up. She made no push to move further, hoping that the Slytherins would calm themselves before it was too late.

“What the fuck?” Remus heard Sirius whisper under his breath as he hoisted himself up from the floor, standing to watch Mulciber flinging plates of food off the table.

“MULCIBER!” shouted Slughorn, standing up from his seat. But Eoin didn't stop, he continued to step on the food, kicking and smashing everything in his path. At this point, all the professors had gotten up and the students sat there in suspense.

“Look what you've done,” cried Lily from across the table, seething at James. He tried to open his mouth to say something, but Lily had already spun back.

“Shit,” whispered Remus, realizing that they may have taken it too far as Mucliber smashed his boot into the roast beef, screwing it down into the table as he stared straight at Dumbledore.

“I SAID ENOUGH!” reprimanded McGonagall, her face stern. Eoin stopped, looking at her with a sneer and then jumped off the table. "50 POINTS FROM SLYTHERIN AND A MONTH’S DETENTION, MR. MULCIBER!"

"Of course," snorted Aphrodite, shaking her head. Sirius watched at the redhead Slytherin pointed towards him and his friends, his eyes thinning as she uttered something to Rosalia Selwyn.

"Fucking cunt," cursed Sirius.

"This is so fucked," spat out Moira Palancher, surprising everyone around her with the crass language. "I'm leaving," she announced, picking up her robes and being the first to walk out of the hall.

The Slytherins all shared looks amongst themselves.

"I need a fucking drink," agreed Antonin, following after his Slytherin chaser.

"I need to bathe in liquor," muttered Sofia Mustaq, pulling Alex by his black sleeve and following after Antonin and Moira.

Soon enough, and one by one, Slytherins began to part and sulk off back to their dungeons with empty stomachs.

"Look at that, Prongs," muttered Sirius, an all too satisfying smirk lining his face.

"It's even better than I'd imagined," replied James as he bit down onto a cob of corn.

And while they enjoyed their meals, Remus had gone into a full blown panic. He propped his elbow onto the table, his mouth kissing the back of his hand as he realized that this risk had been calculated horribly.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you?” Remus heard Lily from his right. She was bending over his shoulder, leaning as far over as she could to eye James.
"It's Halloween, Evans, have a little humor," gibed Sirius. Her eyes fleetingly darted to him, a small grimace appearing on her face.

"You think this is funny, Black? You have no idea what you've done, you fucking git," she bit back.

"Don't call me a fucking git," he finished with her.

"No, you listen to me, all four of you," she breathed angrily. Remus eyeing the top of her red head with much caution. "I am Head Girl, my responsibility is to the students, to all students! Not just our house filled with brainless oafs such as yourselves." Lily tried her best to keep her voice controlled, even though she felt like smacking both James Potter and Sirius Black with the roasted chicken sitting right in front of her.

"It was just a prank," Remus attempted.

"Yeah, Remus, keep telling yourself that," she countered, finally turning to look up at him. What he saw made him want to dig his nails into the polished wood. Her eyes were filled with such heavy disgust and distaste that he had to bite down on his inner cheek in order to stifle a whimper.

I deserve that, he decided. Maybe this time he had indeed gone too far.

He felt like utter rubbish as he felt Lily picking herself up, a sudden chill coming from next to him.

"Where are you going?" Dorcas inquired, her eyebrows scrunching up as she watched Lily touring the entire table.

"I'm leaving, I can't sit next to these prats," she uttered, finally deciding on a free spot next to 5th year prefect, Isla Baxter.

"Fuck," spat out Remus once Lily had departed.

"Calm down, mate," Sirius said, doing a once over of his friend. James looked up from his plate, watching Remus as he ran both his hands through his hair, pulling at the sandy brown locks.

"This is bad," Remus told them, pointing a hand back the now empty table. "I told you we should have done it to everyone, including us."

"Oh gosh, I knew he was going to get like this," muttered Peter under his breath.

"Moony, they did this on their own accord. Do you see the Ravens? The Puffs? They're all still sitting down, enjoying themselves. The Snakes are only doing this to spite us and the professors," James assured Remus, bending over to get a better look of him.

"I think he's upset about Evans," added in Peter. It was true, if it hadn't been for Lily staring at him like he was the most despicable creature on the planet, he wouldn't be so worked up about it.

"She'll apologize," was Sirius' only answer, "she always has."

"Not to me she hasn't," scoffed James.

"It's not always about you," retorted Peter, rolling his eyes.

But Remus wasn't so easily convinced.

"Come on, let's eat. We have a party to host," heartened James, forking some roasted pumpkin and shoveling it into his mouth. Remus sighed, nodding as he looked down at the food placed out in front
of him.

Everything will be fine, he assured himself, because there was nothing else he could tell himself without vomiting, the face of Lily's angered expression burning right through him.

A number of the Slytherins had gone off to sit by the lake, enjoying what little they could of the already dismal evening. Others returned straight to their dorms, taking early solace in their beds or playing a chess game with one of their housemates. In front of one of the fires sat the majority of the Slytherin seventh year boys, a bottle of Quintin Black and some small shot glasses made of crystal placed lazily on the black wood table in between them.

Cedric Avery got up, walking over to the marble fireplace mantle and staring into the green licks of flame. The alcohol was strong, getting to his mind as he begun chuckling at the sight of the fire. Behind him, Antonin turned with his own bottle of Aurora Vodka at his lips and raised his eyebrows at him.

"We can't let them get away with it," Cedric uttered, his back still turned to the rest of them. Edmund brought the shot glass back down onto the table, sitting up and surveying the wizard's silhouette. Cedric spat into the fire, the sudden contact making the flames sputter for a few moments. One of his white palms laid against the marble, allowing it to cool his heated body.

"Let's give the staff a day-" began Evan but was quickly cut off as Cedric spun around, a manic look in his eyes.

"The staff?" he began, tilting his head slightly, his teeth slightly bared. "When have they ever shown us justice? Our headmaster is as useful as tits on a bull."

Eoin Mulciber cracked his neck, growing irate as he remembered the way the staff had grinned and laughed as rats ran over their shoes.

"They laughed at us, humiliated us," listed Severus, his eyes dark as he recalled the same memory as Eoin.

"I can talk to my father, have them reviewed for expulsion," Evan tried again.

"No," ominously sniggered Cedric, shaking his head. He reached out to Antonin and grabbed the bottle of vodka from him. "That would be showing them mercy, they don't deserve that."

"He's right," agreed Edmund, "we're of noble houses and they treat us like we live in the alleys of Knockturn."

"We could poison them," muttered Snape, causing Avery to spin around towards him.

"Poison is a woman's weapon— I want them to see my face when I come after them," he retorted harshly, causing the black haired boy to wilt back into the couch.

"Then tell us your plan if you're such a fucking genius," cursed Antonin, excited and growing impatient.

"Torture," he replied maliciously, his lips turning up into a half grin.

"Torture?" repeated Severus, suddenly interested.

"We've always played so dumb, so rashly. You, Snape, hexing Potter every chance he's not looking
— but you never seem to win, do you?” Cedric began. "Admit it! That's why we always lose, but this time will be different. This time... we will hunt them down," he looked between his house mates, his eyes filled with malice.

"And how are we going to hunt them down? With a bloody bow and arrow?” scowled Rosier.

"No, we get them one by one. We wait, we wait until they are alone, and then we attack," Edmund explained, his gaze lingering a moment on Cedric before turning to look at Evan.

"I will make them squeal like bitches in heat," snickered Antonin, licking his lips as he thought about the sounds he would make them do.

"I like it," grinned Eoin.

"We could get in trouble; Lupin is a prefect and Potter is Head Boy," Evan warned them.

"Go cry to your mummy, this is no place for pansies," Eoin retorted.

"Yes, Rosier, you can go run off with Black and the others who are too proper for this sort of work," mocked Avery.

"I want Potter," announced Snape as he sat there in silence, pondering the reality of a dream he had had for years. Avery and him locked eyes and he nodded in agreement— allowing the boy his revenge.

"But, I want blood, I want to see them on their knees begging," he informed all of them, "and whoever won't give me blood, is free to walk away right now without judgement, whoever joins and quits later will suffer a fate worse than those blood traitors."

"Ay," Mulciber nodded his head.

"I'll make sure they wished that they had never left their mothers' wombs," coldly chuckled Antonin. The two boys shared a mutual smirk, Avery then turned to look at Edmund who remained silent. The regal looking wizard looked up at them, his eyes stern.

"I want them to know who I am, and I want them to know that they can not treat a Nott in such a manner," he confirmed his allegiance to them.

Then all their gazes fell on the icy blonde haired wizard, who sat calmly against the back of the leather couch. His eyes were pensive, thinking about everything. He knew the consequences, he knew that his father wouldn't like it if he got tied up in such nonsense, but he also hated those four boys with such a passion that he could murder and every single one of them without any qualms.

"Okay," he eventually announced, nodding his head.

"They won't stand a fucking chance," Dolohov chuckled, patting Evan on the back and handing him his colorful bottle.

"Good," nodded Cedric.

"What's the plan?" inquired Severus, finding the boyish excitement annoying. He wanted to get to it, to find out exactly what they were planning and making it happen as soon as possible.

"We start with the weakest and work our way up," answered Edmund.

"I always hated that puny rat faced lump," sneered Dolohov.
"Ay, he'll be an easy one," agreed Mulciber, the two of them raising their bottles to one another.

"When?" Severus continued, not wanting them to diverge from the path.

"Patience, Severus," mentioned Edmund. The black haired Slytherin fell back into the arm chair. He shook his head as he eyed his housemates with utter contempt. He wanted to do it tonight, to get to them tonight, but no, he had to wait, he had to be patient until he could finally bite down into James Potter's flesh.

"Blood and tears," Avery demanded from them, grabbing the bottle of Quintin Black off the table and raising it to his mouth. He threw his head back and downed as much as he could manage.

"Blood and fucking tears," bellowed Antonin, stomping his feet on the ground.

"Wait," chimed in Eoin, his hand up to calm the two boys. A sudden epiphany had occurred in his mind, his eyes full of awe and wonder.

"What?" Antonin asked, turning to look at the wizard sitting across from him.

"Not them, we won't go after them," he said.

"What?" questioned Cedric, his face going wry as he scowled down at his friend.

"No, we'll go after something that hurts them more."

Edmund's tilted head suddenly turned upright, his eyes cautious and full of warning as he shifted them to look at the excited wizard next to him.

"Spit it out," Antonin demanded.

"We'll go after who they care for most," daunted Eoin. Severus immediately froze, realizing what that meant. He tried to think of a solution quick, quick so that no one agreed to it.

"They love themselves more than anyone else, especially Potter," he began but was cut off immediately by Cedric's cackle.

"I love it," Cedric grinned like a Cheshire cat. Edmund rubbed his chin as he thought what that meant, not sure any more if he was willing to be an accomplice. Severus' fingers tapped anxiously against his left forearm, his bottom teeth biting into his upper lip as he tried to devise some sort of plan to leave Lily out of this.

What have I done, he asked himself, suddenly wishing that he had gone off with Cyrus Baddok and Oscar Wilkes instead of conspiring the rape and torture of the only god damn person he cared for.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! A rather short chapter compared to the others. I decided to cut Jester's Hour into two parts because I realized that making Jester's Hour in one chapter would have been overwhelming (there is a lot that happens). So, as always, I hope you enjoyed reading this.

Like always, leave a review/feedback on anything from compliments to constructive
criticism, let me know what you think about the storyline, our characters, this helps me sort of know what needs to be fixed, what needs to be worked on, etc. Favorite and follow if you like the story and want to see more! If you find yourself wanting to know more about secondary and background characters, head on over to my blog (link: fogandfire.tumblr.com/).

Thank you very much! Updates every Monday! Love you all, see you next week (:}
The entire room was filled to the brim with bottles, music, and most of all, people. There wasn’t a space available that didn't have a body lingering in it, whether it was dancing or drinking with a friend or stranger. Like the Great Hall, the room was equally as decorated for the holiday— if not more so. There were pumpkins that floated just as they did during the feast, and there were ginormous cauldrons filled with spiked pumpkin juice and gillywater. Students freely helped themselves while sitting on the available hay stacks where they could find scattered bottles of firewhiskey, Quintin Black, and barrels of ale. In addition to the darkness, Remus had been able to charm the room so that there was a constant mist over it. He couldn't lie- he was quite impressed with himself, beaming as he watched Ralph Bowers spinning some fifth year girl around.

As Remus observed from the background, James went around under his invisibility cloak, scaring partygoers as he whispered nonsense into their ears. Remus nearly choked on his drink when he saw Breona Calder, a Ravenclaw, turn around and swat away at nothing. His laughter slowly died down, a boyish grin left on his face as he brought the bottle of Howling Jack Pumpkin Ale to his lips.

And though he tried, happy that everyone else was enjoying themselves, he couldn't embody their merry mood; not yet, at least. Since the first invitees had arrived, Remus had searched the room, looking relentlessly for a certain redhead that he was determined to apologize to.

"Hey, Remus," he heard someone greet him jovially. He turned immediately, doing a once over of the girl wearing a black dress that flared out by her knees, a thin black and white cardigan over her shoulders, and a pink scarf to finish off the entire outfit. It was rather eccentric for the girl, especially since Remus only ever saw her in uniform or baggy overalls.

"Hey, Mary, enjoying yourself?"

"Sure, but it seems that I've lost my mates," she attempted to make conversation.

"Ah, not true- I'm here," he teased, causing a nervous giggle to come loose from Mary's painted lips.

"Of course, how could I forget!"

"No worries," he nudged the girl playfully with his bottled hand, "could I offer you something to drink?"

"Oh no," Mary responded at once, "I'm what us muggles call the designated driver, it's basically someone-"

"I know what a designated driver is," he assured her, "I've read and watched my fair share of muggle culture."

"Right, I just always assume for a culture with no cars, it'd be a little confusin'," the Ravenclaw mocked lightly.

"Actually, Miss Mary, I know how to drive," he whispered conspiratorially.

"What? Really?"
"Uh huh," he nodded, smugly smiling down at her as he brought the bottle back to his lips.

"Yer just full of surprises, aren't ye?"

"Oh yeah, Pandora's Box all right," he chuckled. Mary nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. "Hey, um, you wouldn't happen to know if Lily came tonight?"

"Yeah, she's drinking with Marlene out in the hall, the music sort of got to her head," snorted Mary as she watched him quickly dart his eyes over to the exit. The Ravenclaw sighed, nodding her head understandably: "Go ahead, Remus, I'll be fine."

He looked down to her. "How did you—?"

"Ravenclaw," she snorted again, tapping on her head. In reality, Remus was not as discreet as he hoped to be, often wearing his heart on his sleeve.

"That you are."

"Go," the girl insisted, shooing him towards the door. Remus saluted the girl with a small shoulder squeeze and set off through the crowd. Eventually, after many greetings and smiles, he managed to escape out into the hallway. His head turned both ways, not having to look far until he spotted a leaned over and laughing blonde figure in one of the windowed alcoves. Remus pursed his lips, shoving his hands into his trousers' pockets as he made his way over to them.

"Oh, hello," muttered Lily, looking down at the still half-full bottle in her hands.

"Sit, Remus," Marlene ushered, moving over on the window sill and making room for him next to Lily.

"I'm okay," he assured her with a quick smile.

"Really, not a problem. Besides- I was just going, have to find Mary."

"I was with her now, she's in the back by the haystacks," Remus informed her. She nodded and pecked Lily on the top of her head before skipping off towards the door that he had charmed to look like a normal tapestry.

"I came to apologize," he told Lily, leaning against the pillar in front of her. She nodded, thumbing the bottle's neck.

"I figured that much," she scoffed.

"I can come back a later time, if you want."

"For?"

"Come again?"

"What are you apologizing for?"

"If it's any consolation, I told James that we should have done it to everyone, but he didn't listen," he hastily began excusing himself, simultaneously hoping that it didn't sound like he was throwing his friends under the bus. Lily simply snorted.

"Does he ever?" Remus didn't know what to say. "Listen, I'm sorry for the way I acted before. I know how you are with your mates; I know you wouldn't do half the things they make you do—"
"They don't—" but she cut him off immediately.

"Let me speak, please." He nodded. "But, the thing is, they're going to come back for blood, you know that, right? You can't keep slashing at someone, stabbing them incessantly and just except them to sit there and take a swig from their cups as if nothing had happened. You all wonder why they're so cruel, what do you expect them to be? Why do you think Manasse treats you the way she does? Sure, maybe it's a superiority thing, but it's also because you, from the very beginning, went in with a dagger behind your back," she concluded, quickly averting her gaze to her fumbling fingers.

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is. I heard you, and them, talking about her; you said things that the poor witch doesn't merit. You called her a murderer, a heartless bitch, and so many other unspeakable things. Sure, she didn't hear you, but don't think that she doesn't know. So, tell me, how do you expect her to treat you with kindness when all you give is ill will?"

"She's not pitiable, Lily," Remus argued, "and I don't expect kindness, only respect and some form of cooperation."

"That's not my bloody point, Remus," she bit back.

Remus stared at her, blinking.

"Why are we talking about Manasse?" She was the last person he wanted to think about, and he didn't feel like arguing with Lily over someone who already had managed to weasel her way into one of his friendships.

"We're not," Lily sighed, shaking her head. "It was an example. We can use Severus as an example, I simply thought you'd be able to empathize more with her because it pertains to you."

"You really want to talk about this?" he asked her, a slight expression of discomfort on his face.

"You came here to apologize, and I want to know if you know what you're apologizing for."

"So now I have to apologize for her?" he exclaimed, pointing his hand out in front of him to emphasize his words. His mouth stood slightly open, a bowed over head as he attempted to understand whether Lily was all there or not.

"I didn't say that," she huffed, "I think you've misjudged her."

"Manasse isn't misjudged, Lily. She's misinformed and prejudice, and it has nothing to do with being stabbed repeatedly by me."

"She's not who you think she is. Listen to me, Remus, people like Severus, like Manasse, are people in great pain, pain that you should be able to understand," she disclosed to him. Lily reached out for his hand, looking into his eyes with something bordering desperation.

"Lily-"

"And, of course, some of them are beyond our help. I tried helping Severus, I really did, a-and...and I couldn't, but that doesn't mean you can't help her, it doesn't mean she's lost. Maybe, just maybe, if you try, you can see her for who she really is. There's a person inside her, I know there is, who is trying to get out and it just can't, it can't…" Lily began crying, warm tears rushing down her velvet powdered face. Remus was convinced that she was drunk out of her mind, that there was no other explanation for all this.
"Lily, please don't cry," he whispered to her, wiping away her tears. He hated seeing her cry, and he felt like it was his fault. "Please, I hate seeing you cry."

"It's not your fault, Remus," because Lily knew him better than anyone else did. "I promise you, it's not. I-I... Give her a chance, please."

"I mean nothing to her, and I can't say that I mind that. She's irritating and pompous and not a good fit for me in any way. I can't be friends with someone like her — hell, I can't even be partners with someone like that."

Lily nodded, because at the end of the day, it was his life. Remus would have to decide for himself whether he wanted to put that task on himself.

And Remus really didn't want to get involved with someone like Eva Manasse.

"But you do care about her," Lily began.

"I—"

"Don't tell me you don't, because you do. I saw you in Charms, and whether that be your philanthropic side or not, it didn't look like nothing. You care for the girl, maybe you don't know it yet, but you do. And that's a good thing, it really is."

"I would have reacted like that for anyone."

"I get it," she sighed, "you don't think she's worth it."

"It's not that... I have nothing with her. She's my potions partner."

And it made sense, why should Remus care about someone who didn't show the slightest interest in him? Why should Lily ask him to try and get close to this girl when she pushed him away at wand point? Her emotions had clouded her judgement, not realizing what exactly it was she was asking of him.

"I'm sorry, Remus. I've had a little too much to drink," the Gryffindor witch lied.

Rather obvious, Remus teased internally, smiling lightly as he laid a hand around Lily's small frame.

"It's all right, happens to the best of us," he assured her.

But Lily wished he wasn't such a boy. Sure, he was more perceptive than the others, but he was a teenage boy nonetheless. And though she usually enjoyed his company, Lily really wanted him to leave because she wanted to cry. She wanted to cry because her friends were going to die, because Eva Manasse was going to die if anyone else figured it out, because the green eyed witch didn't know how to handle any of this. She felt like the weight of the world was on her shoulders, and she finally began to understand what it meant to truly be alone.

Yes, Lily was going to cry.

And Lily wasn't drunk, but she sure as hell needed to be.
After his conversation with Lily, she had asked to use the restroom and he had asked her if he wanted an escort, but she had laughed weakly and told him that she could most certainly take care of herself. He had sat on the edge of the window sill for a while, thinking about Lily's words and decided that they were indeed the words of a drunk. So he ignored them, brushing them off and letting Lily rejoin her friends as he found his own company.

At the end, he had concluded that it didn't matter what she had said, he was just glad that they had made up.

"I have another mate, we went to school together long back, and you know what he told me once?" Ed began, waiting on their responses. Remus hadn't even gotten over the last joke the Hufflepuff had cracked, still grinning and nearly on the verge of tears. Gideon’s face was on the table, trying his best to calm himself down and make sure he didn't piss his pants as his brother's face turned as red as his hair.

"Ed, mate, you've got to believe me. I slipped on some ice just the other day, and I swear I saw my own arsehole flash before my eyes," the Hufflepuff banged on the table as he began to convulse at his own joke, Remus laughed even harder, falling off the haystack as he clutched his side that had begun to cramp.

"Please, stop," cried out Gideon as he, too, began to feel a pain in his stomach.

"Oh man, Ed, you make me wish I was a muggle," Fabian mentioned as he chuckled, wiping tears away from the corners of his eye.

"Yeah, me too," he sighed, bringing the whiskey up to his lips but pausing momentarily as another chuckle slipped out. As Remus continued to laugh, he pulled out the pack of nearly finished cigarettes that Sirius had thrown to him before the party and lit one up. "You mind sharing, mate?"

Ed turned to ask Remus, his eyes low and slitted from all the alcohol he had consumed. Remus slowly shook his head, puffing a few times before handing it over to the black haired wizard.

"Ah," they heard a girl shriek as one of their peers grabbed her by the waist, pulling her towards him and against the wall with a grin. She began to giggle as he attacked her neck, his lips traveling down her décolletage. Gideon huffed at the scene, turning back around to look out to the party and grabbing the bottle from Ed’s side.

"It'd be nice to have a lass," muttered Gideon under his breath as he took a swig from the bottle.

"Nah," Ed countered.

"A bottle of whiskey is good enough for me," Fabian disagreed with his brother, grabbing the bottle from his side and taking his own turn at it.

"And a fag," added Ed as he leaned over to return the burning cigarette to Remus.

"I'll die a bachelor," Fabian concluded.

"Bloody hell, why are you always so bloody depressed?" Gideon turned to look at his brother.

"Cause' he's not stupid," Ed defended him, a laugh breaking out amongst them. "Right, Remus?"

Remus snorted and nodded his head in agreement, but deep down Remus wondered every single day if he would ever have a chance at love. But he knew he wouldn't, he knew it just wasn't in his cards.
He'd never feel the intimacy that came from holding a girl that he loved, and he had accepted that fact a long time ago.

But it didn't hurt to dream.

(It did though, and he knew that.)

James was leaning against the wall behind a pillar, grinning and smiling at all the dancers as they spilled their drinks onto one another. He'd throw a party everyday if he could. The Head Boy loved carousing others, catering to them and giving them something worthwhile to remember.

His hazel eyes darted around the room. It was already an hour or two past midnight, and though there were some drunk people laying down on the floor, a good many were still standing firm. He, too, was a little buzzed, but he made sure to keep his alcohol on track, because from what he had seen, all his friends, even Remus, were on their way to forgetting tonight ever happened.

And at least one of them had to be there to make fun of them for it.

He caught Kyra's eye and winked at her as she dragged a girl behind her to some dark corner. He laughed, pressing the edge of the bottle to his lips and throwing his head back to finish it. That's when his eyes got caught with two green orbs, and he suddenly became super aware of himself.

He tried his best to fix his disheveled hair, but there was really nothing he could do to make it more presentable. He rubbed his eyebrow, trying his best not to make eye contact again, hoping that she wouldn't come over- he wasn't looking for a fight.

Lily smirked, watching as James Potter shoved a hand into his pocket and looked sheepishly at the others. Her clouded, whiskey-infused judgement led her to put one foot in front of the other until eventually she was standing by the Head Boy's side. She didn't say anything at first, tilting her head curiously as she observed him.

"Hey," she finally announced. James' eyebrows raised, jutting his chin at her.

"Hey."

"What're you doing over here all alone and mysterious?" she teased. James' grin faltered, his mind and eyes searching, trying to figure out if Lily Evans had actually just flirted with him. But he shoved the idea away as soon as it appeared, realizing that he was jumping to conclusions as he always did when it came to her.

"I like to watch everyone enjoy themselves," he admitted. She nodded, giving him a once over. He cleared his throat and decided to continue: "How 'bout you? Enjoying yourself?"

"Oh yeah, tons, but I'm a little dizzy from the drink."

"Fancy some fresh air?" he asked almost too fast. He didn't even know why he had bothered to ask, at this point he already knew that she was going to write him off; that she was going to laugh and say: "Me? Go with you? Ha!"

But she didn't.

"Yeah, sure," she agreed enthusiastically. And he was starting to think that Sirius had slipped him a mushroom during supper.
"Uh," he froze, trying to gather his thoughts. "Okay, this way then." He made his way towards the back of the room, behind the cauldrons filled with booze and the hay stacks they had placed about for their peers to sit.

"That's the wrong way," he heard her mention from behind him.

"There's another," he informed her. She shrugged her shoulders and followed him. Her buzzed mind so giddy and light that she didn't even care that she was off to some unknown part of the castle with the boy she considered her sworn enemy.

"You have to pass through that wall right there," James told her, pointing towards it.

"You do it first!" she challenged, her eyes full of speculation and laughter.

"All right then," he smirked, walking right through the wall with ease. Lily gasped, her drunken mind actually surprised with something that was a given in the wizarding world. Hesitating, she followed suit, first placing her hand through the wall before attempting the rest of her body.

James couldn't help but chuckle as he saw Lily's silver-covered arm reach out through the wall. He raised his eyebrows in amusement as he watched her slowly and cautiously step through it.

You're pissed, he commented internally. Lily was funny when she was drunk, and he didn't mind it one bit.

"Here I am!" she announced joyfully, stepping out and smiling up at him.

"Here you are," he repeated a little less loudly. Lily observed where they were: the bridge that connected two towers together, except no one ever knew how to get to it. She stared with her mouth slightly open, pausing at one of the archways to gaze out into the open.

"It's amazing," she awed, looking back at James who was making his way towards her. He leaned against the space between the two archways, watching her as she ogled at the lake.

And no matter how much his inner voice tried to tell him otherwise, James never saw someone or something so beautiful. The moonlight shined off her porcelain face and her large eyes glistened like stars. He found himself holding his own breath, pursing his lips and making himself look away before he ruined everything…

Again.

He ran his hand through his hair and turned to lean against the wall. Lily heard his shuffling and turned to watch him. The dim light hit him at an angle that elongated his already sharp jaw. He had taken off his glasses in order to rub his eyes for a moment, placing them back onto his nose and blinking rather long eyelashes.

"You're quite handsome," she let slip out, not realizing that those words had left her mind. But she was drunk, and everyone looked good after six shots of whiskey.

(Right?)

His eyes widened just slightly, finding that he didn't exactly know how to react to such a statement. So his body took charge, doing it for him as he stared at her, his neck turning red and his face heating up.
James Potter was blushing.

James Potter never blushed.

"Thanks, so are you," he managed, immediately regretting his words.

*Really? Handsome? Git*, he cursed internally, eyeing her from the corner of his gaze. She was biting down on her lip, trying to stifle a small giggle.

He took a deep breath in order to calm his speeding heart and his too warm neck.

*Blimey*, he was glad Sirius wasn't here to see this.

And she watched him, the last of the giggle fading away. She found herself completely mesmerized with the boy standing in front of her. She watched his hands as they ran through his hair. They were strong and flecked with purple veins, and Lily couldn't help but think how they would feel on her face, on her waist, on her breast.

The thought alone made Lily's breath hitch in her throat, glad that he hadn't noticed. She wondered if it was him, James, or if she would be like this with any bloke that stood before her.

*Yes*, she concluded for herself. If Remus was standing in James' position right now, she would be thinking the exact same thing. Because that's how Lily got after too much to drink. She craved, yet lacked, intimacy. She wanted someone to touch her; she desired that human warmth, the feeling of someone's face cradled inside her neck as they left their mark.

And he was handsome, he was a handsome, handsome boy with a very good body and a very good face, and Lily was a lustful, lecherous little girl who had drunk too much for her own good.

James turned to her for a moment.

"Lily," he whispered, taken aback by her comportment. Her lips were parted just slightly and her eyes were low and heavy. Her chest heaved up and down, and he felt something jump down under.

But before anything else could be said, Lily closed the gap between their two bodies, pressing her strawberry-glossed lips to his.

James almost had a heart attack.

She stood between his legs, his body frozen and thus awkwardly leaned over to accommodate her. The redhead witch pulled away, but he could still smell her whiskey laced breath and the warmth of it on his face. Her ethereal green eyes smiled at James as he stared at her with a gaped mouth, his hands loosely at his sides as hers cupped his jaws.

No, James was having a heart attack.

She had him wrapped around her finger, and drunk Lily felt another fire ignite in the pit of her stomach knowing it. She slowly pressed her lips to his again, deeply and passionately kissing him. James half-groaned, half-sighed because he didn't know how else to react.

Lily's hands lifted up from his face and into his hair, wrapping herself around him. James snaked his hand around her waist, pulling her closer to him as he began to kiss her back with everything he had. Though she kissed him gently, he was anything but; his kisses were needy and quick, the two Gryffindors black and white as their teeth clashed and their tongues danced together on that tower bridge.
"James," she moaned between kisses, and James took that as a sign that she liked it. He traveled from her lips, leaving wet and sloppy kisses all the way down to her neck. He took the skin between his teeth, sucking gently as she pressed her chest to his own in response.

But that alone brought him back to reality, and James stopped moving. He realized that no matter how perfect Lily was, no matter how much he wanted her, no matter the fact that he was snogging the girl he had craved for so many years... She was drunk.

Lily pulled back when James had stopped moving, eyeing him suspiciously. His hand became limp around her waist and he found that he couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze.

"I-I can't," he admitted against every single fiber in his body.

"What?"

"You're drunk, Lily. I can't take advantage of you," he explained.

"You're not, I want to snog you." James inhaled deeply and pretended he had heard her wrong.

"Yes, but you're drunk and not exactly in the right state of mind to be making those sorts of decisions."

She scrunched her eyebrows, pursing her lips and suddenly feeling very awkward. She let go of him, stepping back once so that they were no longer touching.

James really wouldn't have minded if she had wanted him to hold her for the rest of the night. At that point, he didn't care about any party, he didn't care about drinking or smoking. If Lily Evans wanted him to hold her in his arms for the next few hours, or if she wanted to lay down next to him on the Astronomy Tower and watch the stars, James Potter would go to her running.

But she was drunk.

And that's not what she wanted from him.

"I'm sorry, I thought you wanted," she trailed off.

"No, no," he rushed, "I do, more than anything I do. It's just not right and... and I don't want to be a regret in the morning."

And that was the truth, because if she did regret this in the morning, James' heart would shatter into a million pieces, and he didn't know how long it would take his friends to pick up all the pieces.

So he tried to save them the trouble.

Because he already knew she was going to reject him in the morning, and that was okay— he could live with it.

Or maybe he couldn't, not anymore, not after that brief taste he had gotten. When he kissed her, it felt like the first time he had flown, and when he kissed her, he felt like nothing, absolutely nothing could touch him.

(Yeah, it was going to hurt in the morning.)

"You're not going to be a regret," she assured him, stepping forward again to kiss him, but he placed both hands on her shoulders, keeping her back.
"Lily, if in the morning this is what you want, then come back to me and I would be the happiest bloke in the entire universe. I swear it, but right now... right now—" he couldn't even finish his sentence because he could already see the want she had had for him just moments ago diminishing in her eyes.

Lily blinked at him. The world was glazed over and she couldn't really understand what was going on. She really wanted to snog somebody, and if it wasn't going to be James, then she was just going to have to find somebody else.

"Okay," she mustered.

He nodded, pursing his lips and dropping his hands to his sides.

"I best get back to my mates," she began, "they may worry about me."

He nodded again. There wasn't really much he could say, or that he knew to say.

"Do you want me to walk you back?" he offered, hoping to every god in the world that she didn't.

"No, I'm sure I'll find it all right," she smiled. He returned the gesture, albeit fleetingly and weakly. She began to walk the opposite way of the entrance and James let out a small scoff.

"Evans," the redhead witch turned around, "it's that way." He gestured with his thumb in the opposite direction.

"Ah," she said, pointing in the direction she was supposed to go in. "Right, catch you later then."

He waited until she disappeared before letting out a breath he didn't know he had been holding.

For six years, James Potter had suffered rejection after rejection and not once did that bring him down. He had never quit, not once. But that night, James Potter's heart felt like the heaviest thing in the world, heavier than the sun, and he really hated the feeling.

"Fuck," he yelled out into the darkness, his foot coming in contact with the stone wall. He pressed his palms against the archway, leaning over it and letting himself freeze in the early winter wind. That was not how he had wanted their first kiss to be, that was not how he had wanted them to be. He wanted to take her on a date to Hogsmeade, he wanted to buy her a butterbeer or a tea or whatever she bloody wanted, and he wanted to hold her hand and make her laugh, he didn't want her like this.

"Fuck," he repeated, his breath turning to smoke in the night air. James Potter never regretted anything, but he regretted this.

Eva looked up at the never ending hall, groaning at the rough pain in her throat. She reached a hand up as if to summon the door, but failed and instead came crashing back down to the ground.

Her cheek lied on the cold stone floor. The world spun around her and she kept vomiting up blood. At this point, it wasn't just the blood she had drunk but her own. The voices were singing, drumming, driving her insane.

She let out a sort of deep rumble as she tried to slide her body towards the door, using whatever strength she had in her legs to continue down the hall.

"Help," she croaked, faltering again. "Someone help me."
"Whatever is the matter with you?" one of the portraits asked, waking up from their slumber and being frightened by the sight before them.

"Please, I'm dying," she did her best to say, the vision going off and everything turning black. She coughed up some more blood, letting it stain the floor beneath her as it trailed down her cheek and coated her ear. "Please," she repeated, her voice strained.

But Eva knew no one was coming, so she did the only thing she knew how to do, the only thing she always did. With one last push, with everything she had left, she placed her palms onto the ground, grunting as she lifted herself up with violently shaking arms. She turned with blood-stained bared teeth towards the portrait.

"I said help me," she snarled, the witch's eyes growing wide as she nodded hastily and ran off to find someone. Eva looked forward, inhaling deeply as she finally collapsed under all her weight. The masonry smashed into her nose, making her entire face go numb.

Her vision turned black and her brain begun to shut down.

She never did see who came.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey everyone, another chapter is up! I hope you all enjoyed it. I just want to let you know that for those who follow and then unfollow the story, please leave a comment telling me why that is. Honestly, I don't mind! It's just I'm often left confused as to why. If there's something you don't like, you think that can be better, etc. please let me know. I understand the best way to become a better writer is through constructive criticism.

I also have to start working on Mondays, so I will be updating on Fridays from here on out. I love you all, thank you, and see you Friday.

xx A.
"She came to me this early morn', before the sun woke up," the nurse with wind-swept and brown-streaked-grey hair recounted. She was still in her night gown, bustling about the infirmary as she tried to collect all the available towels and possible remedies for the catatonic witch occupying the second bed from her office. McGonagall pursed her lips and Dumbledore watched over his half-moon spectacles as another bout of coughing and blood spat out through the corner of Eva's mouth.

"By herself?" asked the Gryffindor Head of House, turning for just a moment to watch the nurse pat a towel over the dripping liquid.

"Crawled right through that door," she informed them.

"Remarkable," bemused Dumbledore.

"Albus," reprimanded McGonagall, "this is nothing to admire over. I'm afraid the law requires us to review her for expulsion-"

"There will be no such thing, Minerva. I'm delighted to say that Miss Manasse is protected by diplomatic immunity, therefore her participation in the Dark Arts is not a concern for ourselves nor the school. We must, however, detect and discover what exactly went wrong."

"She has bleeding ulcers lining her throat," noted the nurse while inspecting the girl's mouth, but barely succeeding in seeing anything for the blood stained and coated every surface and wall. She sighed, laying the girl back down on her side so that she didn't choke.

"It's obvious that her body is rejecting the magic," fretted McGonagall, finally stepping closer and approaching the girl. Very few things in the world could make the seasoned witch flinch back, but the sight in front of her did just that. The blood-shot eyes of the petite French witch made her eyes go wide; dead and completely immobile, there wasn't any indication of human conscious within that stare. She waved her hand in front of Eva's gaze, but received no reaction. If it weren't for the spew of blood that exited her body every so often, McGonagall would have thought her deceased.

"Indeed, but why?" inquired the headmaster.

"I can't be certain, but all facts considered, it seems to me that two different strains of magical blood have come into contact; her body is purging herself of the intruder," answered Madam Pomfrey.

"Two different sorts of magical blood?" repeated McGonagall, her gaze darting between the nurse and headmaster.

"Yes, veela blood, lycanthropic blood, even human blood could poison her if she, herself, is
something that contradicts it. I'm afraid I won't know for certain, but mixing different bloods like that, and such an ancient family at that, there must have been a drop of alien blood somewhere in there," the nurse enlightened them.

"Are you saying her own body is poisoning her?" startled McGonagall, her eyes wide and her head slightly leaned to the side. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had had her fair share of students poisoning other students, of students consuming potions ingredients and magical plants that they were not supposed to as dares and jokes, but never had she heard of a student poisoning themselves. Madam Pomfrey's tight smile answered her question without words. "How will you treat her?"

"Oh, she won't die," assured the nurse, a visible relief falling over the professor's face, "her body is strong enough that it will thoroughly purge itself of whatever has poisoned it. There's nothing besides waiting, she'll be in a lot of pain when she wakes up, so we'll see about an induced coma."

"Do as is needed," said Dumbledore, folding his hands behind his back. "As for us, Minerva, we have nothing to worry about. Miss Manasse is in the best of care." McGonagall, with her lips still pursed, laid a hand on the young witch's forehead. The girl was covered in her own sweat and blood, beads of it dripping down her ice-cold face.

"What they make them do," she muttered, thinking of other times the daughters and sons of pureblood families had put their own children at risk for the sake of tradition. She shook her head. "Just a child." Pulling back her hand, she gave one final tight nod at Madam Pomfrey, who did her best to smile despite the extreme weight on her shoulders.

Even though her eyes were open, what Eva saw was not what was in front of her. She was in a barren place, indescribably empty and filled with nothing. Not dust, not mud, not even darkness, just nothing. Nothing caked in shadows, shadows that danced and hopped around her as she sat in the center of what seemed to be the universe.

She could hear the voices, not only the ones that lived inside her, but others, new ones that were coming from every angle, every direction. They screeched and crawled and pawed at her like mothers being sent overboard on a sinking ship, telling her things that she couldn't understand. A thousand whispers and one sound all at the same time, a hundred hands that moved in the same way, three bodies and only one eye. It was complete destruction, it was hell, it was a living nightmare, and she was living it, experiencing it, tasting it, feeling it.

Would she survive? Was this what it felt like to die? No, death couldn't feel like this. It couldn't feel like she was stuck between two walls, two walls that slowly closed in on her. Her hands placed against them, spread apart and holding them open as if she was Atlas who held up the world on his shoulders.

And as she focused in, listening closely to the words being spoke to her, she heard screaming. Someone was screaming.

She looked down at herself- she was the one screaming. Screaming so loud that her throat split apart, that her lips began to crack and the metallic taste of blood dripped backwards, bleeding into her stomach.

And yet, there was no sound.

"Prongs?" called out Remus as his eyes fell upon a body dangerously leaning too far out a window. Though the telltale glasses were missing, Remus couldn't mistake him for anyone else. Immediately,
he picked up his pace and lurched forward to grab James' shirt, pulling him in and placing him against a safer part of the alcove. The Gryffindor involuntarily began to stir, his chin rubbing against his collarbone and his hand reaching up to rub his hazel eye.

"James?" Remus tried again, shaking him lightly.

"Please, don't do that," James pleaded, the hand lifting from his eye to hold his temple. The light that came from the early rising sun blinded him, hurting his eyes and breaking his skull in two.

"James, where're your glasses?" the boy looked up at his friend, realizing that everything in front of him was blurred.

"Is that you, Moony?" James squinted, trying to get closer to Remus' face. The green-eyed wizard quickly pulled back as their noses brushed, his eyes wide and his lips slowly turning up into an amused smile as a chuckle lifted up from his throat and out into the morning air.

"Yeah, it's me, you giant flirt."

"Fuck, I lost my glasses," James cursed, sighing as he leaned his head against the stone. Remus pursed his lips and gave a brief once over of his friend. His eyebrows furrowed and and his mouth gaped at the sight of dry-blood and blue knuckles.

"Bloody hell, you're bleeding," Remus cried.

"What?"

"Your hand, it's all battered up, and there's blood coating it," Remus informed him.

"Yeah."

"What happened?" James' hand reached up to scratch his neck. "James."

"Had to stick it to some Ravens," he admitted, not succeeding in meeting his best friend's gaze.

"They were talking a lot of stick about Wormtail."

Remus pursed his lips, placing a light hand on James' shoulder and nodding his head. "You gave it to them good, yeah?"

James chuckled, trying his best to ignore the ringing in his brain. "Tossers look worse than me."

Remus patted his shoulder once, a small grin on his lips as he stood back up.

"Do you have your wand?" Remus suddenly realized, his eyes darting all over the alcove as he searched for it.

"Yeah, surprisingly- it's in my sock," James chuckled weakly, stopping as soon as it shot a pain through his head.

"Okay, call for your glasses, and then we're paying Pomfrey a visit," instructed Remus. James groaned in response, not really wanting to move, but knowing his friend was right. He had to get help, he had begun to feel the pain in his hand and it almost felt like he had broken a bone. Usually, he wouldn't hesitate to fix it himself, but the Slytherin-Gryffindor game was only a week away, and he couldn't risk playing with a shoddy self-fix of a broken hand.

He slowly reached down and pulled his wand from his sock.
"Accio glasses," he muttered, and soon enough, his glasses swooped around the corner and flew right into his chest, dropping down into his lap. James reached for them blindly, putting them on but regretting it as soon as he had. The world began to sway in front of him, everything turning and spinning around him. He leaned forward, Remus' hand immediately placed on his back as he watched his friend warily.

"You all right there, Prongs?"

"I'm going to be sick," James mentioned, hurling over as the need to vomit shot up his throat. Even though he gagged, nothing came up. Remus sighed and began rubbing his friend's back, comforting him.

"All good?"

"No," the Head Boy croaked.

"Come on," Remus told James, placing two hands on either side of him and helping him up. They didn't say much else as they both began the trek towards the hospital wing, James wobbling from side to side as Remus periodically paused, allowing him time to catch up.

"What happened?" James asked him once he had been able to wake up a little, doing his best to ignore the bile churning in his stomach.

"I don't really know," the green-eyed wizard admitted, scratching the back of his head. "I mean, I remember what happened to me, but I didn't keep an eye on any of you." As the words came out, and Remus did another once over of James' state, he regretted the fact that he hadn't.

"Where is everyone else? Where's Padfoot? Where were you?"

"You're the first person I've seen, but I, somehow, got back to the common room. I was looking for you lot on the map and your name was the first I saw. I have no idea where Padfoot is, or Wormtail, or anyone," Remus responded.

"Bloody hell," James began to laugh, "reckon they remember something?"

"I highly doubt it," snorted Remus.

"Yeah, the best party that no one will remember— that's one for the books, Moony."

"What is the last thing you remember?"

"I have no idea— I think the speech I made."

"What speech?"

"I didn't make a speech?" The two boys turned to look at each other as they continued walking. After that, they fell back into silence. The sun wasn't yet in the sky, but it was slowly lifting itself up and over the the Scottish Highlands. There was a deadness in the castle, nothing yet awake as the two boys made their way down numerous flights of stairs and through several corridors, until they finally saw the doors leading into the infirmary.

"What are you two fellows doing up so early?" cried Madam Pomfrey, rushing over to them. Remus' eyebrows scrunched together as he noticed the obscene amount of blood splattered and staining the nurse's uniform.
"Reckon I broke a hand," sheepishly answered James. The nurse tutted disapprovingly at one of her favorite students, placing both her hands on her hips as she gave the two boys a stern once over. Remus put his hands into his pockets, nervously shuffling about as he smirked over at James, who was lamely holding up his bruised hand.

"You look like yer going to be proper sick," she added, raising her eyebrows.

"That too," James said. Madam Pomfrey turned to Remus, giving him a you-should-know-better look.

"Happy Halloween," Remus attempted, giving her the most cheerful smile he could muster at seven in the morning.

"Very well, I suppose I must do my job. Come on over," she gestured to them, jutting her chin towards the hospital bed closest to her office. The boys walked over, each taking a seat as Madam Pomfrey bustled around grabbing various ointments and cleansing clothes.

"Now, take this for the nausea," she handed him a vile with the clear liquid, "and let me get a look at that hand of yers."

He obliged and reached his hand out to her, and with her delicate fingers and soft motherly touch, Madam Pomfrey spread them out onto the silver tray that she had carried from her office. She quickly felt and glided over every bone, pressing down hard in certain places to check where exactly the damaged had been done.

"You've got two fractures in your fingers, but nothing I can't fix," she assured him.

"That's why you're my favorite," James winked at her.

Without hesitation, she waved a wandless hand over his own. Remus grimaced as he heard the sound of bones moving and re-positioning themselves, and James clenched his teeth as he stifled a small yelp from the sensation.

"Now, let's get you cleaned up, and then we'll put an ointment on that bruise of yers."

He saw her dip a gauze into some sort of cleansing agent, wiping it over James' bloody knuckles and revealing just how bad the bruise really was.

"We should probably warn you," Remus began. Madam Pomfrey briefly glanced up at him. "You may get a visit from some Ravenclaws."

She stopped, frowning at both boys.

"They were being prats, Poppy," explained James.

"Talking badly about Peter," Remus added. She pursed her lips, dipping the cloth back into the cleansing agent and shaking her head.

"A simple talking to was too much to ask for, eh?" the healer asked. However, before anyone else could respond, an awful retching sound erupted and ripped right through the entire wing. Remus' eyes went wide and James actually jolted at the sound, hissing when he felt a pain resonate from the bruise.

Immediately, Remus turned around, searching all over for the origins of the sound. His eyes landed on a crouched over body, a girl expelling the contents of her stomach onto her very own lap— with only a cotton hospital sheet to hold it. The girl heaved, lifting up and lurching forward as she purged,
for a second time, whatever was inside her.

Remus recognized her, his breath hitched somewhere in his throat as he couldn't help but ogle.

"Mother of dragons," breathed James from beside him, "is that blood?"

Yes, it was blood. Blood stained everywhere, on the sheets, on her hospital gown. Blood trickled down her mouth and all the way down under the dress, staining right through her breast. There was blood all over her lips, her nose, matted into her hair. Her eyes were bloodshot and they weren't looking anywhere in particular, matter of fact, Remus was convinced that the girl wasn't looking at all. She swayed back and forth in the low hospital bed, looking paler than a Nearly Headless Nick.

"Oh, my dear," Pomfrey fretted, quickly placing the tray on the wooden bedside table and scurrying over to the witch. She hadn't expected anyone else to come so early, and so she hadn't yet put the screens up around her. She shook her head and pursed her lips as she moved them to cover the Slytherin witch, looking down at her sorribly before enclosing her.

Remus followed his nurse's path as she made her way back over, nervously and hastily moving to finish up with them. He could tell that they weren't supposed to have seen it, but they had, and the image burned into his memory like a sizzling anvil.

"What's wrong with her?" James inquired.

"You know well that I'm not at liberty to say," she answered firmly. Remus had known that was going to be her response, and though he hadn't been the one to ask, he was still bloody curious...

And...

Worried? he thought to himself, slightly bewildered by his own emotions. He shook his head, pushing the thought far away as he brought his attention back to his injured friend.

"All right, you're good to go," Pomfrey smiled tightly up at the boys as James stood, feeling ten times better than how he had when he had first walked into the infirmary.

"Thank you, Poppy, you truly are the gem of this place," he grinned at her and she jokingly curtsied as James threw an arm over Remus' shoulders and escorted him out of the hospital wing. But before slipping out of the room, Remus stole a quick glance at the now screened-over bed.

"Prongs," Remus called down to his best friend, who had already trekked the stairs just outside the hospital wing.

"Yeah?" James turned around from the bottom of the landing.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Manasse," Remus whispered as if to make sure she didn't hear them.

"Oh yeah, bloody ugly that was, made my stomach curl," he frowned thinking about the scene.

"What do you reckon it is she has?"

James let out a low whistle, looking away as he racked his thoughts for some sort of answer. He shrugged, shaking his head as Remus finally joined him on the landing.
"Don't know, can't say I care all that much," he admitted. Remus nodded, but not without James noticing the slight fall in his expression. "Why do you care so much for her?"

"Why does everyone say that? I don't care about her," he exclaimed, his head tilted and his eyebrows furrowed as he looked to his friend.

"Because you do?" James replied bluntly.

"I don't think wanting to know why someone is vomiting blood counts as caring for them," he explained sharply.

"Moony," sighed James, running a hand through his hair, "you heard me wrong."

"What do you mean?" Remus stopped short, eyeing him. "Because between you, Lily, and Padfoot, I'm starting to think there's a conspiracy to make Manasse and I into star-crossed lovers."

James stared at his friend for a few moments, his eyes eventually squinting.

"Is that how you feel?"

"What?"

"That the two of you will become lovers?" clarified James.

"What!? No," rejected Remus with a short scoff, "are you taking the piss? It's just... it seems like I constantly hear her name, everyone constantly talks about her to me... It's just tiring is all."

James snorted, actually letting out a low chuckle as he flinched his head back to get a good look at Remus.

"You're right," James agreed.

"Come again?"

"You're right, you caught us," he joked.

Remus shook his head, crossing his arms: "sod off."

"Besides," James put his arm around Remus, "that's not what I meant. What I meant was that you worry about everyone and everything; you are just a big quaffle of worry and I really don't think you should be fretting over someone like her. Listen, mate, I know you, I know you've got a big heart, but you need to take care of yourself and prioritize who matters to you."

Remus couldn't believe this was James, his James Potter that was giving him psychological advice.

"You sound like Lily," Remus snorted.

"Oh yeah, she snogged me last night," James mentioned offhandedly.

"Come again?" Remus chuckled, his face falling when he turned and realized James had been serious. "WHAT!?!"

(The Next Day - 2 November 1977)

After he had finished his classes, and despite James' words and his own conscious, Remus found
himself heading towards an all too familiar part of the castle. Barely anyone lingered in these parts, the classrooms too far away and the day still too strong for late evening shagging in the shadows.

He had tried to fight against himself, knowing that he was just going to end up walking back up to the Gryffindor common room with the feeling of incomplete success on his shoulders. He had everything already played out in his mind: she would ignore him as he greeted her, there would then be a fleeting anger that pushed him to say something he didn't mean to her, and then he would regret and moan over it for the following days until something else occurred that made him drive it to the side.

But the sight and smell of blood was strong on his tongue. The image of her coughing up and spilling it all over herself, pooling over her cottoned lap and then slipping through onto her thighs pained his memory. And after noticing that she had missed class for the past two days, he wondered if she was still in that state. It wasn't necessarily him worrying about her; he was doing this for himself. He needed to get that image out of his mind, he needed to know, to see that she was doing better and that she had returned to her normal self. Remus was convinced that was the only way to move on from what he had witnessed.

He had one hand on the strap of his bag, the other rubbing the back of his neck as he unconsciously speed-walked towards the infirmary. His feet eventually brought him to the slightly ajar door, pushing it open and taking in the comforting scent of fresh cotton and aqua vitæ.

The screen divided her bed from the others; Remus unable to see her unless he stood right in front of her. He pursed his lips, waiting with bated breath for some sort of hurling sound that would indicate she wasn't any better. After what seemed like an eternity, it never came. He exhaled, still slightly nervous with twitching fingers next to his thigh as he stepped quietly over to her bed.

He sighed in relief, his shoulders dropping as he saw Eva, sitting up right with a mug of something between her hands and on her lap. There was no blood anywhere to be seen, everything was white and pristine, her hair looked clean and soft. Her normally shiny wavy-curls were slightly frizzy, puffed up as if someone had just brushed her hair. She had her knees up, looking down and flipping a page of a book as she blew on the steam coming off the cup.

"Good read?" he asked, breaking the silence but remaining where he stood. She looked up immediately through her eyelashes, averting her clouded gaze and scrunching her eyebrows just slightly as she wondered what on earth Remus Lupin, of all people, was doing standing in front of her.

She decided to ignore him, thinking he would go on and do whatever it was he was there to do. Minutes passed and Remus, instead of leaving, only came closer to her bed. He now stood at the end of it, looking down at the girl.

"You doing all right?" he continued.

"What are you doing here?" she asked quickly and quietly, her eyes turning up to his. They were slightly alarmed, wider than usual. The Gryffindor recognized and pinpointed the look as alarm, like a deer caught in headlights.

"I came to bring you the potions notes from today and yesterday," he explained, pulling the flap up from his worn-out satchel and rummaging through all the papers. Eventually, he pulled out a rather long list, his handwriting staining both the front and back, and handed it over to the Slytherin witch. She retracted back into her bed as if it were poison and, despite himself, Remus' eyebrows furrowed. "Um, I'll just leave 'em here, then." He reached over and laid them on the bedside stand.
"You can leave now," she told him, looking back down to her book. Remus scratched his eyebrow, realizing that this was a lot harder than he had expected it to be. Much to Eva's surprise, her potions partner began to retreat, noticing a slight head nod as he made way to turn around.

"Wait," he blurted out, spinning back around. He stood at the center-end of her bed, looking down at her with a firm and, if she wasn't mistaken, concerned expression. "Are you okay?"

Unbeknownst to him, Remus was subconsciously trying to make things right with the girl. Ever since he had ignored her cries for help in the Charms classroom, he had felt like an utter git. He had been able to push the feelings aside, excusing himself by saying that, at the end, Sofia had gone to help the girl, but ever since Lily's outburst, Remus had found himself thinking rather often about his potions partner. He couldn't help but think how awful that must have been, to suffer by herself as everyone stared, and when he had seen her the other day, vomiting and spewing blood out of her mouth, he realized that she might actually be sick. That it had nothing to do with panic attacks or fever, but the girl was actually sick and no one was there to help her. He couldn't help but draw parallels between herself and himself, knowing that his friends would have never left him like that.

"Are you joking?" she laughed dryly.

"Not exactly, no," he replied.

She shook her head and turned to place the mug on the bedside table. Her eyes darted around the space, looking past his head at the windows sitting high above them, and then back to his green stare.

"Lupin, stop wasting my time."

"Why? What else do you have to do right now? You know, besides sitting in a bed for the next week," he gibed.

"Excuse you," she croaked, "but I have plenty to do."

He stared at her, blinking several times before sighing and allowing himself to lean on one leg. She stared up at him incredulously, noticing the way his fingers were tapping against the strap of his leather bag.

"Spit it out, Lupin," she demanded him.

"I saw you in the hospital wing yesterday morning," he admitted after much hesitation, "and I wanted to know if you were doing all right."

Eva froze, her knees going straight on the bed as she leaned over and got a better look at him. His face was calm and composed, and she couldn't detect a hint of mockery or falseness to it. Her breath hitched in her throat, her gaze averted to the leg of the white screen.

"What do you mean you saw me?" Her voice was low, so low that most of what Remus had understood was because he had been watching her lips. She had been biting down into them, her hands over her thighs, pawing them like a nervous cat as she took the time to mull over his words.

"Uh, well… you know, you were vomiting blood… quite a bit of it, actually," he fumbled. She nodded slowly, her eyes closing as she took a deep breath.

"Okay, what do you want from me?"

"Come again?" Remus' head tilted, his entire face wrying up as he watched her lids open back up.
"Money? Do your assignments for the year? Sexual favors?" she listed, her eyes large and slightly teary as she stared up at him with desperation. Remus' mouth fell open, his body leaning slightly towards her as he eyed her up and down.

She's being serious, he realized.

"I... I don't want anything from you, Manasse," he assured her, his voice soft and concerned. He had come in to ask her what was wrong, and she had automatically assumed that he was there for some sort of blackmail; that he wanted her to pay him for his silence, and he suddenly felt something heavy inside him. His head flinched back as he realized that she wasn't used to someone caring for her, to someone simply asking how she was doing.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right, I swear," he rehashed, lifting his hands up to emphasize his innocence.

"Get out," she hissed, crawling back into the cushions behind her.

"Manasse—"

"Why do you constantly ask questions? What makes you so obsessed with me?" she accused him, her words as fast as her breaths.

"Asking someone whether they're okay doesn't make them obsessed," he defended himself, "in my world, it means that you care about the other person."

"Well, don't."

"Come again?"

"Don't care about me."

"I don't care about you."

She opened her mouth to say something but couldn't, shaking her head incredulously. "Do you think before you talk?"

"Normally, yeah," he retorted, trying his best to rack his already scrambled brain. Remus tried to recall why he had even bothered; proving his point that the two of them could not communicate to save their lives. He shook his head, scoffing at himself for even believing that things would be different this time.

"You know what? I don't have energy for this. You need to leave me alone. You keep putting your nose where it doesn't belong, trying to poke around where you're not supposed to; and don't ever ask me questions that don't pertain to our potions partnership ever again."

"Manasse, I'm not the villain, I'm not obsessed and I definitely don't expect anything from you. I was just wondering if you were doing okay," he surrendered, because Remus couldn't take it anymore. He was tired of this, one moment she was halfway decent, and the next she was cursing and telling him to bugger off. "For Agrippa's sake, is that so bad?"

"JUST STOP!" she shrieked, clamping her hands over her ears. Remus stepped back, Madam Pomfrey rushing in to her side. She grabbed the girl by her shoulders, pulling her into her chest as she brushed her hair. The nurse turned to the Gryffindor who watched with wide eyes, not sure why
there were tears running down the Slytherin's cheeks.

"I-I didn't do anything," he managed, his words heavy with doubt.

"I know," Madam Pomfrey mouthed to Remus. Realizing that it was probably best to give her some privacy, the Gryffindor retreated and moved away from the screen, taking a seat on the other side of it as he turned to watch Eva and Madam Pomfrey's silhouettes moving against themselves. He watched as the Slytherin gulped back an entire vial of something, laying back down into bed and having the sheets pulled over her body as she, he presumed, fell into an induced sleep.

He pursed his lips, his fingers pulling at the ends of his sleeves as he ran back over the conversation. Remus wondered if he shouldn't have been so harsh, so persistent. Or maybe, he just shouldn't have come in the first place; that it hadn't only been a mistake because she couldn't stand him, but because she needed time to heal.

"Remus," he heard someone call him delicately, he looked up to meet Madam Pomfrey's kind eyes. Immediately, he got up, walking over to her.

"I was very diplomatic, I swear," he began, but before he could reply, she placed a hand on his forearm and escorted him towards the door. Once far enough away, she looked over at Eva with pursed lips and then back at Remus.

"I know, I heard everything. She's worried you're going to tell every—"

"I would never," he interrupted hastily.

"I know, I know, but she doesn't. And she's a lil' sensitive this day, a lot of pain, just got her to calm down this mornin'," Remus looked over Madam Pomfrey's head and at the now-hidden witch. He hadn't intended to make her anxious, he hadn't wanted to send her into a panic.

"Shit," he slipped out in an undertone, Madam Pomfrey's eyebrows raising just slightly. "Excuse me."

"Now go, she's resting. It was nice of you to stop by, you're the only visitor she's had," and Remus couldn't help but notice the sadness to his healer's voice.

"Too bad she hates me," snorted Remus, pushing his back on the door to open it.

"Oh no, m'dear," Madam Pomfrey heartened, "distrust and hate are two very different things. I promise you, Miss Manasse doesn't hate you."

Remus' eyebrows furrowed, pausing and staring down at the nurse as if she had told him to go feed her pet dragon. He tilted his head just slightly, his head bowed down.

"Huh," he said to himself before giving one final push against the door. The cool air swung into the temperate room, blowing his hair into an uncomfortable position as Madam Pomfrey waved him a small goodbye. He smiled in return, turning around and walking off into the castle with the remnants of the fact that Madam Pomfrey, a very keen and observant mind, had deduced that Eva didn't hate him with everything in her soul. He snorted again, shaking his head with a puzzled smile as he began hiking up the stairs towards the Gryffindor tower.

There was a bittersweet tang on his teeth, making him clench them together as the healer's words sunk deeper into him. The idea that Eva didn't hate him made confused. On one hand, he wanted to try and understand his partner for who she really was. Not because he lusted after her or craved her company, but because he needed to understand just how exactly he felt about her, where she fit in his
life. Remus needed that sort of organization, he needed to position everyone correctly so that he, himself, didn't feel overburdened and messy. The idea that she didn't hate him left him wary because this entire time he had been convinced of it, he had treated her accordingly, and if it proved to be false, well... Remus didn't like the idea of the guilt he would feel if he confirmed that Eva didn't actually hate him.
Remus didn't really know what he was doing. He didn't know exactly how or why he found himself standing, once again, outside the closed wooden doors of the infirmary. His lips pursed together, his fingers tapping the leather shoulder strap as he carved his eyes over the caduceus placed in the center of both mahogany doors.

He hadn't intended on coming again, especially not after the mess he had caused the first time 'round, but yesterday evening, when he had tried to unproductively clock in some late-night muggle reading, he had found his thoughts wondering back over to Madam Pomfrey's assessment. The story of Sir Stafford Nye's unexpected twist in Frankfurt's passenger lounge had gradually begun to irritate him as an uncharted fretfulness prodded and poked at his brain; a tiny, dark-haired witch popping up every once in awhile as he tried to figure out the mystery in advance.

However, the mystery hadn't been within the book he had held, but the one that perturbed him since that afternoon. He realized that he had been rather fulfilled with the notion that Eva Manasse hated him, that it provided him with a basis off of which he could manage his partnership with her. It gave a rational explanation to her attitude towards him, it offered him an excuse for being short and cynical with her, and yet, the very pinch of a possibility that she didn't hate him, which should have come as a relief, only peevd him further. And though he had returned with the intention to investigate, he found his mind racing against itself—his hands slightly clammy and his heart beating a little too fast as he tried to rapidly list out why and how this wasn't a moronic mistake.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. With one last huff and a final glance at the infirmary's emblem, he placed his palm onto the swinging door and entered the light-filled room. The Gryffindor's eyes toured it as Madam Pomfrey looked up from where she had been collecting glass vials of a now empty bed. The matron's eyebrow imperceptibly raised at the wizard, who had transfixed himself on the screened bed.

Eventually, his head turned to her; shoving his hands into his pockets when he realized she was scrutinizing him.

"Uh," he approached the nurse, "is she— could I speak with her?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded, an eyebrow somewhat cocked as he turned back towards the Slytherin witch. A knowing smile began to build across her thin, prematurely aged lips; and with a satisfied hmpf!, she turned back to her office and set a kettle to boil. The Gryffindor watched as she retreated with her back turned to him, and with one last readjustment of his shoulder strap, he, too, turned to tap his knuckle against one of the screen's aluminum poles. Eva, who sat with her legs crossed on the bed, a book in her lap, and a blanket over her shoulders, looked up at him.

Her eyes widened and wrinkles appeared between her eyebrows. Remus could swear that there had been a hint of flare to her nostrils.

"Hell-oh," he greeted guardedly, lifting his neck to crack it as he eyed her. Her hair was still puffy like it had been yesterday, out of its usual chignon and falling over her shoulders, and her gown swallowed her small body, consequently causing the neckline to droop rather low and expose her décolletage. His eyebrows lifted at the soft raise and curve that hinted at her breasts, of which he was now acutely aware of being much fuller than he would have ever imagined.

Remus blinked away the idea, immediately pulling his gaze up when he heard a book snap shut. A heat creeped up his neck and clung onto his ears, hoping, praying that she hadn't noticed him ogling
"Why are you here, again?" she asked shortly.

But Remus had already expected it - no - planned for it. He had spent a good deal of breakfast trying to think up of an excuse— until Slughorn had handed it to him on a silver platter the next hour. At once, he opened his bag and reached into it, pulling out 36 inches of french-vanilla parchment.

"It's the baneberry essay, I came to give it to you— you got an O, I thought you'd want to put it into your portfolio," he explained, handing it over to her.

"Why wouldn't you keep it? As much yours as it is mine," she muttered, not bothering to take it from him. The same bizarre, rather suspicious, expression overtook her features as it had yesterday when he had attempted to give her his notes. He tilted his head slightly, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Uh, well, you're the one who wrote it," he replied disparagingly, which didn't go unnoticed by Eva. She turned her gaze back to him.

"What do you mean? Why didn't you add anything?"

"You're havin' a laugh? Last time I tried, you told me that I was rubbish at writing," he retorted.

Eva's eyes moved far away, eyeing the handle of the bedside table that sat on the opposite side of the wing. Her thoughts fought against one another as Remus tried to decipher what exactly he saw traverse her face. One moment it had been a scowl, an unwelcome expression that told him to turn around and walk away, but now, well, now it was nearly deferential.

Still puzzled, she investigated: "I don't recall ever calling your work rubbish."

"No, I mean…" But his open mouth came to a slow close; her tone had thrown him off, and Remus wasn't exactly sure how he could be upset with someone who spoke so gently. The Gryffindor stumbled over the sentences he had prepared, having once been so sure of them, and now no longer sure if they were appropriate. "I mean, you implied it— you said that I wasn't objective enough, and then scowled as I took it from you," he clarified. She blinked a couple of times.

"Constructively criticizing your work doesn't make it an insult," Eva countered. Tilting her head, she eyed him up and down, and then continued: "Actually, I think you've taken my words and morphed them into something more spiteful than what I had intended."

"You're saying I'm making up rubbish in my head in order to make you look bad?" he inquired, his eyebrows scrunched and a slight incredulity to his tongue.

"Yes," she nodded, releasing a heavy, almost disappointed, sigh. Her mouth was slightly opened, the rings of her eyes lined thick with a raw pink-red. And Remus wanted, tried to argue, but how could he? The girl looked horrible, to put things plainly. She had bags heavier than his own before a full moon, and she kept smacking her lips as if she was suffering from extreme dehydration. Remus couldn't argue with her, he couldn't say half the things he had come in here to say when looking at the near-zombie sitting in front of him.

And apart from all that, her eyes were wide, completely empty of any malice or bad intent.

"Besides," she went on, Remus blinking himself awake, "I don't think your writing is bad, at all."

"Oh," was all he managed, "then— I mean, you know, why say those things?"
"Your style is not well-suited for potions," she answered plainly, her eyes wondering over the tie he wore. And though any other Slytherin would have grimaced at the presumptuous burgundy and the obnoxious gold, Eva found herself irked by the way it bunched up and out of the v-neck jumper, wanting nothing more than to wrap her fingers around it and place it back into its proper spot.

"Which would be what, exactly?" he urged on, finding himself curious.

"Objectivity, pragmatism, and factual evidence," she paused and looked back up at him.

"So... I'm not objective or pragmatic is what you're trying to say?"

Eva had to stifle a scoff, and instead shook her head as she looked away from him. Once again, she lost herself in her thoughts, her fingers squaring the book that sat on her ankles, absentmindedly rubbing the sides with her pointer fingers. Remus placed his hands into his pockets, shifting side to side with his lips pushed to the left, but as he tried to think of what else to say, he caught the faintest of smiles developing on Eva's stoic facade.

"Amusing you, am I?" he teased, but received no reply, even the smile had already escaped her, sending them back into a stiff silence. Remus found himself impatiently running a hand through his hair, his eyes bouncing over to the clock that hung by Madam Pomfrey's office. "You're not gonna' answer me, are you?"

And then she did the unexpected. She crawled away from the bed's headboard and approached him, repositioning herself at the edge so that she sat directly in front of him. In her new stance, it dawned on Remus just how much shorter she was than him. Sure, he had noticed in the forest, but they hadn't been nearly as close; and now he couldn't help but silently concur with his friends that they were right- if anyone was to look at the two of them now, they surely would resemble a distorted version of Dumbledore and Flitwick.

"Would... Would you prefer if I sat?" he inquired, watching as she strained her neck to meet his eye.

"Whatever you prefer," she shrugged. Like always, her words were left for grabs- Remus never sure whether to follow through with them or not. But whether it was because of her inebriated, fatigued state, or because she had decided that, for once, he may be worth her time, he decided to take the opportunity and hear her out.

The Gryffindor almost went to sit next to her on the bed, but thought better of it and darted around for some sort of seating. He found a dilapidated visitor's chair sitting against the stone wall just behind him. He wrapped his fingers around the wooden top rail and swung it around so that the pair now sat across from one another. Surprisingly, there were no protests from her part. The Slytherin witch sat silently with her legs folded underneath her, her eyes following him as he placed his bag to the floor and his body to the chair.

He looked up at her, nodding his head eagerly to tell her to go on. She couldn't help the breathlessness caused by the fine lines scrunching up in the corners of his eyes, the barest of childish smiles on his face as he eyed her inquisitively. For one of the very few times in her life, Eva looked away and refused eye contact; having been taught the exact opposite, this was odd for the witch, and the sensation too foreign for her to pinpoint accurately.

"Okay," she dove in with the hope that it would distract her, "your writing is... personal, full of your own ideas of ethics and morals, which isn't necessarily a problem, but it isn't useful for a subject such as potions. I reckon you have a hard time receiving high marks on your Charms essays as well."

Her words came to a stop, briefly glancing up at him through her eyelashes. When she realized that
he had been surveying her the entire time, she found herself averting her gaze once again.

"Sure, yeah," he agreed without question. More than her theories on his writing style, Remus was curious about her comportment. And as the girl returned to explaining, he found the words trailing off in his mind while he watched her unconsciously paw at her thighs, just barely rocking back and forth. The Gryffindor lifted his green-eyes back up to hers, and, as he found her often doing during class, they were looking into the horizon. The glaze over them too distant and too airy, leaving him to only guess that whatever she was looking at was intangible. He raised his eyebrows, watching the way her pink, slightly chapped, lips mouthing something to him. Then his eyes travelled further down, washing over her collarbones that stuck out from under her skin, her chest bones standing out prominently underneath the light coming in from the window. He dared himself to continue, secretly yearning for another look of her barely clothed breasts, finding them just as luxuriously soft and full as he had moments ago. Her nipples had gone taut from the movement she made, her hair swinging over them, brushing over them.

_Bloody hell_, Remus realized, immediately bringing his eyes back up and to the ceiling. He picked up his heavy robes and swung them over the uncomfortable tightening in his pants, glad that Eva had been off in her foreign lands as he thought about how it would feel to replace the strands of her hair with his thumb. Remus had to stifle a scowl as he felt another shift in his trousers. He hadn't meant to, he hadn't intended on coming here and thinking about things he ought not to think about, but, _Merlin_, did she have nice-

God, he felt like a hormonal twelve year old pervert.

"Lupin?"

"Huh?" he blurted out at the sound of his name. The act alone pulled him from his stupor, only to find iced-over hazel eyes beginning to narrow.

"You didn't hear a word I just said, did you?"

His ears went as red as his house-themed socks. He averted his gaze from her, scrubbing a hand over his face as he tried to desperately grasp the few words he may or may not have heard.

"No, no, of course I did," he lied. Eva scoffed, shaking her head incredulously. The Gryffindor was terrible at lying, and she was almost keen on making him aware of the fact, but not until she admitted as to what a fool she had made of herself. Of course he hadn't been listening, of course he didn't care what she had to say. No one ever did, no one ever thought it important enough. Why had she expected him to be any different?

"Just go," she dismissed him.

"What? Why?"

"Why did you come here? To stare at the walls?" She watched as the Gryffindor's mouth opened to speak, obviously choked up and searching for some sort of semi-excusable response.

Remus closed his mouth, not really sure what he could say. On one hand, he wanted to bite back to make her realize that she often did the same, but he didn't have the heart. Her lids were too purple, and she had visible veins running up her neck from the stress of vomiting. Madam Pomfrey had said that she had been in great pain, and the Slytherin witch sported the same teary-eyed look she had had yesterday.

He felt like a right git for not listening to her.
"I'm sorry," he said in an undertone, "it's not that I wasn't paying attention, I'm just a lil' muddled is all. You're being... well," he paused, tilting his head as if gesturing to something on the floor, "you're being nice, you know, all of a sudden."

Much to his surprise, that seemed to have done the trick, for Eva sat back, her posture becoming noticeably less defensive as she considered him.

"Explaining to you my reasoning is not me being nice," she informed him, her words careful and so calculated that Remus didn't even bother holding back the snort that escaped from his rather bemused smile.

"Really? And which pureblood etiquette pamphlet did you pull that one out of? I must say— they really do make sure they cover every possible scenario," he quipped, sitting more comfortably. Her head faintly jerked back and she held a stupefied daze as she looked at him.

"Excuse you," she said, her hand reaching up and fanning over her breastbone, "are you accusing me of being false?"

"It wouldn't be the first time you were," he countered, his eyebrows raised in a challenging manner. She pressed her lips together, her shoulders falling over with the sound of a sigh as she realized he was right. But Eva wouldn't give up that easily, sure, he was quick enough to recall the regrettable conversation they had had so many late afternoons ago, but that didn't mean he could use that against her. It didn't mean that he could come here under false pretenses, make her explain her thoughts to him just so he could ignore her- she refused to be the punchline of some cruel joke.

"If you're not going to be cordial, you may leave," she reiterated, crossing her hands over her chest.

"That would entail that I have the option to stay," Remus countered smugly.

Eva ran a hand through her hair and shifted uncomfortably as she felt an odd rise of heat wash over her. Her heart beat a little faster, the tips of her fingers and toes slowly turned cold as needles pricked at them. Her once cold stare had turned into something panicky; her eyes darted around the room, manically searching for something. Remus leaned forward when he saw the witch pressed both palms into her thighs, her breath heavy and her face pointed downwards. The once mischievous glimmer disappeared into complete vigilance, his jaw slack and his head bowed in order to get a better look. Eva looked white-washed, pale just as she had been two days ago. And before he could react properly, Remus lurched forward and grabbed the Slytherin witch mid-fall, impeding her from dropping face-forward off the bed and into the stone floor.

"Manasse," he flustered, his arms around her as he made way to sit next to her on the bed. With one hand now placed gently across her back, holding her to his chest as she breathed sporadically, Remus looked up and searched the room.

"PO-" he began, but faltered as soon as he felt a small hand clasp around his wrist and twist it. If she hadn't been so weak, he reckoned that it would have hurt a great deal more than it actually had. He stared at her with a bewildered expression.

"Wh-"

"Don't call her," he heard her sneer between breaths. Though the wizard wasn't sure whether that was the brightest of ideas, but also not wanting to push the witch any further, he obliged, holding her in his arms, his legs awkwardly placed diagonally off the bed as he tried his best to keep her against his torso. And despite everything, Remus couldn't believe that the witch, although just about ready to pass out, still managed to threaten him. It amused him to the point where he felt a snort escape him.
“Do you feel weak? Feel like you're going to faint?” Remus inquired, looking around for a goblet of water. He eyed the pitcher, reaching over and grasping Eva with his one hand to make sure she didn't bend over again. Managing to reach it with just the barest touch of his fingertips, he continued to pull it closer and closer until finally he could grab a hold of the handle. He lifted up the pitcher, heavier than he had expected, and shifted himself so that Eva was laying against him more comfortably.

He could feel the corners of her lips lift up into a smile.

"Sorry, it was closer than the goblet," he apologized sheepishly. She struggled to reach it, and Remus, without hesitation, brought the glass pitcher to her lips. He watched her as she took desperate gulps of it, forcing the water down as if she were willing to drink stale mead if it meant she'd feel all right. The wizard couldn't help the slight raise of his brows as he watched some of it trickling down her chin.

He reached out and wiped the drops away with the end of sleeve.

"You don't have to do that," she mumbled, letting her accent come through- she couldn't be bothered to speak proper King's English in that moment. On the other hand, Remus caught himself, not even having realized what he had just done. He hadn't meant to clean her up, it had been so instinctive, as if he hadn't even the choice.

"Just water, not a problem," he assured, not entirely sure whether it had been to himself or to the Slytherin leaning into his chest. "Here, you know what would help? Chocolate."

"Mm?" he heard, some hot air being blown into his breast. He chuckled, once again holding her firmly with one hand as he scrambled into his pockets and searched for his prized possession.

"No, there joccheruine."

"Come again?"

"Wrackspurts," she repeated, doing her best to muster both English that was un-accented and filtered. He felt bad for making her repeat herself, the words having come out too sharply and too painful for him not to wince. He felt her sigh heavily against him, her body dropping further into his own. The act caused her hair to brush up against his neck, the soft strands tickling at it as he smiled the feeling away.

"Excuse my ignorance, but what is a wrackspur?"

"'Rackspurt," she corrected him, her accent switching back on, "zis place iz filled wiz zem."

"A rackspeur?"

Eva almost wanted to laugh at his horrible imitation of her heavily frenchified version of the English term.

"Creatures zat make your brain go fuzzy," she answered.

"Creatures that make your brain go fuzzy," he repeated to himself. "You're saying you were about to faint because of some creature instead of a sugar dip?"

She nodded against his body, causing his face to scrunch up as he continued to do his best in ignoring the hairs that brushed against his Adam's apple.
"Oh, all right," was all he managed to think of. "So, is there some sort of spell I can cast to ward off these creatures?"

She shook her head against him, "no, just zink 'appy zoughts is all."

"Ah," but contrary to whatever the Slytherin witch believed, Remus wasn't entirely convinced. "Are you sure you don't want any chocolate? Certainly makes me happy," he added.

"I like chocolat," the Gryffindor heard her say. Just as before, he held her tightly around her shoulders using one arm, and reached, for the second time, into his robes to pull out whatever he hadn't already consumed of that day's chocolate bar. He pressed it against his thigh, hearing the satisfying crack of breaking chocolate, and reaching into the foil with his long fingers to grab the square.

"Here," he handed it over to her, holding it there. But he realized, as he felt her hand slide from his thigh to his knee, that she was too weak to lift her hand.

"Oh, so now I have to feed you too?" he teased lightly, willingly placing the chocolate to her lips as she slowly consumed it. The mixture turned gunk-like in her dry throat, the concoction going down slowly like unwanted bread. But she couldn't deny, the sugar did make her feel better. "Don't forget to take deep breaths," he added, noticing her sporadic breathing.

They sat in silence for a while, Remus periodically glancing down to watch her, feeling her jaw move as she attacked the chocolate. He found himself with a slow smile developing on his lips. Sure, maybe it was like laughing at a funeral, completely inappropriate and unwarranted, but the way she ate, her mouth closed and nibbling at the sweet, reminded him too much of the time Jamie Hughes had snuck a bunny into the Gryffindor common room, and instead of everyone ratting her out, they had all brought up carrots to feed the animal.

So, Eva ate chocolate like graduated Jamie's fugitive bunny rabbit ate carrots, and the thought that someone like Eva could be compared as such, was the reason for the bemused smirk.

"Hey," he whispered. "How you feelin'?"

"Poorly," she rasped, her voice barely there.

"You sure you don't want me to call for Pomfrey?"

"Yeah, it happens all the time. Happy thoughts," she mumbled. Remus scoffed lightly - although in a non-offensive manner - just a light huff out of his body as he looked up to the window. He couldn't help the feeling of squeezing her tighter to him, her voice so delicate and quiet that it almost made her seem innocent. And not only that, the girl just seemed to be going through hell. In a matter of days she had vomited blood, had what seemed to be multiple panic attacks, and fainted. If anyone needed a hug, it was her.

"Right, happy thoughts… want some more chocolate?"

"Okay," she managed. He turned to grab the bar he had let sit at his side, breaking off another piece.

"Can you handle it by yourself or-?"

He saw her try and lift up her hand, only to have it come crashing back down.

"Wait," he heard her breathe to him as he made way to feed it to her. He pulled his chin all the way into his neck, getting a good look of the witch as she scrunched her nose and eyed the chocolate.
Then, in one swift and painfully forced movement, she jutted her hand out and snagged the chocolate from him. Remus' head flinched forward, a deep, hearty chuckle lifting up from his chest.

"Excuse me," he attempted through the laughter, "but you're too much, Manasse."

"Hmph," was all she could muster, not really caring if he found her 'too much'.

Eva, as she relished in the warmth that both the chocolate and the boy provided her, couldn't help but note how unusually kind he was being to her, and not only kind, but collected. He hadn't panicked, he hadn't jumped and jolted out of the room; no, he hadn't done anything except help her. She bit down on the chocolate, a voice insider her bashing her all while she counted how many beats his heart made in a minute. Eva knew she would have to deal with it later, confront her stupidity and blasphemy, but, for now, and after two days of being Baltic cold, where shouldn't even feel her own feet, the wizard's embrace was the lighthouse to her wrecked ship.

"Now that we're here," she began, "I have been meaning to tell you." Remus' ears perked up.

"Yeah?"

"You have to swear to me you won't tell anyone what you saw, in the hospital wing," she said.

"It's not mine to tell," he assured her. Remus would never have even dreamed of it. He knew what it felt like to be sick, to be scared of everyone finding out a terrible secret. This was her story to tell, and he would never take her ability, her freedom, to let her decide what to do with it. And, in some way, he wished he could tell her that, that he could show her that he wasn't just a dirty mutt...

"Okay," she nodded, taking a leap of faith and trusting him- but did she really have a choice? "Lupin."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," she whispered. Remus briefly stopped thinking, his scrunched eyebrows releasing themselves as they lifted into his hairline.

"For?" Eva placed both her palms on his chest, lifting herself up so that they were finally looking one another in the eye.

"The chocolate," she giggled goofily, her head still a little fuzzy. Remus felt himself momentarily shut down and his vision go a little blurry as he zoned out. For some reason, the look she sent made him feel as if they were the only two people in the entire world. When she stopped laughing, he came back to his senses, blinking several times as he smiled weakly at her and wondered what in Merlin's name had just happened to him.

"Yeah, anytime," he responded, his smile faltering as he felt her cheek press back against the Gryffindor emblem on his jumper.

He heard someone at the end of the bed and jerked backward at the sudden presence. Looking up, he noticed a very bemused Madam Pomfrey. She held a tray of biscuits and tea, and Remus couldn't help but blush at their current position— he was holding a sickly looking witch in his arms as he giggled like a little girl.

He let go of her immediately, and the look Eva gave him made his heart stop. She had looked up at him like a rapid dog, her hair swinging across her shoulders as a look of shock and betrayal flashed across her eyes, as if letting her go was the worst possible thing he could have done. But the expression had gone as fast as it had arrived, and Remus was left dumbfounded by the entire second.
"I… I should get going," he muttered.

"I've brought afternoon tea for you two," Madam Pomfrey explained, placing the tray down on the empty spot behind Remus and Eva. The hazel-eyed witch tilted her head, looking up at Remus with doe-like eyes, wondering, and nearly convinced, that he would stay. He had bothered her time and time again, constantly pestering and hankering for her attention.

**Why wouldn't he stay?** she asked herself.

"Oh," Remus let slip, looking over at the steaming pot, "well, I'm sorry I can't stay— I've got tutoring with some first years."

"That's all right," assured Madam Pomfrey, "I'm sure Eva would have liked the company."

Because Madam Pomfrey knew that Eva enjoyed the Gryffindor's presence more than she let on, more than the boy could realize. She saw how Eva looked up at the door every time she heard it open up; she knew what it looked like when someone, who had been shown nothing but aggression all their lives, finally encountered a bit of kindness— at first, they fell, and then they hungrily chased after it, which scared them, just like the shakes did to an alcoholic.

"No, I'd rather be alone," she countered.

The matron also knew what denial looked like.

Eva's eyes thinned, staring at him. She knew he had just lied, she knew because she knew when everyone lied. No matter how good they thought they were, she could detect the scent of dishonesty from a mile away. She scowled at him, looking him up and down. Remus' gaze turned back to her, and the laughter and softness that had just been there moments ago had disappeared.

"Why did you even come?" she hissed at him as they heard the nurse retreat back to her office.

"I-"

"Just go," she told him, hastily scrambling herself up and off the bed in order to put distance between the two of them. She pointed at the door, her eyes wide and her teeth clenched.

"Manasse, what—"

"I said go!"

"Uh, okay," Remus mustered, pocketing the chocolate and retrieving his bag. "Will you be here tomorrow?"

Eva didn't entertain him with an answer, she wanted him gone.

"Manasse?" Remus attempted as he lifted himself up off the bed. She sat back down, turning her back to him and pouring herself tea. He tilted his head slightly, not sure what had caused the sudden shift in her mood.

"Would you like for me to stop by tomorrow?" he tried a third time, wrapping his bag over his shoulder.

"No," she hissed. Remus blinked.

"Are you angry with me?" he exasperated, leaning over to get a better look at her. She picked up her blanket and wrapped it around herself as she continued to ignore him. He straightened his back,
shaking his head with an incredulous scoff. "You know what, never mind. Don't even know why I bloody bother with you."

"Yeah, well, neither do I— you don't even want to be here," she grumbled under her breath.

"What?" Remus hadn't heard a word she had said, a pinched expression on his face, watching the ripples in her cotton dress move across her thin shoulder blades as she played with the tea set.

His words strung her more than he could ever have imagined, more than she could have ever imagined. Her fingers paused as they laid against the silver spoon. She blinked and held her breath, listening as he turned on his hell and began to walk away. Eva looked over her shoulder, watching his retreat, secretly hoping that he wold turn back around like he had yesterday.

But he didn't.

And then he was gone.

And there were two cups.

But only one who would be used, the other neglected.

*Oh, dearie, we're always here,* hymned the voices.

*Yes, hello, how could I ever forget?* she replied. There was no reason to ignore them, they obviously couldn't be written off or forgotten. Eva had voices in her head, they spoke to her, they screeched at her- and she no longer denied them.

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Though not a national holiday, the Marauders always treated one another's birthdays as if they were. Filled with booze, music, festivities and plenty of gifts to go around, the boys always made sure that, for the past seven years, the days commemorating the day they were brought into this world were always memorable.

But this year there was no over-crowded common room or some random classroom they had managed to manipulate into a temporary dance hall. This year, Sirius had requested a simple gathering with the four people he cared for most, his family, his brothers. And he didn't want random strangers or barely-knows to show up, he just wanted them and a good bottle of Ogden's finest.

And so, James had made sure that he had signed up Remus and himself as the patrols for that evening, and Peter had made sure to bring the drink, and Remus had made sure that the Astronomy Tower's observation deck was properly covered in temporary atmospheric heating charms with blankets and pillows from the divination room to serve as their seating accommodations.

So, they sat there, underneath the stars as they threw their heads back and let their laughter rise up to the heavens, their bodies heated with whiskey and their brains filled with the young ideas of what life should be like. Up there, on that Astronomy Tower, no one could touch them, they were above all the travails that the world had to offer them, momentarily taking the time as they relished in their altered reality.

"Aw, no, come on mate, it's my birthday— at least pretend to be happy," mocked Sirius, smiling as he kissed the bottle with his lips, looking over its fat-rounded bottom to James, who sat with his legs crossed and an uncharacteristically hunched back. The Head Boy looked up at them with the best smile he could muster, shrugging his shoulders as he turned to each one of his friends.

"I am happy," he assured them.
"And I'm Jack the Ripper," countered Sirius.

"Come off it, Padfoot," Remus told him, moving his gaze from James over to the bottle-holding, smugly grinning wizard who, unknowingly, wore a hoodie that had POTTER written in yellow letters across the back.

"I'm swell, solemnly swear," James rehashed, cutting his hand through the air to emphasize his words.

"I'd dump the slag," muttered Peter, tapping his wand against the cap of a bottle of ale that had been left over from the Halloween Party. It danced off, clinking and clattering across the ground.

"Don't call her that," James warned him sternly. Peter glanced over at him, turning to Sirius and then back to James' daggers. His head flinched back, a very visible double chin appearing.

"What?" POP! went the bottle as it came off of Peter's lips. The blue-eyed wizard's mouth fell open, staring wide-eyed at his friends, "you lot are not defending her?" When no one replied, he shook his head. "She hurt our best mate."

"I'm fine," countered James.

Sirius considered the smallest of the group, pursing his lips and tilting his head back and forth as he weighed the offense.

"It was kind of slaggish," Sirius agreed with Peter, half his face pinching up and scrunching together.

"It wasn't," Remus argued, "but it was inconsiderate."

"Well, since Moony said it, it's gotta' be true," Sirius sniggered.

"It is true," cut of Remus, sending a reprimanding glower to Sirius, "and James is hurt, that's nothing to joke about."

Because, at the end of the day, there had been plenty of blokes at the party, and Lily had gone after the only one who, she knew, would have felt the sting the very next morning. Remus tried to understand her line of thinking, wanting to believe that she did it out of spite, as a way to get back at James after years of him tormenting her best friend, and consequently putting her into their cross-hairs. He didn't want to think that she had done it because she knew it'd have been easy, because Lily wasn't like that. At least, not the Lily he knew. She was compassionate and gentle and always ready to stand up for the under-dog.

But, of course, James wasn't the under-dog, and maybe that's why she hadn't thought to care enough.

"He said he was over her," Sirius reminded him, eyebrows raised.

Remus almost snorted, shaking his head instead as they both knew - they all knew - that it would take a great deal more than just a summer away for James to get over Lily Evans. Actually, Remus was certain that it would take Lily's doppleganger and an obliviation to make him forget about her.

He looked down at James, who sat next to him, the Gryffindor was running his fingers over the goblet that he had transfigured from a belt. His lips were pursed, looking down into the contents as he tried to forget the pit that he felt in his stomach. He hated himself for it, kicking himself in the arse for feeling that way. The black-haired Gryffindor wasn't used to being the black cloud, wasn't used to feeling the corners of his lips downturned. And yet, here they were, thinking of the burn he had felt that next morning.
Once he and Remus had returned to the dorms from their hospital visit, James had gone and taken a shower using Sirius’ fancy soaps, he had asked Remus to help him with his disheveled hair, both boys doing their best to make him look more well-kept. The Gryffindors went down to breakfast, James not even touching his food as he felt his knee jump, fighting the urge to not run his hand through his hair. Remus had looked at him with an amused, curious expression as James fixated on the Great Hall’s entrance way, until he saw her. She walked in with her silky, dark red hair and her perfectly ironed uniform. He had immediately stood up from his seat, waiting for her as she walked down the aisle, thinking, certain that she was going to talk to him, that she was going to confess her undying love to him.

But she hadn't.

She had walked right past him.

And James, with a gaped mouth and a terrible heartburn, followed her as she went and took a seat next to Dorcas Meadowes and Dirk Cresswell.

He knew rejection was going to hurt, but he hadn't expected to feel like that.

And so he ran his hands through his hair, said "fuck it all", asked Remus for a cigarette, but ended up smoking ten each.

"Whatever— got my hopes up, my fault," he admitted, emptying the whiskey from his cup and letting it fill the void in his stomach. Remus placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, James turning around with a weak smile as Remus returned it.

"All righty," Sirius announced, sitting up and clapping his hands together. He eyed James intensely, reading into his emotions as he tried to figure out the best recourse for this sort of situation. Sure, he wasn't adept at broken hearts, and never in a million years did he think he'd have to deal with James', but apparently there really was a first time for everything. "I say, we drink up to here," Sirius held up the bottle and pointed to the bottom of the label, "then, we're going to talk about who has the biggest tits in our year. Yeah?"

"Everyone knows Selwyn has the biggest tits," chimed in Peter.

Remus rolled his eyes, but James eyed the bottle.

"Can't we talk about something else?" James muttered.

"If he wants to talk about tits, let 'im talk about tits," said Peter. "It's his bloody birthday."

Immediately, a pang of guilt vibrated through James. He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he realized he was being a right git. He nodded, putting on his best party mask and taking a swig at the near-full bottle. They all watched him as he continued gulping, Remus having to place a hand on the end of the bottle and pull it away from him.

"Don't worry, you'll be on the floor in half an hour," Remus told him, James wiping away at his mouth with the back of his hand. The wizard blinked and widened his eyes as the alcohol caused his head to sway.

And so, Sirius went on to talk about girls and the Brazilian Quidditch match he had read about in the Daily Prophet where half the crowd had been topless. And Peter paid attention, nodding and snickering every so often, and James did his best to put his full mind into the conversation, anything Quidditch-related being a safe bet, and eventually the alcohol did get to him and the false grin on his face turned into a drunken one, allowing Remus think of things other than James' pain. The
Gryffindor prefect allowed his shoulders to relax and leaned against the stone wall. The back of his head pressed into it, leaning back and looking up at the stars. And sure, a song played in his mind and he unconsciously bopped his head to it, not realizing that he, too, was just as pissed as the other three. And he let himself dangerously think of a tiny, dark-haired witch sitting five stories underneath. He sighed, tapping his fingers against the bottle's glass, realizing that he was thinking about Eva, Eva Manasse who had so harshly kicked him out, who had made time freeze with her laugh, who had made him rack his brain for some sort of logical explanation.

No — he stopped himself, the logical explanation was that he was making rubbish up in his head. It wasn't complicated or difficult to comprehend: Eva couldn't stand him, and he couldn't stand Eva. Simple and done.

Oh, but did his whiskied-ale inebriated brain like to think about her. Never in a million years would he have thought he'd be attracted to her. Sure, she was an attractive witch in the way that many pureblood witches were: poised with neat and proportionate features, hair always done tidily, posture immaculate. None of that was his type, and never did he think she would have been until he had seen her all ragged and tossed in the hospital wing, with nothing but a cotton dress to cover her. Her hair had been out of its hold, imperfect, she sat with a hunched back, which only emphasized the dip of her breasts…

"It'd be nice to have a lass," he recalled Gideon's words, internally agreeing with him. Right now, on that tower, it really would be nice to have a girl to warm him up. To sit on his lap, to wrap her hands in his hair, to pull at his robes as she sighed and enveloped them in her jasmine—

God.

He had to stop, he really, really, had to stop.

He gulped down another sip from his bottle, looking back up to the sky.

And sure, maybe knowing that she had ample breasts drove his wolf-teenage boy brain crazy- but that was it. It didn't go any further than that, and he still preferred girls with round brown eyes, on the heavier side, with a bit of spunk and a warm personality. Not bony witches with large breasts who could extinguish a fire with their stare.

"Moony," he heard someone call.

"Huh." Remus looked over at them, his skull rolling against the stone wall.

"Pissed yet?" chuckled Sirius. Remus nodded lazily, his eyes already half-shut as he joined in on the laughter.

"Oh," James blurted, looking up at his green-eyed friend, "Siencyn was looking for you today."

A slight scrunch appeared between his eyebrows. "Ed? Did he say for what?"

"No, I told him to catch you tomorrow mornin'. I was too busy trying to keep Marly from clawing out Padfoot's eyes," he snorted, a sheepish smirk on his face.

"Marlene tried to claw your eyes out?" inquired Remus, turning with a suddenly alert gaze to Sirius, who simply shrugged, rolled his eyes, and took a sip from his bottle.

"Padfoot shagged Vance," Peter informed Remus, who raised his eyebrows. It was a well known fact that both Marlene and Emmeline were in constant competition for top witch chaser. This year would be their opportunity to make the big league teams, both of them pining for the same limited
spots. But Remus was certain that the resentment was only one-sided, and that Emmeline kept her aggression on the pitch, for she was laid-back and didn't seem like the vengeful type at all.

"Ah," Remus said, understanding. James pursed his lips, obviously not all that thrilled that one of his star players had slept with his best friends; not wanting anything to cause conflict and distraction for himself and his players days before the first game of the year, and the last first game James would ever play at Hogwarts. But, obviously, he wasn't one to talk, for he had his hands full and his head wrapped around the luxurious red mop.

"I reckon we do the gift," commented Peter, eyeing Sirius who didn't look all too enthusiastic about the conversation, a barely noticeable curl to his lips as he looked into the distance.

It worked, Sirius immediately turned, his eyes lighting up like a pleasantly fat Christmas tree.

"Oh, you lot didn't have to," said Sirius. All three of them shared a look, half of James' mouth lifting up into a grin.

"You sayin’ you don't want it? 'Cause that's not a problem, we'll keep it," mocked James. Remus let out a short chuckle.

"Sod off— give me my bloody gift," jokingly sneered Sirius, baring his teeth just slightly while letting out a low growl.

James reached around and under one of the blankets to pull out a mush of paper. Remus' eyebrows furrowed at the sight of it, taking a sip from his bottle as he wondered just exactly what his friend had done to their gift.

"Here, mate, this is from all of us," James told Sirius, sliding it over to his friend.

"Beautiful job, Prongs," Sirius chuckled as he held it in his hand, pressing against the squishiness of it to try and guess what it was.

"How do you know it was me?"

"Because Moony is a god when it comes to gift wrapping, and Wormtail would have just put it in a gift bag," he stated, all the boys laughing as they knew he was right. Sirius winked at James as he feigned a pout.

"Well, are you going to open it?" Peter asked him, all three of them eyeing their friend as he pressed and prodded at the thing.

"Is it a cloak?"

"Just bloody open it," replied James, reaching back over and grabbing Sirius' bottle of whiskey. Without further questions, Sirius ripped at the paper, his hand running over the contents of it. His eyes widened, and he sat a little straighter as he threw the paper aside, holding up his gift for all of them to see, as well as for him to see all of it.

"Fuck," he slipped, his mouth hanging open as he turned it over.

"We knew you always wanted one," Remus told him, smiling as he had made his friend happy, as they had made his friend happy. Though they usually each got him a gift, this year they had put their money together to buy him something he had always wanted—a leather jacket, a real black leather, motorcycle jacket.
"D'you like it?" Peter asked, excited that he had been apart of it.

"Bloody hell," Sirius nodded.

"Well, let's see how it looks— try it on," urged James. Sirius immediately unzipped it and threw it over his shoulders, pushing his arms through the sleeve as he got it to fit perfectly.

"It's bloody wicked," he began to smirk excitedly, looking down at his arms as he saw how well it suited him. "You know how much I hate saying thank you, but thank you, really, all of you. You three are the best, and I don't know what I would have done without you—" Sirius caught himself before he got too emotional, but it was already too late because James was grinning like a fool, and Peter was starring at him with wide, teary eyes, and Remus looked like he was seeing his own son return from a war. "Please, don't cry mates," he asked them, all three of them breaking out into a laugh as soon as the words came out of his mouth.

"We're glad you like it," James feigned a heavy sob, pretending to wipe away tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Happy Birthday, Padfoot," Remus reached over with his bottle, and Sirius fumbled but managed to pick his own up and touch it to Remus'. A chime filled upon the night air, slowly floating away.

"To my family, the Marauders, may we be forever young," he lifted up his bottle to them. They all followed suit, taking in the chilly breeze and the burning alcohol all at the same time. It gave them freedom, it gave them family, it gave them something to die for.
Metanoia

metanoia (n.): the journey of changing one's mind, heart, or self.

They were in a classless hall, the windows placed high so that the light hit them from above. For the most part, they were alone, with the random body that continued to bustle their way towards the Great Hall for Peter's favorite meal of the day—lunch. The blue-eyed Gryffindor was too distracted by his grumbling belly as Sirius listed off the spells he was debating on for the next duel club. Remus tuned in every once in a while to put in his two cents as James looked about anxiously, patrolling for a flash of red and some milky white legs.

"Just about everyone knew the leg-locker by second year," Remus reasoned with a small scoff, "the reductor is a good one, but terribly messy. Besides, we'd have to find things to practice on— I reckon we save it for next week."

"Mmhm," agreed Sirius, barely having heard a word.

Remus continued on blabbering about some book by a bloke named Viridian, which he thought Sirius would find useful. But besides that, the grey-eyed wizard hadn't really heard how or in what way the book would prove necessary, instead he watched the end of the hall, lost in his own thoughts. But when a figure appeared from around the corner bend, walking in the opposite direction of where everyone else was, his eyes narrowed into crinkled slits. The witch was out of uniform, a floor length black skirt and a violet jumper that drowned her. What caught his eye most was the pasty, ghost-like color the girl took on. She had no redness to her cheeks, even her lips seemed to have paled from the last time he had bothered to notice her.

"Back from the dead already, are we, Manasse?"

The witch stopped dead just after passing them, turning around as soon as the words had been out of his mouth. Remus faltered; having been in the middle of a theory, his mouth still hung open and he hadn't even noticed Eva before her last name had reached his ears.

"Excuse you?" They heard her say. All four of them halted and turned around. Remus's heart beat a little faster and his eyes grew wide, his neck suddenly heating up as he looked from Sirius to Eva. The Slytherin girl watched them with a deadpan expression, but her body betrayed her as it leaned slightly forward, her head tilted as if she had asked them to repeat an incredulous question. Sirius chuckled and Remus anxiously bit down on his lip, his fingers tapping against his thigh as he watched from behind James.

"Oh, you know," smirked Sirius, clutching his stomach and gagging as he bent over, pretending to vomit on the ground. The Slytherin's brows tucked in, her alerted gaze watching him as Remus winced and cringed as his friends began to laugh. He watched her as she inhaled sharply, her gaze darting over to his own, and what he saw made his belly knot. It was the face of a child who had been promised a birthday cake, only for their father to end up at the pub and forget they even had a daughter. She pursed her lips and nodded, straightening her back and looking to the ground.

But Eva wasn't one to entertain fools, so she let them enjoy their small-minded antics and walked away from them.

She turned immediately at the next corner, finding herself pressed against the wall with a hand over her heart, finally letting out the breath she had been holding. Her body slid down the wall, both
hands running through her hair and clamping onto the clumps as she stared at the floor bug-eyed. She hated herself; she wanted to take one of the portraits and smash it against the floor, slamming her foot into the golden frame and laughing as she did it. And it had nothing to do with the Gryffindor, and everything to do with the fact that she had known better than to trust him. She should have threatened him, she could have paid for his silence, she could have done a million things, and instead she had chosen to be naive and believe his pretty words.

And, of course, he had gone and told all of his friends. Could she be upset with him? No, it had been expected. She had known that it was going to happen, and she had done absolutely nothing to prevent it. Now, they all knew of her mistake, of her failure, and it was only her fault, no one else could carry that burden.

She took another deep breath, this time closing her eyes.

"MANASSE!" Her name bounced off the walls, hurried footsteps and an all-too-familiar voice running into her ears. She groaned, her face falling into her crooked arms as she remained against the wall, hoping he would walk right past.

She really had to stop hoping, it never really worked out for her.

"Manasse," Remus huffed, coming to an immediate halt once his eyes looked down and met her curled up body. He, too, bent down, holding himself on bended knees as he pressed his palm to the floor in order to keep himself steady. His eyes darted all over her, trying to find some sort of way to explain what had just happened.

"Go away," he heard her demand, her words muffled.

"Manasse, please, I'm sorry—I swear," he began, "I didn't, that wasn't—I would never, I didn't tell them anything."

"I said," she looked up, "go away." Without warning, she got up and began trekking towards the courtyard.

"No, wait," he pleaded, chasing after her.

Even though it wasn't his fault, he felt as if it was. They were his friends, and Remus had sworn to her that no one would find out about her illness. He hadn't expected them to attack her in such a crude way, something that usually kept for Severus Snape or one of the other Slytherins who often responded with aggression. Eva wasn't one to send hexes their way, instead she had left them to enjoy their small laugh, not caring what they had said. And Remus respected her for that, but he also wished she had reacted so that there had been some sort of excuse that he could convinced himself of. Because joking about someone being sick and weak was not at all okay, but they were his friends and he couldn't attack them, he couldn't turn around and tell them to fuck off, like he had wanted to so many times before.

No, they couldn't have just left her at peace to go where she had wanted. Sirius had to make his snarky comment, and now Remus had to run after and apologize for them.

Remus made a move so that he slid in front of her again, placing his hands on her shoulders and cementing her in front of him. His head bowed down so that they leveled, and he looked her dead in the eye as her head flinched backwards, a grimace on her face. "I'm so incredibly sorry for what just happened. Please, please, just— hear me out okay?"

"Don't touch me," she snarled, pushing him off and taking a sharp turn so that she was now outside.
"Please," he begged, right at her heels.

"Why should I?"

"Because I promised you something, and I want you to know that I didn't break that promise—"

"You didn't promise me anything, and even if you had, I would have known you would break it. Now, leave."

"No, please, I did promise you, I did. I told you I'd never tell anyone, and I haven't. I swear—"

Eva stopped short, spinning around and nearly having him come crashing, once again, into her. He caught himself, his hand pressing against one of the pillars as he looked down at her.

"What does it even matter?"

"Because it does; because I promised you and promises mean something to me," he answered.

"I didn't expect you to keep your word," she enlightened him scornfully, turning back around with the hope to put as much distance between him, herself, and everything around her. Remus followed blindly, not realizing that they had now begun descending the steps towards the boathouse.

"That's not true," he insisted.

"Excuse you?" she nearly growled, turning back around and climbing the steps to the landing he had paused at. He looked down at her, his eyes wide and sorry as he tried to scramble at reversing what had been done. Just now, she had gotten a chance to look at him: a pained expression with gathered eyebrows, his voice was powerless, nearly begging her.

He sighed and came down a step so that he didn't statue over her. "It's not true, you did expect me to keep my word, and I did."

"You're a despicable liar," she scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Please," he repeated in a small voice.

"Lupin—"

"James saw you, James was there with me. He told Sirius, and probably Peter as well. I didn't know, I swear to you on my mother's life—"

"That doesn't mean anything to me."

"Well it does to me," he cried. Eva pursed her lips and sighed, looking out beyond him and to the willow tree that waved in the wind by the Great Lake.

"You didn't tell me about your friend," she responded after a while, her eyes squinting because of the faint sun rays that shone through the clouds.

"I know," he said hastily, "I know, but I didn't think— he's been preoccupied this week, and I didn't think you'd be on his mind."

"Why would you apologize for him?" The question caught him off-guard, his mind running into a cross road as the timer ticked down and he had to figure out which road was best. In reality, he didn't know the answer. He had felt an urge to go after her and explain that it hadn't been him, that his words meant something. At this point, Remus had grown used to it, to tracking down the victims of
their pranks and jokes and offering consolation for them. He couldn't control his friends, and though they had gotten better, they still didn't see reason as he did. And unfortunately, it was a splinter in their friendship, once that didn't prick Remus all too much, but that sat uncomfortably and stung every time he held a quill or grabbed his wand.

"Uhm, it's more that I didn't want you to think I was a lying git," he chuckled nervously.

"Okay, fine," she surrendered, shrugging her shoulders and lifting the strap of her black bag, so that it sat easier on her shoulder.

Remus let out a relieved breath, sitting down on the stone railing with his hands on his knees. Eventually, he looked back up and surveyed his surroundings, but when his eyes went back to look at the Slytherin witch, he found her gone. He sat up immediately, stretching his neck to see if she had returned to the castle, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of black and turned to see Eva jumping down the steps and heading towards the lake.

"Where are you going?" he called out to her, his eyebrows knitting together as he couldn't help a puzzled smile. Without much thought, he got up and followed down the stone steps. Eva had already made her way into the boathouse, and Remus looked on from outside the window, tapping against the glass and turning into the doorway. She didn't even bother to look up, pulling out some sort of blanket from one of the shelves and placing it on the floor at the edge of the structure, with such composure and security that it could only be a part of her daily routine. "What are you doing?" he asked, watching as she sat cross-legged towards the lake.

"I told you to leave," she reminded him, reaching into her bag and pulling out what, looked to Remus, to be some sort of sandwich, except the bread was long and thin, and not square like he was used to.

"Uh," he paused, stepping further into the boat house, "is this where you and your friends usually have lunch?"

She snorted, shaking her head as she swallowed one of her bites. "I don't have friends."

The answer came so plain that it sounded more like a statement than it did anything else. She was so sure, so certain of it that Remus felt the dullness from moments before return to his chest. He found himself frowning and blinking, realizing that he had expected something different, but knowing that that was the truth. Madam Pomfrey herself had told him that he had been the only one to visit her in the hospital wing, and he had never seen her walk the halls with anyone else, he had never heard of her being at a party or being out after hours.

"Oh," he managed, "I mean, so what? You just... you know, eat here... alone?"

"Yes," was all he received. Remus made way to turn back, to head up to lunch before it was over and his friends began to worry. But he puckered his lips, pursing them as his gaze turned from the doorway and back to her body. And he decided that it was a rather nice day for November, and that he should probably take advantage of it before all they had were grey skies. His footsteps were nothing like her own, heavy and causing the floorboards to creak as he made his way over to her.

Eva stopped eating mid-bite, her mouth still pressed to the white bread as she felt something move next to her. Remus Lupin was pressing down his robes, making himself comfortable and taking off the strap from his neck.

"What're you doing?" she asked, her hand covering her mouth. He looked up at her.
"Oh, I suppose I'm joining you," he said pleasantly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I didn't invite you," her words came out clearer this time.

"Sure, but it is a nice day, and I wouldn't mind sitting here for awhile."

"Well..." she paused and looked around, "maybe I do."

"Do you?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly isn't a finite answer," he quipped, wagging a finger at her.

"Okay, but you're missing lunch," she reminded him. He shrugged, his body hunched over as it usually was.

"My friends will probably bring me something after."

Eva sighed, dropping her sandwiched-hand and looking to the opposite bank of the lake. She shook her head, pursing her lips. The boathouse was as much his as it was hers, meaning that it didn't belong either of them, and she knew that she couldn't just tell him to get up and leave. He could easily argue that it had been his idea for, and though it hadn't been, the Slytherin witch wasn't having the best of days to argue against it. Her throat ached, she felt faint every time she walked too fast or got up, and her hands shook violently. So, she wrapped one hand on the end of the baguette, and another on the center, and split her sandwich into two.

"Here," she told him, handing him one half of it. He turned, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline.

"Oh no—"

"It's too much for me, I never eat the whole thing," she lied, the other half was usually her dinner.

"You sure?" She didn't reply, but edged it closer to him and he smiled, taking it in his hands. "Thank you." He lifted up the sandwich as if saluting her, and she gave a small shrug, turning back out to the landscape. And as she took another go at it, he watched her, because he realized that just earlier that day he had called her a bitch, and just earlier that day his friends had used her illness as a joke, and instead of hexing them, reporting them, or insulting them, which she could have and he wouldn't have said anything, she had given him a part of her lunch.

"I can be your friend," he blurted out. For what seemed to be the millionth time that day, Eva stopped mid-bite and looked at him sideways.

"What?" She pulled the sandwich away from her mouth.

"You know," he fumbled, feeling his neck redden as he averted his gaze to her laces, "if you want."

"Don't feel bad for me," she told him candidly.

"Come again?" He looked back up.

"I said, don't feel bad for me. I enjoy eating lunch by myself, here in the boathouse. Just because I have no friends, doesn't mean that I want them," Eva explained to him.

"I don't feel bad for you, that's not why."
"Then why would you want to be friends with me?" she scoffed. Remus froze, not sure how to respond to that sort of question. Usually, friends became friends because it just happened. He hadn't met the Marauders because James had told him to fill out some sort of application; he hadn't become friends with Peter because Peter had interrogated him on why he fit the position. They just talked, got along, told a few jokes, and before they knew it, they had become the best of friends.

But Eva wasn't like that. Eva was unusual, completely and utterly...

"Because you're weird."

Eva's head flinched back, her eyes blinking wider as if it had been some sort of long-life revelation.

Remus felt his free hand clasp the back of his neck, his face wrying up as he realized what he had just said.

"Sorry, I mean—" but she held up a hand to stop him.

"Why am I weird?"

"I mean," he paused, scrambling because he didn't know the best way to explain his reasoning without offending her. Of course, he didn't actually think she was weird, but that she was different from everyone else. Or not different from everyone else, but different from what he had originally thought. And Remus was rather good at reading people, he could detect pain from a sad smile, and he could tell when a letter from home conveyed bad news. But nothing that he had come up for the Slytherin witch had turned out to be true. She had caught him by surprise more than once, and he starting to think that throwing everything that he had put on this table would be best in the rubbish bin.

"Well... you eat in the boathouse, you don't like compliments, you believe in wrackspurts—"

"Wrackspurts," she immediately corrected him, "they're actual creatures that exist."

"Of course," he agreed reluctantly.

"Why befriend someone you hate?" she questioned him.

"I don't hate you, you hate me."

"What reason do I have to hate you? You're irritating, nosy, practically a tree—"

"A tree?" he repeated with a light laugh, leaning against the edge of the boathouse and raising his eyebrows in amusement.

"But I don't hate you," she finished in an undertone. Her words were as they always were, light and airy, no sign of disdain within them. And Remus knew he should have been defending himself, but he couldn't. Because he learned that Eva's insults were not to be taken to heart, she didn't mean them with malice, but instead as a reflection for the person to understand what their flaws were. And he had become convinced that even though they were flaws, that she didn't insult him to make him change, but that she accepted that these were his faults, understanding that they all had faults.

And Remus had put this together just now, in that boathouse, and he found himself utterly taken by it.

"Well, I thought you hated me because I'm a half-blood Gryffindor," he admitted after a few moments of silence. But she didn't reply, and Remus recognized that it wasn't exactly a topic she
wanted to discuss, and he respected that, so he moved on. "And I don't hate you."

"I'd be a terrible friend," she said.

"Of course," he teased, "for someone with no friends, I wouldn't have expected any different." She smiled weakly for a brief second, and then stared down at the fish that swung by them. "But," he cleared his throat, "on a more serious note, there's no right or wrong way to be someone's friend. Every friendship is different. There's no rulebook, or, as I'm sure you're used to, etiquette to being someone's friend."

"You should eat," she told him quietly, turning back to the lake with his proposal on her thoughts. Eva had never had a friend before, sure, she had had her cousins which, as a young child, she had considered her friends. But, as they grew up, she had realized that their relationships had been forced more than anything else. And once her own conscious had grown, she realized how different they really were from one another. She certainly didn't trust them, although she didn't trust anyone, but wasn't that an aspect of friendship? If she agreed to him, did that mean she had to trust him? That was a foreign concept to her, a scary thought, but, as she heard him bite down into his sandwich, she realized that it wasn't too bad to have some company. At least, sometimes. It had been nice when he had visited her in the hospital, which had been a drawling, mundane experience, and it was a welcoming new feeling that he sat there silently next to her as they watched the wave ripple towards them and bounce quietly back into the murkiness.

"This is a good sandwich," he commented with a full mouth. Eva had to stifle a laugh. "What's in it?"

"Gruyère cheese and ham," she replied softly.

"Sounds French. Did you make it?"

She shook her head. "No, I go to the kitchens."

"Oh, really? I didn't think any Slytherins knew how to get to the kitchens," he said incredulously.

"They don't."

"So, how come you do?"

"Lupin." She turned her body around so that they were seated facing one another. Her mouth was open like she wanted to say something, and her eyes blinked like she knew but didn't know how to phrase it. "If we're friends, no one can know."

"Okay," he agreed nonchalantly. If there was one thing the Gryffindor was good at, it was his ability to keep secrets.

"Not even your friends," she added. He paused, his chewing coming to a halt as he swallowed the thickness of it down. His eyes surveyed her, and he saw the same doe-eyed look he had seen the other day. And Eva was worried, she was worried that he was going to get up and walk away, because she knew those four were inseparable; and she was just some stuck-up pureblood elitist who was asking him to lie to them for some friendship that might not, probably wouldn't, work out in their favor.

"Okay," he finally said, bringing the sandwich back up and taking another go at it. They held eye contact the entire time, and Eva was waiting for him to laugh in her face, she was waiting for his friends to pop up from behind the boathouse and call her a bloody fool for believing him. 'Really you think he wants to be friends with you?' Sirius Black would mock, but no one did, and Eva gave him a
small smile as she consumed the last part of her lunch.

When she looked away, Remus let himself grin, because he had been right. This puzzle was coming along, and slowly he could begin to make out the image that it portrayed. And more than that, it was a nice, refreshing feeling that after seven years of the same hum-drum, he could experience something new.

"Where do we start?" she asked, Remus sucking the flour and mustard that had been left on his fingers from the sandwich.

"Start?"

"Yes, what's the first step?"

"Well," he paused. *Isn't eating lunch in the boathouse already a first step?* he thought to himself, but he assumed that Eva followed a completely different list of requirements, and thus, he went along with it. "I mean, you can start by calling me Remus."

"Oh okay," she nodded, "Remus."

She smiled softly at him, looking back down when their gazes met. Remus found himself almost wanting to reach out and lift her chin up so that he could see the way her eyes crinkled in their corners, and how they grew warm and kind. He wanted to make sure to remember the way she smiled because it was rare and it was lovely, and Remus' ears felt a little hot as he thought about how he rather liked her smile. And he knew he shouldn't, and he knew it was just a smile and that everyone had one, but he found hers particularly nice. Maybe it was because it was so rare, and everyone liked to be in on a secret.

"Yeah, I don't really like my last name," he continued, shaking thoughts about her off. "Matter of fact, I don't really like anyone's last name."

"Remus is a nice name, a powerful name."

"Yeah, his brother murdered him," Remus joked.

"You don't build Rome in a day," Eva mentioned, and he let out a chuckle without realizing how serious she had been. But the grin on his face faltered as Remus watched Eva close her eyes, pressing fingers to the back of her ears and massaging them.

"Headache?"

She smiled with her eyes still closed, shaking her head. "No."

No, not a headache, whispers, drumming, drum, bang, hiss. All day, the need to scream, deciding whether she should tie a rock to her ankle and sink herself to the bottom of the lake, and just let it all out. All of it, scream, scream, scream.

But no, she took a deep breath and opened up her eyes. Giving one last fleeting smile to the Gryffindor, who looked rather worried, and then back to the lake.

"You sure?" She hadn't heard him.

"Something bad is going to happen," she whispered aloud to herself.

*Someone is going to die,* she had really meant to say.
"Come again?"
"I can feel it."

(Sunday, 6 November 1977 - Middle of the First Quidditch Game)

"We're going to win," commented Sirius, his eyes darting along with James' body.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Peter. Remus turned to look at both of them.

"We always do, we always win the first game of the season."

The entire pitch grew quiet, all eyes and bodies turning to watch a figure flying in from the distance, growing ever larger as it zipped through and into the clouds.

And then, as if to spite Sirius, Regulus appeared, swooping in with his hand held straight to the sky and a large grin on his face.

"Holy fuck," whispered Peter. The pitch turned green, confetti and fireworks being sent into the sky as their Slytherin peers began jumping and hurraying.

"REGULUS BLACK HAS CAUGHT THE SNITCH! SLYTHERIN WINS!" announced Tomlyn MacCabe. The words resonated into the field, onto the grounds, through the halls of Hogwarts.

Sirius, without thinking, stood up and threw his bottle of ale over the edge of the stands and into the pitch.

"BOOOOO!" yelled out the Gryffindors, their thumbs down as the Slytherin seeker flew around the pitch, his entire team joining him.

"What an ugly game," snorted Marjory from next to Sirius. But Remus stood up, looking over the edge as he noticed James landing onto the grass. His friend smashed the quaffle into the ground and stalked off into the dressing room.

James' face was red and a vein popped out from his neck, the Gryffindor captain couldn't even think straight. He had been so focused on himself, that he hadn't even realized until green fireworks had appeared in front of him that the game had come to an end. Now alone in the confines of his dressing room, James threw his broom across the floor, not wanting to look at it. He glanced around, pulling off his uniform as he felt too hot with it. Everything seemed so confusing, everything had happened too fast. And before he even knew it, James' fist was repeatedly smashing into the mirrors that lined the ceramic walls. He didn't care about the blood or the glass shards stuck in his knuckles, he just really wanted to hit something.

Lily walked into the common room and couldn't help notice that their usually blinding crimson had turned rather grey in a matter of hours. The fire didn't burn as bright, and no one really smiled as they spent their Sunday evening finishing up assignments for the next day.

"Lily," she turned to find Dorcas waving at her from one of the study tables. The redhead made her way over, dropping the books in her hands onto the wooden surface.

"Rather dull, no?" Lily asked, shooting a look around the room as she took a seat. Dorcas shrugged, placing her quill down and leaning back in her seat.

"Quidditch can do that to some people."
"It's just a game, nobody died."

"Reckon Potter's pride did," Dorcas snorted.

"Finally," Lily whispered with a smirk.

"It's not just a game." Both girls jumped in their seats at the bitter voice. Lily turned around, only to meet hazels eyes that belong to none other than a rather inebriated and indignant James Potter. She turned back around, sighing and shaking her head.

"I'm not fighting tonight, Potter," she countered, pulling out a parchment from her bag.

"You think everything is a game, don't you?" he continued. Lily gaped, a scoff hitching somewhere in her throat.

"Excuse you?" she turned back around, a shocked expression on her face. "Are you drunk?"

"You think Quidditch is just a game, you think snogging me and then ignoring me is just a game. It's all just one big fucking game, innit?"

"What's he talking about, Lils?" inquired Dorcas, looking between her Head Boy and Head Girl with scrunched eyebrows and a slightly worried glimmer in her eyes. But James didn't bother looking over at the blonde, he had his eyes set on the redhead who hadn't even bothered to utter one word to him since their run in at Halloween. And with the loss of that day's game, James was looking for a fight, and he had a couple of words to share with his fellow Gryffindor witch, words that he had promised himself never to utter to anyone.

"I was drunk, I thought we had established that." James' nostrils flared, grinding his teeth with an angry smile as he looked away and nodded.

"Sure, you're right, Lily, you're always bloody right. You know, it's not like I've been in love with you for six bloody years, it's not like I didn't care, it's not like I didn't think about kissing you every night, every bloody fucking night."

"You're not in love with me; it's just a crush, you wanker."

"FUCK YOU!" he bellowed, pointing a finger at her face and leaning over. "Fuck you, you hurt me. You really fucking hurt me, you know that? You used me because you were drunk and randy, and you knew how I felt about you, and you knew I wasn't going to say no. You knew you could use me in that moment, and that's exactly what you did. You used me, you used the feelings that I have for you, you took them and you set them on fire 'cause everything IS JUST A FUCKING GAME, ISN'T IT?"

"Woah, James." Remus came running down from the dorms as soon as he had heard commotion in the common room. His hand wrapped around his friend's shoulder, pulling him away from Lily who sat there with a frozen, wide eyed expression. She couldn't even bring herself to meet his gaze, her hands shaking at her sides as everyone looked at her. She was used to playful banter and an obnoxious, smug James Potter, but never in his life had he raised his voice at her. Never had his fist clenched at his side as she reprimanded him for going after Severus or Benjy Fenwick. This shocked her, it made her feel small and Lily hated feeling small, and she wanted to send a hex his way, but there were first years and she couldn't do that in front of them.

Luckily, nothing else came after that. James pulled away from Remus, giving one last look at Lily before hiking up to his dorm. Remus stood there, looking at the redhead. "He's a little upset over today," he attempted.
"You don't have to apologize for him," Lily snapped.

"Okay... are you all right?"

"I don't feel like talking right now," she muttered, grabbing her items in a sloppy pile and running past Remus and out the portrait door.

"She snogged Potter?" Dorcas questioned Remus, ignoring the fact that they hadn't spoken directly since their breakup. Remus pursed his lips and nodded awkwardly, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Blimey," was all the blonde could muster.

"Yeah, I'm going to go check on him," he excused himself, not even bothering to wait for her response as he followed in his friend's footsteps.

They were all drunk, and they tried so hard not to be. But bodies lazily slung over the arm chairs, red lipstick being sloppily pressed onto the edges of gold-flickered champagne bottles. The witches had worn the fanciest heels they had brought to Hogwarts, and the wizards picked them up and took them for a swing around the common room as they enjoyed the one night they could.

Because, by tomorrow, they'd all be back to their usual selves. No one, not even their own Head of House would know what had conspired in the dungeons that night. But, it was true, it had been three decades since the last time Slytherin had managed to beat Gryffindor at the opening game of the season, and it would probably be another handful of years until it happened again.

So, they moved away from their shells, allowing themselves the moment to be actual teenagers, and not pawns in a bigger political game. They could flirt and chitchat; they could call each other names; Antonin Dolohov went around, grabbing his team members by their necks and planting large, clumsy kisses on their foreheads. He pulled away, laughing and taking another shot with them.

But no one, not even their seeker — Regulus Black — was happier than the two twisting and shimmying in the middle of the room. The Vaping Vipers practically screeched their poor excuse for music, but no one cared, they were too intoxicated to even remember who it was singing. And, most definitely, no one bothered to reprimand an almost naked Sofia Mustaq, clad in her favorite red lingerie; her hand up in the air as she swung her hips seductively and slowly, not exactly following the beat of the music, but not really caring either. And Alex Sykes who bobbed his head back and forth, sweat spraying off his curls as he danced like a maniac on drugs.

But, who could blame him? He was a maniac on drugs.

Everyone claimed the Slytherins didn't know how to party, and it wasn't that they didn't know, but that they did it differently. They were quiet about it, lingering against the shadows as they threw a wink across the room, making that shy fifth year with the blue eyes blush and look to the rest of his team mates as they passed him, for the first time in his life, a whiskey.

And the pureblood witches sat at the table, playing a game of wizard poker as they wore pearls and winged their eyes with a thick line of coal. Imitations of their parents, each family represented within those walls, they were powerful, they were wealthy, and they were beautiful.

And they all knew it too.

Sofia had flung herself on the empty couch seated across from Edmund Nott. The two of them stared at each other with blood-shot, heavily lidded eyes. The prefect lifted her legs, placing them on her best friend's lap as he snored along with Crolinax's percussions. And she was too faded to understand what was happening, but somehow, the girl was somewhere different. Yes, still in the
Sofia was in a memory.

This happened often when she and the others around her were drunk, and she absolutely could not stand it.

But.

She saw them drinking, Severus Snape brooding in the corner as Eoin said: "I'm going to fuck that MacDonald bitch so hard."

"No one wants to fuck you," laughed Antonin.

"No one says no when they've been imperiused," retorted Eoin with a smirk.

Sofia's mouth gaped as she looked at each of their faces. They all grinned at one another, nodding their heads as they clung bottles and glasses.

"But when?" sneered Snape from behind Eoin.

"As soon as possible," assured Edmund.

But Sofia was out of it, back in the common room's buzz as the clock chimed midnight. The music grew slower, soft tunes as they all took the time to sit and enjoy their highs in peace. Sofia was anything but peace. She stood up straight, looking over at Eoin Mulciber, who had reinitiated his conversation with Evan Rosier, and began shaking at her best friend.

"Wha-" he grumbled, leaning over and pressing his face into her stomach.

"Wake the fuck up, we've got a problem."

And two hours later, they miraculously found the wandering Ravenclaw pacing in the owlery. His hands were folded behind his back, and he had been whistling up to the animals that crooned and tilted their heads at him, staring with large, yellow eyes that could read souls.

"Fletcher," huffed Sofia, her entire body leaning against the entranceway. Alex came hurrying in behind her, using the opposite side of the stone entrance to search for what little oxygen remained in his lungs.

Mundungus turned with raised eyebrows, looking between the two of them.

"It's two in the morning," he mentioned.

"Pft, that's early for us," retorted Alex, waving his hand carelessly.

"We need to talk," they both heard from behind the curly-haired Slytherin. A moment later, Sofia had straightened her back and approached Mundungus, her heels clacking against the ground and stirring the owls as their wings flapped and they moved to higher ground. The Ravenclaw did a once over of her, and she smirked as his thoughts waved into her mind.

"Get out of my head," he told her, grimacing as he brought his eyes back up.

"I've got information." Mundungus paused, searching the witch's face before darting his gaze to the
stray wizard still standing by the entrance. He tilted his head, a fire lighting up within the depth of his dark orbs.

"You told him?" he said through gritted teeth, the clench of his jaw so visible that even Alex felt the animosity vibrating off him. The Slytherin wizard immediately stood straighter, his back turning into a stone slab as a curl appeared on his lip.

"He's fine," scoffed Sofia. Mundungus raised his eyebrows, snorting and sticking the tip of his tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he shook his head.

"The first rule is not to speak about it, I told you that," he reminded her.

"Alex and I come in a two for one package," she informed him icily.

"Yeah, eat that, bitch," sneered Alex from the back. Sofia rolled her eyes, placing both hands on her hips.

"Gosh, I come here with information, and you're wasting time by getting your cock in a twist over him," mocked the witch, jutting to her best friend with a thumb.

"Fuck, Mustaq."

"Malciber, Avery, Snape, Dolohov, Nott, and Rosier plan to rape Mary MacDonald, using the Imperius. Not tonight, but soon."

The room fell silent, even the owls themselves seemed to be taking in the Slytherin's cruel words.

"Okay," shrugged Mundungus. Sofia's hips straightened themselves, and she found herself leaning forward with scrunched eyebrows as she eyed him.

"Okay?" she repeated, the word so sour that she wanted to scrape it off her tongue with a switchblade.

"Not my problem," he scoffed in response, shrugging his shoulders.

"What do you mean not your problem? You told me to keep an eye on them and report to you with anything that seems suspicious. And I'm literally standing here, with god as my witness," the witch turned and looked over at Alex, "and telling you that there is a planned rape that is going to happen really soon, and they'll be using an Unforgivable."

Mundungus yawned, stretching his arms up behind his head as the smell of owl dung and hay filled up their noses.

"How is that not your problem? A group of boys planning the rape of an innocent girl should be your bloody problem," she argued, her words heavy and thick with fury as she began to feel her own fire ignite within her loins.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted," he snorted. Her eyes widened and her nostrils flared, the heat from her heart huffing out, causing the cool air to warm up around her. Even Alex could feel a rise in temperature, his own blood boiling in order to spite the Ravenclaw's coolness. "Listen, I would love to help, but I've got my hands full."

"Gosh, you're a no good junkie. You can take your sick club with ol' Uncle Dumble and shove it up
your arses," she sneered, spitting on to the ground by his shoes and turning around to walk out of the owlery. Her hand immediately slipped into Alex's, and with one last growl from the Slytherin wizard, the pair walked back out into the dark night.

"What a wanker," Sofia muttered once they had gotten far enough. They both stopped, her hands reaching down to pull off her heels as they made too much noise in the cold silence.

"Your feet will freeze," Alex commented.

"No worries, that bell end riled me up so much that I could breathe ash." He nodded, pursing his lips as she tossed the heels onto to the grass, taking a seat next to them and laying her entire body down so that she could watch the stars twinkle above them. Alex followed, pulling out another cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it up.

"Here, reckon you need it more than me," he offered to her. She took it, bringing it to her lips and making the end glow orange. They laid there in silence for a while, eyes blinking much like the owls that had surrounded them just moments ago.

"Fuck this place, Sof," he broke eventually. "We're going to get out soon, real soon."

She knew that, but soon wasn't coming fast enough.

"Then we can be whoever we want," Alex continued, "and we don't have to deal with this fake rubbish all the time."

"Yeah," she breathed out with her cigarette. The smoke surrounded them, and he raised his hand to move through the veil, watching it as he destroyed the ghosts that had wanted to envelope them.

"We'll move to Paris. We'll find lovers, we'll live together in an apartment by the Seine," Sofia sighed pleasantly at the dream they had dreamt up so many years ago, "we'll adopt children, dress them in the fanciest clothes that money can buy. We'll drink expensive wine and eat stinky cheese, and we'll be lovely."

"But first we need to get out of here," she repeated his words, closing her eyes. The quiet snuck up on them, both thinking of the life they would escape into, what they were preparing for themselves.

"Now what?"

"Keep a close eye on them, follow them around, invade their thoughts," she listed.

"If only my daddy could see me," joked Alex, thinking about how all this fuss was over some muggle-born, and one they had no connection with. It wasn't as if they knew her from prefect meetings or some sort of class. Alex reckoned that neither one of the two had ever uttered a word to her. And now, here they were, the heroes that Hogwarts didn't even know they needed. "I'm calling myself the Vigilante."

"That's not original at all," teased Sofia.

"Sod off."

(Monday Morning, 7 November 1977)

"Lily," whimpered Dorcas, turning to look at her friend as she came bouncing down from the Gryffindor common room and into the Great Hall. It seemed as if everyone was crowded around one
particular section of each table, tears running down some of their faces, others standing in the corners, being hugged as they tried to dab away at their cheeks. Lily immediately stopped, looking around the room with scrunched brows and a frown. Only the Slytherins seemed to be going on about their day as they usually did. The thought alone made goosebumps run up the back of her spine, feeling herself shiver as she thought what that could possibly indicate.

And they always did say there was a sliver of truth in a rumor.

"What's happened?"

"Lutie Lopes was murdered," replied Dorcas, grabbing Lily's hand and pulling her towards the Daily Prophet that was spread out on the table.

"What?" repeated Lily, looking up at everyone, trying to make sense of it. She remembered having to sign Lutie Lopes out for the weekend, for her father had requested her attendance at the Guy Fawkes celebration in her hometown of Devon, England, but... "How?"

"The Dark Lord," mumbled Sirius from where he was seated in the center of the crowd, a finger on the corner of the page. Lily looked back down at the picture and caught something that made her shove Marjory Bones out of the way in order to lean over, grab the newspaper, and turn it so that it faced her.

"Hey!" she heard Sirius cry.

"Oh my gosh," she murmured, his words going right over her head. Her hands ran over the cloud that appeared in the picture, a snake — but not just any — the same snake she had seen in Eva's charms notebook.

"But Lutie Lopes? Why her? What'd she ever do?"

"Her father's Lord Lieutenant of Devon," explained Dorcas through her sobs.

"Oh," mustered Lily, realizing immediately that it had been a symbolic murder. Lutie Lopes was one of the most peaceful, nonviolent souls that had every walked through those halls. She smiled at everyone, and had taken the responsibility of caring for other's pets when they were too busy to do the task themselves.

"I can't believe she's dead," cried Dorcas, throwing her arms around Lily's body and placing her head into her collarbone. "She sat next to me in Charms, she was so nice!"

And Lily's once wry expression immediately lit up, an epiphany hitting her and something like the dawn coming up from a very dark horizon. Despite herself, Lily began to laugh, she smiled and a chuckle reached up her throat and climbed out. Everyone turned up to look at her, even James, who was trying to ignore her, found himself wrinkling his forehead, pushing his glasses further up his nose.

"What the fuck is your problem?" inquired Chastity Proudmore, scowling at the redhead.

"I'm so sorry," Lily apologized, shaking her head and biting down on her lip. At this point, Dorcas had pushed away from her friend to see what was going on.

"Some people laugh in uncomfortable situations," explained Remus to the Gryffindor witch. But Chastity didn't buy easily into it, and instead cocked an eyebrow at the prefect, jutting out her hips and tilting her head as if to challenge him.
But the Head Girl wasn't laughing because she was uncomfortable, quite the contrary. Lily felt a weight lift up from her shoulders, and she walked away from them, to one of the empty parts of the table and looked over all the food. Her hands stretched upwards as she inhaled deeply. Everyone watched, but she didn't care. It was never Dorcas, it had never been Dorcas or Marlene, and it had always been Lutie Lopes. She had gotten it wrong, and she had never been so happy to be wrong in her entire life.

"Thank you," she whispered so lightly that she couldn't even hear herself, closing her eyes.

"She was so young, so innocent," Marjory commented, lost in her own thoughts.

"Innocence is the first to go in war," responded Remus, running his hand through his hair. James nodded, took of his glasses, and then put them back on, shifting back and forth in his seat. Suddenly, the Quidditch Match, the fight with Lily, all seemed so menial. A young witch had died, the culprits probably hadn't even known her name, they had simply been given the orders and they had followed. They killed a child, a casualty of war, that's all Lutie Lopes would ever amount to. She had been the statue that they needed to steal, the message, the raven.

"War?" repeated Marjory.

"This is war," Lily heard Sirius say to all of them. "They've declared war, officially."

And an ominous veil fell over them, Lily's eyes opening up and slitting as she looked out into the distance. But Lily couldn't join in on the rest of their melancholy mood. All she felt was the joy and featherlight weight of being free from a burden, from being able to turn around and stifle a laugh at Dorcas' red-blotched face and Sirius' too serious demeanor as he dramatically stared at the grey-washed paper.

"Oh my gosh, did you hear?" Lily heard Dorcas inquire as they both turned to see Marlene and Mary walking towards them. But before anyone could respond, a flash of a hand, a head that swiveled too fast to the left, and a stinging pain spoke volumes more than any answer could have.

Dorcas gasped, jumping back with wide eyes, her hands covering his mouth. James had immediately stood up, his eyes darting between the two witches as everyone tried to register the last five seconds.

"You knew," hissed Mary, giving one last look to Lily as she held a hand to her reddening cheek, and then marched off with Marlene by her side.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?!?" cried out Lily, her high-pitched voice nearly screeching into the hall.

"SLAG!" yelled back Marlene.

"Look who's talking," snorted Peter looking after the retreating witch, Dorcas turning and glaring daggers at him.

The small wizard turned and caught her look, looking her up and down with a cross of utter contempt and complete boredom. "What? She's boning Bowers."

"WHAT!?!?" they all heard Isla Baxter's voice ring out from the crowd, her small body pushing through them as she turned to look at Peter.

"Sorry, love," apologized Peter.

Lily inhaled sharply, closing her eyes and then turning around to find the only solace this forsaken castle would give her—the dungeons. She wasn't sure whether Isla Baxter had sent a nasty hair loss
jinx Marlene's way, or if it had been someone else; she didn't know that James Potter had felt his heart sink when he heard the smack of Mary's hand crash into Lily's soft cheek. She didn't know that he had gone to walk after her, but was held back by Sirius.

But what she did know, was that everyone around her got to be angry, they got to yell and curse her out and she never said anything. She let them, she understood them, she placed her hand on their shoulders and comforted them when they needed it. But when she needed it, when she wanted someone to rely on, when she was lost and confused, they spat at her, kicked her, treated her like she could take it. That she could take punch after punch without ever retaliating, laughing and smiling and brushing it off. Tears began to drop from her eyes. All her life, she had been forgiving people from their mistakes, and no one ever gave her the benefit of the doubt.

All she wanted was a little help to figure it out.

Contrary to popular belief, Lily Evans didn't know everything.
Her eyes stung, glossed over and seemingly ransacked as they tried to sort through the day's work. She was on the last of the slips and the entire world was already simulated into a dream or a mundane night terror. Nothing really seemed real, not even the thick, heavy red lines she knifed across the flimsy sheets before deporting them into the rejected bin as she realized how ludicrous third years were, and hoping that she hadn't been just as asinine.

*Dear lord, if I was... please let me never remember,* she pleaded internally, an unwilling snort coming out at the end. James looked up at the sudden sound. After an hour of only hearing ink tips scratching against parchment, it had nearly shocked him. His brows scrunched together, watching as the redhead grinned herself drunk, swaying back and forth in her seat as she went to toss another piece of paper, but sent her quill into the bin instead.

He raised his brows and Lily went, with a now bare hand, to write something on the next paper. But her eyes grew wide, blinking and flinching her head back as she stared in utter disbelief at her empty fingers.

James placed his knuckle to his lips, attempting, but failing miserably, to stifle a laugh.

"You, uh," his cheeks lifted up and glowed like two ornaments on Christmas Eve, "in the bin."

Her head swiveled to the left like a seeker finally locating a snitch and her entire body dove over the chair's arm, reaching forward and grunting as she picked up the feathery object. Lily placed it on the table, leaning her forehead down onto its edge as she stared at the floor and tried to find a decent reason for suffering; because it was too late, and everything, at that point, seemed too ridiculous to function properly.

James rubbed his nose, leaning into his chair and onto the side as the key points for their meeting with the Heads of Houses went ignored. His eyes circled around the dark stain on the table, wondering if staring at it long enough would make it suddenly disappear.

"I'm sorry."

Silence. Not even the torch wanted to break it, flaming quietly in the corner as it lit up their tired minds, their fatigued hearts. To James, it felt like a sunburn. To Lily, it seemed as if she had gone *'pst'* and the cat responded with a nice, fat *'sod off.'*

*Yes, that must be it,* she mused to herself, for what was reality if not the things she knew. Was it not the life she had experienced up until that point? Because now she felt like a ballerina who had fallen and broken her leg, bedridden for weeks and missing the entire season of the Nutcracker to some lame back-up dancer from Leeds.

Yes, this was most definitely a dream. James Potter was apologizing, her friends thought she rode broomsticks as a hobby, and everyone else began to believe she was a supporter of the Dark Lord's agenda.

She also swore to never laugh ever, ever, ever again.

"Sorry?" she grinned manically, shaking her head. The sound unnerved James. It was not the voice
he had grown accustomed to over the years. It wasn't light or full of life, it was threatening like a knock on the window after midnight; like something else was coming that only she knew, something bad— a sick twist on dramatic irony, except it wasn't a play.

And James wondered if he really should take her advice and keep his mouth shut. It seemed nothing he said ever came out sounding right. In his head, they were lines of poetry, but once they turned into air, he could see all the faults within them, wanting nothing more than to take them back and keep them hidden somewhere deep and secret.

She stared at him with eyes turned red from strain; strain of reading, of light, of life.

"For what I said to you. The Quidditch game sort of got to my head, and," he pulled at his tie, finding it as annoying as the restlessness in his right hand that kept craving the touch of his hair, "I shouldn't have attacked you,"

He glanced up at her and wondered how it was possible for his body to ignite with a match made from complete disdain.

Maybe everyone was right— he was a masochist.

"Well, you can take your sorry and shove it where the sun don't shine, Potter."

He couldn't help the smile on his face.

"I expected that," he admitted with a light laugh, finally giving in and letting his hand travel through his fields of jet black wheat.

"You want to know something?"

Even though her voice was ice and his blood was fire, he looked her in the eye, giving her permission to let him melt, and melt, and melt at her feet.

"All my life, I've been kicked and spat on. I've been on the floor, I've had to crawl to achieve the things that come so easily to the rest of you. I walk everyday through these halls, judged, sneered at, and having to prove myself to ALL OF YOU. Then I go home, and you know what? I have to sleep in my bed, eat dinner with my family, and PROVE TO THEM that I don't have the intelligence of an 11 year old, because that's how they treat me." Unlike James, who had installed a new editing system into his brain, Lily's was completely broken and rusting at her feet. Making no sense at all; a lack of understanding of what she really wanted to say. But he listened and didn't dare ask questions, or even breathe, as he put the spotlight on her.

"Everywhere I go, I have to be Lily Evans. So many expectations, everyone always waiting on me. But you know what? I don't want to be her, I want to be someone else." Tears had begun to well in her eyes, her face scrunched up like a prune. "So, I want to fucking know when I get to be someone other than who I am."

His tongue was caught somewhere between the underworld and whatever heaven meant. Nothing right nor wrong could be said, and yet everything that he could think of tasted stale between his teeth.

But Lily didn't want him to reply, all she wanted was to be upset with someone. She wanted to curse them and send them out the window, crack their spines so that they could feel what it felt like to have a hand wrapped around her neck at all times of the night. Now an object of a greater hunt, she had hounds chasing her, but no where she ran felt safe. Why keep running? Where was she supposed to go?
"And no one ever fucking listens to me," her hands pulled at her hair, and it pained James to see the beautiful locks suffer. She turned to the wall and in her strongest voice shouted: "WHY WON'T ANYONE LISTEN TO MEEEEEE!?"

Her body heaved, her slight shoulders trekking up just to hit a landslide and fall back down. This was her raw, and James never thought something as cringe-worthy as crude outrage could look so divine. He never thought he'd want to wrap his hands around a bonfire and let it burn him right through until his heart collapsed from the lack of oxygen.

"I'll listen to you." For the first time since Halloween, his words sounded so sure, so certain that he could live up to what he proclaimed. But if James was anything, he was two tablespoons of spice and three cups of reckless confidence, and he truly believed that nothing in this world could hinder him from what he wanted.

"What?"

He moved to the edge of his seat, straightened his back, and placed folded hands onto the table. His chin stood tall and proud, just like the boy who held it.

"You see, I'm ready to listen."

She marched over to him, her eyes scrutinizing slits as she bowed down to observe the creature in front of her. Maybe exhaustion was to blame, or the fact that the world had sat on her shoulders and had finally had enough carrying it, but she began to laugh; a soft trail of incredulous bells that filled the room.

James looked down and lifted the corners of his lips into a satisfied smile.

"But you've never listened to anyone in your entire life," she exclaimed, turning and leaning against the table diagonally from him.

"Yeah, but," he scrunched his face, "anyone wasn't you."

She watched him as his fingers flexed, a single purple vein popping every time he released his hand from the hold.

"Why?" Her voice became a whisper, the fury collapsing into a dying flame.

"I know I've been a complete tosser, especially in the past, but I'm trying to do better," he admitted, sighing as he realized that he had more failed attempts than successes, nevertheless hoping that Lily had noticed. Maybe, just maybe, she would believe him this time and take the hand he was holding out to her. "You know," he let out another light laugh, "I jinxed Marlene's hair off."

"You're lying!" He looked up, the beginnings of an apology already sugaring his lips, but it trailed off like sand being caught in the curl of a wave. Her green orbs were wide, her lips twitching as they decided between grimacing or grinning.

"No... you can ask Peter," he said cautiously.

"I thought it was Isla."

"No."

Lily began to chuckle, throwing her head back and clapping her hands together. It was so appealing and so contagious that after a few seconds, he, too, joined in on the chorus.
"But why?" she cried happily, breathing in deeply to catch her breath. He shrugged, pursing his lips into a smile as he looked away to her hand.

"If I ever did anything like that to Sirius, in front of the entire school, I'd want Remus to singe my eyebrows off," he admitted.

"My god," she sighed, shaking her head, "does she know? She must be royally miffed with you."

"No, only Peter knows, so don't go—" Lily held up her palm and shook her head.

"No, no, I won't," she assured him. "But why? Why go through the trouble?"

James scratched his neck, looking away.

"You were all alone," he answered, "no one defended you, not even Dorcas."

"I can defend myself."

"I know, of course you can— you're the brightest in our year, but you wouldn't, not your friends."

Lily wanted to be upset with him. She wanted to write him off and stomp out of the room while calling him a patronizing tosser, like she had so many times before. Since first year, whenever James Potter smelled an ounce of gas leaking around Lily, he would come like the staunch dog that he was and bark at who ever it was bothering her. Every time, and for all those years, Severus would whisper into her ear how much of a bigheaded wanker he was — "Lily, he's only nice to you because you're muggle-born, thinks you need saving 'cause you're not as strong." — and she would agree because she hated feeling like she needed help, and she hated everyone thinking that she didn't know things because she hadn't grown up amongst cauldrons and pointy hats. But despite everything, and unlike everyone else, James Potter had never once called her out on it, had never mentioned it, and had never made her feel excluded.

When she had discovered and confirmed Remus' condition the previous year, he had confided in her that James not only knew, but had kept him as a brother, constantly doing everything in his power to make him feel included. And she began to think that maybe — after five years of being fed propaganda — Severus was the one who saw her as weak and feebleminded because of her lineage, not James, who had proven on more than one occasion that he viewed her as nothing less than his equal.

Of course, she couldn't deny and simply forget that James Potter had been a bully, but the last time he had tried to test out a new hex on anyone had been over two summers ago.

And she knew that.

Besides, in the next four minutes, she was sure to fall head first into his lap if she didn't get herself into a bed first.

"Marly looks really awful without any hair," he commented after awhile, watching her face intently. A swell of pride grew in his chest when he saw her try to bite back a smile after minutes of a contorted face. James knew she was probably trying to understand what all of this was, for he was as well. She had hurt him a little over a week ago, and he still felt the pricks in his heart, but it seemed easier when he could talk to her. Sure, he wished it was under different circumstances, maybe as he ran his fingers through her soft hair and kissed her on her forehead every time her eyebrows twisted upwards in frustration, but this was okay, this was good.

"You're not supposed to make me laugh," she mock-reprimanded him. Deep down, Lily knew that
had been the point, that almost every time he said something stupid it was to make the other person feel better. That's who he was, seeing the world through rose-colored glasses as he sang show tunes and made people dance. James wasn't just an arrogant toerag, although he could just as easily be, but the boy with the big heart who had found space for monsters, rejects, and leftovers.

It was the plainest truth and the most confusing epiphany that had ever occurred to her.

She should have known, should have been paying more attention. But it had creeped up on her, so silent, so discreet that not even her subconscious had caught it in her dreams. It had been obvious months ago, when she had begun to notice the more beautiful parts of him — rather than what had been there years ago. When she became nervous as he walked into the room, brushing back her hair and standing a little straighter, wondering if he was looking at her, rolling her eyes when she caught him. It had become obvious when they had fought one day in the Great Hall, and the sun hit his eyes in such a way that they made the hazel in them turn into a rainbow of earth — forest, honey, soil, everything. And it had frustrated her because no one was allowed to have it all, no one, no one, no one, but he did.

How? she asked herself. How was it possible to go from nothing at all to all at once? Falling, spinning, diving without even knowing. So scared without understanding what she had to be scared of.

It took seven years, a slap in the face, a little bit of firewhiskey, and a rampage to realize, to see, to feel it all.

"I'm sorry, too," she whispered. Their eyes met; hers were a soft mist and his were thunder clouds.

"For what?"

"I didn't do it because I thought you were easy," she continued, her voice so low and contrite that he wanted to lift her up and embrace her, assuring her that she didn't need to worry about it.

"Oh okay."

"I did it because..." she looked down at his hand, his fingernails digging into his knee as he tried to calm the shots of electricity running through him. Because he didn't know what was happening, and she didn't know what would be the next few syllables to roll of her tongue, but there was a new found magnetic wave coursing through the room and into their bones that made both of them want to run and scream. "Because, well..." Their eyes locked and she finally said it, "because I wanted to kiss... you."

(And the Daily Prophet on the morning of 8 November 1977 would report the following headline: Hogwarts Head Boy and Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, James Potter, explodes.)

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(Two Weeks Later - 19 November 1977)

One night, when her hand laid heavily on the cork to push it down into the ink jar, he had passed her with his hands folded behind his back. There had been no intention to stop, no pre-planned scheme to speak with her, it had been the most spontaneous thing he had ever done in his entire life.

Yes, spontaneity was to blame when he found himself spinning back around on his heel, shadowing over her and asking in a polite, formal tone: "Good evening, do you like walks?"

(They say that everything in life can be traced back to one instance, one moment that changed the line of fate and made it twist around a finger.)
There was a little scrunch between her brows; her eyes roaming around the common room to make sure no one was particularly interested in them.

"Good evening, Black. Yes, I do like walks. Why do you ask, if you don't mind me asking?"

He blinked, wondering if there was a rational explanation to the way her voice made him heat up underneath his robes.

"I often take them just before curfew, usually alone. Would you care to join me from time to time?"

It was a shot in the dark, a curse sent flying against a black shadow flying in a moonless sky.

"Okay."

"From time to time ended up becoming nearly every evening when he realized how enjoyable her company was. Awfully quiet, allowing him to dwell within his thoughts as her footsteps and breathing assured him of her presence, and always responding with a modest answer when he asked her superficial questions about her day. It had been unexpected, to say the least. His original plan had been to spite Evan for thinking he had the upper hand, but his once brief admiration for the witch quickly turned into full-on infatuation. All he could think about was her. When he sat in potions, he thought about her legs around his waist. When he ate dinner, he thought about ruining her calm and collected countenance with a hand up her skirt. Concentration came to an all-time low, and priorities began to change when he realized that — not only did he want to beat Evan — but he wanted Eva."

So he began to court her. At first, it was subtle. When the skies were clear and Eva stopped on the grass to observe, he understood that he hadn't thanked his mother enough for the astronomy lessons, and found himself happily pointing out all the different constellations to her, not even bothering to watch the sky as he saw the stars reflected in her own eyes. Thus, the next time her eyes looked upwards, spinning around as she tried to travel the world in one night, he stood behind her, a hand placed ever so gently on her arm as he whispered galaxies into her ear.

The following evening, it was the small of her back.

The time after that, it was her waist.

And then, on a Saturday evening some time in mid-November, he began to trail his fingers up and down her sleeve. Just like always, her body would stiffen, a breath hitched somewhere inside her throat as she tried hard to focus on the world above her. Her hand pointed up as she said in a whisper: "That's Neptune, correct?"

"Mm," he responded, her smell enrapturing her as he eyed the softest hairs on the back of her neck.

"I never asked you what your sign was," he began, feeling intoxicated. His long, slender fingers left her arm and wrapped around her waist. There was nothing left in him to fight; no reason — that he saw — to stop himself from what he wanted to do. So, as she found herself speechless from the sudden warmth that burned through her cashmere sweater, he found a spot of exposed skin just above her collarbone and began filling it with light kisses.

"Virgo," she responded unsteadily.

"Ah, the maiden," he said against her body, lifting up his chin and re-pressing his lips to the spot just behind her ear. He felt her pulse vibrating, a small sigh escaping from her. Regulus smirked, wrapping his entire arm around Eva in order to pull her closer into him. "The virgin."

His breath was hot against her; her entire body going numb as she responsively closed her eyes and
leaned against him. The kisses continued, the feeling exhilarating like two bandits on the run from a successful bank heist. A sound escaped, a daring one, one that she knew to be meant for private quarters, but instead let the entire nocturnal universe hear her; somewhere between a whimper and a sigh, followed by goosebumps as his tongue flicked out to taste her.

"Regulus," she breathed. He groaned in response, wondering if he could hear his name pronounced in any other way ever again.

Eva, as she often did, had her legs spread on two different banks of a deep, powerful river. Her body came to life at his touch, wanting him to explore every crack and crevice, holding her to him tightly as she let him kiss wherever it was he craved. But another part of her screamed and kicked, pounding at the insides of her conscious as it scolded her back into chastity and diligence.

"Regulus." Though her voice sounded firmer, Regulus was too lost to be redeemed, too far in to come back out any time soon. Eva didn't wait for him to stop, spinning around in his arms to face him. The act alone caught him by surprise, his head flinching back as he blinked himself out of his stupor and found stern eyes gazing back at him. For a mere second, she could feel his hand aggressively squeezing her hip in order to keep her in place.

Regulus soon realized what he was doing and let his hands drop to his sides. He hadn't realized that he may have overstepped a boundary, not ever being taught how to properly or formally court a girl. All he knew, from his mother, was that the world was at their fingertips, and they were to take whatever they wanted. And though that had been his first instinct — to just take her — he didn't want to be Evan, who saw her as nothing less than a step to achieve.

Then again, what did he want? A couple months ago, he had nearly been ready to die for a cause, and now he wanted nothing more than to live out his life with the wonderful witch in front of him. He wanted to buy her a house, wherever she liked, and spend their years raising their children on love. Two sons, that's what he wanted. They'd be brothers, the best of brothers — he'd make sure of it, and so would Eva because that's the sort of person she seemed to be. They'd be a great, happy family, for Regulus would love Eva and Eva would love Regulus, and they'd eat dinner all together every single night, and he'd buy them gifts and he'd make love to her in ways beyond the bedroom.

Amazing to think that he had never thought to want such things, ever — not until he realized that it was a possibility. Now, it was all he could think about.

"Something wrong? I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, his voice full of concern. She smiled, warming his worries away as he felt her two small palms rest against his chest.

"No," she said quietly, shaking her head as she fingered one of his transparent buttons.

He nodded tightly, looking up and over her head. Maybe she hadn't liked what he had done, maybe she preferred other things. Regulus didn't really know much about girls, never thought much about them until this year, until her. The only time he had ever kissed a girl had been his cousin, Narcissa, who had convinced him that she needed his help in order to practice for Lucius Malfoy, who, apparently, was a professional in the subject. But 12 year old Regulus didn't understand everything, although he pretended so hard that he did, and when he had finally agreed, and Narcissa had pressed her rosy lips to his, the kiss lasted longer than the ones he had witnessed between his parents and his aunts and uncles. Her lips had bitten and poked at his own, and it hadn't felt like anything special, not until she had ground her hips into his still bony ones. With a new found strain and a stiffening between his legs, Narcissa had giggled, rubbing her hands over it and asking him to show her what was underneath. He had obliged, because she was older than him and he had thought older people were always right, and moments later her snow-white hands had wrapped around him, tugging roughly and inexpertly.
"Does that feel good Reggie?"

"Yes." It had felt good, good, so good. But a couple months later, he learned it was a memory best kept in his darkest, deepest vaults.

He looked back down, Eva had her lips pursed, still staring intently at his buttons.

"A sickle for your thoughts," he teased solemnly, replacing his hands on her hips. His heart swelled when she looked up again with a half-smile, wondering if there was a spell to make a moment last forever.

She stepped on her tip-toes and pressed her lips to his. It was an inexperienced, chaste kiss that, nonetheless, turned him breathless. Her soles pressed back down to the ground while his eyes were still closed, savoring the last notes of it.

He smiled to himself as Eva laid her cheek against his chest.

Regulus swore that he could have died happy in that very moment

But...

(It is one of life's bitterest truths that bedtime so often arrives just when things are really getting interesting.)*

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The entire hall shook and both of them jumped from one another as the sound echoed into their eardrums. It was closer than it seemed, and before Eva could even figure out in which direction it had originated from, Regulus sped off down the hall, jaw set, and wand at the ready.

(Moments earlier)

"Is there anyone comin', Moony?" mumbled Peter as he bit down into a liquorice wand.

"He just said five seconds ago that there isn't," gibed Sirius, shoving his hand down the bag that swung lazily by Peter's side and pulling out one of his liquorice wands.

"Those are mine!" the wizard cried, his forehead scrunching as he gaped at his friend. Sirius shrugged, nearly consuming the entire confection in one go. Remus snorted, shaking his head as he reached into his back pocket and re-opened the map.

The Marauders, as per tradition, had dined at the Hog's Head for supper, even though it meant breaking Hogsmeade curfew and returning to castle grounds well past the set schedule. They had just come out from the One-Eyed Witch's passage, all four of the boys sporting lovely wipes of dirt across their eyelids, cheeks, and foreheads.

"Why so anxious, Wormtail?" inquired James, turning to look at his friend. "We're back inside, curfew isn't gonna' set for another quarter hour."

"Eh, he always gets jumpy when we sneak back in without the cloak," drawled Sirius, letting out a large yawn and stretching his arms upwards.

"They have no proof that we were out past sunset," assured James, patting Peter on his shoulder. A few paces in front of them, they saw Remus stop in his tracks, turning around with furrowed brows as he stared intently at something in the map.
"What's wrong, Moony?" asked Sirius, his smile faltering as he moved to his friend's side. Remus' eyes narrowed as he looked back up.

"What would four Slytherins want with Mary?"

"Mary who? MacDonald?"

"Yeah," responded Remus.

All four of them shared looks and a second of silence before Sirius responded, "nothing good—that's for sh*t sure."

"Where is she?" James stepped forward, reaching down and grabbing the map as if it were an antidote to a poison.

"The Prowling Passage," Remus replied without hesitation.

"Fuck, fuck," Sirius cursed before breaking out into a quick run. James dropped the map and ran after him with Peter at his heels. But Remus wasn't so quick to move, instead reaching back down for their very own creation and relocating the names he had seen just moments ago. His eyes ran over the cluster, watching as two pairs of feet moved side by side, coming out from one of the spare rooms in that hall and waiting across from it.

He looked back up, his eye twitching as he made haste to join his friends, not knowing for sure if he wanted to find out what was behind the meaning of Eva being in the same room as Regulus Black, Cedric Avery, and Eoin Mulciber.

"FLIPENDO!" Regulus shouted, a plum light shot out the tip of his wand and smashed into Cedric Avery's face as soon as he heard the door being kicked open. The Slytherin went flipping backwards and crashing into the wall as Eoin Mulciber stepped back. The prefect's grey eyes widened as he caught sight of Eoin's unbuckled belt, his fly down as he stepped backwards, his hands up in surrender.

Regulus turned to look at the figure pressed down to the ground, cowering behind a stack of tables as soon as she had heard the bombardment. Her brown eyes were wide, an opened mouth as she attempted to shout but couldn't. There were tears, a cut over her cheekbone, and her shirt had been ripped open. The Slytherin found his breath caught in his lungs, his jaw clenching as he closed his eyes.

"Fix yourself, Mulciber, now," he commanded tightly. They heard movement by the doorway, Eva standing with a hand pressed on the wooden frame. Regulus knew who it was, but Eoin's eyes glanced up, scowling at the witch who stared, wide-eyed, at the scene in front of her. "Don't look at her, you slimy shit," ordered Regulus.

His eyes moved back to his, the two wizards stared one another down. Eva dared to walk inside, approaching them and passing over Cedric groaning on the floor. There was a distinct smell of human sweat filling the air, the room stuffy and sickening as she watched Eoin's fingers fumble on his waist band. Then her eyes darted over to the figure shuffling on the ground, and something between a yelp and a sharp inhale slipped out of the witch. The girl had bronze skin, her brown eyes water-colored red as she pleadingly looked for mercy from the only other girl in the room.

"Regulus," Eva whispered, standing right by his side, placing a hand on his forearm as she hid behind his lean body, her stomach dropping into the fields of Asphodel.
"Just take her, wait outside," he told her. She didn't hesitate, flying down to the witch's side, her arms wrapping around her shoulders. With everything she could muster, Eva got her standing, her body violently shaking against her own.

Regulus dared a glance towards her, quickly realizing that the girl sported nothing more than a tattered shirt and stockings. He shrugged off his own robe, placing it over the witch.

"It's going to be okay, just come with me," Eva kept reassuring her, walking out into the hall.

Once they had left the room, Regulus stretched his neck upwards, inhaling and exhaling deeply.

"What on Earth did you think you were doing?" he eventually asked, already knowing the answer.

"Having some fun," grumbled Cedric, now rubbing the back of his head.

"She didn't look like she was having fun."

"Just a mudblood," added Eoin, pointing out towards the door.

"Don't act like you give a bloody shit about them now," snorted Cedric as he saw Regulus momentarily stiffen. He turned with flared nostrils, marching towards his housemate and snatching his hair into his hands. Regulus' hand pulled backwards, ripping at the Slytherin's strands as he whimpered in pain.

"You idiot," he hissed, nearly spitting in his face. The two boys were nose-to-nose, so close that Regulus could nearly taste the whiskey on Cedric's breath. "We do not attack, we do not touch anyone while we walk these halls." His hand twisted backwards once again, this time smashing the wizard's skull into the wall. "You know that." He let go, standing back up and nearly snarling at the other one in there.

Eoin's eyes narrowed, but he didn't have time to retaliate for Eva was back in the doorway, her eyes wide as she said: "Someone's coming."

And then, from right behind Eva, he saw his own eyes peer back at him.

"No, we're already here."

"PUNGO!"

Eva barely had time to scream before the air had been knocked out of her lungs. Her entire face swelled up and she strained to see what was going on. There were multiple flashes of blues and reds and yellows and purples, and all she could think of was the stinging that pricked the right side of her face. Her ear felt like it was going to pop off and float away, and her neck had welled up so that she could hardly breathe.

She crawled on her knees and crashed against the wall adjacent to the door. From where she sat, she could hear them fighting, grunts and groans as both objects and humans alike went flying. Her head fell into her arms, her forehead resting against her knees as the pain pulsated like a stressed heart.

From across her, Remus sat with Mary in his arms, not being able to help the scowl directed at the Slytherin witch across from him. He didn't know what role she played in all this, but he didn't want to find out either in fear that he might retaliate in a horribly cruel way. There was no remorse when he saw her whimpering in pain, her face reflecting the ugliness from within. He felt wet tears soak through his breast pocket, and he held Mary even closer, placing a hand on the back of her head as he comforted her.
From the corner of his eye, he saw a figure rush down to Eva. His green eyes slitted, turning to eye the hooded person bending down and running a light hand over the injured side of her face.

"Toma, muñequita," she heard someone coo. Before she could even register who and what it was, a small white pill was laid down on her tongue. Her throat too dry to swallow — in too much pain that she would unquestioningly take anything to make her feel even remotely better — she forced it down. Somewhere along the way, it lodged in her throat, and she tried to swallow again, mustering as much saliva as she could to get it down. "Won't get rid of that tumor growing out your eye socket, but it'll take care of the pain."

"You speak Spanish, Fletcher?" she scoffed, closing her eyes as she felt her fingers beginning to tingle. He laughed, running a hand through her hair and curling it around his finger as he laid it down against her breast bone.

"I'll speak whatever language you like, princess," he mock-flirted.

Remus' brows furrowed together, watching as Mundungus Fletcher touched and prodded Eva. He hadn't even know that they conversed, much less on such an intimate level. His breath hitched in his throat, his eyes blinking away as he suddenly felt uncomfortable. But he was saved when Regulus came flinging out of the room, Sirius right behind him as his brother's back hit the wall and came crashing down on his knees. The Slytherin wizard groaned as the pain shot up his thighs and into his stomach.

Sirius huffed before turning to Remus as James came out of the room holding both an unconscious Cedric Avery and a writhing Eoin Mulciber by their collars. He shoved them along the wall next to Regulus, the latter shoving against the Gryffindor with all the force he had left. The bruise forming on his lower right forearm protested, and he found himself clutching it with a pained look. Peter stood by the door, both hands placed on opposite sides of the frame as his eyes toured over all the limp and livid bodies occupying the otherwise silent corridor.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Regulus spat at Mundungus, who was watching everything unfold pathetically with raised brows. Both James and Sirius turned to follow the Slytherin's gaze.

"Were you in on this sick shit, Fletcher?" inquired James, approaching both the Ravenclaw and the witch. But before he could even respond — as he made a move to turn on his bent legs — Remus had his wand out, pointing directly at the back of his head. The wizard's dark eyes traveled to see the blurred outline of the wooden stick, pursing his lips as he held his hands up and slowly began to lift himself up from the ground.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lupin," he warned him.

But Remus only saw red. He stood up, his breath heavy and his nostrils flared as he pressed the tip of his wand into Mundungus' skull; not sure whether he was angrier with Mundungus' threats or with the fact that, just two weeks ago, he had agreed to give Eva a chance and be her friend, and here she was, with the rest of the blood bigots, aiding and abetting in a rape. More than anything, he wished he had been the one to send that stinging hex her way, but he always did have a nasty Achilles' heel when it came to jinxing witches, as if Eva wouldn't have been more than ready to send something his way.

He looked down at her, blood boiling through him as he thought about how fooled he had been. For a moment, he had actually thought of her as something special, not believing that he had actually been amused over and over again as she went into a rant about how fauns were completely different from satyrs; or how he would purposefully pretend he didn't know what she was talking about so that she would explain it him, sometimes even sending a mock-scowl his way that would only make
him laugh. How stupid he had been to waste time reading up on demiguises, or using up space in his notebook to take note of all the new things she told him just so he could spend his afternoons studying them instead of doing things that actually mattered.

He didn't know who he was more disgusted with: her or himself.

One thing was for sure— he felt like a blasted idiot for not believing his gut instinct that this girl was a bad egg.

"You're in on this shit? Huh? You creepy bastard, you're in on this? HUH!?!" snarled Sirius, every syllable being another reason for him to shove Mundungus further and further into the wall. Eva tried to move her feet further into her body, but nothing felt right. Her entire mind felt wobbly and too relaxed, as if she had just woken up from a restless night and couldn't sense her own legs. The world in front of her seemed surreal, the legs moving in slow-motion as the words elongated and spun around like deep bass symphonies.

Sirius felt a hand on his shoulder and he spun around.

"Leave it, Sirius," James told him before glancing at the others, "they're all being reported to the Wizengamot, all five of 'em." His hazel eyes fell over the dark figure leaning against the wall by the rest of his bedfellows. "Your time's up, Mulciber."

Eoin scowled, but before he could throw a wordless confundus towards the Gryffindor, Mundungus was speaking, his fingers wagging and his head shaking slowly with a small smirk on his lips.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Mundungus sang, his hand ruffling the top of Eva's head.

The witch felt and smelled tobacco-stained hands massaging into her scalp, the feeling tickling her as she began to squirm and giggle from the sensation. Everyone was silent, looking at the odd pair as the girl's hair covered her face. Eva couldn't help herself, everything seemed so funny. She shot her eyes up to meet a red, tear-stricken face crushed up awkwardly against a wizard's chest, finding it so completely ridiculous that she was bent over with laughter.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" growled Regulus, attempting to get up but being forced back down by his brother.

"Gave her something for the pain," Mundungus drawled, shrugging his shoulder as he continued to brush through her hair. The Slytherin tried to wring out of his brother's grasp, but bruised knees only got one so far in life.

"Which would be what, exactly?"

"Some muggle thing, wouldn't—"

"YOU. GAVE. HER. MUGGLE. MEDICINE!" This time, Regulus did manage to stand up, Sirius continuing to hold him back as he tried to charge after the Ravenclaw. Mundungus grinned a Cheshire Cat smile. "IT COULD KILL HER!"

"Oh no, trust me when I say we'd know."

"WHAT!!?"

"All right, all right," Mundungus exclaimed, his eyes darting over the others as they all stared at the girl. "I know she's quite the sight, but let's focus on the real issue at hand."
There was a heavy silence, only exaggerated breathing as the tension sat across their shoulders like pesky little bugs. And the silence made Remus' head straighten, his entire face veiling in awe as he looked up and down the hall.

"What..." his words trailed off. "Where... why hasn't anyone come yet? I thought we informed the portraits to receive the Head Master."

"What's going on?" asked James, turning to Mundungus. "And why haven't you told us what you're doing here?"

"Someone very dear to me made me aware of numerous factors that played into our being here this very evening," he riddled, tilting his head as he met the gaze of every single person. "Now, a couple of things are going to happen, and they will be done to the utmost perfection. One, you will put your wand down," Remus stared down Mundungus without moving, "or else I'll snap it in half."

"I fucking dare you."

"Fletcher," called out Regulus, all eyes turning on him. "Walk away from this, you aren't a part of it —"

"All of us are going to walk away from this unscathed," interrupted the Ravenclaw. "We are going to part and forget this ever happened."

"Why the hell would we do that?" puzzled Peter.

"Each of you has a very dirty secret, you wouldn't want everyone finding them out now, would we?" His dark eyes travelled from Sirius to Remus, who felt his lungs collapse into a million pieces, back over to Regulus, who had momentarily looked over his left hand. Mundungus shrugged, pursing his lips innocently.

"And some of you have more than just one."

"You're full of bloody shit, you know that? I don't—"

"Sirius," he heard Remus warn from next him.

"Good boy," crooned Mundugus. "You four, take your girlfriend and get out of here."

"Fuck you, Fletcher," spat Sirius into his face, Remus being the first to slither past him and head back over to Mary, who was curled up against the opposite wall. He didn't even bother looking at the Slytherin witch, knowing that if he did, he couldn't be held accountable for his actions; wanting nothing more than to send another stinging hex to the left side of her face.

He hoped it welted and she looked like a scorched tomato for the rest of the week.

"You'll rot in hell," Peter whispered to him after James roughly shoved the Ravenclaw's shoulder.

"Too bad I'm not welcome there," he snickered, watching the blue-eyed wizard scatter off to Remus.

"Well, well, well," they heard someone sing and all of them, except Eva who continued to smile at her shoe laces, turned around to catch sight of who it was.

"Oh, bloody hell," cursed Regulus in an undertone, running a hand over his entire face as Melisende Gamp raised her eyebrows as she scanned over all of them.

"Shit, Fletcher, you set us up!?!" cried James, not taking his eyes off of Moira Palancher's curled lip.
"Oh my gosh," giggled Rosalia Selwyn, swinging through their bodies as she bit down on the finger in her mouth. She stared coquettishly at Sirius Black, who in turn sneered and looked away. "No one invited us to the party."

"I don't think it's a party, Rosy," commented Melisende, bending down and looking at Eva.

"All three of you are out during curfew, just go back to your common—"

"Look who it is, girls," Rosalia crooned, walking over to James and tilting her head as she smiled mischievously up at him. Melisende had both hands on Eva's wrists as she turned and glanced upward for a moment.

With a snort and a shake of her head she replied, "they're blood traitors, the lot of them."

"Mm," agreed Rosalia, her head playfully swinging around the Gryffindor's maroon scarf.

"So," Moira began, her right shoulder planted heavily into the wall. "This your idea of a date, Black?" Her tone was insulting, her eyes blinking and dead as she waited for a response. Regulus' eyes darted between Eva and Mundungus. Her right eye was closed and bulging out of her head, her hand at her throat as she wheezed for breath. Regulus pressed his back to the wall and threw his head back into it, closing his eyes as he regretted everything that had happened over the past ten minutes. Eva was in pain because of him, she had been jinxed because of him, and she was now being punished because of him. And this sudden realization made him think of the ink tattooed into his left forearm; wondering if this was the sort of life she would be subjected to if she married him. Of course, they could easily wiggle themselves out of the situation, simply by admitting the truth, but that also meant exposing Eva, and such a thing would mean Eva getting sent back to France because she couldn't be trusted to walk through the corridors and not snog someone.

"Ooh!" cooed Rosalia excitedly, clasping her hands together as she caught sight of the shipwrecked Ravenclaw. "Are we playing with the mud—"

James stepped forward and gave her a pointed look, smiling forcefully as he did his best to keep his magic at bay, wanting nothing more than to chop off the Slytherin's golden locks.

"Step an entire foot back, dirty dog." sneered Melisende.

"Come on, let's get Manasse and go," implored Moira quietly, reaching down to put a hand underneath the girl's underarm. Both of them lifted her up, most of the weight being left for the Slytherin Chaser.

Eva began to laugh again, speaking gibberish as her eyes seemed to roll into oblivion.

"She's utterly obscure," Melisende said to the group, blinking from her housemate to the rest of them. "Which one of you had the nerve to hex a highborn pureblood witch?"

Sirius Black scoffed and rolled his eyes, "I did."

"Oh," faltered Rosalia, looking knowingly at Melisende, "we can't do anything about that."

She was right, Sirius Black, even though having been disowned, was untouchable by them. Being caught hexing a highborn pureblood witch was one thing, being caught hexing a highborn pureblood wizard was another.

"Be ashamed of yourself," muttered Moira, grimacing at the grey-eyed Gryffindor.
"Good thing I don't give a shit," Sirius laughed dryly.

"Excuse me but," they heard another voice scoff from beside them. Remus came forward, stepping in front of them as he stared incredulously at all three of them. Luckily, both Melisende and Moira were tall enough so that he didn't have to bend down to be eye-level with them. "They raped Mary—"

"Who?" asked Melisende. Remus did his best to keep calm, sighing deeply as he continued.

"Mary MacDonald," he gestured to the floor towards the Ravenclaw witch with his chin, neither one of three bothered to look. "They wanted to rape her, they were planning on raping her. And you three are more caught up on the fact that a highborn whatever was hexed instead of the—"

"Let's go," drawled the black-haired witch, turning around and walking off down the hall, leaving Remus with a gaped mouth. Moira followed in tow, a dazed Eva Manasse leaning heavily against her as they disappeared into the darkness.

"Bye, bye," Rosalia waved to all of them, smiling coyly at Sirius before skipping after her friends.

"Wow," breathed Peter.

"How do they live with themselves?" Remus inquired rhetorically.

"How did they know where we were?" added James after him.

"You berks, hexing Manasse," they heard Cedric grumble.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP, AVERY," bellowed Sirius.

After that, they sat in silence, and then, out of nowhere, they heard scrambling and running as the three Slytherins got up and high tailed it out of there, leaving everyone and everything behind them in the dust.

With a gaped mouth, Sirius turned and shared a look with Peter. Peter, however, hadn't taken his eyes off of Mundungus.

"You know our secrets?" the small wizard inquired.

Mundungus nodded slowly, "unfortunately."

"How?"

"Fuck off, Pettigrew," snorted the Ravenclaw in response.

"Remus," a small voice called out. Remus turned to look down at Mary, reclaiming his spot next to her and pulling her into his arms.

"What are you doing here?" Sirius directed towards him.

"I had interests to protect," he riddled.

"Interests to protect?"

"Believe it or not, Black," Mundungus sighed deeply, "but there are people more important than you."
"And I thought you were here for Mary," coldly mentioned Remus.

"Low in my list of priorities, if at all," he admitted, shrugging as he stretched his arms upward. James shook his head, obviously disgusted with his words, but he didn't care. He had successfully saved his relationship with Sofia Mustaq, and that's all that mattered, that's all that would ever matter. Mary MacDonald was just a casualty of war, and anyone smart enough would realize that. He needed to make sure the artillery was kept secret, kept safe. He needed to make sure that Regulus Black remained undiscovered, and that none of them managed to turn Eva to their side, though he seemed to be losing on that front.

"Wanker," said Remus under his breath.

"Well, that just about settles it— toodles." They couldn't even watch without hexing the Ravenclaw as he disappeared after the rest of the Slytherin witches. Mundungus left in his thoughts, wondering how that could have gone a lot better, and a lot smoother than it had, but happy, nonetheless, that he had been able to hit two birds with one stone.

Back in the Prowling Passage, Remus leaned against the wall, rubbing his hand back and forth along Mary's back.

"Hey, you want to go to Pomfrey?" he whispered in her hair.

"No, I just want to stay with you lot— if that's all right," she responded.

"Of course you do, because we're going to go to the kitchens and eat a shit ton of chocolate cake," grinned Peter, his teeth bright and gleaming as he threw a wink her way.

"Yeah, that sounds nice," she agreed, closing her eyes and resting her head against the Gryffindor. James' foot kicked the wall, as Sirius let out another deep breath. "Could one of you get Lily, if it's not too much of a bother?"

James nodded hastily, "yeah, of course."

"How the fuck does he know? And what the fuck does he know?" Sirius questioned, more to himself than to anyone around him.

"I don't know, but I don't want to find out," Remus said, already tired. The full moon was in less than a week, and he could begin to feel the aches — albeit only after a particularly long day — in his back. His eyes were tired, ready to close and take a long nap, but then he would think about her and immediately the adrenaline woke him up. Eva: the way she had been sitting against the wall, laughing her head off as everyone around her fought, cursed, as Mary cried because she was scared. He would think of how the Slytherins had only shown up to receive her, to make sure that nothing had happened to their precious little cargo, to insure that Eva didn't — god forbid — show up to her wedding with a bloody scar stretched across her face.

All he could think about was that stupid little giggle that had come out of her swollen face, making her only seem uglier and crueler than she actually was. He couldn't believe he had ever seen her as attractive or beautiful, or that she had a nice smile, she had and was none of that.

And he never, ever wanted to see her again.

"Come on, let's get Mary her chocolate cake," surrendered Sirius, huffing as he began to walk in the same direction that his cowardly brother had gone off in moments ago.
Chapter End Notes

*Quote is by Lemony Snicket, they are not my words
Sorry, The Demon Stole My Shoes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Monday Morning - 21 November 1977)

Everything hit him at once: Slughorn's words that were too jumbled to pull apart and piece back together, the stool underneath him sported a thousand needles that pricked the back of his thighs, the slightest whisper or sigh from someone seated behind him. All of it, all at once, beaming down on him as if he were standing in the middle of a Quidditch pitch in the dead of night. Everyone chanting around him, the lights on and brighter than the sun. He could feel his sanity slowly slipping away as the clock's second hand ticked onwards; everything driving him over the edge.

Something moved to his left and his breath hooked into his throat.

A hand.

A simple, petite hand that scrawled and rubbed against parchment.

He hastily averted his gaze over to James before he did something he'd regret, but the way his friend's shirt was lazily tucked into his trousers made Remus want to scream.

His fingers aggressively ran through his hair and he let his quill float to the desk. With a small grunt, he moved forward in his seat and threw his face into his hands, shutting his eyes closed as he waited for the hour to end.

Sure, he could blame it on the full moon. It wasn't unusual for his senses, during this period, to push the pedal to the floor and go into overdrive, the engine roaring so loud that it'd make the lone farmer in the distance go deaf. But this was different, it had never been so terrible, not even when he had felt his entire world had been ripped in half two years ago. This time there was a target, a focus, a bull's eye for his anger.

He took a deep breath, but regretted it just as soon as the scent of pond slime and rose water violated his nostrils. Groaning, he closed his eyes and detected the faintest notes of jasmine, causing him to dig his nails into the wooden underside of his seat as he tried to push away the migraine that he had woken up with.

From beside him, Eva watched out of the corner of her eye. Her acute awareness didn't miss a thing — he looked like he was in terrible pain, his sleeves pushed up to his elbows as his veins popped out from under his skin as he clung onto the seat like he was ready to fall off it. She pursed her lips, looking around the room as she watched everyone copying down the information that the chalk scribbled and squeaked as their professor spoke.

She leaned over to him and whispered, "is everything okay?"

His eyes widened and his teeth ground together at Judas' imposing scent.

"Fine," he managed, his words surly and cold. Remus went to re-focus on the chalkboard, hoping that it would provide a distraction, but all he could hear was the sound of it screeching. The prefect wondered how many points Slughorn would take from Gryffindor if he happened to punch a hole through the blasted thing.
Eva had a small scrunch jagged into her forehead, her eyes looking down to his hand as he fisted and un-fisted his fingers around the delicate feathered utensil. She knew something was off, and she had a hunch as to what it could be, but...

Surely, he doesn't blame me for it? she wondered, turning to survey him. His entire body was rigid, his breaths exaggeratedly loud. However, at that exact moment, the bell trilled and Eva watched with a patient stance as he winced, the sound causing the tension in his brain to grow tenfold. Letting out another indignant groan, he shoved all his things away into his bag. Without paying much attention to delicacy, they both heard a sharp rip as his notes tore right down the center. He paused, looking at it for a moment before crumpling it up with one hand and tossing it to the ground. Eva was taken back by his crass behavior, her head flinching backwards as a hand spread across her breastbone.

"Remus, what's wrong?" she tried again, this time looking up at him with a concerned expression as they remained one of the few in the room.

He pinched the corners of his eyes, another deep breath flooding into his lungs as he tried to put distance between himself and the witch.

"Don't call me that," he muttered.

"Excuse me?"

His blood was reaching boiling point and, unfortunately, it was beginning to jump and spill right over the edge of the pot. Turning around, his eyes finally came upon her for the first time since Saturday evening.

Upon first glance, Eva saw the fire in his eyes, the redness in his ears, and the way he held clenched hands at his sides. She gulped, giving a quick tour of the room before bringing her gaze back to him.

"Remus?" They both heard from behind him.

"Not now, James, I've got to arrange something with my partner," Remus lied easily, not pulling his gaze from her. The Gryffindor readjusted the strap on his shoulder, looking from Eva and back to his friend. When he sensed his reluctance, Remus turned around and, with the calmest face he could muster, he managed, "don't worry, I won't be long."

"Oh okay, I'll be right outside."

He turned to leave, and Remus waited until the room fell silent before speaking.

"Are you fucking insane?"

"Remus, what—"

"Don't call me that," he repeated, nearly spitting her way as she stepped back. "Don't you dare call me that."

"I," she faltered, staring up at him with an incredulous expression as he continued to breathe hot air between them. "I don't understand."

"That makes it ten times worse!"

Her brows came together and she stepped forward before asking in an undertone, knowing that his friend was just outside the door, "can you please explain what's going on?"
"I can't even look at you, you know that?" They were the first words that touched the tip of his tongue, whether intuitive or purposeful, they were now, and finally, out in the open. "Because when I do, I have to stop myself from sending a boil the size of a quaffle to your face."

She froze, standing straighter with her eyes narrowed as she did a once over of him.

"You'd dare threaten me?"

"I'd do way worse than that if you weren't a witch," he snorted cruelly. "You disgust me, truly disgust me. There, that's the problem: you're a bigoted bitch living in her little world of fantasy, ignoring real world problems as you deliberately perpetuate them in these halls—"

"I didn't—"

"No, you don't get to speak—you've done your part. There's a bloody war going on out there, and you brought that violence into these halls where we're supposed to be safe." He stepped forward. "You brought that in here, you understand?"

His fury and his words choked and restrained her, her eyes looking down to his Adam's apple as it bobbed back and forth every time he spoke. And despite all that, Eva's first instinct was to reach out to him and wrap her small fingers into his and calm him down. Conflict made her crawl and ache all over, it made her want to hide in the background until it was time to come forward and sign the accords. Eva didn't like being sneered at, the center of someone's wrath, tied down to a stake. But Remus didn't want that, something she had understood almost immediately. Remus wanted, and needed, to bleed himself dry of the pus he had let fester in whatever wound he was keeping to himself.

This was not a battle Eva could win.

"How could you sit there, for two weeks, knowing what was going to happen? How could you let me call you a friend?" he whispered derisively, his anger now turning into grief as he tried to understand when exactly this person in front of him had managed to trick him so blindly.

"Answer me," he demanded.

"You don't want an answer, you want me to agree with you," she bit back, eyes widening disparagingly as she tilted her head upwards to watch him.

Never in his life had he thought he could feel such distaste for someone, but he did. In that moment, Remus hated her, he hated her for being able to remain so impartial, to stand there without a worry etched into her face as he played the irrational, belligerent fool.

"How could you look at yourself in the morning and not want to vomit?" he continued. She remained silent, daring him to continue, pushing him over the brink and seeing how far he was willing to go. And though something inside him screamed at him to turn away, to walk from this, he remained there, the adrenaline spewing words out of his mouth.

"FUCKING SAY SOMETHING!"

Though her heart beat to speeds humanly impossible, she remained steady with a stoic expression, her chin held high as she waited for him to achieve what he had come to achieve. No matter the mass that had welled up in her throat, no matter the ache that began in her ribs, she would not break for him.

But one thing had become clear as day— he was no friend of hers, and he never had been.
She didn't know whether that realization hit her with a trail of disappointment or one of utter regret. Did she feel dejected because they really had amounted to nothing, just as she had expected? Despite two weeks of pushing herself to open up to him, forcing herself through conversation so that he would find her worth his time? Or did she hate herself for believing such stupid, childish white lies?

"I don't have time for this," she said, giving him a brief smile before making way to pass him. A hand reached out to the desk behind their own, stopping her from moving any further.

"You know, my mum's a muggle. Of course, you wouldn't know that because you've never asked," he let out an acknowledging scoff, "huh, funny that, I just realized that's where I fucked up. I was blind, I ignored your hesitation to speak on the matter because, well, I don't really know anymore why I did. I should have pushed it, I really should, maybe this way I wouldn't have been caught so off-guard and feel like a complete loser." His eyes left the wall behind her and returned to her downturned gaze. "It was because you agreed, you believe in that rubbish."

"Don't ever—"

"Did you even go to Lutie Lopes' candle lighting?"

"You speak to much, did you know that?"

"And you're a bloody coward, Manasse. You can't hide behind your shitty retorts— you don't fool me," he leaned forward so that his mouth was leveled to her ear, "and you're everything I despise in this world, so don't think for a second that an apology is going to help your cause."

"You're a fool if you think I'm going to apologize to you," she informed him sourly, their noses nearly touching, his eyes boring into her own as he searched for whatever he couldn't find.

They remained like that for a few seconds, both of them participating in a dangerous stare-down. Slowly, he began to nod, glaring at her as he pulled his spine back into a more comfortable position. Both their hearts beating so fast that Eva thought she'd finally given a face to the term heartless bitch.

"Don't know why I bothered," he mentioned bitterly, "again."

Finally, he picked up his things and went to exit the classroom. As he made way to turn on his heel, his foot got stuck around the stool's legs, simply kicking it aside so that it clattered and fell to the floor with a *pang*! Eva's eyes instinctively shut closed.

Once he was gone, Eva let out a breath that she had been holding. Gasps of oxygen flooding back into her system as she held tightly onto the edge of the table and let go of her sturdy posture. She slid down to the floor, her legs jelly-like and nearly shivering as she, shamefully, found herself in the same position she had a little more than a month ago— caused by the same person, only in a different room. But what other choice did she have? The mask, and her silence, was her best defense. She could have admitted to everything right then and there, she could have told him what she had really been doing that evening, but her immediate response had been to freeze up and re-cement the wall that he had tried cracking with an anvil. No more. She would never let him, or anyone, do that to her again; she would never let anyone go at her in such a way. The wall was back up, higher than anything that had come before.

And deep down in an obscure crevice within herself, she felt her heart slowly shrink. The though that the warmth, the assurance he had given her whenever he stood beside her and listened had been false made her want to curl into the wardrobe at the back of the room and let everyone forget she had ever existed. She should have known that the water only grew colder, eventually coming to a point where it would consume her whole— that there was a sinkhole somewhere down below that would
take her in and ruthlessly spit her back out.

She should have known.

A single tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped it away furiously. She hated herself for acting so moronically, exaggerating something so banal; something that shouldn't have meant anything, something that she had known would end this way — quick and messy.

Oh, dearie, don't let them eat you up, someone in her head heartened her.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, leaning her head back as she let herself go.

It's too bad, I was starting to like him, another one of them giggled.

"Yeah, me too," Eva mumbled despite herself. With another sigh, she rolled her head so that she was staring at the fallen stool he sat in, imagining his foot bouncing on the rung.

Then his image faded into a long forgotten mirage and she was alone. Again.

(Tuesday - 22 November 1977)

She leaned back into her seat and neatly placed her quill back into its place in the ink jar. Her eyes roamed over the drying words, blinking away from them as she laid her palm over her stomach and looked out into the murky water. It was just as dark as the room that stood behind her, the green tinted torches flickering in the crystal window as plankton and various sorts of kelp swam past them. As she traveled further down, she was met with some odd little girl, peculiarly short with a strand of curled hair laying against her temple. She had red-ringed eyes and her once rose-tinted cheeks suited best on a corpse rather than a seventeen year old witch.

The girl blinked, catching a figure coming down the entrance steps and placing a hand on one of the wizards who lounged lazily on the couches. Her eyes followed his body as he moved to sit next to his newfound companion, icy grey eyes beginning to dart around the room.

She knew he was staring at the back of her head, looking away as soon as a chuckle bursted and filled the usual quietness.

Her eyes rolled and she shook her head disapprovingly as Antonin Dolohov snickered at his own joke. She just knew that he had gone along with it, even if it hadn't been all that hilarious, because he was a polite little bastard with a stern jaw and a back as solid as a brick.

And he had kissed her, and he hadn't spoken to her or looked her way since.

She internally cringed at herself, grimacing and nearly scowling. It had been awkward, odd, unexpected. One moment they were barely acquaintances and then his lips had been on hers, and she had let herself cling to him because he had been warm and her hands were turning blue. Never in her life would she have let herself do such a thing, never in her life would she have agreed to let him touch her. But no, she hadn't done anything to stop it. Instead, she had encouraged it. She had played along, picking up her little dolls and brushing their hair as she sung childish lullabies. But she was no longer a child, she was the daughter of a powerful, wealthy —

She faltered, sighing as her shoulders dropped forward.

She was no longer any of that, was she? She was a desperate witch searching for something to hold on to. Like a stupid little girl, she had hoped that something had been — could have been — Remus
Lupin, and like a stupid little girl she had gotten her hand stomped on and then whine about it. Then, she had hoped that it could have been Regulus Black, but he had simply used her and, when he was finished, thrown her to the side.

She pressed her lips tightly together and closed her eyes for another time. Eva knew she was losing it, that she was spiraling out of control. It had been on her mind since the incident in September by the lake, when her magic had gone haywire, no longer abiding to her will. Anything using a wand seemed useless, half of the charms coming out wonky and lopsided, and as everyone else succeeded, she ensconced into herself—spending more time with her imaginary friends rather than solving the crumbling house falling down around her.

And it wasn't just scholastically, her sleeping pattern had turned into a jigsaw puzzle of two hours here and another one there. Words passed her ears as if they were meaningless notes played on a piano by a toddler, sometimes, when she looked over her assignments for the evening, she found herself wondering when they had even begun studying the extraction of Mercury, and where had she been during that lesson?

The answer was 'in her head', of course, with the voices she had once been so scared of.

On Monday night, after her scuffle with Remus, she had gotten so lost in conversation with them that Sofia had had to drag her out of bed, slap her in the face, and push her underneath a cold shower that bulleted her with ice pellets in order to wake her up.

Oh, but how she had cried and the only ones to comfort her had been those ghosts inside her.

How humiliating, she thought now, not being able to come to terms with it. She had cried, actually shed tears when Remus' words pierced her mind and reminded her of what a monster she was. It didn't matter that he had been referencing something entirely different, it had hit her somewhere else—somewhere deep. She was everything he despised in this world, and she was everything she despised in this world. All she wanted was to be back to normal, she wanted to pull out of this, she didn't want to have to kiss someone in order to figure out if it was really happening, she didn't want to make her decisions based off of desperation and neediness.

Oh gosh, and she didn't want to be alone. Not now, especially not now when her reality begun to feel more like a dream.

Another tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped it away before anyone could see.

Oh dearie, lighten up! Eva began to smile.

There you are, she greeted them happily, all previous thoughts fading into nothingness.

(Thursday - 24 November 1977)

Shadow binding is the practice of manipulating shadows to do a Dark wizard's or witch's will, Remus read, his eyes slowly and gradually closing as the warmth from the fire and the soft drawl of the after-dinner bustle lullabied him to sleep. Just as he was about to drop onto James' shoulder, he felt the cushion next to him sink down. He glanced up, eyes red and dopey as he caught sight of hair as bright as the couch they were seated on.

"Lily," he smiled sleepily at her. She eyed him, a sympathetic look on her face as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hello," she looked up and over his head, "James."
"Evans," he greeted back with a small smirk, not looking up from his reading.

"Git," she muttered under her breath. It only caused James' smirk to grow stronger. Rather than entertain him, Lily's hands stretched upwards as she let out a yawn.

"Bloody hell," yawned Peter from across the table, a hand covering his mouth. Remus couldn't help but let out a laugh.

"Long day?" Lily asked him. Peter's blue eyes met her jaded ones and he nodded.

"Oh yeah."

"Says the person who woke up at nine this morning and had only three hours of classes," quipped Remus.

"Don't be jealous," Peter mocked back.


"Well, thanks for asking how I'm doing— what a band of gentlemen you all are. Not like I didn't just came back from the most daunting conversation in the history of daunting conversations with Eva Manasse," Lily butted in, her words thick with sour acid.

The Slytherin's name caused all of them to stop talking, looking up at the Gryffindor witch. Even Sirius lifted one eye open as he sat sprawled out across the arm-chair.

"She spoke to you?" Remus inquired, his ears perking up and his breathing growing slow.

Lily looked between the four of them, her brows knitting together as she watched each of their befuddled and concerned expressions. James was bending over from behind Remus, looking like he was ready to pounce if the following sentence out of her mouth wasn't exactly to his liking.

"What's wrong with you lot?"

"Did she threaten you? What'd she say?" interrogated James, his neck visibly turning red. Lily glanced up at Remus, expecting to see something more rational, but he, too, sported a similar look—clenched jaw and reddening ears.

"She didn't say anything— that was what was so daunting about it. She just sat there as Mary thanked her and returned Regulus' robes to—"

"WHAT!?" blurted out Sirius, sitting upright in the chair. James was aggressively rubbing his nose as he eyed the redhead, Peter had one brow raised, and Remus sort of froze in both his thoughts and his body.

"M-" Peter was the first to speak, "Mary thanked her?"

"Wow, you four really should look into show-business. I swear, you're more dramatic than a Shakespearian tragedy, Jesus."

"A what?" asked James. She grimaced his way before shaking her head.

"Anyway, yes, Mary thanked her. She wanted to thank Regulus as well, but it intimidated her way too much. So did Manasse, but she said she had been kind to her during the whole—"

"Kind?" repeated Remus.
"You know," Lily turned to look at him, "if you would just let me talk then maybe we could get this
done a whole lot faster."

"Blimey, Evans, I thought a good shag would take the knots outta' your back. Blimey, James,
what're you doin’ wrong?"

He stopped when both Remus and James shot him a couple of daggers.

"I'm not sleeping with James," pointed out Lily. Sirius' eyes left hers and looked at the new-found
blush on his friend's cheeks, and he couldn't help but grin like a dog with a biscuit at the sight of it.
"Okay, you know what? I'm out of here, obviously no one cares enough."

Lily went to stand, but she felt a hand reach out and wrap around her wrist. James was gesturing for
her to sit down.

"We do care," he assured her.

"It's just— I mean," Remus looked to his friends for help, "we thought—"

"You thought?" Lily urged.

"We thought, you know, well, all facts considered, we thought that Manasse and Regulus were in on
it," finished Remus, gulping as he watched Lily's face contort.

"Why do I always think you four are smarter than you actually are?" she asked herself. "All facts
considered— no, Remus. If you looked at the facts, actually looked, Regulus Black has a better track
record than you when it comes to enforcing school rules— in all areas. Whatever his beliefs may be,
he is a stickler for the rules— as is Manasse. Those are the facts. Now, don't be so theatrical, gosh,
you all look like you've seen a ghost."

Remus certainly hadn't seen a ghost, but he did feel as if the wind had been swept out of his body.
He stared into the flames ahead of him, blinking as his mouth opened just slightly as he recalled his
confrontation with the Slytherin witch— the entire time thinking he had been in the clear because she
had been cruel to one of his friends.

"Rules schmules," said Sirius, "those are pretty words, Evans, but how in the world did ice queen
and skeleton prince help Mary?"

"If it hadn't been for them, Avery and Mulciber would have been successful."

Sirius' eyes narrowed and his head leaned forward.

"They walked in on them. Manasse was the one to comfort Mary, and Regulus not only confronted
them, but also gave Mary his robes so that she could cover herself," finished Lily with an
exasperated breath.

Remus closed his eyes, feeling trickles of remorse drip down his throat and burn into his stomach.

"Sounds like a load of hogwash to me," muttered Peter.

"Oh really?" challenged Lily, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Yeah, I think it was staged."

"Oh? And why is that?"
"What were the two of 'em doin' together in the hall just before curfew? Especially since they're such sticker for rules, as you say," Peter threw her own words back at her.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Sounds like a game of wizard's chess to me."

"Why would they be playing wizard's chess in the Prowling Passage?"

Both James and Sirius gave him a pointed look, which in turn made the boy blush beet red, realizing what they meant.

"What an idiot, I don't even know how we share the same genes," grumbled Sirius. "Would rather go down for a rape than admit he's got a functioning cock."

Remus sucked his bottom lip, his face reddening and his palms beginning to feel sweaty as he realized just how badly he muddled this one up. There was a pulling sensation in his gut, and he felt the need to get up and track down the witch so that he could beg her to forgive him—but no, he'd have to wait. Anything he did now could be altered by the full moon, and the frustration he felt towards himself could end up being projected onto her.

The entire scenario replayed in his head: Eva asking him what was wrong in a dulcet voice, the nausea he had felt when he realized she was addressing him, the way he had just kept going at her, not once stopping to listen, not even simply walking away as he stood there, wanting to dig the knife into her just a little deeper every time she blinked at him innocently.

He wished he could go back and change it all, take it all back. His fist wanted to pound into something, break a knuckle or two from the sheer shame he felt towards himself.

"Moony?" came James' voice from his side. They were all staring at him. "You all right, mate?"

"Yeah," he fumbled, nodding hastily, "yeah."

"No, no, I'm not all right, mate. I feel like the vilest creature on the planet — oh wait, that's because I am, he sneered at himself, shaking his head as he brought a fist hand to his mouth and pressed his lips down on it, the flames from the fire burning and blinding him so that the world around him eventually blurred and faded.

(Monday - 28 November 1977)

She had two terra-cotta pots clutched tightly to her stomach, pressed uncomfortably against her breasts as she pushed open the greenhouse door with her shoulder and turned the corner to walk along the side. It was the golden hour, the sun beginning to set and casting its beautiful light over the earth for another goodbye.

Bending down, she placed both of them directly into the sunlight. Her fingers grazed over their dull leaves, the veins having turned a gruesome chartreuse color that made her insides cringe.

"Vous inquiétez pas," she spoke to them in a hushed voice, giving them a comforting smile," vous vous sentez mieux demain."

A shadow overcame the three of them, Eva gasping as she flinched back and held her breathe. Immediately, the plants began to wilt, and Eva could swear she heard them groaning sickly sobs as the medicine left their bodies. She turned around manically, searching for the cloud which would cause them so much terror, but only being met with a grey sweatshirt and a little red pin that read 'prefect' in gold.
"You're killing them," she hissed at him, placing her two hands on his shoulder as she shoved him out of the way. Her eyes darted back down, a thankful sigh releasing from her lungs as they began to reach out towards the light.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize..." he faltered, looking between Eva and whatever project she was currently working on.

*Go right ahead, Remus, just keep on fucking things up,* he groaned internally. He bit on his own lip, watching as she reached down to check on them for a second time.

"What do you want, Lupin?" she inquired offhandedly after a pregnant silence. "I gave you the chance to say what you wanted, I'm not giving you anymore blood."

He cringed at the analogy she had made, albeit unknowingly. The thought of what he had done, of what the darker side of him had been capable of doing, came flooding back and he could feel the pang of guilt hit him like a broken drum. His hands clasped behind his back as he shifted to face her crouched over figure.

"You're smiling," she noted as he walked in, releasing her hands from around the cauldron as he pulled the strap from over his head.

"Am I not allowed to smile?" he teased, flashing her a lazy grin as he plopped down onto the stool.

"Of course you are, I was just making an observation," she countered, mock-rolling her eyes at him as she waved her wand and got the fire starting.

"No," he took a deep breath, "sorry I'm late, got held up by Dearborn."

She paused, searching the ingredients for something and then looked up at him. "Is that defense?"

"Yeah, you don't take defense, correct?"

"Correct," she responded, preoccupied with the task at hand.

"Anyways, he's one of the best we've had, even though Sirius doesn't like him." She looked up at him, blinking, and he had been quick to learn that it was her way of asking him to go on. He rubbed his hand against his thigh. "He's a strict teacher, doesn't really like to joke around too much, but he hates the books and focuses on practical work which is... well, it's certainly enjoyable." He grinned up at her as he remembered the conversation he had just come from. "He was just telling me about his third year class, he brought in an actual boggart for them to practice on."

*There was a long pause before Eva looked up at him with a completely neutral face and said: "that's riddikulus-ly cool."*

Remus froze, turning from the cauldron and back up to meet her hazel eyes, the slightest of mischievous glimmers in her eyes.

"Did you just make a pun on boggarts?"

"Maybe," she smirked and then bent her head over to see if the water had begun to boil.

"It was so bad," and he couldn't help but burst out into a fit of chuckles.

She stood up again, brushing her hands together after having picked something from their soil. Her
gaze met his and he could see she was growing irritated by his very presence; her eyebrows shooting up and her head shaking as if to tell him to proceed.

"I think an apology is in order," he said.

"Hmph," she snorted lightly. Her eyes were glazed over, focused on the horizon as the words penetrated her ears.

A fist clenched his gut, realizing that he had pushed them back to square one; coming to terms that his anger had driven her back behind her defenses. He looked at her sadly, moving to focus on the golden-veiled, dry, brown grass.

"I'm sorry," he began, "what I said — how I reacted — was completely unwarranted and out of line. I simply assumed—"

"That I would aid and abet something so vile," she finished for him. His neck reddened and he found himself subconsciously gnawing on his inner cheek.

"I really am sorry."

"I know, you mentioned it already," she retorted.

They fell into another tense silence. Eva had pulled her eyes from the distance and back to his own, but he was unable to meet her stare, knowing that he would probably begin to spew a senseless string of sentences, hoping that he could remedy the break that he had created.

"I know there's really no excuse, but I was hoping you'd see it from my point of view," he paused, taking a deep breath, "I saw you with those.. well, in that context, I thought— it only made sense—" he stumbled with his own thoughts for the billionth time. He wondered if he should just pull out the apology he had written down on his returned Charms essay and just read it off to her instead of whatever this mess was. "I have a nasty habit of jumping to conclusions, always have— probably should have disclosed that in the beginning."

Eva smiled forcefully to herself, not being able to look at him any longer. It had been too sweet, he had been gentle and kind with her — once upon a time — and in a matter of seconds he had been able to switch to a different side. Suddenly, she was no longer his friend, but someone he could easily attack and tear apart with his words.

No, no matter how much she wanted to return to before, her pride wouldn't let her. Eva was grasping tightly onto the last bits of dignity she had left, despite the bleeding, cracked palms; the blisters could sting all they want against that rope, but no way in hell was she letting it go.

"Could you please say something?" he whispered, his voice pained. "Anything would be okay."

"I would never have done that to you," she finally spoke up. "I would have sat you down and listened to your side before I ever treated you in such a crude manner."

He inhaled deeply, nodding his head in agreement.

"You're right."

"I believe in innocence until proven guilty— I believe in a fair trial, Lupin. You'd be wise to do the same; it's the way of the civilized," she told him. Her words chilled him to the bone so much that he felt something knock inside his body, crying for the Eva who had been with him for those two weeks.
He had gotten a taste of who she could be, and now she was back to the person he couldn't stand.

Remus watched as Eva walked away from the greenhouse after their Herbology lesson. Though everyone else was returning to the castle on that dreary, wet afternoon, she had stalked off towards the vegetable patch. His brow cocked upwards, his hand holding open the door for everyone as he ignored their 'thank yous' and focused on her instead.

When no one was left, he let the door close and walked over to her. His hands were in his pockets, light drops of rain and mist covering his robes as he squinted his eyes and looked at her.

"What're you doing?" he asked. When she didn't reply, he brought himself closer to her, bending down as she brushed the back of her fingers against the prickly peppermint plant.

"Hi," he tried again, this time a little closer to her ear.

"Hello."

"What're you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He turned to look at the side of her face, a small smirk playing across her lips.

"Doesn't it hurt?" he wondered, looking back over to the plant. She rolled her eyes and reached down to his wrist. Her small hand wrapped around it and pushed it forward so that he came in contact with the underside of one of the plant's green leaves.

"Oh wow, it's so soft," he awed, his voice doused with shock. He continued to graze the fur-like material that covered its body.

"It's a living paradox," she said quietly, running her hand up its spine. His eyes pulled away from the plant and focused back on the side of her face. Though he wasn't directly facing her, he could still catch a glimpse of her cognac eyes filled with passion, the same that he had the privilege of witnessing whenever he bothered to inquire further about one of the unique subjects that she was so oddly well-informed on. And on that grey afternoon, Eva was a little lantern as her body lit up with the affection she held for such a meek creature. "Many think it's thorny, but it's actually harmless."

"Huh, no shit."

"Disappointed, if anything."

She pursed her lips, her arms crossing over her ribcage. Her eyes roamed over him— there were bags, heavy and purple, his hair looked like it could use a good brushing, and his back was hunched over as it always was. Something inside Eva wanted to soften, wanted to no longer put him through so much strife, but then again, he had been the first to shoot.

"It's disappointing because you never really believed in it," she added. This time, however, there was a hint of anguish tied into her vowels which caused Remus to rapidly look up and search her eyes. He would have been certain if he had only been looking, but she was too good, too used to covering up her mistakes in a blink, and so it had already disappeared.

"I did," he attempted, nodding frantically as he took a step forward. "I swear it, I did—"

"No, you didn't. I don't understand why you proposed a friendship to begin with, but it was all too
evident when you said what you said. I may not be an expert, but I'm certain you would never treat your own friends in such a way— you would have given them the benefit of the doubt. I received no such privilege, just as always, I was the enemy to you, and you treated me accordingly."

"What? No, Eva—"

She closed her eyes and smiled painfully at the usage of her name. His face was crestfallen.

"That's not true, I…" his brows furrowed as he pressed his lips together and tried to swallow away his guilt. "I won't deny that I had certain ideas of who you were— and several times your actions only convinced me of their truth, but then I—" she snorted and he faltered for a second, "but I was wrong. Completely and irrevocably wrong."

"Yes, you were," she agreed plainly with him. Their gazes bored into one another, Remus trying to read into her thoughts but only received a blank page, and Eva doing her best to keep him from reading anything more than what she wanted him to read.

"Why didn't you just say you were with Regulus?" He was grasping out into the cavern and trying to pull up anything that might help. The slight opening of her mouth, quickly being pulled back into a tight line, only confirmed Sirius' suspicions. There was no response, only a deathly silence that felt borderline threatening as the sun had nearly disappeared. "Sirius figured it out—"

"Because I don't trust you," she scorned.

He nodded slowly, the words feeling heavier than they should have.

"Of course, we'd only been friends for two weeks."

They were in the library, compiling evidence from different sources and turning it into lists. At first, Remus had thought it odd, used to checking out the books he needed and using them as he wrote his essays, but Eva had convinced him that his method was absolutely foolish and time-consuming. Sure, at first he had been slightly offended, but when she showed him her way, well, he had to admit — it was something short of brilliant, and he couldn't believe he had never thought of it.

"Besides," she had told him, "most of the information you'll need is in the introduction— everything else is a quick search in the index."

He nodded, the end of his quill feathering his chin as he brushed it back and forth.

"Is that how you finished that blasted potions essay so fast?"

"No, I obviously plagiarized," she responded caustically.

He found himself looking at her, his once dazed expression slowly turning into a smile.

"I never did apologize for that."

She shrugged her shoulders. Her nose scrunched up as she read something, and he wondered what it was that made her half-grimace, half-smile in that way. Over the past two weeks, he had noticed her doing it quite often. Sometimes it was when she smiled at him after he said something that was exceptionally snarky, other times it was when she didn't fully understand something she was reading or hearing.

In turn, Remus had been more sarcastic in the past two weeks than he had ever been before a full
moon, just so he could see her scrunch her nose and squint her eyes.

It was a dangerous game he was playing, convinced that it was out of pure innocence and curiosity.

He tilted his head, watching her eyes move back and forth along the page, the stillness of her body, the steadiness and quietness of her breaths. She was out of uniform, wearing a navy blue cashmere sweater and black riding pants, but her hair was still pulled back into a tight chignon at the nape of her neck. He was so used to seeing her with buttons all the way up to her neck, a baggy jumper and a skirt reaching her knees. But now, as she sat before him, he could easily make out and watch the rise and fall of her chest, the way the soft material stretched across...

He sighed, leaning forward and throwing his face into his hands as he re-focused on the task at hand.

"We were never friends."

At some point, he wondered when this cold attitude of hers became something along the lines of ridiculous— because it was beginning to feel that way.

"And besides," she continued, "you never gave me the opportunity to explain."

"Fuck," he spat out, despite himself. A hand reached up to his forehead as he pressed it against his temple. "I know, I'm a bleeding idiot, I don't even know why— how, ugh."

If anyone's an idiot, it's me, she countered internally, not sure whether the ache in her stomach was directed towards herself or the uninvited remorse forming inside her.

He pushed his hands deep into his pockets and shook his head, reprimanding himself for not being the better person, even if it had ended up being her fault. Eva wasn't the only one to sport a sickening illness, there was an awful pain in the back of his throat and a numbness in his ribcage that had removed any hope of getting food in there.

"Listen, Eva—" he caught himself and pressed his lips together as he grimaced at his mistake, "Manasse, I know you're probably not too keen on being my friend — and that's your right, I understand completely and hold you to no judgement or grudge — but if you find it in your heart to forgive me, I'd be more than happy to restart, new beginning and everything. I'll swear to be a better friend and to throw all that prejudice rubbish out the window, light the fucking thing on fire," the last part of his offer came out in a nervous chuckle which quickly diminished with the last of the light in the sky.

She had to give it to him, his words were sweeter than honey. They could probably convince anything he set his mind to, and it was a skill she dared envy. But not too long ago, it had set her on the wrong path and she wasn't falling for that trick any longer. There was not enough candy in the world to push Eva back into such a place.

"What are you doing here?" she sighed, giving up as her shoulders drooped. "Just go."

"I—"

"Why do you care so much?" she nearly shouted, her voice hinted with frustration and dolor. "We were barely friends, why do you care?"

She was standing so close, this small little figure just barely reaching his shoulder — and that was only when he slouched — her chest heaving up and down, gears turning in her head as she forced
herself to remain calm. But no, she couldn't take it any longer, he had said his piece, and now he was back to reek more havoc, to take back what he had done.

"You can't do that to someone, Lupin." Her voice was quieter now, her eyes wide and watered down as she stared up into his own.

He frowned, throwing his head back and to the sky as he repressed the need to let out a ripping groan— not at her, but at himself. Too many times he had made mistakes, too many times he had hastily gone after them in order to repent, but never had he meant to break someone, finally get them to trust someone and then send them cowering for cover again. Never in his life would he think that, what had been, his friend of two weeks would suffer such force. He didn't deserve that, he didn't get to go about and plunder fields, tossing up whatever he found because of some ravenous binge, and then come back and watch as the person weeped and held on to the reaped earth, expecting them to give him a part of what they had been able to scavenge.

Absolutely not, not in a billion years would he ever get to do something of the sort.

This time, he'd have to live with the fact that he had let the monster win.

There was no hope of coming back from this. He should have kept quiet, he should have let her be.

"I'm so sorry," he repeated, "I'm not worth any of this— I should've never bothered you. I didn't come here with the intention to convince you to be my friend. Fuck, I didn't even expect you to forgive me, but I needed you to know that I am terribly ashamed of what I did and said, and that I apologize for all of it."

He made way to turn around, eyeing the plants for the last time on the ground before laughing to himself and standing there as he pulled his chin up and looked at the long-gone sun.

"And you know what's the worst part of it all?" Remus didn't even bother to turn around, knowing that she would be there— listening, just as she always was. "You truly are a brilliant person with an extraordinary way of seeing the world, and I ruined the chance I ever had at getting to know that. I'm probably the biggest arse to have ever lived."

He wasn't sure if the words had been meant for her, or if it had been his way of recognizing and reconciling the fact that he had indeed lost a marvelous opportunity — rare one that so few got to experience — all because he hadn't been able to control the beast inside him and think rationally.

His footsteps continued to take him away from her until he felt cobblestones under his soles and reached an alcove that he could drop himself down into. His elbow rested on his knee and he held his face in one hand as he sighed and shook his head.

What upset him more than this, more than just Eva, was the realization that he had so easily gone off on her. And he couldn't help but wonder how much Sirius, James, or Peter could take before they became fed up with him, with his rash behavior before a full moon, with the way he was sometimes overly aggressive when they asked him simple questions.

Or maybe Eva was right, and if Eva was right— Lily was too. Maybe he had gone into it all with a knife behind his back, never truly trusting her presence without it.

A hand rubbed down his face, pulling the skin with it as he made eye contact with some painted witch on a broom. A thin film of muggy sweat caused by the humidity stuck to him. Only after a full moon did he feel so disgusted, but never had he felt more awake, never had he been more controlled by an experience. The same anger he had felt days ago towards an innocent was now pointed at
himself like a poisoned arrow.

He frowned, wanting nothing more than to soak himself, to scrub himself raw until there was no more Remus left.

He picked himself up and turned in the opposite direction of noise and light. There was no way he would be able to sit through a dinner with James glancing suggestively at Lily — or with Sirius slipping whiskey into his pumpkin juice — without Remus stabbing himself in the thigh with a fork, repeatedly.

He soldiered on, up the stairs and around corridors, mindlessly traveling through the castle he had learned to call home.

Chapter End Notes

A:N/ Not one of my proudest chapters, don't know why, but oh well, it was important to their relationship/friendship/the plot. I know this may have been a little bit of a drag, but actually this chapter is super important if these two want to have any sort of relationship, even if its not romantic. Remus did have his prejudices, and before anything happens between the two, it had to be confronted. This was his lesson. Anywhoo, please stick with me. Next chapter is going to awesome! It's one I've been looking forward to for awhile, and then after that it's just like a great big ball of awesomeness so just hold your horses until next week.

Lowkey (but actually highkey) think no one handles guilt worse than Remus. I think even just spitting on someone by accident would turn him into a tornado of apologies. And poor Eva, she has no idea how to handle a guilt-ridden teenage boy. Unfortunately, she's too emotionally detached/confused to understand whether she's hurt or not by Remus. Like, on one hand she is, but on another she kind of expected it, ya know? I think everyone in this story needs a vacation, good damn.

Haven't written an Eva solo scene in awhile, hope that wasn't too boring for you all. And I touched a little upon the Regulus thing, it will continue and spill over into the next chapter where we will hear and see more of why and what exactly happened there. (All though, I think we get a pretty good idea here as well.) Then again, let me know what you think! I am by no means a professional, I write what I have on my mind and to the best of my abilities, but I always make mistakes.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I love all of you. I hope my writing is interesting, that it keeps you all coming back for more!

Thank you, xx. A. 3
"Walk," a voice sneered hotly against the curled baby hairs on the back of his ashy-bronzd neck. Words didn't stand a chance before she had her nails clawing into the skin there, just over his jugular vein. Without any protest, he obliged, one foot mindlessly stepping in front of the other. From behind him, he could hear heels clack against the stone ground; the scent of perfume so strong in his nostrils that it gave him a head rush.

"Oh yes, I love it when they play rough," he chuckled.

"I bet you do, you dirty dog," a familiar voice teased menacingly. A singular nail pushed even further into his neck, causing him to grit his teeth.

They made a right and then another until he was shoved into a bathroom. As they walked past one of the mirrors, he caught sight of a slack-jawed Slytherin witch with eyes so iced over they could be a flavor at Fortescue's. The Ravenclaw shook his head and began to laugh manically, continuing even after the force of her hand caused him to kneel in front of one of the toilets. Going completely ignored, her hand wrapped into his thick brown curls, and before he could register what was going to happen, his face dove down into the water.

"How long you plan on keeping him in there?" inquired Alex, having already shut the door as he leaned against the stall behind her.

"10 seconds."

She lifted the Ravenclaw's head back up, ripping at the curls.

"I'm used to this shit, Sof," Mundungus informed her.

"Oh gosh, just shut up, you idiot," muttered Alex.

Sofia pushed his head back into the toilet bowl, breathlessly counting off numbers. Another ten seconds passed before she pulled him back up, finally satisfied when he heaved and gasped for air.

"You think you're cute?" she scowled.

"Yes, matter of fact—" he stopped as she roughly pulled back his head. "Fucking shit, you'll snap my neck!"

"Watch what I'll do to that pathetic worm in your trousers," she hissed back, glancing down to his groin.

"Okay, okay," he surrendered, holding one hand up. "What do you want?"

"I agreed to help you, little bitch. But you went around taking credit for my work," she tilted her head and leveled herself with him, "I don't like it when they take credit for my work."

"What—" but before he could finish, he was being pressed back down. Alex had his shoe placed firmly against his spine, causing the Ravenclaw's chest to sit uncomfortably against the edge of the
"Just shut up and listen, Fletcher," he heard Alex's high-pitched voice demand.

"You think I wouldn't find out? Hm? What'd you think would happen? Dumb piece of shit. I know everything. All I have to do is blink in your direction and I know exactly what happened, when, why, and how. Like I know you threatened that little boy band and told them not to open their fat mouths about the rape—"

"But—" The shoe on his spine came down even harder, his lungs nearly being cut off by the ceramic. Sofia's perfectly manicured fingers came and clasped onto his jaw, forcefully tilting it upwards. Her lip curled, eyeing him with such disdain; a fire in her eyes that could burn him into smithereens.

"You threatened them with the secrets that I told you. But, you know what? I'm not even mad about all that, nah," she brushed off caustically. Her voice was honeyed, mocking him as she dug her nails further into his cheek. "You took away that girl's right to justice, you put your grimy little hand into her throat and ripped away her tongue. And for what?"

"Fuck, Mustaq, can you-" he winced as the nail hooked further in.

"For that son of a bitch death eater?

"I did it for you, for us," he struggled against her grip. But Sofia wasn't pleased, watching as her red tips cut into his skin, hot blood breaking through and trailing down. She followed the droplets as they fell and stained the white floor, an obvious disappointment flashing across her face.

"I don't fucking like you, Fletcher. It wasn't that I liked you before, but you were tolerable. Now, well, now I really don't like you. And that's not a good position to be in, trust me."

Her eyes searched his face, blood still gushing out of the cut on his cheek. The witch found him so utterly weak, so unlike the wizard who pranced about and pretended to be everyone's friends. No, Mundungus was a friend to no one and Sofia knew that, she had always known. Not once had she been foolish enough to trust him, but she didn't think he'd ever play such a move against her. More than taking credit, he had tricked her, and there was no one in this world that could trick her— or so, she believed. With one last breath, she mustered all the energy she had into her wrist and shoved his head with such ferocity that it crashed into the wall next to him.

"Fuck," he groaned.

"If I find out you went to the Nurse, I'll do a lot worse," she threatened. Her blood-ridden fingers came to her side as she stood back up to her full potential. Then, Alex's foot came off the Ravenclaw's back, causing Mundungus to fall against the wall with a palm rubbing against the raw spot that was sure to bruise.

"You're so pathetic," she commented. His brown, large eyes followed the Slytherin's bright red heels as they swaggered out away from the stall.

Except Mundungus wouldn't be Mundungus if he didn't have cards hidden up his sleeve.

And this wizard always had one last trick to play.

"Hey, Sofia," he called out as he heard the rust of the bathroom door creak. There was a pause, signaling to him that they were listening. "Your little cousin been getting a lot of fevers lately?"
"What?" he heard Alex blurt out to the witch.

Sofia's index finger came to her lips, shushing her best friend as she listened intently.

"What're you on about?" she shouted back, her eyes down casted to the tiled floor. Her breath had slowed, ready to stop completely.

"Sof?" whispered Alex, concerned with the suddenly pallid witch. Her finger came back to her lips, eyeing him through her thick eyelashes.

"Keeping my eye out to know whose obituary I'm writing next. Get a head start, if you know what I mean," the Ravenclaw mocked.

With a clenched jaw, Sofia pulled out her wand and marched back over to the bathroom stall where Mundungus still lied on the floor, his head pressed against the wall. She jabbed it into the back of his neck, her breath steaming every time she exhaled.

"Bold move, threatening me."

"Eh, you see, you don't really ever know everything," he began to laugh.

"Unlike you, who knows nothing," she sneered, but before Mundungus could finish with something clever — and without a single thread of remorse — she said: "Petrificus Totalus."

"All right, so back to the partial transformation spell," Lily announced, picking up the book as she continued — or rather — pretended to read for the thousandth time.

"Which you've mastered," he stated plainly, almost bored.

"Hardly! It took me three times and your guidance to assure that I—"

She stopped when his hazel eyes rolled; his hand running through his hair as he stared at the ginger cat sprawled across the floor between his and Sirius' bed, his hairy paws curled up into his chest.

"You mastered it," he repeated. "You mastered it on the second attempt."

"Right," she admitted sheepishly, pursing her lips as she looked down to her folded feet. They were clad in thick socks, James having reassured her that he didn't mind that they had 'meow' written across her toes. "So," she tried to distract herself from the holes he was driving into her, "how are you?"

He snorted, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Fine."

"Oh okay, cool."

He wanted to groan, but instead leaned back into his headboard and looked up to the canopy.

"You don't need to make up some lie about needing help with Transfiguration to spend time with me," James said.

"I know that—"

"Do you?"
"Pardon?"

"You're different," he continued, as if the last few words out of her mouth had never existed.

Both of Lily's eyebrows shot upwards.

"Oh?"

James scratched his chin and then clasped his hands together, glancing over at the witch as she looked down to her lap. He shook his head for a second time, looking back to the cat as it blinked at him.

"Just now, you didn't even try and put up a fight—"

"Do you want me to?" she exasperated, her brows furrowing as she leaned forward. James saw her body stiffen, her defenses going up and he didn't know whether to feel ashamed or proud that this was what he wanted.

'I want you to be Lily Evans! The one who spews poison and can stop a person mid-sentence with a simple glare! I don't know why you've become so incredibly docile but..."

Lily frowned, her face crestfallen as she soaked in his words.

"James, I'm sorry to break it to you, but this is who I am." Her words came out as dejected poetic verses. None of this conversation made all that much sense. In a blink of an eye, the boy in front of her had gone from a patient tutor to a fatigued git.

"No," he snorted, "you're only like this because you're embarrassed."

"I'm not—"

"You are, because you fancy me and you hate that you fancy me. I get it, I'm the bloke you're supposed to loathe."

"James."

"It's all right, honestly," he assured her, but his smile didn't quite reach the corners of his eyes and there was a desperate shine in them that told Lily he was anything but all right with it.

"You're a terrible liar."

"Makes two of us," the wizard scoffed. Lily pressed her lips together, watching him, analyzing the slope of his jaw as his teeth ground against each other. A sigh escaped her and she ran a hand through her hair, cursing herself for picking up his nervous tic.

"What else do I have to do?" he began woefully. His eyes were feverish, overly bright and child-like. Lily tilted her head, her entire face softening as she leaned over and pressed a hand to his cheek. In that moment, she no longer felt like Lily Evans the girl, but Lily Evans the one that James Potter needed. And she craved that more than she cared to admit. She wanted him to need her; it acted as a reassurance, as a cushion, that this wasn't some sort of momentary tryst. He was a handsome boy, she had to admit that—and she had many times before. But now, in the soft glow of the oil lamp seated to her right and the low hearth that burned behind them, everything was exaggerated. His jaw was sharper, more angled, and the slant of his nose more defined. She smiled softly, her knees crawling up so that she was nearly curled in his lap.
His eyes were wide and alert as they watched her, allowing her to touch him wherever she damn well pleased. Words choked up in his throat, turning into complete mush inside his brain. He hated feeling nervous, not usually one to jitter and breath zigzaggedly from a slight brush of a girl's hand, but here he was, turning into putty under her gaze. In his lap, he could feel her shift, finding a position right for her. But the blood that flooded his neck hurtled downwards, too, and he found himself gripping onto her hips like some sort of salvation.

"Lily," he said through gritted teeth.

"You're a work of art, James Potter," she whispered, running her fingertips over the curve of his ear. He watched her, his gaze heated and glossing over as she continued to mesmerize him with such innocent gestures.

"Am I?" he chuckled nervously, wondering if she could hear how loud his heart was beating, or the stiffness that sat just underneath her thigh.

"Mhm," she nodded, "a Baroque painting."

His breath hitched in his throat as he felt her velvet lips pressed to his brow bone; and he didn't know what a baroque was, but if that was the sort of reaction it got out of her—fine, he'd be a baroque any bloody day of the bloody week. Her mouth continued to travel across his face, pushing down onto the height of his cheekbone as he dug his fingers through her jumper and into her skin. Despite himself, his eyes fluttered close, aching, wanting nothing more than to just turn his head and destroy the gap. But no, she was studying him, she wanted to memorize him, to know not only who, but what he was made of.

"I'm not embarrassed by you," she breathed against his jaw.

"Thank you," was all he could manage in that moment. Her lips came in contact with his earlobe and her left leg began to slide further over his crossed right one. James wasn't sure whether she was doing it on purpose, whether she could feel it, but he nearly lost it when the friction pushed through his trousers and sent a jolt of energy into his body.

"Don't thank me." Her tongue darted out and took in the saltiness of his neck.

"Blimey, Lily," he huffed.

"You still haven't asked me to Hogsmeade. I thought you a gentleman, Mr. Potter," she mock-scolded him as the tip of her nose painted the underside of his jaw.

"You said you needed time," he reminded her through panting huffs. She pulled back, leveling her face with his.

"James," he looked up, "you're losing it and I'm barely touching you."

All the heat of the sun beating down on him during a Quidditch game in July accumulated on his face.

"Excuse you, but it is bloody hot in here, and could we open a window?"

She smirked, quickly turning into a fit of giggles as she brushed both her hands over and behind his ears.

"I'm not kissing you until you ask me out to Hogsmeade."
"Fine, go to Hogsmeade with me?" he asked all too hastily, borderline begging her to either continue or get off him before he bursted.

"No," she cooed, shaking her head as her cheeks lifted up, "not like that."

His mouth fell open. "Lily, you are torturing me, I don't think you quite understand—"

"Potter."

"Okay, okay, Evans, will you go out with me?" He looked up at her and fluttered his eyelashes, and in return she rolled her green eyes.

"Eh."

His face fell and his heart almost stopped.

"You're taking the piss, aren't you? Don't bloody take the piss, Evans."

"Yes, okay, I'll go out on a date with you," she said nonchalantly, waving her hand as if it were nothing. He smirked, leaning comfortably back against the headboard as he took her in. Finally, after so long, the girl who he had pined after, dreamed of, wrote letters he had never sent to, agreed to give him one afternoon. And yet, it wasn't going to be just one afternoon, was it? Because she was there now, with him, on his bed, bunched up on his lap and calling him a work of art. And dear Merlin, if this was a dream, he'd kill the person who dared to wake him up.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his thumb rubbing back and forth against his hipbone.

She nodded. "I know what I want," she assured him, finally admitting it. It had been confusing at first. She knew she had wanted to kiss him at their Halloween Party, much to everyone's surprise, including her own. She hadn't known how far she had wanted to kiss him at their Halloween Party, much to everyone's surprise, including her own. She hadn't known how far she had wanted to take it, hadn't even known if she could trust him, but now she realized it had been a foolish mistake. James Potter was more trustworthy than a goblin with the little money she had stored away in her vaults.

"Which is?" he urged on.

"Oh gosh, don't push it, Potter."

"Please," he begged, pouting.

"You," she exhaled. Her leg finally moved from underneath her and came to a full wrap around his torso, straddling him. James guided her, holding her in his lap as one of her arms circled around his neck, keeping her in place, and the other ran through his hair.

"Really?"

"You're pushing it," she told him sternly, but smiling nonetheless. His hand moved up her spine to palm the back of her head, bringing both of them closer until they were finally connected. Lips pressed against each other as they finally flipped to the same page. He drank her like she was ambrosia, and she drank him like it was the last thing she'd ever drink. Apprehensive, but too courageous to ever stop, they continued on, pushing one body against the other as they explored and voyaged together.

They came apart for a moment of air, staring at one another like there was nothing beautiful left to look at.
"You're the work of art, Lily Evans," he said pathetically, causing the redhead to throw her head back and let a soft laugh trickle out of her like church bells.

"Oh, James, what am I going to do with you?"

"How about you just snog me, for now," he teased, lifting his lips back up to hers and holding her close. It all seemed too good to be true.

She inhaled sharply, her eyes widening and her chin flinching back as she averted her gaze down to the table. Her eyes bore through the thin line that separated one plank from its neighbor, rooted to the spot like it was some sort of antidote.

There was a man.

Clear as day, as obvious as the quill in her hand and the ink that she had charmed red—a man.

A man that made her heart beat dangerously fast inside her chest; the blood from her body flushing downward and into her feet as her legs began to wobble. In order to keep herself still, she clasped her hands into the wooden table, not daring to look up nor move a finger.

'Tap, tap, tap,' she heard from in front of her. The glass was thick enough to withstand the cruel Scottish winters, but she could still hear his indignant ramblings as he continued to grasp and clobber for her attention. If it wasn't for the sound of her own heart drumming into her ears, she would have made an attempt to figure out what he wanted—but she couldn't. Even her breath had become dangerously slow, the witch beginning to wonder just how much oxygen a human body needed before it fell to the floor.

'Did I lock the door?' she wondered to herself in a moment of panic, realizing that she hadn't—she never did. If the man with the thick vertical lines between his dark bushy brows figured it out, realized that there was a way in—what would he do to her?

It was late afternoon, the sun had already gone down, so it was pitch dark outside. No one would be out and about, for it was too cold for traipsing outside, leaving her to fend for herself. All she had was her wand and a mediocre talent for battle magic—the man could easily expel her the only weapon she contained and then have his way with her.

Her entire body shook as she heard knocking against the door. Both lungs gave out, taking their vacation as they leaped away from her and scattered off to somewhere quiet and safe. She was on the verge of gasping, screaming, her hand instinctively lashing out to grab her wand. The other was digging into the table, her nails clawing into it so deeply that she reckoned it'd leave nasty splinters.

"Hey, am I bothering you?"

She heaved, leaning over as if someone had pushed her forward, and nearly began to laugh as the recognizable voice met her ears. Her eyes finally blinked, feeling uncomfortable from the dryness that had accumulated in them, and looked up to meet soft green eyes.

Remus was taken aback, a nervous smile crawling onto his lips as he saw her posture slump, a shaky laughter climb out of her, and trembling hands. His brows pulled together, stepping into the greenhouse and closing the door behind him.

"Are you all right? Did the Devil's Snare escape its holdings again?" he inquired, his eyes wondering around the room as if the nasty plant was somewhere hidden, wrapped around her ankle.
Eva struggled to speak, her eyes glancing quickly to the small spot of exposed glass in front of her and finding only emptiness. The man had left as soon as the Gryffindor had appeared, and never in her life had she felt such gratitude for someone bothering her.

"Better," she finally responded.

"Ah," was all he found himself saying, still muddled and searching for the missing pieces. Her eyes locked on him, shining with a smile in their corners.

"And to what do I owe this pleasure?" Eva finally broke the silence.

_Pleasure?_ Remus repeated internally, still perplexed as to why she looked to him as if he were some sort of savior. They had barely uttered three words to one another since their fall out, and now she was welcoming him back as a pleasure. Of course, Remus wasn't one to complain, but he did wonder if he maybe he wasn't the only one into alternative medicine— not putting it past Eva to pack some weed into a pipe and smoke away.

He had to bite on his inner cheek, because if he did find out that Eva was getting locked on pipe-weed, then he'd truly seen it all.

"Right," the words came out in a choked chuckle, causing Remus to clear his throat, "I've brought the Tapetum Lucidum."

"Oh good," she said pleasantly, nodding her head. He rummaged into his bag and pulled out the cylindrical glass vial. Eva's eyes widened as they caught sight of it.

"It's turned black," she noted, making her way over to him. "You left it out in the open, didn't you?"

He hadn't needed to answer, Eva already knew that it was only logical explanation. She sighed, placing a palm onto the table as she pressed her lips flat.

"And that's why we always make two," she informed him.

"Exactly, about that," he agreed, reaching back into his pocket and revealing a similar vial, but this time filled with a bright green substance. "I already took the liberty, seeing as it was my fault."

She eyed it, her pursed lips falling.

"But," she began, her hand reaching out to observe the second vial, "you did this by yourself?"

"Gee, don't sound too surprised," he laughed, scratching the back of his neck as she looked up at him. "Am I really that awful?"

"No, you're not," she assured him, "you've certainly improved."

"Thanks to you."

"Excuse me?"

"You've a readably thorough way of explaining these things, I can't deny that it's helped," he admitted; not entirely sure why his neck felt hotter than it had moments ago. Maybe it was the steaminess of the greenhouse, the constant sun charms they had lining the ceiling, or the sheer fact that Eva didn't think him rubbish in potions.

Yes, it most certainly was the heat.
"Well, that's good," she said, returning the vial to him. "Put it away before it turns black, again."

He obliged and returned the vial into his bag.

"You didn't need to come all the way here to show me that," she mentioned. "You could have switched the two vials— your second one was nearly perfect—"

"Nearly?"

"Yes, nothing's ever perfect— statistically speaking."

"Of course," he agreed. His eyes looked back down to hers, realizing that she was waiting for an answer. "Oh, um, I suppose I came to brag— not everyday someone meets the standards of potions prodigy Eva Manasse."

It had been a joke, but the way she pursed her lips told him that she had taken it to heart.

"I'm not a prodigy," she said softly, turning around to walk back over to her work.

"Does that have anything to do with your nothing's ever perfect belief?" he continued to tease, content that they were able to have a civil conversation— one that he had rather missed. But when she didn't reply, Remus sighed, almost sadly, before his hand wrapped around his bag strap and tugged it into place. "Guess I'll leave you to your work, sorry if I disturbed you."

All a little too quickly, Eva's head swiveled and, with wide, panicked eyes, she looked at him. He froze.

"Because you have somewhere to be."

"Uh," he scrambled for a moment, "was that a question or a statement?"

She shook her head, her eyes glancing back over to a spot in the window. Remus followed, furrowing his brows together when he found nothing out of the ordinary.

"Do you," he paused, "would you like me to stay?"

Eva's eyes hadn't left the empty square window pane, looking out into the darkness, the only light coming from the greenhouse and the castle behind it.

She wondered if she should just pick up the assignments and return into the safety of the castle, but her eyes roamed over all the potted gillyweed and she realized that Professor McGonagall would have her head if she saw Eva dragging and spilling salt water all over the castle floors.

Did she want him to stay? The simply answer was yes, she did, because the man had left as soon as he had arrived. But life had a nasty way of not making things simple, and so, instead of it being Professor Sprout or Victoria Cornfoot, it had be the one person she really wasn't too keen on rekindling a hearth with.

It really was a wonder why he had made the trek from wherever he had been and into the brutal winds that sang and hymned outside of the greenhouse confines.

"Something's wrong," he noted, stepping closer to her and finding a spot right across the long table. Unbeknownst to him, he stood right in front of where she had seen that face, that angry, red-splashed face with the unkempt beard.

"What makes you say that?" she asked with a forced neutrality, blinking once before her stone cold
face resembled something remotely warm.

"I've got an uncanny knack for knowing when something's wrong."

"Uncanny? I'm sure you're not the only person with an intuition," she retorted.

"So, I'm right?"

She paused, her eyes searching his face as he leaned over the table and watched her with a concerned expression.

"Listen," he continued, "if something is wrong, there's no shame in asking for help. Even if it is your fault."

She sighed, lips parting as she looked away from him. Eva knew she had a responsibility to report such things, that it wasn't just about her, but everyone else. What if that man came back for someone else? What if he was a threat that she had kept quiet about?

"There was a man," she admitted quietly, turning back down to the illegible words scrawled out on the next assignment she was to correct and mark.

"A man?"

"Yes."

"Where? In here?"

"No, right through that window behind you, looking inside here," she said hastily, brushing it off as if it were nothing.

Remus turned to look over his shoulder, blinking as he met with simple night, and then back to Eva. She was seated, her eyes touring over the parchment while she blatantly ignored the conversation. The Gryffindor had to hold himself back from rolling his eyes.

He really couldn't believe he had once thought her mysterious.

"Eva," he said sternly. The witch sighed, miffed as she placed the paper back down to the table.

"What?"

Remus hadn't caught his mistake until it had already been out in the open; surprisingly relieved when she hadn't caught it either—or hadn't cared.

"This is rather crucial, I'd appreciate it if you would answer my questions."

"I already told you what—"

"I'm asking as a prefect, not your," friend? No, definitely not. Potions partner? That sounded nearly just as pathetic. "If the castle wards have been breached, it's a serious matter that needs to be communicated to the Headmaster."

Eva pressed the tips of her fingers to her temple, closing her eyes. She knew she shouldn't have said anything, having wanted to avoid exactly this sort of reaction.

"I probably imagined it, I'm rather—"
"Bollocks."

"Excuse you?"

"You looked like you'd seen a dementor. The moment I walked in, you should have seen your face, it was—"

"You can leave now, Lupin," she cut him off coldly. He gaped, his entire body leaning over in disbelief.

"What!? Just moments ago you were willing to talk about it, and now you're shutting me out?" he exasperated. "I'm just trying to bloody help you! What is it? You don't want me to go the Headmaster?"

Her silence and down turned gaze gave him the only answer he needed.

"Bloody hell," he nearly cried, rubbing a palm over his entire face. "Fine."

It was against the rules, against what he, personally, believed in. But Remus was something short of desperate, and this might be the one and only chance he ever had at burrowing himself back into her good graces. So he'd stick through it, just as he did with the other three berks he called his best friends.

"Thank you," she whispered, picking up her chin and going back to grading the fourth year assignments.

His fingers tapped against the table, sitting with his shoulder to her as he looked between her and the window. Without another word, he abruptly lifted himself up, ignoring Eva's curious look as he slipped his bag off his shoulder and dropped it onto the table. The witch's gaze followed him, her chin lifting up as he exited the greenhouse and around the bend. In a matter of seconds, his face reappeared at the window, the same one where a different face had sat just minutes ago. Eva lifted her brows slightly, watching as he pursed his lips and inspected, diligence and determination settling across his face, a hand on his hip as he turned his head both ways before marching off again.

She found herself with a soft smile, looking down.

He cared — she knew that — and she hated that he did.

An entire assignment later, the greenhouse door opened again, announcing his presence with a cold flush of air. The Slytherin witch promptly looked up, watching him as he blew hot air into cupped hands and made is way back over to the stool where he once sat.

"Okay," he mentioned, his nose and cheeks stained pink. "All the other greenhouses are locked, but I did full circles of each one— there was no one."

She nodded, watching him as he re-took his seat across from her.

"I mean, could you describe this man? I didn't even know what I was looking for."

"Does it really matter?" she resigned, beginning to feel irritated by her own irrationality.

"Of course—"

"Listen," she dropped everything to the table, her eyes wide and watery, "I haven't slept well in months, I probably hallucinated. So, can you please stop making a problem where there isn't one?"
Remus shook his head, snorting as he looked away from her.

"I'm only trying to help, okay? You looked proper scared," he countered, lifting both his palms up in playful surrender before they crashed back down with a thump to the table.

"I know," she whispered after a few minutes. He hadn't pulled his eyes from her, watching her eyelashes flutter every time she looked to another part of the greenhouse. "I don't— I didn't really get a good look," she began, still not looking at him, "but he had a beard, rugged face with deep wrinkles and—"

"Hagrid?" he puzzled, shoving his hands into his pockets as his knee jumped against the stool's lowest rung.

"Not unless Hagrid speaks Scottish—"

"Scottish?"

"I think so… maybe Irish?"

Remus looked to the cupboard in the far back corner and then back to her. There was a small furrow in his brows, raised with narrowed eyes as he considered her words.

"Well," he began, running a hand through his hair, "could be a boggart."

"I am not scared of little angry men," Eva bit back. Remus simply stared, his expression blank before shrugging.

"Could be a deeper meaning—"

"No."

Remus was at a loss for words, back to feeling as if nothing he said could possibly come out sounding, at least, half-way competent. His head tipped back on his neck, looking upwards to the blinding lights. The scratch of quill and parchment resounded once again into the greenhouse. Her words being written with such efficacy that it made him think she'd already read the papers.

"They should be paying you," he commented.

There was no response, and so he closed his eyes and sighed. Coming to an undesirable conclusion that there really was nothing left between them — that this was as good as it was going to get — he gave up and reached into his bag, pulling out a ratty, mangled book. He leaned over the table, his elbows digging into the wood as he opened it up and began reading where he had last left off.

Eva dared herself a glance, watching him as he sat in silence. His face was peaceful, entirely focused on whatever it was in front of him.

Her heart swelled against her will, burning holes into the cover of his paperback. Remus could have easily left, as he had before. He could have just picked up his things and given her to the wolves, but he hadn't, even though she had given him nothing but a cement wall, scared to let him back in.

Eva really did wonder what made him care so much. She had treated him with the barest of affection. What could he possibly see in her that not even she could see? There was nothing remotely fascinating, nothing that made her overtly unique. Sure, she had her last name, but that was where it stopped, and with the way he had shamelessly reprimanded her for so much as skimming such beliefs, she was sure that it wasn't her family legacy which interested him.
Maybe there wasn't an explanation. Maybe he was just a decent person who enjoyed her company, but why? And that why would drive her over the edge, overflow and contaminate until she had her answer. Why did he insist, why did he promise and relentlessly come back again and again? What was he looking for? Or, better yet, what had he found?

She looked back up at him through her eyelashes, catching him as he scrunched his eyebrows and mouthed the word ‘what’. Eva bit down on her lip, stifling a small laugh, and then frowned. A sudden sadness beginning to mature inside her as the wind hit against the greenhouse, the darkness becoming all too obvious. It was emptiness, emptiness she didn't feel but remembered. One that would come back as soon as she was alone again.

Oh gosh, and she remembered how terrible it felt — that blackness — and so, Eva did the one thing she never thought she would: swallowed her pride and committed herself to another possibility of a black eye.

"So, Remus," she began, not looking up, too humiliated with herself to see his reaction, "what are you reading?"

The Gryffindor froze, looking up and down from his book and to the witch nearly three times before jutting his chin forward.

"Uh," he fumbled, wanting nothing more than to ask if this was her forgiving him— but knowing better than to rush things. Her addressing him by his first name was already a calculated risk that she had taken, one that she had planned before her thoughts formulated into spoken language. And he wasn't about to make her feel uncomfortable in something that already made her muscles turn rigid.

What a simple thing: a name. And yet, its usage had marked his path to redemption. He didn't know how long it would take. He didn't know if he would make it to the end, and he didn't know what that end would be, but the sheer notion that she was willing to try and forgive him meant the world to him.

"To put it plainly," he began, "it's about this bloke who wakes up and finds himself transformed into an insect.

"How peculiar." Eva finally looked up, her head tilting just slightly to the side. A reluctant, upward pull tugged at the corner of his lips as he watched her scrunched her nose, those reddish-pink lips slowly budding into their own smile. And he didn't know why, or what happened, but a warm sensation spread through him, reminding him just how much he enjoyed that face of hers.

"It's actually quite brilliant," he managed.

"Yes, most peculiarities turn out to be so," she riddled, averting her gaze to the window pane just over his shoulder.

But Remus didn't — couldn't — look away. His eyes locked on her unanchored expression as she dazed off into nothing, too far for him to reach out to her. The light was soft, golden as it mimicked the sun, and some strands of her hair had fallen out of the braid laying down her back. One of the shorter pieces laid right over her eye, and he watched as she absentmindedly reached up to pull it back, only for it to return. His fingers twitched, instinctively wanting to push it back.

Remus was in a trance, not really thinking properly as he left her cheek and ran his eyes down to her lips. And that warm sensation came back, this time leaving him exhilarated, pulsating through him a sudden urge to reach out and kiss her, press his lips softly to her own and spill out his apology into her.
He looked away as soon as he saw her hand begin to stir. This time, however, he did blush from sheer shame. Even though she hadn't noticed a thing, he still felt like such a fool to even think something of the sort.

The wizard was certain that he felt nothing other than plain amicability towards her — with the occasional stray thought of her bosom, which he pushed away as quick as a snitch's next move. All he wanted was her company, nothing more. He enjoyed the time they spent together, and sure, maybe she was a beautiful girl with a sharp mind and a hidden tenderness, but that didn't make her any more special than Lily or Mary.

He placed his forehead onto his hand and looked down to his shoes, frowning.

*Besides, he thought to himself, she's with Regulus.*

His stomach hardened at the thought, recalling her silent affirmation at his hunch. At first, he hadn't thought much about it, allowing it to fly completely over his head. But then he'd seen the steely eyed Slytherin at their last prefect meeting, and thought about what exactly he had been doing to Eva in the halls, growing more miffed every time. And he'd convinced himself that it was only because he felt protective of her, just as he did with any other of his witch friends. He knew how cruel teenage boys could be, himself being one, and he cared for Eva, not wanting to see her hurt.

But he kept thinking, wondering if Regulus knew if Eva wanted to become a healer, if he knew that she was a supporter of letting inky toads roam free, if he had even visited her in the hospital wing. Because Remus did and Remus had — and anyone who truly cared for someone would.

*Shut up, you git,* he scolded himself, sighing with a sullen expression as he came back to reality and heard the sound of Eva filing away the parchments.

"I've just got to tidy up and then we'll be on our way," she informed him.

"Yeah."

His rasped response caused her to look up at him, a slight scrunch developing between her brows as she surveyed him.

"Everything all right?" she inquired.

She cared, she cared and Remus hated himself for feeling so bloody fuzzy at the thought.

"Grand."

Of course, the witch didn't believe him, not one bit, but Eva had never been one to pry for information. And so, she left him to brood within his thoughts, knowing that it was a medicine which, in small doses, could do great good.

When she had her back turned to him, pulling out one of Madam Sprout's filing cabinets, he allowed himself to look up.

*You don't fancy her,* he repeated like a broken mantra to himself when the sensation to kiss her didn't return. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed in relief, shaking his head at his own ridiculousness.

"Thank you for staying," she said when she walked back over.

"Oh no, please don't thank me. There's no need for that."
"Of course there is," Eva disagreed, shaking her head as she begun to rearrange the pots.

'That's what friends are for,' he wanted to say, but bit his tongue and held himself back.

"Well, let me know the next time there's a scary Scot outside your window. I'll be more than happy to keep you company," he teased.

She smiled faintly at him before rapidly brushing her eyes over the window. An odd feeling crept up her spine, goosebumps spreading out across her body, telling her it wasn't the last time she'd see that face.

"I mean, of course, it doesn't only have to be when there's a scary Scot," he added, his volume a little lower than before.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay," she finished, picking up two pots and shoving them onto the shelf behind her. Remus slumped back down into his seat, his lips slightly parted as he let out a light scoff of incredulity. He felt the corners of his lips wanting to twitch upwards, but instead pressed his lips together and brought himself back to reality.

But Eva had bit the bullet, pining onto whatever sanity she had left around her.

"Do you need any help?" he piped up, putting his book down to the table as he made way to stand.

"No, go on and read about your bug boy."

Remus chuckled, eventually faltering into a grin. Eva wasn't one for many words, but okay resonated more than a song to him, and he felt himself wanting to burst out another apology and finally ask her if she could give them another chance. But he kept quiet, even though Eva had accepted his sorries in a way that left him feeling unfinished, he'd take it.

There was one less person in this world that hated him, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, here we have it. A lot of dialogue in this chapter, which is good because the last chapter was definitely not very dialogue-heavy, This is a good balance, I think. Don't worry, that creepy little man is going to come back and we'll find out more about him. Sofia Mustaq is mad intense, I know, I know, but I always base a lot of the pureblood, sacred 28-type, characteristics off of how dramatic Sirius Black is, Bellatrix Black, Lucius Malfoy, Draco, etc. I think they're over the top and just wonderful in that way. Really so much fun to write and I love that story line. Thank you and lots of love.

xx

Credits to: Lemony Snicket for inky toads / Tolkien for pipe-weed / Franz Kafka for Metamorphosis
"Manasse!" someone called out into the barren grayness. The only other sounds to accompany it were that of conscientious footfalls ambling through the halls, and of snow piling up against the windows, just beyond the open doors of empty classrooms. A silent and damp cold filled the walls, true to both the inhabitants and the land that surrounded the castle; and yet, her mind had managed to be elsewhere. A place where seagulls cawed and whipped against skies of bright blue, where the sea broke against the land only to recoil back and try again. The soles of her feet were squished and sunk into the sand, soiling her bottom and thighs with the roughness of roughed up stones. And somehow, here, in the midst of marshlands and bogs, she could smell it, she could smell the brine and the seaweed and the freedom.

Thus, the unwelcome interruption was just that— unwelcome, but the witch stopped, nonetheless, and turned to watch the approaching wizard with his too lean legs and too tight smile.

"What can I do for you, Black?" she inquired, her tongue bare of any congeniality and ardor.

Unblinking grey eyes watched her profile, lifting his chin to size up the witch: an unbent spine and hands folded neatly over her front, nothing to indicate any sort of intimidation or perturbation, but at the same time empty of an indication to tell him that she wanted him there, that she was pleased with his presence.

Regulus clenched his jaw as it dawned on him just how ridiculous this must look.

"I suppose I should get to the point, then," he acknowledged, furrowing his brows together for the briefest of moments before averting his gaze to the faraway ceiling. When the wizard didn't receive a response, which only helped to define the tension that matured between them, he continued, "I am here to ask you if you would be interested in attending Slughorn's Christmas Party with me?"

The request was simple enough, but the question made little to no sense. She turned her full body to face him, looking up with narrowing eyes to find just what in the world Regulus wanted from her. But he was just as good as, if not better, and his own eyes were as desolate as a desert.

"We haven't spoken in weeks," Eva began, doing a fine job at restraining the betrayal she had felt, that he had caused.

"You're right, I just thought it best—"

"Best?" she repeated, tilting and shaking her head as she took on a baffled expression. "You left me confused, escaping before you had to answer any questions—"

"Yes, I know," he admitted, "what I did was inappropriate. I should have been more wary than to let a moment get the best of me."

A moment? Eva wound back in her head. Something inside her was relieved that it wouldn't go any further, that it had been a single point in her timeline that wouldn't repeat. And another felt used, thrown to the side, abandoned.

"That's it, then?" It came out involuntarily, a purposeless whisper, and yet so full of reason. Never in her life had she been so sullied, never had she had to walk around on the edge of her sanity as dirt stained the bottoms of her skirts, her cheeks, the beds of her fingernails.
None of it made sense, not really, not to her.

"You did kiss me back," he reminded her. The witch's head flinched back, her eyes blinking rapidly until they widened with defiance.

"Yes," she bit, "it seemed like the polite thing to do."

"Naturally," Regulus scoffed.

"You threw yourself on me like I was some common whore! I hardly knew you," Eva continued, controlling the shakiness in her voice as best as she could. His gaze caught hers, and she averted it as fast as possible, counting to ten as her breath steadied once more. "I need to leave, I've class."

She made way to turn around, but a hand wrapped around her wrist and held her in place.

"We're to be married, that's all, that's why."

All the blood that should have been in her face, dropped down into her feet. She was ashamed for reacting in such a way, for not expecting it. Of course she'd be engaged before the end of the year, the stars had read her fate long time ago. And deep down, she'd known that the day was approaching, but, now that it was here, it seemed like it had all happened so fast. Too quick, too sudden.

"I only wanted to create something substantial, before, you know," he explained.

She had been so caught up in her own world, in her own head, with herself, that she hadn't even seen it coming. And that was unusual, Eva saw everything coming from miles away. Very little could surprise her; people were open books to her, the paths laid out in front of her so clear, and yet, this had truly whipped her off her feet and slapped her right across the face.

In a matter of a month, she had turned into a King's fool. Unbelievable.

"I'll go to the party with you," she said quickly, pulling her hand from his touch. "Is that all?"

"Yes."

And without anything left for either one of them to say, the witch stalked off into the distance.

Regulus didn't follow, but watched her with solemn eyes. Everything he had tried to do was to avoid this—rejection. Though it would happen, and she could do very little — if anything — to stop it, he still felt the sting inside him. The wizard sighed, leaning his shoulder against the wall as her figure became smaller than it already was—only a dot until completely disappearing. But, at this point, it didn't matter. Outside, a heavy smoke began to rise and flood over all of them, one that none of them would be able to avoid. Even the prospect of a wedding seemed ludicrous with everything else he held on his back, with what waited for him.

*It's all turning to shit, anyway,* he concluded, simultaneously tightening his jaw and fist before inhaling deeply, turning around and walking away.

(13 December 1977)

One of the many spiraled staircases at Hogwarts, in the South Tower, led down nearly seven stories, and at this time of the day, one would only find a dozen or so students bouncing and chatting their way back to the grounds. It was a usual Tuesday afternoon, nothing out of place, a shoddy sun doing
its best to pull some sort of ray through thick clouds — failing miserably — but normal.

Normal like Peter who fell into his usual routine of walking behind the group of witches as they swayed their hips, shaking out their hair from the loose ponytails they kept during lessons. A Cheshire cat smirk on his face, thinking he was the cleverest bloke to ever dominate those steps, yes, normal. And right about then was when normality did a back flip and threw the bird to the short, blue-eyed Gryffindor. Because, as he descended one more step, the group of girls and their honeyed bums disappeared. No more giggles, no more cotton candy perfume.

"What?" he asked himself, looking both up and down the steps. Through the lancet window to his left, he realized that he was, once again, positioned on the fifth story. His ashy-blonde brows knit together, his head darting up and down for a second time, anxiously wondering if he had been so lost in his own lecherous thoughts that he hadn't realized where he'd been going.

And then he began to laugh, clapping his hands together, and throwing his head back.

"Stop takin' the piss, lads," Peter called out to his friends, convinced that they were just having a good time with him. "All right, you've had your fun, now come off—"

A pressure clasped onto the back of his neck, causing his words to fall short. Long, callused fingers wrapped around from behind to choke him. Instinctively, Peter's own hands lifted up to claw into them, to pull them away, but their grasp only grew tighter, and Peter began to rapidly feel the oxygen struggling to get past the cuff on his neck.

"Trick step," he heard someone drawl into his ear from behind. Another hand reached down into his pocket and pulled out his wand. Peter writhed and jerked against the body, his eyes widening as he watched them fling his only defense over the railing-less staircase. It clattered, dropping, dropping, until it finally landed with a sound akin to broken ceramic.

"Look at him squirm," Evan Rosier's voice came from somewhere further up. "Make him squeal."

"Getting off on this, eh, Rosier?" chuckled Antonin from behind Peter.

Peter continued to try and pull against the Slytherin's hold, but was instead turned and bent over the edge of the staircase. His hands flailed about as he faced the bottom of the tower, the drop so threatening and tangible that one more push and he'd shit himself. Despite himself, tears began to well up in his ducts, whimpers leaking through his mouth as the wizards around him took pleasure in watching him wring about like a famished hound.

"You know, Piggy," Edmund Nott began to ascend the steps, coming closer. His obsidian, shiny leather shoes with silver buckles appeared to Peter's left, "we could drop you," a whimper-turned-sob ripped out of the Gryffindor's chest, "Severus here would know how to make it look like an accident, like your inept bulkiness caused it—"

"No!" he croaked out, crying.

"No?" cackled Evan, looking up to share an amused smirk with Antonin.

"I'll do anything, pl-p-please, please," Peter begged.

Antonin, who was the one holding Peter, looked to the others, impatience firing from his eyes, the taste of blood so close.

"Anything?" Severus' voice thrummed from further away. The Gryffindor nodded rapidly, desperately, as beads of sweat began to drip down with his tears, staining the grey steps.
"Good," said Edmund, "that's very good."

"Let him go," Evan told Antonin, who swiveled his head faster than a snitch's next move. "What?" The blonde haired wizard asked his friend, "look at him, he's wandless and pathetic. What sort of threat could he be?"

Once he was released, the Slytherin chaser threw him to the steps, Peter bleating like a goat once his knee came crashing down onto the sharp edge. Involuntarily, he slid down to Severus' feet. His blue, watery eyes looked up to the Slytherin, gulping as beady, black eyes diabolically stared down at him, past that grotesque, unsightly hooked nose that Peter had spent too much time making into the butt of many jokes.

"Here's what you're going to do, Piggy," Edmund began, "we need an inside man, someone to spy on your friends for us."

Peter looked down to his shoes, his mind racing, his heart beating. War drums in the distance, horses moving against him at unimaginable speeds; he had been backed into a corner, left completely useless and powerless. Humiliated.

"I—"

"What if he runs and rats to his fucking bitches?" snarled Antonin, his nails digging so deeply into his palm that he could feel hot blood trail down his lifeline.

"He won't, he's a coward," responded Severus, not taking his eyes off the wizard at his feet, tears relentlessly trickling down his red-stained cheeks. "But, if not, we'll tell them that he voluntarily betrayed them, and then we'll torture him."

"No—"

"Severus's been working on some nifty little spells, but, of course, with any good spell you need test subjects, and well, we were hoping that'd be your friends..." Evan trailed off, "though, I'm sure you'd do just fine."

Peter's head hung down, surrendering and weeping.

"What'd you say, Piggy?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" came Peter's voice, broken and cracked as his hands shook and trembled.

"You starved us, you humiliated heirs of noble houses, you made everyone laugh in our faces. Some of us here, myself included, didn't think twice about you bottom-feeders, but enough is enough. I will not be disrespected, not by blood-traitors and mutts," answered Edmund, his chin held high as he descended to stand next to Severus.

"It— it, it wasn't m-me, me," Peter blubbered, "it was th-them, Remus and J-James— their id-idea."

"We know," Edmund's hand wrapped over Peter's jaw, turning it upwards, "that's why you're going to help us take care of them."

"We'll be in touch, Piggy," Evan said as he passed him, the first to exit. With one last gesture to Antonin, Edmund followed him. And as Peter's breath came out in sketched intervals, before he could protest the wand that pinched the tip of his spine, Antonin casted: "Confundus."
By the time Peter came to his senses, the entire tower was empty. He began to breathe rapidly, his entire face pallid, white as a ghost as he searched the area for some sort of evidence. But all he had was the headache that had begun behind his eyes, the salt from his tears stinging his cheeks as the wetness from them pooled on his grey jumper, and the poison that twirled in his gut.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," he repeated over and over again, throwing his face into his hands and letting the tears spill out of him. Shaking, terrified, faint, bile came up and out his throat and there was no holding it back— relieving himself right there, anything and everything that had been inside him came climbing back out.


He had no choice.

Another retching sound and more left him, besmirching the ancient castle's architecture.

Peter hadn't wanted to go to war, but the war wanted Peter.

And it had come.

It was here.

(17 December 1977)

"I can't believe I've agreed to this bloody ponce-fest," grumbled Sirius as he continued to pull at his tie.

"But you four just look so dashing, absolutely brilliant," cheered Marjory, clasping her hands together as she turned around to beam at the four of them. Her navy blue dress twirled around her knees as she continued to skip merrily down the stairs. As always, her happiness was contagious, and Remus found himself sharing in it with a short laugh, as did Lily.

"I can't believe she can run in heels," commented Lily under her breath, shaking her head in amusement as she watched the Gryffindor witch nearly fly down the grand staircase.

"Please, how hard could it be? I could probably run in heels," scoffed James.

"Oh, I bet—"

"No, don't. He'll do it, trust me," Remus cut Lily off short. She let out another round of laughter, reaching over to James' hand and squeezing it. He turned to look at her, his mock-pout turning into a smug half-smile as he winked her way. Instinctively, Lily wrapped her hand around the length of his arm, pressing her cheek to his shoulder, soaking in the warmth and comfort that the simple act gifted her.

"I'm going to be sick," scowled Sirius as he eyed the pair.

"From the party? But you go every year, Pa— Sirius," said Peter.

"Yeah, because this git over here couldn't ever get a date," retorted Sirius, jutting his thumb over to James. "He's got a bird now, and he still couldn't get a date."

Remus let out a snort, which quickly turned into a hearty chuckle.

"I've invited Remus for the past two years, I couldn't go back on that our last year," Lily defended
herself, knowing it was all in good fun.

"The ladies love me, mate, what can I say?" Remus smirked, leaning into Sirius as he waggled his brows. For a brief moment, Sirius side-eyed him attentively, watching the corner of his best friend's upturned boyish grin, and then shoved him away as he forced out his own chuckle.

"Yeah, yeah, lady's man all right," Sirius mumbled, frowning — suddenly annoyed — and reaching into his trouser pocket to pull out a metal flask. He twisted the cap off, brought it to his lips and let the whiskey pour into him.

"Hey, save that," Peter whispered to him, eyeing Lily, "we won't get through tonight if you don't."

"Pete, you and I are going to find two nice birds at this party, and we're going to spend the night in a broom closet, that's how this is going to go," Sirius concluded, nodding firmly as he stared blankly ahead of them, turning away from the staircase and into a hall. As soon as they did, they could hear the music drift down the corridor and into their ears. Sounds of English folk and Elizabethan serenades filling up the otherwise dreary expanse.

Remus' steps sped up as Marjory held out a hand to him, the two of them beginning to spin to the music, both laughing foolishly to one another. Sirius grimaced, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach nagging at him; heavy, smoggy, nauseating.

"Giselle Nettles has a fine arse," Sirius muttered to Peter as he wrapped a hand around his friend's shoulder. "Think she'll be up to it?"

"Definitely," smirked Peter, nodding goofily.

"Ah, Mr. Black! There you are. Why, how stunning you look, Miss Manasse," Slughorn greeted them, already beaming with red cheeks, most likely caused by the tumbler of whiskey he held in his hand. Eva smiled politely as Regulus held out his hand to shake his professor's.

"Woah," said Peter from across the room.

Remus — who had been in the middle of a chuckle — stopped and followed his friend's gaze, catching sight of the newly arrived pair.

The smile on his face dropped, swallowing down the laughter as soon as he registered her. Right away, he straightened himself, rearranged his tie, and hoped that his hair didn't look too disheveled. His eyes were wide, eyebrows lifted as he couldn't help but tour and take in her entire length. Statuesque and ethereal. Her dark mass of hair was braided with a purposeful messiness and pinned to the nape of her neck. Her lips were painted deep red with thick and charcoaled eyelashes to match. Diamonds sat and glistened in her ears every time she angled her chin a different way. And her slender shoulders were bare for all too see — a sleeveless dress that flaunted her décolletage, the curve of her breasts accentuated every time she inhaled. The Gryffindor couldn't help but feel a sudden surge of excitement — much welcomed after the dull night they were having — course through him just at the mere sight of her.

"That's such a pretty dress," sighed Marjory, tilting her head as she admired the fabric. Indeed, it was — pitch black and dotted with twinkling stars, or so it seemed. An entire galaxy painted onto her, more of it appearing every time it turned or twisted in a different way.

And Remus couldn't — didn't want to — stop looking.

"Definitely not as boring as I thought she was," Sirius commented under his breath. Remus shifted
his gaze over to his friend, his eyes narrowing as Sirius watched her from over the top of his goblet.

She was never boring, he retorted internally, looking back to Eva and then down to the table.

"You reckon she's shaggin' him?" Peter's voice came from his right. "Think I've got a chance?"
Sirius snorted and Remus' jaw clenched, narrowed eyes only growing narrower.

It wasn't that he didn't think of Eva in that way, because he did — but only sometimes — and never in a degrading way, or so he liked to tell himself. It wasn't that he searched for it, rather that the thought snuck up on him — but only sometimes — and then he'd push it away and that was it, that was that. And so, yeah, maybe sometimes he thought of her in a too lewd way, maybe he'd rubbed one out one night while he thought about her breasts in his face as he sat her on his lap, but he always regretted it, terribly, even went as far as to hate himself for it. And he'd never objectify her like that, out loud, in front of an audience. He cared about her, as a friend and human being, and he didn't like the way his friends were talking, it wasn't fair...

He pursed his lips and looked back up. And what he saw made his chin flinch back slightly, an incredulous expression donning his features for mere seconds before gradually softening as he held a cognac gaze. A small smile graced her lips as a petite hand inconspicuously lifted up to wave at him. Shy, calculated, careful to make sure the two men next to her didn't witness it. The entire act caused a rush of warmth to flood him as he returned her smile, acknowledging her presence with a discrete nod. It caused her eyes to glimmer, a secret being passed between them, one that no one else around either one of them would ever feel or begin to understand.

"What's everyone lookin' at?" Lily asked cheerfully, re-seating herself next to Sirius and setting down a plate of Victoria sponge cake, extra cream piled high on top of it. It caused Remus to wake from his stupor, eyeing the concoction with great curiosity and amusement as he reached forward and took a sip from his spiked eggnog.

James followed, pulling out the chair next to Lily's, and dropping two separate plates overflowing with food. One had an array of desserts, and the other a mess of whatever he could get his hands on.

Lily's green eyes looked over each of their faces, each one of them surveying and moving between the three plates. She did her best to push down the pumpkin juice she had already consumed, nearly choking on it as she came upon Remus' furrowed brows and pained expression.

"Trust me, I tried to tell him that he'd have a funny stomach if he mixed the smoked salmon with the Caerphilly cheese, but—"

"My stomach's made of steel," muttered the Gryffindor through a mush of food. Lily rolled her eyes, grinning nonetheless.

"He's going to stink the entire room up tonight," said Peter, "do you remember what happened when we dared him to eat that entire case of blood pops?"

Remus leaned back and stroked his throat as he grimaced at the memory.

"What!?" blurted Lily in the midst of cutting off a piece of her cake. "That's revolting."

"He didn't stop farting all night," added Sirius, shaking his head as he chuckled. "Remus went to sleep on the couch— just couldn't stand it."

Lily turned to Remus, looking at him apprehensively.

"It's true, and it was traumatizing," Remus confirmed, nodding solemnly.
"Fuck you lot," cursed James as he glared at them from behind his glasses. "I'd never betray you three like this—"

Peter gulped, suddenly feeling too hot under all those clothes, but no one seemed to notice.

'Make him squeal.'

'A coward.'

'Voluntarily betrayed them.'

"—come off it, mate—"

"No, Padfoot, when you get a bird, watch what stories I have—"

Sirius scoffed, "I'll never settle down."

"Bollocks," countered Lily.

"I'll bet my life on it."

"Don't need to, have you seen him?" began James, mock-grimacing at Sirius. "Bloody repulsive, look at him, blegh! Who in Godric's goodwill would ever want him?"

Everyone at that table laughed, but Remus was the first to falter, trailing off as he lifted his eyes away from them and over to the distance. She was still standing obediently, listening and never speaking, but with so much to say, so much on her mind. His knuckles knocked against his thigh, blinking away as he downed his drink in one go and lost himself in the temporary, primary high that it sent to his head.

Evenly, the festive mood irradiated into everyone's veins, and sure, maybe the elderflower wine and butterbeer helped, but whatever it was, people were laughing and dancing and eating and having a jolly ol' time. And of course, as everyone else chittered and chatted away, Eva found herself alone. Regulus had long gone off with Edmund Nott and some wizard from the Icelandic Ministry, no where to be seen, and unless she went off to search for them — and she'd be caught dead before ever doing something of the sort — she was certain it'd be a good while until he reappeared.

Her fingers wrapped around the thin golden flute placed in front of her, bringing it to her lips as the berry sweetness of the violet drink burned through her throat. Her eyes wandered over every body, mismatched and oddly placed amongst the room, some by the buffet, others tripping over one another as they tried to salvage their angels on horsebacks and cured meats galore. Eva couldn't help a smirk as she caught sight of Kettleburn ranting away to a very flustered, red-faced Flitwick— who seemed to be doing his best to avoid combusting in front of his own students and faculty members.

After the initial amusement had subsided, she lifted her eyes away from the pair, and then there, right in the corner, was where she caught him.

Eva quickly blinked away, down to bouquet that decorated the center of her table.

He leaned against the pillar, raising his brows as he watched her face flush, her cheeks the barest shade of pink— hardly noticeable, especially not with the rouge she was already wearing, but he'd caught it. He always did, she couldn't trick him, everyone else? Maybe, but not him.
(One Week Ago)

She knew she had to make more of an effort. He wasn't going to push, not anymore. He regretted what he had done, and now he was recoiling back into familiar territory so as not to push her any further.

The only time they met was when he could ring up an excuse, and Slughorn wasn't assigning any more projects until after the break, so it fell to her if she wanted to continue this.

It sucked, it really, truly sucked because she was used to him. He smiled a lot, a little too much, and he had a lot of friends, everyone seemed to know and like him, and sometimes Eva wondered how she could possibly fit into his life.

And what the purpose of it all was.

"Remus," she looked up to him just as he was about to walk over to his friend and leave. James Potter eyed them as Remus paused, turning back to her.

"Mm?"

She felt her hands grow hot, and she didn't know why or how, but there was surely heat in her face.

"Never mind," she brushed off as the Head Boy began to approach them, "it was nothing."

"You sure?"

She nodded once, corking her ink jar and placing it into her bag. Remus didn't budge, he saw the red-painted cheeks, the pursed lips.

"Not now, James, just wait for me outside," he told his friend as soon as he saw the mass of messy black hair appear next to him. Eva paused as she closed her flap, pulling the belt through it's loop and shutting it tightly. "It's not nothing," she heard him say as he stepped closer to her.

"It's really not that important," she said indifferently, shrugging her shoulders as she lifted her bag up.

Remus sighed, nodding, close to giving up.

"I was just wondering if you would like to have lunch with me?"

He blinked, placing a palm on the table so that he could level himself with her.

"I know it's cold, but there's a bell tower in the boathouse, and it's quite warm," she continued, everything coming out of her premeditatedly, as if there was some sort of checklist.

"I would have just thrown up some charms, but sure, yeah, of course," he said, a smile growing onto his lips.

"Okay, thanks," she muttered, suddenly very uncomfortable with the entire staging. Eva brushed past him and out the classroom, leaving him with an amused smirk and a newfound relief.

"Okay, thanks," he repeated, laughing and shaking his head as he, too, left to join James.

His tongue ran over his teeth as he continued to push on, trying to get her to look back over at him. And eventually, after she'd controlled everything and everyone around her, she lifted her gaze back
to his. Remus grinned in his victory, a toothless, cheeky little smile that caused Eva's eyes to widen and her jaw to slack tight.

She was clearly not amused.

But he was.

Remus tilted his head towards the exit, moving his gaze over to it and then back to Eva.

The Slytherin witch held her breath, following his line of vision. She wavered for a moment, watching the entrance. Whether it was the elderflower wine or the complete boredom — the lack of anything remotely interesting — or the fact that Remus actually bothered to string more than five words together, she turned back to him and nodded once, tight and firm. But he didn't move right away, instead staying to watch as she inhaled deeply, holding it as she blinked away to the far left wall and upheld an absentminded stare. She was good, really good. With one last, quick glance over the room, and without much hesitation — if any at all — the Gryffindor put one foot in front of the other and finally freed himself from the asphyxiation of the party, a horrible parody of a pureblood function.

And, shit, did Remus hate smoked salmon.

When Eva decided that the coast was clear, she finished off the glass of wine and stood up, folding down her neat dress and perfecting her posture as she made her exit.

*Just say you're off to powder your nose*, she told herself as she watched some partygoers flitter their eyes over to her as she passed. But, of course, no one would ask, no one really cared. And Eva knew that, she knew that, so why was she so worried? Why did she feel jittery and jumpy? Nervous that she was walking too fast, but eyeing the exit like it was some sort of savior?

She took a deep breath and stepped out into the unwelcome chill that she had chosen to walk into, expecting someone to bump into her, to wonder where in the world she was going off into the castle, by her lonesome, at this time of the night.

There was no one.

*Of course there isn't,* she said to herself, feeling goosebumps burst all over her body. A shiver ran down her spine, and she suddenly understood just why no one bothered to idle within the halls. In an instance, her fingers had iced over, and she could feel the tip of her nose lose all sensation.

She took a few steps, and then realized for a second time — there really was no one. Her nose scrunched up, her eyes darting about rapidly as they searched but found nothing.

Was this some sort of practical joke? Should she just turn back and drop these childish games?

Stepping a little further down, but still coming up with nothing, she pursed her lips together and went to turn on her heel. But just as she was about make the full circle, two hands gripped onto her hips and a voice burst out: *"Boo!"

Eva jumped, swiveling around, wide-eyed with a hand spread out over the tops of her breasts.

"Have you gone mad!?" She looked up at him, his body leering and shadowing over her. Even with the death traps she wore on her feet, he still stood well over a full head above her.

He chuckled, one of those laughs that slowly trailed off into a smile, as he put both hands up in surrender.
"Sorry, I saw an opportunity—"

"You scared me," she exclaimed, not finding anything about his little stunt amusing.

"Sorry," he apologized, still grinning. Eva sighed and shook her head, her shoulders falling as she exhaled. "Was it really that bad? I'm sorry."

When she looked back up at him, all traces of folly and silliness gone. His eyes shined delicately, concerned and watching every corner of her face for offense.

"No, I just, I don't like surprises," she told him, her voice mollifying.

"Duly noted," he said, nodding his head, "you just looked right bored in there— thought I could give you some company."

She shouldn't have smiled, she shouldn't have felt as warm as she had by his words, but they did. They acted as a hearth in that icy corridor, causing her to avoid his gaze as she attempted to push him away, again. But he'd been trying, really hard, and his efforts hadn't gone unnoticed by her. Attentive, apprehensive, carefully picking out his words. He'd grown a sudden interest in the generational differences of knarls and spent more time in the greenhouse with her than Professor Sprout did. It was okay to forgive him, and she had, probably a long time ago, but feelings often came late to Eva, not really realizing her own until it was long past. Maybe, this time, she'd allow it. Just once.

(Two Weeks Ago)

"Listen, I know you hate me, but I didn't even touch the cauldron," he told her, nearly pleading as he leaned over the table with both palms on his desk.

She pressed her lips together, looking down at the gruesome, angrily bubbling and close to overflowing, pot of dark orange.

Eva knew this was her fault, she knew that she was distracted. It had only been a handful of days since the incident in the greenhouse, and though at the time she had been too preoccupied with her fears, now the acid from the betrayal that she had felt from his judgement came back. Still confused, still questioning, and still denying that she felt anything more than simple infuriation, it was coming back to her and combusting.

Eva inhaled deeply, looking to around for some sort of salvage. Strands of hair had escaped her bun, it was already late, only an hour to dinner, and they were still here. She didn't even know why he'd come, he'd agreed to taking up the writing part of the assignment and she'd do the practical formation. But no, he'd insisted on being here, just in case something went wrong.

She shook her head, took a deep breath and then glanced around. Immediately, her head reached for a glass of pink crystals and she dropped a fingernail of it into the cauldron. Fingers crossed, counting to ten, they both eventually saw it turning into he bright orange.

Eva exhaled, smiling briefly to herself before going back to her reading as they waited for the potion to come to a boil.

"I don't hate you," she mentioned after awhile.

"I know, I may have exaggerated," he responded. Remus' fingers tapped against the desk, blinking down at them. "Did you hear about the study they just published on the knarls?"
"Hoping, praying that this would work.

"That they're growing bigger every generation?" Eva looked up, her eyes suddenly interested and bright. He nodded, smiling, trying to hide it before she figured out that this was all a ploy to get her to talk. "You saw that?" she continued enthusiastically. "Everything in that article is complete rubbish—"

"I know, they said it'll be disastrous to gardeners all over Britain and—"

"Only if they're provoked!"

"Exactly, that's what I said," he agreed, "I remembered what you'd said about them, and I just— I remembered."

She looked down, blinking as the smile faded away. Remus cared, he was concerned, and whether it be because of a genuine interest or because of her, it didn't mean he didn't care.

Eva turned to stare out into the openness as a brutal wind blew in through the alcove, causing her hands to wrap around her body.

"You're cold," Remus' voice broke through. His eyes ran over her exposed skin, bumpy and full of raised hair, and didn't hesitate for a moment before shaking his robes off and handing it over to Eva. "Here, take this."

She looked to his outstretched hand and back to him.

"No, but, what about you?"

"I'm fine— I don't get cold easily, and besides," he gestured down to the suit jacket, "it's worsted wool, trust me, I'm fine."

Eva hesitated, glimpsing over at the entrance to the party, and then to the jacket. She knew that she couldn't stay out here if she didn't cover herself, and she didn't particularly want to return to the party. Not now, not yet.

"Fine," she surrendered, reaching out to the robes and bunching it into her own hand, "but I can't stay long."

"Because of Regulus? He's been ignoring you all night— don't see why you're in any rush."

"Bloody hell," he reprimanded internally, rubbing a hand over his face as he, too, looked off to the distance. His profile was to the Slytherin witch as he tried to get himself to sew his mouth shut before he said another really smart thing.

"He's busy. It's important for him to network," she excused her date; paying more attention to his accusation than his tone.

With a small sigh, she slipped her arm through the last sleeve. Remus surveyed her, leaning his entire back into the alcove and against the wall. Eva was drowning in his clothes, the ends hanging and draping off like thick curtains, pooling around her feet and making her disappear.

"What's funny?" she asked, looking to him.
"Nothing," he assured her through a chuckle. But as he continued, still no explanation in sight, she scrunched her nose and Remus thought he'd melt. The smile on his face dropped, staring at her as she demonstrated her confusion. Opened up, once again, trusting him with her uncertainty, this was all he had wanted.

He smiled softly, distractedly.

"Do you know this song?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "No."

"It's Greensleeves... It's about Anne Boleyn—a muggle Queen, or so they say." The notes from the lute flowed around them, causing Remus to unconsciously hum along to the familiar tune. "Would you like to dance?"

Eva bit down on her own tongue, a billion thoughts running through her mind. All of them anxieties and worries, most of them irrational.

"Sure."

He hummed a little louder, and Eva laughed as he placed a hand just underneath her shoulder blades, carelessly taking the other into his own. Then, without expecting it, they begun to swing about like mindless children. Eva did her best to follow his lead, but failed horribly, and it wasn't too soon until she gave up, completely helpless against the way the corners of her mouth turned upwards.

"Is this supposed to be a waltz?" Eva asked him, beginning to laugh as she eyed their feet, making sure he didn't crush her toes.

"I have no idea how to waltz, Eva," he admitted, snorting as he spun her around quickly and without warning.

The witch let out another laugh, this time throwing her head back and catching his eye. But that was it, that's all it took for Remus to stop, to completely shut down and make him forget about the world around him. Because she was bloody beautiful when she laughed. And those eyes, that sound, when directed towards him, made his entire chest ache. It wrenched and pinched, both horribly and delightfully, a feeling he hadn't felt in a very long time. And then, in a blink of an eye—before he could even talk himself out of it—his palm dropped down to her waist, pulling her into him before leaning over... and his lips were on hers.

The next thing he knew was that Eva's hands were on his chest, forcing him away from her, both of them heaving as they stared at one another with startled expressions.

"Eva," he began, searching her wide eyes, "Eva, fuck."

"Are you insane?" she flared at him. Remus' entire body went red, his heart pumping too much blood into every corner of his being.

Eva shoved off his robes hurriedly from her shoulders, her breath panicked as she looked to anywhere but him.

"I'm sorry—I shouldn't have—I'm, I'm drunk, I'm—" he tried, stuttering and tripping over his own tongue. "That was—I don't even know what I was thinking—please, I'm so sorry."

But he was scorched Earth, and Eva had turned back into the icy tundra.
"Correct—you're drunk, this was a mistake, we both forget and never speak of it again," she hissed to him.

He felt his insides clench, wanting nothing more than to bang his head against the wall. For once, he wondered if he could ever be with this girl and not knock over the entire chessboard with his clumsiness. If he could just be as calm and composed as she was, rational and objective of his next move.

"Of course."

"None of this ever happened," and with that, Eva shoved his robes back to him, which he took with frozen hands, and walked back towards the party.

Remus closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face for the second time that night.

"Fucking idiot," he mumbled to himself, growing more frustrated with every breath, "what a fucking arse."

A friendship wasted on a moment, on one single second that meant nothing.

Or maybe it hadn't meant nothing, maybe it did mean something—not to her, but to him. And he'd just been lying to himself because he couldn't put two and two together when it came to his own life. Maybe he'd just been lying to himself because he knew they'd never be anything. And maybe there were moments—when he was a little drunk or exceptionally tired—where he wouldn't think of her breasts squeezed between his fingers, no, not that, but instead of his fingers running through her soft, dark hair, or the smile with the little scrunch. Of course, he wouldn't remember it in the morning, but there were indeed nights when he let himself fall asleep to the thought of her.

Because the former, he could blame on his hormonal, moon-fed brain as it took over his conscious, the latter was something entirely different.

And so, maybe it did mean something.

But in that moment, to Remus, it had to mean nothing, and so it meant nothing.

(Because they'd never be together, and it had everything to do with who she was and who—what—he was.)

"Fuck," he let out one last time before running his hands through his hair, pulling at the strands, and then turning in the opposite direction from the party and sauntering off.

Remus always did hate the fucking Slug Club.
The Royal Scam

Indeed, the Christmas Holiday was a special time for most. Filled with joyous gift-giving and stomach-stuffing treats that made all, from newborns to great-grandparents, grin and chuckle alongside their families and loved ones. People came together, discarding long-term strifes and what the world held beyond warm walls. They let themselves wash away the hook of winter by the fire, recounting and reminiscing, playing and loving. In the midst of a cold and somber winter night, homes all across the map lit up and joined together to illuminate the darkness.

It was Eva's favorite holiday, if she had to have one. But within the secular walls of the French embassy, there was no tree, no garlands, no Christmas roast to fill their bellies. There would be no outlawed, recently redeemed relative on their doorstep; no foreign family member who they hadn't seen in years. The Manasse family firmly believed that the holiday was muggle in origin, and muggle it would remain. They looked down upon those who packaged gifts into pretty paper, only to rip it days later. And yet, her father had snuck into her room not two days ago with an impish grin and a red-velvet rectangular box.

She smiled softly to herself as her fingers trailed over the opalescent pearls that graced her neck. Tufeau, their house-elf, circled her, spraying perfume onto her pulse points, and anywhere else she deemed necessary— which, in this case, was everywhere.

"Y a-t-il autre chose avec laquelle Tufeau pourrait vous aider, Mademoiselle Manasse?" Tufeau asked as it set the glass bottle back down onto the dresser.

"Non," Eva replied, capturing the image of the miniature creature in the mirror. Innocent eyes, as round and glassy as a rose window, filled with a concocted, simulated love that gave her little to no affection shined up at her. "Thank you."

Tufeau clapped its thin hands together, bringing them up to its chin.

"Mademoiselle thanks Tufeau. She is too kind to Tufeau. Tufeau is most grateful to Mademoiselle," squeaked the house-elf in French.

"You may go," Eva dismissed it, tilting her head as the allegiant creature continued to sway back and forth, as if dancing, until it was out the door. A gentle smile placated Eva's lips, and she let out a small hmph! as she turned back to the mirror.

Pretty, pretty girlie, she heard one of the voices titter. Maybe so, but it all seemed to well done, and that didn't make her feel very pretty.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and running a hand over the deep maroon skirts. Turning with her hands folded into one another across her lap, she clacked her way out of the blue room. The door led her into another room, into the next after that, no hallways just one room after another. A Versailles-esque townhouse, modeled after the first nobles who had fled the Revolution. Floor to ceiling windows, heights that reached the skies, two mirrors in every room, gold tinted molding— they weren't royals, but they sure fit the part quite well.

Archaic, some would even go as far as to call it medieval. And it most certainly was, but this was her home, and she'd accepted that and its flaws a long time ago.

At the time of the evening, all the rooms were empty. Eva waltzed from one room into another; until, finally, she arrived to the Room of the Great Fireplace, where laid only a carpet for one to wipe their
shoes on and a marble mantle.

"There you are," announced her father as he approached her, "I was just about to send Tufeau to fetch you."

"No, I'm here," Eva assured him. His hazel eyes, which mimicked her own, glimmered against the dull room. They set in deep sockets, heavy-lidded with a fair share wrinkles that were more than likely caused by the sun. Affable but piercing, constantly demanding respect and serenity wherever they gazed upon; Diorix Manasse was one of the many faces of a nation, and he upheld that duty with the greatest honor.

"Look at you," he sweetened, grinning with pride as he looked her in the eye, "my beautiful daughter."

She blushed, casting her gaze to his shoes—all white with silver buckles, matching perfectly with the blanched robes that donned golden-threaded vines all throughout.

"Blancanieves," they both turned to the witch who snorted by the doorway.

"Hello, mother," Eva greeted, turning around to face her. The witch's lip curled, scrutinizing the pair of them with a glowering once over.

"Pearl earrings and necklace?" her mother grimaced, eyeing the jewels. Eva's fingers instinctively reached up to them, her breath hitching in her throat as she realized that she had been all too excited to test out the new gift.

"You were supposed to be in Barcelona, with your mother," Diorix reminded his wife with annoyance thick on his tongue. He placed a hand on Eva's shoulder, leading her into the fireplace.

"And miss my daughter's engagement dinner?" mock-puzzled the witch. With her words, Eva's entire posture stiffened, turning around to glimpse over her shoulder at her parents. Her mother gazed over at her daughter, an eyebrow cocked as her smoldering, cat-like eyes looked between the two of them.

"Nothing has been finalize—"

"Shut up, Diorix!" her mother shouted in Spanish. "You didn't tell her anything?" She shook her head, her unkempt hair sweeping over her ample hips. "Just like my father, walked me right into a marriage without even telling me the bastard's name."

"Don't you dare speak that way in front of our daughter," he reprimanded, his nostrils flaring.

"Our daughter?" Eleuia Manasse scoffed, her head jerking back with a short laugh. "Your daughter," she corrected, "she is nothing like me."

The words made goosebumps erupt all over exposed frame. She pursed her lips, once again reverting her gaze to the ground.

"Look at her—she's positively frightened!" Eleuia pointed at Eva as she simultaneously stared down her husband. "Disgusting, despicable man—just like my father. You should have married him, you two would have been perfect for one another."

"No," Eva began, finding her voice, "it's okay. I already know."

Her father turned around, eyebrows raised and a wild look to his eyes. "You do?" Eva nodded, not
daring to look at her mother, whose stare could burn holes into her father's skull.

"And I find it a good match," Eva inhaled deeply before continuing, "for the family, for our people."

"You see, Eleuia? A Manasse always knows their place; we always do what is best for our family and our people." A gradual smile grew on Diorix's lips, pride shining from a light behind his eyes as he reached out for Eva's hand. They held one another while her mother snorted in contempt.

"My mother's right when she says you're both spineless—"

"We must go," her father's voice concluded, echoing in the empty room. "We're already late—thanks to your mother."

"¡Pues claro!" The witch clapped her hands together, shaking her head in disbelief. "Always my fault, the weather, the ache in your balls—"

"—Tufeau!"

"—the protests, all of it my fault! You sorry son of a bitch—"

Tufeau showed up with a pop and a velvet pouch of floo powder.

"Let's go, Eva," he beckoned to Eva. They were both used to his wife's ramblings, a daily occurrence at the London townhouse, and led her daughter underneath the mantle piece.

"—you beat me, lock me up—"

They both reached into the velvet pouch that Tufeau held up to them, the powder sinking like quicksand between their bony fingers.

"—you care nothing for this family, you'd sell your own daughter like she were cattle—"

"Chateau de Rosier, Greve de Lecq," her father announced, both of them smashing the powder to the floor at the same time.

What are we doing here? Eva asked herself as servants flipped open two wooden doors that led into a grand dining hall. A humble number of people lingered about the room, all dressed in fancy, jeweled robes and holding flutes of golden-bubbled champagne. They chatted amongst themselves, rings of silver and tungsten reflecting the light from crystal chandelier that staged itself right above the center of the table. Caterers weaved throughout the bodies, bustling metal plates of hors d'oeuvres while sporting a sheen of sweat above their brows.

"Papa," she whispered to her father, who held his chin up high as Claus Rosier came their way, "why are we at the Rosier—"

"Diorix," greeted the man in a honeyed tone. He had alabaster-white hair and black robes stamped with black velvet roses. His eyes were deep-set and hooded, much like Eva's father's, but he didn't have the tellings of old-age. Perfect, tight skin that sat across thick-cut bones, a perfect representation of what his son would look like. And true to Rosier name, he had little to not qualms about reaching out and enveloping her father in a tight embrace. The French wizard patted him on the back, forcing his a smile as they pulled apart.

"Very good to see you again, Claus," her father acknowledged.

"Yes, indeed it is! And, why look at you!" the white-washed wizard boasted, holding his hands out
to Eva and placing them on both her shoulders. "You look marvelous. What a beauty you are, my Eva!"

*My Eva?* she repeated in her head as she found herself pressed up against his body, his hands running up and down her back. He nestled his face into her hair, and Eva could hear him inhaling her scent. Her brows scrunched together, chin flinching back into her neck as she ticked down the seconds until he'd pull away.

"Isn't this wonderful?" Claus Rosier eventually asked as he pulled away, giving her one last, odd smile that made her tip on edge. The witch didn't know how to respond, glancing over at her farther for some sort of explanation.

"And Eleuia?" their host inquired, his eyes searching over their heads.

"Family matter to take care of in Spain," her father prevaricated.

"Of course," Claus Rosier said with a polite nod. He clasped his hands together and turned around to face the rest of the crowd. "Please, have a seat! We've all been waiting for you."

Reaching out to grab Eva's hand, he escorted the pair over to the long table. It had no table cloth, but place mats made of golden thread. The table was lined at intervals with the most beautiful, exotic flowers known to mankind. In the center, there was a grand bouquet mixed with jasmines and white roses—not a limp petal in sight, nor a fallen leaf abandoned on the planks beneath it. They sat in a golden vase, and Eva thought she'd never seen something so exquisite.

"You like them, hm?" came Claus' voice from her side.

"Yes," she affirmed, "they're gorgeous."

"They're for you," he whispered into her ear. With widening eyes, she turned to the wizard, but he was long gone before anything in the form of a question could escape her lips. Eva shifted to survey the rest of the guests from the corner of her eye. One by one, she counted them off, repeating their names in her head. Her lips falling apart as her eyes darted down to the name plates. She approached her own seat, a house-elf appearing next to her as it pulled it out for her.

When she saw who sat next to her, her insides congealed and her blood turned into thick slush.

She inhaled, eyes flickering over to the house-elf that waited obediently with a readied chair by is side. Time seemed to move in a daze around her, and she could no longer make out the tips of her fingers. Hastily, she reached out to grab the edge of the seat, holding herself in place as she forced a smile to Druella Black, who sat directly across from her.

Once seated, Eva tried to calm herself, focusing on the crystal glass of water that laid before her. Even the mere thought of consuming it made her want to vomit. All she felt was ice, cruel ice that hiked through her veins and dulled every sensation that attempted to pass. She gulped as the chair beside her screeched and moved, someone coming to occupy it.

"Eva," she heard a voice slice into her thoughts. She looked up, stormy eyes boring down into her own.

"Evan," the witch managed.

"We're getting married."

She wanted to squeeze her eyes shut and pretend those words hadn't existed.
Marrying Regulus Black had come to her like a tree branch knocking her on the head, but Evan Rosier was the entire tree. She was crushed under it, too injured to call for help, certain that no one would hear her all the way out there in the forest. The former, she had managed to come to terms with. But this, this to Eva was a sacrifice that she had never consented to. This was a burning at a stake, a cruel punishment for someone who had spent her entire life obeying.

"Why are you ignoring me?" His hot breath was on her ear, humming into it like a drowsy, wine-filled serenade. "Eva." A finger wrapped around her jaw and tilted her face upwards. Her eyes felt gummy and hot, but she managed to pull together a meek smile and hoped that he wouldn't notice her blanched complexion.

"I am," she assured in an undertone, "just a little nervous."

"Yes, that is rather typical of you, unfortunately," he recalled, brushing his index finger over her lips. In that moment, he could have told her that she was as useful as a prostitute—none of his words registered in her head. But she didn't notice whether they'd spoken to her. All of their voices were distant and distorted. Her mind couldn't put together a face and name without wanting to crawl underneath the table and disappear.

But, luckily, before she could make any rash decision, a glass clinked over from the head of the table. The room came to a complete silence as Claus Rosier stood up, beaming down at his guests, before directing his joy to his son and future daughter-in-law. Eva gulped, finding the hands in her lap more interesting than her own fiancé and twenty pairs of eyes directed on her, only her.

"We have all gathered here today, for — and to announce — the engagement and final signing of the marriage contract between the great houses of Rosier and Manasse."

In one perfect movement, everyone reached forward to grab the flutes of champagne that appeared before them. They lifted them up in salute to the soon-to-wed couple, waiting for the couple to lift their own in response.

Somehow, the flute found itself in her hands. She lifted it up to the rest of them and then downed it in one go, as if it were an elixir to a horrible nightmare.

"To Evan and Eva," Claus said.

"To Evan and Eva," they all repeated in unison.

It was all too much—the chant nearly drove her over the edge screaming. Many times she had shed a tear, but with a deep breath and some rationality, she'd be as good as new. This wasn't one of those times, all she wanted now was to break down in an empty room and sob herself dry.

Never in her life would she think that they would have betrayed her so. Not only her father—who had looked past all her years of loyalty and assumed that she'd react like her mother—but Regulus and Evan, too. They all had had prior knowledge, and Regulus had even made her believe that they were to get married. He had tricked and player her for some sick game of his, leaving her confused for the second time.

Her mother had been right about one thing: Eva had been sold like cattle.

Used. Betrayed. Ignored.

She had been caught with her pants down, and her father had let it happen.

And now they'd married her off to a boy with nothing but acid in his veins. No affection, no amount
of devotion would ever make him see her as his equal. Evan Rosier used to slash at the backs of her heels whenever they'd run through the sand on the beach. In their first year, during lunch, he used to ask her what words such as logorrhea meant, and then laugh when she said she didn't know. No one else had joined him in his scornful manners, but it had pinched and isolated her all the same.

Her hands wrung together, and beginning absentmindedly pull at the shallow skin there. The empty plates in front of her were replaced with a bowl of lobster bisque, and though she would usually consume it in one shot, the fishy smell made her want to spread her legs and choke up her heart from her chest.

"We heard it was your favorite," Evan told her, leaning over and lifting a spoonful of the steaming liquid into his mouth. She followed his steps, reluctantly picking up her spoon and filling it with the food. And yes, it was her favorite, but as she tried to swallow it, all she could feel was a thickness in the back of her throat that refused to go down.

"Do you like it?" he asked as he brought his fourth fill to his lips. She didn't respond, instead repeating her previous motions with as much care and concentration she could muster. "I asked you a question."

"Yes," she replied, her gaze moving from the bisque to his knee.

"Exciting one, you are," he scoffed, shaking his head as he picked up a glass filled with wine and drank from it. Eva frowned as the room took on a grey tint and made her bones turn to ice.

They served lobster bisque, oysters, and pan-seared filet mignon. They served pear vacherin and an assortment of expensive, stinky cheeses. Everyone would eventually get up to continue drinking or dancing, taking turns to congratulate the young couple. The older men would talk politics and the women would gossip over blasphemous statements that the Daily Prophet had dared to publish. And Eva would be there, seated, having barely touched a thing, thinking one thing: they betrayed me.

Once everyone seemed to be up to their heads with elderflower wine and golden-bubbled champagne, Regulus Black took a deep breath, scanned the room, and slivered out and between the ceiling-high wooden doors.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eva caught sight of the fugitive. And without much thought, aguish causing irrationality to override common sense, she pursued the object of her contempt. The doors swung open easily, letting in a much needed draft as Eva stepped out into the damp halls. His footsteps were close enough to be heard, and she quickly made way to pursue them.

But as she followed and followed, he only seemed to be running faster and faster away from her. She continued, her heels sending her off into a difficult, awkward running pace as she tried to chase his footfalls. Soon enough, she was face-to-face with a dead-end, spinning around, certain that he had come down this way.

"Following me?" A voice came from one of the darkened doorways. The door sat wide open with Regulus leaned against its wooden frame as he tilted his head and eyed her up and down. But his grey-eyes narrowed as he caught sight of an ominous shade of malice coating her features.

"You," she nearly snarled, jutting her index finger into his chest. "You lied to me, you—"

"No, I didn't," he defended at once.

"You said we were getting married!" she flared, her eyes blinking wider with every word. "You, you lied to me, you said—"
"I know what I said. You don't have to bloody shout it!"

He wasn't nearly as irate as he would have been to drive sense into her, and Eva had her hands on his chest, shoving him with all her might. But she was no athlete, and Regulus had his hands wrapped around both her wrists, dragging her into the room with him.

"LET GO OF ME, YOU DECEITFUL SON—"

He tossed her onto the bed, glowering down at her while she attempted to regain both her breath and position.

"Calm yourself!"

"Don't ever touch me again!"

"This is your fault," he snapped, eyes ablaze as both their chests heaved in simultaneous lulls. "There is no one to blame here but—"

"My fault?" Her hand pointed to her own chest as she leaned over and looked up at him. "You're the only one with any say! And you made me believe, you made me think... I WAS PREPARED TO MARRY YOU! AND NOW I'M STUCK WITH THAT— DO YOU KNOW HOW LEWD HE IS? DO YOU KNOW WHAT HE DOES FOR FUN!? WHY WOULD YOU LIE TO ME!?"

"YOU KISSED HIM! YOU KISSED LUPIN!" he shouted back at her. His once stern voice became strained, a pain somewhere deep within the vowels that extinguished Eva's anger, causing her spine to mollify and her features to soften. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"I didn't," she struggled, shaking her head. A blush fluttered over her body as his words sank in deeper. She was thankful that the room was dark, only the whites of their eyes and the opalescent glaze of her pearls truly visible.

"I would never have forced you to marry me," he began, stepping closer to her as his voice turned into a whisper. "When I saw you two, you were dancing and—"

"—no, Regulus, you don't—"

"It's okay, Eva. It really is— I just wish you would have told me something instead of leading me on," Regulus admitted, scrubbing a hand over his face. "When you kissed me that day, it was probably the best moment of my life. But not because there was this girl who gave me attention, but because I thought I made you happy. I thought you were happy."

"Regulus," she almost whined, her hand reaching up to her temple.

"But... but the way you were smiling and laughing with Lupin, I knew that you didn't feel for me the way I felt about you." The wizard stared off at nothing, squinting his eyes every so often as he, unwillingly, recalled the memory.

"I didn't kiss him," Eva said in a breath, grabbing Regulus by the edges of his robes and forcing him to look at her. "Listen to me, I didn't, I didn't want to—" She stopped when he heard him laughing dejectedly, her heart dropping into the pits of her stomach.

"You were so happy with him—"

"No, no, he's my friend," she urged on, shaking her head and cupping her palm along his jaw. He
grabbed it, his grasp softening as he brought it back down to her side.

"I'm not upset— disappointed? A little bit, yeah, but if I had gone through with the engagement and found out later that you were seeing him behind my back—"

"—I'd never do such a thing!"

"Eva," he cut her off, wrapping both of his hands into her own as he brought them up to his lips. Her eyes met his and she had to stifle a small gasp as noticed tears welling up in his bottom lashes. A watered-down, morose tint molding every one of his angles as he pressed his lips to her fingers. "Please, just tell me that you want him instead of me. I need you to tell me that, tha— I need you to tell me that you're in love with him, so that I can go back out there and pretend like I didn't make a big mistake. Please, please."

Eva was completely lost. She didn't love Remus, she hadn't even thought of their kiss the entire night. The moment between her and her potions partner was brief and fleeting and filled with alcohol. Nothing more and nothing less. And now that she stood before this boy, she had a sudden urge to wrap herself around him and let out her own tears.

But she couldn't do that, she'd broken his heart.

"I'm," she was at a complete loss for words, "Regulus, I can't—"

"Just say it," he commanded, the pressure around her wrists tightening.

"I'm in love with him," she spat out, "okay? That's what you want to hear? I'm in love with Remus Lupin."

"Thank you," Regulus mumbled, dropping her hands and backing away from her.

"Of course, whatever to make you feel better," she lied, following his retreating figure with a pinched expression. He stopped mid-turn, pausing for a few beats before biting his lip and forcing himself to continue, leaving her behind for what seemed to be a final time.

Once he had disappeared from her view, Eva turned around and leaned her forehead against the wooden column of the four-poster bed. She counted her breaths, letting them even out as she came to terms with her own faults. Her hands felt limp, her wrists even worse— Regulus' imprint slowly forming into a bruise.

Eva needed to escape, jump into the ocean and either drown or swim away. She'd managed to break a heart, she listened to imaginary voices more than her own conscious, and now she was walking into an arranged, forced marriage with no one to blame for but herself.

Ridiculous.

"You're in love with who?" Evan hissed into her ear from behind, both his hands firm on her hips as he held her tight against the bed post.

"Evan," Eva's voice shuddered, attempting to turn around but failing to do so. Her brows furrowed, her eyes blinking fast as she made way to turn around again. "Evan, let me go."

"You didn't answer my fucking question," he repeated, pushing her harder into the wood. Her entire body iced over, her eyes bulging and a newfound inability to blink as he continued to grovel and sniff the nape of her neck. "You know," Evan began, rubbing his nose into her hair. "I never imagined you to 'mount to much, but never did I take you for a whore."
"What's gotten into you? Are you mad—" He shoved her, once again, into the wooden bar, causing it to jab into her chest bone and ache. She struggled for breath, her cheek laying firmly against the post as she tried to writhe against the arms that held her in place.

"You're," Eva wheezed, "hurting me."

"This?" Evan smirked, expelling a small, silent scoff as he wrapped his hands around her curls and pushed them to the side. His fingers traced down her jaw, Eva eyeing him out of the corner of her eye. "This isn't even the beginning of what I'm going to do to you."

He began to chuckle through his nose, shaking his head as he replaced his hand on her hip. His entire frontside pushed into hers, his lust hard through her dress and pressed into her back. It made her whimper, squirming against him as her eyes glossed over from the threat of tears. She wrung her shoulder backwards, but it was o

"Let me go," Eva rasped through clenched teeth.

"Did you like it when he kissed you?" Evan derided, bringing his own lips to the underside of her jaw. His tongue flicked out, tasting her clammy skin as her body flinched against him. "Did he make you feel warm and fuzzy?" His hand travelled down her bodice and began to clamber at her skirts. "Did he make you nice and wet? Hm?"

"Don't fucking touch me," she seethed. Though she knew it to be a waste of energy, she tried to claw at him from behind, attempting to grab at whatever there was in the hope it might be something.

"You're denying me?" He tongue was full of offense, his brows scrunched together as he lifted himself away from her neck and stared down at her. A mocking snicker came out of him, causing bugs to crawl up and out of her skin; making her want to shrivel up and hide. His hand went to grab and lift up her skirts, but as it slid over her thigh, Eva brought her leg up and slammed the back of his knuckles into the pole.

"Fuck," he spat out, grabbing her by her hair as he took her from the pole and threw against the mattress. Eva landed face-first, her palms out in front of her as she lifted herself back up. But Evan was already on top of her before she had the chance to shout. She was pushed back down, his entire body laying heavily on her own. Her hands and legs smashed against the mattress, attempting to shake him off, but she turned breathless quicker than her wishes would have ever turned true.

"You absolute swine!" she screeched.

"You let everyone else touch you," he continued, not at all perturbed by the violently writhing witch beneath him. His face met her ear, his hands on her ribs. "You let that dirty mutt, who leeches off his blood-traitor friends, touch you, kiss you. I wonder what else you let him do to you. You let him fuck you? Huh? Is that what happened? You let him fill you up, got his tiny cock all wet inside you, didn't he?"

"FUCK YOU!" She spat onto the hand that laid beside her face. In one abrupt motion, Evan lifted himself up and flipped onto her back. A hand came swooping in and travelled across her cheek, leaving a stinging mark and a cut caused by the edge of his family ring.

"Don't talk back to me."

She shook with as much force as she could muster, her legs kicking in all sorts of directions, aiming for every and any part of his body. With one blow to his ribs, he doubled over for the sparest of moments, giving Eva the chance to scramble to her feet and run out the door.
"Where the fuck do you think you're— Trafero!" His wand, which he had pointed directly at Eva's back, made a sharp right towards the sliver of exposed wall between the mirror and the wardrobe. She groaned as she braced the landing, her nose crashing into the cement, a pain throbbing through her head. "You're my wife," his voice appeared in the distance, "you will be—"

"Look at me," the wizard demanded, clasping his hands around her neck and pushing her gaze up to him. "Answer my questions."

Eva made an attempt to grab at him, push him away, but the lack of oxygen and the ache in her temple made the world sway too violently for her to know just where exactly her attempt would be successful.

"Answer me!"

"I never let anyone—"

"Did you come? Did the mutt make you come?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" she blubbered, tears beginning to fall and any fight she once had draining out of her. Never had she been able enough to fight him off; not without her wand, which she had never thought to need at such an affair. "I told you— I'd never—"

He pulled upwards on her neck, causing Eva to stand on her tiptoes in insure her ability to breathe. Stormy eyes glowered from his porcelain face, surveying every part of her own as she reached her fingers to his own, trying to get him to pull away.

"You've made this a lot harder than I wanted it to be, you know that?" He released her, her entire body falling forward, her face planted in his chest as she heaved for oxygen. A firm pressure moved her forward and against the wall. His hand brushed over her collarbone and then moved forward down to the swell of her breasts.

"Let's have a peek, shall we?".

"Don't, please," she began to beg. Her body pushed up in a final battle, attempting to pull away from his touch, but his fingers dug into the edge of the fine material and her struggle only helped to expose her.

Fat, wet tears continued to fall down her cheeks, furious and filled with fire as she searched for the strength to fight him. But he had one knee lodged between her own two legs, and the rest of his body folded hers heavily into the wall. He made one final pull on the dress to fully reveal her breasts, flailing about and moving side to side as they came undone from their holds. Evan smirked, raising a brow as he eyed each one of them.

"Wow," he ruminated, "no wonder everyone wants boring Eva, boring Eva's got tits."

As he spoke, his hand reached up and squeezed her left breast with such force that she yelped.

"Fuck you," she spat again, but she was too short to reach her face and only succeeded in leaving her saliva on his collar. "Fuck you," she repeated, scalding hot through red-stained cheeks. His fingers teased her nipple, taut from the cold, twisting it in a spiral that caused a deep sob to rip from her chest.

"You certainly will, don't worry," he assured her.

"REMUSS IS TEN TIMES THE MAN YOU ARE— YOU MONSTER, YOU FUCKING
Eva didn't get to finish her statement, for Evan had lifted her and slammed her back down into the mirror beside them. The entire object came crashing over her. The openness of the dress caused the shards to lodge and pin right into her shoulders blades. She inhaled sharply, shutting her eyes so tightly that she could see light. She was shaking violently, Evan back on her, his shoes crushing the broken glass as he pushed her further into the broken glass. Eva could feel it attacking her ribs, pressing further and deeper into her.

"Do you know how stupid you sound? No one can hear you, shut up," he scolded, his eyes wide as he brought his face down, leveled with hers.

He didn't waste a second longer, his hand went to grab at her skirts, scrambling to lift them as he held her tight against the wall.

"Please, Evan," she exhaled pathetically.

Evan's fingers wedged themselves between her legs, heat enveloping him as he found her center and palmed over it. He rubbed back and forth, roughly and furiously as he looked down at her, waiting for some sort of response and receiving only tears.

"Hard to please, I see," he muttered, lifting his fingers even higher and hooking them into the edge of her knickers. He pushed his hand into them, finding her heat and continuing to poke and prod at her folds like some juvenile child and frosting. "You're drier than bark down here."

Eva's knees began to tremble, her legs feeling like jelly as her stomach churned and bile threatened to come up.

"Evan," she said quietly, her voice weeded with despair.

"What?" he snarled, not even bothering to look as he kept his eyes focused on the wall above her head, and forced a finger inside her. Eva winced, her hips jutting backwards and her entire body flinching at the intrusion. "Merlin, you're fucking tight."

"Evan," she tried again, this time softer. He finally looked at her, huffing as she continued to cry, albeit silently, doing her best to smile through it. He stopped his finger, letting it halt inside her. "Please stop, you're hurting—"

"Don't tell me what to fucking do." His finger came out of her, leaving the feeling of having been struck by a broom between her legs.

"You've done everything you've wanted," Eva begged, "you've broken me, I will never speak to him —"

She stopped when he pressed his hip into hers, rubbing himself against her, groaning as she whimpered through it.

"I want to be inside you, that's what I want," he corrected her. The hand that had been inside her came up to her breast. He held it, pawed at it while he ground himself against her. "Fuck," he cursed, rubbing himself raw as his head fell onto her shoulder; the friction caused him to go breathless, groaning as he clawed his fingers into her supple skin.

Spontaneity had never been Eva's bright spot, matter of fact, many would claim that she hadn't a spontaneous bone her body, but this was all she had at the moment: a last minute, barely thrown together plan as a boy rutted against her, getting himself off.
She inhaled deeply, her chest pressing up, and then, without a second thought, she twisted her head and clamped her teeth onto his earlobe. A primal scream erupted from deep within his chest, causing him to rear backwards, but she held him tight. Eva bit into him as he tried to twist away, adrenaline kicking in as she felt nothing but heat and iron fill her mouth, coat her tongue, drop down her lips. 

He couldn't even get words out— shrieking and writhing, pushing her away. And then she had it, the lobe of his ear placed between her teeth, completely torn as his hand reached up to clutch the bleeding wound. She spat it out to the floor, the limp flesh falling by his feet. He cried, and never in her life had Eva thought to have heard a more irritating sound. With a surge of the power that vengeance had gifted her, she lifted her knee and shot it straight between his legs. He clutched at his groin, doubling over with the sudden need to vomit as he felt his entire stomach hop on out of him.

Eva stared at him, the red veil over her eyes fading away as he whined and writhed on the floor, staining the wooden planks. She looked down to her own body: she was covered in blood, her breasts still exposed, and her shoes long-gone.

This is where her plan had ended, and she found herself stuck in a trap as she looked to the door.

All she knew was that she couldn't linger any longer. They'd come after her, most likely punish her for what she did. Disfiguring the only heir of the Rosier name was not a light matter. No, she couldn't stay here, and Eva felt jitters erupt up her fingertips and into her loins as her eyes darted about the room for an answer.

_Run, run!_ the voices shouted in unison.

And so she did.

She ran through those halls, in the opposite direction of the dining hall. All past the portraits and the dimly lit corridors. She knew this place well, she knew how to get out, and how to escape from the castle grounds. Every pain she had: the ache between her legs, the glass wedged into her backside, the slap on her face, the cut, the choke hold around her neck, was nothing compared to what would happen if they found her amongst the victim.

She bursted out of the back doors that led onto the garden patio and jumped to the wet, frozen grass. Her feet pushed off it, running and running, completely out of breath until she met the edge, where there was only shrub and trees in her path. She could hear the waves, smell the sea just beyond, and she pushed through, the fallen branches splintering the bottoms of her feet.

There it was— the sea. She cried, gasping in relief as the cracked, calloused undergrowth transformed into soft, squishy sand. The lights of the mansion were nothing but dim stars in the distant, and though she wanted nothing more than to collapse on that beach, she knew she had to go push on. Her feet trudged through the sand, kicking it up with every step she took, causing her thighs to burn with such a fire that it really did take everything to not fall down and crawl.

She came upon the rocks that divided one beach from the next one over— a muggle beach, one which would lead to a road. Eva hesitated, eyeing the sharp, jagged rocks and the waves that crashed against it. She pursed her lips and turned back towards the castle grounds, but no, there was no going back now— not in the state she was in.

Eva hiked one foot onto the rock, the other following behind and she could feel the wetness of it, causing her to fumble about, fearful that she may slip and knock her head against the stone. She bent down on all fours, both her palms, her knees, and the tips of her toes becoming victims to the harsh edges. They were cut and sliced, micro-bleeds that would sting at the touch of a lemon or in a hot shower.
"Come on," she urged herself, growling as she made it over the climax, eyeing the next beach over and scrambling to land herself on it. Sooner than she knew, she was on sand again, her face falling into the material as it caressed and shaped perfectly into the concave of her cheek.

Dearie, the waves'll wash ye away, get up! one of the voices shrieked at her. Eva sobbed, wetting the already wet sand, but lifted herself up with whatever little force she had left and swayed over the rest of the expanse. It was excruciating, mortifying in every single way, but she ran a sad little jog towards the sign that read parking in the distance. Her feet met grass, a final molehill that would lead up to her destination. It was so close, she could taste it, the excitement in her fingertips, and with that she had her final push.

The next thing she felt was the touch of cool metal against her cheek. She shut her eyes to the feeling of it, holding herself tight against it, never wanting to let go. But her entire body was cut up, she wore only a torn up dress in the midst of a brutal wind, and she knew she'd die come morning.

With one hand holding her up on the pole, she lifted her hand out and hailed her salvation.

It seemed like a lifetime passed before her eyes; the humidity against her sweat that covered every inch of her body, her fingertips completely numb, a fatigue settling over her spine as the pole became a fine candidate for a pillow. Dizzy, the world uneven, Eva was just about ready to let herself fall into a deep, possibly permanent, slumber before something blindsided her and a horn sounded out into the somber night.
Knock, Knock

May your Guardian Angel be at your side to pick ya up off the floor and hand ya another cold stout from the store.

(28 December 1977 - Half Past Midnight)

Everyone from Lizard Point to Dunnet Head knew that Lyall Lupin was an astonishingly light sleeper. The mere drop of a pin, the faint scatter of a field mouse running through his backyard, even the horn of a distant ship would have him up and readied with a wand before anyone could shout *boo*!

Thus, when he heard the bell trill, a feeble knocking to accompany it, at a half hour past midnight on that December night, there wasn't a doubt that the seasoned wizard had already shot upright, weapon in hand, shoving his feet into slippers, and swinging open the door to the hall.

"Lyall," muttered Hope from the bed, lifting up her eye mask and reaching her hand up to flip on the lamp.

"Shh!" Lyall looked to her with his index finger placed over his lips. His eyes turned to the distance, both waiting with bated breaths in fear that even their heartbeats would hinder their ability to hear.

'Dringggg!'

(45 Minutes Earlier)

"Welcome to the Knight Bus. Emergency transportation for the stranded witch or wizard, my name is Saurus Galloway, and I will be your conductor for this evening," a pudgy little man read aloud from a stack of flashcards. He had a chain connected from his breast pocket to the monocle sitting on his eye, and a white, whisker-like mustache over his lips. His eyes blinked wide and bright as they looked down at the bedraggled girl.

"No luggage, then?" he asked, seemingly oblivious to her current state.

"No," she replied in a broken breath, shaking her head.

"All right, come on in then," he said, waving her into the bus.

Eva didn't hesitate; her hand clasped around the bus' exterior pole, and with all her might, she hiked herself up onto the platform. The conductor stepped aside, continuing to blink periodically while letting her pass inside. It took a good while longer than it should have, having to use and touch every surface she could find in order to support herself. In the end, however, the struggle had been well worth the fight; the warmth hit her like a mother's touch to a lost child. Eva had to stifle a need to yelp with euphoria as she was no longer victim to the brittle winds.

"Where're you going?"

The euphoric moment passed within a question.

Eva's breath hitched in her chest, faltering as she realized that her plan stopped there. All she had needed was an exit, an escape, a way out of the dwarf island, and somewhere safe and warm where
she could rest and think up the following part.

Her eyes toured the bus, looking over all the occupants. No one seemed dangerous, they all sat in their paid spaces and left themselves alone. Most of them had their hoods up, covering their eyes, probably asleep as they journeyed their way to wherever it was they had to be, or didn't. A stark contrast to herself, who was so naked, so open to them all. She gulped, casting her gaze to the floor as she bit down, and hard, on her own lip.

Eva knew that she couldn't go home, not right now at least. St. Mungo's was another viable option, except for the lingering fear that they'd see her state and call for an investigation. No, she definitely didn't wish to be further scrutinized.

Never in her life had she planned on running away, even if it was temporary. She should have, though, for she was no fighter, and she knew that. Not a warrior or a soldier, she'd never stay to battle through something, it was pure flight for her. And though she didn't know what the punishment was for kneeling a boy and biting off his earlobe, she couldn't risk another bout of hexes and jinxes. Not until she was fully healed, at least.

_Could always go back to school_, she thought. It was open for the holidays, but her wand was still at home and all of her required reading. And how stupid she had been to leave it. The thought alone made her want to bang herself against the glass— but no that would change, it would have to.

Besides, it was a lost option, even if she did return, the gate wasn't open. She'd be left outside of it, by the forest's edge, and most likely wouldn't get to see tomorrow.

"What time is it?" she asked out loud.

"10 to midnight," the conductor responded almost as if he had see the near future and had been ready with the answer on his lips. She turned to look at him, his eyes still owl-like and blinking at the same intervals as before.

"Where will you be going?" repeated the conductor— whose name Eva could not remember for the life of her. Her insides clenched. She'd bleed to death on this bus, and she'd freeze if she didn't stay on it— and what a morbid ending that would be.

Fisted hands lifted up to rub her eyes, causing her already smudged makeup to smudge even deeper, causing it to streak across from the corner of her eye to her temple.

It hadn't been a solution in the slightest— it had only been another problem.

"I'VE A FUNERAL IN PENMON, WALES TO GET TO," shouted an old wizard from the back of the bus. Eva turned to look at him, deep wrinkles and a dark beard covering his entire face. She ignored him, looking over and out of the dark windows, nothing but the distant lighthouse and the bus' glow to give light. But then, very suddenly, her brows furrowed and she turned to the back of the bus, seeking out that face from seconds ago. He had seemed all too familiar, the shouting old wizard, but her eyes sought every corner, every bed, and there was no one of the sort there.

"Where'd he go?" she inquired, more to herself than to the anyone else.

"Where'd who go?" asked Saurus Galloway.

"That man right there."

"What man?" Eva ignored him, down casting her eyes back to the floor as she continued to suck and tamper with her bottom lip.
"Wales," she repeated in a stupor.

"Wales? Penmon?"

She swiveled her neck so that she was looking at him, both her and the whiskered man blinking in unison. She didn't know whether he was mocking her, or if this was a nightmare, and she'd wake up in her bed back in London. But there was no reason for such an obscure little place in this world to sound so familiar.

"What?" she wondered, her words raspy as she whispered them out. Her chin pushed forward, mouth falling open with knit brows as she searched those glossy eyes for some sort of explanation.

"Penmon, Wales is it, then?" he reiterated.

"No," she exclaimed, shaking her head, "why would you say that?"

"I didn't, miss, you did. You have a funeral to get to," Saurus Galloway countered. Eva didn't even have the words to argue, the conductor was already dialing and punching out her ticket. The next thing she knew, he handed her a flimsy piece of paper, which she took cautiously, moving her gaze from him and down to the faint print on it.

"I," she paused, reading the ticket, "I don't understand."

"A galleon and five sickles for passage to Penmon, Wales."

Penmon, Wales, she repeated to herself, still eyeing the piece of scrap between her dirt-ridden fingers. She knew nothing of Penmon, Wales; didn't even know where it was, whether it be south or north, east or west. Never had she heard of it, and yet it sounded so familiar, as if someone had told her in passing conversation. She raked her entire head for some answer, but nothing came to her, not in that moment.

A witch laying on a bed diagonal from her began to grumble, mumbling insults her way as she peeked at Eva from the corner of her eye. The younger witch took a deep breath, hands wrapping around the pearl necklace around her neck and yanking it off with a sharp pull.

"It was bought for 360 galleons. It's brand new, you could easily sell it for the same amount— It's all I have, sorry." Before she could finish her bargain, Saurus Galloway had snatched it out of her hands and pocketed it. He turned around, waddling towards the pole by the divider and knocked on the front window.

They were off before Eva could even find her footing. She reached out to hold onto the miniature latch on the window, her eyes wide as she attempted to re-balance herself. But the way her arms stretched forward made the shards of glass shove further into her shoulder blade, causing a groan to bleed out of her.

Eventually, Eva managed to position herself against an empty space before the beds, sliding down the wall and clutching her knees to her body. She hadn't an idea where she was going, or why she had repeated the words of the elfish man, no matter how familiar he looked, or how familiar those words sounded.

"Excuse me," she called out to Saurus Galloway. He turned his head over his shoulder, peering out to her. "Where in Penmon am I going?"

"The monastery," he responded, rolling his neck back to the front.
Eva’s brows furrowed together, her entire face scrunched up as she eyed the floor. She detailed her way up and down the scuff marks, trying to reach into the depths of her mind and find the memory that she so craved. And then, as the bus came to a halt somewhere in Wessex County, her head shot straight up, off the tops of her knees, and her entire face dropped.

"There's nothing there— only a muggle monastery and one house. I quite literally live in the only house in Penmon."

They let the doorbell sing for a good thirty seconds. In these thirty seconds, Hope's eyes had widened into two tea saucers, and she, too, had scrambled out of bed to creep behind her husband.

"What time is it?" she whispered from behind him, both approaching as they leaned over the railing to look down the staircase.

"Go wake Remus," Lyall instructed, brushing off her previous question. "Get your coats, be ready to floo out of here, okay?"

She faltered, pausing a moment before pressing her lips together and nodding. Hope squeezed her husband's arm, both of their hearts beating at unnaturally fast paces.

"Hope," came his voice, this time turning to hold her gaze, "don't wait for me, no matter what happens."

"Lyall."

"Promise me, for Remus."

It took a moment, but she gave in, nodding once again before tiptoeing to the right of the center staircase and across the hall. In that same second, Lyall had begun to descend the stairs, every step calculated, a curse spelt on his lips if they, whoever they were, managed to get through the array of wards he had put up to protect their home.

"Remus," Hope whispered as she stepped into her son's room. He didn't stir, laying on his back with his hand over his chest. His mouth left wide open, a barely-there snore releasing out into the night every time he inhaled. She smiled, her eyes expressing the opposite emotion, ashamed that she had to disturb his peaceful slumber. "Remus," she repeated, approaching and standing over him. Hope ran veined, sun-spotted hands through his hair, causing Remus to flip his face to the other side.

"Remus," Hope said for a third time, shaking his shoulder.

"Wha?" he grumbled, not opening his eyes.

"Your father says to get your coat and your wand, we may need to leave—" He was up, rubbing at his eyes and blinking them awake.

"What?" he said again, this time stronger and clearer. But as Hope went to repeat her previous instructions, the doorbell rang throughout the house again.

A deep scrunch formed between his eyebrows, his head moving away from his mother to look out into the hall.

"Who—"

"We don't know, but you need to be ready—"
Remus' hand shot out for his wand, pushing himself off the bed and stalking out into the hall. He didn't bother stopping at his dresser, or picking up the jacket that laid upon it. Instead, he palmed the edge of the railing, looking over the edge just as his parents had done moments ago.

"Dad," he whispered.

"What!?"

"What's going—"

"Remus," came his mother's voice, her hands around his arm. "You need to get your coat, cariad, we—"

"I can fight now, mam. I'm good, really," he told her, his eyes boring down into her own. "Tad," Remus whispered again over the railing.

"What!?"

"Who is it?"

"I don't know," his dad responded. "I can't see anything— it's raining too hard."

Remus sighed, his wand in one hand, his other arm reaching around to wrap around his mother's shoulders. They stayed like that, Remus knowing that, even though he could stand by his father's side, he had to protect his mother and get ready to flee if it required to do so.

All three hearts thumped, beating out together and filling up, chorusing with the continuous trilling.

"I'm going to open it— you two be ready—"

"We are," Remus assured him, clutching his mother even tighter.

Downstairs, with shut eyes and held breath, Lyall's hands wrapped around the copper door handle. He felt his skin jittery, electrified, everything within him wanting to combust as he began to press down on it.

Originally, he had meant to swing it open, to use the element of surprise to attack whoever dared disturb them at this hour. But he hesitated, first peeking out through the crack, his wand wedged between the door and the pane; the cold air came rushing in, goosebumps running up and down his spine.

His eyes narrowed at the sight: a girl, a very short girl, at wearing nothing more than a tattered red dress, which he couldn't quite distinguish with the amount of blood she had staining every surface. Her chin, her chest, her hands, her feet all covered and soiled in a mix of different elements.

Their eyes met— puffy and charcoaled against bright and bulging.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Lyall spat out, wand still pointed at the girl.

"I— " she could barely talk, the words too hard to pronounce, too hard to even think, "I'm sorry."

Upstairs, both Remus and Hope listened to the best of their abilities. But neither could make out anything, only the sound of rain pattering against the roof and his father shouting at whoever it was.

"You need to leave," Lyall demanded.
Eva felt dizzy, weak in her legs and knees, and a need to burrow herself into a whole and disappear. In a matter of moments, she knew that she would end up blacking out on Remus Lupin's doorstep, and most likely end up becoming the laughing stock of the entire school. He'd remember her for this, half-naked and whimpering as she begged for shelter.

Fucking lovely.

"We can't help you, I'm sorry," Lyall continued, shaking his head, though she couldn't even make out anything besides his eyes and the tip of his wand.

She gulped, the pain in her chest clawing at her from the inside.

"Please," Eva begged, her eyes fluttering to a near close, "I'm here— I'm here, here because of Remus."

Lyall froze, his face turning to ash as he took in her words. The last time anyone had come to their home at this time of the night, unannounced for his son, had been the worst night of their entire lives.

"Absolutely not—"

"Please, let me— zere's really no where—" she sighed, tears running down her face as she shook her head and gave up. "I'm so-s-sorry. I didn't mean, intend to disturb you and your family."

Upstairs, the tight embrace that Remus had had around his mother's slight shoulders began to loosen. He blinked, one eye narrowing as he heard a distinct feminine voice with a guttural r, but not harsh, apologize. "Fuck," he cursed, hands flying off his mother and his legs clambering down the stairs.

"Remus—" but he pushed passed his father and widened the door.

"Bloody hell," Remus said as soon as his eyes were on her.

She looked horrible, even worse than when he'd seen her at the hospital wing. Everything torn apart, from her skin to her clothing, as if she'd been traipsing through a forest.

"Come on," he told her, reaching out without much thought and taking her into his arms.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

"It's okay, you're all right," he assured her, escorting her into the house.

"Who— Remus, explain," said his father, looking between the two. All the while, Lyall made room for the pair to step into the home, closing the door behind them, locking it with a charm, and keeping the cold where it belonged.

"I never meant," she cried, attempting to control herself in the presence of Remus and his family. "I really, I understand it's the middle of the night and—" Her fingers reached to wipe away the rivulets streaming down her cheeks. "I didn't know where else to go, I had—"

He didn't wait for her to finish, his chest clenching painfully as he brought her into his chest and held her there. His father held his gaze, his mother rushing down the stairs, gasping as soon as she caught sight of the girl's sliced back.

"She's a friend of mine," Remus informed his parents, "I know her."

Lyall looked to his wife, who stared back with startled eyes.
"We should take her to St. Mungo's, Remus."

"I need my kit, mam," Remus requested from his mother, ignoring his father's advice. She nodded, descending the rest of the steps and heading into the kitchen.

"Remus," his father beckoned again, this time reaching out for his son's shoulder.

"Not now, okay? Please," Remus hissed. Lyall hesitated, but surrendered with his gaze to the wooden floor. He stepped back, doing a once-over of Eva.

"She'll need a bath," he said before Remus could push her into the kitchen. "Or else it'll fester, and then we'll really need to get her to the healers."

Hope came back into the front hall with the tin box they kept all of Remus' needs in. He took it from her, one hand still perched around Eva as her rain-drenched body soaked right through his clothing. He could feel her trembling, shaking against his body. Her skin was ice cold, her hair nearly icicles as the remnants of rain dripped off the ends and onto his toes.

"I'll put the kettle on," said Hope, receiving a single nod from her son. With his kit in hand, Remus tightened his grip across her back, causing Eva to yelp out in pain. Her fingers clawed into his shirt, and she sucked in air through her teeth as her eyes shut closed and she dealt with the force. Immediately, Remus released her, staring at her pinched face with something akin to utter horror.

"Did I hurt you? I didn't— I'm so— I was only trying to get you upstairs, into the bath—"

"I can get up just fine," she assured him, holding up a bleeding, sand-filled palm. Eva turned to glance up the stairs, making way over to the railing as both Remus and his father watched from behind. She took her steps slow, each time eyeing the next with great dismay, as if the gods were tricking her and kept adding another to the top.

"Eva, if it's too much— I can levitate you up—"

"I'm fine," she snapped, clenching her teeth together.

She closed her eyes, tears beginning to spill out, once more. "I'm sorry," she said, her words torn with guilt. A small sigh escaped her, eyes turned downwards with both pain and shame.

Eva knew that she shouldn't have been there. She hardly knew him, and now she'd put a burden across his shoulders; and not only his, but his family's as well. It was nearly one in the morning, they had been sleeping, and she'd woken them, terrified them to the point where his father had been very much ready to kill. Now they were taking care of her, and instead of feeling grateful, she felt awful. Embarrassed, mortified, and at the same time relieved that she was inside and away from the cold.

Oh, and how it had been so cold. It was raining in Wales, rain that hit her like ice bricks, her entire body blue and purple not only from the hits she had taken, but from the lack of blood coursing through her body. The monastery was not nearly as close as it should have been, and the walk from there to here, a house in the far distance, had been gruesome. The only thing that had kept her from laying down in the frozen ground had been knowing that the Lupins would have found her there, dead.

It sure was a wonder how she was still alive.

Her legs halted, eyeing the rest of the steps, challenging them. One more swivel in her hip, she lifted up her knee and let it crash back down onto the following plank. A groan came out of her, similar to the carnality of the one on the bus.
"Eva," came Remus' voice from behind her. More tears rushed out of her, irritated and irate. His hands were on her shoulders, holding her. "It's only four more steps. You can do it."

She nodded solemnly, one foot in front of the other, and together, they managed to climb up what remained.

He continued to lead her to the left, into the first door by the front windows. It was all cream, ceramic tiles underneath her that indicated they were in a bathroom. Something warm wrapped around her, and she looked to find a fluffy towel over her shoulders. She clutched it tight, standing pathetically as he walked over to the tub basin and turned on the water. Steam rose up from it, enveloping both of them into a warm, much-needed humidity.

Remus shuffled behind her, laying the tin kit on the bathroom counter as he clicked it open and ran his finger across the main cork caps.

"What exactly," Remus began, trying his best to avoid looking at her.

For he knew that if he did, he couldn't be certain of how he'd react. Now that they were underneath the bathroom light, it would all be as clear as day, every single detail bare for him to see and analyze. "What exactly is it that you have?"

"Glass," she responded in a small voice, "in my back."

Whether he had wanted it or not, the answer had forced him to look to her. Remus wasn't sure what he had been expecting, or whether it had been more wish fulfillment, but there was no other word to call it but ugly. The ugliest he had ever seen her, even worse than all the blood that clotted into her hair and onto her hospital gown. His stomach hardened, his jaw clenched as he scrutinized her: gaunt, shadowy, lifeless.

"You can cast either a removal spell or vanishing spell," she began, not able to meet his gaze, "whichever is easiest for you."

Remus' mouth fell, his neck leaning forward. He found that he had to support himself with a palm on the sink basin, looking down to the kit and registering what she had requested.

"Yeah," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I can do that."

"I would do it, but I— I don't have my wand."

"I can do it, don't worry," he assured her, pushing himself off the edge of the sink. "How 'bout you sit with your feet in the water? It'll warm you up, and I'll handle the glass."

She hesitated, blinking from him to the ground.

"What?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"I think I have to take off my dress."

He paused, brows furrowing for the millionth time that early morning.

"Why? Where's the glass, exactly?"

"My back, mostly, hips too."

Remus' lips pursed together into a tight line, catching sight of a bleeding, painted toenail.
"Okay, um," he paused, rummaging through his head for what would be the proper words in such a situation. "I mean, Eva, if you're uncomfortable, then my mother can do it manually. Um, but, I really," Remus began to shake his head, his entire face scrunching up as his indignant, but at the same concerned, eyes looked to her. "I don't care—I just, I don't. Okay? You could be completely nude, and the last thing on my mind—I don't give a rat's arse, okay? I don't."

Whether he had been dreaming it, or whether it had been a moment of comic relief amongst a boat of grey, he detected the faintest of smiles appearing on her lips.

"I'll cover myself with the towel," she said, glimpsing up at him through her eyelashes.

"Okay," he nodded, "I'll wait outside, call for me when you're ready."

Remus exited the bathroom and closed the door behind him, but not without leaving a sliver open. He leaned against the wall, looking up to the ceiling, footsteps climbing the stairs in the distant.

"Remus," his dad called out to him in a whisper, looking to the faint light trailing out the door.

"What's going on?"

He looked to the door, grabbing his dad's forearm and pulling both of them further away from it.

"I don't know, not really," Remus began, "but she's completely beat—I mean there're glass shards in her back." He saw his father's eyes blink wider. "Yeah, I didn't ask, I will when she's feeling a little better."

"Who is she?"

"Eva."

"Eva? Eva who? Seven years you've been going to that school, and not once have I heard of an Eva."

"Eva... Eva Manasse—"

"Manasse!? Remus, we should take her to St. Mungo's. This is irresponsible—"

"Tad," Remus interrupted, "I know, and if it were anyone else I'd agree with you. But Eva... Eva doesn't do something without thinking it through, and she always picks the most rational—"

"Not when they're scared—"

"Just," Remus' eyes closed, his fingers reaching up to pinch their corners. He opened them, once again, after releasing a deep sigh. "Please, trust me. If she came here, it's for a reason. She's terrified out of her wits, and I'm not going to make her feel threatened—"

"That's not—"

"I know, but please, I'll handle this. You and mam can go back to sleep, this is nothing compared to what I'm used to."

Lyall's eyes flitted over the scars that crossed his son's face, frowning as he averted his gaze to the window.

"Your mum's gonna’ leave a tray of tea and biscuits in your room, she said the sheets in the guest room aren’t clean—"
"I'll sleep on the couch," Remus assured him. His father nodded, still not meeting his gaze as he took on a rather distant look in his eyes.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Lyall finally asked, his voice even lower than before. Remus' jaw slackened, a slight heat creeping up the back of his neck, grateful that no one had bothered to turn on any of the lights.

"What?!" he flustered, scoffing. "No!"

His father raised a brow, perplexed by the abrupt defensiveness.

"She's— Can we please talk about this in the morning?"

"Very well," Lyall agreed. "I suppose this is goodnight— and say goodnight to your friend, as well. We'll discuss further in a couple of hours."

Though it had only been mere seconds, Remus found himself grateful when his father finally disappeared around the bend and into his room. He let out another sigh as the door shut to a close.

"Hello," announced a voice from he door. Remus turned around, watching Eva as she peeked out from behind it. "I heard voices, I didn't want to interrupt—"

"You should have," he said, ashamed that she had spent time, even five seconds more, in pain for the sake of a conversation between him and his father. "Ready?"

She nodded, opening the door a little wider to allow him in. His eyes roamed over her, clad in only a towel, her soaked dress folded onto the towel rack.

"Okay, so," he began, looking back to the kit, "I'll— why don't you sit with your feet in the tub? This way the warm water'll heat you up while I— you know." There were no protests on her part, willingly walking over to the bathtub and placed one foot at a time into the basin. The heat felt odd against the pre-frostbite, both making her feel welcomed and causing tears to form in her ducts.

"All right," Remus said as she took a seat on the cool ceramic edge. He followed, sitting beside her with his feet in the opposite direction. "I need to see, Eva." His words sounded sorrowful, as if he'd wished that this hadn't fallen upon either one of them. She rubbed her nose, a similar thickness from before, but not quite the same one, forming along the coating of her throat.

Taking her time, Eva eventually turned to sit in a diagonal position from him. She let the towel drop from her back, clutching it to her chest and closing her eyes as he let him observe the damage.

Remus winced at what she had revealed. His entire body wanting to curl up into itself and look away from the sight. There were six large shards, and a dash of smaller ones, wedged, for the most part, in her shoulder blades and along the upper most part of her back. A rather thick piece, however, had lodged her hip, causing the gash to look petrifying as it hindered the blood that wanted to gush out of it.

"Who—" he began, without even realizing that he'd said it. His eyes ran further down, finding four bruises in the shape of lines bending across her hip. Something erupted inside him, a dormant volcano that had begun to spew ash from the moment he'd laid eyes upon her at the door. "Did—" he couldn't get the words out, not sure whether what he wanted to ask made all that much sense. "Did, someone— Eva, did someone rape you?"

"No," she spat out a little too fast.
"Eva, we should go to the healers—"

"No one did anything, please," she implored, "just, please."

"I know, but Eva... there could be evidence—"

"NOTHING HAPPENED!"

More tears ruptured out of her as she place her forehead into her hands. Remus blinked down to his socks, which were wet with the trail of rain that pooled at the bottom of her dress. His brows furrowed together, his lips pressed in a thin light as she weeped.

"I'm sorry," he heard her apologize between sobs. Remus frowned, taking a deep breath and pushing forward.

"Don't need to apologize," he gave in, "it's your decision, ultimately." He twirled his wand in his hand, brushing her hair away over her shoulder. "This is going to sting—"

"I know."

With years of practice, the only insecurity Remus felt in that moment was the knowledge that it'd only cause more pain for her. But with a deep breath, his pulled his wand back to a decent distance, so that it'd grasp her entire back, before casting: "Evanesco."

The shards disappeared from her back, somewhere into the unknown, far away and no longer aching her body. Eva whimpered, nonetheless, her entire body flinched forward as her fingernails clutched into the towel. The wounds were ever so present, the feeling of hot liquid trailing out of them.

"I'll close them up now, okay?" Remus informed her.

"Yeah."

If the first part had been distressing, the second part would be nothing short of pure, raw agony.

"I'm sorry for this," Remus apologize in advance, gulping down the guilt as he took on a pained expression. Eva nodded, shutting her eyes as she awaited the conclusion.

"Vulnera Sanentur," he casted, trailing his wand over one wound. The bleeding slowed, almost to a complete stop, and they could hear her flesh knitting back together with a distasteful squish. Remus paused, looking over the now stitched wound, and then back over to the remaining five. His fingers palmed his thigh, blinking before taking in another deep breath and repeating the spell and the motion of the next one.

And every time, until he finished, Eva wondered why Death wasn't merciful enough to take her life, why it kept her alive to live through only pain and despair.

"The deeper ones'll scar," Remus told her.

"I know," she responded weakly.

After another handful of minutes, Remus finally finished with the more superficial wounds.

"Tergeo," he casted over her entire back. Both the dried up blood, and the wet, new one, disappeared, as if it hadn't even been there in the first place. "Okay, I'm done."

She paused, turning with caution to look over her shoulder at him. They held each other's gaze,
Remus finding it curious that there was a puzzle in her own. They searched over every corner of his skin, and he suddenly realized that he wasn't the only naked one there. His blood dropped to his feet, fingers reaching up to the faint, white lines running across every part of his structure.

"Uh, I—" he began, trying to conjure up some sort of believable excuse.

"Thank you," she said, turning back to the steaming water. "Thank you for helping, you've gone above and beyond, and I promise to repay you—"

"Eva," he stopped her, "don't even think about it. And don't ever be ashamed to ask for help, please. I'm glad you're here."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Silence followed, before Remus leaned over with his elbows pressed down into his thighs.

"I'm going to go get you an extra set of clothes, you take as long as you need," he explained, getting up from the edge of the bathtub. "I'll leave some ointment here, to put on those bruises when you finish, and then we'll drink some tea to warm up. Okay?"

"Okay, thank you."

Remus lifted himself up, heading over to the door.

"And I'm going to leave this a little open— everyone else is sleeping, so it's only me. You know, just in case, I want to be able to hear you if, if something happens."

"Please don't worry about me," she said, looking over to him. A small, sad smile donned her face, causing Remus to force his own. But where her eyes were solemn and confused with her surroundings, his were beginning to come to an epiphany. One of self-discovery, where he realized that there was a sick relief that came with all of this.

This was not him and his mother after a particularly brutal full moon. No one was here to patch up his wounds, James wasn't there to carry him down the steps, or Peter to wake and feed him his meals. It was gratifying in the most horrid way, because, for once, he was the healer, the protector, the guardian, aiding someone weak and broken. Someone needed him, truly and actually relied on him, not the other way around. All his life, he had felt absolutely useless in comparison to everyone else, and now there was this person, this one person, who had come to his door, sought him out, needed him to comfort and soothe her through a traumatic experience.

And he loved it, loved that she needed him.

And he needed her to need him, because no one ever needed him.

"I'll be back with that set of clothes," he finally said, breaking the silence. Without waiting for a response, nor expecting one, he turned the door knob and walked out into the drafty halls, leaving her to her thoughts.

Back in the bathroom, Eva emerged herself into the heated water, closing her eyes and aching to fall asleep in its warmth. She could feel the icy tundra wash away from her loins; her fingers no longer dull and useless, but re-igniting with sensation. Blood followed, rushing back into her face, pinching her cheeks with a faint color, no longer looking like a broken vampire of sorts.

However, with life came emotions. The need to cry returned, a hammer already pounding her hear, her eyes blood-shot with the tears of the past. She took in a deep breath, ignoring the urge, and with
one last push, sunk herself into and under the water. The cold from her head washed away with everything else, and she came back up with a small gasp, her breasts heaving up and down as oxygen rushed back into them.

She brought her knees to her chest, clutching them and laying her cheek across them. Minutes passed, nothing to around to unsettle her, even the water in which sat undulating only when she wished it to.

The door opened, causing her to jolt in her place, eyes turning up to watch that which dared disturb her peace. Her shoulders visibly relaxed when she caught sight of Remus coming in, holding neatly folded pajamas in his hands.

"I found— I mean, I'm not— my knowledge of tailoring spells is a little slim," he admitted, looking down to the pile, "but— here— I mean this is a shirt that's a little tight on me, and a pair of pajamas with a drawstring— so I'm sure if you tightened it enough— but you'll have to be careful not to trip, uh, 'cause." Remus looked up, wondering whether his ramblings were more painful to listen to than the wounds etched in her shoulders. "There's also a pair of socks, uh," he looked down to his hands, "Think that's all."

"It's fine, Remus, thank you—"

He lifted a palm in order to call her to a halt and placed the clothing on top of the toilet seat.

"I've put the tea under a stasis charm— so it'll be piping hot when you get out." His hands ran over the kit that still sat along the edge of the sink. He closed the metallic lid, carrying it into his arms as he turned to look at her.

"I'll be out in a second," she said, catching sight of his own sleep wrought eyes, bags of black thick underneath them.

"No rush, really," he assured her, giving one last fleeting smile before turning around, kit in hand, and back out into the hall.

Remus retreated into his room, plopping himself into the armchair. He scrubbed a hand over his face, leaving the palm over his eyes as he casted them to the floor, deep in thought. In the time he'd left her, he'd managed to conjure up a weak, low-burn fire, simply embers that would keep her warm along with the charms he had placed on the blankets.

The beginnings of a sleepy fuzziness began to well up inside of him, coming to an abrupt stop when a creak by the door forced him wide awake, once again.

Eva stood there, seeming a little unsure as she bit on her lower lip and held her hand against the door pane, looking into the room. All he could make out from underneath his fumble and jumble of clothes, which were drowning her, was the wet hair that laid across her shoulder. He scratched his nose, eyeing the drawstring that she had pulled to its utter ends, the tips of her sock-clad toes barely visible.

"Sorry 'bout the clothes," he mumbled, running a hand through his hair.

Eva shrugged, not taking her gaze off the rest of the room. It was humble and empty, that's all it was. There was an armchair in the corner between the fireplace and the window; and a bed just across from it, on the opposite side between the fireplace and the wall. The bed — which, Eva noticed, wasn't much of a bed, but rather a mattress — had a colorful assortment of pillows and throw blankets. Besides that, there was only a dresser: no wardrobe, no closet, not even a mirror. Only a
dresser with books piled high both on top and underneath it. An odd little room, indeed, and yet, compared to the endless fill of furniture and knick-knacks they had accumulated in the French embassy, this room seemed ten times more tender.

"You want me to dry your hair for you?" Remus asked, lifting himself up from the chair to approach her.

"If it's not a problem, I can always—"

His wand was already out before she could finish. Eva turned around, allowing him to cast a quick drying spell over her strands. Though successful, the spell, not casted with the efficiency as someone who was adept to it, made her hair poof up, frizzy in every way possible. He grimaced at his own work, hoping that he wasn't making her already grisly night even worse.

"Thank you," she said, turning back around as she ran a hand through her hair.

Despite the dim light, Remus really got the chance to look at her now. Not with the blood stains, not with the dirt, just her in all her innocence. Sure, there was a bruise developing across one cheek bone, an abrasion underneath it. Her eyes looked a little too large, and the winter winds had chapped her lips. There were no glamour charms in play to hide the blemish on her chin, or the blotchy eyes and the purple bags. Eva was just that— Eva.

"How do you feel?" he asked. She wrapped her arms around her body.

"Good, better, thank you."

"Are you cold?"

She hesitated, pursing her lips. Remus raised his brows, bowing his head to level it with her own. A smug smirk pushing the edges of his lips upward as he waited for her response, even though he knew the answer.

"A little, yeah."

"Climb on into bed. I've gone around the house and stole every blanket I could find— go on," he directed her, gesturing towards the bed with both his eyes and his chin. She glanced over at it, a pause in her entire stance stiffening.

"I'm sleeping here?" she asked, her voice wavering. He paused, faltering as his lips came into an unsure pout.

"Uh, I mean, I know it's not much — the guest room isn't exactly prepared for—"

"But where will you sleep? Isn't this your room?"

"Yes," he replied, "and on the couch downstairs—"

"No."

"It's quite comfortable, prefer it sometimes," he chuckled shortly. Remus was something short of astounded when he caught sight of her previous insecurities driving away into limbo. Something bordering irritation as her eyes blinked more than her words functioned.

"That'd be incredibly rude of me, Remus— I absolutely can not do something like that in a house where I'm a guest—"
"Eva, please, don't worry—"

"No."

They both stared at one another; two bulls in an arena, neither willing to give up.

And then he began to smile, a smile that gradually turned into a laugh because he was fighting with her, knowing that there really wasn't much she could do about it.

"Come on, drink some tea, you'll warm up," he told her, sitting back down into the armchair. He reached over, placing his fingers into the hook of the pot and pouring it into one of the mugs. The steam lifted up into the room, making it smell like a mix of flowers and herbs. "It's camomile— it'll help you relax."

Reluctantly, she lowered herself down onto the shallowness of his bed. It was odd sharing in something so intimate—a bed, a room. Somewhere a person was left to their own devices, where they could dwell into secrets and mysteries, ones they never had to confess to anyone except the walls.

She reached forward for her cup, which Remus held out to her.

"Be careful, it's hot."

She bunched up the extra material of Remus' shirt and protected herself from the heat, although she'd stick her hand onto one of those glowing wooden logs if it meant the bone-chill would leave.

Silence followed, Eva staring down into the cup; Remus doing the same, but taking moments to glimpse down at her. He wanted to talk, wanted to know what happened, wanted to know who had hurt her, but she was a private person, and private people needed trust and reassurance before opening their mouths.

He'd wait, and he'd make sure to be there when she decided to finally put herself in his hands.

On the other hand, everything inside Eva told her to stay, and yet she was already scheming herself out. She knew she couldn't, this was a burden, she was a burden to Remus, who was on holiday to spend time with his family. He shouldn't have to pretend to play Healer to some witch who had been more than willing to drop him only weeks ago.

She took another sip from her tea, ignoring his watchful stare.

"You could sleep in the bed with me," Eva offered, muttering it into the chamomile.

"Um," he managed, warmth creeping up the back of his neck. "If this is because of the couch thing— Eva—"

"I can't sleep knowing that you'll wake up with a bad back for my sake," she confessed. "You have a fort of pillows, we'll put one between us, but we're not twelve, we should be mature enough to sleep next to one another—I think."

Remus looked away from her, his eyes boring into the glowing embers in his fireplace. The only members of the opposite sex he had ever fallen asleep with was his mother and Lily. And Eva was far from both of them. He'd kissed her, he'd thought of her during hot showers, his boyish imagination had done things to her which, in that moment, repulsed him. And not that he hadn't done the same with Lily, but those were long-lost third year feelings that had passed quicker than a summer's breeze.
Besides, what if he snored? Or, Merlin forbid, farted in his sleep? What if she was a awake to experience all of that? How horrified would she be of him? What if she never spoke to him again because he had accidentally embraced her in his sleep? If any of those were to occur, he’d never live it down. Remus reckoned that he would withdraw himself before ever facing her after something of that sort.

"Eva, it's really okay—"

"I don't want to be alone," she lied, looking to him, knowing that he couldn't refuse her.

*You said you'd be there, mate,* a voice reminded him, and with a sigh and an affirming nod— he agreed. Remus brought the rim of the cup to his lips, drinking it all in.

"Biscuit?" he asked, trying to ignore the dampness accumulating in his palms.

"No, thank you."

"We'll sleep in tomorrow— wake up for afternoon tea," he heartened, chuckling into the cup as he took another sip. There was no response, only silence and a gulp. "Tired?"

"A little."

"All right." He brought the mug, for a final time, to his lips and finished it off. She followed suit, lifting herself up from the bed in order to place the cup back onto the tray. Eva waited for him, movements slow as both looked to one another with hesitant, nervous gazes.

"Uh, which side do you prefer?" he managed to ask, feeling the heat veil over his face, turning it bright red. The only salvage was the amber glow coming from the hearth.

She shrugged, beginning to feel shy as she realized that she was about to get into bed with him.

"I'll take the inside," she suggested, turning to eye the corner. He nodded, waiting for her to climb in.

Eva crawled around, knees pressed into the mattress as she made her way over to he space. Remus watched as she pressed herself right up against the wall, inching her legs underneath the comforter and the blankets, sitting there looking at the hands on her lap. He knew she wasn't comfortable, and he felt horrid for doing this, felt awful for liking it, and not only for the reason that he'd be there for her if she woke up from a nightmare.

"You sure you don't want me downstairs?" he asked one last time.

"Yes, I'm sure," she sighed, running a hand through her frizzy curls.

With a deep sigh, Remus followed, taking up the space closest to the edge. He sat, like her, with his back straight against the wall behind him. Uncomfortable in every way possible, he wondered if there was something, anything to ease the tension. And suddenly, he understood why Sirius kept a flask of whiskey underneath his pillow— these situations sure merited a shot.

He felt her shift, moving his eyes over to see Eva worming herself further down into the bed; her hair spreading out across the pillows, and turning her body so that her back was to him. He followed suit, back turned to her, looking out to the fireplace glow as a million things ran through his mind.

"You wake me if you need anything," he told her. No response, but he knew she'd heard, just as he knew she wouldn't make the slightest gesture that she needed help, making him wonder if staying up all night would be a better, safer option.
But if there was one thing Remus loved, it was sleep. And between the sound of her breathing, the warmth that both she and the fire generated — even though she was most likely frozen — mixed with the chamomile tea, made his eyes come to a gradual close. He’d lift them up every time he realized, pushing himself to keep awake, but it was of no use.

Before he knew it, hours had passed and he was waking up to the sun shining through gray clouds and straight into his eyes. He groaned, flipping over in his bed, sleep still ever-present in his mind as he spread out over the entire width of the bed. His cheek nestled further into the pillows, his bones cracking as he smacked his dry lips together.

And then, in one sudden epiphany, both eyes flashed open and Remus realized one thing— he was the only one in the bed.
"Eva?"

Every fiber inside that skeletal cage jumped forward, the flesh cover breaking out in goosebumps and raised hairs. She turned around with wide eyes and wringing hands, meeting his bleary-eyed stare as color began to rise up to her cheeks. Thankfully, a light draft came through the door's half-inch crack — enough for an eye to peer out of — and cooled the humiliation off the back of her neck.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Remus sat up, hunched over while he rubbed fists into his eyes to rid himself of their fogginess.

"Euh," Eva managed, stepping backwards so that her heel came in contact with the door and closed it. "Just needed to use the loo."

He blinked his eyes awake, shooting a quick glimpse to the corner of the room before re-averting them back to her. Every feature from forehead to the corner of his lips twisted, his eyes narrowing in on her.

"Okay, so why haven't you gone?"

"Occupied," she answered in the time it would take a hummingbird to flap its wings. "Your mother was in there."

He cocked his brow.

"Was? Why don't you go now? Is she still in there?"

"No, but, you see, I," Eva faltered, her words as fumbled as the fingers that churned around one another. They dropped down, her entire body visibly resigning with a deep sigh.

She turned with a frown to look out the window. A front yard where just beyond waves crashed into a frosty, sandy beach. A sight from a dream it was. The sea, the salty wind blowing against a faulty window, making it creak inside its encasing while blankets were pulled to the chin to shield them from it all.

"You?" Remus pressed on, leaning his head forward as he darted his eyes back and forth between the window and Eva. "You what? Because, I mean... You weren't trying to leave just now, were you?"

She pressed her lips into a thin line, causing the already pale pink of them to turn invisible. No response came, but he hadn't been expecting one anyway. Remus knew the answer, had known since the moment she had turned around with her discomforting grin and her pinched cheeks.

"What," he began, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Why? You'd just leave? Like that? Not even say goodbye?" His brows furrowed deeper and deeper with every word. "Did you not care to think how worried— how bloody worried I'd be?"

"I left a note," Eva responded in a small voice.

"A note?" Remus repeated with a snort. "With all due respect, that's bloody rude! I mean, surely you know that. And my parents, they'd have been—"
"I know," she conceded, running a hand through her hair. "It's just—"

Remus waited, drumming his fingertips over his knees. She glanced his way for the briefest of seconds, averting her gaze when she realized he was watching her.

"It's just?"

She bit down on her gums, and Remus caught sight of the hives that had splattered in various spots from her neck all the way down to the curve of the shirt.

"I— YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!"

His mouth fell open, but closed just as quick when he found himself at a loss for words. His eyes blinked while he pieced together every single consonant that had come out in a greater volume than what should be legal for that early in the morning.

"Believe it or not," he said, not once taking his eyes off her, "but I understand better than you'd imagine. I know what you're feeling, like a burden, humiliated and guilty—"

"You don't know me, Rem—"

"Bollocks!" he snapped, holding her gaze once he finally had her looking at him. "We're past all that rubbish, and you bloody know it!"

Remus closed his eyes and filled his chest with air, taking a second to allow the frustration to release itself from restless fingertips.

"How 'bout you get back in bed, go to sleep," he offered, once again opening his eyes to stare at a slack-jawed Eva, "cause it's too early for this—"

"Why!?" she asked indignantly. "Why should I? I'm not some sort of prisoner, am I?"

"Eva, what!? That's not what I said!" But the way her eyes fell to the wand that laid atop the dresser made him realize that he had achieved the exact opposite of what he had wanted. He felt his throat constrict, no longer sure where to step, wondering whether it had all been too forceful, too free. Eva was not Sirius — not even Lily — there was no liberty to tease or wisecrack, no, this required a much gentler hand.

"You're not a prisoner," Remus stated, his tone three times as gentle. "But you came here— you came to me, and I took it upon myself, made it my responsibility, to make sure you're okay."

"But I didn't want that," she whispered. "I didn't want to come here, I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't." Her fingers ran through her hair again, this time clutching at the strands as she looked everywhere besides his gaze.

"Of course you didn't," he agreed. "No one blames you for what happened, Eva. Not for waking us, not for any of that, okay? You don't have to go—"

"No," she laughed maniacally, shaking her head. "I didn't want to come here! I wasn't supposed to come here, someone— someone made me. I don't know what I'm doing here. I never meant— I didn't even know where you lived."

"That... doesn't make sense." His eyes squinted, his fingers reaching up to scratch his head. "How are you here— How'd you get here?"
"The Knight Bus."

"Then," he looked from the wooden planks and back up to her, "how'd you get here if you didn't know where I lived?"

"What do you think I've been asking myself all this time?" A stifled whimper followed the rhetorical questioning. Her entire face scrunched up, her bottom lip forced out into a pout as tears began to flow freely from her, causing her entire complexion to turn red.

"Okay, okay" Remus said as he scrambled out of bed. Within two strides, he had his arms wrapped around her.

"I know you're frustrated, I know you're trying to figure out what's happened to you, and why it happened. But there is no reason not to ask for help, especially if the person giving it to you is so willing, so bloody willing, to help you."

Much more than intentional, although Remus assumed it hadn't been, Eva propped her forehead against his chest. The tears fell, some of them crashing and soaking through his cotton shirt, others dripping onto their socks. She stared at each and every one that dropped, burning the memory into her mind so that she never forgot betrayal's sting.

"Please stop saying that," she mumbled. "I don't want you to wait on me. I hate it, I HATE IT!" Her fist pressed into his chest, her fingers turning to clutch at the soft material, squeezing it, feeling every inch of the fabric.

"I'm here," his embrace tightened, "I'm listening, okay? No need for anyone to yell."

"I'm not yelling."

Remus stifled a short snort.

"All right, fine, you call the shots today." He heard Eva harrumph with satisfaction, causing him to grin. "But it's bloody cold, and there's no good reason you should be walkin' 'round barefoot when there's a grand pile of blankets right over there, all for you."

She remained silent, her forehead still against his chest, her hand still holding onto his shirt.

"I'm so s-sorry," he heard her apologize, her voice vibrating, the heat from her breath pressing against his breastbone.

"It's all right, you're all right, you're all right. Okay? We're all right, don't worry about me— us, okay?" Remus reassured her, running a hand through her hair. "It's just," he pursed his lips before continuing, "if you tell me, I can help you. I'm not— believe it or not, but I do understand. And I want to help you, you know? No expectations, I just want to make sure you're all right."

"But I don't want to tell you."

"Okay. It's your choice— whatever you want, whenever you want it. Okay?" He sighed, running his tongue over his lips as he looked up to the ceiling. "But, if you asked me, I do think a little more sleep would do you some good."

She didn't answer, instead nodding her agreement. He led her back to the bed, his arm around her shoulder as he waited for her to climb in and reposition herself under the covers. She crawled into the same slug-like position as before, cocooning herself on her side, her back faced to him. Remus followed, sitting with his back to the wall, his eyes on her spine, counting out the seconds betwee
Seconds turned to minutes, and more minutes passed before, and with a sniffle, Eva's cracked voice filled the dawn's silence.

"This man... There was this man," she paused, her brows scrunching together. "He said he had a funeral to get to, here, in Penmon. And I thought— he was yelling at me. Got so angry because I was taking too long to decide where to go, just started shouting that he had this funeral." A vague recount of the story that remained likewise in her brain, only faint depictions left like an image in the clouds. He listened nonetheless, a finger resting on his chin, his head tilted towards her as he soaked in her words. "Then, out of nowhere, the conductor gives me this ticket for here, for Penmon, even though I hadn't asked."

"What?" Remus said under his breath. "Why would the conductor do that, surely he realized it hadn't been you to ask?" He looked to the dresser, his eyes narrowing in on the books that lined its top. "You don't think he was just having a laugh?"

"No."

"Odd," he muttered, rubbing a hooked finger into his lips."There's no funeral here, that's for sure, but —"

"He disappeared after."

"Come again?"

Eva twisted slightly so that she could catch the tips of his toes in the corner of her eye.

"After that, after I got my ticket, he disappeared."

"Maybe he'd gone a level up?" Remus offered, neither one of them convinced of his shoddy hunch.

"Maybe," she agreed reluctantly, falling back on her side.

A silence ensued. Both of them staring at walls, albeit different ones, one deep in thoughts, the other near ready to drop into a realm of infinite possibilities.

"You know, this isn't the first time you talk of an angry man."

She opened her eyes, staring down at the frayed edges of the burnt orange wool blanket.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Remus swallowed as he put together the memory. Her fear from that evening engrained in his head; the way she had stared out the window, her fingers twitching for her wand whenever she'd hear the shuffling of a page. "You mentioned something similar in the greenhouse a while back, d'you remember? You were working on some assignment for Professor Sprout."

Her entire body stiffened, her breath hitching in her throat, both her lungs and her heart ceasing to function as a light snapped on in her dark room.

"Yes," she confirmed in an undertone, "you're right— it's the same man."

He watched as she pulled her knees tighter into her chest, grappling the hoard of blankets closer to her.
“You don't think he's a stalker?” Remus asked.

“That wouldn't make sense, would it? Not if he was already on the bus when I got on.”

He scratched his jaw, the slight stubble rough against his fingertips. "You also said, in the greenhouse, that the man spoke to you in Scottish, was that the case this time?"

"Yes," she answered hastily. "I mean no, not Scot— no."

"No?" he repeated. He felt the sheets shake as she shook her head.

"No."

"Irish, then? English?"

"No, just leave it— I want you to leave it, please."

Remus' brows furrowed, blinking his eyes narrower at her sudden halt. Though irritating, he couldn't say he was naive to it. Whenever the realization hit her that something bordering threatening was in her way— she shut down within seconds, and it'd take him anywhere from a two seconds to two weeks to pry her back open.

"Okay," he said, nodding his head.

"Thank you."

"No need to thank me."

"Okay, thank you."

Remus couldn't fall back asleep, especially not after the revelation of Eva's journey. Instead he waited, waited until her slumber was as deep as the breaths that came from her. Periodically, he'd look over at her from the corner of his eyes, catching the slight quiver of her shoulder blade under the cotton shirt, or the minute twitch of her leg. Strange how hours ago he had fretted over the idea of sharing a bed with her, and now there was no where else in the world he'd rather she be.

No, now the only thing that perturbed him was a strange little man.

A strange little man that seemed to grow more imaginary with every passing second. And yet, to her he was real— this man was so real. As real as the flesh on his bones, as real as the feel of his fingertips against the vein crossing the back of his hand.

And just about everyone knew that seeing and hearing things, even for witches and wizards, was no light matter.

His fingers tapped against the side of his thigh. He had his bottom lip between his teeth, sucking on it while attempting to mash together a plethora of fragments. Nothing seemed right. Even when the pieces looked as if they would fit, a missed edge here or there and he'd have to walk back to the starting line and find why it was wrong.

Remus let out a deep sigh, running his ever-going fingers through the tumble of unwashed weeds that he claimed as his hair. He looked over to the books on the top of the dresser, then over to the leather bag that sat halfway underneath the armchair. With a groan and a good stretch, he reached out his hand and grabbed hold of the tan shoulder strap.
Once in his lap, he threw a quick glance over at Eva to insure he hadn't disturb her. Content when he found that she'd only fallen further onto her face; the glimpse of profile he had before completely covered by a duet of hair and blankets. Remus allowed himself a small smile, which fell into pressed lips as he looked back down to the open bag in his hands. He reached in and thrummed through the various material: disheveled parchments, some extra reading for assignments, none of them quite what he was looking for. Something familiar, a word on the tip of his tongue which he had once known like the way he knew Peter took his tea with six sugars, though James had brought him down to four.

*What You Should Know About the Dark Arts (But Don’t)*, he read, sliding the book out of its hold and discarding the bag to the floor. He flipped it over in his hand, tattered in certain places, not because of neglect, but because it had become a guide like none other before it. He ran through the pages, shuffling through them like a stack of cards. Everything from Transmogrifian Torture to obscurials and back again present within those pages. A depth that surpassed the lax understanding they had grown accustomed to. The general consensus was that it was the best Defense book anyone had ever written, and if there was a question needing answering, this book would have what he was looking for.

He sped back through all the pages and landed on the index. He was an inch from being nose-to-page with the miniature sized print lettering, continuing to bite on his bottom lip as he tried to find something, a word that would — could — fit.

*Hallucinations, 329*, he read, his eyes darting over to the girl next to him, and then back to the enamel colored paper. His eyes trailed down hallucinations, seeking something more specific. Sure, the mention of a little angry man would be ideal, some sort of poltergeist from the boglands, but there was nothing of the sort.

— from curses, 35; — in Banshees, 417; — of legilimency, 239, was all that the book had under hallucinations. He ran over the options, thinking up percentages of how plausible each was.

A curse would have had her at St. Mungo’s, not in the north of Wales with her potions partner. And the sort of hallucinations he believed Eva to have didn't fit what he knew of legilimency.

His hand scrubbed over his mouth and chin as he escaped the inked words and looked to the door.

*Fuck it*, he concluded internally, checking the list one last time before flipping to page 329. Though a waste of energy, he had gone through this book four times already, what was a fifth time? If it did prove to be nothing but ludicrousness, then he'd throw her a biscuit and call it a day— blame it on the severe amount of pain, the trauma, the fatigue, and forget about the incident in the greenhouse— for all he knew, it could've just been a slipped mushroom or two.

He skimmed over the meek page.

A disappointment— that's what the information shown to him felt like. There was nothing on hallucinations, or if there was, it was brief. Some words on muggle mental illnesses — *dementia praecox*, he read — and a list of potions and spells that had the side-effects of temporary hallucinations. Another mention that if anyone suspected or witnessed those symptoms in any witch or wizard, that they be reported immediately to their local healer.

Not the answer he was looking for, not by a long shot.

He flipped back to the index, the next option being Banshees. The least likely of the four options: Eva wasn't green, nor did she have straw-like hair. Banshees were supposed to be in a state of constant fury, ready to kill at any threat, extremely volatile beings with nothing but blood on their
mind. Eva liked to steal and munch away on his chocolate while mumbling about the difference between English and Swedish trolls.

He turned to page 417 all the same.

He looked back down to her— the furthest thing from volatile. Nothing more than a bark; having figured out long time ago that her claimed Medusa stare was only a physical fault— she simply couldn't help it.

*Banshees*, read the chapter title. Unlike other books he had read, there was no images in those pages, only paragraphs worth an entire palm describing the physical features of those creatures. But Remus didn't need a drawing, everyone and their mother knew what a banshee looked like— and he couldn't blame Tommy MacCabe when he claimed that he had wet himself when one came singing songs of the dead at his window.

Harrowing, indeed.

But volatile nature and green skin had been their third year curriculum, and the words he read below him contradicted those statements, or rather theories, like a steel blade to human flesh. Opposites, almost violently so, his entire body stiffening as he neared himself to the pages.

Apparently, they weren't green nor were they horrifying to look at — so what exactly had good ol' Tommy seen? — nor were they old hags who weeped bloody tears into the river.

Truth be told, much of what Remus read off the page seemed as if it made mores sense than a potion gone bad.

*Understand Irish Gaelic (even without ever having learned it); see spirits who are invisible to the human eye; prone to social isolation; chronic migraines*— all things that could fit into a neat little paragraph and placed underneath her photo, things that Remus hadn't even thought to be symptoms of an underlying condition.

*Hear voices and/or thoughts of other Banshees*, he continued to read, skimming through the pages, his eyes zooming back and forth across the lines.

There was no definite evidence of it, but he'd be lying if he hadn't suspected. He'd caught her more than once mouthing silently to herself, sometimes even laughing or smiling without a cause. Often times Remus had turned paranoid — left to think that there was something left in his teeth from lunch, or that his fly was down — only to realize that she hadn't even looked his way once. Other times she hadn't even realized that hours had flown by; entire afternoons had passed with them sitting side by side without a word shared between them. And he'd not only occupy the time and deathly silence with assignments, but also with the wonder whether Eva was going through another loop of hating herself for being friends with him.

But if it was because she held full on conversations inside her head— well, Merlin be damned, but it made a whole lot of sense.

The next part he read, however, skewed up the near perfect theory: *'Of Irish ancestry/origin; nocturnal beings; yearn to be near water, notably flowing water.'*

Remus snapped the book closed, a wry expression on his face as he slowly placed it back on his lap. He realized what he was doing, his gut spewing acid as his lips twitched downwards with disgust.

Desperation.
To be cursed was to understand its cruelty — something he wouldn’t wish on his worst enemy — and yet he wished it now. Deep down inside him, somewhere dark and imperceptible, he had wanted the thread to lead to that conclusion.

For seven minutes, Remus had felt a little less alone in the world, nearly giddy with the knowledge that the girl sleeping next to him might not only be a girl, but a monster.

And he hated himself for it, for all of it.

His eyes shot up to the door as he heard another slam shut in the hall. The floorboards creaked, the sound of light, inconspicuous footsteps traveling outwards through the rest of the wooden planks and into his room. He knew it was his father, and Remus had never been happier to have a distraction from the moonlit-caused frenzy he had created for himself.

He lifted the blankets, replacing them on Eva so that the morning chill didn't cause her to wake, and climbed out of bed. With one great, satisfying stretch, he grabbed the burgundy cardigan from the armchair, threw it on, and tiptoed out of the room.

It happened slowly, taking its time as the loamy fragrance and the cool morning dampness made her pull the blankets further up and over her nose. Her eyes were first to open, harsh and filmy, the memories of her dreams already fading away with reality coming to take its place. A beautiful lie and an ugly truth taking their shifts, doing their rounds— only left with a sudden and lonely detachment, grappling at what was, coming to terms with what changed.

Change: nothing too grand, it happened to everybody. Inevitable. Inescapable.

Eva felt as if she had her head above water, gasping for air, trying her best to keep afloat despite burning muscles.

Swallowing hard, she clutched at her chest, her hand palmed over her breast as she pressed her face into her own lap and stifled a cry between teeth. Her breaths came forward deep and shallow, not enough to feel fulfilled, having to remind herself that dying now would only be a burden and not at all purgative.

She rubbed her eyes with bruised palms, blinking them awake as she threw the covers off her and accepted the glacial air onto her skin. Goosebumps came first, then the need to rip apart the mattress and throw it out the window. She sighed, falling back onto the pillow, hiding her face from no one, missing the moment before a full awakening when nothing made sense.

Now, everything did.

She took a deep breath, the scent of pig fat and something briny filling the air. Laughter came wafting in with the culinary scents, distant but hearty, and her heart clenched knowing that she, without much choice, would have to disturb their familial tranquility.

No, she announced internally, groaning as she pushed herself up from the bed. She would not linger, despite whatever he had told her that morning. No where had a contract been presented, assigning him or them responsibility of her well being. If she could stand on her own two feet, she could walk out that door and find the next step by herself.

Her hand supported her against the wall as she swayed on the mattress. She pressed and pawed into the blankets, a maze-like struggle, before reaching the floor and curling her toes into the wooden, firm base. Her eyes roamed around the room, but found nothing besides the ocean that sat beyond the window. A grey light donned the entire atmosphere, both inside and out, while a thin layer of
virgin snow sat across the entire landscape.

Another bout of laughter came from underneath her, waking her up from her living dream. She marched across the room, opening the door, the scents from before only stronger and more diverse as they hit her all at once. Eva hesitated, her entire face falling as the corners of her mouth twitched downwards and her brows furrowed slightly. A dullness erupting inside her, her palm against the door pane as she listened in on the family's conversation.

"This Siencyn boy is from around here, then?" she heard Hope Lupin ask.

"Er, yes and no," Remus responded, Eva's eyes unblinking as her heart swelled at the sound of his voice. "From Caerau."

"Oh, that's near your mamgu! Did'ya tell him you've got family in Penarth?"

"No, 'cause then I'd have to explain how we ended up all the way up here."

"Sounds like the sort of lad who'd have a good laugh from it, if you asked me," Lyall Lupin commented as the sound of sizzling oil evaporated out into the air.

Eva's fingers hooked and unhooked themselves through the sleeves, her palms damp and her back heated. They were having a conversation, a fun one at that, and her presence would only darken the mood. She knew how they would react upon seeing her, their bodies stiffening, wary glances across the room to one another as she semi-answered any filler question they threw her way.

How mortifying.

"Well, breakfast's almost ready," Hope said. "D'you reckon your friend'll get up anytime soon? Should we wait?"

"I'll put her plate under a stasis charm," Eva heard Lyall answer before Remus could. "She needs to rest."

"Oh, okay," Hope mumbled, the disappointment as thick as the plywood underneath Eva's feet.

Her shoulders drooped while tears began to water in her eyes. She wiped away at nothing, catching them before they could even drop so that she didn't walk into the kitchen looking like a soppy mess. Her fingers hastily ran through her knotted curls, brushing them to the side as she descended the steps.

In the kitchen, Remus and his father shared a look with each other when they heard the stairs creak with a newcomer. The jesting from minutes before ceased. Hope went back to plating the food, a newfound excitement across her movements, and Lyall flipped the page of the Daily Prophet to read on. As the other two busied themselves, Remus began to tap his electrified fingers along his thigh. Waiting, expecting, wishing Eva didn't always walk at the speed of a flobberworm.

'It's not my fault, you know? Not everyone can reach their destination in one go,' he recalled her saying, letting out a short snort at the memory.

A figure appeared in the doorway, and even though he had expected it, his body still gave a little jolt.

"Eva," Remus breathed out with a growing grin on his lips. Their eyes met, and even a blind man could sense her apprehension from a mile away.

"Hello," she managed, waving to him with floppy sleeves and a tight smile. Lyall turned around in
his seat, a similar expression to that of his son's donning his features.

"There she is!" came Hope's voice as she carried two plates over to the table. Once placed, she wiped her hands over her apron and approached Eva. Remus sat a little straighter in his seat, his mouth falling open as he watched the two. His mother rubbed a hand over Eva's upper arm. "Would it be okay for me to hug you?"

"Mam," Remus said, catching his mother's gaze as she turned around. He gave her a pointed look, causing her to purse her lips before looking back to Eva.

"Oh, all right, how 'bout a cup of tea, then? That'll warm you right up," she offered, her palm still warm against Eva's shoulder.

"No, thank you. I'm okay," Eva responded in a small voice, forcing a smile.

"Coffee?"

"She'll have a cup of tea," Remus interrupted, hand wrapped around the top of the chair next to him. He pulled it out, gesturing with his chin for Eva to take a seat.

Eva waited until his mother had turned back to occupy herself with the tea and the rest of breakfast. For a moment, she held her breath, peering out to the white dining table. She could feel his eyes on her, most likely thinking that she'd do something rash like dash out the window. But instead, Eva met his gaze, giving him the same awkward, forced smile that she had had moments ago before trudging over to the seat.

"Good morning," he said as she slid behind him and into the seat across from Lyall. Remus glimpsed over at him, thankful that his father had caught on rather quick that Eva preferred the lack of attention, and busied himself with that day's news.

"Good morning," she returned in a whisper, her hands folded in her lap.

Every single one of her movements was in overdrive. Her hands wrung incessantly, her eyes darted about and blinked in milliseconds. Remus could sense her fretfulness, the way she clutched and grabbed at the baggy pajama pants, how she continued to glance up at his father. He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he leaned forward to place an elbow against the table.

The silence may have pleased her, but it killed him in the process.

"So," Remus began, "what's the news have to say today?"

"Well, the seers've predicted the next end of the world, but I suppose they've been doing that since the start of time," Lyall quipped, folding down the paper and discarding it on the spare chair. His eyes turned to the right, watching his wife coming back with a piping hot cup of tea to place in front of Eva.

"Thank you," Eva said, briefly looking up to Hope.

"Wait for the bacon," Lyall smirked. Their eyes met for a heartbeat's worth of time, and it was all he needed to look to Remus with a heavyhearted expression.

Hope hurried back into the kitchen, only to return moments later with the next two plates of food. She settled one down in front of Eva, and the other at the head of the table, diagonal from her. She stared down at the plate, the contents still hot, her stomach growling as it dawned on her just how famished she was.
"So, fy annwyl," Hope began, taking a sip from her own tea.

"That means dear," Remus leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"Eva, is it?"

Eva pressed her lips together and gave a short nod. Meanwhile, Remus held a full sausage between his teeth, ripping it in half as he glanced over at Eva's untouched plate.

"You know," Hope continued. "In Welsh, your name is Efa, written with an f— don't know if Remus told you that."

"Oh, no, he didn't," Eva said, scrambling her brain together to think of something else to say. "In Irish, it's Eabha. Sounds similar, I suppose." She reached forward for her tea and took a sip from it, ignoring the scalding liquid that burned everything from the tip of her tongue to the back of her mouth.

"What?" Remus laughed dryly, brows deepening with near concern as Eva set the cup down and went to pick up her fork. "How do you know that?"

"My great great grandmother told me, her mother was Irish."

Remus' jaw slackened as he recalled the words from the book, the one piece that made the entire theory void. He swallowed down the cured salt taste that the sausage had left behind, eyes burning holes into his fried eggs while he recollected his thoughts.

"Oh," Hope looked between Eva and Remus, "we were under the impression that you were French."

"Yes, I am, but," Eva bit on her inner cheek, not able to look his mother in the eye. "We're a diplomatic family, most of the marriages are for political reasons."

The last part turned the black tea into vitriol, her hands mentally pushing the reminder into the depths of her mind. She looked back up, giving Lyall one last fleeting smile before scooping up a pile of beans.

'Are?' mouthed Hope to her husband, eyes wide as he responded with a solemn nod.

"Well, I don't know if Remus told you or not," Lyall moved to change the subject.

"Oh, no, Merlin, please stop—"

"But," he continued, raising his brows conspiratorially, "we're Normans."

"Bloody hell," Remus grumbled under his breath, his head hanging down into his neck as he pinched the corners of his eyes.

"I don't understand your defiance, Remus, I truly don't. You know, many believe that the Norman conquest was the single greatest political feat to ever happen to this island."

Eva turned to look up at Remus, whose eyes rolled so far back into his head that she reckoned they'd get stuck back there—and how horrible that would be.

"It's not that—" Remus glanced over at Eva. "He only ever brings it up when we're around anyone remotely French—you should have seen him when we went three years back. Bloody nightmare."
"Oh," Eva said, her entire face picking up and brightening by three shades. "I didn't know you've been to France—"

"Why of course he has," Lyall butted in. "Well, Remus, go on, tell her where you've been.

"Er, yeah— in the north, for the most part."

All three of the stared at him with looks ranging from gentle bewilderment to utter irritation.

"He's embarrassed, doesn't want to muddle up the pronunciations," Lyall explained to Eva.

"Oh, but I mess up all the time in English," she said, even surprised with herself for finding the ability to speak so easily. Remus looked up, eyebrows raised as she turned to him. "I wouldn't think anything of it."

He didn't pull his gaze from her, not even when she returned back to the food. His eyes ran over her hair, the cut on her cheek, the constant purse of her lips. They travelled further down her body, watching as her fork poked and prodded at a green patty. He nearly threw himself into the table with the violent laugh-turned-cough that came out of him.

"Excuse me," he apologized to them, holding up a hand to assure that he was all right. Remus reached forward for his cup, taking a sip from the tea as another light laugh came out of him. "That greenish thing, Eva, is laverbread— it's, well it's a sort of seaweed."

"With oats, fried in bacon," Hope finished for him. "And those by the eggs are the cockles, you also have your lamb sausage, bacon, beans, and, of course, a fried tomato."

"Oh okay," Eva said, not showing the slightest distaste as she pressed the side of her fork into the laverbeard.

"You don't have to eat it if you don't want to, you know that, right?" Remus reassured her after his parents went back to consuming their food.

She looked back down to the plate, full and overloaded in every way possible.

"No, I think I like it, but... Remus?"

"Yeah?"

"You don't eat like this every day, do you?" she asked, concern thick on her tongue.

He had to look away in order to keep back another chuckle, but failed miserably as a smile grew on his face.

"No— no we don't, only when we have guests."

The rest of breakfast passed without much focus on any one in particular. They had included Eva in their discussions, but never once made them centered around her. Topics ranged between Ministry New Year's Eve parties to James and Lily finally dating — the latter causing her neck to warm up, never thinking that Remus, or anyone, would speak so openly about the sort of thing with parents.

After, Lyall had introduced Eva to their owls Merry and Fatty — though Remus had butted in saying that Fatty was actually his owl named Billy— and Hope's cat Pippin. She had played with Pippin while Remus scavenged the house for some sort of toy, returning with a half-torn mouse that had cushioning coming out one eye. He had been too late, for Pippin had already gone to sprawl out on
the kitchen windowsill as Lyall cleaned the dishes.

"I love cooking," Hope had told her, "but I'll never be grateful enough for magic when it comes to cleaning."

Up until that point, she had forgotten that his mother was a muggle. She tried not to dwell on it, feeling guilty whenever she did, and then feeling guilty for feeling guilty. There was no reason to see her as any different, as inferior. Remus surely didn't, and if he didn't, then she shouldn't either. But it still felt funny when she had whispered into Eva's ear: "Who names an owl Billy?"

They lived differently from how she did, although that much should have been expected. At home, even dressing herself was a task meant for the house-elves. But the Lupins seemed happy without the luxuries and extravagances, instead preferring laughter and each other's company. It made Eva almost uncomfortable to think of diamonds or champagne; so, when they hadn't been looking, she had pulled her pearl earrings off and shoveled them deep into cotton pockets.

Sometime after Lyall had excused himself to his study, but before Hope had gone upstairs to prepare for her day in Bangor, Remus had nudge her in the shoulder and asked if she fancied a walk on the beach.

When she finally agreed, just as Remus was shoving his feet into his shoes, he instructed her to go pick out a jumper from his dresser— whichever she liked. Hope had also offered her a pair of trainers and a windbreaker more suitable for Eva than the one Remus had picked for her. Reluctant to accept at first, but with a gentle push from Remus and a bit of stammering — not knowing what else to say or do besides thank her — she did.

"Ah, that's the jumper I got from Fair Isle last summer," Remus commented as she came back down the stairs.

"Oh, is it all right that I wear it?" she asked, looking down to the multi-colored, patterned wool.

"Yeah, of course," he assured her. "It's a good choice, is all."

"I guess, you know you don't have any green ones."

"Should I?"

"Yeah, I think you'd look good in green," she said as she hopped down from the last step. Even though she hadn't meant it as anything more than a suggestion, a blush erupted over his cheeks. He twisted the doorknob and swung open the door, eager for the cool air to dissolve the heat from his face.

They trudged over the entire expanse from the house to the rocky beginnings leading into the sandy beach without a word. Once there, Remus had found them a dry enough spot in the damp sand, both of them plopping their bottoms down without a worry in the world.

Eva sat with her knees bent, her arms wrapped around them as her chin laid across their tops, watching, drinking in the sight of the foaming waves. Every now and then, she would close her eyes and breathe in the salty gale, licking her lips to taste it on the tip of her tongue.

Next to her, Remus also had his knees bent, but his palms digging into the sand behind him so that he could lean back. He'd look out into the horizon, attempt to decipher where the grey sea turned into sky, and then turn right back to watch her.

_Yearn to be near water_, he recalled, scrutinizing the way everything — from her brow to all 206
bones in her body — ceased to sizzle. The rocky edge from last night crumbling and dissolving into the sea with each wave.

"Hey," Remus broke the silence. She turned her head only slightly, so that she was looking at him from the corner of her eye. "You know, I was thinking about this morning."

He sat forward to catch sight of her face. His back hunched over as he bowed his head down. She watched him from behind the strands of hair that whipped across her face, almost blinding her.

"What about this morning?" A finger reached up to hook around the strand, pulling it back into the jumper's neck opening.

"Well, I was a bit concerned, you know? With this man and all," he explained, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. He opened it, offering one to Eva. She shook her head, not taking her stare off him as he helped himself to one. "A lot of what you said, how you described him, well, to me it sounded a lot like you had imagined him."

"You think I'm mad?" she asked, her forehead scrunching together as she watched him place the cigarette between his lips.

Remus narrowed his eyes, looking out to the sea.

"No... Not anymore, at least," he mumbled, moving his gaze to the tip of the cigarette in order to light it. It did, the end glowing like embers as he sucked on the filter.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He pulled the cigarette from his mouth, holding it between his thumb and his index finger as he let out the smoke.

"It means that I've got a theory."

"Which is?"

Remus brought the cigarette back to his mouth, taking another go at it. Eva took a shaky breath, looking from the shore's edge and back to Remus. He continued to eat away at it, not bothering to look at her. "Remus?" The smoke came out his nose, escaping with the wind. She frowned, her hand reaching out to shake his forearm. Finally, he looked up. "Why won't you say it?"

"Because I don't want you to be scared."

She blinked, the scrunch in her forehead only deepening as they held each other's gazes.

"Why would I be scared?"

"I mean, I would be."

"We won't know if you don't tell me, right?"

He licked his lips, straightening his back and looking over her head to the distance.

"It's just a theory, isn't it? How bad could it be?"

"It's not bad, Eva," he sighed, placing the cigarette back in his mouth. Inhale, exhale. "I just want you to know that you don't have to be scared— I'm not going to tell anyone, you know, if it's true."
"Yes, okay," she snapped, the grip on his arm tightening as his words were beginning to make her mouth go dry. "Tell anyone what? What is there even to tell?"

A long pause ensued, in which Remus profited of another two puffs before he finally opened his mouth.

"That you're a banshee."

For a second, time stopped. Her heart stopped, the earth stopped. Eva did not make a sound, holding her breath as her muscles froze into place. She did not let go of Remus, she did not move.

But the second passed, and he let go of him to turn forward. Her eyes dropped to her lap as the words rang in her head alongside her drumming pulse and the crashing waves.

Remus pursed his lips together, dropping the cigarette to turn to ash in the sand as he placed a hand on Eva's shoulder.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he heard her say, muffled and distant.

"I swear I won't say—"

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!" she shouted, twisting back towards him, her eyes bulging and her teeth clenched. Remus almost fell backwards, his palms back into the sand, watching as she pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Eva," he attempted, reaching out to her for a second time. She swatted his hand away, instead making way to stand. Remus followed, both of them at their full heights. She hastily brushed the sand away from her backside before marching off through the sand.

"Wait," Remus called out, jogging ahead to try and stop her.

"I want to leave, I don't want to be here anymore—"

"Eva, I know how you feel, okay? I do, you don't—"

"I'm not a banshee," she stated, stopping in her tracks to look up at him. Even with the jumper and the windbreaker, Remus could still catch her chest heaving up and down— alongside the slack jaw and empty eyes. He wanted to hug her, maybe even kiss her on her head, assure her that there was nothing to worry about, but she was having none of it. "I don't know where you got that idea, but I'm not— I'm just not."

"Listen to me," he said, bending forward to level himself with her. "I know—"

"I SAID YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING, NOT A THING!" Both of her palms pressed into his chest, using all her force to shove him backwards. The first time failed, so she did it again— continuing to push him, only succeeding in making him take another step back every time.

She stopped, her hands fisted at her sides, her breaths heavy. She didn't look at him, focusing instead on the button from his brown wax jacket, blinking, not exactly processing information how she should.

"Did you get what you need?" he asked. She didn't respond. "I know, okay? I do know. You feel threatened, right? You're scared— I promise I won't tell anyone, I won't say anything."

This time a fist came swinging at his chest. It wasn't nearly enough to cause so much as a groan to
come out of him, but the act itself pained him to watch.

"SHUT UP!" she cried, her hands in her hair, clutching at the strands and ripping them away from her scalp.

"Eva," he said, "please stop hurting yourself. You don't have to do that."

She didn't understand any of it. One moment she was fine, her life steady, and next someone had to come in and dump a whole tub of acid on her. They had been fine on the beach, they had been fine in the morning as they played with the cat— why had he gone and ruined it? Why?

Tears began to come down, as salty as they sea. Remus' heart clenched, slanding himself for not being able to wait at least a day before dropping another bomb on her.

"Eva," he gave made one last attempt. She looked to him, eyes stained red, cheeks blotched the same color. "I—" he paused, looking away from her. "I've got a secret of my own, you know?"

"What secret?" she said, her voice watery and broken.

"A horrid one," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "And I want you to know— well, I'm going to tell you, I'm going to tell you so that you have something of mine. To make you feel secure."

"There's nothing you can say," she sobbed, wiping away at the tears. "Nothing you have—"

"I'm a werewolf."

His skin broke out into goosebumps. Never had those words come off his tongue, not by him. Not once in his life had he called himself what he was. He had been asked on more than one occasion, his father would whisper that he had lycanthropy into the healers' ears, but never had he actually said it.

"What?" The tears continued, but her face had dropped. Her eyes were wide, dull and wet, surveying every corner of his own. Remus couldn't look at her, not when breakfast threatened to come up his throat.

"So, you see? Now you know my secret, this way you know that I can't tell anyone because then you'll tell mine—"

"Why would you say that?"

His head shot up, eyes narrowing. Eva's chin trembled, her jumper-clad hand covering her mouth.

"What do you mean why—"

"This isn't some joke, what d'you think that I'll— You think by lying to me, by making up some story—"

"—Eva, what?—"

"—this isn't some sort of monsters club, Remus!"

"I'm not joking!" He was bent over with his hand pointed out towards the sea in emphasis of his words. "You think I'd joke about something like that?"

She shook her head, her arms crossed over her chest. There was a worry line painted deep in her
forehead, her lips curled into her mouth as she stared at the house.

"I can't," she began, her head continuing to shake, "I can't deal with this right now— I really can't, I'm sorry."

Remus felt a mass well up in the back of his throat, holding back tears. She made way to turn around, giving one last glimpse at him before taking a step in the opposite direction.

"Where're you going?" he managed, shoving his unstable hands into his pockets. "I can come with— I swear I won't talk—

"I want to be alone," she stated firmly, taking another step away from him.

"Okay," he forced out, "I'll wait for you at home, then."

Remus remained glued in that spot, watching her as she kicked up sand with every step. He didn't know when it happened, but eventually Eva had become nothing more than a dot in the distance.

He sat back down in the sand, running a hand through his hair and resting it on the back of his skull as he pressed his forehead onto bent knees.

*What a sodding idiot,* he cursed internally. He could have let it go, there was no point for her to know that he knew, or for her to know about him. All she had needed was a safe place for the day, and now she was running from it.

Remus sighed. He knew deep down he had been selfish, he had wanted to know— wanted so badly to know if he was the only one or not.

Well, now he knew.

He knew that he wasn't alone. But not once did he stop to think that maybe Eva did want to be alone, and that's where everything went wrong.
Eventually, Remus managed to pick himself up and make his way home. He walked with lead-coated calves, trudging through the sand with the wind blowing against him like some sort of Dantesque nightmare. All he had were his thoughts; slandering, blaming himself for believing that embracing her on a cliff wouldn't send both of them spiraling down. There was no coming back from it, either; nothing that could amount to a whole enough apology to erase what had happened.

It hadn't been his plan to confess, at least, not like that, not in a moment of desperation. But seeing her pulling at her hair, trying to chase her breath, her eyes red-ringed and her face no better, left him with very few options.

The soles of his feet pressed against the gravel surrounding his home, lingering for a moment to search the horizon. Nothing, not even a bird. He sighed, pulling out a cigarette as he leaned against the front door. Before he knew it, the end was lit and the wind already eating away at it, escaping him faster than he had wanted.

Like her— one moment there, the next gone.

Whether she came back or not was her decision— he would no longer pester or badger her for anything; trying to worm himself into her life because he thought it'd fill something in his own. He wouldn't seek her out at lunch or bother her with questions about every little thing she did, even if he couldn't help it.

He looked down to the cigarette, rolling it between his fingers, observing every inch of its micro-surface.

Leaving, she'd left. Disappeared. Ran away into thin air.

It was all his fault, too.

Remus brought it to his lips, taking in another round of smoke before frowning and dropping it to the ground. It had only been three puffs, but the burnt-musk aftertaste and the thickness in the back of his mouth left no room for a dry throat and an unwelcome head rush.

He opened the door, kicking off his shoes and not bothering to take off his jacket as he entered the kitchen. The kettle already sat on the stovetop, only leaving him to refill it and place it back on the fire as he waited with both palms placed on either side of the stove. He leaned all his weight into two bent wrists, ignoring the moaning protest they let out in favor of a deep groan. His eyes scrunched together, attempting to rid himself of the headache created from a mix of brumal wind, crying, and stress.

"Remus."

"Yes," he mumbled, remaining in the same position. Lyall's hand rested on the doorway, stepping forward into the kitchen.

"Everything all right? Where's Eva?"

"Upstairs, I'm making us a cup of tea," he lied, wanting to avoid worrying him.

"Oh, good," Lyall commented, nodding his head. "Well, I've got a report about a possible sighting out in the Valleys. You two'll be all right by yourselves? Sounds simple enough, but you know
down there how it is this time of year."

Remus forced an affirmative scoff, shutting the fire as the kettle had begun to shrill, and reaching for a cup. His father watched, narrowing his eyes on his son's hand as it reached into the PG Tips box and pulled out only a single bag of tea.

"I thought you said you were making the both of you a cup of tea."

Remus froze for a fleeting second, his eyes lifting up to look out the window that sat above the sink before continuing with his brewing task.

"I am— one at a time."

He reached back to the cupboard for a second cup.

"You should take a nap— you couldn't have gotten a lot of sleep last night," Lyall suggested.

"Yeah, probably will."

_Bollocks_, he thought, almost shaking his head while he clenched his teeth together. All he wanted was to hole himself up on the couch and forget about the day in the curious comfort that was a BBC nature documentary.

"Okay, well, your mum told me to tell you that if you two get hungry, there's stuff to make cheese toasties with," Lyall informed him. "Oh, and try to throw in a vegetable with that, would you? You know, to make your mum happy."

"Duly noted."

His father blinked, the smile on his face falling as he surveyed Remus, who hadn't bothered to turn around once.

"You sure everything's all right, son?"

"Yes," Remus answered, walking over to the refrigerator and pulling out the milk. "Hard day is all."

"You know," Lyall began, pursing his lips. "It's nice what you're doing and all, but you can't save everybody. The girl, she's sweet, but—"

"But nothing." Remus cut him off, stirring the sugar into the tea and waiting for the grittiness at the bottom to dissolve.

"Okay, then... I should get going."

"Good luck."

"Remus?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

He faltered, his stiff composure mollifying, evaporating, disappearing like the sugar in the tea. Remus turned to glance at his father out the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. I love you, too."
Once the front door had shut, and Remus was sure to be the only person left in the house, he broke down. His knees hit the floor, his forehead against the cupboard, the tips of his fingers left to cling themselves onto the kitchen counter. A sob ripped out of him and he could feel his back shake with every tear that spilled.

Hours had passed, six to be exact, since Remus had returned home.

His father was still out, and his mother had come home with four containers worth of curry chicken and rice, disappointed to find the house near empty and Remus alone, staring with dull eyes at the television. Hope had passed him a couple questions—‘where's your father, where's Eva, are you all right’—to which he answered with one word and zero emotion.

But as he shoveled the last of the yellow-stained rice into his mouth, the bell rang. He sighed, leaning back into the couch and tilting his head to see if his mother would shut off the Elton John album she had played non-stop since Christmas. It never did stop, and so the task was left to Remus. With another great sigh, he picked himself up, the rice that had fallen onto his chest dribbled down to the carpet, and he made his way over to open the door.

"Hi."

She was standing there, nothing from the previous 24 hours anywhere written on her face. A slight dash of pink on the height of her nose and cheeks, but nothing else. She had her hands shoved into the windbreaker's pockets, her eyes wide and blinking as she gave him a delicate, toothless smile.

Remus watched her as she walked passed him and into the house, not waiting for a greeting. He closed the door, keeping his hand on the doorknob while trying to gather his thoughts. His brows furrowed, his pulse beating a little harder into his ears as he turned around to face her.

"Smells good," Eva noted as she shook off the windbreaker, placing it onto the hook by the door.

"Yeah, it's the curry mam brought back," Remus muttered, knitting his brows together and crossing his arms over his chest. "Uh, I thought you'd run off?"

"No," Eva replied at once. "I got caught up with something, lost track of time."

His eyes left the spot on the staircase they had locked themselves on to meet her own. 'Caught up with something', a vague way to say she had been conversing with whatever resided in her head, he imagined.

"All right," he said, forcing away the twitch in the back of his mind that encouraged him to ask her what her return meant. "Well, there's curry, if you want it?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." She turned to look through the darkened doorway leading into the kitchen. "I suppose I'm hungry."

But before Eva could head into the kitchen, Remus had stepped in front of her, lifting his palm and giving his chin a quick jerk towards the living room.

"Go have a seat, I'll bring it."

She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it as he turned back around and disappeared into the kitchen. He walked towards the counter, picking up the container and pulling out his wand to warm the contents, all the while ignoring his shaking hands.
Her presence unnerved him and comforted him at the same time.

Despite both their confessions, his push to know, hers to keep it hidden, she had returned, but why? Then there was her behavior. Ill matching, almost eerie, and too serene for someone who had stomped off with fisted hands and a red face.

Remus sighed, running his armed hand through his hair. He knew she preferred to sweep the dust under the carpet, but it would drive him over the edge to figure out what she was feeling.

With the container piping hot and in hand, he walked back into the hall and through to the living room. Eva had taken a seat in the center of the couch, her eyes focused on the television, of which Remus had once attempted to explain to her the time he had made a Monty Python reference. She had only stared at him, blinking every so often before smiling and scrunching her nose. He knew she hadn't a clue what he was on about, most likely finding it ludicrous, but she had listened, questioned, and laughed all the same.

"Here," Remus said, handing her the steaming container over her shoulder from behind the couch. She twisted her body around, first looking at the container before moving her gaze up to him.

"Won't you have a seat?" Her hand came down on the cushion beside her, patting it to convey that he was welcome. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, not taking his eyes off her fingers before answering with a single nod.

Remus sat down next to her, on the edge of the couch with his legs apart and his elbows digging into his knees. His hands were clasped together in a fist, pressed to his mouth as his leg jerked up and down.

A few minutes passed that way. Only the sound of fork scraping against foam, Eva swallowing, and the BBC's weatherman talking about isolated thunderstorms in the southern regions to fill the silence. He gnawed on his bottom lip, pulling it into his mouth, and peeling away at the chapped ends of it while deciding on asking whether she enjoyed the food or not.

"How'd you know? How'd you figure it out?"

His eyes fell from the screen to her knee.

"I," he inhaled sharply, pressing his lips together as he looked back up to the television. "I'll be a moment, wait here."

With that, he was up and exiting the room. Eva's eyes followed him until he disappeared, the floorboards cranking and the staircase creaking to tell her he had gone upstairs. She surrendered her back to the couch, slouching into it as she placed the near-empty container onto her lap and waited for the door to his room to shut.

Minutes later, he appeared again, nothing changed except for a tattered book in his hand. The place next to her sank down with his body, his back still hunched but a newfound giddiness to his movements as she watched him out the corner of her eye.

"Here," Remus said, handing her the book with his thumb bookmarking an open page. She didn't take it from him, instead reaching forward to leave the container on the coffee table, and leaning into his side to look at the book.

"Banshees, it read. Ink in some corners, other words underlined.

"That's it? Just one page— that's all you needed?" Her gaze left the book to peer up at him through
her lashes.

Remus didn't move, caught in a trance with her proximity, feeling the heat radiating off her body. All he had to do was turn his head and their noses would brush against one another's. The thought alone caused his body to ignite and his groin to twist with an unwanted throb. "Guess that intuition of yours truly is something to brag about."

He turned back to the book, focusing on the information in his hand and ignoring the feeling her surveying eyes placed on his profile.

"No." His tongue ran over his teeth. "Well, yes, I suppose that helped, too. But it's the man you mentioned. None of it made sense— he couldn't be a stalker, and from what I had gathered, no one else on that bus noticed him besides you— not the conductor, not the other passengers. So, well, I looked up hallucinations—"

"I'm not mad."

"I know that," he said, flipping and pointing to a paragraph on the next page. "That's what it says— it's not hallucinations, but actual, well, they're dead people. Dead people that want to be seen."

Remus felt his ability to breathe come back to him as she sat back, her inquisitive face falling while she gulped down the truth. Her once deadpan expression now contained a worry line between her brows, the corners of her lips downturned as a hand lifted up to rub against them.

"At least," Remus added, "according to the book."

"That book might not be reliable, you should keep that in mind."

"Of course, everything with a grain of salt, yeah? There's a lot of false information on these sorts of things— they say true love's kiss can cure a werewolf." A short, halfway between nervous and sorrowful laugh expelled from him.

She looked back down to the list, realizing that the Xs next to the bullet-pointed descriptions were what led him to suspect her.

"I don't know Gaelic."

Remus folded his lips into his mouth, narrowing his eyes on the list before turning to look at her.

"But you understand it?"

"No, not even— I can detect it, hardly, but that's far from knowing it. I never learned it." She took a deep breath, shaking her head. "Besides, it wouldn't make sense. Language is a learned thing."

Finally, she looked from the book to him, holding his gaze, searching it for answers. Remus had to hold himself back from flinching— Eva was looking to him for answers. She didn't know, hadn't a clue what was occurring to her. He felt something light up within him, a cross between frivolity and repletion brightening and filling him up. He sat forward, hiding the grin threatening to appear on his face.

"All right, okay, so that's off the list. What about the rest?" he asked, not waiting for a response as he returned to scanning the words he had read only a thousand times.

Eva had no intention of responding right away, still seated with her shoulder pressed against the back of the couch, watching him. Remus' back was to her, his spine visible through the knit, his sleeves
pushed up to his elbows and revealing the scars on his forearms.

Her fingers twitched, wanting to reach out and run a finger over them, then wrap her arms around him and lay her cheek against his shoulder blade. Her eyes traveled up his arm, landing on his jaw. A straight line with hollowed cheeks to match. Gaunt and often tired looking, an easy smiler, though. She couldn't help the absentminded lift of her lips, watching his teeth gnawing down on one another. It was something he did when he couldn't quite understand something, nearly there but not quite. A familiarity that she had grown accustomed to. And in that moment, she wanted to press her lips to it and run a comforting hand through his hair, whisper to him not to think too hard about it—he'd get it soon enough, and if not, the world would go on spinning.

Eva's breath hitched in her throat, her hand spreading over her collarbone as she caught herself. She blinked her eyes wide, forcing herself to wake, convincing herself it was the fatigue causing her to fall into an irrational stupor.

"So?" he rehashed, turning to look over his shoulder. She darted her eyes his way, taking in a deep breath before nodding. "Yeah?"

"I can hear voices," she answered in an undertone.

"The voices of other banshees, you mean?" Remus pressed on. Eva ran a hand through her hair, nodding again. But her confirmation slowly grew sour, her face scrunching together and her brows furrowing. All traces of kissing clenched jaws and touching scarred arms disappearing from her mind as she, too, sat forward.

"The voices of other banshees?" she repeated searching the page for the words. "You mean they exist!?"

"According to this, yeah." Her mouth fell open, her hand coming up to cover it. "I-I thought they were imaginary, I thought I'd made them up."

"Well, a least you know you're not going mad," Remus attempted to tease.

Her entire body plopped backwards into the couch, her eyes focused on the ashen fireplace, her lips pouted, her eyes darting zigzaggedly as the lines on her forehead grew deeper and deeper.

"That still doesn't explain how — it's still arbitrary."

"Yeah, I suppose. I suppose I went for the first indication that you," he paused, biting on his bottom lip, knowing he shouldn't mention anything of monsters. "It was between this and some muggle disease, and when you mentioned your great grandmother being Irish during breakfast— well, it became plausible."

"Great great great grandmother," she corrected.

"Well, pardon me," he mumbled, rolling his eyes.

"I don't even know — I haven't always been like this. It sort of happened one day... I was different, all of a sudden"

"Well, I'm not sure how accurate it is, but in the book." He flipped through the pages, searching back and forth before locating it. He sat back so that she could read on, ignoring their touching shoulders, and pointing to a line. "It says here that it's sort of like a parasitical spirit — not really but the analogy works — that travels through blood in search of a human body they think'll survive in. Think of it like a plant, in the correct conditions, it'll thrive; in the wrong ones, it won't."
Eva's shoulders dropped.

"So, what? I'm just unlucky?"

Remus pursed his lips, closing the book and settling it down next to him.

"That's usually how it goes," he answered with a solemn smile.

She lifted her legs onto the couch, placing them to the side. It caused her body to lean towards his own, the tops of her knees pressed into the side of his thigh. Her arm lifted up, elbowing him in his breastbone as she brushed her hair all to one side. Remus sputtered, forcing it into a laugh.

"Comfortable?" he asked through a groaned chuckle. She looked to him, tilting her head in a questioning fashion.

"Quite, why?"

"No, that's good. I'm glad," he told her.

She shifted back around to rummage through her thoughts, leaving Remus to wonder whether their closeness was intentional or not, whether she noticed the way he did. It didn't matter, though. Her presence alone comforted him, made his torn apart heart feel not so shattered, realizing that they were going to be all right.

"Is there anything you want to say?" she asked, breaking the silence and turning to look at him.

"You know, about the..."

"Uh, I guess. I mean, like you, I didn't want this. I was, I was four." He took a deep breath, closing his eyes and leaning his head back to stare at the ceiling. "He preyed on children, sort of his modus operandi, so to speak. Uh, I suppose I just happened to be unlucky, too, ended up one of those children."

Remus pressed his lips together, his eyes squinting. Eva twisted her torso to watch him, catching his bobbing Adam's apple as he swallowed, the way his fingers tapped against his leg. The pain was Mariana Trench worthy. It spread across him like black blood, excruciatingly deep, and making her wonder what drove him to wake up every morning.

"I know how to handle myself, know how to take care of myself before and after. I don't need help, you know? I've never bitten anyone, I've never killed. I make sure I'm locked away and pose no threat every full moon. I never want to hurt anyone, I swear it, I swear. " He clamped his bottom lip back between his teeth, his eyes beginning to feel hot and gummy.

To Eva, his words sounded more like a desperate plea for forgiveness rather than an explanation. She felt her own heart throbbing at the sight of him, her hand reaching out to hold the one he was using to grasp at his trousers with.

The hours that had followed his outburst on the beach, she had spent convincing herself that it wasn't true. That it couldn't be possible the only friend she had was no better than she was. The boy who had come to her in the hospital wing, the only one to bother looking a little further in a damp cave, not scared of the bats or the rats; the one person who had defied all odds at two in the morning, opening his door to her, had turned out to be a monster. And it had taken everything inside her, having to freeze herself and then melt back down, to realize that there were truly monstrous people out there, and the person who had pushed past every trap she had set for him, could not be half the villain the world wanted to make him out to be. He simply could not be.
And what a hypocrite she had been, for he had sat there on that couch, helping her to understand what she could not on her own. Not once thinking of abandoning her, claiming that he could no longer be her friend in fear of what may happen.

She supposed Gryffindor really was the house of the brave.

"Don't say anymore, you don't need to," she told him, looking down to their enjoined hands. He held her tighter, his fingers no longer shaking as he rolled his head to the other side, looking to their reflection in the window.

"Okay," he agreed, knowing she was right. There was no reason to linger, to push it further. They both knew what they had to know, accepting the truth and moving on from it.

A rolled his head to the ceiling, and then back over to her. She was gazing dazedly something in the distance, her eyes glossed over and wide. He let his thumb brush over her skin, watching her eyes grow momentarily and then turn back to normal. He tried again, enjoying the feel of her soft skin against his calloused one. A dream-like, barely-there smile crossed her lips, causing his heart to stop.

"Uh, oh yeah, I forgot something," he told her, loosening his grip on her hand, feeling daft from what he'd done seconds ago. "A letter came for you earlier."

"Saying what?" she asked airily.

"How would I know?," Remus scoffed, almost laughing, "I wouldn't read your mail. I'll go get it—"

"Can't you summon it? You know, being a wizard and all," she teased, waking up and moving her gaze to his.

He wiggled his sleeved-arm where he held the wand, not ready to let go of her hand just yet. He brought it to his mouth, managing to pull it out with his teeth, winking her way as she threw him a mock-scowl.

"Accio Eva's letter," he casted with an impish grin. Not even a second later, and the object flutter into the room and landed in his lap.

Eva's hand darted forward, brushing against his lower abdomen. Remus' eyes widened, shooting upright and causing her hand to retreat back to herself. With a deep breath and a tight jaw, he preoccupied himself with his trousers, while Eva ripped open the envelope.

She ran her eyes over the script.

"That's odd," she muttered.

"What? Everything all right?" Remus held his forehead in his hands, not wanting to face her.

"Yes, they want to know if I'm all right, and where I've gone."

"Ah," he exhaled, his eyes squinting. "That's usually a good thing, right?"

Considering I bit someone's ear off?, she wanted to say, but instead shook her head.

"Of course it is."

"Well, what's your plan? What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to write back, tell them I've returned to Hogwarts."
"Will you?"

She looked from the letter to Remus, her teeth chomping down on her inner cheek.

"Where else will I go?"

Remus shrugged, looking around his living room.

"You could always stay here," he offered. "My parents wouldn't mind— they enjoy the extra company, especially all the way out here where our only neighbor's a sheep."

Eva frowned, her gaze dropping again. It would be nice, it had been nice to be there, with them, with him, but she knew that it would never sit well with her— not in a million years. They had their own plans, Remus had his own plans— she couldn't intrude like that.

She shook her head with a smile.

"No, it's quite all right, I have work to get done. It'll be easier there, now that it's quiet."

Remus bent his neck forward, nodding. But the tightness in his chest told him that he had wanted her to stay, had almost expected it. He had wanted to show her Snowdonia, to take her for a pint in Bangor, maybe even go by Holyhead for a day.

She liked those sorts of things— nature, he knew she did, and there was so much of it there, for her. And she wouldn't be alone, and he wouldn't be alone— no, he wouldn't, not anymore. There was no gut-wrenching feeling of having to play along with jokes or having people pretend to know how he felt. With everything he had, he loved his friends, but their sympathy could never amount to empathy. Never, not ever, and once he had believed it could, but he had gotten ahead of himself and been proven wrong. No one could understand, and he never expected them to.

Well, he turned to look at Eva, maybe someone could.

"Okay. I mean, we could meet up before the end of holiday or something?"

"Where?" she asked. Remus shrugged his shoulders.

"Hogsmeade?"

"There're still people there. A lot of them head down to the village to study and eat. I know Avery and Mulciber do."

"Avery and Mulciber'll be there?" Remus inquired, grimacing at the thought of having nothing but two bullying, bigoted buffoons for company.

"Yeah, Snape, too. No one else from our year who's in Slytherin, I suspect. But they're at the pub all day— from ten in the morning to two in the morning." Eva turned to look at him, realizing that he was looking somewhere in the distance, his lips pursed. "Besides, I thought you go to your friend's after New Year's, stay there until the end of break? That's what you told me."

It was true, one thing to claim he was going home to be with his family after New Year's, another thing to run off for a day to Hogsmeade without his friends suspecting and following him.

"Yeah, of course," he confirmed, glancing at her briefly. "So, does the telly scare you? Because there was a rather mediocre documentary on, but after they're going to air Murder on the Orient Express, which is—"
"I thought that was a book. You said it was written—"

"It is, but it's also a film," he informed her, watching her scrunch her nose. He pressed his lips to stifle the smile he wanted to make.

She flailed her hand, waving him to go on while crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing the screen.

They watched for hours, and Remus no longer felt the bricks on his shoulders. He let out several deep breaths, emptying his lungs of all the tar he had had to swallow, and finally feeling awake. She'd be there with him, he could have her in his life. Someone to talk to, to confide in, even when he didn't want to speak, she could understand, he'd seen her do it.

No longer alone, a whole other person who wasn't all too different from himself. There was very little he could do not to grab her arm and pull her up to dance to that bloody Elton John album.

As the Orient Express came to a stop somewhere in snowy Yugoslavia, Eva shifted, pressing her entire upper body into his own. She slouched further into him, her eyelids beginning to droop as she attempted to persuade Remus to spill who the murderer was.

"Who did it? I know you know."

"No, besides, I figured it out sometime halfway through the movie."

"That's 'cause you read the book, cheater." Remus scoffed, albeit with a grin. "I'll do your potions assignments for a week."

"Nice try, but no."

She harrumphed, scrunching her nose while Remus kicked his feet up onto the coffee table.

With every moment that passed, he slid further down until his head was leveled with her's. His fingers folded into one another across his stomach, letting his head rest against her own.

"Eva?"

She had fallen asleep, and soon enough, he followed her with a drowsy laugh and a dopey smile.

The rest of December passed with a welcomed tranquility. Eva had left with three hugs and an invitation to return whenever she wanted or needed, no matter the circumstances or the reasons. Remus had let her floo to Hogsmeade, and then received a letter later on that afternoon announcing her arrival and the silence that accompanied Hogwarts during the short days and long nights.

Their correspondence continued everyday. He'd write to her, she'd write back. And one day, catching him by surprise, a package a little bigger — much bigger — than the standard letter came flying in with a hefty, burly looking owl.

It had been a green cable-knit sweater.

'Merry belated Christmas, something green to go with all that red. Both a gift and a thank you for everything you did for me. I will never forget it. Happy New Year,' she had written in the card.

And on the very last day of December, after he had patiently waited for Eva's letter, he wrote his reply, grabbed the sack with his books and a week's worth of clothes, saluted his parents — told them he'd write to them as soon as he got to James', and was on his way to celebrate the long awaited New
Year with much joy.

Like that, Remus ended the year with a smile, a green sweater, and a sense of fulfillment.

"So," James announced as he landed with a great thud on the maroon couch. He peered at each of his friends through his rectangular spectacles, his eyes stern. "This has to be the best party we've ever had. Better than Halloween."

"We know," Remus muttered, sipping on his tea.

"No, seriously, better than last year's."

"As long as Benjy sodding Fenwick doesn't show up pissed on rum and whatever that muggle rubbish was that Fletcher'd sold him, then I'm sure we won't have to spend it at St. Mungo's again," Sirius said.

A smile grew on James' lips, gradually turning into a small chuckle.

"You remember that?" he asked through a laugh, holding his head in his hands as he shook it.
"Bloody awful, I could barely answer the Healers' questions."

"I know, because I ended up doing it for you," Remus reminded him, setting his cup on the coffee table. "And Peter over here had to hold you up the entire time, couldn't even stand on your own two legs."

All three of them broke out into a laugh, each one of them looking over at Peter, who managed a smile as he kept his chin down, his gaze on the cup of untouched tea in his hands.

Remus frowned, his eyes dropping to the floor before looking back up to Sirius—who had already turned back to discuss James' impromptu guest list. He looked back to Peter, eyes narrowing in on his friends near chewed off nails, not a sliver of interest in current affairs.

"James!" called out Euphemia Potter. She walked into the room, her black hair long down to her waist with white streaks all throughout. Smile lines edged around her lips and in the crinkles of her eyes, her teeth white pearls against perpetually tanned skin—a glamour charm, according to James, but a beauty nonetheless.

"Yes?" James twisted around to look at her from over the couch.

"Lobmy came back with the last of the bottles, but I'm not having the house-elves planning your party for you. Take Sirius and move them yourselves."

"Yeah, all right, in a moment," he told her. She gave a curt nod, one last grin to the boys, and then turned back around and disappeared.

"She was supposed to have left by now," James sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"Probably scared to leave you alone after what happened last year," Remus mentioned, sliding to the edge of the couch with tapping fingers. He could feel Peter's anxiety bleed out of him and stain his own shoes, causing his brain to go into overdrive to pinpoint the cause.

"You know," Sirius began with a snort, looking to Remus. "They said the only reason they're leaving us is because you and Evans are gonna' to be staying over."

"Smart people," Remus quipped, causing both Sirius and James to grin.
"Anyway," announced James, running his palms over his thighs as he stretched his back. "Got to go move those blasted bottles."

"I'll help, mate," Remus said, beginning to sit up.

"No, no," James countered, shaking his head. "Mum'll have my head if she sees you or Wormy doing anything. I sort of need my head for tonight, you know?"

"He means his tongue," Sirius taunted, sticking out his own and wiggling it back and forth. They both stood up, winking before turning around to head out towards the house-elves' door, leaving Remus and Peter to sit in silence.

"Pete."

Peter looked up to Remus, his eyes widening.

"What's going on, mate? Everything all right?"

Blood flooded to Peter's face.

"Grand," he responded all too quickly.

"Okay, let's try the truth. What's wrong, mate? I can't stand to see you like this, you know it worries me."

Peter bit down on what was left of his thumbnail, and Remus bent his head further down, trying to catch his friend's gaze as he did everything in his power to keep it hidden from him. His brows furrowed, watching the tears well up in his blue eyes.

"Is it your mam? She all right?"

Peter nodded, mumbling, "y-yeah."

"Mate." Remus put a hand on his shoulder, the corners of his lips downturned as Peter's chin began to tremble.

"I ca-can't, I can't tell you," he surrendered, a single tear dropping from the corner of his eyes. "Not because I don't, I don't want to. I'm."

Remus reclined his back to the couch, exhaling as he watched Peter. Unlike Sirius or himself, Peter rarely had secrets. There was very little that he felt ashamed enough to keep from them, oftentimes being reprimanded for talking without thinking.

"You'll hate me, all of you— especially," he faltered, scrunching his eyes closed as he pressed a finger to his temple. Remus reached out a hand to his back again, watching him. "Especially them."

His blue eyes moved to the doorway that James and Sirius had walked out of.

Remus' chin tilted upwards, letting the confession sink in.

"All right," Remus said after a second's silence. "You tell me, then."

"What?" Peter asked, turning to him.

"Tell me, we'll figure it out you and me. No need to tell them— I get it, I do. They can be a little aggressive sometimes, stubborn. They're my best mates, but that doesn't mean you aren't."
Peter's hands began to shake, more tears trailing down his red-blotched cheeks.

"I'm not supposed to tell you— they'll, they'll kill me. They wanted to kill me, said they'd make it look, look, look like an accident."

Remus had to blink to make sure he had heard correctly, his mouth falling open and then closing again when he realized he had nothing to say.

"Who, Pete? Who would say something like that?"

"They— they'd said that if I told, they'd, they'd say I was a traitor— that I betrayed you."

"Well, clearly they didn't think that through, did they, now? We know you'd never betray us, Pete—"

"Sirius, he hates me," Peter said, wiping away at the tears that had begun to run dry. Remus tried to shake his head, but didn't manage to get in a word before Peter continued. "Always talks bad to me, puts me down, always feels like rubbish compared to you three. I never, never, he calls me all those names and never wants to hear what I think. Always telling me to shut up and stuff."

Remus felt his heart clench, his stomach screw in a bad direction, hoping, praying that he had no part to play in this. He pursed his lips together, taking in a deep breath before releasing it with a small nod.

"Sirius can be a tough-love sort of bloke, at times—"

"He'd believe 'em, think I betrayed you," Peter interrupted, sniffling and rubbing his nose with his sleeve.

Remus looked up to the ceiling, not sure how to continue. He wanted more than anything to comfort his friend, but it was beginning to seem like a two team game, and he had never been one for sports.

"Tell me who threatened you, Pete. I'm not going to say a thing to either one of them, I solemnly swear," Remus promised, his expression stern, boring his eyes into his friend's.

They sat in silence, Peter biting on his thumb, Remus watching, waiting. He was no Eva, no Sirius—Peter would crack under the slightest pressure, sweat with only a jumper.

"Nott," he whispered. "Snape, Dolohov, Rosier."

Remus scrubbed a hand over his face, blinking as those names dove in, closing his eyes and reopening them to the ceiling.

"They threatened to kill you? They actually stooped that far this time?" Remus inquired. Out of the corner of his eye, he could detect Peter nodding.

"Aye."

"Why?"

"I don't know— scare me, probably. They want me, they want me to spy on you three. Tell them everything we do and all."

Remus took in another deep breath and held it in his lungs.

"Fucking cowards. I can not believe them," he muttered, shaking his head as he sat with his back
straight, adding one and one together to come up with a conclusion. "All right, fine, we won't tell Sirius. Have you, well, you know, have you already started feeding them information?"

Peter looked down to his lap.

"Yeah, once."

"Okay, and what'd you tell them?"

Peter looked back up to Remus, his eyes blinking, his lips pouted and shaking with the force of an earthquake. Tears began to spill out of him again, and Remus could feel his heart beginning to freeze and sink.

"I-I to-told 'em 'bout Saturday, about Saturdays."

"Mate," he began, his words careful, his gaze on his friend's leg.

"I'm so sorry, Remus."

"Fuck, Pete."

He was right, there was no way from deepest pits of hell to the high heavens Sirius could ever find out about this. Everyone picked by them, by Remus himself, had been trusted to not utter a word to anyone, Slytherins most of all. A club where they didn't simply dabble, but practiced the Dark Arts, Sirius claiming the only way to beat the enemy is to know the enemy. Anyone who found out about it, had enough information to get them all expelled, not just the Marauders, but all of them expelled.

"Snape knows, then?"

"I'm s-sorry, please don't hate me," he begged, his ands clasping together and coming to his lips. Remus closed his eyes, not being able to keep himself still without wanting to smash his hand through a window.

"Well," Remus sighed, jutting his chin forward and giving a resigned shrug to his shoulders.

"Nothing we can do, eh? Wait and hope we don't have a expulsion review waiting for us after Holidays."

"Re-Re-Remus."

"Fuck," he said again, slouching down into the couch with both hands on his temples.

"Remus, please—"

"Pete, not now." He heard a whimper escape his friend, who turned away from Remus to look down into his lap. "I know it's not your fault, that you were scared, but you do realize you could have made up something? Unless you were under the Imperius, or they had forced you to take veritaserum, I don't understand—"

He gave up, throwing his hands into the air while pursing his lips. Remus stood up, not bringing himself to look at Peter before pulling a cigarette out from his pocket and turning to walk to the patio.

"I'm sorry, Remus."

So much for that sodding tranquility.
The Slytherin common room was beautiful when the only sound was that of running water and not bickering boys. No one to force her into banal conversations, to pull her aside and ask her opinion on this wizard or that witch. No one who would squander her time with talk of the weather, everyday having to come up with another shade of grey to fill the dialogue with.

No, nothing to look forward to, no schedule, no reason to wake up early or late. Nothing, empty, barren. Only Remus' letters which she opened behind drawn curtains, all the while grinning like a fool with aching cheeks as she read over his words. She'd laugh when he hadn't mean to be funny, and smile when he said his mother's car's engine wouldn't turn over because of the cold. No particular reason for it, only that he had taken the time to write her those lengthy letters.

But that morning, there had been no letter. Matter of fact, two entire days had passed since his last, rationalizing that his friend's house left him with little time for such. And thus, she hadn't bothered to write him another, no longer wanting to burden him when he could be enjoying himself with less boring things.

'No wonder everyone wants boring Eva, boring Eva's got tits.'

The thought caused her heart to screech, her insides turning a similar shade of Scottish weather, dull and bleak. She ignored it, picking up her things from the black-wood study table and walking back to her dormitory.

She didn't need his letters to keep her company, she had live, sentient human beings living inside her head. Uncanny and intriguing all at the same time. She felt less scared of them now, beginning to dwell deeper into who they were, and not what they were. Young girls like herself, but also mothers, grandmothers—who knew, who understood and could answer her questions.

Twenty five in total they were. Twenty five of them all connected and scattered across the world. From County Kerry to Queensland. Iceland, Guyana, Argentina, too.

Why do I understand Gaelic? she had asked.

Because I do, dearie, one of them had responded. And I'm in your head.

Their knowledge was her knowledge, and her's, their's.

Can I really see the dead? she had questioned hours later.

Only if they want to be seen, they answered. The same answer Remus had given her, having caused her to grin and clap her hands together as she twirled about her dormitory.

They distracted her, and that was good. It would only be days until she would have to see him again, and she didn't know what she was expecting—or what to think when he laid eyes upon her.

She opened the door to her room, the shower on as she placed her cloak onto her bed post's coat hanger.

The shower turned off, and the only other person who had bothered to stay — which she had yet to understand why — opened the door to step out. Eva turned to look over her shoulder.

"Oh, Eva! I didn't think you were going to be here," Aphrodite Flint almost shouted.

Her cheeks beamed like two red ornaments, bright and glossy from the steam that had begun to evaporate out of the bathroom and into their room. Eva smiled tightly at her roommate, making way to swivel back to her cloak before her eyes locked in on three, burgundy-colored bruises lining her
Her eyes widened, her mouth falling open and then closing again. Aphrodite tried to hide them by flipping her hair, failing to realize that short hair didn't pair well at a masquerade.

"Please don't tell anyone," Aphrodite squeaked, her face pained as she looked to Eva with wide, watery eyes.

"It's none of my business," Eva reassured her, turning back around.

"It's just," Aphrodite continued, as if in over drive, "I like him so much— he's so good to me, you know? Treats me right, and I just. " The witch shrugged her shoulders, looking down to the ground. "I'm happy, and I know it's wrong, maybe. I don't know. It feels real right, though."

Eva blinked, looking to the olive branch broach.

"It's important to be happy," she managed. "As long as you're happy, and it's what you want"

"Oh! Eva! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Aphrodite skipped forward to embrace her roommate, wet hair nuzzling against Eva's back. "I have to tell you all about him!" She pulled back from her, grinning as she hopped over to her bed and began opening and closing drawers.

Eva pressed her lips as she pushed open her bed curtains, wanting to disappear inside her head for the rest of the day. She did, glad to find Aphrodite no longer sermonizing, but preoccupied with matching her undergarments.

"He's such a darling, he really is— so funny, too! Just a moment!" She heard her shout, Eva placing a hand to her temple, massaging small circles into it.

The room had turned silent, once again, and Eva could close her eyes and lean her head against the headboard. But, as she was about to open a can of worms, her entire body flinched back. The curtains were force aside, Aphrodite jumping and crawling onto the bed, laying her cheek against the pillows.

"We talk about everything! He loves to hear what I think, always asking all these questions— some would say it's annoying, but I like it, you know?"

Eva shook her head slowly, her mouth hanging open, unsure what to say. Aphrodite pursed her lips, her eyes darting up to her roommate's before falling back down to her thin, veiny hands.

"Am I bothering you, Eva? I can go."

"No, no," Eva halted her, lifting her palm. She sighed, licking her tongue over her lips and realizing that some company other than the voices in her head wouldn't be such a bad thing. Besides, it was mindless talk, enough to occupy her on things other than a blonde bastard. "Go on, talk to me about this mystery boy." She sunk down onto the pillow, flipping onto her side and placing her hands underneath her cheek, a copy of her roommate. Aphrodite's eyes lit up.

"His name's Tommy," she hesitated, looking to Eva, who nodded for her to continue. "He's got real soft hair, and whenever I'm sad, he gets me a fairy cake from the kitchens— 'cause he's a Hufflepuff and all. Always the one with the extra chocolate on top so it's like two desserts in one, you know?"

Eva smiled, allowing the girl her moment in the sun, figuring she had kept this pent up inside of her for too long. Tommy MacCabe, it had to be. A Hufflepuff muggleborn of whom Eva knew next to nothing of, except that he managed to gain a steady thirty pounds every year— according to
"He thinks I'm real pretty, too. Always saying nice things about my hair, eyes. He likes those bows I have, you know the ones that can turn into butterflies if you tap 'em?"

"Yeah, I've seen them once or twice," Eva replied. Aphrodite's hand reached out and clasped around her wrist, squealing all the while.

"Oh my gosh, Eva! You don't know how much I've wanted to tell someone about Tommy, I'm so glad you understand. All these girls think they're too good for everyone else, but it's not true. Tommy's sweeter than all those Slytherin berks, and likes to read and everything. He writes me poetry all the time, and can play a guitar. He wrote me a song, you know?" She began to giggle, biting on her bottom lip to stifle another squeal. "Come on, now it's your turn. Fancy anyone?"

She faltered, her brows knitting together and her head giving a small, bewildered shake.

"No, there's no one," Eva told her. Aphrodite rolled her eyes.

"That's no fun, everyone fancies somebody." Aphrodite pursed her lips together, pushing them out and giving Eva a once over. "You don't always need to have a broom up your bunghole."

Eva sighed, looking away from her roommate's brown-eyed gaze and instead to the striped pants Aphrodite had chosen for that day's outfit.

"Not saying I do, but even if I did, what would I even do with it?" she asked her, looking to her.

"I would tell him! That's what happened with Tommy, he was too shy. Still is, so I have to initiate and all that. He says he likes it, though, can appreciate a strong witch."

"I'm engaged," Eva whispered to her.

"Are you really going to marry Evan?" she whispered back, leaning forward so that their noses were only mere inches apart.

She held her breath, not having expected the word to have gotten out so quickly. She gulped, her bottom lip pouting outwards as events that she had wanted to scratch off her calendar flooded back in. She shook her head. "Then, who cares? Snog the bloke! You're not marrying Evan this second. When the time comes, you pick up your things and leave."

"And where would I go?"

Aphrodite paused, blinking.

"With me. Tommy and I are gonna' elope. I've been savin' all the money my tad's sent me, even lied saying I needed extra for new books 'cause I got 'em all wrong in the summer. I haven't bought anything in a year!" Her hand reached out for Eva's, holding it there. "We're gonna' get a house, and I'll make sure there's a room for you."

Eva's brows furrowed, taking in a deep breath and holding it in her puffed up chest as she searched her roommate's eyes for some sort of joke. There was none to be found. Aphrodite was a boulder in all of this, and she would not budge from the decisions she had already made from herself. And though Eva had done nothing more than to push her aside for years, she had offered her an escape when she had most needed one.

"Thank you."
"Well, don't thank me yet!" she giggled, tightening her grasp on Eva's hand. "So, come on, now you'll tell me who you fancy, yeah?"

"I told you, I don't fancy anyone. And even if I did, how would I know?"

Aphrodite stared at her, her face slowly falling as she realized that the question wasn't for laughs.

"You mean you can't tell?" she asked, almost gasping. "Oh my gosh, Eva!"

"What?" Eva laughed nervously, feeling a heated shadow creep up her neck. "I've never fancied a boy— never crossed my mind."

"You mean you've never wanted to kiss someone? Never wanted them to hold your hand or take you on a date?" Eva looked down to the necklace around Aphrodite's neck— a silver snake charm with an emerald for an eye. "When you fancy someone, you always want to be with them. You start to look for them in places, even when, like you're in the loo and you come out of it, you want to see them. You're like disappointed when you don't and everything. And then you get all warm inside when they do talk to you, or when they walk into a room, even. You want to be close with them, as close as you can get. Want them to hold you, tell you how pretty you look, or how cool it is you can make dandelions grow and stuff— even though a first year could do that."

The awkward smile on Eva's face disappeared as she swallowed down Aphrodite's words.

"It's nice, fancying somebody. Loads of people say it's the best part of seeing someone. I think that's rubbish, but everyone's different."

Eva bit down on her bottom lip, coming to a very sudden realization that Aphrodite might be right— maybe she did feel that way about somebody. Not having taken a single moment to read into her own feelings, to sit down and try to understand — although she never could — what she felt for him.

Wanting to be close to him, upset when he left, finding any reason to touch him.

"Tommy said he's going to get me one of those half cat, half kneazle pets for my birthday! Oh my gosh, Eva, wouldn't that be so fun to have here!?"

_Oh my gosh, Eva,_ she repeated in her head, wondering where and how she had ended up where she had.
What Happens When You Shake a Soda Can?

(Minutes Before Midnight - 31 December 1977)

A war boomed beyond those grounds, but to their adolescent minds, all they could picture, all they could feel, was the music that blasted through that room. It traveled into the building blocks of that home, right into the pavement, and transferring into their soles every time they bounced against it. The energy traveled up their spines, igniting each of them into glitter and fireworks. More toxic than alcohol, than any substance they could consume. Together, they were one; all and every single one of them letting the sounds and words of KISS and David Bowie make their decisions for them.

These were the last licks of complete indifference to whatever occurred outside their insular lives, and they all knew it. And they took it by the hand and spun that last lick into gold, insuring that it would last as long as it could before dying out. In there, not even the winter could touch them. Sweat wrung off their brow bones, trailed down their backs, staining ironed shirts and causing layers to be torn off without a single care where they landed.

He could say he was happy for them. Happy because they were happy, able to enjoy themselves, ignore their problems. But his forced grins and chatter about the forecast only left him feeling heavier and heavier. He knew someone would figure it out, look to him while wearing a wrinkle in their forehead, that last lick dying before his eyes as he was left to scramble and huff it back to life.

But there was no need to scramble, all he had to do was quarantine himself from them. Leave them to enjoy the music, the whiskey, while he waited outside until one brave soul admitted that they were quite ready to pass out and be carried home.

Remus brought the near finished cigarette to his lips, squinting his eyes as another cruel wind blew by him. The hair that landed over his forehead blew to one side, the cracks in his outfit allowing the cold in. He closed his eyes, unbuttoning one of the buttons on his wool coat, cooling down his too hot skin.

"There you are!"

The cigarette he had between his thumb and index finger pressed down into the bannister. It left a ring of ash behind, Remus tossing the rest of it over the edge of the patio and onto the snow-blanketed grounds.

He raised his brows, her giggles filling up the silence and growing closer with every step she took towards him. The door came to a close somewhere in the distance, and seconds later, Lily appeared at his side, arms clutching her torso, pulling tighter on the yellow shawl across her shoulders.

"What're you doing out here? Everyone's been looking for you!"

Remus lifted his chin, darting his eyes to the corner to catch her growing-concerned expression. He forced a smile, running his tobacco-reeked fingers through his hair.

"Came out here for a smoke," he replied, his tone pensive and clearly preoccupied.

Lily's eyes roamed over the dark expanse in front of them, only the lights on top of the gate in the distance illuminating the grounds. The could only see that which laid in the close proximity of the house, everything else left to the workings of the mind and its imagination.

"It's bloody cold out here," she noted as she wrapped her arms around Remus's. He let her rub her
cheek against his upper arm, falling back into his palace. "You should come inside, countdown's in 20 minutes."

Lily tilted her head upwards, warm enough from the firewhiskey that the cold was only obvious through her chattering teeth and the goosebumps on the swell of her breast.

"Remus?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you hear a thing I just said?"

"Yeah," he sighed, knowing he was doing the opposite of what he wanted. "Needed some air, could barely breathe in there."

"I know! The windows have fogged up and everything," she agreed, laughing. Remus leaned his head back, looking up to the sky. There were no stars that night, only grey clouds lurking over them.

He clenched and unclenched his left hand, pushing all the tension held up inside him into those pumps. With no idea where to go from there, how to proceed. When he was young, sometimes he thought that the images in the clouds were messages sent by the wizards of the past. They would guide him, point him in the right direction, but every arrow in that moment seemed to be pointing to worse or worser.

The best group of friends to have ever lived, he thought, remembering James' words from their third year, just after they had discovered his secret. Remus closed his eyes. Once a memory to smile about, the wistful grimace on his face looking nothing of the sort.

What had he done for this to happen, for this to be their end? What had he missed? Did a piece from the puzzle fall and hide underneath the couch? Stuck with his head in his books, running back and forth between tutoring strangers and protecting the school, that he had never once stopped to look at his own. Peter had fallen behind somewhere along the line, and no one, not even he, had noticed. That didn't seem like the best group of friends that had ever lived to Remus, not by a long-shot.

"Remus?" He woke from his stupor, looking down to find Lily shaking him.

"Yes, yes. Yeah, everything all right?"

"Me?" Her chin leaned forward, her eyes wide. "What about you? How long have you been out here?"

"I like it out here," he stated matter-of-factly.

"You're going to fall ill!"

"Merlin, Lily, I don't need you playing mother right now," he muttered, reaching into his pocket for another cigarette. Her eyes narrowed in on his fumbling fingers, watching the end of the stick turn to an orange glow before looking back up to him. "I've got enough on my plate, no reason for you to be out here. Go back in with the rest of 'em, enjoy yourself. It won't last forever."

"What the bloody hell are you on about, Remus?" She clutched at his jacket, listening to him sucking and inhaling the smoke. His eyes turned to slits, a small shake in his head with a wry smile coating his lips.

"You know that thing they say? The one where it talks about life being a bitch?" He turned to look
down at her, the shit-eating smirk ever present on his face. "Yeah, well, they've got a bloody good point." He let out a short, eery laugh, causing Lily's brows to scrunch and turn upwards. "Whatever, I suppose I deserve it."

"That's not true, you know that. Remus, what're you saying? What's happened?" she fretted. His fingers continued to claw in and out, feeling the short edges of his nails digging into his calloused palms. His jaw tensed, a breath held inside his lungs while blood boiled. He could feel it, his control coming undone, what he had tried so hard to avoid since that afternoon. "Come on, what's wrong—"

"Nothing, it's nothing. Just… go back and enjoy yourself, please. I've got this, I'll figure it out," he implored, leaning his palms against the railing. Lily took a step back, her eyes leaving her hands that held his arm and moving up to his face.

"I'm your friend, Remus. Let me help—"

"Lily," he snapped, taking in a deep breath to regain his composure. "Stop looking for something to fix. You can't, not this, not me, not— there's nothing here."

"I'm not trying to fix anything, I—"

"That's rich coming from the person who spent five years trying to mend a broken cause," Remus snapped, his passiveness turning into a cold bite. An indignant snort left him, quickly turning into a derisive chuckle.

Her jaw slackened, her nose lifting upwards as she crossed her arms over her chest and sent him a scolding stare.

"You want to stand out here, in this weather, feeling sorry for yourself?" she asked, a sneer maturing on her face. "So be it. Do whatever the bloody hell you want, but don't take out your frustration, or whatever stupid little thing's making you feel this way, on me."

Remus closed his eyes, bit down on his lower lip, and stomped one foot to the ground. He shook his head, scrunching up his entire face as he fed himself the pain. The shadow that crept inside of him had a tendency to crawl out — turning a lovely night into a dismal scene — and he had let it. Behind him, the door opened and shut, signaling that he was, once again, alone.

Emotions spun inside him: guilt, confusion, betrayal, and failure — a whirlpool sinking three thousand ships all at once. There was no control of who went where, whether it was blue or red, it was all turning into one inside of him. He didn't know whether to cry, to yell, to laugh. Everything swelled, kicked, began to irritate and burn in his sides until all that he could do was pull his fist back and smash it into the bannister.

"Fuck," he snarled, holding the bleeding knuckles to his chest as he bit down on his lip. The physical pain was good, temporary; the physical pain was familiar, something he could handle, deal with, heal. The earthquake underneath his feet, he could not, he wasn't nearly powerful enough for that. But he needed a solution, to find one, to make sure they came out of this in one piece. There had to be an answer stuck in the back of the closet, a word on the tip of his tongue. He could sense it, but it seemed stuck, gummed down to that one spot, and no matter how hard he pulled, he could not get it out for the life of him.

Long, sleek fingers pressed into the underside of thin, pink lips, while eyes narrowed on the sunflower-colored yoke that slipped down a glass and into James' mouth. Sirius looked away, a grimace plastered on his face as the redhead next to him picked up her own glass and downed
James' head wrung like a wet dog, shivering at the taste of pending salmonella slithering down his throat. He could sense it sitting at the pit of his stomach, jiggling back and forth like Lily's mother's jellied salads. There was a distinct green tint to his features, eyes almost rolling back into his head as he fell back into the couch.

"What exactly was in that?" Sirius asked, gulping, causing his Adam's apple to pop out. He could feel last night's festivities threatening to come up, picking up his pitch black coffee, and having a go at it in the hope it'd mollify the hangover. "You know, besides the raw fucking egg."

"Worcestershire sauce, squeezed tomato, vinegar," Lily listed. Sirius brought the edge of the cup back to his lips and took a longer gulp. "Hot sauce, salt-"

"Got it," he said, cutting her off as his stomach flipped and flopped like a fish out of water.

"I think I'm going to be sick," grumbled Peter from his side.

"You should try it, my father swore by it," Lily insisted, raising her yolk-covered glass to them. Sirius lifted his hand, shaking his head and holding his forehead in his fingers as he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath.

"You'd think," he began, smacking his lips together while bringing the coffee up for another sip. "Fleamont — being a renowned potioneer and all — would have some sort of Hangover Potion laying about."

"Doesn't want to encourage it," James responded through a yawn. He lifted his body forwards, stretching his arms back before settling down with a hand reaching over Lily's shoulders. She shifted, placing a leg over James' as she grabbed hold of his shirt and snuggled into his chest.

Their sudden movements caused Sirius' head to sway, forcing him to look to the doorway while his fingers clenched around the scalding mug.

"It's four in the afternoon," he noted.

"Meaning what, exactly?" James inquired, following his friend's gaze to the open door.

"Where's Moony?"

"Still sleeping?"

Sirius sucked his teeth and shook his head.

"No— where's he been? He disappeared last night, ghosted everybody. No one could find him—where the fuck—"

"He's not feeling well," Lily said in a low voice, leaning forward to pick up her milky tea.

"He's not?" James asked as she repositioned herself against him. "Should we send for my Healer? What's he got? The full moon was two weeks ago—"

"No," Lily sighed. "It's not that, something's happened— I, I don't know what. It's making him bloody upset, though, like he gets when he's miffed 'bout something. Lashes out at everybody."

The hand Peter used to hold his biscuit dropped to his lap, forcing down the bits that stuck to the walls of his dry mouth. He picked up the tea that sat against his hipbone, swallowing near all of it to
get rid of the extra dose of nausea that caused his body to flush with heat.

"Lashes out at everybody?" repeated James, sharing a look with Sirius. "Why, who'd he lash out to?"

"It doesn't matter," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "You know he'll feel worse if we badger him about it. Let it pass, he'll come back with his tail between his legs like he always does."

"Fuck that," Sirius said.

"What? Where're you off to?" James asked, watching Sirius as he stood up — coffee cup in hand — and began to exit the room.

"To go wake the bastard up. He's ignoring us, can't you fucking see that? And, I'm starting to get sick and tired of this shite." Without another word, Sirius disappeared from their view and only the sounds of his slippered feet squeaking against the marble staircase made them aware of his presence. James took a deep breath, lifting up his chin and looking to the ceiling.

"All right, love, be back back in a jiffy," he announced with a light pat on Lily's thigh.

"He won't tell you," she told him, removing her legs from his own to allow him space to stand up. "He wouldn't even tell me."

James looked away, lifting his brows as his index finger lifted to scratch at one.

"Sounds like bird trouble, then."

Lily scoffed, rolling her eyes. "You think Remus doesn't talk to me about girls?"

"Not if he couldn't get it up," James quipped, winking one last time at her before reaching over the table and stealing a biscuit from Peter. He, then, stepped over her legs and followed in the same direction that Sirius had gone seconds ago.

He jogged up the stairs, counting every step he took before landing on the first floor. His head swiveled back and forth, searching the corridors until he finally heard a grunt to the right. He followed it, squinting his eyes through the dimmed halls, and catching sight of Sirius' hands on the doorknob. He rocked it back and forth, attempting to open it as he pushed against it with his shoulder.

"What're you doing, Padfoot?" James asked, leaning against the wall to its left.

"Locked the fucking door." 

"So?" James shrugged. "He always sleeps with his curtains drawn— Remus likes his privacy."

"Good, glad your memory's in check," Sirius retorted. "Still need to open the door if we're going to get to him."

"Well, all you had to do was ask," James whispered, running his palm over Sirius' arm while blinking coquettishly. He licked a tongue over his lips, both of them watching one another before Sirius bursted out into a chuckle.

"All right, you prick, get on with it."

"Move out of the way. This is a job for a man," James said, placing one hand over another fisted one and cracking his knuckles. He tilted his head both ways, another satisfying crank letting out before
reaching into his waistband and pulling out his wand. He placed its tip to the doorknob, staring at it intently before casting, "Alohomora."

A sharp click! resounded from the lock and into the hall, the door creaking open.

The room was dark—the curtains closed, the covers drawn up and over Remus' body. Sirius didn't waste a minute, sliding past James and approaching the bed. His hands reached for the covers, throwing them off the bed before he took three steps back and then flung himself onto Remus.

"HOLY FUCK!" Remus yelped, shooting upright, but not succeeding because Sirius had his torso pinned to the bed. He gasped for air, scrambling to push him off his chest, kicking while the other two shared a laugh.

Eventually, Sirius rolled to the other side of the bed, clutching at his stomach as tears welled up in his eyes. Remus' face scrunched, groaning in response to the soreness throbbing in his chest. He rubbed his eyes and ran a hand over his face as he felt the distinct winter morning film coat his skin.

"So," Sirius began, his fingers playing with the corner of the comforter. "Sleep well?"

"Why the fuck— what the fuck was that for?"

"It's four o'clock," James stated. Remus turned to look at him, blinking his eyes wider.

"So, that means body slamming me into the bloody bed?" Remus brushed another hand through his hair. "Fuck, I wonder what would have happened at five— thrown me out the fucking window or what?"

"No, but we'll keep that in mind for next time," Sirius retorted, before reaching out his hand and tapping a finger against Remus' knee. "D'you know, Moony, that last night was the first time in five years we didn't count down all together?"

Remus' face fell, inhaling a bout of breath as he pursed his lips and nodded.

"Yeah, I was— I don't know, I was rather tired."

"Then why'd Lily tell us you lashed out on her?" James puzzled, his eyes narrowing. Remus chin leaned forward, his eyes darting everywhere but to his friends' faces.

"Is that what she said?"

"Those exact words," answered Sirius.

"I suppose the music— sometimes when it's that loud, it can get to my head."

"Let me understand— you didn't count down with your best mates because of what, exactly?" Sirius let out a snort, his head flinching as he looked to James with a rigid smile.

"I was feeling poorly," Remus reiterated, sighing as he lifted his hands to drop them again. "I'm sorry —"

"I have seen you go to class with 103 degree fever, but you couldn't use ten seconds of your time to count down with us? A tradition we've kept since our first New Year's Party."

"Sirius—"

"It's our last year at Hogwarts," he continued, bowing his head to look Remus in the eye. "It's our
last party, the last one like this, and it was supposed to be the party of a lifetime. Where were you?"

"Fucking hell," Remus muttered under his breath. "I said I'm sorry!"

"Sorry," scoffed Sirius, shaking his head.

"What about Marjory?" James asked. "She looked for you all night."

"What about her?" repeated Remus.

"She fancies you, you know? But you don't seem to care about that, or about anyone, really," Sirius finished for James.

"Please, stop the theatrics." They were the wrongs words, and Remus swallowed the rest before he could finish, instead looking down to his wringing hands. Sirius' eyes grew wide, a contemptuous snigger coming from him as he looked between his two friends.

"We're your best mates," Sirius bit back, his nostrils flaring. "Or we're supposed to be, I thought we were. But, for some time now, I can't help but feel like you're trying to get rid of us."

"That's not true—"

"What is it, then? Found someone better, is it?"

"No, of course not, please," Remus almost begged. He could feel the whirlwind showing up again, the beginnings of it as a dry, dead leaf fluttered by to announce its present threat. "I just, I only need some time to, to think."

"We could help you, mate. You don't need to do it all alone," James told him, taking a seat at the end of the bed. Remus shook his head.

"No. No, not this time."

Sirius clenched his hand, bringing it to his lips and biting down on his knuckles.

"Well, figure it out fast, real fucking fast," he advised Remus. "And take a fucking shower, you reek."

Without much else left to say, he picked himself up from his friend's bed and walked over to the windows. One grand pull, and the curtains were wide open, letting in the infamous blue light. Remus' forearm swung up, covering him from the sudden attack, scowling all the while.

James didn't take his eyes off him, peering out their corner to him. He knew Remus, they both did. They knew that he believed isolating himself would insure everyone's contentment, even safety, but he failed to realize one thing. What he couldn't quite grasp, even after so many years, was that the ones who loved him wouldn't abandon him without great struggle. Seeing him that way, under the covers as the sun came down, didn't sing to anyone's tunes. If anything, James couldn't help but feel worse than he had waking up that morning with an anvil to his skull.

Sirius walked back over to the door, nudging James on the shoulder to get him up and going. They both walked out, Sirius turning back around to watch Remus searching about for a missing sock.

"Take the fucking shower, now."

(7 January 1978)
The rest of break passed without so much as a second glance from Remus. A week ago he had felt his legs coated in led, but it seemed to have spread to every other part of his body. Arms, neck, even the tips of his toes felt heavy and squished inside his well-worn boots. But he played along, allowing them to puppet him and place him where they needed him to be, dictating his movements, even when and how loud he should laugh.

Their days had passed with many of its hours asleep; their nights, however, filled with different companies in various cities. An evening in London, another in Puddlemere— every day a pick from the hat and off they went. Apart from their journeys, Remus had waited by the window, watching the distance while a cup of tea shook in his hands. He'd even taken on a nasty habit of cracking his knuckles, not sure what else to do with the tension in his tendons.

Thoughts of returning home had popped up every now and then, having to hold himself back because he knew he'd want to be there when the letter came for them. But nothing had. The only owl that had come was Merry, and another he had recognized from Hogwarts' owlery— which had almost sent him into an epileptic shock until he had realized it was only Eva.

And somehow, a handful of days later, he found himself with his temple pressed against the all too familiar Hogwarts Express window. His arms crossed over his chest, staring out as the train gave one last hoot, and they began to roll out of the station. Remus slouched down even further, stomach churning as his knee jerked up and down, trying to figure out how and why they were on that train.

He glimpsed over at his friends. Sirius held a folded Daily Prophet, lips downturned as he skimmed the headlines; and Peter attempted to scrawl out mediocre answers on his procrastinated holiday assignments. James and Lily were off, supposedly doing train rounds, but knowing they were more than likely snogging in a vacant compartment.

Remus, sitting opposite from them both, felt his eyelids threatening to close. It was the first time in two weeks that any of them had woken up to the sun in the east, and he wished more than anything that he could be back in a bed.

He closed his eyes, taking advantage of the free space, and lied down. With a slowing breath, he shove away all questions of his current reality and replaced it with nothing of great importance.

"Oy, Moony!" A voice broke out into the silent compartment. Remus groaned, a warm hand laying on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

"Remus," he heard a gentler voice whisper into his hear. A hand ran through his hair, causing him to pout and nuzzle further into it. Lily let out a light laugh, looking up to James, who mock-scowled at Remus. "Remus, it's time for your rounds."

"What?" he grumbled, turning his face to the opposite side, towards the cushion. "No, no rounds."

"Please, there's been an accident with one of the prefects, and we need somebody to fill in."

Remus opened his eyes, flipping his head back over so that he could look directly into Lily's eyes. "I thought there was some sort of benefit to being best mates with the Head Boy and Girl," he said, sitting up. With a great big yawn, he planted his feet onto the floor and stood up with a cat-like stretch. "Okay, rounds, yeah?"

"Yeah," James began, biting down on his bottom lip to stifle a grin. "With Mustaq." Remus' jaw slackened, his eyes darting between Lily and James to insure that this wasn't some joke to get him to wake up.
"Sykes has been sick in the loo since the train left," Lily added quickly, noticing her friend's fallen face.

"We suspect he's taken something," James continued, pursing his lips and leaning against the compartment door.

"The bloke is a walking apothecary," said Sirius, snorting. "How'd he even make prefect?"

Remus let out a minute groan, giving one last pointed look to James before surrendering with a sigh. He flicked his chin over to the now empty seat, signaling to James to move over and let him through.

"Don't worry, if you're not back in an hour— we'll tell your parents you love them," Sirius taunted, both him and James sharing in a laugh. Lily rolled her eyes, but not helping the grin on her face.

"Make sure Billy's well fed, too," Remus added on before letting the door slide close and walking off into the corridor.

Passing through two carriages, he eventually arrived at the Prefects compartment. He put his forehead to the glass, peering inside to see if she had already arrived. But when he saw that no one had, he opened the door and poked his head in.

"Hello?"

He sighed, shaking his head as he stepped into the compartment and walked over to the round table to have a seat. Remus allowed himself to get comfortable, dropping down into the chair, his hands folded across his stomach, and his legs spread out in front of him. But, all of sudden, he began to feel warm; he could feel heat rushing into his cheeks, the itch of his jumper uncomfortable against his skin. The back of his hand reached up to press against his forehead, frowning when he concluded that it wasn't a fever. He shifted, shoving up the sleeves of the knit and sitting back into his seat.

Minutes passed, or maybe it had been seconds, but Remus sat upright, running a hand through his hair and feeling droplets of sweat accumulating across his forehead. He picked himself up, taking to waiting in the corridor, wondering if he should take the initiative and go control the entire train solo. It'd take a good while, opening up each compartment, make sure no one was sticking their friend out the window, but what choice did he have? Either that or wait an eternity.

The cool air rushed through him like iced water on a hot summer's day. He felt himself breathing again, his head defogging, pressing the back of his neck against the cold window. As the countryside rushed behind him, he did a full circle with his head, cracking the sleepy bones in his neck, closing his eyes to relish in it.

Further down the corridor, he could hear a compartment door slide open. He turned to look at it, but before he could even get past their shoes, something hit his ribs. He looked down, brows scrunching together, before a gush of pain jolted through his entire body. His breath halted somewhere in his trachea, completely escaping him. A scalpel-like feel stuck in his stomach and twisted it about, ripping at his insides, causing him to clutch it while falling to his knees. He reached out for the wall, a door, anything to give him support, but all he could find was the floor.

Another lash came out of nowhere, hitting him on the other side. Remus let out a half-wheeze, half-yelp sound. His vision began to turn black, the world tipping back and forth like a balance scale. All he felt next was his nose smacking into something and pressure on both shoulders.

"Come on, Lupin," someone grunted. They shoved their hands underneath his underarms, picking him up onto his jiggling legs.
He was dragged somewhere, something soft cushioning his bottom as his entire body leaned against a wall. A wave of nausea washed over him, and his stomach contracted and spat out its contents before anyone could do anything. It smelled acidic, coming out and spewing all over his lap, so that he could feel it soaking through his trousers.

"Scourgify," someone casted while he continued to chase his breath. Short and shallow, though he knew it would only make him feel worse. Thankfully, the scent of rotten food didn't linger, making it more bearable as tears began to run down his cheeks.

Sofia Mustaq sighed, knitting her brows together, frowning as she surveyed the Gryffindor. He was ashen and faint, not yet able to lift a finger or open his eyes.

"Chocolate," he croaked, the one word coming out in a sharp breath. She didn't hesitate, knowing what to do, reaching forward and beginning to pat down his pockets. Once located, she cracked off a single square, breaking it into two and placing it on his lips.

It melted against the heat his body let off; the sugar and the bitterness doing its job, beginning to twitch and gain control of his fingers and his toes. All he had to do was focus on the feel of the dark, rich thickness on his tongue.

"Low blood pressure, huh?" she asked. He nodded, taking in a deep breath as she placed the next piece to his lips. "Yeah, my brother carries around dark chocolate, too— salt works better."

Remus wished she would stop talking.

"Fine, I won't say anything," she muttered. His brows furrowed, daring to open up his eyes — fearful that the world may still be shaking, content when he found it wasn't. He reached into his pocket for another square of chocolate.

"I didn't tell you to not say anything."

"It was rather obvious," she drawled, running both hands over her bottom as she took a seat beside him.

"What happened just now?"

Sofia pursed her lips, eyes darting up to the empty trunk rack and back down to his face. She crossed her legs, pressing her elbow into the one that sat on top and leaning closer to him.

"It would seem that Antonin Dolohov has invented his own curse," she explained, her words elongated and slow. "Which would come as a surprise seeing as he's such a fucking idiot. But..." She titled her head, batting her eyelashes at him. "It is rather impressive, never seen something like it before."

"What?" Remus asked, his jaw coming unhinged. His eyes glimpsed over at the compartment door, which Sofia had covered with the blinds. "Dolohov did this to me?"

"No."

"But you just said—"

"I know what I said."

"Then, what? Who? Why would—"
"Evan."

"Rosier?"

"The one and only."

Remus took a deep breath, lifting himself so that his back sat straight against the seat. His hand reached up, wiping away the sheen of sweat from his hairline, thinking over the Slytherin witch's words.

'Nott, Snape, Dolohov, Rosier,' he recalled Peter listing. They had attacked him first, then what, came after him? As if it were some sort of list. Except none of that made sense. What reason did they have to attack him when they were planning to expel him? They had everything they needed, enough information to never see any one of them four ever again, and completely destroy their futures. Almost as if they'd gotten a taste of blood, and couldn't help but go in for seconds.

"No one's fucking expelling your lanky arse," Sofia stated.

"Come again!?" he blurted out, his forehead wrinkling while his neck bent forward.

"Why the fuck would anyone want to expel you of all people?" she continued.

He moved back slightly, his mouth gaping, finding even the right words not accurate enough for the questions running through his head.

"Halloween retaliation? Ha!" Sofia snorted, shaking her head. "Answer this, Lupin. How many testicles does Nott have?" Remus held her gaze.

"I-I don't know."

"Wild guess."

"I don't bloody know," he nearly cried. "Two, I'd assume. How is this relevant?"

"Okay, he's got two. How many of them do you think he'd give for the likes of you?"

"What the fuck are you on about?"

"Fucking answer it, Lupin."

"Er, I'd assume neither—"

"Exactly, he doesn't give two bollocks about you. Why do you think he cares whether you're expelled or not?"

Remus carved a hand through his hair, grasping at the strands as he let it go with an exaggerated breath.

"Listen, Mustaq, I don't— I don't fucking know," he gave up, not able to put one and one together when he felt like someone had cut him open and left splinters inside his organs. "I haven't slept in days—"

"—pft, obviously," she quipped, her eyes roaming over the bags under his eyes. She ran a hand through her shoulder-length, coal black hair while her glassy eyes looked to him. "They can't expel you if Pettigrew's confession was coerced. The moment that's revealed, the entire claim becomes void. And believe me when I say this, Edmund Nott knows that."
One moment his stomach was contorting, and now, only minutes after, it was hardening. His eyes
narrowed on her, lids rapidly blinking.

"How, the fuck, do you know any of that?" he inquired in a rigid whisper, his words shaking from
the continuing lack of sensation in his limbs. Sofia pursed her lips, looking down to her nails and
twisting her wrist back and forth.

"That's sort of my speciality— I just know things," she riddled. The witch gave a little shrug, looking
to the window before moving her gaze to him.

Remus' eyes dropped down to his palms, the tips of his fingers itching for his wand.

"Calm down, Hercules, no need to get all hot and bothered. We're only chatting." Sofia shifted, her
hand reaching through the neck of her blouse and into the her bra. She fumbled about with her
breast, Remus' face flashing bright red as he realized what she was doing.

"Fag?" she offered, smirking. Her hand stretched out towards him with one of the cigarettes. Remus
shook his head, lifting his palm to decline.

"No, uh, I've— I've my own, thanks."

She shrugged, placing one to her mouth and lighting it with the tips of her fingers. A cloud of smoke
came out of her nose as she took the first few puffs, tilting her head back and looking down at him.

"It's against the—"

"Do not fucking finish that sentence, Lupin."

He pressed his lips into a tight line and nodded. They remained in silence, nothing but her inhales
and exhales filling it. His eyes toured the space, Sofia continuing to watch him. She blinked, tears
welling up in her eyes as the smoke floated up and burned them.

"Sorry, but what do you mean you know things? What sort of things do you know, exactly?" Remus
surrendered, not helping himself, the question too pronounced in his mind to leave it untouched. "I
mean, what? You're, you're what? Some sort of legilimens?"

She pressed the cigarette into the metal lining around the seating, not once taking her eyes off him.

"You won't tell anyone what happened here. I'm glad you didn't cause a ruckus with your mates.
Merlin knows it'd have been a Trojan War in two days time, if you had said anything." She took a
deep breath, licking her tongue over her painted lips.

"Why shouldn't I say anything?"

Sofia rubbed her hands over her thighs before standing up, coming to her full height in the tall black
heels she wore. Her hand etched into the door handle, sliding it open before giving him one last look.

"She's right, you do ask a lot of questions."

"Wait!" he called out. She turned with lifted brows. "What about rounds?"

"Pfft!" And with that last note, she left him alone with only his thoughts.

His gaze fell to the floor. Maybe it was a sickness, or maybe Peeves had a point when he called him
Loony Lupin, but something inside him tingled. No longer nervous jitters, but a climatic sort of
feeling that bloomed over him like the first flowers to show after a long winter. He dropped back into
the seat, a hand running through his hair, a wide, toothy grin beaming on his face. The first real smile he had managed in days.

It matured into a laugh, his cheeks hurting from the sheer size of his elation. No longer did he feel heavy, but the opposite—as if he could fly.

*(8 January 1978)*

But not everyone had floated from pub to pub drinking away their grief. Instead, Eva had spent the rest of her holiday scavenging the castle for hidden burrows. She wanted away, far away from everyone and anything that could remind her of what had happened. And with the students’ return, it seemed not a decent space remained untouched.

Luckily, she had found solace in a deep set window edged into the Turris Magnus. Without classes in session, she knew there was no good reason for anyone to visit those parts. So, she had grabbed her books, with the knowledge that she would be left alone, and went to enjoy the last day holed up somewhere distant and safe.

Hours passed. Morning rushed into noon; time lost meaning in that part of the world, for the sky held one color and no indication whether the sun was up or down. She closed the book, placing it in her lap, casting her gaze outwards to catch the last minutes of dim light that graced the castle.

She raised her fingers, pressing the pads into the cool glass. When she released them, she smiled at the foggy imprint she had left behind. She did it again, shaking her head at her own silliness, but letting out a small laugh all the same.

"What're we laughing about?"

She jolted, the book tumbling off her lap and onto the staircase. Remus lifted his brows, bending over to retrieve it. Eva's eyes widened when she realized who it was. Her insides turned to ice, her heart stopping and then dropping into her stomach as he handed it back to her.

"You're a hard one to track down," he teased through a light chuckle. Remus took the liberty to sit down at the spare end of the stone seating, by her feet.

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She brought her knees further into her chest, not only to give him more space, but also to put distance between them. "Thought you'd be in the boathouse, went down there looking for you."

He turned to her. She was staring down at the book he had just returned to her, but could see her features as clear as day. Hunched back, gaunt, lifeless face, pale as if she hadn't eaten. The scar across her cheek had faded, hair a little frizzy, composure no longer regal, but rather fragile and broken. He bit down on his lip before forcing himself to smile.

"We're a little quiet today," he needled, nudging her leg with his forearm. "All right? How was the rest of your holiday?"

Eva took a deep breath, keeping her eyes focused on the window instead of him. She hadn't been sure of how it'd be to see him again, not after the chaotic revelation Aphrodite had instilled in her. At first, she had wrote it off as over thinking or imagining something that did not exist. But it manifest, every night growing into something stronger, something that had not been there the day before. Whether it be imagining his arms around her, or the way his dimples protruded when he smiled—she was thinking about him.

Aphrodite had called it fancying somebody, but Eva could not bring herself to imagine feeling that
way about him, or anyone. To focus on one person with such a magnitude seemed foreign to her. She knew about dating, what two people who fancied each other did, but she could never see them ever being those people. Holding hands, sharing a slice of cake, going to Hogsmeade together. But, and what left her puzzled, was that that acknowledgement made a pain shoot out from her heart, causing her to clutch her stomach and her lungs.

And that odd pot of emotions made her wish there was an ocean between them.

"Eva?"

Remus leaned back, giving him the chance to get a better look at her. Her finger traced the metalwork, the same few inches over and over, causing Remus' brows to furrow as he straightened his tilted head.

"Peaceful," she managed, not knowing how to speak to him anymore.

"Nothing interesting? What'd you do for New Year's? I wrote, but you never responded."

"Well, you took three days to respond," she shot back in a whisper with a slight shake to her head. Her words sounded thin, on edge, causing Remus to place his head into his hands, elbows digging into his thigh.

"Uh," he began, looking away from her while running his tongue over his teeth. "I don't understand, you knew I was at my mate's. I told you I wouldn't be able to write you everyday."

The quiet was anything but welcome, and Remus couldn't help but watch her out of the corner of his eyes. He opened his mouth every other second to say something, but not knowing how to interpret her silence, and thus remaining speechless.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked her, his ribs beginning to tighten.

Eva blinked to where his spine would be underneath his thick jumper. She breathed slow, taking her time to think. Yes, she wanted him to go. Not because she never wanted to see or talk to him again, but because she didn't want to yet. His presence had stunned her, caught her off guard. One moment she was weaving her way through an intricate Malaysian discovery, and in seconds, someone had come and stampeded all over it.

She needed to spin all of it into a logical conclusion, something she could resolve. And that current lack of conclusion made her want to rip her hair out strand by strand, shake someone, shake herself into figuring it out. *Anything* to make sense of it, because felt paralyzed, as if her body was not her own, as if her mind had gone and made a decision without her permission.

"Can you say something? 'Cause it seems like I'm bothering you," he continued. She pressed her lips together, giving one firm nod without ever turning to look at him.

Remus didn't know what he had been expecting, but for some reason her answer had felt like a slap in the face. He looked out to the staircase, grimacing briefly as his chin flinched back in a delayed response.

"Brilliant, another pile of shite," he muttered under his breath, shaking his head in disbelief. "All right, okay, I'll see you 'round."

She felt a thick mass gather up and well in the back of her throat, making it hard to swallow or for air to come up. Her eyes began to feel warm and foggy, squinting to distract herself from them. Did she want him to leave? Or was it all the smoke inside of her that she didn't know how to release? The
same fire that had died out long time ago, greying her insides, wanting her to explode, but she, herself, keeping it from happening.

He gave her one last glance, clenching his jaw, before standing up and making his way down the stairs. He stopped, his fingers tapping quickly against his thigh before he swiveled about and stepped back up to level himself with her.

"Really!?" Remus asked, his voice and face a colorful assortment of emotions—from utter bewilderment to acute frustration. "We're back to this? All because I didn't respond the same day, even though I'd warned you 'bout it?"

"I want to be alone," she said in an undertone.

"Fine, okay, I can respect that. But why are you writing me off? Not even a hello, how are you after not seeing one another for a week?"

"It was only a week."

Remus' face pinched, his eyes having to blink because somehow he thought it'd assure he hadn't heard wrong.

"Yeah, but, I assumed. I wanted, you know. I was looking forward to seeing you, Thought maybe," he faltered, gulping, feeling his heart clench. "What about... After, after all of that? I mean, after everything that happened, I thought maybe things had changed between us."

"Changed?" she repeated, whispering it out loud to herself. Certainly, things had changed, everything was different for her. She had left the school as one person, and had come back someone else, someone not even she could recognize.

"Unless, I mean, have you changed your mind about me?"

Eva had nothing to say, or nothing she could find to say. All she had was locked lips, keeping her words inside of her. Even if she wanted to shout, she couldn't. She wished she could open up, explain everything: her confusion, the bottled up cocktail of acid and vitriol that she kept capped inside her. But it remained, it stayed where it always had, keeping her mouth shut because she did not know the right way to handle any of it.

"No," she forced in a breath. "I just want to be alone right now."

"Aren't you fucking tired of being alone?" He caught himself, closing his eyes and pressing his fingers to his temple while cursing himself internally. Remus stretched his neck back, his head looking to the top of the tower, throwing up his hands in surrender. "Okay, all right. Let me know when you want to talk, if you ever decide you want that. Didn't mean to, sorry if I bothered you, just wanted to see you is all. I'll be here, around somewhere, so I suppose that's all." He gave her a brief, rigid smile before turning to descend the steps. He shook his head, the corners of his lips forcing themselves downwards despite knowing he had no reason to be upset.

But he'd be lying if he said it didn't hurt.

He felt like a right git for jumping down her throat when she had every right to push him away. The constant back and forth was what tricked him, fooled him, every time stepping closer to only find that there was another trap in his way. And he wanted her in his life, truly yearned for her to be there. He'd been convinced on that couch, falling asleep together while watching Murder of the Orient Express, that she'd wanted the same thing. That's what made him tear at himself, that he had known, should have known better, and yet had fallen into the same trap he always fell into.
(Monday 9 January 1978)

A piddling grunt left Remus as he bent over and placed his barefoot into a sock, rolling it up passed his heel so that it laid against the lower half of his calf. He leaned back, stretching his foot out to make sure nothing was out of place as the dormitory's door creaked open. He turned to look at it, watching James rushing into the room with his hair even worse than after a Quidditch game.

"Forgot something?" Remus asked, glimpsing over at James before pulling out the leather dress shoes from underneath his bed.

"Lily left her Potions book here last night. Nearly stabbed me with a fork when I told her she could use mine, and I'd just look on with Fabian. Made me come all the way back up here," he replied, sighing as he grabbed the pale blue book strewn by his bedside table. James tossed it between his hands, turning back around to catch sight of Remus' bent back, fingers fumbling about with laces. "Everything all right, Moony?"

"Fine, yeah. Why?" he inquired, finishing up with his uniform and straightening his spine. He reached down and grabbed hold of the leather bag at the floor of his bed, buckling the flap closed and standing up.

"Just a thought. We never talked after that time, you know, New Year's," James explained, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the bed post. "I know you—"

"Overreacted," Remus cut him off, shaking his head in disbelief as he recalled how he had been, what he had said. "I jumped to conclusions, realizing that none of it really made much sense." He paused, finally turning to face James. "I was a complete prick to everyone, I won't deny it."

James' gaze fell behind Remus, to the thrown about bed sheets, as if they had been in some sort of wrestling match. He slid his wand out from where it lay underneath his belt strap and flicked a quick spell over it.

"Thanks," Remus sighed, walking around the center hearth towards him.

"Don't mention it." James ran a hand through his hair, tossing it both ways until it sat in a worse fashion than a second ago. "So, what was it, in the end?"

"You won't tell anyone what happened here,' rang in his head, looking to the door.

He wanted to tell them everything, what had happened to Peter, how he had almost shat himself agonizing over expulsion, the attack on the train. There was no longer any solution he had to find, no reason for him to strain his nervous system to fix the things he had believed to be broken. No, he could tell them everything with ease, a stroll along the shore, a few words over a pint or two. But not yet, not until he had all the facts lined up. A day or two, a moment to destress, to focus back on his studies before diving back in. Only this time, it wouldn't be into a frying pan.

"Soon," he finally said. "I solemnly swear."

"Yeah, mate, take your time. We're here," he assured him, shrugging his shoulders before pushing himself off the bed post. "Besides, got to get this book back to Lily before she marches up here with smoke comin’ out her ears." James' eyes widened as he lifted the book and waved it in Remus' face, who permitted himself a short chuckle. Both of them made way to exit the room, grins on their faces,
James throwing his arm over his friend's shoulders to bring him closer.

"You know," he began, whispering in Remus' ear. "We took bets— reckoned you'd gotten some Welsh bird pregnant."

"What?" Remus exclaimed, his chin jutting forward as he turned his head to look at James, who raised his palms in defense. "Mate, that's not me. Who bet for?" He cleared his throat, causing Remus' jaw to slacken as he threw him a pointed look. "Merlin," he cursed under his breath, pressing a hand to the center of his forehead as he tried to stifle another round of laughter. He failed, both of them did. It was impossible not to with the way James clapped his hands together and threw back his head, his chuckle too contagious for Remus not to join in.

Sofia walked, no, marched with clicking heels to signal her presence as she travelled against the undertow of students. They skipped out from a room situated around the Middle Courtyard, shoving against her, pushing her to take shelter and wait on one of the damp stone benches. She rolled her ankle, peering over at the melting snow running down the leather. Her head tilted, eyes lifting up and roaming further over the rest of the cloister. Black ice — more mud than snow — piled up against the borders, and a grey sky which only added to the unsightliness of it all. Her hand reached into her brasserie, pulling out a cigarette and placing it to her lips.

Sofia paused, waiting until McGonagall's pointy black hat disappeared around the bend with the rest of the students. With the newfound loneliness, she lit the cigarette and closed her eyes to drink it in.

"You sure do spend a lot of time looking at her," chimed Mundugus from behind her. He grunted, swinging his legs over the open arcade and planting his soles on the empty space next to Sofia.

"I hate the cunt," she sneered along a breath of smoke.

"Yeah, I'll never forget—"

"What do you want?" Mundungus' face fell, his eyes narrowing before rolling about in his head. She placed the butt of the cigarette back to her mouth, and twisted her torso so that they faced one another.

"All right, whatever— have anything new?"

She exhaled through her nose, a scowl appearing on her face as she looked over at the iron Armillary sphere that sat in the center of the courtyard.

"Fucking Peter Pettigrew."

Mundungus lips parted, his eyebrows scrunching together as he shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned forward.

"What? You're tryna' tell me he went and joined—"

"No, you fucking idiot. Attacked, right before holidays."

"Before!? Merlin, Mustaq— you're supposed—"

"I'm not supposed to do shit, understood? Not some little bitch, you lot ought to be kissing my feet," she reminded him. Her jaw clenched, teeth grinding down into one another as she huffed out another bout of smoke.
"What happened?" he asked, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the wall.

"Lupin, at first—"

"What?"

"Let me finish," she hissed, waiting for complete silence before continuing. "I found out from Lupin, did some rounds with him on the train. Got some names: Dolohov, Snape, Rosier, and Nott. Pettigrew ended up spilling about Black's little club."

"Yeah, all right. What? Miffed with the lack of invitation?"

She lifted her finger, wagging it in his face as she sucked her teeth twice.

"Except they aren't. This isn't some playground fight—they knew about it." His eyes popped open, looking out into the distant with a puckered mouth.

"Go on."

"Suspected. They only asked him about the club, nothing else."

"And?"

"I've good reason to believe they think Black's club is the Order, and that someone's sent them to inspect it, dismantle it, or find out who's in it, either way—"

"You mean they think that Black's hobby is us?" he reiterated.

"Both Black and Potter were attacked during the holidays, Death Eaters following them. They're targets now, both of 'em—all of 'em."

"Who cares about those berk's," Mundungus fretted, his vision going blurry from how fast his eyes darted about. "Bloody hell, you're saying they've joined? All four of them, working for him? That's—"

"I don't know," she admitted begrudgingly, her manicured nails brushing through her hair. "They've got walls up, especially Snape. Couldn't get in, and whatever I did get was superficial."

Mundungus kicked himself off the stone he sat on, standing in front of Sofia with eyes like saucers.

"And that's not suspicious to you in the slightest? All four of them versed in Occulumency!?" he exclaimed, his fingers reaching out to grab hold of Sofia's cigarette. "That didn't ring any bell—"

"It's not cutting a fucking cake," she snarled, both of them holding each other's gaze. "You would never be able to do it! You wouldn't have the fucking guts to do what I do." Sofia darted her hand forward and took her cigarette, bringing it to her lips and taking a long drag from it. They sat in silence, Mundungus not once lifting his stare from her. "You don't know what I've seen, what I know, things I never wanted to…" Mundungus surrendered, taking a deep breath before walking over to sit next to her on the stone bench. He crossed his legs, his fingers tapping against his knee as smoke twirled about him.

"We expected them to join, but not like this, not until they graduated." He turned back, retracing his steps, trying to figure out what they had missed. "Regulus was the exception, not the standard, but we were wrong—"

"Someone's recruiting them from the inside," she muttered, handing the cigarette to Mundungus. But
he was lost in space, none of his surroundings obvious with the blueprints folding and unfolding in his head.

"Who?"

"I don't know, but they're— think about it, Rosier, Dolohov, Snape, Nott."

"So?" he asked.

"They've never been mates, Nott couldn't stand the likes of Snape. Rosier and Dolohov always had it out for one another since the beginning of time. These are not best mates playing a little prank," Sofia explained, her eyes roaming the opposite arcade to insure no one lingered. "They've got a reason to be together; whatever that reason is, it came this year."

"Well," he said, waking up and looking down at the almost finished cigarette. "Any ideas?"

"No, not one, but whoever they are, they're bloody smart. Covering their tracks."

"What'd you mean?" Sofia leaned back, her head pressed against the stone behind her, eyes on the back of his head.

"How is it in there?" she inquired. "Dull, I imagine, always having to rely on someone else for the answers." Mundungus lifted his brows, letting out a snort and smirking.

"I won't lie, it would be interesting to have what you have."

"It's annoying is what it is," she countered, pressing the charred end of the cigarette into the side of the stone bench. "It all turned to dog shite after Halloween, after that stupid fucking prank. They plotted their revenge, but," Sofia trailed off, her eyes twitching while searching the distance.

"But?"

"I don't know," she whispered airily. "It almost seems like some sort of test."

"Test?" Sofia stood up, lifting her nose into the air.

"I don't know, picture's not clean yet, need to a little more time."

"Well, what do I tell Dumbledore?" She looked through the archway, into the covered arcade where sat several different portraits. Most of them had huddled together in the portrait of a family during the Witch Hunts. They sat about a fire, knitting needles going to work on a blanket or scarf of sorts, drinking tea and discussing whatever it was sentient portraits discussed.

"Tell him I'll let him know when I figure it the fuck out," she rehashed, her head tilting as she grew mesmerized with the needles.

"I can't tell him that, Mustaq—"

"Then tell him to stop Black and his club, they're going to get themselves killed if they continue. And go talk to Lupin, he's going to ask questions soon—"

"What?"

"He hasn't told anyone about the attack on Pettigrew, but he will, eventually. And when that happens, we'll have questions from every corner, especially that redhead cunt," she explained, flicking her nail against her palm. Mundungus' mouth opened, closing as he looked to her with
disbelief.

"And you didn't think to tell me this earlier?"

"I bought us some time—"

"—how do we know he hasn't told anyone yet?"

"Because he hasn't." Mundungus dropped back against the wall, two hands coming to scrub his face. "I bought us some time," she continued. "He's a planner, he won't say anything until he's got it figured out, and the timing's not right. He's sitting on it."

"You fucking talk to him, then. Tell him everything," he said, shaking his head.

"What?"

"You heard me— besides, he's next on their list. Dearborn's been grooming him."

Sofia looked back to the portrait, eyes blinking without a stop in sight. She wondered how far he would drive her until she reached a point of no return and simply smashed his face into the wall. A solution to turning him unrecognizable, never again having to stare at his bumblebee eyes.

"Why the fuck do I have to talk to him? Aren't you the bloody recruitment?" Mundungus stood, lifting up his palms as he began to retreat backwards.

"Just handle it, Mustaq."

"Yeah? Well, fuck you, Fletcher," she shouted as he swiveled about on his feet and began to head towards the south end of the courtyard. The portraits from the cottage all looked to her, one of them sticking their nose in the air and tutting. "Fuck you, too."

(Tuesday 10 January 1978)

"I've always wanted to go to Curaçao," Aphrodite mused as she wrapped her hand through the crook of Eva's arm. The two witches lifted up from the dungeon shadows and into the grim Scottish light gracing the Entrance Hall, where the voluble bursts of morning glory trailed out from the Great Hall. Eva's brows lifted as she watched the magically artificial rays of sunlight bouncing off goblets and silverware, and though a pale resemblance to the outside world, she felt it a much welcomed and needed change.

"Oh no," Aphrodite said, shaking her head as she pulled Eva in the opposite direction of the Slytherin table. Her brown eyes skimmed over the sea of green, catching sight of a flash of blonde before turning and smiling at Eva. "You can hardly ever find a seat at our table, I much prefer the Ravenclaw one."

Eva opened her mouth to say something, but closed it when she found no decent argument against it. They walked over to it, a passing glance from a curious onlooker, but no one protesting their sudden change of routine.

"Have you ever been?"

"Been where?"

"Curaçao," Aphrodite clarified. Eva shook her head, taking a seat on the right side of the long wooden table. "Well, I reckon we should go. Wouldn't that be lovely? I should tell Tommy, though
he burns so easily in the sun, which reminds me." Aphrodite spun around, looking over her shoulder at the Hufflepuff table, eyes narrowing in on the Quidditch commentator.

Eva, on the other hand, forced a polite smile as she looked down to the silver plate that had appeared before her. Everything had been rather simple up until that point. Between the unintelligent time spent with Aphrodite — though grateful all the same for or her blissful ignorance — and completing assignments, she had little time to think of much anything else. But sitting there, with the cause of her sluggish heart and the boulder sitting in her stomach only mere feet behind her, made her shift and fidget with anything she could get her hands on. Hem of her skirt, the strap on her bag, the knife on the table. He made the wool of her stockings itch in a horrid way, and the bloat in her belly puff out ten times as worse. He made her want to walk backwards out of the hall, eyes to the ground until she was, once again, safe under her covers.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes before opening them and pulling out her wand. The wand tapped on the cup next to her plate three times. Not a second passed before the smell of black coffee wafted up into her nose, filling her with warmth. By the time she had filled her drink with sugar and milk, Aphrodite had sat down and helped herself to oat-encrusted toast and marmite.

From the table next to them, two pairs of green eyes peered on over at the Slytherin pair. He watched her hand reach forward and grab a mandarin off the tray. She peeled into it as if it were a porcelain doll, placing the peels onto the plate before going at it again. Not once had she given up the forced uplift of her lips, absentmindedly nodding her head at whatever her housemate said. Remus picked up his own cup of coffee, taking a sip from it while still watching her. He couldn't help but notice the gauntness to her, bruised from what could only be sleeplessness; there was also a watery fretfulness in her eyes which made him question whether she would burst into tears or a run.

His breath slowed, a thumb running up and down the side of the mug. They still hadn't exchanged a word, and even though it had hardly even touched upon two full days since their last encounter, he couldn't help but feel it had been a lifetime. At first, he had assumed the worst, that it had something to do with him; that she had come to a delayed realization of wanting no association with him whatsoever, but he shook that hunch out of his head before it could canker. He knew her better than that, she would have never answered in the negative if she meant otherwise. So he had fallen to the next obvious conclusion: the time she spent alone in that massive castle had caused memories to resurface, even relive. He understood, she needed time to sort out through her next few steps. He would have done the same, isolating himself while spending days tossing and turning, growing quiet, even disappearing.

Even so, he couldn't help but smile as he saw her looking up with wide, blinking eyes at whatever Aphrodite Flint had said. It had to have been enthralling, for the Slytherin witch's hands flailed about with every word, and Eva's hand paused on the fruit. He smirked into his coffee cup as her nose began to scrunch and her polite smile turned bemused. His chest twisted, tightened, followed with a small sigh, realizing how much he was hoping she'd come around sooner rather than later. Sitting next to her in potions the other day, with neither uttering a word, had him running a hand through his hair every two seconds. He had wanted to look, to say something, anything, but instead forced his focus on their professor's lecture.

"One person told her she could sing, and now she thinks she's WWN-worthy," continued Aphrodite. Eva moved her eyes over to the food laid out in front of them. Her stomach somersaulted, finding herself without an appetite for the fourth time in a row. She pressed her lips, lifting her gaze past her roommate's shoulder. Green eyes met hazel, causing her breath to hitch in her throat.

They both looked away before either could react any differently. Remus felt heat creep up the back of his neck, looking down to his fingernails, paying false attention to Peter and Lily's impromptu
tutoring session. Eva, on the other hand, reverted her eyes to Aphrodite, the smile from before long gone. One of her hands had reached up to hold her upper arm, rubbing it up and down, causing friction against the cashmere of the grey sweater. She pushed to ignore the brief jolt of electricity that had zapped her seconds ago, taking in a slow breath and letting go of it.

It was nothing, like someone's touch startling her when only exchanging books.

Like Regulus.

Yes, like Regulus, that's what she told herself. Because everything about the two situations matched up, identical twins without even an eyebrow different. She had needed him in a dire moment to forget a dangerous door that had opened up—voices in her head, wanting to grasp onto normalcy. A minute, nothing more. Irrational, yes, but with all the cards falling back into their rightful places when the game finished. Her and Remus would return to what they had been, amicable conversations and a lunch together or two. Nothing else, nothing more, nothing less.

But Eva knew he wouldn't bother her, knowing it would be on her to make the first move. She would, except on Tuesdays they didn't have potions, and consequently, neither had a good reason to speak to one another.

Yes, no good reason for her to seek him out. Not yet, soon, but no sooner than necessary.

"What're you doing all the way the fuck out here?" came a voice from behind Eva, shaking her out of her stupor. Her eyes bulged out, turning her head to look up at the person who was sliding into the seat beside her. His thin leg swung over the bench, an extra-curly head of hair bending over the table as it reached forward for the plate of sausages.

"Don't know, a change in routine is good for the soul, you know?" Aphrodite responded, shrugging her shoulders as she took a bite out of her toast. Eva reached for her cup, searching for a distraction, for she knew she was the reason they were there, akin to exiles, with two iced-over eyes digging holes into her shoulder blades. She pressed a finger to the tension in her temples, a shiver running up her back as if someone—he—was breathing down her back. The thought formed into a sour, sugarless lemon drop on her tongue, her mouth shriveling up like a leaf in a desert. "Where's Sofia?"

"Masturbating, or fucking Mundungus Fletcher up his arsehole," quipped Alex. Aphrodite's forehead scrunched and her lips parted. "Never can tell what the difference is these days."

"Oh, well," she began, managing to recompose herself. "That's all right. We've got Eva for company."

He turned his gaze from Aphrodite, who gestured with her own eyes to the witch sitting next to him. The Slytherin turned, his chin digging into his neck, his hands raised up as he beamed down at Eva.

"Oh my gosh! Little bird, it's really you!?” Alex gushed through a mouthful of food, which didn't seem to hinder him from reaching out and embracing her.

A distraction good enough that all thoughts of champagne-laced breath escaped her mind. She looked down to her hands. The cup was trembling between them, not having realized that they were, and made way to place it back onto the table when Alex had finally released her. "You've decided to ditch those bastards and join the righteous side, then?"

Eva couldn't help but find it rather odd that everyone seemed to think they were the righteous side. She forced a smile all the same.

"If you'll have me," she said, joining in on the playful banter.
"Pft! If you'll have me, did you hear that?" Alex looked to Aphrodite, before reaching forward and tapping his wand against his own cup. "Of course we'll have you, petal." He took a sip from his pumpkin juice, smirking. Eva's head tilted slightly, her eyes darting between them. He had accepted her with such ease, no prior knowledge of her presence required, an embrace and a laugh and that was all. "I reckon we're going to need some sort of way to identify one another from now on. Isn't that right, little bird?" Alex turned to face Eva with owl-like eyes, munching into the sausage on his fork. "There's too many of us, it's brilliant. They're," his thumb jutted back over his shoulder, "going to hate us.

"As if they didn't already?" Aphrodite teased, shaking her head and rolling her eyes before letting it grow into a giggle. Eva's lips pressed into a tight line, and despite herself, her mind traveled there, to them, 'they'. She wondered if they were looking at her, whispering amongst one another while she finagled with a girl in love with a boy, and a boy in love with himself. *Eva's been kicked to the outskirts, Eva's skirts are stained brown.* No Japanese silk or wool jackets, a golden city in the distance, a bottle passed around. She looked back up to their faces, laughing, smiling. No, these weren't faces of those who had been forced out, they had chosen that path; and she knew, knew it was time for her to chose. Not yet, soon, soon enough.

Remus stifled a groan, his eyes roaming back over the empty spot between *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration* and *Transfiguration Before Written Word: A Theory*. His hand rubbed over his face, the dampness of his palm pulling down his pouted lip before accepting his losses and hopping back down the staircase. He landed on the ground floor, making his way over to Madam Vivlia's circular desk located in the middle of the library.

"Yes?" she drawled, a book opened and covering her face, which she did not seem quick to relinquish.

"Er, yeah, I was wondering if someone had already checked out *New Theory on Facial Transmogrification* by Trandafira Tarus?" he requested. She sighed, shutting her book with a sharp *snap!* and peering up at him from under her spectacles. Her eyelashes were spidery form the amount of mascara she wore, and blue eyeshadow covered her lids. Without another word, she twisted about in her chair and waved her wand to open the archaic book register. Dust particles and the distinct musky smell of page rot rose up from it and into his nose, causing him to viciously rub at it as her finger ran down the list.

"Nope," she answered, flicking the book closed with another wave of her wand.

"Oh, all right. Thank you all the same," he muttered, tapping his fingers against the desk. He sighed, pursing his lips and turning around to find his friends where he had left them. Sirius was folding one of a parchment into a paper airplane, and Lily was picking out another quill from her bag without noticing the one she had tucked behind her ear.

With a conceding shoulder drop, he walked back over to them, plopping down into his seat and carving a hand through his hair.

"All right, Moony?" asked Sirius, folding the last wing on the plane before angling it on top of the pile of books they had collected. He pulled out his wand from inside his sleeve, muttering a quick incantation before sending his creation zooming into Adrian Schwartz's curls.

"Ow!" the Ravenclaw yelped, his hand reaching up to pick the paper weapon out of his hair. Sirius sniggered as he crouched down under the table, balancing himself on the tip of his toes with a hand on James' thigh. Remus rolled his eyes, throwing his friend a pointed look before shooting his gaze upwards as a paper plane with a compressed tip flew past him. He followed its path through the
library until it finally hit Rory McPhail on the tip of his nose, causing him to stand up, hands fisted at his sides, pink-pinched face turning a deep shade of burgundy.

"That was gold!" Sirius announced, sitting back in his seat as he followed the paper plane dashing from Rory's hands and back into Adrian's eye.

"Should someone say something?" James inquired, eyes firm on Lily.

"Nope," Sirius answered before anyone else had the chance to.

"Great, anyway, has anyone seen or know of who may have checked out the book on Transmogrification theory by the Romanian witch?" Remus asked, looking over each one of their faces. Sirius sucked his teeth and shook his head no.

"No. Sorry, Moony," James said, placing his forehead into his hand and bringing his book closer to him.

"Pete?"

"No, mate, haven't," Peter replied, not having looked up once from whatever it was he was scrawling down on the parchment.

"I already finished the Transfiguration questions from today—"

"—you did!?!" exclaimed James in a failed whisper, his eyes widening. "You monster." Remus' eye twitched before turning upon Lily.

"—you could have a look at mine," she continued, looking up with the tip of the sugar-tipped quill that he had gifted her for Christmas placed against her lips. Remus' eyes darted back and forth between her and James. He tapped his fingers against the table, gnawing on his bottom lip.

"I feel bad," he said, scrunching up his nose. She waved her hand and rolled her eyes, a hand darting into the bag strewn out in front of her and tugging on a rolled-up piece of parchment.

"Don't, but you will owe me one," she teased, grinning as she rolled it down the table to him. He grabbed it, placing a hand on each end of the parchment, and opened it up to skim over the writing.

"Thanks, Lily," he said. "Let me know if you need help with anything." He heard her hum in the affirmative, going back to her work and leaving him to sigh once more. Remus reached into his own bag to pull out an ink jar and a quill.

They sat in silence, a snicker or two from Sirius when his paper plane came swooping by, but stopping when it dropped dead to the floor and turned into ash. He had turned around, catching sight of Madam Vivlia's dagger-throwing stare before picking out a random book and opening it to any page—the index. A normal, mundane afternoon in the life of a seventh-year. But sometime around the fourth question, with a lingering debate in the back of Remus' head on whether he should pull out a thesaurus or not, a shadow enveloped the table.

They all stopped and looked up.

"Marjory," greeted Lily with a smile, pulling the quill away from her mouth.

"Hiya! Everyone all right?" she whispered in a cheerful voice, taking a seat in the empty chair next to Remus. Sirius' eyes jumped between the two Gryffindors, a smirk grew on James' lips.
"Yeah, all right. You, Bones?" Sirius returned, tilting his head to get a better look of her face.

'She fancies you, you know?' Remus recalled James saying, blood rushing to the back of his neck as he clutched his quill a little tighter.

"I may have procrastinated a little too long over the holidays. Arithmancy is due tomorrow, and I'm afraid I'm nowhere near finished," she explained, a mirthful giggle between her words. "Reckon I'll be up all night. If any of you lovely people find yourselves up at two in the morning, you know where to find me for a cuppa." Sirius' toothy grin fell to his lips alone, a finger reaching up to scratch his hairline, trying to figure out whether she had slipped some gillyweed — and where he could get some if so — or if her merry manner was innate and why?

"Remus can help you with Arithmancy. He only took it for four years," James offered. Remus mouth nearly fell open, quickly pushing it back up and gritting his teeth together. He looked to James, eyes widening, nostrils flaring— his only response was a wink.

"Wakefield almost had a heart attack when she found out he had dropped the class," Lily added, stifling a giggle as she caught sight of Remus' red ears. He took a deep breath, shaking his head before facing Marjory.

"Yeah, I can help you with Arithmancy," he surrendered, knowing he was a weak-link when it came to such things. It could have been a first year he had never met, and still would have offered. Not sure yet how he felt about it knowing that she harbored feelings for him— when had that happened? But, most of all, why?

"Would you actually?" Remus nodded, meeting her gaze for a brief second before dropping it to the table's corner. "That's wonderful, thank you! Hardly anyone wants to tutor anyone in Arithmancy, and anyone who does has packed schedules. I checked the list in the common room— the only one available is Jacknife. Gave me the shivers thinking about it!"

"How does he find time to tutor anyone with that grueling Quidditch schedule Dolohov has him on?" Lily inquired, looking up to her roommate.

"He doesn't tutor anyone, that's the point," quipped Sirius, an affirmative snort escaping Remus as he picked up his quill and returned to his work.

"Give me five minutes to finish up here," Remus told Marjory. "If that's all right?"

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip as he turned back to his work, his eyes widening with a shake in his head. Marjory watched him, placing her chin into her palm as she waited.

A good half hour passed before Remus found himself satisfied enough to close the book on that one and start the next. They were nothing more than half-arsed answers — knowing McGonagall would have his backside — but he knew it'd get no better and slid the paper back to Lily.

"Thank you, again," he told her before turning back to Marjory. "If that's all right?"

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip as he turned back to his work, his eyes widening with a shake in his head. Marjory watched him, placing her chin into her palm as she waited.

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"Thank you, again," he told her before turning back to Marjory. She had her nose near pressed up to the lines of the book in her hands. Remus lifted his brows, a crooked smile maturing. "What's that?" She turned and blinked twice before grinning.

"A book on MACUSA's political system," she answered, looking down at the pages. "They can't seem to agree on anything, that lot across the pond." Remus scoffed pleasantly, lifting his chin and pushing back the chuckle that threatened to leave him.

"Arithmancy," he said in a shallow breath. "So what is it that you don't understand?"
"Everything," she joked, shrugging her shoulders.

"Okay, so you need help with everything today?" he inquired further. She pushed the papers towards him. He took them in his hands, leaning back in his seat with his legs spread out, and reading from the top. It had the usual date and name inked out, another line of words stringed out just below. He froze, face igniting for the third time that day as he stared down at them.

**What are you doing Saturday?**

Audacious and bold, but he reckoned she would not have been a Gryffindor without it. He glanced up at his friends, whose own assignments diverted their attentions, and swallowed down the wings fluttering in his throat.

**Nothing, why?** he scribbled back, plastering his eyes to a book that floated back to its place in the bookshelves. Marjory tapped the parchment when she had finished responding.

**We should hang out, if you're up to it.**

Remus paused, thinking it over. It wasn't a definite date, Saturday excursions with a girl that supposedly fancied him could mean a plethora of various possibilities. His knee jerked up and down. She had looked for him at James' party, and he had shut down everyone with no explanation. He had acted like an irrational fool while ditching everyone and leaving them their hands down their pants. If nothing more than that reason alone, he knew he owed this to her.

**Sure, what did you have in mind?**

Remus handed her the paper, hoping his question would open up her intentions further, but counting to ten didn't suffice before she was sliding it back over.

**I'm sure I'll come up with something by then. So, it's a go?**

Her elusiveness almost made him want to laugh, palms already sweaty, his back burning hotter than a sword sitting in fire.

**But she never said it was a date,** he reminded himself.

On the other hand, if it was, if her feelings were genuine, he knew rejecting her in that moment — with his friends there, the grin on her face so large it could light up that dingy library — would only lead to an interrogation he would much rather avoid. He had no choice but to nod, quick and finite. She threw her head back, clasping her hands together.

"Shh!" hissed Madam Vivlia from the center, her wrinkled finger placed over her bright coral lips.

"Oops," Marjory said, a hand covering her mouth and causing the words to blur. She continued to giggle, everyone else peering up at the pair with cocked brows and sly, knowing smirks.

Remus leaned his elbow into his own ribs, a finger pressed to his lips as he stared off into the distance. **Bloody hell,** he thought, sighing. He grappled for the confidence that he had managed to steal from Sirius and James over the years, somehow finding it inside himself to allow one last time, even if everything about it screamed at him to let it burn away in a fire.

Without a second glance, Tuesday passed into Wednesday. Everyone could feel the pace turning up a notch, full-speed and no sign of stopping anytime soon. No longer could did they have the holiday in their muscles, already stiff before they had a chance to appreciate the tenderness of it. They had to
wake early, jog to put something inside their grumbling stomachs, but succeeding in only stuffing themselves with air.

And somehow — though he wasn't sure what had contributed to it — but Remus found himself squished between Sirius and Marjory. All he had wanted was to eat in peace, for a morning person he was not, and yet the pair bent backwards and forwards relentlessly shouting out Divination answers.

"No— wait, you've got it mixed up with 5C," Marjory said, her eyes analyzing her own paper.

"Really?" Sirius muttered, looking over his own paper as he ripped a piece of bacon hanging from his mouth. "Let me see yours for a second." Remus closed his eyes as he felt a spray of meat-essence colliding against his left cheek.

Marjory slid the parchment off the table, and without a second’s warning, crossed her arm in front of Remus. He flinched back, eyes widening, mouth still opened as he had been ready to bite down on his eggs.

"Thanks, love." Sirius retrieved the paper, shoving his plate away from him and causing the milk in his cup to spill. He placed the two assignments side by side, his eyes darting back and forth, a finger shoved into the underside of his lips as Remus attempted, for the second time, to fork some eggs into his mouth.

He lifted the fork, already sensing the fried saltiness on his tongue as another hand darted out from the left. It came crashing into his own wrist, causing the fork to drop and clatter to the floor. Remus shut his eyes, pressing the tips of his fingers to his temples while releasing an exaggerated breath. Sirius pushed his torso into Remus's, violently wiggling the parchment in Marjory's face. He blinked, expressionless, looking down at the two bites of eggs and half-eaten ham he had left on his plate.

"Yeah, fuck it," he said in a breath, picking up his things from the floor and standing up.

"You're off? Already?" Marjory asked, looking up to him with big, doe-like eyes.

"Going to stop by the library," he lied to both of them. "Forgot to return a book I'd borrowed before the holidays."

"No, but wait," she fretted, shoving a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. "I'll come with you!" He stifled a smile, lifting up a palm.

"No, stay. This way you lot have more space to finish up."

"No worries, love. I'm loads more fun," Sirius quipped, winking at her.

Remus choked on a scoff, coughing it out before turning and walking out of the Great Hall. He took the first staircase leading down into the dungeons, the musty dampness already beginning to touch upon his skin. When the world outside changed, they could always count on that part of the castle to remain static. Lackluster and obscured.

Completely alone down there, the heels of his shoes echoed for miles against those walls. Torches crackling, doing their best to light his path, but failing to rid him of the two eyes he felt glued on his shoulder blades. The thought alone caused a shiver to break up his spine, goosebumps dotting both his arms. He took a deep breath and lifted his hand to his shoulder strap, readjusting it and keeping his gaze focused on his surroundings.

Cloistered so far underneath the dirt, a feeling of being buried alive. Asphyxiation. Something in his
knees told him to jolt, to gallop away at speeds unknown to man. He could not quite pinpoint the origin, but it didn't stop his strides from elongating, throwing a glance over his shoulder every so often. His breaths quickened, air pumping out of his nose, giving off his location to any who craved it. Faster, a cold sweat beginning to drip down the back of his neck, his hands curled around his wand, the bend in the short distance he came to it.

A gasp flew out of him as he reached the torch-light, the familiar door cracked open and a quiet chatter traveling out of the room.

"All right, Remus?" Fabian greeted as they heard him appear at the door. Ralph and Sanjo, two other Ravenclaws who accompanied the redhead wizard, turned around. Each smiled the Gryffindor's way, jutting their chins out to acknowledge his presence and turning back to some colorful magazine they had spread out on the table. Remus leaned his shoulder against the doorway to catch his breath, nodding in response.

"Yeah, all right. You?" he rasped, coughing.

"Ralph brought these drawing things— comics, the muggles call 'em. They're wicked, mate. Have to give 'em a look," he offered, stepping back to free a space for Remus at the desk.

"It's got KISS battling Mephisto and Doctor Doom," Ralph added, his cheeks two crystal balls from the sheer magnitude of his grin.

"No, that's quite all right," Remus said, shaking his head. His breath was still choppy, coming out in short huffs as he tried to understand where the irrational paranoia had popped up from. A million and two times he had walked through the Dungeons, even alone during rounds, and never had he felt so alone. Stuck, as if any direction would lead to the same one; as if he could shout for help and no one would ever hear him. "Need to take a seat is all."

They all nodded, Fabian's eyes roaming over to the Gryffindor's desk. Remus followed his gaze, his breath hitching in his throat and his lips pressing together. A rapid toss-up between accepting the Ravenclaws' offer, or throwing some paint to the wind and seeing if it would give him a mural. He placed a hand on the Ravenclaw's shoulder before heading over to his seat.

Eva had turned into solid stone — a Greek statue of sorts — from the moment his name had penetrated the room.

'All right, Remus?'

The name like a curse, binding her limbs to her body, not even able to flip a page.

Only because they hadn't spoken in so long — she told herself — and the last time they had, it hadn't exactly been as smooth as summer's butter. Nothing else, nothing more, nothing less. It's what she believed in all totality, irrevocably.

A shadow fell over her, the stool next to her sliding and screeching against the stone floor. She kept her eyes unyielding on the chapter's title on page 242, one of her cropped fingernails pressing into the yellowed paper. Her eyes dropped to the knee that appeared just past the bend of her elbow, fingers sliding down to sit on top of them. His hands: veiny, slender, calloused. How discomforting. She knew them so well, memorized the feel of them against her own skin, could picture them in her sleep.

She pulled her gaze back to the page, digging her nail back into the imprint she had left moments ago, deepening it.
Remus kept his neck bent, his eyes peering out of their corners to the back of her head. She had a book opened up on the table, her hand holding its corner, no sign that she had even noticed his arrival. He cleared his throat, his foot jerking up and down against the stool's last rung.

"Good morning." His eyebrows shot up into his hairline at the familiar, reticent voice.

"Uh, hi. Yeah, good morning. All right?" Remus responded, his words as whiffled as his breath had been upon entering. He leaned his forearm against the table's edge, tilting his head so to get a better glimpse of her.

A muscle involuntarily twitched in the pit of her stomach at the sound of his voice that addressed her. It caused a sickening numbness to spread through her, and she began to wonder whether she should have eaten a little heavier that morning. Fainting was not very becoming of anyone.

"Fine, thank you," she managed, finally meeting his gaze for the first time in a long time. It didn't last very long, for she was straightening her back and looking back down at her book before he had a chance to tell whether they were more cognac or olive green today, whether they were as bruised as they had been yesterday morning or if she had managed to glamor them away. Her fingers hooked underneath the book's front cover, shutting it closed and placing her folded hands on top.

Remus followed her movements, his eyes narrowing in on her rigid, one-cornered smile.

"Yeah?" he asked. Eva blinked.

"Yes, of course."

Remus took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. He'd been there before, they both had. One worded answers, forced smiles, and avoiding each other's stares. Instead of moving forward, he had to walk backwards. An ordinary day for their friendship, he'd say.

"Er, I believe I heard Victoria Cornfoot mention that Madam Sprout invested in Vervain seeds. Thought you'd know something about it?"

Eva took a deep breath, her finger trailing up and down the book's spine. She pursed her lips, nodding. So much they could say — once would have said — and yet she could not bring herself to say them. Resting at the tip of her tongue, and yet so impossible to find. When had it become so hard with him? He'd always been easy, uncomplicated. Filters tossed aside, ties hanging loose around their necks, flour staining their noses. But no, no longer, her back would not bend, despite the ache.

Had she changed her mind about him?

"Yes," she answered in a rapid breath.

"You're going to be harvesting them? Or—"

"Helping, yes."

"Of course, that's rather cool. Are you, I mean, is that something that would be exciting?" He let out a short, nervous laugh, doing his best to keep the smile on his face from flustering.

"More so if we succeed," she whispered, eyes planted on the fingernails that had begin to scar the book's spine.

"I could imagine."
Remus rubbed both hands against his thighs, spreading out his fingers and pressing the pads into his trousers. In the past, when he had used the same sort of dance — playing on superficial questions, knowing the answer but feigning ignorance — she had gone along with it. Spread open her arms and let him take her for a spin. Prudent, but not enough to keep the awe from glimmering in her eyes. But that dance didn't seem to work well with the tune playing in the background, and he was no longer sure what would.

"So, do you know when the seeds will come?"

"In a week, most likely." Eva dropped her hands from where they laid on the table to her lap, wringing them together. "We can't plant them until the frost has cleared."

"Of course, winter and all."

"Well," she countered, blinking and tilting her head. Remus looked down at her, eyes glossed over with distance. "There are plants that thrive in the winter, albeit few. But they require the alchemical qualities of snow in order to—"

"Remus," someone interrupted. Eva faltered, her body — that had almost turned to face him — shifted straight again. She leaned forward, re-opening the book to a random page. Her elbow dug deep into the table, her cheek leaning against her hand as she distracted herself with furnaces and crucibles. "You got here rather fast, didn't you?"

There was no blaming Marjory, but he had watched Eva's resolve beginning to teeter, and thus couldn't find himself sharing in the witch's enthusiasm.

"Yeah," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Quick drop off is all."

"Yes, quick drop off," she repeated, her eyes searching his face. Her hand reached up and cupped his jaw, turning it her way. "What's wrong?"

"What? Nothing," he responded all too quick, scoffing. "Not much of a morning person is all."

"Well, I was thinking we could do something outside on Saturday? Or is that not your cup of tea? It will be rather cold," Marjory said, dropping her hand from his jaw and resting it on the table.

"Outside is fine, yeah. What? A snowball fight is it?" he teased, causing her to break out into a laugh. "Let me know, I need to prepare myself."

"Prepare yourself?"

"Yeah, armor and all."

Once her cousin had asked her why she blinked so much, but Eva had not moved her lids in the past 30 seconds. Her eyes bleeding into the miniature diagram in the upper-right corner of the page, her breath dragging out like an end of a Hallowe'en song. The ardor in his voice, their closeness, it engrained inside her mind, spinning, churning slow, very slow.

"All right," she said, nodding her head as another group of students walked through the door. Marjory lifted her hand and waved at Flora Sawbridge. "I've got to go, but outside, yeah?"

"Yeah, sure," Remus confirmed.

"It's a date, then," she cheered, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before trotting off to her friends. The smack of the affection resounded out into the room, Eva's insides curling into
themselves. His eyes darted over to her, the tips of his ears reddening as he closed his parted lips.

Like a shipwreck, the ice water flooded her before she could realize the boat needed repairing. Her breath began to shorten, his forehead wrinkling up. And like a shipwreck, the water would sink the boat. Her heart sunk, dropping into the depths of her stomach and doing nothing else but sitting there.

Her eyes swiveled everywhere, but the sudden movement in her vision sent a bout of nausea through her. Particles of dust floated in the air, coming down from the walls, and she swore she could feel her seat shaking underneath her. If not that, then she most definitely felt her certainty beginning to tremble, a wavering mirage in a desert heat.

*When?* she asked herself, eyes seesawing to each corner of the room. Her hand reached up to her throat, holding it, thinking her heart's speed would send it racing and jumping up and out her throat. She wanted something cool against her cheek, a flush of heat washing through her as she replaced Regulus with him, and herself with *her*. Out there, underneath the stars, his lips pressed to her neck. *When?* she repeated, not when did they become one, but when had it happened for her, to her? When had it turned into something painful?

"Sorry 'bout that," Remus' voice intruded her thoughts, as if his image wasn't enough. A deep breath rocked her lungs, finding control in the sudden, unbearable warmth. It would take a school of scholars to figure it out, but somehow she managed to lift her chin. "You were say—"

"What? You're seeing her?" she decried in a mix of disbelief and disgust, her eyes darting between the Gryffindor witch in the distance and back up to Remus's. He felt his chin edge into his neck, his tongue stuck between his teeth. Her tone of voice resembling to much like acidic rain to keep his hand out the window.

"Er, well, no, not really. Maybe?"

Truth be told, he didn't have a clue. Initially, he had believed that their rendezvous was nothing more than something between friends, and there had been no mention of anything more up until that point. But to place weight on her parting words was a shot in the dark, especially when it came to someone like Marjory, where it could mean anything between a playful wink or something much deeper.

"You like her?" Eva continued, something inside her telling her to stick her own hand in her mouth and rip out her tongue. But that train had left the station with a faulty break, and there was something akin to her dignity stuck on the tracks.

"Yeah, I suppose I do. She's, she's nice. Funny, laughs a lot." He looked down to his hands, the redness from his ears transferring to his face. "Tall, don't have to bend down too far to look at her," he finished with a short laugh and a shrug. Remus faltered when falling upon the unmistakable scowl donning her features. He felt his breath grow thin, silent drips as he found himself scrambling for bandages. And for what? What had even broken? "Eva?" Remus received only silence. He tapped his fingers against the table, pursing his lips, eyes flitting about the room before reverting to her. "I mean, I don't— what did, are you upset with me?"

She could feel the bitterness envelope her, but like coffee, it did not disenchant her. Rather, she wanted more of it, drink it in, satiate herself with it. A punch, a knife into his gut and twist it around and around. She wanted to spit on both of them, to smite them with everything that she had and they didn't.

He shifted forward in his seat, almost placing a hand on her shoulder to force her to turn around.
"Ev—"

"Don't speak to me," she sneered under her breath, her eyes focused on those trailing into the room. His head fell forward, his eyes widening with every blink.

"Come again?"

"Don't you ever speak to me again," she repeated, hissing it. Before either of them could continue, Slughorn walked through the door. With her head held high and all the poise of a royal, she stood up with the others to greet their professor. Remus couldn't find it in himself, whiplashed, his feet glued to the floor, his limbs slack at his sides.

"Have a seat, please," Slughorn instructed them.

"Eva," Remus made a last attempt, twisting his torso and forcing her to look at him. She did not meet his gaze, instead flitting it everywhere else. "Eva, if you've got some sort of problem— whatever it may be, I'd appreciate it if you told me instead of this, this rubbish, or whatever it is." He leaned closer, his features downturned, his eyes dulling down. "And if you don't care about me, just bloody say it—I can take it, really, trust me."

He could see her breaths shallowing, but no plans of advancing any time soon.

Remus' hand fell with a thump to the table. He conceded, turned forward and diagonally so as not to look at her. He felt his heart thumping, his hand clenching into a fist as he closed his eyes and pressed it to his teeth. Lungs constricted, all the while dredging up history to try and find how it had led there, to that, to such ugliness.

When he finally turned around, Eva let her hand reach up and cover her breast bone. She felt a massive lump stuck in the back of her throat, having felt his breath in her ear, indignant, fire-breathing and everything but warming. Too soon, all of it had happened so fast. She stifled a yelp, her shoulders stiff as bricks, her eyes holding the polished doorknob.

None of it had been false. It had all been real, tangible.

She had thought that by convincing herself it was nothing, it would have created some sort of stability, but it had all been pretend. A ladder leaning against a building: seemingly secure, but there was an earthquake shaking the world at its core. Obsessed with gathering details, searching in the past to base her decisions off of when she had none. It was not a short story with a solemn boy who needed something other than death to believe in; it was not a power-hungry monster who needed her blood to rid himself of the pangs in his stomach. It was something that had made her dirty skin feel clean, that had forced her to rip off the mask that had begun to grow into her skin. Maniacally pinpointing how and everything she had felt since their first meeting, so much so that she had lost touch with herself. Layering one excuse on top of the other until the finish looked exactly how she wanted it to. Everything shifted into one person with such force that it had knocked her off her feet, and she had sat there pretending her knees weren't scraped. Paralyzed.

Her eyes, wide and wary, turned to look at the back of Remus' head, falling down and trailing over his bowed spine. She would lose him after that, there was no coming back from it. Even if he did forgive her, she could never turn her back and deny the total loss of self-respect in those five seconds. Never before had she felt something so powerful overcome her in such a way, overriding all of her controls. Like playing with the waves as a child, but the wave being too grand for the little bird, reaching up and pushing it underneath. It crashed on top of her, hands flailing about, trying to pull herself up, but not being able to because the current was winning. The current had won.
What have I done? she gasped internally, the hand across her breast bone rubbing into her skin as she averted her gaze from him.

"I'll be handing back the assignments from the holidays," Slughorn informed them. Eva lifted her chin, her face twisted with pain but forcing it to resemble something along the lines of normal. "Due to the rather startling amount of failing marks, we will go over the answers together. You will all have a chance to hand in a revised copy of your work. It will count as a second grade, hopefully helping your overall mark."

But she didn't need help with her overall mark, she needed help with understanding. Her lacking skills in comprehension had walked her hand-in-hand into a red-faced destiny of eternal mortification. *Ugh, Eva*, said something in her head, and she reckoned, for the first time, that it was her own conscious.
The weekend greeted them with a blanket of soft snow and an infinite supply of eyelash-coating flurries. With hands shoved into pockets and noses nuzzled into scarves, Remus and Marjory grasped at the rare opportunity to roam the decorated grounds. Ten minutes had pasted, and despite an endless teasing from his part, he was clueless as to where it was she was taking. They had left the castle far behind them, the infamous nude willow tree now only a handful of feet away. But it wasn't their boundless promenade that irked him, rather Marjory's lacking giddiness. The glimmer in her eyes had vanished, the casual upturned smirk long gone.

"Er," Remus attempted for the billionth time, "still not going to tell me where we're going, are you?" He added a small chuckle at the end, though he reckoned it sounded more like a cat coughing up a hairball. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Marjory turning to glance over her shoulder.

"This isn't what you think it is," she whispered to him, hooking her arm into his own and pulling him behind the willow tree's branches.

"Come again?" he asked, tilting his head and doing his best to keep the smile strong on his bewildered features.

"Whatever you think this is," she repeated, her eyes never leaving the distant castle on the hill, "it's not." Marjory glimpsed at him, downtrodden and furrowing brows that continued to deepen with every passing second. "You're a doll, truly," the witch continued, "but this is so much more than a date, or two mates passing time together." Remus' chin raised an inch, eyes narrowing. "I needed to come up with a plan, no one can think we're conspiring—"

"Conspiring?"

"Sh!" Marjory hissed, her pointer finger lifting up to her lips. "Speak low, you don't know who's listening." Remus spared a glance around the empty, whitening landscape.

"There's no one here."

"You don't know that—"

"Who are we hiding from?"

A moment's silence transpired between the pair, reading but not yet comprehending.

"There's a group of us," she explained, her words quicker than a snitch. "A few from Hogwarts, but not really, most everyone has graduated. It's—Dumbledore created it to fight," her eyes darkened, "to fight you know who." Remus remained quiet, lips locked and ears open, pointing forward to not miss a single comma that spilled from her lips. "He recruits those he trusts, the cream of the crop," Marjory explained. "It's not something you can join. Everyone's sworn to secrecy, and if you tell anyone, we'll— well, we'll have to obliviate you."

"Then why would you tell me?" he puzzled, though the answer stood there, fluorescent against a black sky and impossible to miss.

"He wants you, trusts you," Marjory confirmed his suspicions. "He felt that you should enjoy your life a little longer. It's not easy, being a target like that, the others who have already joined — our
peers, me — they're needed for other reasons. He needs you to fight, but not yet. You need to train first. Dearborn will help you, but no one can know why."

"Me? Dearborn?"

"Yes," she stepped forward, her hands clasping on his shoulders, "you mustn't ever mention it in his presence, or out loud at Hogwarts, ever."

"But why me?" Remus repeated, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders. "What good am I?"

"You'd be a strong addition, and Dumbledore knows you'd never betray him, but you need to decide right now. I can't let you leave until you do, so we can sit here for the next twenty hours if—"

"Yes." Easy. Thoughtless, a little subconscious because beggars couldn't be choosers. Marjory pursed her lips, nodding once before releasing her grasp on his arms.

"Okay, then," she said. "You'll go to Dearborn and ask about Cornish Pixies, that's codeword to begin your training."

"When?"

"When you're ready." Remus scoffed.

"Never took you for the ambiguous, mysterious sort," he attempted to hearten, a grin on his lips that gradually fell at the sight of the tight pull of her lips. Marjory sighed, pocketing her hands, a watery glaze in her eyes. "You shouldn't have, you know, I'm sorry you went through all that trouble for this."

"I had to, no one can suspect me, us. The more people that think we're intimate, the easier it is to share information."

"Of course, right. But you did, are doing, a bloody good job at it, I was convinced— so bloody nervous." Finally, a light trickle of giggles escaped the Gryffindor witch, her eyes squinting as she shook her head. It irradiated into him, seeping into his bones, and despite the suicide mission he had just signed up for, the air felt a little warmer.

(Tuesday 10 January 1978)

Sofia leaned against the bathroom door, her legs crossed over one another and all her weight supported on her heels. She had a cigarette burning in her hand, ashes spread out on the tiled floor as Marjory stared at her in the mirror.

"What?" the Gryffindor witch asked, the smile she usually had plastered on her face disappearing by the second.

"Need you to do a job for me," Sofia told her, smoke clouding her face as Marjory returned to washing her hands, albeit taking time to work in the nooks and crannies.

"What? Why do I have to do your—"

"Fish out Lupin." Marjory's eyes narrowed onto the knuckle popping out of her left thumb, opening her mouth to speak, but closing it as Sofia started up again. "It got out that you fancy him, it's a better cover than I could ever come up with."

"What? I don't bloody fancy him, I only said he's the one I'd shag out of the four of them, " she
exclaimed, her chin flinching back into her neck and her face scrunching up. "And I only said it to Dorcas—"

"Well, seems like your bitch has got a loose mouth," Sofia quipped. "What a surprise."

"But it's not what I intended..." The Slytherin rolled her eyes and taking another puff from her cigarette. Marjory frowned, feeling her insides clench.

"Wow, Hogwarts twisting someone's words? How rare and unexpected," mocked Sofia, clapping a hand against her cheek and gasping. Marjory's eyes narrowed on the witch, her nose scrunching up in disdain.

"But why me? You do it!"

"Same path as you—Dearborn and all," she told her. "And it'd look too suspicious if I did it, you know that. Think of the greater good! The Revolution!"

Without another word, Sofia pushed herself off the door and wrapped her fingers around the handle. A breeze flushed into the bathroom, the hairs on the back of Marjory's neck rising as a full minute passed before she woke from her stupor and turned on the faucet until it was piping hot, and rubbed her hands into a bright pink.

(16 January 1978, Monday)

Remus had his chin placed in his hand as the other tapped against the table and his eyes focused on a lone figure criss-crossing its way through the library, all the while wondering if she would even bother to glance his way. He let out a long sigh when she disappeared amidst the books, giving up and leaning back into his seat to scrub a hand over his face.

A second sigh escaped him, his feet planting firm into the floor as he pushed his chair back so that he could make way to stand. With one last look to the neighboring tables, he turned into the aisle that sat between an endless series of bookcases. His eyes darted about, a book zipping and skimming past the top of his head and into the labyrinth every once in a while, but the witch no where to be found.

Pursing his lips and debating whether to pursue her or wait for a better time, he shoved his doubts away, realizing that he was stalling, and walked down the aisle. His head turned into each row, growing dizzier and light-headed with each one before finally he found her. She had her head tilted back, eyes roaming over book spines and papers on the obscure art of alchemy.

Remus shoved his hands into his pockets and cleared his throat as he stepped closer. Eva's head swiveled about as a hand laid upon the top of a book. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, startled like a deer caught in headlights.

"Er, didn't mean to bother you," he apologized. "I saw that someone else had booked Thursday at five, so I was wondering if now would be a good time to decide on a new slot?" Eva swallowed, the tips of her fingers gliding down the layers of books to rest upon the table.

"Euh," she began, placing her tongue between her front teeth as she scrambled for the English dictionary. "Friday at the same time?" An involuntary snort escaped the wizard, which he quickly covered with a forced cough. His brows furrowed, a tight, unsure smile appearing on the right corner of his lips as he reached a hand up to scratch his forehead.

"Er, yeah... Friday, really?"
"What's the problem with Friday?" she asked, pouting out her lip and shrugging her shoulders.

"I mean, nothing. Just that no one, you know, no one does any schoolwork after classes end on Friday," he tried to clarify, only to receive a second unfazed shrug from her.

"So, it'd be perfect. No one would have taken that slot—"

"I can't do Friday, Eva." He bit down on his lower gums when he caught her lips parting before closing once again, catching his mistake.

"Then why ask me? Pick any day you want, since you've all the preferences, responsibilities, and particularities," she retorted, turning back to the shelf and finally pulling out the icy blue book. His chin tilted upwards, the strained smile on his face dissipating.

"Particularities?" Remus repeated, blinking fast as if it would help the words sink in. "My prefect duties are past curfew, and you know that I tutor Mondays and Wednesdays—"

"Yes."

"You're the one who assists Sprout four, sometimes five days out of the week for hours on end," he continued, his voices growing ever so stressed by the consonant. "If anything, you're the one with the problematic schedule."

"And your friends? You seem to always ensure that there's ample time for them as well," she countered. "Probably even more so now that you have a girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes, I think I was rather clear," she snapped, not once turning to look at him. Remus' chin flinched back, his brows furrowing as he narrowed his eyes on her profile.

"I don't have a girlfriend," he said, pausing as his demeanor softened and his voice turned into a hushed whisper. Eva stilled, looking out the corner of her eye to his brown leather shoes. "And yes, my friends are a responsibility or, you know, I'd like to have time for them, but that doesn't mean you aren't, or that I don't want—"

"Tuesday at four is fine," she interrupted him, opening up the book and running her finger over the copyright page. The words tugged like a fishline on her heart, but she covered it with an arm over her chest, pretending that she was alone in that vast library. Remus stepped forward, his mouth unhinging and his eyes dropping to the ground.

"Eva," he began, looking back up and leaning the side of his thigh against the wooden table. "Why — I mean, are you all right? We haven't talked and I know what you said, but—"

"I'm fine," she said with a hint of vexation, eyes flitting up to him for a second. "You accomplished what you came for, no?"

"Why won't you talk to me?" he asked in the smallest voice. Eva felt her cheeks heat up, the answer so simple to all but herself. "If you're upset with me, if I did or said anything, you know you can—"

"I'm fine," she repeated, albeit stiffer than the first time.

"I don't understand why you're getting upset," he confessed, eyes narrowing on her. "I find it a reasonable inquiry—"
"You don't listen do you?"

"But—"

"Please, don't make me repeat it."

Without trying to begin a staring match, and with her words now engraved into his mind, he knocked his knuckles against the wood and sighed, turning around, defeated. Crushed and irritated — more so at himself for thinking she'd have changed her mind — he ran a hand through his hair.

"So, Tuesday at four, yeah?" he said when he made it to the end of the row.

"Yes."

And with that, he disappeared back into the aisle, the corners of his lips downturned and a new found heaviness to his heart.

(17 January 1978, Tuesday)

Eva appreciated the long, empty afternoons when she could permit herself a stroll around the castle's periphery. Her eyes constantly placed outwards, sometimes upwards to glimpse into lit windows that often had a student or two sitting next to one another, sometimes a younger year looking out the window and meeting her gaze. It was a past time meant for forgetting life's scuffles. She smiled to herself, tossing the end of her scarf back over shoulder as she squinted against the harsh wind that blew her way every once in awhile.

A little beyond where she strolled — in one of the opened arcades — another passed by, catching sight of the Slytherin witch through the columns. The wizard pursed his lips, eyes darting about the barren corridor before making a sharp right and walking out onto the grounds.

Eva felt the eyes on her before she saw them, her chin lifting down from the windows. Her own eyes turned into slits, focusing in on the pale figure making their way towards her. His clothes camouflaged him into the black sky, which in turn contrasted against the thin cover of snow on the ground. The epitome of a black and white photograph: statuesque, shadowed, sophisticated.

"Good evening," he greeted, his hands folded behind his back.

"Regulus," she returned, her voice wary, her spine stiffening.

"I suppose this is rather inappropriate," he commented, forcing a small smile as Eva's glossy gaze locked on him.

"That would depend on why you're here." His grin faltered, eyes dropping to the ground as he furrowed his brows, leaned his neck out and swallowed.

"I was only wondering if you were all right," Regulus explained. "We haven't spoken since," his Adam's apple bobbed with another thick swallow, "Rosier," Eva's breath hitched in her throat, "what he did, it was rather, well, intense—"

"What?" The word itself disappeared into the wind before she had the chance to alter the volume. Her heart began to thump a little louder, her blood evaporating from her veins as her hands started to tremble.

"I am—"
"Y-you were there?" she continued, somehow able to lift her chin and palm to halt him. "You— you saw?"

"I didn’t—"

"You heard, you know..." A boulder sat on her words. "You were, you were there!?"

Days, incessant nights where she had questioned whether she had messed up, whether she could have avoided what had happened, convincing herself — for sanity's sake — that she had done the best she could.

But she hadn't.

Regulus stepped back, watching her eyes dart about the ground manically. The normal warm cognac turning into burnt wood, the canyon between her brows deepening into a beast's cavern.

"YOU COULD HAVE STOPPED ALL OF IT!" she exclaimed, stepping forward and pushing him with both hands. "YOU LET IT HAPPEN, HOW COULD YOU!? HOW COULD YOU LET IT HAPPEN!?"

"I—"

"INTENSE!? Th-that's all you have to say!? That's your apology?" she continued, rampaging, adrenaline coursing through her loins. "THAT'S ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY TO ME!??" Regulus found himself stuck in mud, a foot too deep, and though every direction was available to him, he could not move. Her hand lifted up again, and he prepared for the next shove, but instead found the end of her wand piercing his neck. His eyes widened, eyes looking down at her as his chin was forced upwards, both of them breathing fire into the cold as his fingers itched for towards own wand.

"STUPEFY!" she conjured, acid within those words as the wizard found himself flying backwards in a defined arch across the grounds. His spine smashed into a stone column and slid to the frosted ground, eyes closed and head hanging lamely.

Eva stepped backwards, her wand dropping into the snow as her eyes dashed between her hand and the unconscious wizard. She placed a hand to her cheek, moving it to her mouth to stifle a gasp as she ran towards him.

"No, no, no," she pleaded, pressing her knees into the ground, wrapping her hands around the ends of his robes. "Wake up, come on, please, please."

The tip of Eva's thumbnail pressed between her two teeth, chomping and gnawing at it as her eyes darted between the broom closet and the staircase. All the torches had dimmed, as they usually did past curfew, and the only sound was that of her heartbeat and the slight sniffle to her nose.

Something pattered in the distance, causing her to recline her back into the wall — almost becoming one with it — and closing her eyes as the footfalls drew closer. Tension. The air grew thick around her, her breath no longer functioning as the heat rose into her cheeks and her underarms became damp despite the single digits in the air.

A silhouette, that's all she could make out as she peered from behind the column, but the walk distinct. Lanky, a little nervous, a hunched back and hands pressed deep into pockets. Eva closed her eyes.

One.
Remus jolted to a stop, his eyes widening, heart leaping out of his throat and sending a scare straight down to his skeleton. Short, and a mass of hair with a familiar frizzy curl to it.

"Eva!"

"Sorry," she whispered, stepping closer. "I—"

"What the bloody hell are you doing here!? Do you know what time it is!? You realize it's well past curfew, right?" he pressed on, his words ignited with the nearing full moon and the hand of injustice she had dealt him since their return.

"Yes," she said, looking down to the distant ground behind him. "I'm sorry if I scared you," Remus' eyes narrowed in on her wringing hands, "I sort of. I need your help with something, I knew you—"

"Do you know what time it is?" he repeated, his tone stern and finite. Eva's eyes casted to his jaw, clenched and stiff. Her fingers reached up to hook a loose strand behind her ear, Remus' head tilting outward as he awaited a response.

"I know," she managed, having greatly underestimated the difficulty of the confrontation.

"It's well past curfew." Eva's parted lips pressed into a tight line, folding them into her mouth as she nodded slowly. "What the bloody hell do you need help with at this hour?"

"I don't," she sighed, her shoulders drooping as an inaudible hmph! left her. "It's— it was an accident."

"What was?" he inquired, shaking his head in a bewildered and impatient fashion. She clenched her teeth, giving him a once over before sighing and turning around to make way for the broom closet. With one last deep inhale, she pressed down on the door's cool metal handle and swung it open. Behind her, she could hear Remus' footsteps approaching before coming to a stop, his ample height casting a shadow over her. Remus' brows furrowed as he caught sight of a pallid hand hanging limp in the torch's light.

"What," he muttered to himself, Eva enveloping herself into one side of the doorframe, allowing Remus to bend forward towards the body. He knelt down, his head cocking sideways to level himself with the unconscious body's face. His breath hitched in his throat, his eyes blinking all over the miniature space. "What the fuck is this!? What the bloody hell happened!?"

"I—"

"And you put him in a sodding broom closet!?"

"I placed some charms on him to slow down the bleeding—"

"Are you fucking mad!?"

Eva's gaze dropped to her own feet, her hands folded behind her back as she swallowed down his words. Remus twisted his body to look up at her.

"He'll be fine," she whispered. "I need you to take him to the hospital wing-"
"You should have already done that—you should have called for a professor," he hissed, pulling his wand out from his robes' pocket. "What were you doing waiting for me?"

"I couldn't call for anyone," Eva told him. His brows scrunched together. She sighed, running a hand through her hair and looking up to the ceiling. "It was me, I stunned him into a column." Remus' chin leaned forward, his jaw unhinging.

"You what?"

"Please, all you need do is say you found him during your rounds—"

"And what?" he cut her off, his words turning his surroundings into ash. "You walk away? You go back to your common room and act as if—what? As if you weren't out past curfew, as if you didn't—" Remus stood up, towering over her. Eva curled back as he stepped closer, his fingers pointed down to the limp wizard. "You could've bloody killed him! You expect me to let you walk—you know what they would do to me if they found out that I'd been a part of this!? I don't have fucking diplomatic immunity to say fuck it to all this! They'd bloody crucify me, he's—he's a fucking Black!" He placed a hand to his temple, shutting his eyes. "Fucking hell."

Eva's heart dropped, and she joined it, sinking into the stinging, vitriolic reality. Her eyes became gummy, warm with the onset of tears as an even larger lump swelled in the back of her throat. Remus spewed a string of curses under his breath as he bent back down to slide Regulus out of the closet.

"I'm going to take him to the matron, and then I'm reporting you," he informed her moments later. His words had stabilized, no longer filled with fire, but cold and stringent like steel. She didn't move, her eyes plastered to the stones lining that made up the floor, counting her breaths and blinking back the tears. Remus shook his head, looking to the opposite wall and blinking. "You know—help me to understand—but what exactly, I mean what were you hoping for? That I'd help you cover this up?" Silence, not even a torch light's crackle to fill it. "You told me to never speak to you again, or did you conveniently forget about that?"

The back of Eva's hand reached up to rub her nose, swallowing once again as the corners of her lips forced themselves down.

"Of course, no answer." He rolled his eyes, biting down on his tongue as he rolled the wand between his fingers. With one last slight shake to his head, he turned back to the wizard and casted a levitation spell on his body. "What'd he even do to—no, you know what? Never mind, save it for the Headmaster."

"It was an accident," she said, ignoring his last few words.

"Bollocks," he spat out, scoffing. "We both know that's not true, you would have called for help and explained that it was a mishap with your wand—it happens all the time."

"I—"

"Listen, say whatever you want to Slughorn or Dumbledore. I have to take him to the hospital wing, but I also have to escort you back to the dungeons, okay?" Eva surrendered with a small nod, not once meeting his gaze. Remus, not aching to spend a second more there, pointed his wand to Regulus and began his way down the hall with the body floating beside him.

Eva followed, nothing left for her to say, and both of them knowing it. Her fingers scrubbed against every surface, her shoulder pressed as close to the wall with the hope that it would suck her in and
make her disappear. Her chin trembled, a weakening numbness beginning to spread from her fingers
into the rest of her body as they marched nearer to the inevitable.

Despite himself, and knowing it would push for his resolve to crumble, Remus would look over his
shoulder every now and again. She walked a good distance behind him, sometimes stopping to let
her catch up, other times having to bite down on his tongue to stop himself from gibing at her slow
pace as he was so used to doing.

Eventually, and all too soon, they came upon the sturdy doors that signaled the hospital wing. Remus
turned around, Eva still hiking up the staircase as he took a chance to finally breathe. Her gaze hadn't
left the ground since their departure from the ground floor; her posture still slumped, and Remus
couldn't help the sinking feeling in his body as he, too, dropped his eyes down.

"Er," he lifted his hands to his ear, pulling at the lobe, "wait here on the bench. I'll be back in a
minute or so."

Eva casted her eyes over to the stone bench, Remus pressing his shoulder against the door and
pushing it open as she folded her hands underneath her robes and took a seat. With his wand, he
guided Regulus into the infirmary, placing him on one of the vacant hospital beds by the front.
Within seconds, Madam Pomfrey came rushing in, hair already placed into a tight bun while her
apron floated about and wrapped around her. She looked between the Gryffindor and the Slytherin,
eyes widening at the unconscious figure.

"My goodness! What happened?" she asked, rushing over to him and forcing his eyelids open.

"I found him in a broom closet," Remus lied. "How you see him is how I found him. I'm afraid I
don't know anything more than that."

"Which broom closet?"

"First floor, the one that sits diagonal from the owlery." She shook her head and then nodded, and
waving her hand to shoo him out of the infirmary, placing him on one of the vacant hospital beds by the front.
Within seconds, Madam Pomfrey came rushing in, hair already placed into a tight bun while her
apron floated about and wrapped around her. She looked between the Gryffindor and the Slytherin,
eyes widening at the unconscious figure.

"Ready?" Remus finally asked. Eva nodded, standing up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her
hand lift up and wipe away at her cheeks. He closed his eyes and pinching their corners as his chest
tightened and twisted. "Listen, I know you. I know you don't stun people unconscious for fun. If you
have a good reason for what you did—"

"I don't."

"Eva." He tilted his head sideways, still gazing at her from the corner of his eye. "I don't want to— I
don't like doing this to you. Don't be stubborn, please. I'm willing to help you if—"

"Help me!?!" she exclaimed in a strained undertone, her eyes finally lifting up to meet his. Bloodshot
red with a face streaked due to the salty sting. "Help me!?!" Eva repeated, croaking as her swollen
throat made it hard to speak. "There's nothing to do, to change," her eyes grew watery as the
memories flooded her "it happened, it already happened." Remus' brows pulled together, not sure
whether she was referencing the past hour or something much more sinister.
He clapped his hands together and pressed the side of them to his lips, staring back to the clock.

"I can't let this go unless I know it's for a good reason," he admitted. "The last thing I want to do is punish you, especially because I know, I think," he grimaced at his own hunch, his stomach churning at the thought of it. "I've— I reckon I know— I can put two and two together."

Her body shook as a reflexive sob ripped out of her, her palm clasping over her mouth as small whimpers ensued. She did her best to wipe away the rivulets streaming down her cheeks before they could stain her chest, but found the world in front of her blurred and inconceivable.

"I don't want to tell you. Don't make me tell you."

Eva felt the warmth of a hand on her shoulder, Remus ushering her away from the infirmary's doors and down the stairs they had come from. He sat her down on them, both of them next to each other on the same step. Knees pressed together and shoulders crammed against themselves in the narrow stairwell. She could feel the heat radiate from off his body, his elbows digging into his knees as he sat forward. Stifled whimpers defied her, rubbing them away and attempting to spell out the alphabet to get her mind clear. Remus' head tilted, holding his right temple against the pad of his hands to catch a glimpse of her face.

"Okay, listen, I'm not going to make you do or say anything," he assured her. "And I won't tell a soul about this, but I can't make any promises about what will happen when he wakes up, okay?"

She turned to look at him. An eternity followed before either one made an attempt to say something.

"I'm sorry, Remus." He blinked, taking a moment to let the words sink in. "About everything, lashing out on you. I'm— I don't know what's wrong with me. Something's wrong with me." He didn't move, instead forcing to ignore the dullness that had begun to spread in his body.

"Nothing's wrong with you," he countered. "Something awful happened to you, and there's no predicting how you would react to it. I don't, I didn't expect you to be in any one way." A moment passed as he gathered his thoughts. "I care about you, a lot, I won't lie. I don't— I really only want to help you, if that's what you want. And the thing is, and I'm sorry if I sound like a selfish prick saying this, but you do this thing where you approach me, but seconds later you shove me away. I don't know— I just don't know how to be with you, or what to do." He stopped, a light half-scoff, half-laugh escaping him. "It's a little frustrating is all."

Remus' chin flinched back as he felt a warmth pressing up against his side, arms wrapped around him as a cheek laid against his bicep. His brows gathered in, swallowing and looking down at Eva's scrunched up face as her silent tears came to a full stop. He blinked, slowly pulling his arms out from her grasp and lifting one to lay lightly on her back.

Neither one of them moved. Eva growing all the more quiet as the seconds passed, the chaos and fogginess beginning to clear. A profound tiredness sat on her shoulders, inside her bones, even her lids feeling heavy and her eyes dazed into a slumber. The clock ticked on, but to her it seemed as if the day would never end. Diving deeper into her thoughts, their closeness became more and more acute. The realization caused a sudden heat to flush over he, her breath slowing as she locked her gaze on his jaw. It mesmerized her the way it tightened according to the flow of his thoughts, almost smiling goofily as she watched it jerk and twitch.

A large sigh escaped her, causing Remus to wake from his thoughts and look down to her. His eyebrows lifted when their gazes met, a watery distance washed over hers. He smiled a toothless smile, nudging her to see whether he had lost her to whomever lived inside her head. But she wasn't lost to him, instead shifting closer to him, no longer clammed-up and ensconcing herself in his chest.
She leaned forward, straightening her spine, which caused her face to appear mere inches away from his. Remus' breath hitched, his eyes roamed over her face, blood and muscles freezing as his heart pumped loudly in his ears. He swallowed, beginning to burn up from feet to face.

For Eva, the world had come to a stand-still, a yearning inside her that made her breath shallow, her gaze akin to that of complete intoxication—heady and heedless. He watched her warily, eyes never closing as her hand spread out over his thigh to support her weight. Her gaze darted up, watching him look down at her through lashes, before she reverted back to his lips. Eva lifted her chin slightly, the tips of their noses now touching and a painful ache spreading throughout her, making her feel as if she could explode. Her eyes fluttered to a close, and her nose rubbed against his cheek as she tilted her head and brushed her lips against his. Everything around her disappeared. Featherlight, as if it was a figment of their imaginations, and yet goosebumps traversed both their bodies. A small sigh escaped as she pressed deeper, reaching closer to envelope his upper lip between her own, but Remus remained unresponsive and quickly pulled back.

Eva's eyes burst open, widening into tea saucers as her forehead wrinkled and her gaze dropped to the ground. Remus' lips pressed into a thin line, eyes squinting and both palms up.

"I get the need for comfort, I do." Eva's mouth fell open, sitting back onto her bottom once again, wanting as much space as she could allow in two feet of space. Her neck jutted outwards, a sudden onset of nausea making its way up her throat. Maybe it had been for comfort, maybe it was all a fantasy, a dream gone horribly wrong, and she would wake up underneath the sheets and her face flushed pink. Or maybe her heart jumping out of her chest, running at speeds it had never before, made her feel more alive and real than she did sitting in a classroom, or swimming in the ocean. A drug, one that she craved more of. Thinking one taste would suffice, not realizing it had been enough to make her addicted.

"I'm, I'm so sorry," she said as she blinked herself awake. "I don't know why..."

"Don't be, it's all right. Things happen when you're confused, upset. We don't—don't worry about it."

"N-nothing's making any sense."

"I know." A forced smile appeared on Eva's face, wiping away an imaginary tear and beginning to feel a headache mature behind her eyes. Remus stared at the wall at the bottom of the staircase, attempting to steady his pulse.

"It's probably best if I go back to the dungeons now," she said, her words airy.

"Is that what you want?"

A second passed before she nodded in the affirmative.

"Okay," he said as both of them got up. Remus gestured for her to walk ahead and down the stairs. No more words passed between them, but he took every other minute to check on her. Despite the push in his legs for speed, he kept steady by her side, coming up with another question, but shooting it down in order to give her space and privacy. Silence followed their journey down through the layers of Hogwarts, with only a sniff or two escaping Eva every so often, but nothing else to indicate that she was there.

The third floor passed into the second, and the second into the first, and so on until they were making their way down the steps into the damp dungeons. The atmosphere changed both between them and around them. Eyes became ever more alert; Remus lifted his chin and Eva straightened her posture.
She crossed her hands over her chest; he pulled out his wand.

"Lumos,“ he casted, a faint glow appearing at the end of his wand, lighting the corridor. Eva pressed her lips together, wishing she could claw her own eyes out every time her shoulder rubbed into his elbow.

"I know I've been acting rather rash," Eva whispered after several minutes upon entering the dungeons. Remus turned to look down at her. "I'm usually not like that."

"I know," he said, casting his gaze back to the hall. "You don't have to apologize. I understand wanting to push people away, or, you know, doing something seemingly irrational because you're embarrassed, scared, frustrated... Trust me, I've been there." He paused, a grin appearing on his lips and a chuckle escaping him. "Matter of fact, I'm always there."

Eva's eyes toured the corridor, grimacing as she came to a sudden halt. Remus did a double-take, his brows knitting together.

"What's wrong? Why'd we stop?" he asked.

"We're here," she responded, staring at the empty wall.

"Right," he said, following her gaze and taking a deep breath while nodding. His eyes narrowed on her face, his chin lifting. "Before you go, would you mind if I asked you something?" Her body froze, numbing as she shook her head once, telling him to continue. "Do you really want me to stop speaking to you? Because I will—"

Her rigid face dropped, looking him straight in the eye as her lips parted and her heart shrunk.

"Remus," she said, not finding the right words. "Of course not, I was being a complete child."

"No, you weren't. I just didn't know what was going on, I assumed you hated me," he chuckled, shrugging his shoulders. Eva shook her head.

"Don't, I was being rash and jealous—"

"Jealous?" Remus repeated.

"No, I mean, irrational— sorry, urgh, my— it's a false friend," she scrambled, her face reddening into a rich beet color. "I'm so tired, it's been such a long day. I forget the English language when I'm ready to drop dead."

"Yeah," he said, the word trailing off ever so slightly. "I reckon I should let you go and rest, then."

"Yes." Neither of them moved. "Thank you for everything, and sorry, again, for, you know... everything. I've been quite the mess, and probably an awful friend," she gibaed at herself, forcing an awkward smile.

"No, you're not, but I won't deny that we could improve a few things," he half-joked, half-advised. "But we're going to be all right, you'll see."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well," Remus scratched his jaw, his face scrunching up as he took a deep breath. "I mean, I know it's hard for you to open up, but if you just let me in a teeny bit — a little bit more trust — you'd see that things would go a lot smoother."
"That's all?" They held each other's gaze for a heartbeat before Remus nodded.

"Yeah, other than that," he shrugged, "I find you rather brilliant. I like being your friend." Her heart swelled, having to swallow down the tears that threatened to come crawling back out. She gave him one last short nod and a small wave before moving past him and towards the wall. He turned to watch her whisper the password, catching her shooting him one final glance.

"Goodnight, Eva," he said, but it was too late for she had already gone, leaving him with a pulse that had never really stopped racing.
(18 January 1978 Friday)

The sun's rays had yet to pass over the hillside when Remus was already shoving his gold and crimson striped tie into his jumper's neckline. As he finished, he dared a fleeting glimpse to the mirror hanging on the bathroom door, but shook his head and instead turned to reach for his bag.

All the curtains in the dormitory were drawn, except Sirius', who notoriously slept with them wide open with no notion of shame. A light snore rose from Peter, and Gideon's boisterous drumming harmonized with it. Though afraid that his bustling about would have caused at least one of them to wake, not even an eyelash batted as Remus slipped out of the room at the crack of curfew.

Like always with out of the common hours, everything he did appeared ten times as obnoxious. His footsteps against the spiral staircase were firecrackers, the grumbling caused by an empty stomach was a dragon's breath, and the opening creak of the portrait door seemed like it could make a tower crack and topple over.

The damp, cool morning air that greeted him as he stepped out into the hall caused goosebumps to erupt over his body. Remus stood there, surrendering to the chill and taking a moment for himself. Glossy, sleep-deprived eyes that toured the length of the corridor, all the portraits nestled somewhere far as they, too, slumbered. Alone. A dust particle in the midst of a grand universe.

Remus pulled himself away, forcing himself to wake up and continue down the barren halls where only the odd Ravenclaw would be seen rushing to the library. He twisted and turned through the labyrinth, some of them filled with venetian arcs that opened the foggy grounds to him, others filled with nothing more than a dying torch-light. A faint violet light filtered into sky, and in the distance, beyond the undulating horizon, he could see the sun struggling to poke and fight its way up into the winter sky.

A moment too short, for before he knew it or could even decide how he would explain his presence, he had marched up the steps of the narrow hall where he had been only hours ago, and spread his fingers against the wooden caduceus. He pushed forward, forcing it open and stepping inside, pausing as he clutched the strap on his shoulder. His eyes moved left and then right, seeking out the matron, but instead catching a lone figure in the last bed to his right.

"Mr. Lupin?" Remus heard, causing him to turn to Madam Pomfrey, who held a metal tray with an assortment of breakfast foods and a plethora of vials. She placed it on the Slytherin's bedside table before wiping her hands on her apron and approaching the Gryffindor. "What may I do for you?"

Remus leaned forward, his eyes drifting over to the occupied bed.

"Do you think I could have a moment with Black?" he inquired in an undertone.

"He just woke up," she responded, shaking her head. "Needs to eat first."

"I know, but," Remus scratched the back of his head, "it's about last night—"

"You'll have to ask him," the matron concluded, a hand lifting to point at his chest and accompanied by a stern jaw. "But I will have no arguing, must be relaxed in order to heal."

"Of course," he said, nodding his head as he watched her give a curt nod before turning around and disappearing into a closet filled with various supplies. The Gryffindor hesitated, moving his gaze to the tips of his shoes before looking up to the corner. This time, however, he found two startling
bright eyes staring back at him, but made no demonstration to move forward.

"What?" Regulus scowled, breaking the silence. He had his back straight against the headboard, his hands folded over his lap, and his jaw clenched like rusty pliers. "Looking for gratitude, Lupin?"

"No," Remus responded, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "I came to talk." He stepped closer, every footfall scrutinized by the Slytherin until he finally came upon the end of the bed. "About last night."

"There's nothing to talk about—"

"I'll wager that there is," he countered. "Besides, it doesn't concern me, or even you. It's about Eva." The Slytherin faltered, his brows furrowing for the briefest of seconds. His locked jaw unhinged, and all of the resolve he might have had dissipated with a finger's snap.

"What about her?"

"Well," Remus took a deep breath, looking at the matron as the sound of two glass jars crashing into one another vibrated out from the closet. He moved from the foot of the bed to the chair by the Slytherin's bedside. "May I?"

"No." They stared at one another, neither speaking, both with iron rods and neither afraid to use them.

"She's the reason you're here," Remus continued. Regulus snorted, shaking his head with an indignant smirk.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't be, if that bitch—"

"Call her what you like, it doesn't change the facts," Remus stated, shrugging his shoulders. "But what happened last night, well, it'd be best if you feigned ignorance, wouldn't it?" Regulus' eyes thinned and darted all over the Gryffindor's face.

"So that's why you're here?" he exasperated with flared nostrils. "To threaten me?" Remus blinked, pressing his lips into a tight line.

"Yeah, er, you see..." The Slytherin lifted himself forward, eyes alight and blackening as they bored into Remus'. "I know," he continued, "I saw her, I see her and she suffers every day from what happened, so what she did to you is nothing compared to what you did to her," Regulus' brows pushed together, "she kept quiet about it, so you could do her this one courtesy if there's any decency —"

"What are you on about?" he interrupted, holding up a palm to halt him. "What I did to her?"

"You raped her," Remus lashed out. "Beat the living shite out of her, or do you not fucking remember?"

"I did no such thing," Regulus exclaimed, the volume of his voice ascending as his eyes enlarged. "Is that what she's saying?!" Remus leaned back, his chin dipping into his chest as the two met for another round of silence. "What the fuck did she say to you?"

"She—"

"I would never do that sort of thing to her, to anyone, ever," he rambled on, manic, his once rigid posture breaking down into miniature blocks. He pointed a finger to himself, holding it along the
"I've done nothing but protect her. Is she mad? Do you know what I've done for her?"

"I—"

"What? You came in here to what? To protect her from the monster? Well, tough luck, but I'm not it — so stop trying to be some pathetic excuse of a hero," Regulus said, holding Remus' stare before running a hand through his hair. His breath came out ragged and short, color beginning to raise into his face from his neck and ears. "You bloody Gryffindors are all the same, always thinking you've some sort of moral high ground— well, you're not the only one who cares about her. You couldn't even begin to imagine what I've done—"

"I'm not trying to be the hero here," Remus finally spoke up, and despite the Slytherin's original aversion, took a seat. He held his chin in his hand, scrubbing a hand over his mouth as he tried to understand what he had missed. Everything, apparently.

"Right," Regulus scoffed, shaking his head. "Because you don't want her to turn to you— like it when she turns to you. Don't want her to come to you when something's wrong so you could feed your sodding ego. Always you, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, " he disagreed, lifting his head and knitting his brows together. "I'm here to make sure that Eva doesn't have to suffer more than she already is." Regulus licked his lips, grimacing as he looked up to the high windows. The first greetings of daylight shot through them, lighting up the room but not making the cold atmosphere the least bit warmer. "Listen, I know you're doped up on potions and can't tell black from white—"

"I don't know what's been going on between you two," he said, overriding Remus. "But one thing's for sure: you've been trying to get into her knickers since the moment you even had the chance of speaking with someone like her—"

"That's bollocks, absolute bollocks."

"You do all these favors for her, you stare at her during meals, you wink when she passes you in the hall, chase her in the library," he listed, snorting, "but you're just some form of a whore, did you know that? It's quite pitiful." Remus stared at his jaw, watching it grind back and forth as if it would churn the gears inside his head faster.

"She's a human being," he managed in return, breathing away the affronts and jibes. "I'm here because I care about her—"

"And what!? I don't!" Regulus rehashed. "I've done nothing but protect her!" His hand stretched forward to point at the door. "Do you know what she did!? She bit off Evan's ear!" Remus' face fell. "She bit off his sodding ear, and do you know what happened!? She ran away! She ran and I took the blame for it!" His ponderous breaths filled the second. "I took the blame for it— do you know what my mother did to me?" Watery eyes and too fast heartbeats filled the next second. "And I did it because I knew they would have done ten times worse to her!"

Not a word could make it to the tip of his tongue, instead Remus let the wizard retreat back into his shell, plopping his broken back against the wall. He observed him as he let out a groan, keeping his breath steady. Minutes passed before either one of them could so much as bother glimpsing at the other.

"I don't understand," Remus finally muttered. "It was Rosier?"
"Yes," he answered under his breath, forced, spitting it out like it was a mouthful of poison.

"Then why—"

"Because I'm an idiot."

Remus let out an exaggerated sigh, running a hand through his hair and resting it there as he looked up to the ceiling. He bit down on his lower lip while his left hand tapped against his thigh.

"You're not an idiot," he said. Regulus looked to the Gryffindor from behind his lashes. "I made a mistake, I only had parts of the facts, and I shouldn't have marched in here like some sort of..." He brought his gaze back down. "I apologize." Regulus' fingers curled inwards into his palm, licking his lips as he looked away and felt a weight sink his stomach. He shook his head.

"I should have done more," he explained, ignoring both Remus' stare and apology. "But they're engaged," Remus' mouth parted, "I-I never thought to, I should have. I know that now." His grey eyes blinked back to the Gryffindor's, meeting a skewed and twisted face.

Remus' eyes fluttered all over Regulus' face, searching for a laugh, a hand clutching a stomach and tear-filled eyes. It never came. He looked away, pushing his chin forward and gulping down the thickness that had manifested in the back of his throat. The half-empty pack of cigarettes laying deep in his robes' pocket burning a reminder through the cloth, because it was all beginning to seem more and more like an Anne Boleyn story. Something out of a book. "Besides, I wasn't planning on telling anyone. It would have caused a riot over nothing."

"This is so fucked," Remus mumbled.

"Yeah," Regulus agreed, pressing three fingers to his temple. His eyes roamed over the droopy-shouldered wizard. "You should leave, someone's going to be down here looking for me. They'll ask —"

"Yeah, right," he said, and within the locust frenzy that reaped through his mind, he somehow managed to stand up.

"She deserves better than him," Regulus continued, wringing his hands together. "Maybe even better than all of us, all of this." Remus' brows furrowed as he kept his eyes plastered on the wizard.

"And what? You saying that's me?"

"Yeah, maybe," Regulus offered, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't— she's my friend, I don't feel th—"

"Friend?" the Slytherin scoffed in response, chin jerking back. "You woke up at five in the morning and came down here to convince me to keep my mouth shut for a friend? You sure about that, Lupin?"

"Yeah," he responded, though more as an impulsive reaction than not. He nodded before reaching deep into his pockets for the cigarette pack, and with a rigid smile and a tense wave, he greeted Regulus goodbye and made his way out of the hospital wing with a cigarette dangling between his lips.

Once outside, he walked straight towards the clock, dropping the bulky bag to the floor and leaning against the curved stone. The cigarette was lit before the secondhand had a chance to move, and a heavy dose of reality accompanied the first dose of nicotine. He leaned his head back, taking in a
deep breath and recalling that, once upon a time, he had thought Sirius histrionic for his tales, and now he realized that it had only been the tip of the iceberg.

"What the fuck," Remus mumbled as he took another puff from the cigarette.

Aphrodite bit into a bright red apple painted with streaks of yellow, crunching her teeth and smacking her lips as she stared out to the Great Hall with an absentmindedness that could rival Eva's. She had one eyebrow tucked downwards, the other raised as she took another go at the fruit. A horse, that's what crossed Eva's mind in that exact moment. Her heard tilting further to the left with every bite her friend took. Yes, the resemblance was uncanny.

The two witches sat alone, one across from the other, neither having said a single word in twenty minutes.

Odd, was the second word that passed through Eva's mind. More than not in Aphrodite's presence, she prayed for a moment of peace. Now she found herself with restless fingertips and itchy thighs as she waited for her regular dosage. She bit down on her tongue, pursing her lips and pushing them to the side.

"Everything all right?" she asked. Aphrodite harrumphed, breathing in deep and releasing it all as the hand holding the apple fell with a light thump to the table.

"I got into a fight with Tommy today," she answered. Eva nodded, pressing her elbows into the table and holding up the sides of her face with her palms. "He said that his mother could make a saffron bun as big as the sun, and I asked why he'd say something like that." Eva blinked, nodding once again to assure the witch that she was following the plot. "He said because the sun is big, and then I said that the moon is bigger, so why not say as big as the moon?" Aphrodite raised the apple back to her lips. "He said it wasn't bigger, and I told him that it was—all he had to do was look at it!"

Aphrodite huffed, blowing air out of her nostrils. One of Eva's eyes twitched.

"Maybe astronomy isn't his strong suit?" she offered, raising her brows.

"He does prefer Quidditch," Aphrodite mused. She crossed her arms over chest and leaned forward so that her breasts pressed into the table. Her eyes roamed over Eva, who had casted her attention to the stained wooden planks where she drew imaginary circles into the existing swirls. "And you?"

"Me?"

"You keep doing that," Aphrodite clarified, stretching her chin out to gesture to Eva's finger.

"Oh," she shrugged, "they're diagrams, it's nothing."

"You've never done it before."

Eva's brows furrowed, her eyes falling to her wrist that was nothing but an empty canvas of multi-colored veins. She let Aphrodite's words sink in, scratching at the polished table top, swallowing as she felt heat flooding her cheeks.

"I did something stupid. It's not that important, really," Eva said, not bothering to meet the witch's stare.

"Alihotsy?" Despite herself, the corners of her lips lifted up.

"No, nothing like that."
"Oh," Aphrodite faltered, her shoulders dropping as she straightened her back. "Then what? Did you kill somebody?" Eva peeked out at her from the corner of her eye.

"No." The witch threw her hands in the air, her palms landing with a painful smack on the table.

"Then it can't possibly be as awful as you're making it out to be," she declared. Eva took a deep breath, looking down at her already neat jumper and lifting it only to smooth it back down over her trousers. "You're fidgeting."

"I kissed someone." Aphrodite's eyebrows shot up into her hairline, disappearing underneath her clean-cut bangs. Eva shifted, wrapping a hand around her forearm and rubbing it up and down as she sucked on her bottom lip.

"Oh." Eva dug her finger into her own flesh.

"It's stupid."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What happened?" Eva's lips parted, cupping her cheek in an attempt to cool down.

"Nothing, he wasn't interested. It was a mistake," she answered, pulling her hair out of its tight bun and running a hand through it.

"What, are you sure? How do you know he wasn't interested?" Eva folded her lips together, crossing her arms and leaning them against the edge of the table.

"He didn't kiss back," she explained, letting her hair fall into her face. "It's," she inhaled, "it was a hard day, a rather... sensitive moment, and I don't know, he was there. He had— we were sitting next to one another and he felt warm, safe..." Eva paused, her brows knitting together as she darted her gaze to Aphrodite before swallowing and waving a light hand. "I was exhausted, not thinking—"

"Wait," Aphrodite ignored her. "What did he tell you?"

Eva looked up to the ceiling, wondering what the purpose of the conversation was, and why she had led herself down this path. Yet the relief she felt as she exposed herself to someone who had been a stranger no more than two weeks ago allowed her mind the oddest and briefest moment of much needed peace.

"He understood that I wasn't in my right mind," she brushed off, shaking her head. "Said that it made sense, needing that sort of thing." Aphrodite's eyebrows scrunched together.

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Need that sort of thing?" Silence, blinking to fill the emptiness as they stared at one another.

"It did feel nice, I suppose," Eva whispered, an entire body on fire.

"So was it nice or needy?" she challenged like it was some sort of trick question and Eva had no clue to lead her to the right answer. As if they had come to a fork in the road, and though each one was the same dirt path, one led to snow and the other sand.
"Both?"

"Eva!" Aphrodite exclaimed, her hand reaching out to give her arm a light slap. "Do you fancy this mystery person!?" Eva controlled the area around them. Luckily, seated at the end of the table, they were neighbored only by a group of younger years that were too preoccupied with themselves to stray an inch further.

"I wouldn't go as far as that," she mumbled.

"You need to tell him— you confused the poor bloke," Aphrodite told her.

"Tell him what? I told him that—"

"That you have feelings for him."

"I'm not going— no," Eva said, eyes widening as she repeatedly shook her head and wagged her finger like a metronome. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because," she exasperated, running another hand through her hair and shoveling it all behind her shoulders. "He doesn't feel the same way."

"Oh? And how are you so sure of that, hm?" Aphrodite gave her a reprimanding look, placing her hands on her hips. "Did he tell you that he didn't—"

"No, but—"

"No buts," she interrupted her. "Tell him—"

"No—"

"What if he feels the same and your pride is what's stopping you from being with the love of your life?" she pointed out.

"He's not the love of my life," Eva muttered, rolling her eyes.

"You don't know that."

"Can we stop talking about it?"

Silence again, Eva staring down at the swirling wood as Aphrodite stared at her hairline.

"Fine," she conceded, picking up her cup of pumpkin juice. "But know how daft you're being— you have this one chance to be happy, and you're throwing it away because you're scared."

"I'm not scared," Eva scoffed, lifting her head.

"Then why won't you tell him?" she countered. "Since you're not scared."

With that, Aphrodite left her to stir, pulling her gaze for the final time from her friend. She disappeared behind the too large goblet and gulped down its contents as the bell trilled in the distance. Those left in the Great Hall began to pile up their assignments, put back on their robes, and lift themselves up to head on to conquer the day. Eva, however, found herself glued to the seat, the tension from moments ago lingering, pulling her to a standstill where moving would bring an entire bar down.
"And there may or not be a surprise quiz on Thursday, so make sure to read those pages," Caradoc Dearborn announced to the already half-empty and departing class.

Sirius rolled his eyes and Peter groaned as he slid his book from the table and shoved it haphazardly into his canvas courier bag. James stretched his hands up to crack his back, and Remus remained the only one sitting. He opened his book to the required reading and scribbled: possible quiz. Satisfied, he shut the book and placed it into the bag hanging off the chair.

"Go on, I'll meet you later," he told his friends, who were all standing idly by with crossed arms and bored expressions.

"What? Why?" Sirius puzzled as Remus turned around to share a look with the three of them.

"Have to ask Dearborn something," he replied.

"We'll wait," James said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know how long I'll be. Just go on. You lot'll survive with me, don't worry," he teased as he made way to stand. Remus reached for the leather shoulder strap and placed it over his head.

"Yeah, all right, whatever," Sirius said, placing a hand on Peter's shoulder and escorting him out. James gave two thumbs up to his friend, who chuckled in response, before following the others and leaving him alone. He took a deep breath, his finger pads pressed into the table top as he watched Rohan Singh and Agnes Clearwater walk past him and into the hall. Once the coast was clear, he straightened his back and approached his professor, who was shuffling about papers on his desk.

"Sir," he greeted, pausing a half-foot away from the wooden table. Caradoc Dearborn looked up, his round brown eyes alight with youth, but the lines around them thick and deep.

"Remus," the older wizard returned, looking back down at the papers. "How may I help you?"

"I, er," Remus' scratched the back of his neck before returning his hands to the bag strap. A million thoughts coursed through his mind, worried that he may have misheard Marjory, or that it may have all been a dream and he would leave with nothing more than red ears and a raised brow. "I had some questions about Cornish Pixies..."

"Yes, what about them?"

"Er, just in general, I suppose," Remus guessed. His professor cocked a brow, the dreaded brow which had the Gryffindor concluding that it would be best to say farewell and be on his way.

"I've got just the thing," Dearborn said. He walked over to the shelves aligned along the left wall of the room, underneath the windows, and reached down to the bottom-most row. The wizard slid out a dusty book with gold lettering and a navy blue cover. All ends of it piled high with dust, of which most escaped and bloomed into the air. Remus grimaced as his professor coughed and sneezed, looking down to his shoes as he shifted his weight into his right leg. "This should be what you're looking for, one of the best there is."

Dearborn handed the book to Remus, who stared down at the title: Are Cornish Pixies Cornish?: All The Things You Never Knew. His brows furrowed as he weighed the book in his hand.

"Will that be all, or was there something else?" Dearborn inquired, waking Remus up from his bewildered stupor. The young Gryffindor shook his head, raising the book and pursing his lips into a rigid smile as he began to take a step back.
"No, thanks for this," he said, gesturing to the book with his eyes. With a toothless smile from his professor, he finally made the full turn and continued on his way out.

When he was only a couple steps from the door, he stopped to look down at the book. He wondered if Marjory was sitting somewhere laughing her head off with Chastity Proudmore. Tittering away, pleased with themselves for having fooled the unfoolable. Remus turned the book around in his hand, blowing at the cover to get rid of the dust that had remained. He brushed the side of his hand against it, flipping it over and over again as his frown grew deep like his professor's wrinkles.

He laid out his palm, which allowed the book to fall open to a random page.

"What..." he whispered to himself as his eyes roamed over the letters. The words were not at all those of a second year level, but archaic and invented long before the British Isles could even be called that. It gave Beowulf a run for its money; and there was no doubt that Dante had yet to see Beatrice when the dusty, musty book in the Gryffindor's hands had been published.

Remus rustled through the pages, the frown leaving and being replaced by a silent look.

*Occulto·Mens*, he read, a shiver running up his spine and right into his fingertips. It forced him to shut the book, realizing that it was neither the time nor place. But instead of moving, he stood there, concrete legs while standing on a merry-go-round, looking into a familiar distance, but dizzy all the same.

There was nothing in the hall, not even a wind. Everyone had rushed to fill their stomachs, and though his had once been rather rambunctious, now all he had were dirty fingers and a rock at the bottom of his stomach. He lifted a hand to rub along his mouth, holding it there as the reality of it all sunk in. The reality that he had not been able to comprehend when Marjory had told him. One that he had assumed existed too far beyond those walls... He had been wrong, hadn't he? Yes, he answered for himself. The reality was there, in a castle that had stood strong for centuries, and the book he held was more than proof of that.

There he was in all his glory, leaning against the bannister with a tongue sticking out and his eyes wide as they gestured to one of the darker corners of the castle. Her breath had stilled, her eyes only slits as she felt her pulse beginning to run up a mountain. He reverted to her, grinning with missing front teeth that had been victims of sugar rot. He pointed, beckoned for her to come up and follow him, but she made no motion to move.

*Do it, go*, one hissed.

*Don't, they're bored with themselves*, another advised, the roll of her eyes thick in her words. Eva felt the shelves closing in on her, no one around, and wondering what this man standing above her with a beard as thick as a log wanted from her.

"All right?" She jumped, bones rattling as her hand reached up to spread across her breast. Blinking, waking herself up, she felt the warmth of a palm leave her arm and somebody cast a shadow over her.

"Remus," she said in a breath.

"What? What happened?" he asked. Eva took a second to look at him before shaking her head and casting one last glance at the now empty balcony. Remus followed her line of vision, twisting his head to look over his shoulder but finding nothing. "What?" He turned back to her. "Is it— do you see someone?" She pressed her lips together and nodded.
"The same one," she whispered. "But he's gone now."

"Did he say anything? I mean," Remus shoved his hands into his pockets, "if you want to tell me, that is."

"He wanted me to go into the restricted section with him."

"What? What for?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it," she assured him, crossing her arms over her chest. "I think he's some sort of jester." Remus watched her as she ran a hand through her hair, clutching at the strands and causing the skin on her forehead to stretch. "Did you need something?"

"Er," he began, "yeah, you said you wanted to conclude and finalize our sources for the...?"

"Right," she said, blinking her eyes wider every time in order to wake herself up. "Okay, sure, where do you—"

"Here is fine," he offered, shrugging his shoulders. "Unless you prefer somewhere else."

"Okay," the witch agreed, giving a curt nod before picking out one of the wooden chairs that lined the bookshelf's table. Her fingers wrapped around its top, pulling it out and dropping herself into it. All grace flung out the window, making him wonder if it had ever been there in the first place.

Remus, however, took his time to follow, instead choosing to watch as she leaned her head against one of her hands, her bag still laying across her chest and no books or parchment in sight.

"So, we should start with—"

"Eva," Remus scoffed, finally making way to sit next to her. She turned with wide eyes to him, which fell onto a bewildered, uneasy smirk.

"Mhm?" she managed.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You're not scared are you?" A fleeting frown appeared on her lips. "Is he still here?"

"No, he left when you came."

"You see, then? Nothing to worry about, I'm not going to leave you alone." She brought her gaze back up to his, allowing herself to travel within them, catching all the lines of green that darted out from his pupil, all the while wondering how she wasn't the oven she had been with Aphrodite that morning.

"Yeah," Eva whispered, promptly looking away.

"Have you ever tried asking him what he wants?" An inaudible scoff escaped her.

"What for?"

"A cuppa' tea?" Remus attempted to hearten, feeling the atmosphere lighten as he caught the corners of her lips jerking upwards. Her head shook with amusement before sinking into nothing more than a pin drop.

"Shall we?" she asked.
"We shall," he answered, words as distant as a wind that had passed hours ago. With one quick nod, she reached for her bag and pulled it onto her lap to rummage through the papers. Remus' eyes remained a little longer on her profile, watching her eyelashes flutter as she read across the lines of black ink, tracing the length of her jaw. He watched her run her fingers over the edge of each parchment she held, observing it, investigating before coming to a soundless conclusion and discarding it.

"Oh no," she said, of which passed right over her partner's head. "I forgot to give this back to her." Remus woke from his daydream, the dopey smile on his face faltering as he looked between her and the sheet in her hand. He blinked, taking a moment to register what was happening, and what had happened, before shoving it far away.

"What? Give back?" he puzzled, scrubbing a hand over his face and through into his hair. Eva turned, lifting the paper to him.

"Aphrodite's Herbology assignment, she gave it to me to look over, but," she paused, the hand that held the parchment fell back down onto the table. "I hope it wasn't due today."

"Don't worry. Even if it was, you could talk to Sprout and explain," he assured her. "She'll understand, especially since she knows you."

"Yeah, you're right," she agreed in a sigh.

"Are you two mates, then?" he asked, tilting his head as Eva filed the papers around to ensure that Aphrodite's was at the top of the pile. "I noticed you spent quite a bit of time with her, you know, lately."

"Yeah," Eva responded, leaning back into her seat and placing her hands on her lap. She turned to look at Remus. "She was always nice to me, but I sort of wrote her off because I found her rather simple, but over break, it was only the two of us, so I thought it was better than being alone."

"Look at you, Miss Social making friends," he teased.

"Oh yeah, breaking news," she joined in.

"Most certainly is," Remus continued, sitting forward in his seat and bending over so that he was leveled with her. She lowered her gaze, heat starting to return and pinch her ears as she came under his stare, grateful for the library's dim-light. "One step at a time, you know?"

"You sound like one of those life gurus in Witch Weekly—"

"Oh?" he said, raising his brows. "I didn't even know you read Witch Weekly, always had you for a Glenda's Gardens sort." Eva's eyes widened, looking to him in an incredulous fashion as she shook her head with heightened cheeks. She bit down on her inner gums, bringing the back of her hand up to cover her mouth as she broke out into a grin.

"Glenda's Gardens?" she repeated, the question muffled by her hand.

"Definitely." Eva shook her head.

"Well, I don't, but they are entertaining," she continued, attempting to compose herself by not meeting his stare. The sound of the familiar and odd stifled giggle or two caused a warm ache to spread throughout Remus, the smile on his face falling. "Sometimes, when we sit next to one another, she reads them. I don't pay attention—"
"Sure."

"And I suppose you know everything, don't you?" Remus scratched his neck and looked to the bookshelf in front of them.

"Maybe I am a life guru from Witch Weekly," he quipped with a smirk.

"That's not funny." The smirk on his face grew into a toothy grin, sitting back into the chair and lifting his leg to rest his ankle on his knee.

"Well, how 'bout a hip hip hooray for your new friendship?"

"Absolutely not."

"Hip hip—"

"No."

"Hip hip—"

"Stop." Remus leaned sideways so that they were shoulder to shoulder, so close that he could catch the baby hairs curling on the nape of her neck.

"Hip hip?" he whispered into her ear, unknowingly causing goosebumps to erupt over her skin. Her breath hitched, the playful giddiness from before disappearing as she lost sense of the moment.

"Hooray," she conceded weakly.

"There we go!" And though the words were full of mirth, a dullness came to sit on his chest as he saw her open up the folded parchment they had drafted earlier. No longer smiling, no sense of laughter in the air. Remus lifted his chin, repositioning himself back once he realized their proximity, wondering whether he had pushed it too far.

"Eva," she twisted her neck to look at him out of the corner of her eye, "I'm sorry, if I did something wrong— made you uncomfortable."

"What?" she puzzled, her brows knitting together. "You didn't do anything wrong, why would you say that?"

"No, nothing, I, never mind," he fumbled.

"If anything, I'm the one who should be apologizing," she mumbled, her eyes boring down into the pile of parchments that sat in front of her.

"Apologize for what?"

"Last night," she scoffed, finally turning with wide eyes to look at him.

"Eva—"

"It's terrible, everything—"

"Eva," Remus attempted for the second time, leaning forward and holding his chin at the top of his clasped fingers. "I said it was okay, to not worry about it— about anything, okay?" She blinked, both of them staring at one another, before she pressed her lips together and nodded. He forced a smile, though it never did meet his eyes, until Eva returned to the list and pulled out one of the books
from her bag. She opened it to the required page and placed it in front of him.

"You'll only need the index from this book."

"Yeah, thank you, I got it," he said, reaching forward to take it from her, but found himself too
distracted to even bother glancing at it. His eyes remained on the witch, lost and cold and glacial. He
swallowed down something thick, tar, concrete, a too large piece of bread, a spoonful of truth.

There was something missing, both something that had turned on the light and shut it at the same
time. A puzzle piece that fit no where, but looked like it fit everywhere.

He held his breath. One more page, one more page to turn and he'd be there.

An epiphany, a violin that grew angrier and angrier with every note. Not quite yet, but soon. He
could feel it like the notes of an orchestra arriving at a climax. Soon he would realize what she had
realized, that these moments were much more than fleeting bouts of happiness.

Maybe the delusional had a point. Maybe the girl with only her eyes as filters had a point, maybe
everyone could see where the missing puzzle piece belonged and they were running around with
their heads chopped off trying to find it.

*Ridiculous.*

It could have been the air, the open window letting in the icy current, causing the already chilling
temperature to drop to its half. Or perhaps it was the way the door creaked as it slammed closed. Or
the heels of expensive shoes clicking and tapping in even rhythms against ceramic tiles. They drew
closer, a shadow within the grey light, but not quite since he could see all from hairline to the
reflection beaming off the silk green and silver tie.

Peter wiped his wet hands against his thighs, keeping them there as his mouth fell open and Edmund
Nott came to stand in front of the sink next to his. The Slytherin's hands went to his belt buckle,
fumbling and unfastening it before popping the button on his pants and pulling out his flaccid
member. It hung limp and pink in his palm, pointing into the marble sink as he released a groan
followed by a light trickle. Peter shut his eyes, his chin trembling and gulping as he kept still, waiting
an endless wait.

"I read something today," Edmund began. "Something that didn't make me very happy." He began
to shuffle about, shoving his member back into his trousers, the sound of a zipper being pulled filling
Peter's ears. "Something that made me think you did the one thing we told you not to do." The
Gryffindor could feel his eyes turn gummy, the air reeking of urine which caused his churning
stomach to twist even further.

"Did you wet yourself!" Edmund exclaimed, his nose scrunching up as he looked down at the
puddle gathering at their feet. He looked back up to Peter, who was mumbling senseless words on
his lips. "LOOK AT ME!" the Slytherin demanded, his fist slamming into the wall between the two
mirrors sitting above the sinks. Peter, slow to act, eventually managed to peek up at the Slytherin.
Edmund's ring-filled fingers reached forward to wrap around Peter's neck, his index finger rubbing
against flustered and wet cheeks. "Absolutely repulsive."

"Please," Peter whimpered.

"Who did you tell?"

"I didn't—"
"LIES." The Gryffindor shook as flashbacks of their first encounter replayed in his head. "There are to be no unauthorized group meetings," Edmund recited from memory the posters that littered the castle's walls. "You told someone, and now they're covering up their tracks. Who did—"

"Th-they, they fig-figured it o-ow-out."

"Who did?"

A sob ripped out of Peter.

"Please—"

"If you cooperated, you pathetic pig, you wouldn't be pissing yourself like some little boy," Edmund scowled. "Tell me who you told, and I will forget this ever happened." All of Peter's resolve broke into pieces, a fight that he could not fight, nor wanted to. He quivered from spine to toe as another one of Edmund's fists shot into the wall. "COME ON!"

"R-Re, I told Re-Remus, he, Remus. Please leave m-me alone," he begged. Five seconds of silence ensued, a hand still wrapped around his neck, and no one in the hall or in the bathroom to witness. Alone. "Please."

"Good." Edmund dropped his hand from the Gryffindor's body. "Very good, excellent."

"Please," Peter repeated over and over against like a mantra, "please," eyes shut so tight that he could see white. "Please." It wasn't until he heard the door closing behind him that he realized he was, once again, by himself.

Out in the corridor, Antonin Dolohov lifted himself off the wall adjacent to the bathroom door as he saw his housemate slip out of it.

"That was quick," he stated, giving the wizard a once over. "And?"

"Exactly to plan."
Once Upon a Time In Limbo

(Friday 18 January, 1978)

As it had been for most of its history, the atmosphere in that tower five stories up was much the same as it had been on any other evening. A fire crackled in the background, the flame still bright yellow with a blue base, a young couple sat in the corner attempting to explore one another in the shadows, and, of course, Sirius Black, who albeit his glowing marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts, could not keep his eyes open to save his life to finish his assignment.

Remus lifted his gaze from his reading to glare at his friend as another snore drummed out of him. He closed his eyes, pressing his fingers to his temples before opening them back up to return to the work at hand. But he, too, could not help but have his mind wonder, his eyes drifting off to another book. A book that was as dusty and rotten as a corpse, hidden inside the bag that pressed against his ankle. He could feel the weight of it tiring his muscles as if he were Atlas holding the world.

Shaking his head to wake himself from the stupor, he once again reverted back to the endless lines in front of him. One after the other and another and another, he ended up rereading them more times than necessary in order to remember what it was he was even reading. And just as he finally felt confident enough to move to the next page, his ears heard the sharp close of the portrait door an hour after curfew. Curious, he looked up, waiting for the rule breaker to make their way out of the corridor and into the warmth of their common room.

His chin shot backward into his neck, his brows furrowed as he caught sight of Peter rushing through the room with bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks. Remus blinked several times, following his friend's body, registering it before standing up and tossing his book aside onto the armchair behind him.

"Pete?" he called out. Peter, who had just taken his first step onto the stone staircase, froze in place. As Remus approached, he began to turn, teeth chattering and eyes widening as the two boys stared one another down. "Peter?" Remus said again, albeit more quietly this time. His hands were held out in front of him, as if her were trying to catch a cat.

Peter let out a deep sob, lifting his hand to cover his mouth and contain it.

"Mate, what—" But he scattered off at the speed of light before Remus could finish. Both of them ran up the stairs, shoving first years, third years, and fifth years aside as they did. "Peter, wait!" Remus would yell as the others threw curses and blasphemies at them, but neither could hear, only their heartbeats thudding in their ears as they flew up seven flights of stairs.

Just as Remus made his way around the last twist, he saw the door to their dormitory shut with a bang. He stopped, clutching his chest as he bit down on his tongue and stifled a string of slurs. The hand that wasn't holding his chest had turned into a fist, pressed against the railing as he leaned all his weight onto it, never once taking his eyes off the door.

Once able to survive the last leg of stairs, he made his way to the door. His forehead rested against it, eyes closed as he searched for what had escaped him— and it wasn't just the oxygen from his lungs. He paid attention, pressing his ear to the door and hearing Peter's tears as they vibrated through the door and into Remus himself.

"Peter," Remus began through raspy breaths. "If— open the door, mate. I can, we can find— let me help you, let me figure— let me in." He waited, knocking his knuckles against the door twice before
attempting again. "Whatever it is, we'll figure it out— but you need to let me in right now, mate, you need— you got to tell me, whatever it is." When he could hear nothing decipherable through the mumbled sobs, Remus pulled out his wand from his pocket and pressed it to the door's lock. "Alohomora," he whispered, a click following after the incantation.

With a deep breath and a hand placed firmly around the door's knob, he twisted it open and let himself in. There was nothing impeding the entrance, only a pitch dark room and the moon's faint light coming in through one of the windows. He closed the door behind him, reclining against it, and eyeing Peter's hunched body by right by James' trunk. Neither said anything, neither could meet the other's gaze, but a distinct and musty sourness filled the air, causing Remus to stick his nose up and sniff.

"Mate, is that— is that you?" His only answer was the warble of salty rivulets. "You should take a shower, it'll make you feel better." Little did he know that Peter wasn't listening, that he couldn't hear anything besides the blood that had rushed into his head. All he could feel was his clammy skin and the clothes that stuck too tightly to it. Everything from head to toe was wet, either with sweat, tears, or urine, and Remus knew, he knew. "Peter, listen to me— it's going to be okay, they're not getting away with—"

"No," Peter responded in a wavered shout, finally lifting his forehead up from his knees. Remus' face fell as he stared at the only thing he could make out: barely white eyes with the moist glisten of something worse than fear— guilt.

"This can't go on," Remus insisted, shaking his head. "None of this— don't you see? It's not some prank any more. It can't be, it's—" he pursed his lips. "It's not— Mary wasn't a prank, this isn't a prank— don't you see that? We can go to Dumbledore right now—"

"NO!" Peter shrieked, a strong tremor shaking his body.

"By morning they'll be gone, expelled—"

"NO!"

"Mate—"

"NO! You can't," he fretted, "it's not the s-same, it-it's dif-different this time."

Remus bent down on his knees, clasping his hands together and looking Peter straight in his bulging blue eyes.

"Then tell me, please," he pleaded. "Whatever it is, I swear—" His shoulders dropped as he watched his friend stow away back into his own body, hiding away in the shadows, letting the draft from the windows chill the back of his neck and seep into his bones.

Remus could beg, bribe, and barter, but at the end of the day, it was all going to plan.

"Fuck, Pete," he said under his breath, plopping on his behind and leaning his shoulder against the stove as he looked upon his friend with an expression of complete helplessness.

(Saturday 19 January 1978)

Eva's shoulder pressed against a cold, bone-chilling stone wall in an empty corridor. A sharp ache had matured at the tip of her spine, slowly spreading up her neck and across the width of her head which caused a ringing sensation in her ears. She lifted her fingers, pressing and rubbing at the sore
spot as her eyes closed to focus all her attention on it.

All had been quiet, not even a wind's swirl until, in the far distance, a doorknob squeaked downwards and a door cracked open. The sound made the witch open her eyes, narrowing into slits as they met pale skin and grey eyes. She blinked, and every time she did, the wrinkle between her brows deepened. One watched the other, waiting, coming to their own conclusions of the almost too surreal moment.

Was it too soon? Eva's body couldn't decide for her. There were no dreadful ants crawling up her skin, and her stomach didn't tighten at the sight of him, but the air was thick and tense. It reeked of a saloon where they had been serving nothing but ale and cigars, and Eva found her nose scrunching up as if she were about to sneeze. But she didn't.

He approached with hasty steps and eyes as wide as the fists he held tight by his side. She swallowed, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared him down and waited for whatever it was he had to say.

"What are you doing here?" Regulus asked before he had even come to a full stop in front of Eva. A bemused smirk grew on half of Eva's lips, and it took everything he had to keep his hands in his pockets and not wrapped around her wrist in order to yank her away. Far away.

"I was passing through," Eva responded with a slight and bewildered shake of the head. "Is—" But her words faltered as Regulus took the liberty of stepping even closer. Her palm immediately reached for the wall, holding it as if it would hold her if he decided to, once and for all, push her down.

"You need to turn around and leave," he continued, his words even tenser than before. The once stoic expression on Eva's face melted away all too soon, replaced by nothing more than her silent and rapid blinks.

"I," she couldn't find the words, and thus forced herself to look away from him and past his shoulders. He tilted his head in the same direction, surveying every angle, line, fold of her face. "I owe you an apology, don't I?" Regulus' nostrils flared, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips.

"Cheers, but it's not a great time," he said. Eva opened her mouth to respond, but not before Regulus had her in his firm grasp. Both his hands had grabbed hold of either side of her arms, and she could feel the heat of his palms burning through the curve of her shoulders. He bent down, eye to eye, and only inches from her face. "You're good, yeah? Forget about what happened and leave."

She took slow breaths, her once endless blinking nowhere to be found as both of them wordlessly took part in a staring game. Regulus had yet to let go, and she couldn't help but wonder why he urged her to scatter but kept her planted firm to the ground. Why he forced her to look him in the eye, as if there would be a message in there, but pushed her to turn around? As if she had to only step a bit closer to see it, the answer, what he truly meant to say. A second more, a step closer.

It was gone too soon; locked away behind pale skin and thin lashes as a door jarred further down the hall.

"Fuck," she heard him curse under his breath as his fingers sunk into her skin. Though she watched him, out the corner of her eye she could spot a flash of blonde. She turned to look at it, doll-like eyes and a mischievous smirk waltzing its way closer to the pair.

Eva's brows furrowed, gaze reverting to Regulus, who had given one last squeeze to the witch's shoulders before releasing her and standing straight once again.
"Selwyn," Eva greeted, looking between Regulus and Rosalia. Then, like a slap to the face, it dawned on her what she had walked in on. And just as quick, she felt a flash of heat rush up her neck and onto her cheeks. "Ah," she let out, pursing her lips into a thin smile as she met Regulus' grey gaze for a brief second. "Right, well, I'll be on my way, then."

"Yeah," Regulus said. Eva made way to step past him, but hesitated as Rosalia reached out her hand and brushed it through her housemate's hair.

"But does she have to leave so soon?" Rosalia mewed, twisting the dark brown strand around her index finger. She blinked her eyes over and up to Regulus', whose teeth visibly ground back and forth. "We could have so much fun." His eyes narrowed as the wicked grin on her lips grew even larger. "Isn't that what you always wanted?"

Eva's lips parted, her brows drew closer, and she turned to look at the wizard over her shoulder. Regulus, however, watched Rosalia like a hawk without uttering a single word as she continued to tease and taunt the both of them. Her eyes returned to the blonde witch, eyeing her up and down as if they hadn't been sharing a dorm for the passed seven years. Never in her life had Eva assumed her capable of being so brazen with someone of Regulus' distinction, especially not without reprimand from his part, but here they were. Why were they here?

"I've work for Professor Sprout that needs to be done by this evening," Eva spoke up when no one else did.

"Of course," Rosalia whispered, turning back to look at her. "Off you go, then."

"Right," Eva said with a final nod. She dared a quick glimpse at Regulus, who stared in the opposite direction of both herself and Rosalia before setting off for the greenhouses.

Yet, as she retreated, she could feel their eyes on her back. Watching her every move, as if they were commanding her with a pair of strings. Her breaths shortened, and her thoughts sped up at the same rate as her footsteps. A sort of psychosis that had blown in with the vent de malheur. One that brought along with it sickness and even death. Cruel and strange, and it chased her all throughout the castle. It followed her, braided with cackles and vile ways to make her suffer, to make her think that one more step and she would fall into an abyss.

It wasn't until she made it to the corner that she found herself with her back pushed up against the wall, her eyes wide, and her hands clutching at her chest as she drifted back to reality. As if she had woken up from a bad dream.

They were all intoxicated, and not because they had drunk or consumed something, but because they had done it to one another. All this time, they had all shared and propagated a false sense of power that had been granted to them by some invisible face, of which they knew only by name, whispers during a slow dance, after dinner with a glass of scotch.

That's what he felt, looking down at the lines that traversed his palm. A drunken power that overwhelmed him, pushed the blood to flow in his veins, causing them to bulge out like purple mountain ranges. He clenched and unclenched his fist, mesmerized by the act alone as the silver rings on his fingers glistened in the glimmering light like a beacon of some sort. Edmund, who stood before him, was yanking his tie from around his neck all the while watching the mystified wizard.

"He named Lupin," Edmund said, breaking the silence. Evan blinked, slowly nodding his head without any indication of stopping.
"Yeah," he let out in an indifferent snort, "could've guessed."

"I didn't say anything," Edmund continued, inhaling as he pulled off his merino wool jumper and left it to lay on his bed. "But do you think that she has—"

"I don't fucking know," the blonde wizard hissed, scowling as the thought sunk deeper. "But I swear if she is—"

"You have to make sure," Edmund told him. "You have to make sure, Evan, because you know He's counting on this marriage—"

"I know," he sneered in return, looking to his housemate with widening eyes and a tightening jaw. "You think I want to marry that fucking whore?"

"Handle it," Edmund continued, almost as if he were ignoring everything Evan said. "We're almost there, I can feel it. Nothing can go wrong now, do you under—"

"Don't tell me what to fucking do," he snapped, cutting him off. "I know what I have to do." Edmund nodded. "What're we going to do about it?" Evan waved his hand about in a meaningless manner. "With Lupin, I mean."

"Wait," was the only response he got. "Wait until he leads us to where he needs to lead us to." Evan cracked his neck, letting out a resentful huff. "You can't let your emotions get in the way of this. You leave him alone until it's time, do you understand? Her, too."

"What emotions?" he retorted before lifting up his legs and stretching them out on his bed. He spread out his hand in front of him, giving one last long look at the rings before reaching to pull them off.

( Sunday 20 January 1978)

"Earth to Remus," someone said in the distance. The far distance, though. Beyond his range of hearing, beyond even that which was perceptible. So far away that Remus reckoned it hadn't even been real. "Yoohoo."

But no amount of catcalls would work on him, for all he had on his mind was one thing, one person: Peter. Ever since that wretched night spent alone in the dark, a sort of paranoia had festered within him. Every second of every day, all he could focus on was him. Where was he? What was his next class, and would they be in class together? If not, how and which path would he take to get there? Who else was in that class with him? How close is that to the dungeons? And if Remus happened to have a free hour, one would find him no further than six feet away from whatever room Peter was in.

"Heeeeeellllllooooo," a voice crowed into his ear. Remus raised his hand to swat it away.

"What the bloody hell do you want?" he muttered, turning to look at Sirius. Only the two of them had remained of the troupe. James had gone off to Quidditch practice, and Peter sat one table away with Victoria Cornfoot for their weekly Herbology tutoring. Remus had insisted on taking a seat right behind the pair, even though Sirius had argued that it was as crowded as a pregnant rabbit's belly. His protests had fallen upon deaf ears, though, as did everything else he had to say.

"I'm bored," Sirius responded in a mock-whine.

"Mhm."

"And you're supposed to keep me company."
"Great," Remus scoffed, shaking his head. Sirius sighed as he leaned his cheek against his hand. He allowed another minute of silence to pass between them before allowing another sigh to escape.

"What's with you?" he finally asked. "You haven't left the poor bloke alone all day."

"He's alone now," Remus countered. Sirius let out a short snort, shifting once again so that his hands held up his chin and he could look upon the Hufflepuff witch and their friend.

"So," Sirius let out in a long breath, "how 'bout a good ol' fag?"

"No."

"No!?"

"I'm studying," Remus added.

"Bollocks, you've been staring at Pete ever since the hour began." Remus took in a deep breath and pressed his lips tightly together as he looked down to the still empty parchment in front of him.

"What is it? Did you two—"

"Nothing," he replied shortly. "I've got to finish this work, or else I'll be up all night."

"Sure, whatever," Sirius surrendered with a huff, shrugging his shoulders. But his eyes never once left Remus' profile, instead watching, scanning, and surveying everything. He leaned forward, attempting to read his friend's facade as well, but it was hidden behind a hand that held up a half of it.

Minutes passed, then a good quarter of an hour passed, and Remus had managed to get through a total of three pages while Sirius had done nothing but stare at Remus. How ironic.

"Are you miffed about Minnie canceling the club?" Sirius inquired.

"What?" Remus blurted out, shifting about to look at Sirius.

"I know I was," he continued without waiting for a more intricate response. "I couldn't believe it."

"Bloody hell, Sirius," Remus cursed, lifting his fingers to pinch the corners of his eye. "Yeah, sure, I was upset— but it was bound to happen sooner or later. Wasn't some big secret, you had invited half the fucking school."

"Still," he said with a sigh. "Now what am I supposed to do on Saturdays?"

"I don't bloody know, get a girlfriend," Remus retorted before returning to his reading. Sirius hesitated before speaking, eyes on Remus as if it were the last time he'd see him. Out of nowhere, a dullness spread over him, as if something had punched him in the gut and he had lost all track of breathing.

"That got old a long time ago," he replied quickly. "Besides, easy for you to say now that you have Bones."

Remus paused on the word clairvoyant and shifted his eyes to one of Sirius' knuckles.

"Right," he said in a small voice. "Marjory."

"What? Honeymoon over already?"

"No, I just don't know how serious it is..." He stopped, ensuring that he didn't let on too much.
"Whatever it is that we have." Sirius jut out his chin, tapping his fingers along the wooden table as he mulled over Remus' words.

"Do you want it to be something more?"

"No," Remus replied with a brief laugh. Sirius let go of a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. But it wasn't relief he felt, no, and as he focused more on whatever it was twisting and kneading away in his stomach, his feet began to jump against the ground. He ran a hand through his hair, took deep breaths, but the lightning bolts at the tip of his fingers didn't relent.

"Right," he announced with a smack of his palm against the table. "I need a fag."

"Okay," Remus murmured, not lifting his eyes from his reading.

"Okay," Sirius repeated, giving one last look at him before lifting up and away from the bench to escape for a much needed breath of fresh air. And a shot of nicotine.

(Monday, 21 January 1978)

Waiting, that's all there was to do, and so that's what she did. She waited with her back pressed against the wooden planks, a barely eaten sandwich on her lap, and a boy who hadn't stopped sighing since that morning seated next to her in the dungeons. She waited with her legs straight in front of her, she waited as he sat on the outer part of the boathouse with his temple placed against his knees so that he could look out onto the black water that reflected the grey clouds above. Neither had said a word apart from the polite good afternoon, and how surprised she had been when she strolled into her serene lunch spot to find it already occupied by none other than her Tuesday lunch partner. Even though it was Monday.

For the millionth time, she looked down at his untouched sandwich and then up to the hand that he had scrubbing at his hair. He would pull at the strands in even intervals, and then release them as if he had talked himself out of it. But everything around them seemed to be in standstill. The nude tree branches across the water didn't dare sway, the water didn't even have one wave or oscillation, as if it were waiting for one of them to spit something out of their mouths. Anything, anything at all, because Eva could feel the humidity sticking to her neck, and the ever growing need to take the boy's head in her hands and shake him back to life.

She caught herself and took a deep breath before looking back to the tips of her black flats.

Remus raised his brows, finally averting his gaze from the lake and turning to look at the witch for the first time in almost an hour.

"What?" he asked, causing Eva to glimpse at him from the corner of her eye.

"What?"

"You sighed."

"Yes," she answered, the syllable stretched out to its maximum. They held one another's gaze, tension growing, fighting, waiting, battling, a pinch more of waiting thrown into the bubbling concoction.

"And?"

"And?" Eva repeated, stretching out her chin and shaking her head with bewilderment.
"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know, you tell me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he puzzled, straightening his back. Eva let out a short scoff as she pulled her eyes away from him and back to the opposite bank.

"Well, where to begin?" she asked rhetorically, lifting her shoulders the slightest inch. "You're here and it's Monday, and not that that's a problem, but you usually tell me beforehand whenever you're lunching with me, and you didn't today, and to be frank, you really haven't said much of anything—and that's quite unlike you, you're always badgering me to talk."

Remus, too, looked away before Eva's gaze could meet his again. He pressed his lips together, nodding along with her words as he focused on the boathouse's ceiling.

"Yeah, sorry, I'm sorry 'bout that," he whispered after a minute. "It hasn't been the greatest of weekends for me."

Eva's stomach hardened, and she crossed her arms over it as if it'd alleviate the heaviness that had suddenly appeared.

"Because of me?" she asked in a quiet voice, watching her fingernails with the greatest interest as they tapped against her upper arm.

"What?" he uttered suddenly, shaking his head and furrowing his brows. "No, of course— no you're— you're pretty much the only person I can stand being around right now." Despite himself, and despite the neutrality of he thought his words contained, he could feel heat intruding and making a home on his face. He took a deep breath to help ease it.

"Oh," was all she found herself able to say, a slow smile filling out her lips. "Really?"

"Yeah," Remus admitted with difficulty, "you-you're peaceful."

"I am?"

"Definitely," he responded with a nod.

"Then I'll leave you to think," she said, rubbing her palms against her thighs and holding her breath as if her breathing would end up breaking everything, including the honesty in his words.

"No, it's fine," Remus assured her. "It's nice when you talk, good distraction." He turned to look at her, to watch her lips part, words somewhere hidden in her throat about to come out before she shut herself down once again. Remus reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack that had been nearly full less than twenty-four hours ago. "Ignore me, I'm going through—I'm having an existential crisis," he placed the cigarette between his lips, "again."

Out of the corner of her eye, Eva watched his thin, battered fingers filled with cracked and scarred skin as they reached up with his wand to light the tip of the white stick. He leaned the back of his skull against the wall, his eyes closed as the cigarette smoke twirled out of his nostrils and disappeared up into the thick air.

"How come?" she asked, following his lead and leaning comfortably against the wooden planks.

"Huh?"
"Existential crisis over what?" The Gryffindor wizard hesitated, the cigarette that had been in reach of his lips falling back down to his side as he watched Eva's eyes dart about on the horizon, gears churning in her head. A soft realization matured over his features, his eyebrows raising slightly as the cigarette made a second, this time successful, attempt to his lips.

"Nothing, don't worry about it."

"No, tell me," she said. "I won't tell anyone."

"I know you won't, but I don't want to involve you."

"I'm only offering an ear, not a hand," she countered. "Unless you need—"

"No," he answered, a small smile forcing its way onto his face. Eva folded her hands onto her lap, twirling her fingers about themselves. Both of them breathed slow, thoughts now ignited, popping and sparkling between them. What once had been a lifeless desert had quickly turned into a sandstorm. The wind had picked up, waves now coming to crash onto the boathouse. "Besides, it doesn't have anything to do with me. Not really, that is." She shifted closer to listen, his lips puckered out to suck on the cigarette, his eyes narrowing as he did so. Eva traced the length of a near-faded scar that ran up and behind his ear lobe. "I mean, it's got to do— I don't know, maybe it's got do a little with everything."

"Everything's got to do with everything," Eva whispered, staring at the walls as if they could hear. "Everything's connected, most of the time we don't even realize it, but it's when we realize it when things start going bad." Remus cocked a brow, rolling his head towards her so that it was now him who was staring at the faint, pink scar that graced her cheek.

"You don't believe in coincidence?" She turned back to look at him, their noses barely an inch apart, tobacco and jasmine filling up the other's senses.

"No," she answered, "but ignorance is bliss." Remus licked his lips, his eyes momentarily averting to the tarp covered canoes in the far corner before reverting to the witch's.

"It's all fucked, Eva," he began, words barely the sound of a mouse's patter as the wind grew stronger and stronger by the second. "Something's happening, and I've only got pieces which all lead to dog shite. Complete dog shite." The cigarette between his fingers reached up between them as an offer offer to her. She took it, placing it between her own lips as she cleared the way for his speculations. "It's Peter, he's gotten himself into, well, I don't really know, but he's in trouble with some," he paused, allowing Eva's silent blinks to lead him, certain that he had her full attention. "He's gotten himself in a tight spot with some Slytherins, and he's telling me one thing, but I don't think that's it— I think there's more to it, it's not—" he took the cigarette back from her, "it's not— this can't just be some fucking joke."

Eva nodded, following the cigarette until it reached his lips. He took a moment to breathe, closing his eyes before opening them back up and letting out the smoke from his lungs.

"Kicking food off the table, not giving two bollocks about superiors, attempted rape," he listed out, no longer looking at the witch. "They threatened that they'd kill him and make it look like a bloody accident if he doesn't do what they want him to do. But for what? What the fuck do they want with Peter? He's just some farm boy from Northern Ireland, doesn't even have two sickles to rub together." A palm lifted up and scrubbed over his face, pulling down his chin and causing his mouth to open as he stuck pins into an imaginary pinboard. "And I feel like I'm losing my fucking mind. I have no clue what could possibly be happening, and I'm scared, I'm bloody scared for him. Friday night he came in crying, drenched in his own piss, and I just stood there and did nothing, nothing,"
he repeated with a slight quiver.

He rubbed his eyes with his fist before looking back to Eva, this time not with any amount of certainty, but with a plea. She found not someone sure, but someone who found themselves on the same muddy, rubbish filled path as she found herself on. Her heart beat a little harder, laying her palms on his arm and wrapping herself around it as she leaned her head against his shoulder. His eyes became gummy from the tears birthed from frustration, a scratch in the back of his throat that made the cigarette in his fingers make him want to vomit. He tossed it aside, swallowing down the smoked bitterness of it all, and without a second though, leaning his own cheek against the witch's head.

"He begged me not to say anything, so what can I do?" he said, more to himself, but knowing that she was there listening. Listening to everything he said, to the commas, to the breaths, to the filler words that took up space. "What if something terrible happens and I knew, I knew everything and didn't say anything because I didn't want— I don't want him to hate me, but I can't let them do this to him. And, I can't go to the others for help either because he doesn't want them to know. So what— I'm all alone, I've got no where to turn, no clue, fucking zero."

"What do you think it could be?" she asked. Remus shook his head, his jaw rubbing against the strands of her hair, tickling his chin but thinking nothing of it for he was too caught up now. Or perhaps because he had grown used it it.

"I— he told me that Snape was part of it, and I thought, I mean, Snape hates us— fucking loathes us, and I thought maybe he was trying to get us expelled," his shoulders lifted, filled with air before deflating, "but it couldn't be that either, it wasn't— not like this, but nothing, nothing— fuck, I don't know."

"Who else is it?"

"Merlin," Remus sighed. "I don't— Nott, er, Dolohov, Avery…"

"Got it," she said as a bell trilled in the far distance. Remus looked to entrance of the boathouse, a sudden weight dropping into his stomach, a breeze of chilly air flooding his body as Eva released her grasp of his arm. Without hesitation, she picked up her bag, placed her half-eaten sandwich into it, and closed the flap to place it on her lap before turning back to him. "They'll make a mistake, you just have to wait for it."

Remus stood up at the same time she did, wiping his hands over his trousers for any crumbs or wrinkles, eve though he hadn't eaten a single thing. He reached back down for his own bag and the sandwich. It hung limply in his hand as he lifted his chin and watched her. She, too, gave one last look at her own trousers before making way to turn about, but Remus stepped forward.

"Wait, Eva," he blurted out. She stopped and shifted to look at him. "Thank you, you know, for listening." He hesitated as he slid his hand into his pocket. "I'm sorry if it seems, I don't want to burden you—"

"You weren't," she assured him. "You can trust me."

"I know."

"Good," was the last she said before giving him a final, gentle smile and turning to depart. Remus' eyes held the spot she had last been in before the shortcut to the dungeons made her disappear with a snap of his fingers.
"He-llo," Marjory Bones sang as she bent over the couch's back to wrap her hands around Remus' neck. Her face nuzzled into his hair, giving him an amicable joggle as James, who sat diagonal from them, cocked an eyebrow and smirked at his friend's reddening face.

"Er, hi, Marjory," Remus responded with a taut smile and even tighter nod. She didn't think much of it, placing a vocally plump kiss against his ear before sinking backwards onto the couch, so that her head sat next to his knee.

"All right?" she asked with a toothy white grin, her legs kicking up and down in the air. Remus collected and lifted the enamel-colored parchment that had been strewn out across his lap.

"A bit swamped at the moment."

"With what?"

"Paper on whose method for growing Dianae is better, not exactly a showstopper."

"Herbology?"

"Yeah."

"You're right, not at all show-stopping." Both of them glanced over at the third wizard as he stifled a snort behind his fisted hand. Marjory bent her head further back to get a better look and some sly words, only to find that he was no longer paying attention, or better yet, feigning attention on the book in his hand. "We need to talk," she whispered to Remus after returning to look at him.

"Now?" he lipped, pointing his index finger downwards. The witch nodded, eyes darting over to the staircase behind the couch they sat on. Remus blinked from her to James, drawing his mouth into a straight line.

"What're you waiting for?" she muttered, poking him in the ribs.

"Mate," he called out to James, who didn't waste a second to lift his head. "Do you know if, if someone's upstairs?" His cheeks burned, the heat having creeped up and settled entirely on his face as soon as the question had finished.

"Sirius might be having a nap, but tell him I need to speak with him. He'll come down," he answered with a smug glimmer in his eyes, before adding, "but if that doesn't work, tell him the sofa's free." Remus threw him a strained thumbs up as he ran his hands over his thighs and began to pile his things onto the coffee table. Next to him, the couch cushions and various books he had used began to shuffle about, some dropping to the floor, as Marjory twisted and contorted her way to her feet.

"It's all right if I leave my stuff here? You're not going anywhere?"

"That quick, eh? Merlin, have a little more faith in yourself." Remus did his best to oppress the second wave of heat that threatened to flush through him, but ended up even worse. He sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets and looking to the witch who idled by the base of the staircase. When their gazes met, Remus jut his chin out so to let her begin the hike up with him following close behind, counting each step as he went in the hope that it would help dissolve some of the warmth.
"Wait," he called out to Marjory as he turned the ultimate bend of the spiral staircase and caught her already pressing down on the door handle. "Knock first." But his words fell upon deaf ears, for the witch took the liberty to open the door without so much as poking her head inside. Remus rushed up the last flight of stairs, butting his head around the opened door and scanning bed to bed—all the curtains open except for his own.

"Oh, no one's here," he puzzled, finally entering the room.

"So," she said, clapping her hands together and looking to him with raised brows. The demeanor from before had petered out. No more larger-than-life smiles or giddy gymnastics, she was on alert, spine straight and locked as if ready for a hearty debate. "Tell me, give me a progress report."

Remus' chin leaned forward at the same time as his head tilted. "Progress report?"

"Yeah, with the book, mate. Where you at with the book?"

"Dearborn's—"

"Er," he scratched his head, "a good way through it, but, yeah... I don't feel like I've retained anything yet." She held her palm up, flapping it as if to push away his words.

"You need to finish that book, as soon as possible. Don't worry about understanding all the details." Marjory stepped forward, taking both his hands into her own and bringing them up to her face. "We need to start practice, that's the only way to learn. Really learn. But there isn't a lot of time left. You already know too much, and your walls are down, no, they're non-existent. They don't even exist." She shook his hands as if to jolt him awake. "You need to finish that book, now. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he answered, nodding.

"Like now, Remus."

"Yeah, like now. I understood the first time, don't worry."

"Good, that's good." She let his hands drop back down to his sides. "Then we can begin practice by the end of this week."

"Practice?" he repeated, his face scrunching up. "I'm practicing with you?"

"Yes, with me," she said with a curt nod. "But not until you finish that book."

"But," he began, eyes blinking to different directions of the room. "I mean, this sort of thing could take years—"

"Well, you don't have years, do you?" she hit back with an almost sadistic smile. "You have weeks, that's it. But, Remus, there's a reason why Dumbledore wants you, why Dearborn wants you—because they know, they both know what you're capable of. You can do this, but you're going to need to believe in yourself." The witch paused, dazing off into the distance before, and as if some sort of alarm had gone off in her head, turning around and heading towards Sirius' bedside table. "Do you see now why we need to pretend? This'll make it easier for us, for you." He watched her as she pulled open his friend's drawer with considerable casualness, bending down to scavenge, pushing aside sketchbooks, pens, and knick knacks of all sorts. "A-ha!" she let out as she picked up a cracked in half, stale looking thing that could pass for a cigarette in the dark and placed it between her lips.
Remus approached the foot of his friend's bed, crossing his arms and leaning against the bed post.

"Well, I hope so."

"It'll be easy for you," she said, pulling her wand out of her skirt's waistband. "You'll see, read the book and we'll start this weekend." The cigarette was lit now, the smoke whirling about the small space, forcing Remus' eyes to narrow as he waved a hand around to dissipate it.

"Merlin, open a bloody window," he told her, blinking as tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. "Was the end of that fag charred?"

"Yeah," she confirmed, the window creaking open as she gave it a good push with her hand to let the glacial winter air in. "Why?"

"You're not supposed to smoke those," he said with a laugh. Marjory coughed after having her first puff, smiling remorsefully up at him as she offered it over. He raised his hand and shook his head. "All yours, no worries."

"I hardly smoke, but conspiring like this puts me in the mood, you know?"

"No, I don't, but you do what you want."

"Besides," she took a seat on Sirius' bed and lifted the cigarette, observing it, twisting it in her hand before letting it fall back down to her bony knee, "we couldn't go back now, could we? You wouldn't hear the end of it from James." Much to his surprise, and possibly hers as well, a wholehearted chuckle escaped him, finding one laugh coming up after the other and the next.

(Wednesday, 23 January 1978)

A drawing of illegible scrawls and thick, vertical lines poking out from various parts in antiquated black ink. The curves and angles were imprinted in her: mind, throat, lungs, heart— all of it. She reclined in her seat, a vacant expression on her face as she took her thoughts inwards and away from the world around her. Two fireplaces glowed at opposite ends of the room, silent readers occupied the couches, and Sykes drank champagne with Seacole. But she saw none of it, only the diagram beneath the tips of her fingers.

Her eyes ran up and marked feet, legs, hips, until she landed on the face of the man she had fashioned into her very own marionette. Another predator perched on heightened ground, surveying the crowd below him, alone and without company. Waiting for what he thought was the right moment, but taking no heed of the hunter in the shadows. So, when he thought he was in the clear, he glided against the wall and vanished into thin air.

Eva stood up, abandoning her books and slipping behind velvet green loveseats without so much as a glance from any of the silent readers. She was a scavenger, too, having taken to a long time memorized book from the moment she had marked her prey, watching him surveilling from his branch. Slithering, floating, not even her footsteps could be heard as she climbed the marble staircase and disappeared behind the wall.

Goosebumps bursted on every inch of her skin as soon as she stepped into the musty dungeon chill. The torch was on its last few hours, and drops of water slid down the humid walls, causing the odd pluck, pluck, pluck at uneven intervals. She ignored all the creaks and squeaks, searching the darkness for something else. Deep, immersing herself into it, and then, as if by silent prayer, the familiar click, click, click of expensive soles resounded off the masonry to her left. Knowing that they could very much turn into her own, she kicked off her shoes and hastened towards Edmund Nott's
footfalls on the tips of her toes. Her hands roamed over the walls, guiding her, leading her closer to wherever it was she was meant to be headed to.

Indeed, it had only been a hunch. Eva knew there may only be a star-crossed lover at the other end, waiting for him in the prefects' bathroom for after-hour carnal pleasures, or perhaps he was a believer of old magic and worshipped the moon with dance and sacrifice. The possibilities were endless, yet she pursued him, chasing him, slowing only when his footsteps grew closer; to the point where she was certain he was around the bend. Every step careful, agile, even if nothing else had been. She paused before going left or right, ensuring that he was always two steps ahead— exactly where she needed him to be.

Except he had led her into the deep unknown, into parts of the castle where not even ghosts dared meander. Ancient and arcane, where the trapped souls of prisoners from centuries ago were rumored to be heard in the hours before dawn; where one could walk and listen to the bones of law breakers crumbling into dust underneath their feet. It was too late when she realized that they weren't heading up, but instead sinking further down; poking her head around a corner to find a torch-less corridor colored in the same ink as the lines of the diagram imprinted in her mind. She pressed her back against the adjacent wall as moths — not butterflies — erupted inside her, hesitating, taking a deep breath and rolling her neck. But Edmund Nott was fleeing, and Eva knew that it was now or never. With one final glance at the flame in the distance, she spun about the corner and surrendered herself to complete darkness. She had only the wall and Edmund's footsteps to accompany her now.

In the dark, her eyes grew into two bludgers, desperate to seek out something in it, but failing to find her own two feet. For all she knew, Edmund Nott could have been waiting for her; or there could have been a ditch falling through to the center of the Earth, and she would have fallen without so much as time to blink. Blind. She was blind, completely and utterly blind.

The adrenaline that had once warmed her had now transformed into cold sweat; the hairs on her arms stood in a permanent formation. She made sure her shoulder grazed the wall — never daring to let go of it — as she wrapped her hand around her forearm and rubbed it in an attempt to suppress the frost.

"Where's Dolohov?" Edmund asked, causing Eva to stop short and stifle a startled gasp. Her hand pressed against the stone, gripping it, breathing so low that not even she could make sense of it.

"On his way with the others," Evan Rosier replied. The air hitched in her throat, the muscles in her legs jerked as if forcing her to bolt, but she kept them ironed to the ground. A hand reached around to the back of her neck, pulling her hair out of its tight bun so that it draped over her shoulders. Black like obsidian, sure, but it was all in vain.

"Presumably intoxicated," drawled a voice which the witch recognized as Severus Snape's. They were closer than she had realized, a mere few feet away around the corner and nothing more.

"Black?" Evan asked, ignoring his housemate.

"He'll be here, I didn't give him much of a choice," Edmund told him.

As silence fell upon the group, Eva took slower breaths, despite knowing that nothing could rescue her— not the dark, not her hair, not the stillness of her body. They were on their way. The words made her heart speed up, her insides ready to burst from the need of more oxygen. Her eyes blinked rapidly from one black corner to the next, in the hope that it would help her come up with a solution when she had entered without so much as a plan.
Unknown to Eva, Severus had raised a palm to silence his already quiet friends. He stretched his neck forward; a brow furrowed underneath one of his matted locks of hair.

"All right there, Snape?" Evan asked, a tinge of vexation prevalent and interwoven throughout. Severus snapped his neck to look at him, nostrils flaring and teeth clenching. But it was too late, Eva could sense it, make out the shuffling of trousers against robes, gulping down the ugly truth with what little breath she could afford.

He took a step forward — Eva squeezed her eyes shut — and another step, a third, and so forth until Severus stood in the center of where the adjacent halls met. His eyes nothing more than two slits as he pored over the emptiness to his right. _Nothing_. He searched, taking broader and hurried strides into the vacant corridor, going through it with a fine-tooth comb, but still nothing.

Nothing, not even a pinch of oxygen remained in her lungs. It had all been whipped out as the force of 160 pounds came crashing down on her. A moist palm covered her mouth, smothering the shocked yelp that had threatened to escape her. Wooden soles squashed her shoeless members, and she could see nothing beyond the torso of the person on top of her. The person who, within the time it had taken Severus Snape to step forward into her line of vision, had decided to flatten her against the wall. She grimaced at the pain, the pressure against her shoulder blades, the ache in her breasts and toes. Her palms pressed against the jumper covered chest, pushing, shoving, but failing to do much of anything.

Severus spun back around, causing his robes to billow out behind him.

"Paranoid," Evan snorted as Edmund wrung his arm and brought his wristwatch up to his face. "No one comes down here, not even the sodding professors."

As soon as the Slytherin receded from view, Remus stepped back the slightest inch to let Eva breathe. She held him now, rather than pushed, trying to regain her composure without causing any sound. Her eyes closed, counting, screaming inside her head as she laid it against his chest; her hands clutched and bunched his jumper into her fists. _Four, five, six._

When she managed a glimpse up at him, Remus was not looking at her, but in the direction of the wizards. He had his jaw sealed while his teeth ground against top and bottom. Her eyes fell down to her sock-covered, bruised toes, discovering that his own feet stood on either side of her left one, much like the palms that pressed against the wall on either side of her head. And every time they heard so much as a cough or a yawn, he would press up closer to her, causing her to hold her breath and brace the attack against her entire length.

Both Eva and Remus turned their heads in the opposite direction as a bitter chuckle broke the dungeon's stillness. They could not see them from where they stood, but the cajoling and snickering only drew closer until Remus could finally make out Regulus Black and Cedric Avery, the palest of the entourage.

Eva waited with bated breath for them to yell, curse, hold them at wand-point, but their eyes seemed to glaze right over them. They continued past the pair, turning the bend, ignorant to the two glued against the wall right in front of them. She opened her mouth only to close it just as fast, brows scrunching together as her and Remus focused all their attention on the four wizards, studying them until they passed from sight.

"Finally," came Severus' psalmatic voice.

"Good," said Edmund, nodding at the newcomers. "This won't take long."
Antonin Dolohov stumbled and webbed through the company, coming upon rusted metal bars and pulling out a brass key from his back pocket. Regulus watched him with a grimace, tapping his fingers against the side of his leg until, at last, a metallic clang rattled through the corridors. Antonin bowed, gesturing for the group to enter the cell. Regulus, however — being the last to enter — searched the void behind him, one eye narrowing on it before shaking off the feeling and shutting the gate.

As soon as it closed, Remus grabbed Eva by the hand and dragged her far, as far and fast as possible, from the cells. Her feet were sore, her head dizzy, and eyes glossy as she fumbled and staggered to keep up, every step he took equating five of her own. At times, she would feel something soft brush up against the bare spot between her ankles and her trousers, but whe she turned to look, there was always nothing.

He let her go once they had returned to the hall holding the last torch before the complete darkness. She held her wrist in her hand, massaging it, observing Remus out of the corner of her eye as he tore a cloak from over his shoulders and bundled it into his hands. Her eyes fell to the velvet material.

"Where did that come from—"

"This," Remus lashed out, holding the cloak up to her face. "This is what saved your arse just now." She looked to the ground at his feet. "What the fuck were you thinking!?! What were you doing there, Eva!?!"

"I could ask you the same," she countered.

"Me!?!" he asked as if it were the oddest of questions, scoffing while pointing to himself. "I was there to find out what they're up to."

"Yes, well, so was I."

"Are you bloody mad!?" Eva didn't bother answering, knowing well that she had walked into something much more sinister than after-hour carnal pleasures. "Eva, what were you doing following Nott?" She clasped her hands together and lifted both her eyebrows and her shoulders with a faux-air of innocence.

"I didn't realize that I would end up there."

"Don't avoid the question."

"And what about you? How did you know where they'd be?"

"Answer the question." Eva huffed as her shoulders drooped, too fatigued to fight back.

"Well, you told me about your friend and Nott, and so I thought—"

"You thought!?!" Remus repeated with an unconvinced snort. "No, I don't think you did."

"I only wanted to help you."

"I told you I didn't want you involved."

"Stop telling me what to do, then," she tore back, her arms crossing over her chest. "Who do you think you are?"

"Bloody hell, Eva." He clasped his hands together, briefly clenching them. "That's not what I'm
trying, I'm not telling you what to do, but do you know how awful I'd have felt if something bad had happened to you because you were trying to help me?"

"They'd have done worse to you," she rebuffed. Both held themselves still for a moment, regaining control over their nerves and the sudden rush that had enveloped them. Eva lifted her chin as she felt his gaze on her profile, but refusing to meet it herself. Remus shook his head minutely, pursing his lips and giving her a once over.

"And where the fuck are your shoes?" he inquired as he pointed a hand down to her feet. A warmth crawled up into her cheeks.

"I had to leave them, they made too much noise."

"Leave them where?"

"In the corridor by the entrance to my common room," she mumbled. Remus didn't know whether to laugh or cry, his jaw coming undone as his body slumped forward. "Listen, I'm sorry if I ruined some grand scheme of yours, but," she looked to him with a feverish expression, "but I'm sure there's a reason why they go in there. You wouldn't have been able to—"

"I know," he agreed, "but that's not it, that's not the problem here." Eva returned to stare at the wall.

"You can't do— you can't do this sort of thing without telling me, without telling anybody. No one would've known where you were, something terrible could've—"

"I know," she snapped in a swift breath. "I never claimed that what I did was smart, but I didn't do it with bad intentions." Remus' face fell.

"Eva," he said in a tender tone, taking a step closer to her. "I'm not— I know that, but I also don't want you putting yourself in harm's way for my sake. Promise me you won't do that again, please swear—"

Neither one of them would ever know the promise she would make, for in that moment, a familiar bone-rattling laugh escaped from the deep cavern. Without waiting a second to rationalize it, Remus had an arm wrapped around Eva's waist, and hurried her against the wall. His eyes were wide, nostrils as well as he fumbled to spread open the tangled cloak. She looked between him and the garment, his hands trembling, quivering, and without saying anything, she took it from him. Eva fanned it out to its entirety before handing it back to the wizard, who wrapped it behind his back and over his head before bending down as far as he could to cover both of them.

"Already?" he wondered to himself out loud as his palms came to sit beside her ears.

"Remus," she whispered against the crook of his neck, causing his jaw to tighten. For unlike him, Eva knew how sound travelled in the dungeons, and laughter that loud was still a great deal away.

"Must we be so close to one another?" He shifted a bit to her left. "It's just, well, it's rather stuffy—"

"The cloak isn't big enough for me, much less the both of us, so you'll have to get used to it."

"Of course," she conceded, pursing her lips. "And what sort of cloak is this that it—"

"An invisibility cloak," he said, shutting his eyes and fisting his hand for a second. "But you mustn't—"

"I know, I won't," she assured him, looking up at him. He held her stare, as if to test her confidence, to see if she would falter under it. When he was sure she wouldn't, he casted his attention to the end of the corridor.
In the returned silence, Eva was left to contemplate him. Eyebrow, eyelashes, the stubble grazing his jaw; his chest was caved in, hunched over so that his chin could easily sit on her head if he wanted it to. She could make out the way he sucked his inner-cheek between his teeth, biting down on his gums, gritting one against the other. "You know, I am sorry," Eva admitted. "For all of it. I don't know what I was thinking."

"What, Eva? What're you on about?" Remus puzzled, his brow furrowing as he turned to look at her. "Causing trouble wherever I go," she clarified with a dismal, fleeting smile. "Never mind."

He watched her, peering down at her as if trying to comprehend a different language. She could see the twist in his face, the gears churning in his head. The wrinkled forehead, the inward-looking squint of his eyes, the sudden downcast expression so embedded with uncertainty. Without the head-rush of being caught, it dawned on him how close they were, that he could feel every nudge, shove, and bump.

"Don't be so nervous," she told him, her hand reaching up to brush against his tense jaw. "Sound travels down here." His mind focused in on the ambrosial scent coming off her wrist, the dancing shadows against her cheekbones, the warmth coming from her breath against his neck. The same hand that had swept across his jaw dropped to his chest, holding him up with the gentlest of touches, searing right through all cloth and onto his skin.

Eva's body stilled as she caught his eyes landing on her lips. She blinked, their breaths simultaneously growing heavier as the heat rose underneath the cloak. Tentatively, her neck stretched upward, his eyes dropping to a close to take in the feel of her nose skimming against his cheek before dusting against his own. Every breath counted, every touch, every sensation. His hand dropped from the wall to the curve of her waist, fingers digging into the black jumper as if forcing their way past to touch her flaming skin. Massaging, kneading; needing, pleading. Eva held her breath as she tilted her head to fill the remaining distance. Lingering there, eyelashes fluttering up and down between his mouth and closed eyes. He could sense her closeness from the way it tickled against his skin, parting his lips as he felt hers press against them. Enveloping them, slow as the devil, hesitant and cautious, but kindling a fire.

The grip on her waist tightened, forcing her closer. Hungry, starved, a hand fled from the wall next to her ear and wrapped into her hair, holding the back of her head where he wanted it, needed it. He brought his lips down onto hers with a sudden eagerness that shocked both of them. The kisses were hard pleasure; fast, sucking, pulling, open-mouthed. Everything in that moment was her, only her. Her taste, her smell, her touch; the warmth of her skin, the sweetness of her jasmine perfume, the silky locks of hair between his fingers. He wanted to delve deeper, fervent for so much more, filled to the brim with wanderlust. More lips, more hands, more of her.

Eva cupped his face, rubbing her thumb across the well past five o'clock shadow. It made him pull back, placing only a finger's width between them as they watched one another with half-opened eyes and swollen, parted lips. A deep, heady sigh escaped Remus as he leaned down and took her mouth again.

They were forced apart from one another as the sound of footsteps pulsated against the ground. Remus' face dropped into the crook of her neck, his forehead against the wall, and her nose pressed into his shoulder. They held their breaths, neither breathing despite racing hearts and detonating lungs, neither looking to the group strolling by, instead shutting their eyes like children during a horror film.

When Eva heard their footsteps retreating into the opposite distance, she opened her eyes to peek over the Gryffindor's shoulder. Her body stiffened as she found two black, inky eyes staring back at
her. She swore on everything good that he could see her, that he knew.

"Snape!" called out Cedric. The Slytherin wizard's eyes twitched, but it wasn't long until his gaze dropped to the ground and he turned to continue on with the others.

They waited even after they had turned the corner; one leaning against the other until lifeless quiet returned to the hall. No laughter, no footsteps, nothing. Within seconds, it was filled with gasps, both wheezing and heaving as oxygen re-flooded their lungs.

"We need to get out of here," Remus said through a raspy inhale. "Now." Eva only looked to him with a wide, detached stare, her palm spread out over her left breast as it rose and fell by the double.

By the time she had recovered, Remus had removed the cloak and armed himself with his wand. The fresh, cool air slapped was quick to wake her back to reality, and as their eyes met, she averted hers to the ground and nodded once to indicate for him to proceed, The two of them set off, Remus a step or two ahead of her as he searched for could-be dawdlers.

"Eva," he said, breaking the silence as they neared the Slytherin common room.

"Yeah."

"They're going to find your shoes." She scoffed, shaking her head.

"They'd have to know they're mine."

Nothing else was said between them, even though there was plenty to be said.

(Thursday, 23 January 1978)

"Lupin!" The holler sent a lightning bolt through him, forcing him to sit straight from the lumped-up position he had been in during most of the study session. His eyes searched the insipid library, almost empty during the between-class hour, but found nothing of interest. "So," Sofia Mustaq hissed into his ear from behind, her hands curling around the back of his chair, "how 'bout a little chat, yeah?"

She pulled out the chair next to his, ignoring the glower Madam Biblia's sent from behind her leopard-rimmed spectacles. The Slytherin's long, manicured, blood-red fingernails tapped on the wooden table, her head pointing at a two o'clock angle, and her eyes only green flames that burned holes through the Gryffindor. Remus ran a hand through his hair, reclining in his seat as a tint of color rose to his ears.

"Er," he began with a slight head shake. "Did I— a chat about what, exactly?" Her first response was a disgruntled observation of his entire length, a shameless scowl clear as day gracing her face.

"I recall telling you to keep your mouth shut." Remus pressed his lips into a tight line, his eyes narrowing, and yet not able to look away from her. She held him there, exactly where she wanted him, challenging him to do otherwise.

"Ah, we're talking about last night, aren't we?"

"Yeah, boy, you bet we are."

"Yeah," he took a deep breath, gazing up at the bannister lining the library's second floor. "It wasn't something I had planned, exactly." Sofia sat forward in the chair, pressing her thin and unusually long finger point-black between his eyes.
"You told her." Her eyes protruded further with every word. "I told you not to tell anyone, but you did. Didn't you?" His eyes scrunched closed as she pressed her fingernail deeper into his skin before letting it drop down to the golden chain around her neck.

"Was that necessary?"

"Was that necessary?" she repeated in a baby-like whine. "If I tell you to do something, you do it. If I tell you to not do something, you don't do it. Understood?"

"I don't know why the fuck you're protecting them," he bit back, his nostrils flaring slightly. "But that's my mate, my best mate, and I can't — will not — sit back and let them—"

"This goes beyond friendships, this goes beyond you."

"They're—"

"I don't give a fuck."

"You're protecting them!? You're part of that— you're in on it, aren't you?" Remus chided, his own eyes growing cold and thin by the second. "You're all fucking—"

"We're safer when they're here," she cut in, her breath hot against his ear. "I can watch them, see them, hear them, but only if they're here. If they get expelled, then they go bye-bye. We lose them. Does that make things clearer for you, or do you need me to spell it out as well?" His mouth went slack, entire face blanching as it dawned on him what he would have never put together otherwise.

"You?"

"Don't fuck this up because you think you know. You don't know anything, Lupin, not yet, so why not listen to those who might know a little more than you. Have a little faith," she said, holding his stare one last, long second before standing up, chair screeching against the floor. His lips parted, but at such a loss for words that she had gone by the time he came out of the gobsmacked stupor. Disappeared, like a flame blown out in a sudden sea breeze. He turned to look at the strewn out, forsaken chair, realizing that nothing truly was at it seemed to be. That perhaps she was right, he didn't know anything, not yet.

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Her hands were deep in dirt: running through it a million times, ensuring that nothing was in there that shouldn't be. Fallen branches, leaves, even dust would be cause for concern. A call for contamination. Lifting and sifting, cleaning and probing. She had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, and her eyes glazed over with the lethargic acknowledgement that there was still much to do.

Eva sighed, closing her eyes and wiping a stray strand of hair back behind her ear. It wasn't until the brief pause that she noticed the faint knocking against the flimsy glass door.

"Remus," he watched her lips motion. The Gryffindor pointed down to the door handle, mimicking the action of opening a door as Eva hastily wiped her hands against her apron. She looked over her shoulder, giving a quick inspection of the dirt-ridden, untidy workspace before shaking her head and hurrying over to open for him.

"Merlin," he said as the door opened. "How many locks d'you have on that thing?"

"A little much, isn't it?" she asked, pressing her lips into an apologetic smile. "I've got so much to do. I didn't want first years marching in here demanding help from Professor Sprout, and then staying as
if it were some sort of lounge." Eva didn't wait a moment to return to the tin bucket; Remus choosing instead to idle by the door, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

"I mean, if you're busy, I can—"

"No, it's fine. You can stay," Eva assured him, shrugging her shoulders while diving her hands back into the oppopanax mixture. "Besides, I'm almost done." His hand twisted into his bag's leather strap, unsure whether to take her word for it. "Remus, sit, please."

He walked over to the stool across from wherever Eva found herself that day, sitting down and placing his bag onto the table. He observed the witch's repetitive motions in and out of the soil. Her hands were stained dusty brown, her fingernails caked with soil, and the more he looked, the more streaks and marks he discovered—blouse, neck, forehead. The sight forced a small, slow smile to mature on his lips.

"What's she got you doing now?" Remus inquired, jutting his chin towards the bucket of soil. He sat forward, using his forearms for support in order to get a better view.

"Euh," Eva didn't bother to look up, "it's for class tomorrow, actually. Oppopanax soil needed to grow Hellebore."

"Hellebore?" he repeated, eyebrows shooting up into his hairline. "Isn't that supposed to be a bit poisonous?"

"Only if you eat it," she teased.

"Yeah, right, of course," he said with a sigh, not taking his eyes off her hands as they turned into fists and began punching the substance.

"You can talk, you know? It's no bother," she mentioned, glimpsing up at him through her eyelashes. "Or is something wrong?"

"Yeah," he scratched the underside of his jaw, "I want to— actually, I thought maybe we could talk about last night." Her hands stopped pounding the dirt. "But if it's not a good time, we can—"

"What about it?"

"Well," he shrugged his shoulders, "you know, I wanted— I realized I was a little… harsh, but I was, you have to understand I was worried about you. And I wanted to let you know, well, that I appreciate what you— I understand you were trying to help, and I appreciate it, but that it can't happen again. It's too dangerous." His eyes lifted from the soil to meet her own, but they were engrossed in a non-existent horizon. "And," he took a deep breath, wetting his lips, "you, what we saw, did, where— everything — you need to, we need to forget about it all. Like it never happened."

Eva's eyes narrowed, well aware that the conversation had taken a sharp turn somewhere, knowing there was no one else in this car except for them.

She turned around in one swift movement, running a hand through her loose strands and flipping it two one side as she stared at the foggy window. Remus’ blurry reflection shifted about, his arms crossing over his chest and his body fidgeting due to a restless leg.

"Because, er, it's probably best, you know, if we forgot and didn't— don't talk about it."

Her hand ran over a boline's white handle, sitting on the shelves lining the windows. She ran over the bumps, the uneven edges, the imperfections. Remus bit down on his tongue, brows scrunching downwards as he eyed her shoulder blade moving underneath her blouse.
"Eva?"

"I have," her heart pounded, drumming inside her ears so that it was the only thing she could hear. "It's just— I don't know how possible that'll be."

"Oh?" he sat a little straighter. "How come?"

"You see," she rubbed her hands over her apron, holding her tongue between her teeth, "you see... it wouldn't be that easy."

"Could you be a little clearer?" Eva opened and closed her mouth, choking on the very words that he needed. "Is there, did something happen with—?"

"No."

"No? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Then?" Eva could feel her stomach sinking, pulling at her ear, rubbing the lobe between her fingers. "It's just, I suppose... since I have feelings for you, it would be—"

"What?" he dropped, lifting himself from the stool and bending over the table. She closed her eyes, letting out the breath she had been holding. "What's that supposed to mean?" he began to fret, his eyes flickering with a mix of bewilderment and some form of distress. "What, what sort of feelings are we talking about, exactly?"

"Merlin," she sighed, shaking her head as she turned around and occupied herself with the dirt mixture. "It's not that complicated, Remus."

"Yes, actually, yes, it bloody is, Eva," he countered, letting out a deep sigh. "I mean," a hand scrubbed over his face and into his hair, "how?"

"I don't know," she muttered, pushing her shoulders forward in a sort of half-hearted shrug. "How should I?"

"You don't know?"

"No," she bit back, not once daring to look him in the eye as she dragged her finger back and forth through the soil.

"How don't you know!? I mean, aren't you— aren't you engaged?" Eva snapped her full attention to him. Her jaw slackened, a scrunch appeared between her brows as Remus pressed his lips together and swallowed.

"Excuse me?" she whispered, her words slow and portentous. "What did you just say?"

"I just, well, I may have heard—"

"From who?"

"Sirius," he lied, heat creeping up the back of his neck. "He still, he still talks to some, to some people in that, well, he mentioned it in passing. It wasn't a big, it wasn't anything important or, you know."

"Well, he heard wrong," she lashed, picking up the bucket and turning around to place it on the shelf.
next to the boline knife. "Because I didn't sign anything, there's no ring," she added, lifting her left hand over her shoulder to show him, making sure to lay it into him like daggers against a board. "Clearly."

"Right, yeah, I noticed that."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm not going to marry him. Okay?"

"Okay," he said, nodding while rubbing the back of his neck. "Okay, that's— yeah, that's all that matters, what you want."

It had been a long time since Eva had felt the godawful crawl of insects up her arms, her spine, spilling onto her neck. The humidity, the mugginess accumulating and suffocating her until she was left with no other option but to run from it. It had returned, the craving for a new layer, a new color, a new everything. To start again, move backwards, rewind. Her hands squeezed the tin bucket's handles, allowing them to dig further and deeper into her palm.

Another mistake, stumble, fault.

"Listen, I know, I'm sorry I mentioned the engagement thing. I know... you're right, none of my business," he apologized, clearing his suddenly parched throat. "It's just, I don't, well— fuck, I don't, I don't really know what to say." He held his forehead in his hands, searching the ground for some sort of answer. "You see, I don't do anything of the sort." Eva shut her eyes. "But, er, thank you?"

"Remus."

"Yeah?"

"You're not helping."

"No, I suppose not," he agreed, grimacing. "I, I want to explain— I guess what I'm trying to say is that you're, it's not you. It's me. I don't, I don't date"

"That's fine."

"It's, well, it's the circumstances— me, you know? If they were different, maybe..." He crossed his arms and shrugged his shoulders, looking like he had missed the last train home. "Me being, you know, it's not good—"

"Then what should I say about myself, hm?" she challenged him, turning around to meet his eye. "Don't forget that we're not that different from one another." His lips parted, and all he could answer with was a slow, acknowledging nod. Eva gave him a rigid smile, lifting her palm and shaking her head. "Never mind, like I said, it's fine."

She returned to her work after that; their words replaced by a thick tension. Remus held his weight up with both palms firm against the table, his lips sucked into his mouth, his eyes to the glass ceiling above him. He attempted to look through to the sky, to make a game out of the constellations, but the hanging lamps reflected too brightly, and all he could make out was the witch bustling back and forth a mere foot away from him.

"I can go," he said against the pulse in his throat.

"If it's what you want."

"I don't want to bother you or anything, you know." Eva reached for a glass vial of pulverized
bloodstone. "I guess it'd be best if I got going. You seem busy here, besides, I've got to get a head start on my assignments for tonight." He sighed, picking up his bag from the table and turning to position himself towards the door, but hesitating. "I'll see you soon, then?"

"Yes."

"Right, yeah," he said, knocking his knuckles against the wooden shelves behind him. "Okay, goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, Remus." He held a blank expression, peering out to the witch one last time before making way for the exit. The last thing Eva heard from him was the sound of the door shutting behind him, and then nothing.

She watched him retreat through the open arc and into the castle's stone corridor. He never looked back, continuing forward until he disappeared from view. Her fingers lifted to pinch her throat as she gazed upon her work with a wrinkled brow and watery eyes.

"Okay," she let out in a deep breath, swallowing and beginning to reorganize the mess she had made.

As her hand reached to replace the pulverized bloodstone, something flickered in the corner of her eye while dashing through the cloisters. Though usually one to ignore, curiosity got the best of her, and the witch paused, permitting a glimpse of whatever it was.

All emotion dissipated as she leaned towards the window, bringing her arm up to rub away the thin layer of steam. Her eyes narrowed into slits; her lips parted.

"What...?" she whispered to herself, watching as Severus Snape slid out of the same empty classroom that Rosalia Selwyn had just left from.
"We need to speak," someone hissed into her ear as they rubbed shoulders in the hall. Rosalia Selwyn turned her head to look at the recoiling body, eyes narrowed on the lean limbs held tight to his body. With a tight smile, she turned to look at Melisende Gamp.

"I'll be quick," and with an acknowledging nod from the darker-haired witch, Rosalia followed in the same path that Regulus had fled in. Winding and whirling through the crowd, ignored and forgotten as everyone else rushed to their next class. It was always the perfect cover-up.

A couple of wrong turns later, and Rosalia happened upon the unoccupied. A deserted hallway filled with nothing but classrooms heaped up to the top with centuries worth of broken chairs and tables. She slid into the second one, Regulus lifting himself up from the edge of the table he had been leaning against.

"Petal," she crooned, blinking her painted eyelashes at him. Specks of it had fallen underneath throughout the day, smudged and making her look like she had come back from one of her infamous late-night card games. "What did you bother me for?"

"It might be nothing," Regulus began, his eyes on the door behind her. "But I found it last night on our way back, outside the common room." He bustled about to open the flap of his leather bag, reaching his hand into it and pulling out a suede black ballerina-style flat with a small bow. Rosalia's eyes narrowed, snatching it out of the wizard's hand and bringing it right up to her face. She looked inside, underneath, running her hand over the soft material.

"Weren't there when you left?" she inquired, bringing it underneath her nose to sniff it. Her eyes, wide and glassy, focused on the black horizon in front of her.

"No."

"How sure you are?"

"They weren't exactly hidden." She pursed her lips, eyes darting between the shoe and Regulus. He stepped forward, hunching his shoulders forward and leaning his chin out. "You know whose it is, don't you?" Rosalia threw the shoe at his chest, which he managed to catch without so much as a blink.

"Of course I do, you imbecile," she sneered. "Size 37— it's French, obviously."

His face fell as the blood running through his veins froze. He opened his mouth to speak, finding the words stuck on his tongue.

"Maybe— that doesn't mean anything, plenty of us vacation in France." Rosalia snorted, shaking her head as she planted both her hands on either side of her hips. Her foot tapped against the floor, clicking as she sucked on her teeth. "I'll talk to her, okay? I'll—"

"No," she lashed out through gritted teeth. "Not you, you're too soft. Tell Evan to get her in line or else."

"To get Evan involved is a little much," he protested. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation—"
"That her shoes were outside the common room past curfew?" she retorted, shrugging her shoulders and cocking her head to the left. Regulus looked to the shoe in his hand, swallowing hard as he tried to manifest an excuse for the witch out of nothing. "Tell Evan or I will."

"I know her bet—"

"No!" she shrieked, her hands shaking at her sides.

"Okay," he ceded, Rosalia not even giving him the time to fight it as she slid out of the room and back into the empty hall. Regulus sighed, running a hand through his hair.

(Sunday 28 January 1978)

"Eva?" A shockwave shot through the witch, her hand spread out over her breast as she caught the sight of Regulus' reflection in the glass windows.

"You can't do that," she said, yanking the key from the door and sliding it into her bag. Regulus pressed his lips into a tight line, keeping his distance as she made the semi-circle to face him. "Are you here to talk about what—"

"No, no," he repeated, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed, looking down to his shuffling feet. His hands were in his pockets, his eyes narrowed as he lifted his gaze past the greenhouse to the lake. "Can we, do you mind if we went somewhere a little more private?" Eva hesitated, clutching her bag's strap tighter.

"There's no one here."

"Behind the greenhouse, at least that," he implored. "I'm not here to hurt you. Please believe me, Eva." She flattened her lips, crossing her arms over her chest before giving him a curt nod.

His gaze lingered on her for a handful of seconds, before he muttered a near-silent, "Right."

He was the first to step left, in between the two neighboring greenhouses. His eyes roamed over the alley-like space, hidden from unwelcome bystanders, the night settling down and blanketing them. Eva let out the breath she had been holding, looking to the castle that stood only a few paces from her. It took everything for her to turn the corner, finding the wizard waiting for her, eyes cold like ice observing her from head to toe.

"So, what're we hiding from?" she asked, hands still crossed over her chest underneath her robes. The wind blew, lifting up and attacking whatever inch wasn't covered. Her nose had turned numb, her ears threatening to fall off as Regulus' hair whipped in every direction. "Regulus, please, it's frigid out here."

"It may sound a little odd," he stated, his fingers pressing into his palm, sheltered in his pocket. "But you haven't lost a pair of shoes recently, have you?"

Eva's face fell, her hands faltering and dipping outside the confines of her robes, becoming victims of the cruel chill. She swallowed, a slight wrinkle drawing up between her brows as she dropped her gaze to his chest.

"No."

"Lies," he snorted.
"I haven't," she insisted, straightening her back. Regulus took a step forward, lifting his hand out of his pocket and holding it against the window as he looked through into the dark and vacant greenhouse.

"Why were you out at that time? What were you doing, and without shoes?" His fingers tapped against the glass as Eva sought shelter in the distance, squinting and tightening her fists underneath her underarms. "Eva."

"Yes?"

"Answer me, please."

"I don't have to," she whispered, though he reckoned it could have been the wind howling into his ear that made her words disappear along with it. "I don't have to do anything for you."

"No, but I have to tell Evan." Eva's eyes lifted to his own, the wrinkle between her brows deepening. "What?" His voice dropped lower as he bent down further, his mouth almost parallel to her ear. She couldn't make out his face, but she could feel his breath tickling her, taunting her. "Were you out with Lupin, is that it? You need to be careful, you can't—"

"Stop telling me what to do."

"Eva, be reasonable. If Evan finds out, and he will—"

"Do you think I care?" She shrugged. "What he thinks, wants? We don't speak, he hasn't apologized." Despite the feral-like bitterness that graced her face, she paused, sputtering on the words, instead finishing with a sorrow smile.

"I know," he attempted, knowing that the wet ground was the only thing stopping him from begging. "He's an arse, I know, and he doesn't deserve you, he doesn't. I know now that what I did was out of spite, and I shouldn't have. I would take it back, all of it, I swear, if I could." He pressed his lips together, eyes darting, sprinting around her face. "I'm telling you because someone else knows, and they're going to tell him if I don't. I can manipulate him, I can make something up. I can protect you, let me—"

"What are you? A puppet?" She shook her head, her nose scrunching up. "You don't have to do anything."

"You don't—" he coughed on an anxious laugh. "You don't understand."

"Maybe not," she considered. "So you have to tell him? Go ahead. But know that whatever happens to me, it'll be your fault. Actually everything that has happened to me, the reason I'm in this mess, is because of you." Regulus' certainty shattered at his very own feet, drawing back to put distance between himself and her.

"Eva, please—"

"No," she said, her eyes watery and her voice wavering. "No."

Regulus nodded, taking in a deep breath, causing his chest to puff out before releasing all of it in a cloud of smoke. A whoosh that enveloped both of them.

"Then I'll report you." Her lips parted. "For everything: breaking curfew, smashing my spine and then stuffing me in a bloody broom closet." Regulus shoved his hands back into his pocket, shrugging. "And not only you, but your boyfriend as well. I'm sure I don't have to tell you what'll
happen if I, a Black, implicate him."

"You're bluffing."

"It'd be for your own good."

"What're you so scared of, huh?" she challenged, not relenting the stare she held on his face. Regulus' brows furrowed. "What're you hiding that makes you bold enough to threaten me?" She lifted her hand from out behind her robes, halting him before he had a chance to speak. "Thank you for your concern, Black, but it's a little late for it, no?"

Regulus heard her loud and clear.

"Eva."

"Enjoy the rest of your evening," she dismissed.

"Eva, listen to me—"

"I don't want to!" she exclaimed, shaking her head. "I don't want to listen to you, or speak to you, or anything! Leave me alone."

"You're making a mistake," he warned her, Eva concluding their encounter by turning around and walking away. He wrapped his hand around his mouth, blinking as she disappeared, gritting his teeth to keep from smashing the glass exterior beside him.

(Wednesday 1 February 1978)

The bell's trill broke through and filled every vacancy in the castle, a wakening symphony after early morning classes where students — and Slughorn — had attended with their still full mugs of tea and coffee and plenty of biscuits so that there was a constant communal hum of clandestine crunching.

"Remember to discuss with your partners, essays due Friday," the potions professor announced to the class with a finger in the air and crumbs gracing the corner of his lips. Everyone scrambled, throwing metal and glass tools into boxes, sliding their books in one swift swoop before they flew out of the dungeon classroom to their sixth-floor lesson.

"So," Remus began as he re-buckled the flap on his bag. "Did you want to meet in the student potions room or—"

"I already did it," Eva slighted. The Gryffindor's brows knit together as the witch stood on her toes to reach past him for one of the glass vials that had rolled his way. He grabbed it, handing it to her without so much as a glance in return. "You can check it over, but it'd only be a waste of time."

"Back to this, eh?" he asked with a subtle, vexed snort.

"Back to what?" she retorted in an undertone, whisking her head around in order to look at him. "You're the one whose been ignoring me. Don't turn this around and make me out to be the bad one." Remus' brows raised, watching the witch as she placed the last of it — her ink jar — into the bag and buttoned it to close.

"I haven't been ignoring you."

"You haven't said a thing to me since Thursday," she countered through a sudden soreness in her throat. "And you missed lunch, you didn't show up yesterday."
"Yes, I—"

"Not that you have to," she added, lifting the strap of her bag and placing it over her shoulder. "But you usually tell me when you don't think you'll be able to come." He had dropped his gaze to his own hands that sat folded on the table; Eva had her back to him, but out of the corner of his eye, he could make out the shoes that began to turn and face him. "It's fine, I should have expected it."

"You're right," he ceded, sighing. "I thought it best, for the moment."

"*Best?* You told me to tell you, to tell you so that we wouldn't— so that," she fumbled, her words coming much swifter than what her lungs and heart could keep up with. "You told me to let you in, that way things would be *better*, smoother, and," Eva pursed her lips, "and now I feel like I'm going to lose you because I did just that, what *you* told me to do."

To Remus, her lines were strings of an untuned guitar. He could hear them, quivering in a way they weren't supposed to be. His cheeks burned, a thickness dripping from his throat into his stomach and sitting itself there.

Eva didn't look away, instead watching the side of his face as he continued to focus on his own hands. She wanted to grab him by the face, force him to look at her, like there was something there — right there at her fingertips, but she could not get it, not to save her life.

"Look," he finally said, sitting straighter and meeting her gaze. His fingers were spread out, as if he were offering her something, but nothing that she had any use for. "You got to understand that— I mean, it's a little, there's— it's a bit tricky between us right now." A dejected smirk lifted half her lips.

"Of course, but it would've been just fine if I had kept quiet and agreed to forget about every time you had a random, unexplainable urge?" Remus leaned forward, eyes to the ground, staring at the tips of her shoes.

"I'm sorry if I led you to believe that I— that something like that might be possible between us."

"Of course you don't get it," she muttered, more to herself than to him.

"Get what?"

"It's not about that. I don't care about... it's you— you were," her shoulders drooped, her head tilting at the same time as his eyes lifted upwards to hers. "You're— were my best friend." His heart sunk as she averted her gaze to the door, the slight jeer from before disappearing as a stinging melancholy made her eyes warm and wet. "And I thought that being honest would— well, I didn't think that this would happen. I didn't think you would stop speaking to me. It sucks."

He shifted again so that he was no longer facing her, but the front door, eyeing James who stood with Lily, conversing to their professor. It wouldn't be long until they would turn to him, waiting for him to pick up his things and leave the witch beside him behind. Eva followed his line of vision, the downwards pull in her stomach causing the corners of her lips to involuntarily push down as well.

"It's just for the moment, until I can—"

"It's fine, Remus. I get it, you have your friends," she bit down on her lip and nodded, "you can afford to lose me."

"*No—*" Eva shook her head, clutching her potions book to her chest as she slid past him and out into the hall. Remus stood up, jaw dropping as he tried to chase after the words that escaped him. But something too heavy sat on his shoulders, inside his chest, keeping him still and silent. Truth be told,
he didn't know how to chase, only hide.

(Friday 3 February 1978)

There weren't five seconds left on the clock as Sofia Mustaq marched down the hall and into the teeming classroom. She stood in the door way, hands on her hips as her eyes roamed over the scene in front of her. Students of every shape and size lingered by the first empty table they could conquer, sitting on the window frames, comparing last-minute assignment tips and tricks before the bell hurried them into their seats.

Her eyes lifted to the small platform sticking out above the classroom, their professor chatting away with one of her peers. She tilted her head, scowling, rolling her eyes. There was a reason why she made sure to show up late, terribly late, to anything and everything.

Amongst the various hairstyles, she spotted tight curls, bouncing up and down and a slim body that never could quite stay still. A flitting bird, as she enjoyed painting him into. The only person who could match the fire inside her, the only one who had not burned under the pressure. She stepped forward, expecting the world to sit at her fingertips as they moved and created a path for her without even realizing they were.

Today, and like a shark sniffing blood in the water, she stopped in dead-cold in her tracks. It was an invisible wall in front of her, eyes darting one way and then the next as she searched, seeking what had forced her to stop.

The final bell rang, and all she did was turn her head to the left and listen close. The world rushed, changed, kept on going 'round as she stood there, a pillar in the midst of a bazar.

Then it was silent.

"Mustaq, please find a seat," Dearborn told her, making his way down from his office. His fingers reached up to pull the spectacles from his nose, blinking as the Slytherin witch blatantly ignored him. "Do not make me repeat myself." She lifted her palm to him, a number of gasps and curses spreading out behind her.

"Mustaq!" Her nostrils flared, rolling and cracking her neck before putting one foot in front of the other and making her way to Dearborn. He watched her, cocking an eyebrow as she drew closer, the rest of the class silent, staring.

Except the world did not matter to someone like Sofia Mustaq. It was a stage, and she was the director and everyone and everything around her were what made it the best piece in all the universe.

"Dearborn," she whispered, leaning both her palms against the table, spread out to almost either end. The wizard didn't respond, observing her lowered and shadowed face. "Lupin's bleeding, and Snape's paying attention."

Not once did his deep brown eyes part from her face, not even when he raised his chin to nod once. Sofia spun about, her bag swinging from one side to the other, parading her way down the center aisle.

"Lupin," Dearborn called out. His stare left the witch as she disappeared into the hall, instead falling onto the wizard sitting behind a frazzled Ravenclaw. Remus, who had been watching the Slytherin like everyone else, shifted his attention to his professor. His eyebrows gradually furrowed. "Professor McGonagall would like to meet with you in her office."
"Now?" the Gryffindor puzzled, lifting himself up from the back of his seat. Dearborn did not respond, instead waving his hand and sending a piece of white chalk to scribble the day's date on the blackboard. Everyone made haste to take notes, knowing that the words would disappear before they got their quills to touch the parchment.

"Odd," Sirius muttered, stretching over the table to whisper it into both Remus' and James' ears. The latter turned around to look at him, sharing a lingering stare as Remus let out a short huff and pushed his chair back.

"Probably about how many assignments I've missed," he mumbled.

"What's Mustaq got to do with that?" Sirius disagreed.

"I don't know," he whispered, folding the parchment in half and shoving it inside his book. "But I'll let you know when I do." Both Sirius and James watched their friend as he stood up and exited in the Slytherin witch's path.

A foot tapped against the floor, lips pressed into a tight line, head twisting back and forth down the hall in search of the person who could command even professors, apparently. But nothing, not even as he stepped forward, stretching his head out to look around the bend.

"Huh," he let out in a breath, forehead wrinkled, hand scratching away at his jaw as he considered a fag.

"Keeping walking," he heard her command him from behind, watching the shadow emerge and hearing heels snapping against the floor. She did not stand close to him, did not even bother to look at him, actually passing him in the hall as he hesitated and she continued on.

It dawned on him that she was rushing, running, eyes wide as she shot her head over her shoulder every few seconds. A shell had broken, a hammer to it, possibly only cracked for the moment, but he had never seen anything like it. Remus followed, taking long strides as they hopped down the stairs, all the way down until they were on the ground floor. The cloisters were empty, everyone in class, fresh snow covering the ground as more and more flakes fell. Sofia didn't stop, going on and on and on, stepping into the muddy soil and then stopping all at once, pressing her back against the wall.

"Mustaq," he wheezed, bending over with his hands on his knees, "what the fuck are we running from?"

"You know what?" The Slytherin witch raised her gaze to the sky, reaching her hand through the unbuttoned top of her blouse and digging in her brassiere. "What if I wasn't fast enough?" She brought the warm cigarette out and into her mouth, as Remus watched with a pinched face. Her fingers snapped and a flame erupted from the tips of her fingers, lighting the end as the first lift of smoke rose from it. "You need to get your life together, Lupin."

"I do?" he asked. She stepped forward, pointing her finger in the direction of the staircase they had come down from. Her eyes were wild, running over everything, trampling, stampeding across a vast landscape.

"You—" she paused, taking heavy and deep breaths. "You're sad, and that's not fucking good. It's not fucking good, Lupin, because Snape was in there— Snape was FUCKING IN THERE, AND HE WAS INSIDE YOUR FUCKING HEAD." She slammed the cigarette to the ground, closing her eyes and walking past him, her hands on her hips and her head stretched back. A cavernous groan boiled out of her, echoing off the emptiness.
"But I didn't, I didn't know," he stuttered, holding his hands out to the side. "He can— I didn't... Snape's a legilimens!?!"

"You need to finish the book," she told him, reaching down into the snow for the cigarette. It was wet, her finger rubbing against the burnt end over and over again. Her callouses turned black, inking every crack and line of her fingerprint. "And you need to calm down. There's no reason for you to be making so many molehills into fucking mountains. Not when there's a war, when there're people in this fucking school that're waiting for you," she turned around, poking him in the chest with the stained finger, "you to fuck up. I'm not going to lose everything that I've fucking built for your fucking problems, especially not because some bird wants to shag you. You see how insane that sounds, yeah?!?"

"If he was in my head, that means he was looking—"

"Your thoughts were pouring out of you, fucking bleeding all over the place," she shot back, shaking her head. "An amateur would have been able to get in." Remus sucked in his upper lip, heat rising up the back of his neck as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"You know she doesn't hate you, but you want to tell yourself otherwise so that you don't fuck it up. Except you're hurting because of it, and you're hurting me because of it. So what's the point? You're not doing anyone any fucking favors."

"Because I don't know—"

"You do. You do know how you feel, don't lie to me." He lifted his head to protest. "Wake up!" She snapped her fingers in his face. "You want the ugly truth? You might be fucking dead in the next six months. You need to start being a little selfish, because, trust me, no one will give a shit about your pointless fucking sacrifices when you're gone."

"You sure have a way with words, don't you?" he scoffed, brows scrunching together as they stared at one another.

"Listen— lie to yourself, tell yourself that you don't bloody wank to her every night, but do not fuck this up for me. Do not, because, and I swear on everything, I will ruin your life."

"Not much worth ruining," he said lamely.

"Lupin, pick yourself up off the ground."

"It's not that simple," he snapped, shutting his eyes and fisting his hands. Sofia narrowed her eyes on him. "It's not that simple to stop thinking about it. It, I fucked up, again, I'm always—"

"Shut up, please," she begged, clasping her hands together. "You're ridiculous, you know that? You didn't do anything wrong, Eva doesn't hate you. You hate you, that's your problem."

"She doesn't?" Sofia jaw came undone, her chin flinching back into her neck as she let out an incredulous snort.

"Are you sure?"

"Fucking certain." He nodded, placing his pink hands into his pockets, looking down at his snow-stained shoes. "Look at me, kid." He re-focused on her, her face falling with the sigh she released. "Let yourself have this, don't think about it. It'll be okay, you'll see."
"I'll fuck up again, I know it."

"You won't."

"I will."

"Do not doubt me, Lupin."

"How are you so sure?" he exclaimed, not helping a rigid laugh. "How can you know everything?"

"Because that's what I do— I fucking know things." Her words hung between them, swinging back and forth, but the silence didn't last for long. Sofia had straightened herself, closing her eyes and counting three breaths lasting three seconds each. "Do you have something I can smoke? she asked, her voice softer now than it had been before.

"Muggle fags okay?"

"I'll smoke a fucking carrot, I don't give a shit." Remus nodded, ignoring her cantankerous comportment and reaching into his bag for the pack. He flipped open the top and held it out for her to take, her long fingernails pinching the filter of one to pull it on. It wasn't long before she held it between her cherry red lips, smoking away, swallowing it down before Remus had the time to take one for himself.

"You smoke fast," he noted, exhaling the first puff.

"It was a close call." Her eyes were open now, but barely. "So fucking close."

"I'm sorry, you know, if I had known—"

"Fuck being sorry, Lupin. Snape was confused, more than anything else. Your thoughts were practically seeping into him," she explained, tossing the already finished cigarette to the ground and listening to it sizzle out. "But he's no expert, didn't know what was happening, and that's how I caught it. Bless me."

"Is there— I mean, how do I know if, what if it happens..." Remus paused, sucking in on the cigarette's filter. "I don't have anymore classes for today, so I'll try and avoid him—"

"Lupin, all you have to do is read the book, practice with Bones, and go tell this girl how you fucking feel about her." She took a step closer. "You'll be fine, okay?"

"Sure."

"Lupin."

"Okay, okay, yes."

"Good," she said, nodding once. "Good."

When there was nothing else left to say, and as Remus came to the conclusion of his five-minute cigarette break, Sofia Mustaq stepped back into the alcove and disappeared from view.

(Saturday 4 February 1978)

Remus would eventually come to the conclusion that he may have taken Sofia Mustaq's advice a little too much to heart. But in that moment, with his eyes bleeding red, glossed over with a film of
whiskey, he couldn't even recall where he was.

On hand, he understood that in the corner of his eye, there sat a red-faced man — who was redder, himself or the man, would be a debate for later — with no neck and two tufts of grey sideburns sticking out on either side of his head. Across from him, sat a man with white linen robes, deep wrinkles, and copper-skin. There was nothing important about the whole set-up, nor would Remus remember it later on a cold winter evening, but he couldn't seem to focus his attention elsewhere. It remained glued on these two anonymous wizards, ones he had never seen before, and would likely never see again.

Something nudged into his right ribcage, and in the distance, but only inches from him, he could hear Marjory, or perhaps it was Sirius — the difference was unimportant to him — guffawing, clutching their stomachs at some farce someone said.

It was Lily's birthday, and she had wanted round after round at the Hog's Head. Those precise words, round after round, had been the only instructions granted. Of course, having James Potter as her boyfriend, her wish was his command. He made dreams come true because he was a hero of sorts, and so there they were— nine of them bunched up into a table for six. Remus could feel someone's leg hanging over his own, and he supposed that his pseudo-girlfriend had her hands wrapped around his neck, but he didn't know anything about that.

Within the mix of whiskey, ale, butterbeer, and the pipe that he had indulged in with Peter earlier, Remus came to a conclusion on how and why he had ended up there: singing happy-birthday at the top of his lungs while lifting two pints of cider to Sirius, who sat at the opposite end of the table. In the midst of the caroling and drinking, and something Remus would be aware of tomorrow morning, Marjory left an imprint of dark berry-purple lips on his cheek. One that only disappeared with the help of a beauty potion straight off the catalogues of Witch Weekly, of course.

"Mate," he whispered, leaning over the pint as he cupped it with both hands. His mouth hung open, because he couldn't remember to close it, gaping at Peter. Peter's eyes rolled like two glass marbles and landed on Remus. He sniggered, staring at Remus from over the top of the glass he had brought to his lips. "I'm fucking pissed." Peter broke out into a teetering chuckle, the liquor he had consumed spewing all over Remus' face and down his own chin, staining his white shirt. A gradual laugh climbed out of Remus, forcing him to hold his forehead against the edge of the glass pint in his hands since he couldn't quite hold it up himself.

When it passed, and it could have been an hour or so later for all they knew, both of them reassumed the positions from before. Peter let out a warbling burp, rubbing a hand in circles over his beer-bloated stomach as he waited for Remus to continue.

"D'you'wanna know somethin', Pete?" Remus mumbled.

"Wha?"

"I don'wanna be 'ere," he said, shaking the glass in his hand and watching the ale's foam shake back and forth.

"Where d'ya'wanna be?" Peter asked, Remus' eyes lifting up to the two men in the corner. His brows scrunched together.

Where did he want to be? If he didn't want to be there, where did this inebriated, whiskey-soaked Remus want to be? He thought of all his favorite places: a bacon-perfumed home, the countless amounts of blankets available for him to use, the comfort of his sheets. Warmth. A fire, one right beside him as he lay down with a book, shadows dancing as the heat filled up the room and melted
his iced toes.

His eyebrows lifted as he thought about how big his bed was, much bigger than the one he had at Hogwarts. Big enough for two—he knew that now, he knew because Eva had slept right next to him, and he hadn't even noticed. She had curled up beside him, and they had both fallen asleep to the taste of honeyed chamomile and dying embers.

His stomach twisted, wishing he could have had another night, wondering if there ever would be. Frowning when he realized that there may never be, but pushing it to the far depths of his mind as his alcohol-filled bloodstream ignited into flames, sparking with daydreams. His mind settled on the one where he'd wrap his arms around her body and hold her close. So close that he could smell her jasmine-scented hair, nuzzle his nose into it, place kisses along her neck. She'd giggle, swat him away because those kisses tickled, but never enough to ward him off. He thought about how, if she were there with him at the Hog's Head, he would have her underneath his arm, because she would be cold, and her own arms would be wrapped around his torso. They'd share a laugh or two with Peter, eat a slice of cake, whisper to one another whatever it was she wanted to talk about, because it was her voice he wanted to hear. Nothing else mattered.

He let out a sigh, picking up his glass, and sitting back against the wall.

By then Peter had forgotten what the question had been, but for Remus, well, for Remus it sat at his feet like a starved dog.

(Sunday 5 February 1978)

There was nothing out of the ordinary that Sunday morning. Like any February day at noon, it was crisp and cold, but not so extreme that one couldn't appreciate the fresh air while standing on the stone staircase leading down to the lake. She took it all in, filling her lungs, and then letting it all out again as her eyes opened to the faint rays poking out through the clouds. They beamed off the thin cover of ice coating the lake, forcing her to squint, leading her to smile.

Eva followed the rest of the dew-soaked path down to the dollhouse-like boathouse. Her hands were in her pockets, her lips still upturned as she swung into it. Right there, as she stood in the doorway, her hand clasped on the door's frame, frozen in place. Suspended, stopping short like the breath that now found itself locked in her throat.

Remus, who had been sitting down, scrambled to his feet.

"Hi," he said, lifting his hand to hold up a piece of cloth tied at all four corners, resembling a dumpling. "I brought dessert." She lifted a brow, albeit barely, holding back the smirk that threatened to push its way through the winter frost.

"Really?" she asked, stepping into the boathouse and approaching him with slow, unhurried steps. "And what'd you bring?"

"Custard tarts." Remus' eyes couldn't leave her face, darting in one direction to another so fast that Eva couldn't quite understand what it was he sought. "The treacle tart was too messy."

"Naturally," she said, reaching forward for the impromptu package and using a finger to pull aside a part of it. "No burnt ones?"

"Not even the crust, I made sure." Remus' shoulders dropped as he let out a sigh of relief, tracing over the curves of her lifted cheeks, pink like her nose from the cold. A dull ache flared in his chest, growing more obvious with every thump his heart made.
"Eva," he began as she, package still in her hand, started to search the floor for the perfect seat. "Eva, I'm sorry." She stopped her search, instead lifting her head to him. "I'm a fucking prick, I know. I'm sorry." He could have gone on for hours, a list of every reason why he was half the person she was, but he kept quiet. Maybe because he missed her voice, or maybe because he knew — deep down — that she would let him return, as he would her. Because they had no one else, not really.

"It's okay." She bent down to place the cotton bundle on the floor, shaking off her robes and splaying it across the wooden boards. "Come, sit," the witch gestured to him, patting the place beside her as she sunk to her bottom and crossed her legs.

"Right, thanks," he said in an undertone, accepting and taking the seat next to her.

"Don't have to thank me," she told him, twisting about to grab hold of yarn bag hanging off her shoulder. She dug through its contents, and it wasn't long before she produced a sandwich wrapped in nothing but napkins, somehow kept together as if it had been made only then. Remus watched her — watched her as if it was the first time he saw her. As if he had to memorize the moment because there would never be one like it.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out again, the words having sat at the tip of his tongue, fighting to escape. Eva glimpsed up at him, her hands on opposite ends of the sandwich, slightly bent as she had been ready to split it in half. "Sorry, I know I already said—"

"Remus," he stopped, swallowing whatever had remained of the sentence, "it's okay, really."

"I know, but," he finally casted his gaze away from her, drawing his knees to his chest and laying his forehead on it, wrapping his hands around his legs and blowing air into his cheeks. "It's just— I don't know how to do this. It's not easy."

"What's not? Apologizing?" she asked, placing the still-whole sandwich back onto the napkin. "Or forgiving?"

"Neither."

"Then?"

"Especially for me," he went on as if ignoring her, gnawing on his bottom gums. "Half the time, I don't— you know I can't understand myself? You're probably asking how the fuck that's possible, but I don't know what I want, ever." Remus' entire face felt impossibly hot, drums pounding in his ears, grip tightening around his legs. "Last night," Eva's eyes narrowed on his curved spine that rose between with every two words, "I was with my mates." He lifted his head in the hopes that the cold would cool him down— too late to realize that he had put up atmospheric charms to keep it out. His eyes focused on the glimmering shards that varnished the lake, only his red-tipped ears and blotchy neck visible to the witch. "We were, well, we went to the Hog's Head for Lily' birthday, and I — ugh, fuck." Remus began to shake his head. "No, I can't— I can't do this."

"Remus," Eva said, sitting forward so that her legs sat underneath her thighs. "You don't need to excuse yourself, it's fine."

"I'm so fucking bad at this, it's unbelievable," he muttered. Her hand lifted to his shoulder blade and rubbed small circles through the wool coat. "I don't remember anything from last night." Eva pursed her lips, attempting to stifle a giggle. "I — I never get like that."

"It happens."

"And I woke up this morning, thinking someone had punched me in the fucking face." Remus
scoffed, hands carving through his hair and holding it back. "I didn't know where I was, didn't know how I got there. I don't remember a bloody thing." He released his hands from his hair, letting out an exaggerated sigh, and as the silence settled for a moment between them, he focused on the fingers pressing into his shoulder. Remus closed his eyes, leaning his temple back onto his knee while keeping his head turned in the opposite direction, to the lake. "But I do remember one thing—or, well, I do remember some of it, but not—a little bit muddled."

"Mhm?"

"And I don't know what it's supposed to mean—but I know that I didn't want to be be there, or yeah, I did but, but I wanted, you know," the volume of his voice dropped down into an incoherent mumble, "I wanted you to be there. I missed you." The last part came out blurred, Eva's hand pausing, eyes blinking. Without warning, he straightened his back, head shooting up, his palms landing with a concluding thwack on his kneecaps. "So yeah, that would've been nice." Eva's neck bent forward, and her hand came down from his shoulder to rest on her thigh.

"What?"

"Huh?" he asked, turning his head to find her staring at him.

"That's it?"

"Why? Should there be more?"

"Well," she let out a helpless, bewildered scoff. "You made it seem like you'd done something terrible, and all you had to say was that you missed me?" Remus opened and closed his mouth. "I'm just—you know, I'm not good, not used to this sort of thing."

"You've never missed your friends?"

"It's not, not the same," he muttered, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall, neck stretched and eyes to the ceiling. "It's not, not just missing you, Eva. It's..." His Adam's apple jumped as he forced down the thickness in the back of his throat—though it went nowhere. "I don't think, feel, about you in the same way I do with my mates." Her mouth slackened, her gaze unfocused. "It's different, more complicated."

Neither had anything to say, not right away, not as one tried to forget what he had just said and the other clambered for something to say. Her mind floated, drifted off into an unknown world, a realization dawning on her, one that forced her to suck in her own cheeks in order to wipe the grin off her face. The wizard's brows tucked inwards, rolling his head to the right.

"Excuse me," she apologized, hiding her mouth behind the back of her palm.

"Don't worry, I expected—"

"Remus, it's," she paused, exchanging the simper for a toothless, gentle smile. "You have to admit, you're being a bit..."

"A bit?"

"A bit theatrical."

"I'm not theatrical," he rebuffed, scoffing.
"Fine," she conceded, "but you're overreacting a tiny bit, and to be frank, I don't see what the problem is?"

"Problem is, well, it's that I want— I think about you in this... but I don't want to be..." He averted his gaze from her once again, eyes narrowing, darting about as he searched for the right way to go. There was none. "I don't want to be your boyfriend, or anyones. It's not you, I don't want to be that for anyone."

"Ah."

"But you're also, I don't think of you— you're not just a friend to me." Remus turned his head to look at her, following her line of vision to where it sat on the oscillations between the two miniature boardwalks making up the boathouse. "You think I'm mad."

"No," she assured him without so much as a second thought. "I understand. You can't stand the thought of being someone's boyfriend, or of someone being your girlfriend. It doesn't take a genius.

"I bloody hate it, the idea, the word, everything— makes me want to rip my hair out," he said, his jerking movements coming to a full stop; the fingers that had pulled and tugged at every thread, cuff, and dangly bit falling still. "There's something about the dates, the monthly bouquet of flowers, fucking Valentine's Day… I suck at it all. I can't— I haven't a fucking clue how to be that for anyone."

"But you're okay with being intimate?" Remus pressed his lips together, tilting his head both ways as if weighing the question.

"Yeah, I mean, sure. But, the thing is, with, with my problem, it's, well, a problem. You know there's always that possibility of hurting someone."

"Remus," she sighed, running both hands along the locks of her hair that had escaped the hooks of her ears. "We crossed that line when we decided to continue being friends. I think we both knew the dangers."

"I know, but Eva, if someone... if it were to get out, you know, my condition, and someone new that you were in anyway... well, that way with me..."

"And what about you?" she challenged. "It goes both for both us, no? Does that mean— what's that supposed to mean, that we runaway from one another? Hide from everyone? The world? Because I've done that, hid, and it only made me miserable."

"But it's reckless to do otherwise."

"Not anymore than being friends." Remus stared at the floorboards. "If that was the problem, you wouldn't be here." He couldn't help but let her words push a smile onto his face, lifting his eyebrows as he peered out to her from the corner of his eyes. He met her gaze, bright and quixotic as it had been in the forest months ago, as if it had been in the hospital wing, as it was when she was trying to get something through his thick skull. "Besides, no one would know."

"No one would know what?"

"No one would know about us. Think about it, no one knows about us now," she responded, shrugging her shoulders. "What difference would it make if we were... closer?"

"Closer?"
“Yeah,” heat flushed over her cheeks, "you know."

"Know what?"

"I was thinking, if it's the— if it's the relationship part that bothers you, then why even bother?" He stared at her, face lowering and chin bending inwards as his eyebrows shot upwards. "It wouldn't be much different than it is now."

"What?"

"Remus," she pleaded. "It's not that difficult."

"But— and you'd be okay with that?"

"Would you?"

"I mean, yeah, I guess. I suppose it makes it easier."

"You see? And what difference would it make? I like the way we are now, I enjoy," her hand gestured to the space between them. "I enjoy this, and you know how I feel about you, so I wouldn't mind— all that matters to me is that you're here, really. I don't care as what, I never expected you to be anything, I don't expect anything from you. Kissing could be a sort of pastime time for us."

"Pastime?" he repeated, shaking his head albeit the laugh that followed it. Truth be told, Remus didn't know how to react, knowing that it had taken a legilimens — a fire-snapping one, at that — to help him understand what he had to do, what he felt, thought. So, could it be so simple as a one-worded yes? Could someone like him have it as easy as that, when everything else was an uphill battle, would this be as effortless as to grab this person's hand for a waltz?

"Like we'd—" his voice lowered "snog and, well, you know, have lunch here, and study together in the greenhouse— but I wouldn't be your boyfriend? Theoretically speaking."

"Husbands have lovers." Remus wet his lips as another grin erupted over his face.

"And would you— I mean, you'd be seeing other people at the same time?"

"I don't want to see anyone else." She pursed her lips. "Do you want me to see other people?"

"No," he said all too fast. "I mean, that's for you to decide, not much I can—"

"I don't want to."

"Okay." Eva reached her hand up to rub at her nose, sniffling as the warmth he had casted on their secluded spot began to seep into her bones. She could feel her fingers again as she curled them into her palms, running her eyes over them, waiting for him to decide what it was he wanted. "You're saying… you really want to be that way with me?" he asked, despite himself. "You'd let me touch you— it doesn't, that doesn't scare you? Disgust you?"

"Do I scare you?"

"No," he answered. "I'm— I probably should be, just as you should be of me. But," he pressed his lips into a tight line, "there's a great deal of things I'm scared of, and banshees aren't one of them." He heard her let out a gentle snort.

"But being someone's boyfriend is?"
"Eva," he said, lifting his hands and letting them fall again. "I just don't want you to hate me because I didn't— I'm not what you expected me to be."

"I don't think it'd be easy for me to hate you," she countered, picking up the sandwich she had laid to the side.

"You don't know that."

"Remus," she began to bend the sandwich in half, "I've met real monsters in my life, cruel people who wanted to hurt me." She lifted her shoulders, looking up from the sandwich. "You aren't one of them." She began to rip the bread in two, some of its contents coming spilling out of it and onto her lap. Remus reached forward for one of the two napkins, holding it open for her to place the sandwich into it. "You're my, I think of you as my best friend, and I have faults, no? But you accept me, you keep coming for lunch, haven't given up on me yet; and I'll do the same for you." Eva lifted her half of the sandwich to her lips, sinking her teeth into it and munching down on her first bite. She searched for him while chewing through the starch and cheese, finding that he had returned his attention to the lake. "But take your time, no reason to decide anything now, or decide anything ever. You can say no."

Remus unwound his legs, stretching them forward as he relaxed.

"You should eat," she said, gesturing with her chin to the untouched sandwich in his lap. His eyes looked down at it, then lifted to meet her own.

All at once his lips were on hers, so sudden that Eva didn't have time to close her eyes, didn't have time to lean her head back and find a position more comfortable for the both of them. All she could do was let him have this. Not five seconds passed before Remus pulled back with the same drastic shift he had kissed her with, albeit with a heavier breath and wider eyes. Eva brought her fingers to her lips, focusing on them as they ached from the angle they had pressed into the ground in order to keep his contorting body from falling.

"Wow, that was awful," he said, despite the dry mouth and racing heartbeat. "Bloody awful."

"No." She stopped as he threw his face into his hand, fingers pressing over both eyelids as he let out a muffled ugh. Eva's fingers grazed the curve of his ear, tilting her head to see if she could make out something of his face. "Remus?" she whispered into his ear, he didn't let up. "Remus?"

"What?" he gave in, raising his red-pinched face.

"Don't act like that." She leaned forward and brushed her lips along his cheekbone, closing her eyes in response to his heated skin. "You can try again." Instead, his head fell into the spot where her collarbone became her shoulder. Strands of his hair that had become matted from a long night of drinking and disheveled from the wind tickled her neck, forcing her to bite down on her lip and hold back a laugh. It bubbled inside her, deeper, churning. Remus could feel it boiling, manifesting into something, and without realizing it, he was the first to let it out.

"Merlin, that was so bad," he said through the chuckling, both of them sitting there wrapped around one another. He had his head leaning against her, and she laid her chin on its top, looking out to the lake. Neither of them moved, even as the laughter died out, even as the bell in the distance turned to a new hour.

He would decide later.
Edmund Nott was a raven, it was the most accurate way to describe such a person. Always perched with a spine straight as a rod, gelled back pitch black hair, and inky eyes that had not moved from Evan Rosier in an hour. The blonde wizard had noticed, but chose to ignore the stare and focus on the lamp chop that stained his fingers with pepper and butter. A sound of teeth gnawing into flesh, ripping away at it filled the space between them; and every time he would pull back from it, Edmund would count the stringy red meat and saliva between the bone and Rosier's wet lips. Raw kisses between two sadists, a film on repeat with the only purpose to haunt and disgust.

Edmund licked his lips, swallowing down the vitriolic taste coating his tongue and shoving it to the back of his mind. Behind Evan, he caught sight of swinging hands as two fifth years came waltzing in from the hall giggling and stealing kisses whenever they could.

"Valentine's Day is next week," he mentioned, voice monotone and dull as he shifted his focus back to Evan. The wizard had pushed the entire bone into his mouth, the tips of his fingers now inching it out slow and gentle, with teeth chomped down on it in order to scrape off every last bit. "You have something planned, I assume?"

"No," Evan scoffed, tossing the bone onto the plate and picking up the napkin to the side of it.

"No?" Edmund repeated, raising his brows.

"What's it to you?" he jeered, the snigger that followed veiled over by the napkin that slid over his lips. "Interested in joining? Feeling lonely, Nott?"

"No," he responded, grimacing. "Quite the opposite."

"Great, I wasn't too keen on sharing." Evan balled up the napkin and threw it so that it landed next to the bare bone. He reached forward for his goblet.

"And what about your fiancée?"

"Financée?"

"Yes, fiancée... Manasse, remember?" Evan froze, the goblet sitting still at his lips. He inhaled, his chest puffing out as he returned the cup to the table, but never letting go of its stem, instead staring into it, his reflection skewed and distorted into a glob in the golden mirror.

"Manasse?" he repeated, eyes narrowing, grasp tightening around the goblet.

"Flowers, chocolates, anything at all?" Edmund inquired, sitting forward so to speak in a hushed voice.

"Are you having a laugh?" Evan retorted, snorting and bringing his gaze back up to Edmund's. "Flowers? Sodding flowers?"

"You must!" he hissed, fist slamming down on the table. Regulus, who sat only two seats over from Evan, turned to look at the pair.

"I—"
"She's your fiancée!"

"She's a whore."

"You still have to marry her," Edmund continued, his breaths shortening, his nostrils flaring. "Do you think her father will stand for this? He's not—he won't give up his only daughter to some arse who can't buy her bloody roses—"

"Shut the fuck up, Nott," Evan demanded, clenching his jaw. Color began to rise up his neck, staining his ears, and making the vein that popped on his porcelain skin appear all the more vicious. "Shut the fuck up, now."

"Marvelous," Edmund snorted, shaking his head. "You made me," his voice dropped down to a quick whisper, "you made me convince Him that you could do this, you—I swore to him that you could. Do you know what'll happen to you, to me, if you fail!?"

"I said shut. the. fuck. up," Evan rehashed. One hand still tightened around the glass, another clasped along the edge of the table. "She'll marry me."

"No, she won't," Edmund countered. "You think—you think you're the best match for her!? You think her father won't hear how shit you are!? You're not wealthy or sophisticated enough. Fuck, you're not even charming!" He sat forward, his index finger pressed and pointed down into the wood table. "Her father wanted to marry her to Black; He was going to give this to Black. But you made me, you swore to me—"

"Nott—"

"No," he cut him off. "No! You have to do this, you must, you don't have a choice now—we don't have a choice. You do whatever's necessary to get her diplomatic immunity. Anything."

"I'm going to marry her," Evan said, his chest heaving. "I'm going to make her, she will be mine. Don't fucking doubt me."

"Just get her roses, you bloody idiot," Edmund told him, running a hand over his hair. His eyes roamed up and down the table, connecting with Regulus', who at once averted his gaze elsewhere.

(Tuesday 7 February 1978)

A stair after stair that became a staircase, and another staircase after that, eventually leading far below and under where the rest of the world paraded. A dimly lit room with a boiling cauldron and dew-touched skin that made sweaty palms seem cool. Only a sound of a bone cracking, a grunt along with a stretch, a finger tapping as ideas manifested and evaporated at the same time. Each figuring that the other would, might, care, but almost scared to touch the glass-like silence surrounding them.

Remus lifted his gaze and peeked up at the witch — as he had many times that same hour — through the overgrown strands he had internally sworn all weekend to trim. Eva's face was a watch tower over the steam that rose up from the iron pot, brushing over her face and then splitting in two to fall at each side of it.

"It's not going to grow a head or something, is it?" Remus teased. Eva looked at him, a gradual smile growing on her face.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "But it might explode, and then we'll be the ones needing heads."

"She's your fiancée!"

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"No," she said, shaking her head. "But it might explode, and then we'll be the ones needing heads."
"I thought you said removing the Bewhiskered Beets would only change its color," he reminded her. She sighed, attention dropping to the wood table and then returning to the bubbling liquid mere inches from her. "Eva." He waited. "Eva?"

"Yes?"

"It's not going to explode," Remus reassured her, letting his stare linger even as she occupied herself with lowering the cauldron's temperature. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, why?"

"No, nothing." by which he meant so much more. A phrase which usually meant that there were, in reality, too many reasons, questions that he had created on his own, that he had let fester and rot inside him; all night, all morning, every second of every minute. By which he meant: what makes the blasted cauldron so interesting? Why won't you look at me for longer than a second? Why won't you sit down? Why won't you sit down with me? Why won't you sit down and kiss me? "Seem a little distracted is all."

"Well, of course. It's not everyday you decide to alter a potion."

"Only its color." Eva met his stare. "Which was the assigned task, approved by Slughorn, not some daring challenge we undertook ourselves?"

"We don't know what else could've been altered—"

"You're right, and you're right to be cautious," he said, lifting his shoulders. "But, I don't know, is it— would it be so awful if we, well, I don't know, talked?" His shoulders fell back down, a tight, insecure smile on his lips. Eva hesitated, caught off guard, unsure of what he wanted — of what was supposed to happen — because it had never happened before, not to her, at least.

"Euh, yeah," she nodded, "yes, we can. What'd you like to talk about?"

"I don't know," Remus let out a brief laugh, "anything— how you're doing? If something… new happen— or, you know, if you read something interesting, maybe?" A bout of silence ensued, Eva's hand reaching up to pull at her earlobe, her eyes firm on Remus' white knuckles and vein-ridden, spider-like fingers. Remus, on the other hand, watched, his heart sinking, slugging further down into his stomach as the seconds passed and still nothing, not a word from her part. "It's fine, you, don't worry about—"

"Have you ever trying bezel nut milk?" Remus' chin stretched forward, his eyes narrowing and his eyebrows knitting closer together as the question repeated over and over again inside his head.

"What?"

"It's, euh," Eva pressed her lips together, "Alex gave me an entire explanation today about, rather a story, about how he had strained bezel nut milk into a glass of fire whiskey and then chugged it." Remus' knotted brows rose up, not helping the snort that followed it and the grin growing on his face. "But I think, I don't think they sell it anywhere, legally."

"Shit," he commented, clearly amused.

"Sounded intense," she continued, "a little bit much."

"Yeah, a little bit much for anyone, I'd reckon."
"Alex is a little much," she said, both of them breaking out into toothy smiles.

"I mean, I didn't realize— I always assumed that being prefect, but," Remus turned to look at the cauldron. "But I suppose, I suppose if he enjoys that sort of thing, then, well, good for him." Eva's smile faltered, a small wrinkle appearing at the center of her forehead, the sudden fall not something that had gone unnoticed by the Gryffindor. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know how much he enjoys it," she said, picking up the ladle to her right and dropping it into the concoction. Remus lifted his chin, blinking, realizing that though he knew very little of the curly haired, lanky wizard who seemed to be all smirks and bones and jokes.

"Of course, I'm sure it can't be easy for—"

"It's not, not for him, no," Eva said quickly, stirring the potion, scooping it up and bringing it up to check before letting it splash back with the rest. Remus nodded slowly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Is there a particular reason? Is he, does he not agree with, I mean," his eyebrows furrowed, "the Sykes, they're not, all I know is that they're, er, they own the Chudley Canons, no?"

"Yes, Quidditch, and they love to gamble," she answered, a glossiness to her eyes as they turned all the way left to the door. "Love taking risks."

"And I take it he's not…" Remus scratched his jaw. "I suppose, well, I suppose he doesn't share their beliefs?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?" she asked, quickly coming back to reality, turning to pick the ladle out of the cauldron and lay it down on the table. "Doesn't matter now, not anymore."

"It makes you upset, so I—"

"I'm not upset," she countered, forcing a smile. "You see? I'm not."

"But—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Eva said, her voice and eyes dropping down.

"Okay, sure, okay." It wasn't until she had taken her seat on the stool across from him, until she had opened up her reading and had turned the page when Remus sat forward, folding his lips inward and placing his crossed arms onto the table top. "Eva, I'm sorry if I—"

"No, Remus, there's no reason for you to apologize. It's not you. You haven't done anything wrong."

"Then why the face?" He bowed his head down to get a look at hers, raising his brows as her lashed fluttered up and down, her eyes darting about the wood planks. "If I said something—"

"I don't enjoy, like talking about those sorts of things," she explained, folding the book she had opened to close.

"Yeah, I've noticed."

"You have?" she asked, lifting her face so that he could see it.

"Yeah, I mean, you know, every time I've brought it up, you change the subject or, well, ignore me." Remus, despite his efforts to keep it in, let out a scoff. "It's usually the latter."
"I don't do that," she rebuffed, her brows scrunching together while her back straightened.

"You do."

"I do?"

"Yes," he said through a chuckle as Eva's chin jutted back into her neck. "But, it's fine, it's good. It's all anyone can talk about these days, and with you, well, at least I can think about other things." Her once bewildered expressions shifted, lips closing and pursing, hands placed back onto opposite sides of the leather book cover, and her attention placed to the wall behind Remus. He took the chance, a chance of no shifting about, no fidgeting with futile papers, to look at her. A small sigh left him, his shoulders drooping even further as he felt the familiar warming pull in his stomach. He swallowed and looked away before she could notice. "It's fine, you can talk, we can talk about anything," he told her, breaking the silence. "I'd— you know, that makes me, makes me happy knowing that you want to."

"Of course I want to," she said, returning to look at him, her hand traveling along the edge of the table as she made her way around it and over to him. He watched her approach, his back hunched over, face lowered and a slight pinch of heat expanding over the back of his neck. "Why would you say that?"

"No," he said quickly, taking a deep breath and ignoring — rather avoiding — her sudden, unexpected closeness. "I just, well, we haven't— it's been, I know I saw you yesterday and earlier today in class, but I— maybe you had changed your mind, you know, which is fine. I'd understand."

"Remus," she sighed, despite the laugh threatening it's way out of her, "I'm not going to—"

"But—"

She stepped forward, cupping his jaw and tilting his face to the side to kiss him. Remus brows shot upwards, his eyes wide and his brain lightning struck. It wasn't until she pulled away to look at him, waiting on him, that his limp hands finally rose and locked onto her hips. His heart beat fast, his breath matching it as they regained it together.

It wasn't long before he pulled her closer, shifting slightly on the stool so that she stood between his legs, and brought his lips back onto hers. Like she had grown accustomed to, they crashed, collided. His fingers dug through the thin white blouse — that still seemed too thick despite its linen base — and forced it to ground him.

His kisses were eager, but Eva had prepared for it, expected it this time. Nonetheless, she lost her breath in the midst of their endeavor, lost her mind, lost track of the boiling liquid behind them, and instead delved deeper with him. He took in her bottom lip, biting it gently, and then pressing his closed lips onto hers again before forcing them open. Her hands laid on his shoulders, both of his on her waist, wrapping around and clasping onto one another as they connected behind her back, pulling her closer, wrapping her into him whole. He wanted her closer, not ready to let go, not willing to surrender the ache in chest just yet.

"Fuck," he hissed as Eva let go all of a sudden, her eyes scrunched closed, the back of her hand to her lips as she bent over with two fingers pressed into the side of her forehead. Remus, who could taste the blood on his tongue from where she had bitten him, stopped everything and reached down to grab her by the shoulders. "Eva?" He shook her. "Eva!? What's wrong? Eva? What did I do!?"

She lifted a palm his way, pressing it into his chest to distance him from her.

"Someone's screaming," she said. Remus froze, having to take in for a moment what exactly she was
saying. "They think they're so funny."

"Wha— Eva, what, what sh— should I do!?" He stood up, his wand already in his hand and ready with whatever spell she needed him to cast.

"No, someone, someone else," she said through a sharp breath. "Not me, I'm not screaming, nor want to." Eva took the hand he had placed on her shoulder into her own, allowing him to guide her into the seat he had previously occupied. Remus, instead, leaned against the table, his arms crossed over and his eyebrows knit together and focused no where else but on the witch below him. "Check the potion, please." It took him a whole of 3 seconds to twist his head and ensure that the concoction was still what it had to be. A small laugh teetered out of her. "Thorough."

"Not really my concern, you know? Not at the moment."

"If it explodes, then it will be," she reminded him in a teasing tone, followed with a deep breath and an even heftier sigh.

"All right?" he asked. She nodded with a small mhm. "I didn't realize, well, that you could hear it when…"

"I don't know what it is," Eva answered, pursing her lips and shrugging. Her gaze fixed on the hem of his jumper. "I don't— sometimes I think they're trying to prank me, scare me—"

"Scare you?"

"Like a joke," she swallowed, "but it's not funny, because," Eva looked up at his swollen bottom lip. "I'm sorry about—"

"You're all right," he reassured her, her hand reaching back out to take his, bringing his palm to her face and leaning her cheek into it. A corner of his lips jerked upward, his thumb running over what he could have sworn was velvet, his eyes traveling over the expanse, and landing on the one scar that scratched its surface. He let out a helpless, silent sigh, placing his other hand over that cheek so that both sides were cupped and warmed by his palms, and brought his lips down to place a lingering kiss on the top of her head. Eva closed her eyes.

"But I can feel it when someone dies, all the time. Even if I don't know them or see them, I don't now why." When stood straight again, both his hands left her face and reached for the spare stool they had thrown to the side, placing it next to hers and taking a seat so that they were leveled one again. "I don't know, though, because it doesn't make me want to scream. It's like a constant whisper, so much death, you wouldn't... it's all so— I can't make sense of it." Remus leaned his elbow onto the table, holding his head up with his fist. "And when I ask them, sometimes I ask them, and I feel as if they're playing with my head, like it can't possibly be true, real, any of it."

"Well," he began, raising his gaze to the ceiling and scratching the underside of his jaw. "I'm not going to lie to you, Eva." His voice lowered into a mere whisper, as if the walls could hear them. "No one's going to have the right answers, it's going to be, it's a... a lot of it you're going to have to figure out for yourself, usually the hard way." His looked down at her, watching her teeth gnaw at her inner cheek. "And when I ask them, sometimes I ask them, and I feel as if they're playing with my head, like it can't possibly be true, real, any of it."

"What if I do something bad, Remus?" A felt a familiar thickness ball up in his throat.

"We'll... I won't give up on you."

"Thank you," she said in a small voice, blinking. "I won't either." She folded her hands over her skirt before standing up, looking to the finishing potion to her right, and then back to the wizard standing
in front of her. Her cheeks began to warm up, reddening for some unknown reason, and as if it were
the most natural thing to have ever occurred, stood on her toes and left a kiss on his lips.

He had never decided, because he was not good at making decisions. So he had let it happen, with
no defined lines, with not even a question to answer.

Her head lifted and shifted to the left, making out the body leaning against the stone column that
made up one side of the alcove she sat in. Rosalia blinked back to the mud and snow covered ground
two stories below, her leather-gloved fingers lifting a cherry red lollipop to her lips, biting down onto
it, and cracking away at the broken glass cutting her mouth. The sourness soaked her tongue, the
sweetness stuck to her lips, the sound filled her senses.

"I got your message," Edmund Nott said, lifting the parchment between his fingers. Rosalia didn't
turn around, chomping down instead on the fruit flavored shards. "What'd you want to talk about?"
The wizard pushed himself off the column, hands in his pockets, to take a seat across from her stone
bench.

"We're doing everything wrong," she replied, her voice nothing more than a soft hymn.

"Everything?"

"Pettigrew," she clarified, the hand that held the now empty lollipop stick dropping down to her lap.
"I've been thinking— he's done everything we expected him to do, hasn't he?"

"Sure," Edmund answered, the word fighting its way against his throat. His head tilted, his eyebrows
knit together, and his eyes narrowed.

"And we still don't know anything."

"I wouldn't, that's not how I'd phrase it," he began, shaking his head. "We suspect Lupin's got a hand
to play in the resistance. We've got eyes on him, it's only a matter of time before he leads us to the
others."

"Suspect," she repeated as if it were reminiscent of better times. "Suspect."

"Yes."

"But I want to know," Rosalia told him, sharply lifting her chin and hissing.

"We will—"

"No, no, think about it, Edmund," she began, her cheeks rosy and ripe from the sugar overdose.
"Think about it— we have a way in, we have a way in for good, not just now, but for—"

"A what?"

"Pettigrew," she said, clasping her hands together and lifting them to her lips, "we'll use him, assign
him—"

"What?"

"We could convince him. He's meek, a puny little boy with no spine. But," she sat forward, "he can
infiltrate them, he can spy on them for us. We would know everything— everything, all their plans,
where — when — they meet. We'd know all of it. All we have to do is guide him, tell him what to
do, what to say, he'll do it."
"You really think Pettigrew's going to fucking tell us—"

"Yes, yes, yes, and more, so much more, so much you wouldn't believe."

"Are you fucking mad? Someone like him can't be trusted—"

"It's what he wants."

"What he wants!? How the bloody hell do you know what he wants!?"

"Power, he wants it. He wants to be like them, following around Black and Potter as if they're gods."
Her eyes darted about manically. "So, let's make him one, let's promise him it."

"And you think He'll agree to this rubbish?"

"Yes, watch," she said, a smirk lining her face as she raised her chin and pecked his lips with her own in a form of a malicious farewell. Edmund's jaw tightened.

"Don't kiss me."

"He'll be the most loyal servant He could dream of, you'll see." She lifted the now empty, red-stained stick to her painted, grinning lips. "All he wants is power. I know it, I know it, I know it." She stood up, shoving the lollipop between his lips, and danced away.

"I'm fucked," James Potter sighed as he came slugging into the room, feet dragging behind him, droplets of water running down his wet hair from the shower he had walked out of. He tossed his uniform onto his trunk before plopping face-down into his bed, and released a deep, muffled groan.

Remus narrowed his eyes, closing the book in his hands and bringing it down to his lap. Sirius, who sat cross-legged on the window sill next to Peter's bed, looked up from the game of wizard's chess the two of them were playing.

"What?" Sirius asked. James responded with another groan.

"Is he all right?" Peter inquired, whispering to the other two. Remus pushed himself forward from his pillows, sitting with one leg crossed and the other hanging over the edge.

"James?" Remus called out. "All right, mate?"

"Fine," they heard him mutter into the pillow. "I'll be fine."

Sirius rolled his eyes, scrubbing the corner of his eye before looking back down to the chess game and saying, "pawn to E4." Across the circled dormitory, they heard the bed by the door creak under James' weight. He had flipped himself onto his back, hand behind his head and glasses-lacking eyes to the canopy.

"I don't know what to do," James sighed, loud enough so that the others could hear. Remus cocked a brown, the corner of his mouth lifting up into a smirk.

"Just spit it out, Prongs. You got our bloody attention," Sirius muttered, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as Peter's bishop took his pawn.

"What's wrong, James?" Remus asked, James not once turning to look at him, most likely because he couldn't see him.
"I don't know what to do—"

"We bloody know," exclaimed Sirius, leaning back against the window. "You made sure of that."

"Why did her birthday have to be exactly two weeks before Valentine's Day?" Remus' mouth parted involuntarily, turning to share a knowing look with Peter, and then to Sirius— the latter's eyebrows shooting up into his hairline. "What am I supposed to get her? I already got what she said she wanted, now what?"

"Er," Remus began, looking back to Peter before returning to James. "Have you— I mean, have you asked?"

"You can't ask a bird what she wants for Valentine's Day," Peter explained, lifting his palm and shaking his head. "Can't do that, Moony. It's bloody suicide is what it is."

"Bollocks," Sirius scoffed.

"It's true! They'll get upset that you didn't surprise them, or didn't care enough to," Peter argued, his face pinching red with what seemed to be an unspoken and forgotten memory to all but him, revived in that moment to haunt him for the few seconds he would have to relive it. "And then— then they'll, well, you lot know."

"Shut the fuck up," Sirius said, "none of that's true, you'll make him bloody nervous for no reason."

"Don't talk lie that," Remus called out to Sirius, his face scrunching up and his head shaking.

"What?"

"Don't tell him to shut up, it's— he's just trying to help." Sirius' face fell, his eyebrows knitting together and his chin jutting back into his neck.

"It's not— just having a laugh, Moony, no need to get your knickers in a—"

"I'm not, but, you could say it in a—"

"What are you getting Bones?" James interrupted. Remus didn't pull his attention from Sirius, not at first, not until James lifted his head and repeated, "Moony?"

"What?"

"Bones? Valentine's Day?"

"Huh?"

"Bloody hell," Sirius said under his breath, reaching into his breast pocket for a cigarette. "Nothing, he's not getting her anything." James eyes darted between the two voices.

"What? Why not?"

"Because they're only shagging," Sirius answered for Remus, placing the cigarette between his lips. "You don't get someone you're shagging a gift for Valentine's Day, not that type of gift, at least."

Peter let out a short snort, quickly covering it up as James sat straight-up from his laid down position.

"I didn't— you're only shagging her?" Remus opened his mouth to speak, but instead dropped his gaze to his navy blue socks. The back of his neck began to heat up.
"Yes, Prongs, it's not—"

"But that's not what Lily— not what she's telling Lily," he countered, reaching to his bedside tables for his glasses. As soon as they slipped onto his nose, the blurry figures turned into humans, and who he had thought was Remus morphed into Sirius.

Remus had no response, nothing valid. No good excuse, no, and how could he? Lies upon lies, and more on top of that. A heaping mountain, making them, crafting them—and not because of some little devil sitting on his shoulder, but because he had made it with his very own hands. One after the other, and another, and one another on top of that. Packed on that clay thick and sturdy. He had delved so deep into it that everything around him was only that, lies.

He looked to his friends, to each of their faces.

Sirius, when they spoke Remus felt something churn deep inside him, his fists tighten at anything he said, every joke, every exhale of cigarette smoke. He'd grit his teeth without understanding why, shake his head, and cough up a laugh because it was how he knew to handle it, to let it go and come back again when it was time.

Peter, and though Remus understood and knew what fear was, he couldn't help but slit his eyes and peek through a hole he had hammered into the wall between them to watch every thing he did. Once innocent and seatless, the young bright, blue-eyed boy had turned into something to watch, something to keep an eye on because he wasn't quite sure who he was, not anymore.

James, who had his head so wrapped up in dreams that he forgot to take a look at the world around him. So far gone that he hadn't seen the temple crumbling around him, left with two broken columns at the entrance and a slab of marble where one could sit with a bottle and ponder how beautiful everything had been once upon a time.

They were not what they had been, they hadn't been for a long time, and so Remus swallowed that pill which would let him continue listening to the broken tune around him. He needed them, but, and something that had plagued him for a long time, they did not need him. They could walk out the room one by one and never look to one another again, and he would sit in the back, waiting for them to return because he needed them, and he wondered if they would have lasted if it weren't for that need.

"Well, she hasn't said anything to me," Remus responded, shrugging.

"Let the bird live her fantasy, Prongs," Sirius butted in. "And let Moony enjoy himself, for once." Remus scoffed, a rigid smile on his face, which quickly fell as the attention left him.

"So, that means no double-date on Tuesday?" James asked, his shoulders drooping.

"No double-date on Saturday," Remus affirmed, leaning his back into the pillows and reopening the book in his lap. Everyone returned to what it was they had been doing, different tasks, different habits, admiring an archaic structure that no longer stood straight—or at all.

(Wednesday 8 February 1978)

"Fletcher," Marjory said into the Ravenclaw's ear, grabbing him by the elbow and leading him away from the bustling hall. Her eyes roam it, jumping from face to face as they passed them. When they made their way around the bend, her arm wrapped into Mundungus', and lead him into one of the alcoves. "What the fuck is Mustaq up to?"
"Just noticed, eh?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest, cocking a brow and pursing his lips.

"She's like," Marjory shouldered lifted, taking a deep breath as her eyes closed and her fingers pressed against her temple. "Like a damned dictator, I don't know anymore who I'm supposed to be listening to—"

"And Dumbledore's wet dream," he added.

"She's decided to train Lupin himself," the witch continued, her voice growing ever the more squeakier. "What the fuck!? It was her idea to have us pretend to be together, so that I could train him without—"

"I know," he said.

"What the fuck!?" Mundungus eyed the Gryffindor before him, head to toe, watching as she ran a hand through her hair. A bewildered expression graced her face, from wide eyes to a jaw that dropped at the end of every sentence.

"She has her reasons," he began to explain. "But, so far, she's given us— she's, she might be the reason we win the war."

"Yes, but I didn't realize she would be—"

"Do you think I like her?" he asked, watching her as the words sizzled out in her head. "I don't, I try to avoid her whenever I can because I can't stand her. But the information she gives us, no one could get that for us. So get used to it, and do whatever it is she wants you to— because she's our most valuable member at the moment."

"Bloody hell," Marjory cursed in a sigh. "Ugh, fuck, I mean, do we even— are we any closer to figuring out—"

"That's not for you to know," he reminded her. Their gazes locked for a moment, ending as Marjory nodded, pressing her lips together. "But there will be more of them, now that we do know." Her lips parted.

"More of them?" she whispered. "More— what? Snakes?"

"No, more pricks," Mundungus said, his eye twitching at the thought of it. "But we need more, we need soldiers; not just intel. People who want to die, willing to die for this."

"Like who? If there are, they aren't talking. How do we know that they'll be—"

"Mustaq," he lifted a hand and patted her shoulder as he made his way past her, "always Mustaq."

"Peter!" she near-squealed, grinning with her teeth bare and her hands held together over her green plaid skirt. Her blonde hair hung in a low ponytail, a black silk ribbon that glistened every time she turned her head holding it all together.

"Er, yes?" he offered, eyebrows furrowing, head turning to look down the hall to ensure that there wasn't someone else with his name standing behind him. His mouth hung open as he returned his attention back to the Slytherin witch. "Me?" One of his fingers pointed at his own chest.

"You're quite difficult to catch alone, aren't you?" Her hand reached out, fingers running over his wrist. "Always with... well, with someone." Peter didn't utter a word as Rosalia Selwyn's finger
grazed the back of his hand, her eyes deep and prodding in search of a secret. She tilted her head. "I thought we could talk."

He swallowed; an unforgiving giggle escaped her.

"No, no, no need," she reassured him, reaching out for his hand and pulling him closer to her. He watched out of the corner of his eye. "There's no need for any of that. I'm not here to hurt you." She lifted her free hand to rub the greasy, day old gel-ridden strands over his forehead to the side. "Just you and I, yes?" The words came out in nothing more than a whisper, her lips brushing along his earlobe in an inebriating dance. His eyes shut closed, a small sigh escaped him, and Rosalia placed her mouth against his skin with opened eyes and a vicious smirk. "Come with me."

She walked passed him, forcing him to spin about, and dragged him with hands still connected through the halls. The sham of a smile never faltered once, not even as the portraits raised their brows and whispered into one another's ears.

Peter didn't hesitate to follow, and even if he had, he reckoned the words wouldn't have made it past the tie that now seemed to sit too tight around his neck.

"Wh-what're we— where're we going?" he attempted to inquire, receiving only one of her candied giggles as a response.

A door opened, and a door closed, and before he could realize it, it was only the two of them somewhere in an empty classroom on the fourth floor. Not once did it cross his mind that perhaps someone would come looking for him, that his friends holed up in the library might begin to wonder where he was. No, not as he stood in a cage with a bone in his pants and a sadistic dog foaming at the mouth— one that he had happily walked into, however.

All he could make out in the pitch dark was her pale skin, smooth as milk, from the faint light that came through the cracks of the door behind him. Her palms pressed against his chest, pushing him back against it.

"I want to show you something," she whispered, reaching her hand around and into his back pocket. She slid out his wand, tracing it along the curve of his stomach, up his chest, and into his neck. Peter gulped, his breaths turning heavier and heavier, before releasing a sigh as she began to giggle. "I have a present for you."

"What? A present, for me?"

"Yes," she said before casting, "Lumos." A white light glowed at the end of Peter's wand, lighting up both their faces. The Gryffindor squinted and blinked to grow accustomed to the light. She handed his wand back to him, and lifted the fat brown toad in her palm to his face.

"Do you like him?"

"W-what? Where'd you, where did that come from!?"

"I asked if you like him?" Her head tilted the opposite way, her eyes looking up at him through black coated lashes.

"I— er, sure?"

"Too bad," she crooned, shaking her head and pouting her bottom lip. "Too bad, because he's going to die."
"Die?"

"You're going to kill him."

"What?" he asked, his jaw unhinging. "K-kill, you— you, you want me to k-kill the— th-that?"

"It's not hard."

"I—"

"You know how, nothing illegal. Make it suffocate."

"I don't— I don't—"

"But you do."

"I don't w-want—"

"You do, you just don't know it."

The toad burped in her hand, the slime-filled skin contracting back and forth, but Aphrodite did not look elsewhere but at the sweat that had broken out on Peter's face. The air in the windowless room grew stuffy, the walls closed in on them.

"Peter, Peter, Peter," she began, stepping closer, his wand lowering to his side, his hands shaking. Her lips swept along his jawline, pressing the softest of kisses to the bone. "I can be very generous."

"Wh-why?"

"Because you don't deserve this," she spewed through her teeth, everything low and hot. "You don't deserve how they treat you, your friends, Nott, Dolohov— all of them, they don't know, they don't know what you can do, what you can be." She darted her tongue out to lick the underside of his jaw, smirking as his breath hitched. "So show me, show me to prove them wrong."

"Wh-what, I don't know if I—"

"No one will ever step on you again, never."

"Never?"

"It'll stop, all of it."

"It'll— if I do i-it, they'll stop?" he asked, looking down at the almost dipsomaniac amphibian. "No more, I won't—"

"No one will ever hurt you again," she promised him. "I can show you how— all you have to do is what I tell you. Exactly what I tell you. Can you do that for me, Peter?"

"I don't know—"

"Power," she whispered, her eyes widening for a brief second. "Don't you want it? Want them to respect you? Don't you know that I can make that happen, for you? Only for you."

"All — I just—"

"Kill him, a quick Incarcerous, and bye-bye froggy."
It wasn't quick, but it wasn't slow either. Most of all, and most importantly, it wasn't what anyone would have expected from the likes of him. Always the best friend to James Potter, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin, and not much else. Crying on a ceramic floor, reeking of piss and disappointment, no one could have thought that five minutes of coddling and promising would have led him to lift his wand and cast a spell that made the fat brown toad choke on the very air they breathed so freely on, watching it as it twisted and wrung itself, eventually plopping to their feet.

It should have been quiet, as that was the normal response to such an event, but Rosalia Selwyn clapping hands and giddy grin brought the light into the room. She sang, "you did it, you did it," over and over again like a war chant. Peter's shoulders fell forward, slumping, catching his breath. And much to his own surprise, he, too, began to join in on the witch's drunkenness. A laugh left him, and then another, until it turned into a never-ending, stomach-aching chuckle.

"I did it, I did— I did that!" he exclaimed with excitement, pointing down at the dead toad. "I never, I didn't, me!? Did you see it, did you see the rope!? It just flung out, flung out of my wand."

"Doesn't it feel good? No one else could have done that, no one. They're too scared, you know that? Cowards, but you're not. You're not," her hands clasped onto his chin. "Because you want this, you want it, don' t you? You're going to do great things."

In the darkness, with the electricity vibrating through the stonework and thus his own limbs, Peter leaned forward to kiss her. Rosalia stopped him, a hand pressed firmly against his shoulder.

"No, not now."

"Sorry." A finger laid over his lips.

"I need you to do something for me," she told him, closing the space between them. Their bodies pressed against each other, and he could feel every curve, every plain, everything against his own. "To become powerful, to gain His trust, you have to do this. He'll make you one of the most powerful wizards that history has ever known." The hand that hand held his shoulder ran down his chest, over his ribs, his stomach, turning about to lay over and cup his groin through his grey trousers. "But you will, won't you? You'll help me? You'll help me because it's what you want, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes, little boy."

"Anything," he rasped, closing his eyes and leaning his head back as she massaged the growing ache in his pants.

"Look at me," she demanded, waiting for him to open his eyes. "Do this for me—," her hand below stopped, the warmth of her palm bleeding through the cloth. Peter's thoughts swam, his lids drooping low. "And I'll give you so much more, I'll give— you can be more than what they are. Everyone worthy enough has a place beside Him, Peter. Everyone, and you can prove your worth, as you did now. Do you want that?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Good boy." Her finger rubbed over his throbbing head, causing his hips to jut forward. A small whine left him, causing Rosalia to smirk. "That's what you want, isn't it? To be like your friends, isn't it? Well, I can make you better than them. They'll cower at your feet, stare at you in awe. I promise."

"I want to, I want— yes."

"You'd do anything to have it?"

"Anything," he answered, nodding.
"Good," and with that, she lifted herself onto her feet and pressed her lips to his.

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