And So, All the Pieces Fall into Place

Summary

Harriet Potter had just defeated Tom Riddle. She means to keep her promise to place the Elder Wand back into Dumbledore’s tomb. But she and her friends could not have suspected that Riddle had made one last desperate bid for his life shortly before his demise. The trio suddenly find themselves in the Hogwarts of 1977 in much more sinister circumstances than before. Familiar faces of the past are only a part of the mess they’re in. If Harriet thought that her mission had finally been completed and her life become free, she would find herself most grievously mistaken.

Notes

*Korean Translation* by the lovely and wonderful Elywen now available!!*

This story has been floating around in my head for a while. I know there’s already quite a few time travel fics out there, but frankly, I couldn’t resist—time travel offers so many
possibilities!

I hope to do the idea of a female Harry justice. I’ve been wondering how Harry’s experiences might be different as a female while maintaining Harry’s canon personality as much as possible. And of course, when I say experiences, I mean to include her relationships with others, which I hope to explore in the subsequent chapters.
I also hope to do the canon characters justice.

Author’s notes will usually be at the end starting from the first chapter.

Rating and tags may be subject to change.

Disclaimer (for the entire story):
J.K. Rowling is the true and rightful owner of the Harry Potter series—I do not own any part of the world it portrays except for the obviously non-canonical parts which I have added for the sake of the story. The only characters I own are the OCs I have created to help support background details and add depth to the plot.
“Harry, are you absolutely sure that you want to do this?” Ron’s cautious voice filtered into her ears as they watched Dumbledore’s white marble tomb rise out of the ground.

Outside, the grounds were peaceful and the warm, cheerful light of the morning sun was incongruent to the solemn and formal affair in which they were engaged.

The Elder Wand was going back to where it belonged. Back into the hands of its former master who had been buried with it.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron stood just outside the edge of Dumbledore’s resting place near the Black Lake. Harry held her wand up, concentrating on levitating the coffin out onto the ground.

“Yes,” she replied firmly. “It’s more trouble than it’s worth. We’d likely have another war on our hands if people figure out what it is and what it can do. And I don’t know about you, but I can use a bit of peace in my life,” Harry finished lightly.

Ron made a sound that was between a snort and a sigh.

“Well, you’re not wrong about that. I think I’d like to go to sleep for a thousand years. Who’d have thought that fighting against You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters would completely sap the energy out of you?” he commented back casually.

The three of them watched quietly as the tomb softly descended onto the grass still wet with morning dew. The flat, smooth lid slid away soundlessly at the bid of Harry’s murmured spell, revealing the white, frozen face within.

Hermione moved to Harry’s side and gripped her wandless arm firmly and perhaps consolingly, for both of their sakes. Ron, who was at Harry’s other side, moved towards his black-haired friend as well. He put a strong, reassuring arm around her shoulders.

They gazed, silently, at the preserved, prone form of their former headmaster and the greatest man they had ever known.

Thank you, Harry murmured to him, inside her head. In the end, you knew best. Because of your efforts, I was able to do what I was meant to do.

She gingerly took out the Elder Wand which she had stowed in her robes. She rolled it in her fingers, smiling wryly. Ron and Hermione looked at it with her.

“This really is the end, then?” Hermione asked, her voice wavering slightly from both relief and disbelief.

The war had finally been won. Her two best friends were alive. Harry had survived. Ron was here, safe and sound. They could breathe again. They were free with the rest of their lives ahead of them.

“Yes,” Harry responded, leaning into her gently. “Tom Riddle’s—”

Harry felt the Elder Wand grow hot in her fingers and a bright, white flash engulfed them.
All was dark and she couldn’t move.

An infinite expanse of space surrounded her as she floated and drifted within it, her body impossibly light and hollow, as if it were merely a shell.

She did not think, but only felt. It was quiet with the slightest hint of a murmur every now and then. A part of her brain grasped at the elusive shifts of sound. But mostly, her mind was content to remain static and blissfully submit to the softness of silence.

It was peaceful.

Peace. Something she had never really known or experienced. Fleeting moments were all she had had.

She did not mind this boundless and mostly soundless darkness.

She continued to float for a long time. Until the murmurs became louder. Every now and then, there was an almost comprehensible utterance of a word. The part of her mind that was partial to these auditory breaks grew more fervent and determined to fully register the identity of the word.

She almost cursed the disruption of her peaceful state.

But she could feel herself grow restless as her conscious determination to know increased. There was something wrong. Panic grew as the muttering became louder and her body became heavier, wanting to ground itself. She became afraid of drifting away into the gaping and listless infinity of darkness.

She pulled at the yet indiscernible words as if they were her lifeline to whatever bound her to herself and to her consciousness.

Finally, one of them registered.

“Albus.”

And suddenly, the darkness was bounded, encased. She was lying down on something firm and flat. She was grounded, stabilized.

“Perhaps we will not have to wait much longer, Minerva.”

Her senses flickered to life.

Something nagged at her in the back of her mind.

_That voice…_

There was a rustling sound near her.

She inhaled, testing her surroundings. The sharp, uncompromising scent of sterile cleanliness and the musty, bitter smell of medicine filled her nostrils.
And she knew where she was. But how? And why?

She opened her eyes to a ceiling that she knew all too well.

Her eyes drifted down to look in front of her and she found herself staring into blue eyes that were shockingly familiar.

Albus Dumbledore stood at the foot of her bed, examining her with a look brimming with curiosity and a hint of wariness.

“Professor?” she rasped out, her eyes wide with disbelief. “Professor Dumbledore?”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Why, yes,” he replied genially with a smile. “Indeed, I am. But with whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

His bright eyes peered at her with interest.

Harry gaped at him.

She looked him over. He was definitely not a ghost because he was not transparent or all silver-colored. In fact, he looked very much alive. If this was an imposter, then whoever it was had gotten Dumbledore’s image down to the last, minute detail. Except for the fact that he had just asked her who she was. An imposter would be smarter than that.

She decided to go along with him.

“Er, sir, do you not recognize me?” she asked cautiously.

“I know it’s been a year since we last saw each other in person, but I would have thought—”

She broke off mid-sentence as he raised his eyebrows.

“Last year, you say? How very curious.”

Harry searched his face for any trace of recognition. There was none, to her complete and utter confusion.

She frowned. “Sir, it’s me. Harriet—”

“HARRY! You’re awake!” a shrill voice interrupted her.

Harry turned her head so quickly that she almost gave herself whiplash.

“Hermione!” she exclaimed.

Her best girlfriend sat upright in a bed one bed away from her to her left. A flood of warm relief and worry filled her chest.

Why was Hermione in here too? And in a bed, like her? She wasn’t hurt, was she? Her eyes drifted down to the bed between them.

“Ron?” she gasped. The redhead was in a deep sleep, snoring softly. He didn’t look to be hurt anywhere specifically.
“Yes, we’re both here.”

Harry moved her attention back to Hermione.

“Hermione, are you all right? Why are we here? Do you know what happened?”

The questions rushed out of her as she sat up fully in her bed. A dizziness filled her head and she scrunched her eyes shut, grimacing.

“You have been in a comatose state for three days, Miss…Harriet. I would recommend some caution in your movements to allow your body to readjust itself,” another extremely familiar voice drifted into her ears.

Harry turned to its source and found herself looking at Professor McGonagall, whom she had not noticed standing by her bed until this moment. She blinked.

“Professor McGonagall,” she blurted out in surprise.

The deputy headmistress furrowed her eyebrows.

“It seems that you know me as well,” she said, sounding bemused.

“Er, yes,” Harry replied dumbly.

“Of course I know you. I’ve known you for years. And you know me too, don’t you?” she asked with some trepidation.

There was a tense pause.

“No, I cannot say that I do,” Professor McGonagall finally replied with a guarded expression.

Harry stared at her wordlessly. This was some sort of joke, right? A really messed up one? In all the years that Harry had known her Head of House, she would have never suspected that the professor could be capable of lying about her student.

This was a dream, right? She had to be dreaming. Because Dumbledore couldn’t be alive and not know her too.

“Er, Professor,” she started cautiously. But before she could say more, a groan broke out in the room.

Harry swiftly turned to her left, where she saw Ron open his eyes blearily as he woke up.

“Is Harry awake yet?” he asked thickly.

“Yes, I’m awake,” Harry replied. “You all right, Ron?”

Ron bolted up, blinking to focus his eyes on her.

“Bloody hell, Harry! Hermione and I were getting real worried about you. You’ve been unconscious for three days.”

His eyes were anxious as they scrutinized the state of her health.

“Yeah, so I’ve been told. But you’re okay, right? Have you guys been waiting for three days to see me wake up?”
“Yeah, I’m okay. And so’s Hermione. And no. We only woke up yesterday. Madam Pomfrey told us about how we were found unconscious near the Black Lake three days ago. Er, I don’t think they know who we are,” he finished uncertainly with a furtive glance at McGonagall and Dumbledore who were quietly observing their conversation.

“They asked us who we are,” Hermione spoke up timidly, also glancing at the two professors.

“I was the first to wake. I told them that I couldn’t give any answers until you and Ron woke up.”

She paused, her face nervous, before adding hesitantly, “Harry, today’s the twenty-seventh of August, 1977.”

Harry blinked at her.

“Sorry?”

“It’s the twenty-seventh of August, in the year, 1977,” Hermione repeated, looking back at her meaningfully.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Harry?”

Harry’s mind did a double-take.

1977?

That was…twenty-one years back from where they had been.

Wait.

Years. Time. Back.

Her mind froze. *Time travel?*

She glanced at Ron, who gave a small nod, also with a meaningful look.

She shook her head at them.

No, this couldn’t be possible. It was impossible. What business did they have, being twenty-one years back? How did they even get here?

But Dumbledore and McGonagall’s inability to recognize her gnawed at her. No, they must have been lying. They knew her, surely?

But Dumbledore was *alive*. Harry turned her head back to look at the still-silent professors, who looked back at her. She noticed things that she hadn’t quite noticed before.

Her Head of House looked considerably younger. Less lines on her face and her hair looked fuller. The former headmaster, on the other hand, admittedly looked much the same as before. But then, he had already been well-advanced in years in this time they were apparently in, she supposed.

“Sir,” she addressed her former mentor, who gave her his full attention, “Could you tell me the date, please?”

“It is as Miss Hermione told you. It is the twenty-seventh of August, in the year, 1977. And close to eight in the morning,” he said gently, his eyes never leaving her face.
Harry felt herself become pale. She stared back at him, defiantly, probing his face for the merest hint of a lie. Not that she could properly tell if he was. She had never quite mastered reading his face when he had been alive, er, properly, that is. Not that he didn’t seem to be properly alive here, but she couldn’t make sense of the situation in front of her.

She glanced at McGonagall, who was easier to read. It wasn’t much help. McGonagall just seemed to be watching her reactions.

“How did we get here?” she decided to probe further.

“We were hoping that you could tell us. As Miss Hermione has already told you, she refused to answer any questions pertaining to your identities or the matter of your being here while you were still unconscious. Mr. Ronald also took up this condition,” McGonagall answered matter-of-factly.

Harry contemplated her for a moment.

It seemed that the professors didn’t know who the three of them were. Which meant…

But time travel?

And they didn’t know how the three of them got there either.

A memory sparked in her brain.

Outside, in front of the school and by the Black Lake, with Ron and Hermione. Dumbledore’s tomb rising out of the ground. Dumbledore’s lifeless, pale face. Ron and Hermione with their arms around her. The Elder Wand in her hands. Her fingers feeling hot. Then a blinding flash of white light.

She closed her eyes momentarily, replaying her most recent memory, trying to put the pieces together. Had it been the Elder Wand? If so, how—

A terrible, sinking feeling on the edge of horror overtook her.

Tom Riddle.

She had uttered his name with the wand in her hand while Ron and Hermione held onto her.

A portkey? For time travel? But since when, and how?

The answers came to her readily. Because she knew him.

Tom Riddle had the last laugh.

Well, not if she could help it.

Voldemort, she cursed to herself, her fists clenching her sheets. A white-hot fury burst in her chest followed by terrified despair.

What do we do?

She opened her eyes and looked at Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall.

“I believe you,” she said seriously. “And I’ll tell you about us as much as I can.”

The last part she said while looking pointedly at the headmaster.
“I see,” he said solemnly. “But first, perhaps you should have something to eat and drink. I would like to see you three fully well before we speak of more serious matters,” he added kindly, his bright blue eyes twinkling gently.

“Yes, Professor.”

The headmaster shared a glance with Professor McGonagall and they moved to leave the ward.

“I wish you three a quick return back to health,” he said, nodding to them before turning towards the door.

He stopped.

“Ah, yes. I almost forgot.”

He pulled out a wand from his robes.

Harry’s eyes widened. Her wand!

Her hands immediately went to the front of her robes, searching for it within its inner folds. Nothing.

Dumbledore moved towards her and held out her wand to her, which she took.

“Sir,” she started to say.

He gave her an apologetic smile.

“I do hope you forgive me, my dear. I took your wand while you were unconscious as a security measure. You see, when Professor McGonagall and I found you three by the Black Lake, we were not sure of the manner of your circumstances. Of course, we still do not know. But I do not think I will need to keep this from you any longer.”

“Sir,” she began again, “was this the only wand you found on me?”

His piercing blue eyes looked at her for a moment before he calmly replied, “Yes. There was just this wand on you. Is it not yours?”

“Yes, sir, it is,” Harry said.

She wanted to ask, to make sure, “And do you have yours?” but didn’t.

He gave her one last smile and left, Professor McGonagall following closely behind him.

Madam Pomfrey was as strict as always when it came to the treatment and well-being of her patients.

Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall had barely left when Madam Pomfrey came rushing into the room with a cart full of breakfast trays.

“Ah! You’re awake, good,” was her greeting to Harry.

After a comprehensive check-up of Harry’s vital signs and overall bodily status, the matron made her drink a large gobletful of extremely bitter potion which was supposed to put her on a speedy path to complete recovery. Ron and Hermione received routine check-ups on their health after which,
breakfast was served to them.

A goblet full of a different potion was set on Harry’s bedside table.

“I want you to drink it, all of it, after you finish eating. And call me after you’re done with it,” the matron instructed her.

The three of them ate silently, absorbed in their own thoughts and their food.

Harry found herself famished. She hadn’t eaten anything since before the battle. The new potion made her gag, but she forced herself to drink it all. Madam Pomfrey’s wrath was not something to be considered lightly.

She and her friends received another checkup afterwards. They were allowed to leave their beds and walk around to exercise their limbs after the period of comatose inactivity, but not too much and certainly not out of the ward.

“You three are still in the midst of recovery, you know,” Madam Pomfrey said, looking at them sternly.

Ron and Hermione wasted no time in approaching Harry after the matron retired back into her office. The two of them sat down on the foot of her bed.

“Ron and I don’t have our wands,” Hermione whispered to her anxiously. “I asked about my wand and Ron asked about his when we woke up, but Professor McGonagall said we didn’t have any wands on us. Just you. And I don’t think she was lying.”

“Yeah, I mean, Dumbledore just gave yours back to you, mate. No reason why he’d keep ours from us if he believes that it’s okay for you to have your wand back,” Ron whispered too.

“But why don’t you two have your wands?” Harry asked, frowning. “You didn’t happen to drop them when that white light appeared? Er, you two did see the light too, didn’t you?”

Surely it hadn’t been just her who’d seen it?

“I think I have an idea why,” Hermione replied. “And no, we definitely didn’t drop our wands. Mine was in my pocket and Ron had his in his robes at the time when the light appeared and covered us.”

Harry was relieved that she hadn’t been seeing things. She raised her wand and pointed to Madam Pomfrey’s office.

“Muffliato.”

She did the same thing to the door.

She turned back to Hermione. “All right, explain. But, first, just to be clear, we have traveled back in time, haven’t we?”

The three of them looked at each other nervously.

“Yes, I believe so. When I woke up and saw that we were in the Hospital Wing, I thought that something had happened to us when we were putting the Elder Wand back into the tomb. I wanted to ask Madam Pomfrey about what had happened to us, but she wasn’t here. And neither were the professors. So, I got out of bed and went looking for her in her office and, well, I saw the calendar. I thought I was out of it and seeing things strangely, so I decided to look around in there a bit, just to
make sure. All of her current patient records were labeled with the year, 1977. And so was her daily planner and the letters she’d received recently. There was also her collection of the *Healer’s Handbook*, which is an annual publication, and the most recent copy is from 1977. I don’t imagine that Madam Pomfrey’s the type to completely end her subscription for twenty-one years,” Hermione finished quietly.

“And McGonagall really didn’t seem to know us,” Ron continued the discussion. “Hermione prevented me from revealing my last name and she didn’t reveal hers either.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t think it’d be a good idea. Not until we found out what’s going on,” Hermione explained.

“I asked her if she didn’t remember me in her class, when, I, er, messed around and didn’t pay attention,” Ron said with a sheepish look on his face.

“But she just frowned and told me that she had a habit of remembering every single face that had been in her class, and she had never, not once, seen mine. Or Hermione’s or yours, for that matter. I almost yelled out your last name at her ‘cause I was getting weirded out, but Hermione let out a fake sneeze. She looked at us real suspiciously after that.”

“And there’s Dumbledore,” Harry said. “He’s obviously alive or at the very least, I’m convinced he’s the real thing.”

“Us too,” Hermione agreed. “Mostly because we believe that this is really 1977. I asked Madam Pomfrey if I could have a look at the *Daily Prophet* yesterday and she brought me the day’s copy, which was dated the twenty-sixth of August, of 1977. According to the paper, it’s been a pretty bad year. A lot of murders, mostly having to do with Muggles or Muggle-borns. Harry, it’s—”

“When Voldemort was in his prime, yeah,” Harry finished for her.

Hermione and Ron’s expressions were frightened and tense. She wondered if her own sense of despair showed in her eyes as they silently looked at each other, hesitant to speak up about the certain danger they were in again.

They had thought everything had ended once and for all. They had won. All the horcruxes had been found and destroyed. Voldemort was dead. His era was over.

But not now. Not yet, in this year they found themselves in. They had never experienced the first period of Voldemort’s power, when, arguably, he had been strongest. They could imagine the terror, the suspicion, the paranoia, and the determined brutality that Voldemort’s presence inspired among the public during this time, because they had witnessed and felt it too during their own fight against him, but even so, this was a different time with different people, attitudes, and values. The three of them were complete strangers.

Voldemort’s reign of terror was already closing in on a decade here. He had yet to be defeated.

She looked at her friends grimly.

“I think we’re going to have to find the horcruxes and destroy them again. I’m going to need to face him again.”

Ron gaped at her.

“What are you talking about? We should be looking for a way to go back to our time, where we’ve already taken care of him. If we’ve arrived back in the past, we shouldn’t change anything. That’s
the rule, isn’t it? The slightest alteration could change the flow of events permanently. Isn’t that right Hermione?”

He looked to Hermione for help.

“Yes,” Hermione answered hesitantly. She looked very uncertain.

“Hermione?” Ron asked her worriedly.

Harry waited.

“It’s just…well, about our missing wands…I told you I had a theory, didn’t I? Bear with me a bit, Ron, please” she pleaded gently when Ron opened his mouth with a puzzled look at this sudden change of topic.

He closed his mouth and nodded, giving her his full attention.

She took a deep breath. “I don’t think they’re our wands anymore. I don’t think we’ll ever get them back.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked while Harry remained silent.

“Well, for starters, our wands weren’t really our own. I had Bellatrix’s wand and you had Pettigrew’s wand, Ron. They’re still alive during this time, aren’t they? Wands are unique for each individual and it wouldn’t make sense for a copy to exist during the same time when the person it chose still has it in their own proper time. We’re intruding in on their timeline so it makes sense that they’d have their own wands instead of us. As for what happened to their wands that we were holding, I think they just ceased to exist, for us, at least. They’re back with their original masters, who they’ve been with all along. It fits with the Magical Paradox Principle in time travel.”

“Er…” Harry and Ron both looked at her sheepishly.

Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes.

“Oh, honestly. Harry, I know you still remember what we had to look out for when we used the Time-Turner in third year.”

“You mean the rule that you should never meet up with your past self nor change anything in the past?”

“Yes. Well, the first part, really. The second part just follows from that. The fact that more than one version of you can exist within the same timeframe is one of two main parts of the principle. You see, the principle also says that having two magical objects that should only exist as one at the same time is impossible in the inherent structure and flow of magic. For example, a significantly powerful object like a wand that’s only supposed to have one holder at a time can’t suddenly have two different holders that both wield it. It destroys the inherent logical structure of magic because a wand’s only supposed to have one master at a time. In other words, it makes no magical sense.”

“But, Hermione, we and our past selves both had our wands at the same time,” Harry pointed out.

“That’s different. It’s possible for you and your past self to both have your wand at the same time because you and your past self are the same person, technically, and therefore, the same and rightful master of the wand. The master remained the same, so the wands stayed in place that time.”

“Okay, all right, I get it, but what does all this have to do with our problem of going back to the
future?” Ron asked, looking bewildered.

Hermione hesitated and looked at Harry, who was slowly figuring out her friend’s motive for a seemingly tangential explanation about the Magical Paradox Principle.

“The Elder Wand,” Harry said grimly.

“Er, what’s that got to do—”

“It’s gone. Dumbledore said he didn’t find it on me and now it makes more sense why. He’s the wand’s master during this time. And I wasn’t exactly surprised that I didn’t have it anymore. He wouldn’t have let me keep something that could defeat him, not that it would have stayed with me anyway, according to the Magical Paradox Principle. I’m sure he knew about it. That’s why he cursed the wand to take me here,” Harry said darkly.

“You’re not still talking about Dumbledore, are you?” Ron asked uncertainly.

Harry and Hermione shared a mutual look.

“I don’t think it was a freak accident or a coincidence that took us to the past. You don’t think so either, do you Harry?”

“No.”

“Will one of you please tell me what’s bloody going on?” Ron demanded. “Who and what are you talking about, Harry?”

“Tom Riddle,” Harry replied solemnly.

Ron’s face paled and he opened his mouth but no sound came out. Hermione, who had already known the answer, was nevertheless as still as a statue.

Harry looked back at them. The time to explain had come. This was not going to be easy to believe. Not after all they had gone through and finally achieved. But she knew it was true. Because she knew Riddle best, perhaps better than Dumbledore had ever known him.

She opened her mouth and explained about the Elder Wand’s role in transporting them to 1977 and how it connected to her suspicion that Voldemort, after discovering that they had been hunting down and destroying his horcruxes, most likely had doubted, for the first time, his tenacious hold on near-immortality and had taken extra measures to guarantee his survival.

“Harry,” Ron started, looking a bit sick, “Are you seriously suggesting that Voldemort placed spells on the Elder Wand to take us back in time when he was at his strongest, so that he’d get another shot at killing us? At killing you?”

“Yeah, I am,” Harry replied. “His second greatest obsession in life behind making sure he was more special than everyone else was immortality. He’d have grasped at any chance to live a little longer. You don’t know how scared he got when he found out that we were hunting his horcruxes.”

She swallowed and continued.

“I’d say he was desperate enough to consider something he’d never thought to believe before: the possibility of his defeat. I reckon that’s why he got himself a bit of insurance in case he actually found himself disarmed or worse, killed by me. The only time when his arrogance took a back seat.”
She scoffed humorlessly.

“But how’d he know it’d be you going back in time?” Ron demanded.

“Because he set Harry apart as his equal,” Hermione answered for her. “Remember the prophecy? Voldemort heard most of it and tried to kill Harry because he saw her as someone who could become as powerful as him. He was arrogant to the end, but a part of himself was always afraid, always doubted, as long as Harry remained alive. He knew her as the one with ‘the power to defeat the Dark Lord.’ If anyone had the capacity to properly take him out, to take the Elder Wand from him, it would be Harry.”

“And it was me, in the end,” Harry confirmed. “Although he wasn’t the master of the Elder Wand like he figured when I defeated him. But I got my hands on it from him and I…I said his name…Tom Riddle.”

Understanding lit Ron’s pale face.

“It’s like the Taboo,” he said in a hushed voice. “He put a curse on the Elder Wand to trigger the spells he put on it to take you here. You never were afraid of saying his name, either of his names, Harry,” he sighed.

“It wasn’t a fail-safe plan,” Hermione said.

“No, it was a huge risk, even for him, but it was clever, all the same. Really clever.” Harry bit her lip and looked down. Her hands shook slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said to them.

“Er, sorry?” Ron asked.

“I don’t think he meant for all three of us to come here. He would have only wanted me. I think the reason you two are here is because you both were holding onto me at the time.”

She gulped.

“I’ve put you guys in danger again. I’m sorry,” she said quietly, her throat tight and her heart full of guilt.

There was a loud snort.

Harry looked up at Hermione, who gave her a stern look.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry. We’ve always followed you into danger of our own volition.”

“But—”

A warm hand closed over hers and gave it a firm squeeze. Harry looked into Hermione’s soft, gentle eyes.

“It’s not your fault, Harry. None of us could have known. Who would have thought that he’d be smart enough to acknowledge his own mortality?”

Harry felt a great rush of affection and gratitude towards her.

“I don’t think he really believed in it but for a moment. He was so sure of his victory after he killed Snape because he believed the Elder Wand belonged to him. He probably did it in the spur of the
moment right after Gringotts when he doubted for the first time. He’ll be happy to know that his plan worked,” Harry said bitterly.

“Harry, you’re sure about this? About the wand, the spells, and his plan?”

Harry looked at Ron, who, to her surprise, looked more determined than afraid, although his face was still pale.

He believed her. They both did.

A comforting warmth spread in her chest.

“Absolutely. It’s the only thing that makes sense. The wand got hot in my fingers right after I said his name and then, that light covered us. Next thing we know, we’re in the period when he was at his strongest, conveniently for him.”

Ron looked thoughtful. “D’you reckon that it’ll be easier to defeat him this time? We just need to find the horcruxes again to defeat him and good thing we already know where they are, so…”

“But we don’t have the sword of Gryffindor, Ron. And even if we managed to retrieve it somehow, it wouldn’t be imbued with basilisk venom because Harry hasn’t killed the basilisk yet. We’ve got the same problem as before. We may know or have an idea of where the horcruxes are, but nothing to destroy them with,” Hermione countered.

Ron looked at Harry. "You wouldn't be up for killing the basilisk again, would you? If we get the sword again, I mean."

"Er..."

"Don’t be ridiculous, Ron. That's way too dangerous," Hermione snapped impatiently. "Harry nearly died the first time if not for Fawkes, remember? Besides, I'm not sure if we can get at the basilisk this time. Even if we could enter the Chamber of Secrets by imitating Parseltongue, the basilisk wouldn't be awakened."

Ron exchanged looks with Harry.

"Er, isn't that a good thing? It'll probably be easier to kill if it's asleep."

Hermione regarded him stonily. "Do you really think it'll be that easy?"

Ron groaned. “Well, bloody hell, then. Then what do we do—OH!” he suddenly bellowed, startling Hermione, who flinched violently.

“The wand, Harry! The Elder Wand! It’s the most powerful wand in the world! It could probably destroy the horcruxes with the right spells! You still have it—oh...oh, no, wait, you don’t. Magical Paradox Principle. Forgot in the heat of the moment,” he muttered.

There was a moment of silence while the three pondered the weight of the challenges posed against them.

“By the way,” Ron started tentatively, “There is a way for us to return to our time, isn’t there?”

A stone dropped into the pit of Harry’s stomach. She swallowed.

“I think the Elder Wand with the spells on it would have been the key to returning us to our time. We could have tried Priori Incantatem or something to figure out counterspells. But it doesn’t exist
anymore, not in the way that we had it in. According to this time, it’s been with Dumbledore since Grindelwald.”

“Meaning we won’t be able to go back,” Hermione concluded. “Or at least, it’ll be extremely difficult to find a way back. And even if we had a Time-Turner, it wouldn’t take us to the future, only to the past. But I don’t know if things will even stay the same if we do manage to get back home somehow. The Novikov Self-Consistency Principle says that the things that have already happened by our time should stay the same regardless of our being in the past, but, we arrived here through dark magic, which already caused a disruption in the magical structure of this time, so, I don’t know. I just don’t know,” she said hollowly.

“So basically, we’re fucked.” Ron got off the bed and started pacing around in front of it.

Harry’s jaw tightened as guilt reared up in her chest again.

They shouldn’t have to suffer this fate with her. They had been brought here with her, because of her. Because she had decided to say Riddle’s name.

“Look,” she started quietly, looking down at her covers. She couldn’t bear to look at them for shame. She took a shaky breath.

“I just want you guys to know that I never meant, that I never wanted this to happen. I never wanted you guys to be stuck here with me. It’s me that Voldemort wants, as usual, and I’ve brought you guys into another mess and it’s so much more dangerous than before—”

“Oh, Harry, be quiet,” Hermione cut across her crisply.

“Mate, we’d be stark raving mad to believe for a second that you wanted any of this to happen.”

Ron had stopped pacing and stood at the foot of her bed. He gave her a crooked smile.

“But—”

“Harry,” Hermione said gently, moving up the bed towards her to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, “Didn’t we already tell you that we’re with you ‘til the end? We’re on your side, always.”

Harry’s throat was tight with emotion.

“Thanks,” she managed to get out thickly. She leaned into Hermione’s hug and embraced her back fiercely. She heard Ron come towards her to lean down to hug her as well.

They broke apart only when Madam Pomfrey came back out from her office several minutes later.

They spent the rest of the day stretching out their limbs by walking around the ward while Madam Pomfrey checked up on them every now and then.

Harry marveled at the fact that everything about the place seemed to have been the same in this year, twenty-one years ago.

The beds were the same from their arrangement to their covers as were the privacy curtains.

Without knowing what had happened to them, they could probably forget that they had traveled more than two decades back.
They were unable to discuss any further about their circumstances until Madam Pomfrey turned off the lights for bed and left for her own quarters, which were attached to the ward.

“If any problem arises, don’t hesitate to call me,” she told them before retiring for the night.

Harry cast *Muffliato* again immediately after she heard Madam Pomfrey’s door close.

*“Lumos.”*

Holding her wand up high so that she and her friends could see, she and Hermione met with Ron at his bed, the midpoint between them.

“So,” Ron began the discussion, “What are we going to tell Dumbledore? He’ll be expecting some answers soon.”

Harry and Hermione both hesitated. They answered at the same time.

“Everything.”

“As little as we can.”

The two girls stared at each other while Ron looked from one to the other.

“Harry,” Hermione began, “You can’t honestly think—”

“We tell him everything,” Harry insisted, holding up a hand when Hermione opened her mouth to protest.

“Listen to me. Riddle can’t have sent me back with my memory intact while keeping his past self here oblivious to who I am. What would’ve been the point of sending me back if his past self doesn’t know to look for me?”

“Look,” she continued in the tense silence, “I’m only running on my own suspicions, because that’s all I can do regarding his motives right now, but we all know that he was damn smart. Smart and powerful enough to defy the regulations of time travel by forcing us back to the past when he was in his prime, with no viable option of returning to the future. Which suggests that there’s more to his plan than just making me stay here indefinitely. Of course, he can’t have traveled back here too since he was dead when I accidentally transported us here, but, I don’t think he would have had to.”

She gestured to her scar. Ron and Hermione’s eyes flickered to her forehead.

“He and I have a unique connection because of the prophecy. Now, I don’t know how much the prophecy’s going to factor in to my presence here, in the past, before I was officially born, but I think there’s a good chance that his current self here will somehow know, or recognize, who I am. I think he believed that somehow, our connection would enable his past self to recognize me enough to want to kill me. And when he starts looking for me, there’s going to be chaos. You said it yourself, Hermione: we’re strangers here. We can’t fight him alone while he wreaks more havoc than he should in this time because of us. The people involved in the fight against him, especially Dumbledore, have a right to know. And we aren’t going to be able to return anytime soon, if ever. We can’t just wait for him to make the first move.”

She tried to make them understand.

Ron was the first to speak.
“You’ve got a point,” he admitted. “It’d be weird for him to have given you an advantage over him by keeping your memories intact. He knew that your being here would eventually mean something to him in this time. But even so, why do you reckon that he didn’t make you lose your memory?”

“Because he wanted me to know exactly what he’d done and what he was going to do to me by bringing me to this time,” Harry replied.

She had pondered the same question as well. The answer had come to her as readily as when she had immediately realized who was responsible for activating the Elder Wand against her.

“It wouldn’t be much fun killing me without me knowing why. And I suppose it’s his way of mocking me, that clearly, he’s not so easy to kill. He’s not done. Not yet.”

Hermione shuddered.

“Harry, if you’re right about him recognizing you, then everyone who matters in the fight against him here and the years to come is in danger. By that, I mean Dumbledore and the original Order of the Phoenix, including your parents, Sirius, and Remus. And if he recognizes you, he’ll recognize me and Ron, so he’ll go after Ron’s family and my parents, too. My parents were never part of the Order because they’re Muggles, but, they’re connected to me and he doesn’t care about Muggles, so…” she stopped, her face deathly pale.

“The Death Eaters ran rampant in the years before our births,” she whispered, trembling.

“No,” Ron uttered in horror.

Harry’s mind froze.

Her parents. Sirius. Lupin. And Pettigrew and Snape.

It was 1977. The Marauders’ seventh year. How could she not have realized it sooner?

Panic began creeping through her veins.

“Hermione,” she said in a shaky voice.

“Yes, I agree, we need to tell Dumbledore everything. We’re here because of Voldemort. When he finds out we’re here, he’ll start destroying everyone connected to us just to make sure that he’s not defeated again. Things are probably going to be worse than before. But not if we can help it.”

Hermione’s face was still a ghastly shade of pale, but she looked at them with eyes shining with such fierce determination that Harry was taken aback.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed firmly. “We’re not letting things go to shit because of one stubborn bastard that refuses to die.”

He looked at Harry, also with a determined look, and nodded.

“All right,” Harry said. “We’ll ask to see Dumbledore first thing tomorrow.”
And so, the basis of the trio’s arrival in the past is set.

I know this chapter was rather heavy on the dialogue, but I hope you’ll bear with me. The next few chapters will move a bit slowly because I want to set things up properly.

Non-canonical elements worthy of mention:

The Healer’s Handbook – created and added in as a supporting detail.

The Magical Paradox Principle – this is one of the answers I came up with to the question of what challenges the trio would face in their accidental time travelling.

~Thank you to those who left kudos after I posted the prologue. I really appreciate it :)
They sat around in a sort of semi-circle in comfortable plush armchairs conjured by Professor Dumbledore.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat in front of the headmaster, with Harry in the middle.

They had not been allowed to leave the Hospital Wing to meet with him in his office as Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping them in the ward for at least another day and a half. She had reminded them in quite a severe tone that they had each been in a comatose state for at least two days. Besides, they still had a whole schedule of health-rejuvenating potions to go through.

This information had not been accepted well at all by Harry and Ron, who were impatient to get started on their goal of taking down Voldemort before he took care of them. Hermione, however, had taken the matron’s side and reminded them that their health was indeed very much important for the future, which slightly mollified them. Satisfied with their grudging compliance, the matron called the headmaster for them to meet them in the ward after breakfast.

Now, the three former students faced their first challenge: convincing the Dumbledore of 1977 of the truth of their identities and their experiences in the future.

Professor Dumbledore regarded them with curious blue eyes and a cheerful smile.

“I am glad to hear that the three of you have almost made a complete recovery from whatever ordeal you have been through,” he said. “I can only be grateful that you all wished to speak with me so soon. Your health, after all, should come first.”

“With all due respect, Professor, we’ve already kept you waiting for four days,” Hermione said somewhat timidly. “I imagine that you must be very curious indeed about who we are and how we came to be here.”

“Yes, incredibly so. My ears are open to anything you wish to confide in me.”

His eyes twinkled.

“Am I right in my assumption that what you will tell me shortly is for my ears and mine alone?” He looked at Harry.

“Yes, Professor, for the moment. After we tell you what we need to say, we leave it at your discretion to do what you will with the information, according to your own convictions. And actually, we were hoping that you could advise us with how to proceed with the information we tell you,” Harry replied.

She knew they were taking a risk with offering Dumbledore so much trust before they had even told him anything. But they needed him to trust them. If anyone could anticipate or attempt to manipulate Voldemort’s movements, it was him—the one who had kept an eye on Voldemort from the beginning and the one that Voldemort had always feared.

Dumbledore looked at her with his piercing eyes, making her feel as if he could see into her thoughts. Was he using Legilimency? Well, all the better. She welcomed it to further persuade him of
their trustworthiness.

“You are placing great confidence in me when I do not know who you are,” he told her gravely.

“Yes, Professor. But this is the only way to do it,” she replied.

He contemplated her solemnly for a moment then nodded.

“Then, please,” he said cordially.

They introduced themselves to him by their real, full names before diving into the matter of their arrival on Hogwarts grounds.

Harry told him everything.

About the prophecy, her parents, Sirius, Pettigrew, Snape, Voldemort’s first defeat and her role in it, the dangers she and her friends went through during their time at Hogwarts, the connection between her wand and Voldemort’s, the horcruxes, the cave and the fake locket, his own death (which made her particularly uncomfortable to tell him when he was so obviously alive and kicking in this time), his will, Voldemort’s control over the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts, the hunt for the horcruxes, the role of the Elder Wand and the other Hallows, their infiltration into Hogwarts, the destruction of the horcruxes including herself, the final battle, Voldemort’s final defeat, the way in which they had been transported back to 1977, their interpretation of the situation, and finally, their objective to defeat Voldemort again with hopefully, more help this time.

Dumbledore remained silent and attentive throughout her explanation which included occasional interjections or supplementary information from Hermione and Ron. He did not scoff, nor laugh, nor frown. His expression was consistently serious and solemn with the occasional furrowing of his eyebrows particularly when Harry explained about the prophecy, the horcruxes, and the Deathly Hallows. He did not speak immediately after she finished talking, but stood up from his armchair and began pacing around the room.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron watched him for a moment before sharing glances full of trepidation and resignation. They had done all they could do for the time being.

They waited.

After a while, the headmaster finally settled back into his seat. They nervously anticipated his reaction.

“Please pardon my delayed response,” he apologized to them. “The information you have given me is, I hope, understandably quite shocking to me. And I must admit that there are not many things in life that surprise me as I have recently been surprised today.” He gave them a self-deprecating smile.

“I wonder, my dear Miss Potter, if I could take a look at your wand. I would like to confirm for myself that it is indeed Fawkes’s tail feather that resides as its core,” he addressed Harry. His blue eyes were bright.

“Of course, sir.”

She took out her wand and offered it to him. He was taking it from her when he paused. His eyes were fixed on the faded but still-distinguishable scars on Harry’s right hand.

*I must not tell lies.*
“Forgive me, my dear,” he said quietly, “But may I ask how you got these scars?”

And so, Harry told him about how Dolores Umbridge had come to be at Hogwarts in her fifth year and the things the woman had done to his students. Dumbledore’s face was grave and his eyes sorrowful when she finished.

“I am sorry that such things occurred at Hogwarts under my watch.”

“It’s all right, Professor. I don’t think anyone, even the Minister for Magic, expected that she would be so horrible,” Harry reassured him.

Dumbledore looked as if he wanted to say something more, but instead nodded and took her wand from her gently. The three of them watched as he took out his own wand and murmured some spells over Harry’s. He regarded her wand unblinkingly for a few minutes, turning it over in his fingers, before handing it back to her.

“Fascinating,” he beamed. “Absolutely fascinating.”

Hope fluttered in Harry’s chest.

“Sir,” Hermione began tentatively, “We’d like to know…do you believe us?”

“I do,” Professor Dumbledore replied calmly and firmly, eliciting three sighs of relief.

“Oh thank Merlin,” Ron breathed. “You don’t know how much it means to us, Professor, we were so bloody worried—oh, er, sorry about the language, sir,” he caught himself sheepishly.

Dumbledore smiled. “Not at all, Mr. Weasley. I can completely understand and sympathize. It is not every day that one finds oneself decades away from their own time and with circumstances as serious as yours…”

He looked at each of them in turn, before returning his gaze to Harry.

“Harry,” he said solemnly, “I cannot begin to imagine the troubles you have endured, some, or rather, much, of which, I understand, I placed on you. If it means anything, I am—”

“You don’t have to be sorry, Professor,” Harry interrupted him. Yes, she had cursed him for his secrets and his lies, but in the end, she had accepted them. It was because of him that she was able to accomplish so much against Voldemort, after all.

“You had as much to do with defeating Voldemort as me and my friends here did.”

“Oh Harry,” she heard Hermione say in a tearful voice.

Dumbledore looked at Harry with something that looked like gratitude in his sorrowful eyes.

“My dear girl,” he murmured, “I am greatly humbled.”

Harry felt embarrassed all of a sudden. She decided to change the topic.

“Er, sir, are you really convinced that we’re telling the truth? I know it’s a lot to take in and might even seem quite a bit mad…” she trailed off nervously.

“Yes, you three have my full confidence,” he reaffirmed. “As to what was particularly persuasive, well, other than certain confidential information that you should not know but do, was your scar.”
“My scar, sir?”

“Indeed. I must apologize again for my indiscretion, but it was necessary, you see, for security’s sake, that I made as close to absolutely sure that you three would not be a threat to Hogwarts when you appeared so mysteriously four days ago. I cast spells to examine the state of your bodies, fearing the presence of dark magic, and it was through them that I found a presence of a particular dark wizard centered around the scar hidden behind your hair on your forehead. Oh, nothing to worry about, my dear, it was not the presence of a part of a soul, but rather, the last whispering shadow of one. I found it most intriguing all this time. And now that you have explained about the horcruxes, I must admit that such a vile method of prolonging one’s life is not unlike Tom, in his never-ending search for power and greatness. Although he may be arrogant and prideful, he is not above resorting to such crude means,” he said. He sighed deeply, his eyes distant.

Then he blinked and turned to Harry again with piercing eyes.

“You mentioned that there is a horcrux in the castle at this very moment, correct?”

“Yes, sir. And sir, I was wondering, do you have any idea of when Voldemort might find out about me, about us?” Harry, Ron, and Hermione awaited Dumbledore’s response with bated breath.

“No, I do not,” he admitted seriously. “I agree with your belief that Voldemort sent you back to this time with your memory intact for a reason. It is a shame that we cannot find out the manner of spell-work that was cast over the Elder Wand.” He took out the very wand, currently and rightfully his, from his robes, and considered it with a slight frown.

“If I were to assume, knowing his style, he would have calculated the significance of certain magical bonds and principles, such as the Magical Paradox Principle, as you suggested, and your scar—the physical evidence of the bond between you two. Despite the fact that you no longer host his soul, Harry, the magic evident from such a curse, even if now faded, tends to keep a singular trace, if you will. And the weight of the prophecy cannot be denied. Once a prophecy is delivered, so it will come to be fulfilled through the individuals it concerns, if and when the appropriate conditions exist. Such is its power, which is beyond the typical workings of magic. Voldemort may not have known of its full and exact contents, but he believed in the significance of the scar he gave you, which was brought about through the prophecy. I believe, as you do, that he will know, but not when and to what extent. Hopefully, it will be later than sooner.”

“Then, because we don’t know when he’ll remember, wouldn’t it be best if we destroyed the diadem as soon as possible, so that we’ll have an early start on him?” Harry asked.

There was a pause as Dumbledore considered her suggestion with a thoughtful expression. “Magic is a curious thing,” he began reflectively, “We wizards and witches can control and understand only so much of it, although we may prefer to believe otherwise. But I mean to say that there might be the possibility that destroying the diadem may accelerate the restoration of Lord Voldemort’s memories of the future instead of giving us an advantage.”

“Like a trigger, sir?” Hermione asked, her face lit with understanding.

“Precisely.”

“I do not mean to discourage your efforts,” he said, turning to Harry again, “But I would like to be cautious, because of the connection between you and Lord Voldemort.”

A memory flashed through Harry’s mind—Dumbledore avoiding her eyes in his office.
“I understand, sir,” Harry replied. But she did not dismiss her urgency regarding the horcrux.

*If magic can be random, she thought, who really knows when he’ll remember?*

“And now,” he continued, his tone becoming businesslike, “We must discuss the matter of your accommodations here.”

Harry blinked and looked at her friends, who were also at a loss for words. They hadn’t considered where they would be staying or how they would live in this time yet. But it was indeed a problem. How were they going to provide for themselves? They had absolutely no monetary resources whatsoever. Their Gringotts vaults didn’t exist yet.

Professor Dumbledore regarded them with an understanding expression.

“I wonder, Miss Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley, if I could interest you in temporary lodgings within Hogwarts for the time being? Until the school year begins, that is. Then you may rejoin your former house if the Sorting Hat decides you fit for it again.”

They stared at him.

“Sir? Are you suggesting that we become students again?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Yes, I think it is best that you do. Please be reassured that I do not offer this suggestion as a means to keep a closer eye on you based on suspicion. I offer it in the belief that Hogwarts is the safest place from Lord Voldemort. Here, I may be able to protect you better than elsewhere from his designs. And perhaps the guise of a Hogwarts student may serve to deter possible outside suspicions as well.”

He paused briefly, his eyes twinkling. “I understand that you all have missed out on your seventh year. I hope that you do not find it too much of a bother finishing up your schooling?”

“Oh,” Hermione gasped, making Harry and Ron glance at her. Her eyes seemed to be sparkling.

“But sir,” Harry addressed him, “Didn’t you say that we would have to be sorted again? Er, wouldn’t it be strange for us to be sorted as seventh-years?”

“No, not in our current circumstances, no,” he replied. “You see, ever since two years ago, since the Death Eaters’ attacks proliferated considerably, many previously home-schooled or otherwise-educated witches and wizards all over the country have come to Hogwarts, seeking refuge. To help them continue with their education, we accepted them as our own students and had them sorted accordingly. This year should be no different. Your sorting will not be as bizarrely regarded as you think.”

“Well, at least we won’t be alone, standing up there all awkward-like,” Ron said to Harry, shrugging, while Hermione nodded vigorously, looking more excited by the second.

“Sir, there is another matter concerning our education that I was wondering about,” Hermione spoke quickly. “You see, sir, since we arrived here so suddenly, we haven’t got any funds on us to get any supplies for school…” she paused, her cheeks turning pink. “I was wondering, sir, if there are any scholarships to help pay for our expenses.”

She seemed embarrassed, but looked at the headmaster determinedly. Harry was impressed. She herself had been wondering how to bring up the money problem.
“Ah yes, you make an excellent point, Miss Granger,” Professor Dumbledore said graciously, making Hermione’s face turn a darker shade of pink. He tapped his fingers together, thinking.

“Hm. Yes, I shall make an exception for this case,” he murmured to himself.

He faced them again. “I will take direct responsibility for your well-being and subsistence,” he told them. “I will have three separate vaults made for your personal use at Gringotts. Sufficient funds will be deposited into them for, er, your activities.” His eyes twinkled.

“The reason that I will not offer you scholarships is because I do not think that you would appreciate regulatory supervision over your spending, particularly in regards to whatever you need to get done. However, if I give you the funds as a personal gift, it is out of anyone’s business except yours, and technically mine, but I believe that you will not take advantage of an old man’s personal savings,” he added mildly.

“And now,” he cut across them cheerfully, as they made the beginning sounds of protest over his over-generosity, “We must talk about your identities here.”

They fell silent and gave him their full attention.

“I am sure that you are aware, Miss Potter, that your parents, James Potter and Lily Evans, will be starting their seventh year with you?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell them about who I am. Even though I’m stuck here in this time.”

“Yes, I agree. I think it would be best to keep it a secret for as long as possible until it must be uncovered, as all truth ultimately is.” He gave them a smile which was full of a familiar weariness.

It was the smile of someone who had lived and experienced a life of constant secrecy (and lies), Harry realized. She felt a stirring of sympathy and pity for him. He had suffered much in his long life as well…

“I think your original first name should serve you fine. But perhaps a different surname?”

“How about Granger?” Hermione suggested. “I think my name should be fine as it is since I’m Muggle-born. We can be sisters or adopted sisters, at least.” She looked at Dumbledore to see what he thought.

“Hermione and Harriet Granger,” he agreed. He turned to Ron. “The Weasley name is as well-known as it is well-spread. But if my memory serves me correctly, there is no Weasley at this time in Hogwarts. I believe it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to say that you are one of the many extended members of your family, if you would prefer to keep your original name.”

“I was thinking the same thing, sir,” Ron said, looking relieved.

“Very good. I shall inform Professor McGonagall to add the names, Harriet Granger, Hermione Granger, and Ronald Weasley to the sorting list. And I shall send an owl to Gringotts for your vaults to be made and the funds to be transferred as soon as possible.”

He regarded them kindly. “My generosity, if anything, is my debt and my meagre compensation to you, for all that you have accomplished and suffered in the future for the good of the Wizarding World.”

His gaze landed on Harry last. Harry met his eyes solemnly while Ron and Hermione stammered.
“And now, I shall finally leave you to your much-deserved rest,” he said, getting up from his seat. They stood up with him.

“We shall have time to talk about the finer details of your circumstances at another time and through the school year. Your Gringotts vaults should be made available to you by the time you are allowed to leave the Hospital Wing and I will have your keys delivered to you. I bid you three a good rest of the day and wish you a speedy return to your full health.”

The chairs disappeared after he closed the door behind him and just as Madam Pomfrey barged in from the very same door.

“I told him an hour!” she barked at them. “It’s been three! Back to your beds, all of you! No complaints!” she snapped at Ron, who had opened his mouth to protest. He shut his mouth and moved towards his bed, watching her warily.

She had each of them drink another large dose of awful-tasting potion before she gave them their lunch. They met at Ron’s bed again that night, after Madam Pomfrey had retired to her quarters to review the events of the day. Ron and Hermione marveled at Dumbledore’s sagacity and generosity while Harry reflected on the headmaster’s advice.

Before she drifted off to sleep in her bed, Harry felt a brief flare of giddiness at the prospect of seeing her parents, Sirius, and Remus as they had been when they were her age. Despite her underlying dread of impending danger in the form of Voldemort, she found herself looking forward to life in 1977.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I portrayed Dumbledore all right. The man was kind even with all of his devastating secrets.

Hermione offering her surname to Harry seemed like the most practical thing to do. It was inspired by TaraSoleil's Time Turned Back, which was in turn inspired by SStar Luna's Turn Back Time. Both works are brilliant and I recommend that you check them out if you've got time :)

Next chapter will have them getting ready for the first of September.

Thank you so much for the kudos and bookmarks. They make my day. You are all awesome. :(
There were good news and bad news the next day.

The good news was, their vaults were ready. They received their keys from Professor Dumbledore that morning and they could finally leave the Hospital Wing.

The bad news was, they had to come back to the ward, not only because they still had their few remaining evening potions to take, but the infirmary also happened to be their temporary lodgings until the first of September. They didn’t complain, however (not outwardly, at least). They would take what they could get.

They met with Professor McGonagall in her office after lunch to use her fireplace to get to Diagon Alley for their school supplies. But first, they had to confer with her about the courses they were going to take for their N.E.W.T.s.

Harry looked around the office with a small smile on her face as they sat down before their Head of House. It seemed that not much of the office would change by their time in the future. The few differences included the numerous books on the professor’s bookshelf which looked newer, the lack of items on the mantelpiece, and the teapot and the teacups on the small side-table by the desk that were of a different design than the ones in the future. She had to suppress a grin when she noticed a tin of ginger newts on the desk.

“Miss Granger, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley, is it?” Professor McGonagall said crisply as she sat down at her desk with her clasped hands in front of her.

“Before you make your way to Diagon Alley, we must first decide your schedules.”

She waved her wand and three small pieces of parchment appeared with three already-inked quills, which wrote their names on the parchment.

“Professor Dumbledore has told me about your story. You three Apparated to Hogwarts under extreme duress. It would explain how you came to be here, unusually as it may have occurred. Doubtless, the determination to escape your attackers fueled the sort of powerful magic that broke through the spell barriers put on Hogwarts grounds to prevent Apparition.”

She gave them a very significant look, which they understood. This was the story that they must go by if anyone asked about their being at Hogwarts.

“I must let you know that it is normally impossible to Apparate to or in Hogwarts. I would not advise attempting it again.” She gave them a stern look. Harry, Ron, and Hermione nodded vigorously.

“I also understand that you were all homeschooled. Perhaps you may already know about the courses taught at Hogwarts or perhaps you do not. I shall introduce them to you…”

For the next hour, they discussed with McGonagall the classes they might be able to take. Their professor stressed the importance and difficulty of the classes, as they were all N.E.W.T.-level and drilled them closely about their personal opinions on their abilities in each subject and even had Harry take out her wand to demonstrate her skills in Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts.
It had been a while since Harry had been subjected to that kind of pressure, especially under McGonagall and Hermione’s critical eyes. She thought she’d done decently, judging from the professor’s interested “Hm” that followed the abrupt demonstration.

“Not bad, Miss Granger. You’ll do just fine in N.E.W.T.-level Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I’ll schedule those in for you.”

One of the levitating quills scratched quickly on its parchment.

“How do you feel about your abilities for Potions and Herbology?”

“I feel all right about Herbology, but I’m not sure about Potions,” Harry replied, thinking back to her dependence on the Half-Blood Prince, or really, Snape, in sixth year.

“She’ll do fine in Potions,” Hermione interjected, making Harry turn to her in surprise.

*I’ll help you*, Hermione mouthed to her. Harry repressed a sigh. She would never hear the end of it if she didn’t comply.

“Er, I suppose add Potions in as well, Professor.”

The quill scratched on the parchment accordingly.

Harry lent her wand to Hermione, then Ron, so they could show their skills to Professor McGonagall as well. They ended up with the same schedule, except for Hermione’s extra classes for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Professor McGonagall looked at Hermione sharply.

“Miss Granger, are you sure about your schedule? I remind you once again that N.E.W.T.-level classes are not to be taken lightly.”

“I’m sure, Professor,” Hermione replied confidently, looking directly into her eyes.

“Hm.”

There was the slightest hint of a smile on McGonagall’s face as she handed them their complete schedules. She waved her wand and another piece of parchment appeared before each of the three students.

“Your complete school list,” she explained. She gestured to the fireplace. “Floo powder is on the mantelpiece. Remember to be back by five,” she dismissed them.

“Professor,” Harry called her before they went into the fireplace. Professor McGonagall looked at her with her eyebrows raised.

“If I may ask, how much did Professor Dumbledore tell you about us?”

The deputy headmistress’s eyes narrowed slightly as she considered her question.

“Only that you three are here in very unusual circumstances and that you are to be trusted. I did not ask him to elaborate,” she said, alluding to her confidence in Dumbledore’s integrity.

Harry nodded and stepped into the fireplace.

They came out through the Leaky Cauldron and set off immediately for Gringotts.
“Wicked,” Ron said excitedly as they rode the cart to their vaults. “First time I got a vault of my own. Hagrid was right. Great man, Dumbledore.”

“Oh!” Hermione gasped. “Hagrid! He’s still the gamekeeper, isn’t he? Oh, but, he doesn’t know us yet,” she said sadly. Then she frowned. “Try not to spend too much at one time, Ronald. We mustn’t abuse Professor Dumbledore’s generosity.”

“I know that! What are you, my mother? Honestly,” Ron said, shaking his head and exchanging a look with Harry.

“Yeah, shame about Hagrid,” Harry replied to Hermione. “But maybe we could visit him sometime. Introduce ourselves to him again.”

“Yes, that would be nice,” Hermione said happily.

Ron’s jaw dropped when he opened his vault.

“Merlin’s beard,” he breathed, when he took in the modest fortune in front of him. He seemed dazed as they continued on to Harry and Hermione’s vaults, where the same amount had also been deposited.

They moved onto Flourish and Blotts, where they bought their books, which seemed bulkier than the ones they had in sixth year.

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it?” Hermione said while Harry and Ron bemoaned the piles of reading they would most likely have to do. “We’ll be taking our N.E.W.T.s,” she said in a too-bright tone, making them roll their eyes.

Next was the apothecary, then Madam Malkin’s, and Ollivander’s for Ron and Hermione. Harry decided to head on over to Eeylops Owl Emporium while her friends tried out wands.

She thought briefly and sadly of Hedwig as she entered the shop. No owl could ever replace her Hedwig. But owls made practical pets and it would be nice having one of her own again. There were no snowy owls this time. Not that she would have wanted another one again. She decided on a male, short-eared owl with large, alert eyes that seemed to scrutinize her every movement. She couldn’t help it. His attentiveness reminded him of her late owl.

Hermione and Ron exited Ollivander’s just as she approached the shop with her new owl’s cage in her hand.

“Ooh, Harry, you got a new owl!” Hermione greeted her excitedly. “He’s lovely! Have you named him yet?”

“Egmond. Did you get a wand?”

“Yes! And guess what, Harry? It’s my wand! The same one! Vine and dragon heartstring, ten and three-quarter inches. Can you believe it? If you think about it in terms of the future, it waited for me for another fourteen years!” Hermione was completely aglow with happiness and wonder.

“That’s really great, Hermione,” Harry said, beaming at her. She turned to Ron.

“What about you?”

“Alder and unicorn hair, thirteen and a half inches. Think that makes it my fourth now,” Ron said, grinning. “Works as well for me as my old wand that I got before third year.”
They spent the rest of the day walking around, gazing almost greedily at the shops and vendors around them. The last time they had been here, it had been deserted and most of the shops had been boarded up or destroyed.

In 1977, Diagon Alley was not quite up to its usual bright cheer due to the heavy atmosphere generated by Voldemort and his Death Eaters, but no shops were boarded up this time. Although there was an air of caution present, it seemed that Diagon Alley was yet untouched by traumatic events. The three of them looked wistfully at the store that, in the future, was Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Harry and Ron dragged Hermione to Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they looked at the best broom of the time, the Nimbus 1001. She looked at the price tag mournfully with Ron—they could not afford it.

And as it usually was the case in the week before a new term began, Diagon Alley was teeming with people of all ages. Harry wondered with a spark of nervous excitement if she would catch a glimpse of either one of her parents, Sirius, or Lupin.

*I need to stop that,* she reprimanded herself. *In this time,* they’re not my parents. They’re just James and Lily, fellow Hogwarts students. And Sirius isn’t my godfather. Lupin is not my former professor. Pettigrew…hasn’t betrayed anyone yet.

Her face twisted into a scowl. Hermione noticed.

“Harry?” she questioned.

“Oh, it’s nothing, just thinking of…familiar faces we might come across.”

Understanding filled Hermione’s face and she smiled sympathetically.

“It’ll be all right, Harry. I know a part of you is eager to see them as much as you’re anxious. Ron and I will back you up, so no need to worry,” she said, putting a comforting arm around her.

“Huh?” Ron had been staring at Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour.

“Oh nothing.”

Harry let Hermione drag her to boutiques and various clothing shops as her friend insisted that they get new wardrobes, the main reason being that they needed to dress in the day’s fashion and not like time-travelers from the future. Ron, in the meantime, made his way to a joke shop which made Harry squirm with jealousy. He, unlike her, did not have to be stuck shopping for clothes, the style of which she had not particularly cared much about, but was forced to, by Hermione and Ginny, back in their own time.

“Harry!” She turned to look at Hermione, who looked annoyed.

“I’ve called your name three times already! Here.” Hermione shoved a pile of clothes into her arms, making her stagger back a little. “Go try those on and I want you to look at yourself seriously when you do, Harry. Honestly, you’ve got a nicer figure than I do and it astounds me that you don’t seem to care at all!”

Harry spluttered in reply as Hermione pulled her along to the dressing room impatiently. She stared as her friend entered with her and closed the curtain behind her. Hermione plopped down on the bench inside the room.

“Er, Hermione?”
“I’m watching you try these on,” Hermione said, raising her eyebrows. “I’ve decided that I can’t trust you with your lack of fashion sense.”

Harry glared at her, but Hermione thrust the first item, a dress, of all things, at her.

“Go on, now,” she said coolly. “Try it. And I assure you, I’m not leaving until you try on every single thing in here.” Then she narrowed her eyes. “Don’t make me force you, Harry,” she said threateningly, gesturing towards the wand in her pocket.

“Oh all right,” Harry snapped, snatching the dress from her.

A satisfied smile spread on Hermione’s face.

The next few days before the start of term passed quickly.

They hardly saw Professor Dumbledore, busy as he was with his own errands and meetings with the Ministry and, Harry suspected, the first Order of the Phoenix. She would bring up the subject the next time they met.

Hermione managed to get permission from Professor McGonagall to venture into downtown Muggle London to go shopping for more clothes. The condition was that Professor Burbage, who had arrived early to the castle for the Welcoming Feast, would go as a chaperone. Harry, of course, was forced to go along. Ron was persuaded to join and had Muggle money explained to him by both Hermione and Professor Burbage, who taught Muggle Studies.

It turned out that Harry was the only unenthusiastic one in the group as they maneuvered through the streets stopping by at, what felt to Harry, every single clothing store they came across. Professor Burbage and Hermione talked animatedly about current Muggle fashion trends and Ron gazed at everything with fascination.

“Blimey, Muggles sure do like their brightly colored trousers, don’t they?” he said while looking at several racks of high-waisted flare pants in the men’s section.

Harry was dragged to the cosmetics department and sat awkwardly on one of the stools at the counter while Hermione discussed her color palette with a saleswoman. Harry felt as if she was under a microscope as they scrutinized her face the whole time. She left that store with a full set of makeup that she had been coerced to buy.

She couldn’t help feeling that the money she spent that day would have been better put to use in saving up to get a new broomstick. Thoughts of Quidditch and the possibility of seeing her father fly for the first time helped her get through the day.

They found out several more things while they waited for the first of September to arrive. Some fortunate, some unfortunate.

The unfortunate included their discovery that Harry no longer had the Invisibility Cloak, which she knew had still been in her robes when they had been transported to the current time. The Marauder’s Map was no longer in her possession, either. Both items had been subject to the Magical Paradox Principle. The fortunate, on the other hand, included all the things inside Hermione’s beaded bag, which had made it to the past with her. They still had the books on dark magic and horcruxes that Hermione had obtained from Dumbledore’s office with a Summoning Charm.
They weren’t completely hopeless, was Harry’s relieved thought.

The day before their Sorting, they walked around the castle, reminiscing and reliving their memories of the place. Nothing about the castle seemed to be different except for the absence of students. It was the timelessness of Hogwarts that made Harry especially fond of the school as it welcomed one back with its remarkable familiarity. Hogwarts really was like home.

Had Riddle thought such things too?

When they reached the seventh-floor corridor, Harry’s thoughts went to the diadem again. She stopped as they were passing the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls the ballet and looked across to the spot where the door to the Room would normally appear.

“Harry?” Ron questioned, stopping as well. He and Hermione looked at her inquiringly.

“The diadem. It should be here.”

“Yes, Harry, but Dumbledore said we shouldn’t touch it until we know more about You-Know-Who’s current status,” Hermione said.

“No, not exactly. He just said we shouldn’t destroy it. We could find it again and keep it safe by hiding it somewhere Voldemort can’t get to easily.”

“But—”

“I don’t think the horcrux is going to freak out from us just touching it. I doubt that Voldemort even felt the pieces of his soul being destroyed last time. He only found out because of Gringotts. But that’s not the point I’m trying to make—Dumbledore himself doesn’t know what’s really going to trigger his memory. He could remember today or tomorrow, who knows? I just want to make sure that he’s not going to find it where he expects it to be, by himself or through his followers.”

“How would his followers get into Hogwarts?” Ron asked.

Harry sighed. “Death Eaters who are students. Remember Malfoy? And Regulus Black became one at sixteen.”

“Oh, right, good point.”

“Hm…” Hermione said pensively, “Then where would we hide it? In the Room itself with very specific conditions? That’s the safest place I can think of, other than Dumbledore’s office, which I think is a bit obvious for You-Know-Who.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about the Room. I know we haven’t really made a plan for what we’re going to do here, but I reckon we’re going to want to train in spells. In that case, we’d need the Room anyway. So how about a room that only we and people we trust can access, where we can both train in and hide things?” Harry suggested to them.

Ron and Hermione looked at one another for a brief moment. Ron nodded.

“You always knew him best, Harry,” he said.

“Yes, all right,” Hermione agreed. “Are we telling Dumbledore?”

“Eventually.”

Harry walked back and forth in front of the blank space of wall across from the tapestry.
I need the place where everything is hidden.

She looked up after walking in front of it the third time and saw that the door had appeared. They entered and found it practically the same as before. It did not seem to be as cramped and cluttered from all manner of things that people over the years at Hogwarts had needed to hide, but the difference was barely discernible. Harry utilized the best of her memory to lead Ron and Hermione to where the bust of the ugly warlock was. The labyrinth of disorganized organization made it difficult to judge where exactly she had turned or which direction she was going in.

“There!” Hermione cried, pointing to their left.

Sure enough, there was the same bust with the diadem on its old, musty wig. They ran towards it.

“Great,” Harry said, once they’d reached it. She gingerly took the horcrux from the wig and held it away from her with two fingers. “Let’s get outside and make a new room.”

Hermione was the one to call upon the room that they needed.

“We need a place in which to train in spells, hold discussions, and hide things we need to hide, that’s impossible to find for anyone affiliated with Voldemort or his Death Eaters, a place where only we and the people we trust are allowed.”

Hermione was so focused on summoning the room that Ron had to call her name and tell her a new door had appeared. They paused at the door for a moment with nervous anticipation. Harry turned the doorknob and entered, followed closely by her friends.

They were met with a large room with two distinct sections.

In the front, when one entered, was an oval shaped, modestly-sized, carpeted area with three armchairs and a sofa encircling a low table next to a fireplace in which a fire burned merrily. There was a tall bookcase by the mantle filled with various spell books and books about defense. Several candles lit the area dimly and bestowed an intimate air of exclusion which was further reinforced by its encasing walls that left a small entryway for the back of the room, which was larger.

Past this entryway were three steps that descended onto a spacious and open marble floor. There were several simulation dummies to practice spells on as well as a small stack of cushions off to the side, in case they practiced spells on one another. A large foe-glass leaned against the wall on the far side of the room with a table on which there were several sneakoscopes. It was like the D.A. classroom all over again.

“Amazing,” Hermione breathed.

“Yeah, it is,” Harry said, admiring the training area.

“Do you see a place to hide stuff, though?” Ron asked, looking around curiously.

A low, creaking sound from the sitting room answered him. They tensed and looked at one another. Hermione took out her wand.

“Homenum Revelio,” she whispered.

But there was nothing.

Ron led the way back to the sitting room. He held up a hand, telling them to wait, when they reached the stairs. He cautiously ascended the stairs and went through the entryway.
A pause. Then,

“Oh. Well, that’s convenient,” Harry and Hermione heard him mutter.

“It’s okay! Come up and see what the room did!”

They hastily entered the room to see that the bookcase by the fireplace had swung forward, revealing another space behind it. It was a little bigger than the cupboard under the stairs that Harry had inhabited for eleven years. Inside it was the same kind of multilayered trunk that Barty Crouch Jr. once had for hiding Mad-Eye in fourth year, two normal trunks, and a shelf that held several rings of keys.

Harry opened the multilayered trunk to its third depth and placed the diadem in it. She locked it with one of the keys from the shelf.

“Right, that’s done,” she said, standing back up.

The bookcase quietly swung back to its position after they exited it.

“I think I get more amazed every time we go back there,” Ron commented as they continued on to the other side of the corridor after leaving the Room of Requirement.

The first of September arrived, bringing with it a full set of nerves for Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“Do you think we ought to rehearse or something?” Hermione asked anxiously as she paced restlessly by the large beech tree by the edge of the lake.

“Rehearse for what? The Sorting? We already know how that goes,” Ron said, before biting into an apple. He and Harry sat underneath the tree.

“No, Ron, for what we’re going to say to others, like our housemates. How are we going to introduce ourselves? We need to put together a solid backstory.”

“Well,” Harry began, “We decided that I’m going to be your sister. Should we even go with adopted? I’ve lived with Muggles, so I can pretend to be one. Dumbledore already set up the reason for why we’re here. We were attacked by Death Eaters and in a fit of desperation, our magic reacted to bring us here.”

“Okay, but how do we know Ron? It’s not exactly normal that two Muggle-borns were friends with a pure-blood since they were little.”

“My mum was like that with Snape, though,” Harry pointed out. “He was a half-blood, but same difference.”

Hermione sighed. “Yes, but it is still rather unusual.”

“How ‘bout we put it like this,” Ron suggested, “I was being chased by Death Eaters at the same time and we happened to run into each other. We grabbed onto one another when we got cornered by them and attempted to Apparate in a fit of desperation to the one place that’s rumored to be safe from You-Know-Who. And when we got here, we hit it off.”

“By the way,” Ron continued, after chewing and swallowing the last bit of his apple, “How did two Muggle-born witches come to be homeschooled? Bit odd, don’t you think?”
“Not if mum and dad were both Muggle-born with magic,” Harry offered after a brief pause.

“Were? Are your parents dead? Oh, er, in this context, not like, you know,” Ron added hastily.

“Probably better if we say they are,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “That way, people won’t pry. We’ll say that they lived rather average and ordinary lives. No job in the Ministry. Just shopkeepers or something along those lines, I suppose.”

“Brilliant,” Harry said. “By the way, Ron, don’t Weasleys usually attend Hogwarts? How are you going to back up your story about being homeschooled?”

“Er… I’ll say that I’m from the weird branch of the family that doesn’t get mentioned much. My parents prefer to keep to themselves and don’t like socializing,” he supplied.

“Reckon that should be enough?” Harry asked them. Ron nodded and Hermione bit her lip.

“Oh yes, I suppose,” Hermione said, sighing.

“We’ll just add in some more details along the way if someone gets particularly curious,” Ron said, shrugging.

“But we’ll have to remember every single thing we say,” Hermione warned. “That’s how we ward off suspicion—by keeping track of every lie we tell.”

Dumbledore’s face flashed in Harry’s mind.

“Agreed,” Harry said, getting up and stretching. “But I’m a bit worried about how I’ll be around, you know, James, Lily, Sirius, Lupin,” she struggled a bit with her parents’ names—it was odd referring to one’s parents by their first names only.

“And Pettigrew and Snape,” she finished.

“Blimey, can you imagine a young Snape?” Ron asked, his expression that of mingled horror and fascination. “I mean, yeah, turns out he was a hero and everything, but I can’t really say I’m ecstatic at the idea of seeing his face again.”

“Just try to be normal, Harry,” Hermione advised.

“Normal?” Harry choked.

“I mean, just be yourself. It’d be nice getting to know them when they’re the same age as you, don’t you think? I know it’ll be difficult; I can’t imagine myself trying to befriend my seventeen-year-old parents and being smooth about it, but, we’ll be there with you, Harry,” Hermione said earnestly. “It’ll be odd for us too, knowing that they’re your parents, and seeing a young Sirius and Remus, and Pettigrew when he was still innocent…oh Merlin, Ron’s right, seeing Snape the same age as us is going to be awkward.”

“What if they don’t like me?” Harry asked quietly.

“Then we’re here for you, mate, no matter what happens,” Ron reassured her. “Hermione and I aren’t leaving you anytime soon, you know.” He grinned at her and Harry slowly gave a small smile of her own.

“Just, er, be there for me when I say something stupid, okay?”

“Always.”
Chapter End Notes

I tried to come up with an at least semi-interesting name for Harry’s new owl.

As for “the best broom of the time,” I figured the Nimbus 1001 would be an all right choice. According to Harry Potter Wiki, the Nimbus Racing Broom Company was established in 1967 and the first broom they came out with was the Nimbus 1000. There were at least three more broom models before the Nimbus 2000 came out and I thought it’d be reasonable to establish the 1001 model as being relevant to the 1970s, to provide for a reasonable gap between the subsequent models.

Next chapter will finally have the Sorting Ceremony and the introduction of some very familiar characters.

Thank you so much for the kudos and bookmarks! And feel free to let me know of your thoughts :)}
The three of them waited in Professor McGonagall’s office half an hour before the Hogwarts Express was due to arrive. They had already packed their trunks, which they had bought in Diagon Alley, and placed them in the entrance hallway, where they would be taken to their rooms after they were sorted.

They heard footsteps outside and turned to see Professor McGonagall open the door and enter.

“Ah, good, I see that you’re all dressed,” she remarked on seeing them in their school robes. She settled down at her desk and they sat down in their chairs as well.

“As you may know, the train is due to arrive in thirty minutes. I want you three to make your way to the Great Hall in about an hour. There should be a small chamber off to the side in the hallway near it. I want you to wait there while the first-years and other new students like yourselves arrive to join you. Then, I will take you all inside for the Sorting. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” they answered.

“In the meantime, you may wait here. Now please excuse me as I must take part in the preparations.”

She bustled out of the office.

An hour later found them fidgeting restlessly in the small chamber. All the students except those waiting to be sorted had already arrived and were seated in the Great Hall. They could hear talking and laughter from where they were.

“Dunno why I’m so nervous,” Ron muttered as he paced. They were still waiting for Professor McGonagall and the new students.

“I know what you mean,” Hermione said, smoothing down her robes for the hundredth time. “We’ve gone through all this before. There’s no reason that we shouldn’t be sorted into Gryffindor again.”

“I think it’s partly because we don’t know anyone here, except for some of the professors,” Harry said, also pacing. “It really is as if we’re new students. The only thing that hasn’t changed at all is the castle itself.”

The sound of approaching footsteps reached their ears. Harry and Ron stopped pacing and stood off to the side together with Hermione as Professor McGonagall entered the chamber, leading the first-years and some older students who made up the rear. Their faces were a mixture of excitement, nerves, and some fear. The three friends let the new arrivals filter in front of them so that they could see and hear Professor McGonagall as she explained about the four houses and the Sorting Ceremony, a speech they had heard before.

Then she was leading them out of the chamber and into the Great Hall in a straight line. The first-years were in front and the older students followed a couple paces behind as they would be sorted after them. The trio made up the rear. Harry felt Hermione squeeze her arm tightly to steady herself as they entered the Great Hall.

It was like a repeat of the first six years of their time at Hogwarts. There were the same floating
candles, the four house tables, the bewitched sky, and the professors at the head table: she recognized Flitwick, Sprout, Burbage, Vector, Sinistra, Slughorn, Hagrid (with a bit of a thrill) and of course, Dumbledore. They stopped with the professors’ table behind them.

Harry felt a sense of déjà vu as she watched Professor McGonagall place a stool with the Sorting Hat on top of it. She felt hundreds of eyes trained on them and tried not to glance over at the Gryffindor table, lest she meet eyes with certain individuals. Nevertheless, she found herself distracted as the hat began to sing. She turned her head to Hermione, who was behind her.

“Do you see them?” she whispered, barely moving her lips. Hermione shifted behind her as she craned her neck to look over at the Gryffindors.

“I think so, yes,” she whispered back. “I think I see your father. Your mother has red hair, right?”

Harry’s heart skipped a beat. “Yes.”

“Then I’m pretty sure I see your mother. That red hair is very noticeable.”

Ron muttered something from his spot behind Hermione.

“What?” Harry craned her neck towards him.

“He asked me if I see Snape,” Hermione clarified. “And er, yes, I think I do. Can’t really miss his hair either. Or his face.”

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table. Sure enough, there was Snape, looking a few years older than when she had seen him in the Pensieve in fifth year. He was hunched over slightly in his seat and his dark eyes were focused on the hat, like the rest of the hall. Two curtains of oily shoulder-length hair framed his face, which harbored his usual sour expression. Certain things really didn’t change as the years went by.

There was a stifled snort of laughter from Ron.

The hat stopped singing and the room fell into silence. Professor McGonagall began calling out the first-years’ names. Harry’s heart took on a rapid, erratic beat and Hermione gripped her arm tightly.

“Breathe,” she heard Hermione muttering to herself, followed by shuddering inhales and exhaleds.

“We’ll be fine, Hermione,” her voice came out steadier than she felt. “We’re definitely Gryffindors.”

The boy in front of her turned his head to her slightly.

There were cheers as the last first year was sorted into Hufflepuff.

“Now,” Professor McGonagall raised her voice above the noise. Everyone quieted down. “We will begin sorting our other new students to Hogwarts.” She turned to them. “I will call out your name and the year you are being sorted into. When you hear your name, come sit on the stool and place the hat on your head.”

Excited whispers and murmurs broke out as the smaller line of young witches and wizards who had either been homeschooled or had been taught at another school of magic in Britain moved forward. Harry made sure to keep her eyes solely in front of her. She took Hermione’s advice for herself.

Breathe.

She counted the people in front of her.
Seven.
Great.

Who knew how soon her name was going to be called?

“Clark, Nathan. Fifth year.”

The brown-haired boy in front of her gave a start and quickly made his way to the hat.

“RAVENCLAW!”

Cheers erupted from the Ravenclaws as Nathan made his way over to the house table.

“Edwards, Catherine. Third year,” was next and was sorted into Slytherin. Professor McGonagall continued after the cheers from the corresponding house faded away.

“Granger, Harriet. Seventh year.”

Harry ignored the loud whispers that broke out as she made her way to the stool.

“Seventh year? Blimey, that’s late,” she heard a boy mutter loudly as she sat down and placed the hat on her head.

Well, well, this is interesting, the hat murmured to her.

I’d like Gryffindor, thank you very much, she thought back to the hat, boldly and firmly.

The hat chuckled. Not quite how this works, my dear, but you have a point. Although, you do seem to have quite a diverse set of qualities…well, nevertheless, you better be

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“YEAH!” she heard Ron roar somewhere behind her.

She pulled off the hat from her head, grinning. How could she have doubted that she would be anything other than Gryffindor? She strode her way to her house table, filled with relief and pride. The Gryffindors cheered and applauded as she made her way down the table, where the upper years typically sat and found some empty spots on the bench near the end. She turned to look at her tablemates and immediately met the eyes of one James Potter, who sat diagonally from her.

She froze, her jubilant smile still stuck on her face.

Dad.

James grinned at her, his black hair unruly, his hazel eyes friendly and bright behind his glasses. He stuck out his hand to her.

“Harriet Granger, is it? I’m James Potter.”

Her head felt dizzy and light as she extended her own hand and shook hands with him. She struggled to come back to her senses.

“Nice to meet you,” she managed to get out, smiling a little too widely. “I go by Harry.”

“Well, Harry,” James said, sticking his chest out with a pompous air, “I happen to be Head Boy this
There was a snort from beside him. Harry’s eyes widened.

*Mum.*

Lily Evans sat across from her. She regarded her boyfriend with a thoroughly amused air. Harry stared at her, mesmerized, as she tucked a strand of her beautiful red hair behind an ear and turned to James.

“Trying to make the new female student swoon from your high academic status? I think you should try being a little less cheesy next time.” Lily turned her bright green eyes to Harry.

Eyes that were just like her own.

“Lily Evans,” she said, shaking Harry’s hand. “I’m Head Girl this year, so don’t hesitate to ask me any questions about Hogwarts,” she said warmly. “We should be in the same dorm, since we’re both seventh-years. I look forward to getting to know you.”

“Yes, same here,” Harry said, feeling breathless with wonder as she took in every single detail of Lily’s fair, slender face with vivacious almond-shaped eyes. Her mother was stunning, she thought. This was the woman who had sacrificed her life to shield her infant daughter from Voldemort. And now, she was going to be dormmates with her. With her own mother!

_No, just Lily now, _she corrected herself. _Get it together, Harry._

“By the way, don’t mind James,” Lily said, gesturing at a pouting James. “He tends to act stupidly from time to time. I wouldn’t listen to half the things he says, if I were you,” she added with a mischievous spark in her eyes.

There was a bark of laughter near her. Harry’s breath hitched.

“That’s because he’s lost half his brain trying to woo you for three years, Lily. Moony and I were completely astonished when he got the badge. I suppose Dumbledore found something irresistible about having a bit of a head case as Head Boy.”

James scowled at his best friend.

“Shut up, Padfoot.”

Sirius smirked and wiggled his eyebrows at him in reply before turning his eyes to Harry.

_Sirius._

Overwhelming happiness intermixed with disbelief and old grief rushed into her chest as she met his gaze. Just like she had seen in Snape’s memory, her young godfather was singularly attractive with smooth black hair that fell effortlessly to his shoulders and laughing grey eyes. He was here, _alive_, and so full of life that Harry’s heart hurt from the intense emotions welling up in her chest. She stifled the sob that threatened to rise in her throat.

It was so good to see him looking so well. This was a Sirius that had never been touched or damaged by Azkaban, and who was _happy._

_And who was free._
A radiant smile lit up her face as she extended her hand to him, reaching across the boy who sat between them.

“Harry Granger.”

A wide smile spread on Sirius’s youthful and handsome face as he took her hand. There was a spark of playful mischief in his eyes as he bent his head over her hand and kissed it.

“Sirius Black. Absolutely charmed,” he purred. He winked at her.

“Oh!” a voice squeaked behind her. Harry turned to see Hermione, whose face was pink and who was staring at her hand in Sirius’s.

“Hermione!” Harry exclaimed. Grinning, she pulled her friend into the seat beside her.

“Gryffindor too, eh?”

Hermione beamed and hugged her. “Yes! Now all we’ve got to do is wait for Ron.”

Her eyes widened when she saw James and Lily.

“Oh yeah, Hermione, let me introduce you. This is James Potter, Head Boy, and Lily Evans, Head Girl,” Harry gestured to them in turn. Hermione shook hands with them.

“Hermione Granger, pleased to meet you,” she told them warmly.

“Another Granger? Are you two related, then?” Sirius spoke up. He reached over to shake hands with Hermione.

“Sirius Black. Charmed,” he said, also winking at her. Hermione’s face turned bright pink.

“Yes, we are,” Harry answered his question. “I know we don’t look alike much, but we’re twins.”

“Oh, very cool,” Lily said, looking at them with bright interest. “I’ve got a sister too, and we don’t look alike much as well, but we’re not twins. I’m the younger one,” she told them. Harry almost snorted. She sure got that right. Petunia and Lily looked nothing like each other.

“Let me introduce you to the rest of my friends,” James said. “The dashing young man next to you that likes to make himself look like he’s above us is our Prefect, Remus Lupin.” He gestured at the boy that Harry had overlooked when she introduced herself to Sirius. Harry turned to the boy next to her and stared.

Lupin.

He looked so young.

His hair was light-brown with no trace of grey. There was already a hint of the premature lines that would take over his face as he got older, but overall, Remus Lupin looked like any other happy and healthy seventeen year old. His brown eyes crinkled as he smiled and offered his hand to her.

“Nice to meet you, Harry,” he said, shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you too, Remus.” Harry beamed at him. He looked so well and full of life too.

“And this roguish young man here is our marvelous friend, Peter Pettigrew,” James said, grinning, as he threw an arm around the small boy next to him. Harry tensed and Hermione turned her head while
shaking Remus’s hand to stare at the traitor.

Who was not yet a traitor, Harry had to remind herself. She forced a what-she-hoped-was-pleasant smile on her face as she reluctantly extended her hand to Peter. The chubby, mousy-haired boy with watery blue eyes shook her hand with a timid smile.

“Hullo, nice to meet you,” he said in a squeaky voice.

“Nice to meet you too, Peter,” she managed to say calmly while inwardly, she hissed. She turned her attention back to the Sorting.

There were only two people left. Ron and a tall girl with long blonde hair.

“Templeton, Natalie. Fifth year.”

The blonde girl walked up to the stool and put on the hat.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry cheered with the rest of the Gryffindors as Natalie made her way to their table.

“It’s his turn! Finally!” Hermione murmured to her excitedly, gripping her wrist this time.

“Weasley, Ronald. Seventh year.”

Sirius snorted. “A Weasley, eh? Well we know how that’s going to turn out.”

Harry shot him a quick smile, which he returned with one of his own. She watched as Ron put on the hat, which did not hesitate to say:

“GRYFFINDOR!”

She and Hermione cheered and whistled loudly as Ron made his way to them with an exuberant grin.

“Fancy that, eh?” he said as he slapped hands with Harry.

“Ron, you made it! We all got in!” Hermione squealed as she hugged him.

“Always the tone of surprise,” he teased her, winking at Harry, who grinned.

“So you all know each other?” Lily asked as she watched their reunion.

“Yes, let me introduce you…”

Ron’s reactions to her parents and the Marauders were similar to Hermione’s. His smile slipped slightly when he shook Peter’s hand.

The Sorting having ended, Professor Dumbledore stood up from his seat and said the customary words of welcome. His eyes roved over the students and landed last on Harry and her friends. He gave them an almost imperceptible wink.

Harry had not realized how much she had missed the food until she dug into the feast that appeared in front of them. She heard Hermione admonishing Ron to slow down before he choked.

“So, where are the three of you from?” Lily asked them as they ate. Harry and Hermione shared a
“Hermione and I are from Surrey.” Harry improvised. “Born from a Muggle-born witch and wizard. We were homeschooled until, er—”

“Until things changed,” Hermione backed her up. “We figured Hogwarts was the safest place around during these times.”

“Yes, things certainly have taken the turn for the worse since this year started,” James said grimly. “We understand why Hogwarts has been getting more students every year. Being under Dumbledore’s protection seems like a good idea when You-Know-Who’s been after everything and everyone more than usual.” He let out a heavy sigh.

“Your parents all right by themselves?” Remus asked, concern lacing his voice. Harry and Hermione paused.

“They’re dead,” Harry replied quietly. “Death Eaters got to them. That’s why we’re here. They were chasing us when we tried to Apparate to the one safe place we knew. I think our desperation helped us because apparently, you can’t Apparate onto Hogwarts grounds.” It was easy to lie about supposed tragedy and danger. She’d had a lifetime’s worth of it and more. Hermione nodded to confirm her words.

Lily, James, and the other Marauders stared at them.

“I’m very sorry,” Remus said, looking contrite.

“It’s all right. We’re not the only ones it’s happened to. Being attacked and chased by Death Eaters, that is,” Harry reassured him. A hand touched hers and she looked up to see Lily, who had a soft expression on her face.

“I’m very sorry about your parents. If you ever need anything, if you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here,” her young mother told her gently, also nodding to Hermione. “And as long as you’re here, under Dumbledore’s protection, you’ll be safe from You-Know-Who. We’ll,” she gestured at herself and the Marauders, “help you feel safe here.”

Harry’s throat was suddenly tight. Lily didn’t know the impact those words had on her. Her own mother was comforting her and making her feel as if she belonged there with them.

“Thank you,” she said with feeling, looking into the very same eyes that she had inherited. Lily smiled and gave her hand one last squeeze before drawing away.

“Well, gentlemen, as Marauders, our honor compels us to do everything in our power to make sure our new friends feel at home by experiencing everything that Hogwarts has to offer,” James said grandly, a roguish glint in his eyes.

“Couldn’t agree more, Prongs,” Sirius said, raising his goblet of pumpkin juice to him. “After all, who knows the castle better than us?” He and James exchanged a mutual look, which made Harry smile. It seemed that the Marauder’s Map was still in their possession.

Oh no.

The map.

One glance at it to see where she was and her game was up. At least Hermione and Ron’s names weren’t lies.
I knew it was gone, so why didn’t I think before? Harry cursed herself. Probably ‘cause I was too focused on Voldemort.

She struggled to push away the new problem for later. She couldn’t panic in front of them.

“Treacle tart, Harry?” Remus offered her a plateful of her favorite dessert.

“Thanks, Remus,” she said, taking the plate from him. She flashed him a bright smile.

His ears turned pink.

Sirius sniggered, making Remus turn and glare at him. Harry observed the exchange bemusedly before turning her attention to Ron, who was explaining his own background to Lily and James.

“I must say, that is unusual,” James commented on Ron’s homeschooled education. “Especially for a Weasley. But I suppose every family’s got its own quirky side.”

“Yeah, my family’s a bit bonkers, in my opinion,” Ron said as he dug into a baked alaska.

“Well, I think it’s nice to have some individuality, especially in a pure-blood family,” Lily said, making Sirius snort.

“Yes, Padfoot, like you. You could’ve turned out to be a slimy snake-lover like the rest of your family,” James teased him.

“Snakes aren’t the only things they love these days,” Sirius replied wryly.

Harry glanced at him, catching his meaning. The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black had been sympathetic to Voldemort’s cause during this time. Which also meant, Harry realized with a jolt, Regulus was set to become a Death Eater, if he wasn’t one already. Kreacher had said that Regulus had become a Death Eater at sixteen—this was Regulus’s sixth year.

Sirius looked pensive and a little gloomy.

I bet its difficult, Harry thought, regarding him sympathetically, when almost your whole family’s on the exact opposite side, fighting to destroy what you yourself hold dear. He’s alone, in that respect.

She was reminded of her godfather’s lonely suffering in Grimmauld Place, the house he loathed because it reminded him of his unhappy childhood, a miserable affair, as she herself knew. He had been stuck in the house that reminded him of everything he had wanted to escape, had escaped, but had been brought back to, as its prisoner once again.

His desperation to leave had led to his death.

Harry knew she had a part in his death, too. He had wanted to save her. She had been so damn stupid…but the joy on his face as he fought against the Death Eaters in the Death Chamber had showed her that he had long been at his breaking point. She still could not forgive Dumbledore’s decision to hold him at Grimmauld Place as she still could not forgive herself for endangering him.

She decided something there and then.

Sirius Black would not meet a demise like that again if she could help it. He would not be forced to suffer through the things he had suffered through by her time. His life would not be spent in bitter misery, but in hope and happiness. She would do her damnedest to take out Voldemort before he could lay a finger on Sirius.
Sirius glanced her way as these thoughts ran through her head. The moodiness vanished from his face and he smirked at her, raising an eyebrow. She quickly smiled back at him and turned away, a little shy.

Warmth blossomed in her chest. It was always nice to see him smile. He hadn’t done it nearly enough back in her time.

The Great Hall quieted as Professor Dumbledore stood up to make his speech.

“Before I let you go to your beds, there are a few things that I must say to you. First, as it always has been in previous years, the Forbidden Forest is, as its name implies, forbidden. I strongly advise you not to venture into its depths lest you find for yourself a most unfortunate death. Secondly, there will be new security measures in place. Due to the dire and tragic events that have taken place earlier and throughout this year, every excursion outside of Hogwarts will be supervised by Aurors from the Ministry of Magic. This includes the weekend visits to Hogsmeade and trips back home during the holidays. Please be assured that your safety and well-being are the school’s top priority and concern.”

He paused before continuing.

“I know that all of you have been affected, either directly or indirectly, by the state of our time. Family politics, for instance, may have influenced how you see the world right now. In a time when we must have unity, divisive forces would keep us apart and threaten the things we hold dear. What you believe does not matter so much as what you may do despite what you believe. In a time when we must trust one another, we look upon the other with suspicion. And for those of you who fear, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named will not be able to touch you whilst I am here, I promise you.”

The last part he said with solemn gravity.

There was a sharp intake of breath around the hall.

“And on that note, I bid you good night and pleasant dreams. Off to your beds you go!” he dismissed them cheerfully and with a gentle smile.

“I think this is the most serious I’ve seen Dumbledore,” James commented as they left the Great Hall minus Remus and Lily, who stayed behind to rally up the first-years to lead them to Gryffindor Tower.

“Yes, he was serious tonight,” Peter agreed, jogging a little to keep up with their strides.

“I thought I was Sirius?” Sirius joked as they climbed the marble staircase. Harry let out a small laugh and he winked at her.

“So, Harry,” Sirius drawled, ignoring James’s squawk of protest as he nudged him aside with his shoulder so that he could walk beside her. “How good are you at magic, being homeschooled and all?”

“I think I’m all right,” Harry replied, shrugging. “Not the best, but fairly decent, I’d say.”

“I’d be willing to help you one-on-one if you find yourself struggling with any of the material.” He brushed his arm against hers.

There was a squeak and Hermione suddenly grabbed onto Harry’s shoulder from her other side.

“Sorry,” her friend gasped, her face red with embarrassment, “Just tripped on my robes.”
Harry helped Hermione steady herself.

“You okay?” Ron asked Hermione, putting a hand on her back.

“Yes,” Hermione reassured him. She looked at Harry with wide eyes. Harry blinked back, puzzled, as they started walking again.

She turned back to Sirius. “Yeah, all right, I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks, Sirius” she said, smiling warmly.

“Not at all,” he said, his eyelids lowered as he gazed into her green eyes with his grey ones.

Distantly, she heard Ron cough.

“If you’re done seducing Harry, Padfoot, we’d really appreciate the password,” James’s amused voice filtered into her ears.

Harry broke away from Sirius’s gaze and blinked, realizing that they were in front of the Fat Lady’s portrait. She couldn’t help laughing when she understood what had happened. Sirius, of all people, had flirted with her.

“Do you do that with all the girls?” she asked him while laughter continued to bubble up through her chest. He opened his mouth to reply, but James answered for him.

“Yes, he does, actually.” He flashed his best mate a cheeky grin. “I think Harry’s a bit smarter than the usual ones. Better luck next time, Padfoot. Now, the password, please.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow at him. “Aren’t you Head Boy?”

“I forgot the password,” James said with a careless shrug. “But you remember, don’t you? I told it to you on the train.”

Sirius huffed and rolled his eyes. “Figures you’d forget, Prongs.”

He turned to the Fat Lady and said pleasantly, “Belladonna.”

The portrait swung open for them and they stepped through the hole and into the common room.

“Right, so this is the Gryffindor common room,” James introduced it to them. “Anytime you want to enter, just remember the password that Padfoot, I mean, Sirius, just said, and you’ll be let in. But don’t tell the password to anyone except a Gryffindor.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione nodded, showing that they understood, although they already knew. Harry gazed around the room, filled with content from its familiarity. There were the same table and armchairs that she, Hermione, and Ron had studied at and sat in, the same fireplace where she had communicated with Sirius, and the same couch where the Weasley twins had liked to sit with Lee Jordan and show off their experimental Skiving Snackbox products.

And there was one armchair that she was sure she hadn’t seen before.

Huh.

Something must have happened to that chair before her time.

“I’ll take you to the dormitories next,” James said, after Harry and her two friends were satisfied with looking around the common room. They were led to the same two doors that separated the girls from
the boys.

“Ladies are on the left and gentlemen on the right,” James informed them. “A word of caution, mate,” James said, turning to Ron, “Don’t try to go up the girls’ staircase. Not a fun time if you do.”

“Right,” Ron said, nodding. He glanced at Harry and Hermione, and the three of them shared a secret smirk.

“Well then, my dear ladies,” James addressed Harry and Hermione with a dramatic bow, “Your very handsome and noble escorts shall leave you to get your beauty sleep.”

Harry and Hermione laughed. Sirius bowed to them as well.

“May this humble gentleman escort you to breakfast tomorrow?” He extended his hand to Harry.

Harry placed her hand in his, playing along.

“You may,” she said, amused.

“I thank you, my lady. You are most kind.” He placed a kiss on her hand like he did earlier at their introduction.

Harry smiled at him. “Good night, Sirius.”

Sirius made one last bow to Hermione, who giggled. Then he joined the other boys who were already standing by the staircase.

“Good night,” Harry and Hermione said to the boys, who echoed back the sentiment.

The girls climbed the stairs to their dorm, which was at the very top. When they opened the door to the room, they found that two other girls were already there, unpacking their trunks. One had shoulder-length, wavy blonde hair with a round face and the other had long auburn hair with a heart-shaped face. They both looked up when Harry and Hermione came in.

“Oh hello,” the auburn-haired one said, smiling. She made her way towards them and extended her hand.

“I’m Marlene McKinnon. You two are the new additions to our dorm, yes?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, shaking her hand first. “I’m Hermione Granger and this is my sister, Harriet Granger. She goes by Harry.”

“I’m Alice Langley.”

The blonde girl had made her way over to them too. She had a friendly, earnest air about her, which sparked something in Harry’s memory. She couldn’t quite grasp it, however.

“It’s so exciting to have more girls join us. It’s always just been me, Alice, and Lily, who’s Head Girl this year. The room’s also expanded itself to accommodate your beds,” Marlene said, nodding to the two new beds that were across from the original three.

The door opened and Lily stepped in. Harry and Hermione watched as Marlene, Alice, and Lily hugged and greeted each other enthusiastically.

“I see you all have met one another,” Lily said, grinning. “We’ll be a lot less lonely this year, won’t we girls?” she said to Marlene and Alice.
“Yes, and it means more people to study with,” Alice agreed. “I could always use more help with Transfiguration.”

“I thought Frank Longbottom was helping you out?” Marlene said slyly, raising an eyebrow.

It finally clicked in Harry’s brain. Alice Langley was Neville’s mother. Harry glanced at Hermione to see if she had realized it too and it seemed she had. Hermione’s mouth was open as she stared at Alice, who was now bantering with Marlene.

“Oh honestly, Marlene, he’s already graduated!”

“So? I know you two exchange letters. Have you set the marriage date yet?” Marlene laughed as Alice chased her to her bed.

“I trust the boys saw you two safely to the dorms?” Lily addressed Harry and Hermione with a lightly teasing tone.

“Yes,” Harry replied as the three of them went over to their beds to start unpacking. “James was very helpful.” She smiled, glad that her parents had gotten together by this time.

“And so was Sirius, especially to Harry,” Hermione added. She glanced at Harry with amusement dancing in her eyes. “He wasn’t exactly subtle.”

“Oh Merlin, he hasn’t been flirting again, has he?” Lily sighed. “Don’t mind him, Harry, he’s an idiot.”

“I thought he was funny,” Harry said, grinning, while Hermione giggled.

“Ooh, does Black have another girl in his sights already?” Marlene asked, joining the conversation. “I’d be careful Harry, he’s known to be a heartbreaker.”

“What do you mean by that?” Hermione asked, her brows furrowed.

“Oh, Marlene likes to exaggerate,” Lily said, giving the auburn-haired girl an amused look. “He just likes to flirt, that’s all. He’s never been in anything serious, relationship-wise. I wouldn’t worry too much, Harry,” she said, turning to her fellow green-eyed girl across from her. “Just ignore him if he starts to annoy you and he’ll move on to someone else to bother.”

“Hm,” Hermione said, sounding more or less critical.

Harry just smiled. It didn’t surprise her that young Sirius was a bit of a flirt. She’d expected as much from a Marauder with the arrogant good looks of a Black. It fit in with what she had seen so far of his mischievous personality.

The girls exchanged more cheerful banter as they finished unpacking and got ready for bed.

The boys were housed on the sixth floor.

James and Sirius threw jibes at one another as they reached their beds to unpack their trunks. Ron was relieved to see that his bed was not by Peter’s. Instead, it was next to James’s and closest to the door.

“Could you be more obvious, Padfoot? The poor girl just got here and you’re already pouncing on
her,” James teased his friend. Sirius gave him a haughty look.

“She didn’t seem to mind,” he said, smirking. “Hey, Ron, is it? Harry’s not seeing anyone, is she?”

Ron stopped in the middle of taking off his jumper.

“Er, no, she isn’t,” he answered, feeling uneasy.

It was more than a little weird seeing Harry’s godfather look at her that way. All right, well, he wasn’t her godfather at the present and he was the same age, but still.

“Well then, looks like I’ll be doing all right,” Sirius said cheerfully as he got out of his robes. “I’m not in the habit of getting all cozy with girls who’re already taken. Too messy, know what I mean?”

James snorted. “Is that right? I wonder, do you still remember Matilda Ogden?”

Sirius rolled his eyes while Peter sniggered. Ron cocked his head at them.

“Matilda Ogden?” he questioned.

“Oh all right, but how was I supposed to know that she was in a relationship with that German bloke?” Sirius responded to James defensively. “No one knew that her pen pal was more than a pen pal until he sent that Howler to her…”

James and Peter roared with laughter.

“Sorry, what happened with Matilda Ogden?” Ron asked, feeling curious. James turned to him, still laughing.

“So in our fifth year, Padfoot got cozy with Matilda Ogden, a fifth-year from Hufflepuff. Apparently, she’d been gushing about him to her German pen pal in Germany, with whom she was in a long-distance relationship. About two weeks after Padfoot started chatting her up, she received a Howler during breakfast from her boyfriend, who sounded like he was near tears while he screamed at her for being unfaithful.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron said, wincing.

“A pen pal boyfriend, honestly,” Sirius muttered, shaking his head, as he unpacked the last bit of his trunk.

“She hasn’t been able to look his way again since,” Peter added, still snickering.

“Right,” Ron muttered, shooting Peter a wary glance.

The door opened and Remus entered with a weary sigh.

“First-years give you trouble, Moony?” James asked him cheerfully.

“I got separated from Lily because of Peeves. Had to lead my lot to the tower by another way than the usual. One of them got his foot stuck on a trick step and he started panicking. And as it turns out, he has asthma. Took a while to calm him down.”

“Sorry ‘bout that mate,” James said, going over to him and clasping him on the shoulder. He grinned. “We were in the middle of talking about Padfoot’s interest in Harry.”

Remus snorted. “ Noticed that too, did you?”
He turned to Sirius with a smirk. “What was it you said, Padfoot? Oh, that’s right, ‘Absolutely charmed,’” he mimicked his introduction. “With a nice kiss on the hand for effect.”

Ron couldn’t help laughing along with James and Peter. Sirius shrugged.

“Well, I was,” he said, unembarrassed. “She’s a rather good-looking girl. And I don’t think I’m the only one who noticed that either,” he finished with a sly look at Remus.

Ron’s eyes grew wide at the implication.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Remus responded coolly. But his ears were very pink.

*Merlin’s beard,* Ron groaned to himself. *Harry, mate, I’m sorry.*

Sirius grinned. “I mean, I get it, obviously. Long black hair with pale skin and bright green eyes. It is rather striking. And with a nice, slim figure to boot.”

Ron cleared his throat. “That’s my best mate you’re talking about.”

He was getting really weirded out.

“Oh, right, sorry.” Sirius looked a tad sheepish. “You don’t mind me chatting her up a bit, do you?”

Ron considered it carefully for a moment. Other than the uncomfortable fact that he was her godfather in the future, he didn’t seem like a bad bloke. And besides, Harry could take care of herself.

“No, I suppose I don’t. But,” he said in a warning tone, “If you hurt her or humiliate her in any way…”

“I won’t,” Sirius said with a sincere look. “I prefer to leave girls with a good impression of me.”

James muttered something that had Peter sniggering again. Sirius turned to James and sighed.

“Prongs, will you please shut up about Matilda Ogden?”

Ron got back to unpacking, feeling satisfied, while the Marauders jeered at one another in good humor.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Matilda Ogden. (She’s an OC, of course)

Other OCs include: Nathan Clark, Catherine Edwards, and Natalie Templeton.

Maybe they’ll appear again in later chapters, who knows?

On the physical traits of certain canon characters:
- Remus and Peter’s eye colors are unknown in canon, so I improvised. I know the films have their own extra material on physical descriptions, but I personally do not consider them to be official.
- I had to improvise on Marlene’s looks. Pottermore’s picture of Marlene depicts her with reddish-brown hair.
As for Alice, the films depict her with brown hair, but the books don’t say what she looked like before St. Mungo’s, other than the fact that she had some of her son’s features, like her round face. J.K. Rowling stated in an interview that she pictured Neville with blonde hair, hence Alice’s blonde hair. Her last name before she got married is unknown, so I decided on Langley, which was the first random last name that popped into my head.

Next chapter will have the trio experiencing their first day of classes with Lily and the Marauders.

Thank you so much for your patience, the kudos, the bookmarks, the comments and all other feedback. Thank you for giving this work your time of day :}
“They’re late,” Lily murmured, looking at her watch. “And they say girls take long to get ready.”

Harry, Hermione, and Lily waited in the common room for the boys, who were, at present, running ten minutes late for breakfast. They sat together at the study table closest to the dorms and watched as their other housemates exited the doors to head to the Great Hall.

Harry glanced at Lily every now and then, giddy and nervous at the prospect of being in the same classes with her. She had taken care to look as sharp and presentable as possible by trying to smooth down her long hair. Although it was less unruly than when it had been short, it somehow always managed to get a little messy one way or another.

She ran a hand through her hair self-consciously and grimaced when her fingers got caught in a loose tangle. Her hair was rebelling already.

“Your hair’s fine,” Hermione whispered, leaning over to her. Harry sent her a quick smile, somewhat embarrassed at being caught.

“Oh, thanks.”

Lily turned to them with a bright smile. “So, are you two excited for the first day of classes?” she asked them warmly.

“Yes,” Hermione replied, her face perking up in excitement. “I can’t wait to start studying for my N.E.W.T.s.”

Lily smiled widely and was about to respond when loud voices reached their ears. They turned their attention to the boys’ door, which opened to reveal two boys in the lower years, who hurried out. In the second that the door remained open, the girls heard James, Sirius, and Remus’s voices overlapping as they noisily made their way down the stairs.

“We’re late because of you!”

“Me?! Whose bright idea was it to make his socks run away from him? It took him five minutes just to catch them.”

“Maybe the two of you should’ve tried to be normal this time.”

“Oh, where’s the fun in that?” James said as he opened the door. He beamed when he saw Lily.

“Lily!”

Harry watched as James rushed over to Lily and embraced her. A soft smile spread on her face as they murmured affectionately to one another.

“Ron, what happened to your clothes?” Hermione exclaimed upon seeing his disheveled state as he approached them with Sirius, Remus, and Peter.

Ron’s face was pink, but he grinned. “They er, jinxed them,” he replied, indicating Sirius and James with a flick of his head. “Sirius put a spell on my shirt that made it belligerent when I picked it up.
He put another one on my trousers that made them jump up and down. And James had my socks run around in a frenzy, which took me a while to catch them. He’d put an Anti-Summoning Spell on them as well, you see. That’s why we’re late.”

Lily looked at the two Marauders and sighed.

“You two, honestly,” she said, shaking her head at them. James and Sirius exchanged grins.

“Just our way of formally welcoming ol’ Ron here to Hogwarts,” James said cheerfully. “No harm done, except to his clothes, which might work out in his favor.”


“Well, it’ll certainly make it seem like he got some early morning action from his girl,” he said, shooting a sly and suggestive look at Ron and Hermione, who both flushed red. He winked at Harry when she let out a surprised laugh.

“How’d you know that we’re together?” Ron blurted out. His face turned a darker shade of red.

“One can always tell,” Sirius replied mysteriously. He turned to Harry while Hermione helped Ron straighten out his clothes.

He gave her a small bow.

“Good morning, Lady Harry. I trust you had sweet dreams last night?”

His voice was warm and pleasant and his laughing grey eyes were bright with mischief, which made Harry smile.

“I suppose I did,” she replied.

“What about?” he asked, stepping closer to her so that he was right in front of her. “I’m very curious about what a lovely lady like yourself might dream during the night.”

Harry let out a huff of laughter as she looked at him in amusement.

“Are you really asking me what I dreamed about last night?”

“Why yes.”

Her lips twitched up into a grin as she let herself be caught in his mischievous spirit.

“Well, not about you, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

She let out a small laugh as a look of surprise spread over his face at her cheeky answer. Disbelief glimmered in his eyes before being replaced by a glint of intrigue. He smirked at her in return.

“Oh? Well that’s a shame. Perhaps I should try harder to get into your dreams next time.”

“Oh, my dreams aren’t worth getting into. Your efforts would be put to better use elsewhere.”

“Is that a challenge? As a Marauder, I think I’ll take it.” He grinned at her, his face bright with renewed interest.

Harry stifled a snort and smiled back at him. She glanced at Ron and Hermione to see how they took his playful attitude. She blinked when she took in their wide-eyed expressions. Next to them, Remus
looked amused while Peter stared at her and Sirius in fascination. She turned her head at Lily’s giggle and saw that she and James were grinning.

“Shall we head to breakfast now? We’re late as it is,” Lily said, her eyes twinkling.

“My lady.” Sirius offered his arm to Harry.

“Oh no, that’s all right, I can walk by myself. Ron, Hermione, you ready?” Harry addressed her friends, who nodded and joined her as she headed towards the portrait hole. The last thing she heard before the portrait swung closed behind them was laughter, the loudest coming from James.

Hermione giggled as they made their way to the Great Hall.

“What?” Harry asked, bemused, making her giggle harder. She turned to Ron, who glanced away from her with a smirk.

“All right then,” she muttered to herself, puzzled and a little amused at their behavior.

She saw them exchanging glances as they sat down to breakfast.

“Seriously, what?” she asked them, getting impatient.

“Nothing,” Ron replied a little too quickly. She raised an eyebrow at him as his face turned red.

Hermione glanced at her with amusement as she served herself some scrambled eggs on toast.

“I think you just encouraged Sirius to chase after you,” she said lightly.

Harry stared at her.

“Sorry?”

But before Hermione could explain, Lily and the Marauders arrived at the table. Sirius sat himself down next to Harry, while Lily sat across from Hermione, and James across from Harry. Remus faced Sirius with Peter next to him. James grinned at Harry, who was startled and pleased by his attention.

“I believe,” James began cheerfully as he served himself some toast, “that this is the first time Padfoot’s been rejected by a girl.”

Harry blinked as everyone but Sirius laughed. Sirius turned to her with a mournful expression.

“Oh, right, I did,” Harry remembered. She was about to apologize, but the dramatized woe on his face made her lips twitch and she changed her mind.

“I believe,” James began cheerfully as he served himself some toast, “that this is the first time Padfoot’s been rejected by a girl.”

“Lady Harry, how could you leave me like that? You promised me last night that I could escort you to breakfast.”

Harry blinked as everyone but Sirius laughed. Sirius turned to her with a mournful expression.

“I believe,” James began cheerfully as he served himself some toast, “that this is the first time Padfoot’s been rejected by a girl.”

“Did I? I must have forgotten. And I didn’t leave you. We were both on our way to the Great Hall. I just chose to go first,” she replied calmly. Lily’s giggles made Harry turn to her in wonder.

“My lady is so cold.” Sirius sighed. But merriness twinkled in his eyes.

Remus smirked and passed him a plate of sausages. “Are you going to sit there all day, moaning over
“My love is not lost, Moony. I have yet to show her my winning charm,” he declared with a haughty and dignified air, making Remus snort.

Hermione nudge Harry. “You just did it again,” she whispered to her. Harry turned to her, bewildered.

“But I was just bantering. I wasn’t trying to encourage him. I was just playing along with him.”

Hermione shook her head, smiling. “Oh Harry,” she said fondly.

Harry furrowed her brows and puzzled over the matter as she finished her breakfast. She had only meant to banter on equal ground with Sirius by playing off his antics. His mischievous energy was infectious and it was wonderful seeing him so carefree. Besides, why on earth would she want to encourage him that way in the first place? It was Sirius. She didn’t understand what Hermione meant and thus, for the time being, didn’t care. The issue was dismissed from her mind.

Speaking of issues…

She glanced around at her tablemates. Sirius was still being teased by the Marauders and Lily.

“Hey,” she whispered to Hermione, who immediately turned to her. She also caught Ron’s eye and he leaned over to listen as well.

“We need to talk about what we need to do here. Meeting tonight, late, in the common room?”

They agreed.

Professor McGonagall came around to the table as breakfast was ending to hand out their schedules. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already gotten theirs, so they took theirs out to see what classes they had for the day.


“What classes are you three taking?” Lily asked them. She had just received her schedule.

“Oh, the usual—Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, and Herbology. But Hermione’s taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as well,” Ron answered.

“Seems like we all got the first five classes together,” James said, making a smile break out on Harry’s face.

Peter gave him a gloomy look.

“I don’t have Potions or Herbology,” he muttered, looking down at his schedule.

“Oh, right, sorry, Wormtail,” James apologized and reached over to give him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“I’ll be taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes too. And so are James and Sirius,” Lily told Hermione.

“Oh,” Hermione said, surprised.

She glanced at Sirius, who smirked and raised an eyebrow at her. “Didn’t think I had the brains for
it? ‘S all right, I get it. My devastating good looks tend to distract,” he said haughtily, running a hand
through his long, silky locks for effect. Even Hermione laughed.

“Are you taking any extra classes, Remus?” Ron asked Remus, who nodded.

“Yes. Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures. You and Harry aren’t taking any?”

“No, I think I’ll barely manage to pass my classes this year with the workload we’re likely to have,”
Harry said wryly.

“But you’re brilliant at defensive spells,” Hermione pointed out. She turned to the others. “That’s the
only thing she beats me at.”

The Marauders looked at Harry with interest.

“Is that so? Then I think I’ll look forward to seeing your skills in Defense Against the Dark Arts,”
James said.

“Reckon you’re good enough to beat him, Harry? I’d like to see Prongs fall flat on his arse for once
in that class,” Sirius said, poking James in the head.

James retaliated by trying to smack him on the head, but missed as Sirius ducked, and ended up
knocking over Remus’s goblet of pumpkin juice instead. Professor McGonagall passed by them on
her way back to her seat and gave James a disapproving look as he hastily helped Remus clean up the
mess.

Harry stifled a laugh. “I suppose I could try,” she replied.

Lily checked her watch. “We better head to class or we’ll be late,” she told them.

Seventh-year Charms was shared with the Ravenclaws and before Harry could confer with Ron and
Hermione about who was going to partner up with who, someone else got to her first. They were
nearing the classroom when Harry felt a light tap on her shoulder.

She turned around and found herself face to face with Sirius.

“May I sit with you?”

“Oh, sure,” she agreed. She was surprised as she had expected him to sit with one of the other
Marauders. But she didn’t mind in the least as she was also delighted at the prospect of seeing his
skills in magic, which had been exemplary, according to Lupin back in her time. She caught Ron and
Hermione exchanging a look.

“Be a gentleman,” Lily told Sirius sternly as they all found a seat inside the classroom. James, who
was her partner, flashed her a grin, which he returned.

Harry watched as Sirius leaned back in his seat with a content sigh. She couldn’t get enough of his
cheerful demeanor. His face was meant for laughter, not brooding, she thought.

“Nervous?” he asked, turning towards her with a smile. His eyes were merry as he leaned towards her,
making her raise her eyebrows at him.
“Not really. I heard Flitwick’s one of the more sympathetic professors,” she replied. She felt his amused gaze on her as she turned her attention to Flitwick, who was taking attendance.

Harry felt herself become a student again as the professor taught his lesson. It had been a year since she had attended a class at Hogwarts and she had not realized that a part of her had missed the routine and demands of academic study until this moment. The familiarity of it calmed her and made her feel normal, as if she really did belong there. It was just another Charms lesson, headed by Professor Flitwick, and practicing spells nonverbally like in sixth year. For once, she felt happy concentrating on the lecture and taking notes. She glanced at Sirius, curious about how he took the lesson, and was taken aback when she saw him doodling on his parchment, humming quietly to himself.

“Do you not take notes?” she asked him.

“No, not really. I prefer to listen and memorize,” he answered, making Harry marvel at his apparent intelligence. Or was he just lazy?

No, he was definitely smart.

She was astonished to see him master the spell they were told to practice almost immediately. He grasped the full theory and intention of the spell the first time he cast it verbally and performed it just as perfectly on his second try at casting it nonverbally.

“I think you might need to help me,” she told him. “I haven’t mastered nonverbal usage yet.”

She felt chagrined from the gap in skill between them. But at the same time, she was very proud of him. And at the very least, he didn’t know her in this time and therefore, wouldn’t be disappointed in her comparably lackluster skills.

Hopefully.

“It would be my pleasure, Lady Harry. I suppose our one-on-one tutoring sessions start now?”

Her lips twitched. “Yes, I suppose,” she agreed, making his smile widen. She listened carefully as he explained to her about the basic theory behind the spell and advised her on how to focus her mind when casting it nonverbally. She performed the spell proficiently enough on her second try verbally, and on her third try nonverbally. Sirius looked very pleased with himself when she thanked him for his help.

Transfiguration turned out similarly, as Sirius asked to be her partner again before anyone else could. Hermione looked more than a little amused as she passed by them with Ron to their desks.

Harry watched, amazed, as Sirius mastered the spell for Transfiguration on his first try. Nonverbally, of course—McGonagall insisted that every spell in her class be performed without the slightest hint of a murmur. “How are you doing that?” she demanded in a very Hermione-ish way. She had tried out the advice he had given her in Charms, but so far, had been unsuccessful.

“You’ve got to get your wand movements right first,” he told her, taking her hand that held her wand and moving it through the right motions. “And don’t grip your wand too tightly. You won’t be able to jab properly, otherwise.”

Harry practiced the motions until Sirius gave a satisfied nod. She concentrated on the spell with all her might in her head, then flicked her wand and jabbed it at the owl that she was supposed to turn into an hourglass. The owl gave one hoot before transforming into a large hourglass with wooden foundations and scarlet sand. Not as fancy as Sirius’s ornate, steel-topped hourglass with silver sand,
but a success, nonetheless. She turned to him, grateful and ecstatic from her accomplishment.

“It worked! Thanks, Sirius.”

“Anything for lovely Lady Harry.”

She snorted. “How long are you going to call me ‘Lady?’”

He pretended to think. “Forever?”

Warmth filled her chest as she laughed at his silly answer. She could certainly get used to Sirius being like this.

Charming, playful, and mischievous Sirius. Untouched by betrayal, sorrow, and Azkaban.

Alive, not dead.

Looking up as she recovered from her laughter, she caught Hermione’s curious eyes on them. Hermione gave her a gentle, knowing smile before turning back to help Ron transform his owl.

At lunch, Harry struggled to keep her face calm as Remus peered into his goblet suspiciously for the third time. He hadn’t caught on that Sirius had been vanishing its contents with his wand since the first time he had refilled it. She looked away with Sirius, acting nonchalant, as he narrowed his eyes and cast a glance at his fellow Marauders. His gaze lingered on Sirius and James, seemingly indecisive as to which one of them was responsible, before letting out a quiet huff and refilling his goblet again. She put a hand over her mouth as Sirius casually pointed his wand at the goblet when Remus returned to his conversation with Peter, who was aware of the prank. Peter couldn’t help letting out a snicker as Remus lifted his goblet to his mouth.

Remus paused, the goblet barely touching his lips, when he caught the way Peter’s eyes flicked to Sirius. His own eyes moved down to his goblet and he let out a loud, irritated sigh.

“Padfoot!” he snapped, glaring at Sirius, who put on a surprised look.

“Yes, Moony?” Harry was impressed with how innocent he sounded.

“Will you please stop doing that?”

“Doing what, Moony? I haven’t the faintest idea of what you’re talking about.”

Remus was about to retort, but then his expression turned to that of wry amusement and he smirked at Sirius.

“This,” he replied calmly, taking out his wand and pointing it as Sirius’s goblet, which overfilled with pumpkin juice and began flooding onto the table. Sirius let out a yelp and Harry a laugh as they both scrambled out of their seats as the juice leaked over their side of the table in steady streams. Hermione and Ron were safe, however, and they turned with James to witness the scene.

“Got a bit of a dry throat there, Padfoot? Perhaps from talking with Harry?” James asked in mock-concern. Hermione began giggling.

“Oh, you know how it is, Prongs,” Sirius said with a dramatic sigh. “Any man would rather drink up the sight of a beautiful woman than an actual drink, even if he was dying of thirst.”
Hermione took one look at Harry’s wide-eyed and startled expression and burst into laughter. Ron let out a very loud cough.

“I think you’ll have to do a bit better than that,” James said, looking at Harry shrewdly. “Your lady doesn’t seem too impressed with you yet.”

Sirius shrugged. “Like I said, Prongs, I have yet to show her all of my charm. I’ve taken up that challenge of yours, my lady,” he said, turning to Harry with a cheerful and confident grin. Harry smiled back at him hesitantly. She was starting to understand what Hermione had meant that morning. Remus stopped the spell on the goblet and Sirius cleaned up the juice with a wave of his wand, allowing her to sit back down. She pushed away her perturbation as she raised an eyebrow in reply to Hermione and Ron’s amused looks.

“Prongs,” Peter spoke up, “will you be holding Quidditch tryouts soon?”

Harry’s ears perked up and she looked at James.

James’s face lit up. “Yes, I am, Wormtail. I mean to hold them next weekend. I’m hoping we’ll get some better players than last year. Can’t believe we lost the Quidditch Cup again to Slytherin.” He sighed.

“What positions are you looking for?” Harry asked. Maybe she could try out as well? She imagined James’s awestruck face as she showed him her flying skills and his proud eyes aimed at her when she helped them win the Quidditch Cup.

“Well, we’ll need a Keeper, for starters. Gibbons was rubbish last year, thank Merlin he’s gone this year. The Beaters are okay. The Chasers could be better coordinated…I suppose I’ll keep a lookout for a better Chaser than Parker. Nice bloke, but he fumbles too much. Oh and a new Seeker would be nice.”

Hope rose in Harry’s chest.

“McAllister not holding her own?” Sirius asked.

“She’s too anxious. Her head’s only partly in the game when we play. She only just manages to notice the Snitch when the other Seeker does.”

“Well, Harry’s a great Seeker,” Ron spoke up eagerly. “You should see her fly. She’s amazing. Went up against a dr—”

Hermione coughed loudly. They all turned to look at her.

“Sorry, got something caught in my throat,” she said, her face pink. She shot Ron a look.

Ron clamped his mouth shut, looking mortified.

“Sorry, went up against a what? Didn’t catch the last part,” James said, turning back to Ron.

“Er, went up against a drunk Beater, one time,” Harry improvised wildly. “I was playing Quidditch with some mates and the team we were up against had a drunk Beater that kept tagging me. He was so out of it that he forgot about hitting the Bludger and chased me around instead. Took a bit of skill to get around him, him being so big and being an aggressive drunk, at that.”

It wasn’t as impressive as going up against a dragon, as Ron was about to say, but it was the best she could come up with.
“That’s more than McAllister could ever do,” James said. Harry sighed inwardly in relief. “You’ll be at tryouts, I assume?” he asked her, flashing her a grin.

“Yeah, sure,” Harry said, feeling thrilled. “And if you’re looking for a Keeper, Ron’s pretty solid.”

Ron’s ears were red as he sent her a grateful smile.

“I thought you two didn’t know one another until you got here?” Peter spoke up, looking at them curiously.

“We exchanged stories about Quidditch while we stayed here before the Sorting,” Harry improvised again. Damn Wormtail, she cursed to herself. Just happened to catch the inconsistencies, didn’t he? She knew she was being unfair, that the fact was, any one of the Marauders could have pointed it out, but Peter’s identity as future traitor was not so easily forgotten.

“You’re in luck, Prongs,” Sirius said to James. “Our new friends are just as serious about Quidditch as you are.”

“Damn good, I say,” James said cheerfully as he finished the last of his steak and kidney pie. “I need to win that Cup.”

“So it’s just you, then?” Remus said, raising an eyebrow.

James went off on a lecture about how important Quidditch was to house morale and thus to the intellectual and spiritual health of the students. According to him, Quidditch was the foundation on which academic success rested. Sirius humored James with occasional comments of agreement while Remus listened to the spiel with amusement. Peter listened to James as if entranced.

“Harry,” Hermione murmured, touching her arm to get her attention.

“Hm?” Harry had been listening to James.

“Do you think it’s a good idea for you and Ron to join Quidditch? I’m not saying it’s a bad idea, necessarily, but, we do have a goal,” Hermione said, sounding anxious. “We need to keep our cover by making sure we keep up with our classes, but we need time to do other things too,” Hermione emphasized the last part meaningfully.

“Oh relax, Hermione, joining Quidditch is part of the cover. We’re just your typical, Quidditch-playing student. ’S not so bad,” Ron murmured back to her, joining the discussion.

“But,” Hermione paused and looked at Harry again. “I know you want to impress James and the others with your flying skills, and I know that we’re stuck in this time but, Harry, we need to think of our priorities.”

Harry hesitated. What Hermione was saying wasn’t wrong. Joining the Quidditch team would be an indulgence for her. She did want to impress her father and his friends. And she hadn’t been able to lose herself in a good game of Quidditch since sixth year.

But…

 Couldn’t she be selfish, just this once?

That’s not true, her mind argued, you’re also being selfish about wanting to keep Sirius happy and alive. And besides, if you want Sirius to be alive, doesn’t that mean that you want your parents and Remus to stay alive as well? And in that case, why not try to save everyone else along the way?
This sort of thinking was getting dangerous. Hermione was right. They had a goal. She couldn’t afford to be selfish about everything that had to do with the time they were stuck in. The three of them really needed to have a talk later.

“All right, I’ll think about it,” she replied.

“Harry, James is expecting us to be at tryouts next weekend!” Ron looked at her as if she was mad. “Don’t you want to play Quidditch again? And with him?”

“I—we’ll talk about it later,” Harry said evasively. She glanced at the head table.

No Dumbledore today.

She stood up, catching the others’ attention.

“I’ll meet you guys at the library later,” she told Ron and Hermione, who looked at her with surprise. She gave them a meaningful look and they nodded back.

“Would you like me to escort you to wherever you’re going, Harry?” Sirius asked, making to stand up as well.

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” Harry said breezily as she turned around and left.

She smiled as she heard James, Remus, and Peter laugh at Sirius again.

Harry watched from the owlery as Egmond flew his way to Dumbledore’s office.

She wanted the headmaster to read her letter as soon as he returned. They needed to discuss their roles in the events to come and the horcruxes in more detail.

It was likely that Voldemort still had the locket with him, since it had been a few years later when he used Kreacher to test the potion for him in the cave. The ring was probably still in the Gaunt house. But she wasn’t sure about the diary or Hufflepuff’s cup—when had he entrusted them to Lucius Malfoy and the Lestranges? At least they didn’t have to worry about Nagini, as he had obtained her companionship shortly before her fourth year.

Harry mentally reviewed the list of tasks that she and her friends could do in the meantime.

First, they could start their training by getting familiar with a more diverse variety of spells in the Room of Requirement. She would even dare to say that knowing some dark spells would be helpful. Not to use them in a fight, necessarily, but knowledge was key in dire situations—she still remembered the feeling of frightened helplessness when Hermione had been struck by Dolohov’s curse in the Department of Mysteries. The Death Eaters never pulled back in their brutality and in a fight, caution and indecision were thrown to the wind. They needed to know the other side to survive and Dumbledore could give them permission to research about the Dark Arts in the Restricted Section of the library.

Perhaps she could try her hand at Occlumency again. She wasn’t a horcrux anymore and theoretically, Voldemort wouldn’t be able to access her mind through the scar, but she doubted. The scar was a curse scar and if what Dumbledore had said about it leaving a singular trace was true…
And there was the possibility that he would use Legilimency against her when they inevitably faced off again.

She worried at her lip. Things were definitely going to be harder this time around.

The Marauders and her friends were sitting at adjacent tables when she arrived at the library. She ignored Sirius’s attempt to lure her to his table and suppressed a grin when he pouted at her as she sat down next to Hermione. Ron opened his mouth to ask her where she had been, but she gave a slight shake of her head and flicked her chin subtly at the Marauders.

Ron nodded in understanding.

Lily joined them at dinner and chatted cheerfully with the Marauders about their day before turning her bright eyes to the trio and addressing them with the same question she had asked the others.

“Have a good day today?”

“Yes,” Hermione answered with a smile. “We went to the library after classes and I got a good portion of the reading done. I can tell that we’ll be studying a lot this year, seeing as I wasn’t able to get started on my essays yet.”

James and Sirius exchanged a smirk, which Lily caught.

“I suppose you two are already done with everything?” she asked them wryly.

Hermione whipped her head towards them as the two Marauders tried to not look too pleased with themselves.

They failed.

“Well, I thought it was all fairly easy, wouldn’t you say so, Prongs?”

“Why yes, Padfoot. Particularly Transfiguration. I barely noticed that I’d finished the two rolls of parchment until my quill ran off at the end.”

Hermione looked indignant and Lily rolled her eyes at them.

“All right, you two, we all get that you’re smart, although your appearances may say otherwise.”

Sirius made a sound of protest, feigning offense taken.

“My dear Lily,” he said haughtily, “I am from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. I always look smart.”

“Speaking well of the House of Black now, are we?” James teased him.

“Only when it flatters me.” Sirius grinned when Harry snorted.
“I prefer to think it’s due to the fact that you spend an extra ten minutes at the mirror in the morning, grooming your hair,” Remus said, eliciting laughter from the others. Hermione turned back to her food and muttered something under her breath that made Ron snicker and exchange an amused look with Harry.

“Harry?”

Harry was surprised to see that it was Peter who had called her. She managed to give him a polite smile as he regarded her shyly.

“Where did you go after lunch? Padfoot missed you terribly.” Peter sniggered as Sirius mock-scowled at him.

Harry could have groaned. Wormtail, you again? She felt Ron and Hermione tense beside her, ready to defend her.

“I went to check out the owlery. I thought it’d be a good idea, in case I wanted to send out something.” She wasn’t lying, really. And it was a perfectly valid excuse.

“Haven’t got a pen pal or anything, do you?” Sirius asked her casually.

Ron choked on his pumpkin juice and exchanged looks with James, Remus, and Peter, who were trying to suppress their grins. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, bemused.

“No, I don’t, why?” Harry responded to him.

“Just wondering, that’s all. Pen pals are in fashion these days.”

Ron coughed and Lily gave Sirius a knowing look.

“Referring to Matilda Ogden, are we?” she teased him. James, Remus, Peter, and Ron burst out in snickers. Sirius gave them a dirty look.

“No, I am not,” he answered coolly.

“Who’s Matilda Ogden?” Hermione asked, glancing at the Marauders and Ron.

Sirius stood up with a dignified air.

“I think I am done with my dinner. I will see you all in the common room.”

He started walking towards the doors.

Harry decided to follow him after a split-second. The Marauders and Ron were still laughing as she left, while Lily explained to Hermione about Matilda Ogden.

“Sirius,” she called him as he made his way to Gryffindor Tower. He paused while climbing the marble staircase and turned to her with a smile.

“Chasing after me now, Lady Harry?”

She snorted. “You wish.”

Truthfully, she wasn’t sure why she had decided to follow him. Perhaps it was because she wanted him by himself, without the others getting in the way. She wanted to spend some time with him and get to know him properly this time, now that she had the chance.
“Do you think you could help me with my homework? I’ve never been that great at studying and I don’t fully understand the theories for Charms and Transfiguration yet. I reckon I’ll need all the help I can get if I want to pass my N.E.W.T.s.” She looked at him earnestly and he gave her a sincere smile.

“No problem, Harry.”

Half an hour later, the others found the two of them sitting next to one another at a table in the common room, as Sirius explained the foundational theory of the spell that they had practiced in Charms. Harry nodded as she listened to him and took notes. She was glad that she had asked for his help as he explained everything in a way that she understood easily.

“Thanks, I get it now,” she told him as she finished jotting down notes. “I can finally get started on the essay.”

“You sure you don’t want me to help you with that as well?” he asked, leaning back in his chair with a lazy smile.

“Ooh, Black, getting cozy with the new girl, are we? You sure are quick.”

Sirius and Harry turned to see Marlene grinning at them with a twinkle in her eyes as she passed them on her way to the dormitories.

“Well, I think you’re a good friend, Sirius,” Harry said after an awkward, split-second pause. “And a great teacher. Do you think you’d be able to help me with the other classes as well?”

Sirius, who looked a little embarrassed after Marlene’s comment, recovered himself and smiled.

“Sure thing, Harry.” A teasing look appeared on his face. “Always a pleasure helping a pretty lady like yourself out.”

“Padfoot, you dog, you.”

They turned to see James approaching their table with the others after hearing Marlene’s comment. Harry saw that Ron and Hermione looked amused as well.

“He was being quite helpful, actually,” Harry said to James. “He was explaining the lesson to me. Very minimal flirting.”

“Looks like you do know how to behave around company,” Remus told Sirius, making Harry and the others laugh.

“Sod off, Moony.” Sirius grinned.

“Do you mind if we sit here?” Hermione asked him, gesturing at the remaining armchair and the sofa beside the table.

“No need to sit yourself on the sofa, I’ll move aside for you,” Sirius said courteously, standing up from his seat. “I daresay I’ve overwhelmed Lady Harry with my presence today.”

“Oh not at all, you’re good company,” Harry protested.

“I’d be careful about saying that Harry,” James warned. “Now Padfoot’ll never leave you alone. I said something like that to him once and he’s been following me around ever since, even to the
toilet.” He sniggered as Sirius swatted at him, scowling.

“Let’s go, Prongs,” Sirius said briskly, grabbing James’s arm and steering him to another study table at the other side of the room. Remus, Peter, and Lily followed them after giving Harry and her friends a smile and a wave.

I wouldn’t mind him never leaving. Harry thought to herself with a bit of melancholy as she watched them go. I want him to stay as long as possible. I don’t want to be forced to say goodbye again.

“Harry, are you all right?” Hermione asked her quietly. Harry blinked and turned to her.

“Yeah, why?”

“You looked a bit wistful there for a moment.” Hermione gave her a kind smile. “It’s nice seeing him again, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.” Harry felt as if something was stuck in her throat. She cleared her throat and continued, “A part of me wishes that he could stay like that forever. Happy and alive. And free.”

“I know what you mean, mate,” Ron said, looking at her earnestly. “Just being in this time before everything went to hell…it makes me want to do something, to preserve certain things.”

“You’re talking about your family, aren’t you?” Harry asked him.

“Yeah. My uncles, Fabian and Gideon Prewett, from my mum’s side, you know. They’ll die in a few years working for the Order. Mum never talked about them much, but I know that their deaths hurt her. And…” a complicated expression took over Ron’s face, “If we get rid of You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters during this time, Fred won’t have to die again…and neither will Remus and Tonks and the others who died at Hogwarts.”

“And Sirius and my parents,” Harry added. She and Ron exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Hermione watched them anxiously, but didn’t say anything.

“So, Harry,” she started awkwardly, “Where did you go after lunch?”

“Oh, right.”

Harry told them about her trip to the owlery and the contents of the letter she had sent to Dumbledore. She wanted to schedule another meeting with him as soon as possible.

“Good thinking, Harry,” Hermione said. “If we want to get the upper hand on You-Know-Who, we’ll need to make a plan quickly.”

“I was thinking that we could start making one tonight,” Harry said, looking at them.

“Right,” Ron nodded. “It won’t be hard coming up with an excuse as to why we’ll be going to bed late. I thought sixth year was bad, but I was wrong.” He looked down at his books and his half-finished notes with an air full of suffering.

“Well, on the bright side, by planning our discussions for when everyone’s asleep, we’ll all be on schedule for studying and homework, since we’ll need the cover,” Hermione told them encouragingly.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and sighed.
They were finally left alone a little after midnight.

The common room had begun to empty out around eleven, when Lily and Remus finished their studying and homework. But Peter took longer to understand the material and had only his notes and a third of his essay for Charms finished by midnight, although James and Sirius helped him the same way Sirius had helped Harry. Everyone had gone up to bed by then except for the Marauders, Lily, and the trio.

“It’s all right, Wormtail,” James said, clapping him on the back as they packed up their books to go to bed. “It’ll be the weekend tomorrow, so you’ve got plenty of time to get it done.”

Sirius stood up and yawned as he stretched. He glanced over at the trio and smirked. He made his way over to them. “Not going to bed yet, Ron?” he addressed Ron first.

Ron gave him a rueful smile. “No, I want to finish this,” he said, indicating his Charms essay. “Already halfway done, you know? But I’ll leave Transfiguration for tomorrow.”

“What about you ladies?” Sirius turned his attention to Hermione and Harry, who smiled tiredly at him.

“Almost done with the Transfiguration essay,” Hermione muttered with her eyes on her parchment. Her hand moved over it quickly, filling in the blank space with words. There was a speck of ink on her cheek.

“I’m going to wait for Hermione to finish,” Harry told him. Her brain was done for the day. She had managed to finish her Charms essay and the introductory part of her Transfiguration essay, which marked the day as one of her most productive ever at Hogwarts. Sirius opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by a whistle. The four of them turned to look at James, who looked extremely mischievous.

“Come on now, Padfoot, that’s a good boy. Let’s leave them for the night, it’s bedtime,” James said to him encouragingly. His knees were slightly bent and he made come-hither motions with his hand. Remus and Peter smirked at Sirius.

“James,” Lily reproached him. But she looked amused all the same.

“Tosser,” Sirius growled. He turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were attempting to suppress their mirth. “Well, good night then,” he told them pleasantly.

“Good night,” they managed to get out. They watched as Sirius walked over to his friends and immediately grabbed James in a headlock.

“Lily, help! He’s killing me!” James gasped, struggling against Sirius’s tight grip, while Remus snorted and Peter laughed shrilly. Lily rolled her eyes, heading to the dormitories. She glanced back at Harry and her friends and waved.

“Good night,” she said to them. They echoed it back.

The Marauders left as well, with Sirius dragging along James, still in a headlock. The three of them remained silent until both doors to the dormitories closed. Hermione pointed her wand at the doors.
“Muffliato.”

“Finally,” Ron said, stretching his arms and yawning. “I thought they’d never leave. I’ve been needing a break from my essay for about forty-five minutes now.”

“They’re all really intense about their work,” Harry added, rubbing her eyes.

“Yes, they’re all quite impressive. But let’s get started on our discussion,” Hermione cut in. She and Ron looked at Harry expectantly.

“All right, we need to talk about what exactly we’re going to do here while acting like normal students,” Harry began, “About what we can do until Voldemort starts moving towards us.”

Ron flinched at the name as usual, but his voice was steady as he said, “Training, right?”

“Yeah, but there’s a problem…”

Ron and Hermione listened as Harry told them about the problem that the Marauder’s Map posed to the integrity of their identities through her false surname.

Ron groaned. “Of all the things that the Magical Paradox Principle had to take from us…we can’t control when they’re going to look at the map. We’re going to be on the tips of our toes if we want to sneak around to get things done.”

“Yes, and I’ve also been wondering—how are we going to sneak off to the Room of Requirement? I assume it’ll have to be at night, with all the studying we’ll have to do. But we don’t have the Invisibility Cloak either. I assume it’s with James?” Hermione inquired, looking at Harry, who nodded.

“Yeah, it should be.”

“Well, this puts a damper on our plans.” Ron threw his hands up in despair.

“Maybe we could try the Disillusionment Charm?” Harry suggested.

“Hm, we’ll have to get really good at it, though, if we want to move around undetected by Filch and Mrs. Norris,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Maybe we can borrow a classroom from Professor McGonagall to practice in like we did in fourth year.”

“Excellent. We’ll work on perfecting the charm next week,” Harry said, feeling a lot more hopeful than before.

“But Harry, what will we do if one of the Marauders does happen to look at the map sometime and see your real name? I think they’re a bit too smart for their own good to buy whatever excuse we come up with. They haven’t noticed the similarities between you, James, and Lily yet, but once they see that your true surname is Potter, they might start putting the pieces together.”

“Wouldn’t James think she’s a relative off the family tree, though?” Ron asked, turning to Hermione. “My family tree’s so big that my mum and dad don’t have certain parts of it memorized.”

“No, he wouldn’t. If there had been any remaining Potters, I’m sure I would have been sent to them, not the Dursleys,” Harry replied.

She paused, thinking. There was no other way, was there? Not that she had really considered lying her way out in the first place…
“If the truth has to come out, we’ll let it out,” she decided. “I’m not exactly jumping up and down to tell James and Lily that I’m their daughter from the future ‘cause it’ll sound mad and they’ll think I’m mad and—” she hesitated.

“I’m scared,” she admitted, clenching her fists in her lap, “I’m scared to let them know who I am. Because once I do, I’ll have to tell them everything that’s happened to me, to us. There’s no going back after telling them something like that. Their lives won’t be the same anymore. I’ll be breaking whatever sense of peace they have here, and I… I don’t want them to resent me for it. I don’t want them to hate me for it, but, if I don’t tell them eventually or lie, they’re going to wonder when Voldemort starts targeting them and their families because of me. I’d rather they hear the truth from me than from him or Dumbledore.”

“But I’m not going to tell them until I’m, or we’re, confronted by them, if that’s all right with you,” she said, finally facing her friends.

Ron and Hermione looked at her with compassion.

“Do what you have to do, Harry. Hermione and I will be there to back you up,” Ron told her firmly.

“Ron and I might be forced into the same position if we want to keep our loved ones safe too,” Hermione said with a sad smile. “We understand, Harry, we really do.”

Overwhelming gratitude and affection filled Harry as she looked at her two best friends. She felt that she did not deserve them.

“Don’t you dare say thank you, Harry,” Hermione said fiercely as Harry opened her mouth. “What are friends for?”

They smiled at each other.

Then Ron looked at her seriously.

“Harry, have you thought about joining the first Order of the Phoenix?”

“Yeah, I have. I was wondering if you guys have too.”

“Yes,” Hermione admitted. “We’ve already told Dumbledore everything, so the next logical step in our goal would be to formally ally ourselves with him and get more help this time around.” She bit her lip anxiously. “Although, I don’t know how Dumbledore thinks we should fulfill our roles—”

“We’re not giving him a choice,” Harry interrupted, startling Hermione and Ron, who stared at her. “I know we entrusted him with all our information, but that doesn’t mean that we’re subordinating ourselves to him again. He should be aware of it too. We know his deepest, darkest secrets. And we’re on our mission because of him—the Dumbledore that we knew chose to die and left the job to us, which means he made us his equals. We’re still the best hope he’s got, since the Voldemort we’ll be up against will be the Voldemort from our time, when he regains his memories. Besides, I’m not too keen on running around with only half the information like last time, are you?”

“No,” Ron said quietly, “I’m not. We’ve had a bit too many close calls because of things left unsaid. I’m with you on this—I want to be kept up-to-date this time around.”

“I agree,” Hermione said after a pause. She looked troubled. “He did leave us to decipher all his secrets in the end, so it wouldn’t be too forward of us to demand that he treat us as his equals. Do you think he would understand our reasons, Harry?”
“He should, if he really believes what we’ve told him,” Harry replied.

A thoughtful silence descended upon them as they contemplated the weight and significance of their relationship with Dumbledore.

Then Hermione spoke up again.

“By the way, Harry,” she began with a cautious look at her friend, “I’ve been meaning to ask…what exactly do you plan to do? Obviously, we’ve got to find the horcruxes and defeat You-Know-Who and all that, but, what I mean to ask is, what do you want to do?”

She looked at Harry’s eyes searchingly.

*She really is the brightest witch, regardless of what time we’re in,* Harry thought to herself with some grim amusement. She shifted her eyes down to the table as she steeled herself.

“I want them to live.”

Hermione and Ron tensed. Harry flicked her eyes back to their faces and regarded them piercingly.

“You know who I mean. They all suffered or died because of him. If events play out like they should, they’ll join the Order to fight Voldemort. Except we’ll be there with them as well. We can’t go back to the future and we’ve already done some irrevocable things in this time. And Voldemort recognizing us will be the real break within the timeline. We might be forced to live another life, so why can’t we help out where we can?”

“I agree,” Ron said before Hermione could say anything. “You-Know-Who already changed time for us and we can’t do anything about that fact. And like we discussed before in the Hospital Wing, when he recognizes us, no one connected to us is safe.” He gulped. But his eyes were fierce as he looked at his friends. “I don’t think it’s a matter of what we want to do. I think it’s a matter of what we should do. Don’t we have a duty to protect the ones we love?”

“Yes, but the limitations of time travel—”

“I don’t think this is a matter of time travel anymore, Hermione—it’s beyond that. It’s more like our entire timeline has been restructured. It’s about memories being where they shouldn’t be, it’s about people knowing things they shouldn’t, and it’s about people who exist in a time and place they shouldn’t. There’s no ‘past selves’ here. We’re an anomaly, just like You-Know-Who when he regains his future memories. And the prophecy about Harry…Dumbledore told us that it’s got rules of its own—rules that transcend the typical magical constraints. I bet you that means that the prophecy’s going to play out here whether we like it or not, since the people it concerns are here.”

Harry and Hermione were more than a little impressed as they took in his words.

“Ron,” Hermione murmured.

He gave them a self-deprecating smile.

“It may seem like I don’t pay attention half the time, but I do, when it counts. I’ve had to think about a lot of things, especially after I left you guys that time in the tent. I reckon I’ve matured more in the past few months than I have in my entire life before that.”

“Oh Ron,” Hermione said tearfully. She looked at him with such softness in her expression that
Harry thought she would kiss him in that moment.

Hermione pulled him into a tight embrace, which he returned. It was deeply intimate in its own way and Harry looked away politely until they separated after a minute or two, smiling at one another.

“Should we make a list about who we want to save or protect?” Hermione asked, recommencing the discussion with new determination shining in her eyes. At Harry and Ron’s nod, she pulled out a new roll of parchment along with a quill and a bottle of ink. She offered them to Harry.

“You two go first,” Harry said.

“But—”

“This whole thing’s about way more than me. It’s about your lives and the people you care about as well.”

Ron went first and wrote down his names. He then passed the list to Hermione, who wrote her names down. Harry took the parchment from Hermione and looked at the names already there.

Ron had listed his uncles from his mother’s side, all six of his siblings, and his parents. Hermione had listed her parents, Ron, Harry, Remus, Tonks, Dobby, Kreacher, and Hagrid. Harry took the quill and started writing.

Sirius Black
Lily Evans
James Potter
Albus Dumbledore
Cedric Diggory
Neville Longbottom
Alice and Frank Longbottom
Alastor Moody
Luna Lovegood
Minerva McGonagall

She hesitated before moving her quill down from her list and added three more names.

Regulus Black
Severus Snape
And at the very bottom, she wrote,

*Those who lost their lives or fought for the greater good:*

*The first and second Orders of the Phoenix*

*Battle of Hogwarts*

She put the quill down and pushed the now-finished list towards Ron and Hermione.

“When we look at the list, we’ll be reminded of who and what we’re fighting for,” she told them. “It’s always been about the people around us.”

“But, Pettigrew?” Ron asked, frowning. “Are we sure?”

“We’ll give him the benefit of the doubt for now. He hasn’t done anything yet. Although, the problem is that we don’t know when he turned to the other side,” Harry replied.

“Mm. And Regulus and Snape aren’t on our side yet—will they ever be, now that the timeline’s been changed? And there’s the possibility that they’re already Death Eaters. But we know there’s some good inside them,” Hermione added to Harry’s train of thought.

“All right, so we’ll keep an eye on them, then?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Harry said.

“Is it just me, or is our job harder than before?”

“It’s not just you,” Harry and Hermione answered at the same time. The three of them smiled wearily at one another.

Hermione let out a small laugh.

“Sorry,” she said, smiling at Harry and Ron’s bemusement, “but don’t you think, despite the circumstances we’re in, that it’s kind of amazing that we get to experience our seventh year with Lily and the Marauders? They’re so different from what I expected when they were our age. I mean, Remus is so cheerful and Sirius, well…”

She smirked at Harry, who gave her an embarrassed half-smile.

“Okay, all right, I admit I was a bit naïve around him. I certainly did not mean to make it look as if I was encouraging him to chase after me. I just…well, it’s just nice seeing him happy and carefree.”

“Just letting you know, he asked me last night if it was all right to chat you up,” Ron told her.

“And what did you say?” Harry asked, unnerved.

“I said okay since I figured you could take care of yourself,” he responded with a shrug. Hermione
giggled at Harry’s resigned expression.

They fell into a companionable silence. The fire in the fireplace crackled as it continued to burn late into the night and the soft, wavering glow of the candles’ light illuminated their faces while the restless flames of the fire intermittently cast shadows on them. Each of them reflected on what had come to be and what was yet to come, with alternating feelings of hopeful optimism, anxiety, and dread.

Hermione made two copies of the list, which she handed out to Harry and Ron, and the three of them headed up to bed after Ron finished his essay for Charms.

The faces of the people on the list flashed through Harry’s mind as she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter went through several edits as I tried to balance out the trio’s interactions with the Marauders and their impending problems.

You all may have noticed by now that I have a penchant for dialogue-laden scenes. I personally like to play out interactions between characters in as much detail as possible before it becomes too drawn-out. But I do try my best to tidy up as much as possible.

The next few chapters will push the story along slowly, as they’ll take the characters through day by day, until their relationships take on a certain pattern. Although, they will be more succinct (I hope) in going through the events of the day, unlike this chapter — this chapter was a special case as it was the first day of classes and I wanted to see for myself how the trio, Lily, and the Marauders would experience it together. (Talk about a bit of self-indulgence, eh?)

Next chapter should be interesting for those looking forward to more Harry-Sirius interaction.

Thank you so much for all the feedback! I appreciate everything—the kudos, the bookmarks, the subscriptions, and the comments. They make this girl’s day :)
Harry woke up the next morning feeling disturbed.

She lay in her bed, with her eyes half-open, as she tried to decide whether she had dreamed or not. The immediate answer was no, but there had been something restless about the darkness in which she had been encased while she had been asleep. It had shifted in depth, as if it had been made up of layers and she thought it had whispered to her, although she could not say what. It had only teased her senses.

She closed her eyes and reached a hand up to her scar. Her fingers touched it tentatively.

It had not hurt since the Battle of Hogwarts.

Sighing, she moved her hand out to her bedside table and grasped empty air. A split-second of panic set in before she remembered.

Three weeks of being subjected to the newly patented remedy for imperfect vision had corrected her eyesight—Hermione, Ginny, and the Weasley twins had seen to that. They had pooled their money to buy the corrective eye potion for her sixteenth birthday, so that a respectable teenage girl, who happened to be the Girl-Who-Lived, would henceforth forgo the services of a rather old pair of spectacles, which she had worn for as long as she could remember. The girls and the twins had insisted that it was high time that she show off her best feature, her bright green eyes, to the world (she had raised an eyebrow in skepticism at this). She had attempted to resist, uneasy with such a drastic change to her image, but they had guilt-tripped her by loudly reminding her of the money that they had spent for her sake.

But she had yet to get completely used to it. Her glasses had been one of the few constant things in her life before it, too, changed, by being no longer needed.

Still frowning from lingering unease, she got out of bed and put on her dressing gown to get ready for the day. She registered a sound at the window after drawing back her bed curtains.

It was raining.

The door opened.

“Good morning, Harry,” Lily greeted her. She was drying her hair, having gotten out of the shower.

“Morning, Lily,” Harry replied with a shy smile. “Are any of the showers free?”

“Two, when I got out. Best you hurry before they’re taken.”

When she returned from the bathroom, all of her dormmates were either awake or preparing to go breakfast. Marlene and Alice had just gotten out of bed and Hermione, also having finished with the bathroom, was putting on her robes.

“What are your plans for the day?” Hermione asked Lily as Harry reached her bed to get dressed.

“Since it’s not a good day to head outside, I think I’ll spend some hours in the library to do some
reading in advance. Never a bad idea to start studying early, especially with the workload this year,” Lily replied as she brushed her long red hair.

Hermione beamed. “That’s what I always say, but no one ever listens.”

“What’re the boys doing today?” Harry’s voice was muffled by her jumper as she pulled it over her head.

“Planning their pranks for the year, I assume,” Lily said with a sigh. “It’s their seventh year and they still haven’t grown out of it. But I reckon James and Sirius will be helping Peter with the rest of his homework sometime in the day. They can be careless when it comes to responsibility, but not when it comes to their friends,” she added fondly.

Harry felt a nervous sort of pride at her words. She had admired her father and her godfather for their fierce and unwavering confidence in their friends, but to have that loyalty directed at Pettigrew made her uncomfortable.

“Oh and Remus and I have a meeting with McGonagall today about our Prefect duties,” Lily remembered out loud. She turned to Harry with a smile. “What about you?”

Harry basked for a second in Lily’s bright and warm gaze before answering.

“I think I’ll be in the library with Hermione. I haven’t finished my Transfiguration essay yet. Ron’ll probably join us since he hasn’t started it.”

“Do you want to go to the library together then, after breakfast?” Lily asked, addressing Hermione as well. “We could study together.”

“Can I join?” Alice piped up eagerly. “I still haven’t got perfect control over that spell McGonagall had us learn. Mostly because Marlene sucks at explaining things.” She gave Marlene a mischievous look. Marlene rolled her eyes as she put on her dressing gown.

“Will you be joining us too, Marlene?” Lily asked her.

“Oh, I suppose. Haven’t got anything else to do except study. How utterly boring. Will Potter and Black be joining us?”

“No, probably not. They’ve got their own things to do.”

“That’s a shame. I was looking forward to seeing Black try his luck with Harry here.” Marlene smiled at Harry, who was now embarrassed.

“I’m not into him like that,” Harry muttered, her face feeling warm. *I need to be more careful around him,* she reminded herself.

Marlene exchanged a look of gleeful surprise with Alice.

“I’d say that’s a first, wouldn’t you say so, Alice?”

“Yes, Marlene. No girl I know of has never not been interested in him. Except Lily.”

“Even you two?” Lily asked them, arching an eyebrow.

“I mean, he is kind of gorgeous,” Marlene said, shrugging, while Alice nodded, her cheeks slightly pink. Hermione and Lily giggled.
Harry felt awkward and amused at their confession. Young Sirius was very good-looking, she had to admit, but she found herself thinking of her godfather when she was around him, just as she thought of her parents when she looked at James and Lily despite her efforts not to. She finished putting on her robes and joined Hermione and Lily to make their way downstairs.

The boys were waiting for them in the common room this time. Hermione nudged Harry when Sirius sidled up to her as they walked to the Great Hall.

“So, Lady Harry, what are your plans for this fine and beautiful day?”

His voice was warm and pleasant like it had been the previous day and Harry couldn’t resist smiling back at him.

“Studying at the library. I still haven’t finished the essay for Transfiguration,” she answered.

“Oh, the library,” Sirius said, affecting a melancholy air as he shook his head at her answer. “The house of sadness where youthful dreams go to die.”

Harry and Ron laughed, but Hermione frowned.

“You studied at the library with us yesterday!” she pointed out to him.

“Well, I try not to, if I can help it. The only reason I went yesterday was for Lady Harry.”

Harry looked away from him as he smirked at her.

Hermione regarded him with haughty disapproval. “Studying is the foundation of a student’s career. If we don’t study, we might as well not be students,” she told him primly.

“But consider this, my lady,” Sirius began as he turned to her with a grave expression. “To be a student is to be young. And to be young is to be full of youth, which is so fleeting. Therefore, it is only reasonable that we delight in the fullness of youth while we still can. For instance, beauty is the dream of youth. And to submit oneself to the rigors of knowledge means to sacrifice one’s beauty to the harsh, unforgiving lines of a frown or a grimace as one suffers under the tyranny of intelligence. Of course, your lovely visage seems to be holding up rather well, but it would be a shame to lose such poetic elegance so soon. The world would cry wretched tears of misery if either your or Lady Harry’s unblemished feminine charms were forever lost, taken by the cold, unfeeling hands of academic proficiency.”

Harry burst out laughing as Hermione’s face turned bright pink and she barely saw where she was going. She bumped into Remus, who was in front of her.

“Sorry, Remus,” she gasped, still choking on her laughter.

“That’s all right,” he said as he helped her steady herself. “Are you okay, Harry?”

“Yes,” she said getting the last of her giggles out. She glanced at Hermione.

Bad mistake. Hermione’s flushed face set her laughing again.

Hermione shot her a reproachful look, but her twitching lips softened the severity of her expression. If anything, Ron looked more embarrassed—his face was red and he avoided looking at Hermione or Sirius, who looked rather pleased with himself.

Harry jumped slightly when Sirius put an arm around her shoulders. She looked up at him and he
smiled.

“I daresay you’re falling for me.”

Hermione stifled a snort next to Harry, who blinked and stared at him with astonishment. A cautious and uneasy feeling rose within her, but a spark of mischievous impulsiveness impeded it as a satisfied smirk spread over his face at her immediate lack of reply.

“I think not,” she responded, turning away from him dismissively. “I’ve never fallen for anybody and I certainly don’t plan to anytime soon.” She glanced at him and smiled as surprise flickered across his eyes.

The others laughed as they witnessed their exchange.

James’s eyes were gleeful as he turned to Sirius with a grin. “Your usual methods aren’t working, Padfoot. You better try harder or admit defeat.”

“A Marauder never admits defeat. It is beneath them,” Sirius replied, his expression becoming arrogant.

James turned to Remus. “Moony, how long do you reckon it’ll take Padfoot to seduce Harry? We should make a bet.”

“James,” Lily said, frowning at him.

“Oh come on, Lily. You can’t deny that it’s hilarious seeing Padfoot be rejected for once, or rather, several times now.”

“Well…”

“I am a Marauder, so I shall keep at my courting until she succumbs to my undeniable charm,” Sirius insisted as they entered the Great Hall.

Harry exchanged an amazed look with Hermione and Ron, whose eyebrows were raised. Courting? What a dramatic flirt. A scoff escaped from her as they reached their house table.

“Excuse me, I’m still here. And your charm is definitely deniable.” She shrugged his arm off her shoulders as they sat down at the table. Undeterred, he took his place next to her.

“How can I persuade you to like me, Harry?”

Sirius gave her a pout that reminded her of a puppy, which made her think of his Animagus form. She suppressed the grin that threatened to take over her face and regarded him calmly.

“I never said I didn’t like you. But I don’t care much for your style. It’s only the third day, you know.”

His eyes widened and his face lit up as if he had experienced an epiphany.

“Ahh, so the lady needs to be romanced!”

There was a spluttering noise as Ron choked on his tea. Harry stared at Sirius while Hermione patted Ron’s back and muffled her giggles.

Had her godfather really been this ridiculous when he was young?
“Or just give up,” she suggested hastily. “I don’t really do romance.”

He gave her a haughty look. “The more you deter me, my dear, the more I will be enticed,” he told her smoothly, as he reached for a plate of crumpets.

James arched an eyebrow at him and smirked. “I must say, that sounds rather insidious,” he teased.

“Oh please, Prongs, like you were any better with your secret stalking. I still remember how Moony, Wormtail, and I had to make sure you didn’t get caught trying to break into the Prefects’ Bathroom to sneak a peek at Lily in fifth year.”

The lid on the teapot clanged onto the table as Lily’s arm jerked up from her shock. Tea rushed out onto the pristine tablecloth as Lily froze and cast her blazing eyes on the Marauders, who gulped except for Sirius, who looked back at her calmly and gave her an insolent wink.

Her pink face turned darker by the second as her jaw dropped open.

“Excuse me?!” she screeched. She turned to her boyfriend furiously.

“James!”

James laughed nervously and shot Sirius a glare.

“Padfoot,” he growled.

“Prongs,” Sirius replied. He gave him a shit-eating grin.

Harry shared a wide-eyed look with Hermione and Ron, who put a hand over his mouth to suppress his mirth. She turned to James with a disappointed look.

“Really, James?”

Her father had definitely been an idiot when he was young. Sirius’s bark-like laughter filled the air as James stammered.

“James, I can’t believe you would—oh!” Lily let out a cry as she hid her red face in her hands, mortified. She lifted her face from her hands. “And Remus! Peter! You two enabled him! I can expect it from him—” she pointed her finger at Sirius, who blinked at her innocently, “but how could you two—” Groaning, she placed her face in her hands again.

James cleared his throat. “I, er, didn’t see anything, Lily. Filch almost caught us when Wormtail accidentally stepped on Mrs. Norris’s tail. She’d been sleeping near the door, you see.” He patted her on the back, looking extremely sheepish.

“We’re sorry,” Remus and Peter both muttered, looking chastised.

“Yes, I’m sorry too, Lily,” Sirius said cheerfully as he continued eating his breakfast.

Harry just shook her head.

Marlene and Alice met Lily and the trio at the library after breakfast.
The Marauders had gone back to the common room to help Peter finish his homework and to come up with ideas for “wonderful and wholesome visual attractions that the whole school would enjoy.” These words belonged to Sirius, who invited Harry and her friends to take part in them. Harry and Ron had been immediately interested while Hermione gave a disapproving sniff and reminded the other two of the work they had to finish.

“Maybe later, after we’re done,” Harry had told Sirius with a quick smile as she left for the library with her study group.

“I shall wait for you, my lady!” he had cried to her gallantly before he was dragged off none too gently by James, who was still embarrassed that his secret stalking had been revealed.

Marlene and Alice gossiped as they took notes and did their homework, with Lily occasionally adding to their conversation. Harry worked diligently on her essay, wanting to impress Lily, who she knew to be an academic genius like Hermione. She thought with some wry amusement that she would be more academically focused than ever in a time in which she did not belong. Hermione, who was studying ahead for Arithmancy, like Lily, helped Ron with his essay as well.

Ron decided he needed a break after only a paragraph in.

“I don’t think I even understand half the terms,” he muttered to Harry as he passed by her to walk along the aisles of books to stretch his legs. Harry had to agree. If it hadn’t been for Sirius’s help, she would have been completely lost.

They both managed to finish their essays by lunchtime to their great relief and satisfaction, although by the end of the second roll of parchment, both felt that their brains had melted.

“I can’t believe the new students are understanding the material better than we are,” Alice moaned to Marlene, who nodded with a self-suffering air.

“You three must have been homeschooled really well, to catch onto Hogwarts material so easily” Lily complimented them. Harry tried to not be too pleased with Lily’s impressed smile.

Marlene and Alice joined them and the Marauders for lunch and their eyes glittered with interest when Sirius took his seat next to Harry. Harry tried her best to avoid their intense gazes while Sirius chatted cheerfully with them.

“So, Black, I see that you and Harry Granger have become fast friends,” Marlene said conversationally. Alice stifled a giggle.

“Why, yes. We were utterly charmed by one another from the moment we met. Weren’t we, Harry dear?” Sirius leaned his head on Harry’s. Harry froze for a moment before deciding to let it be.

“Sure,” she replied with a shrug. Marlene and Alice laughed at Sirius’s crestfallen face.

“She’s just being shy. I know she’s absolutely enchanted by me,” he whispered to Marlene in a mock-confidential tone, making her giggle.

“Would you like to make a bet with me and Remus, Marlene?” James spoke up.

“A bet?”

“Yes, to determine how long it’ll take Padfoot to persuade Harry to go out with him.”
“Ooh, I think I will. What’s the prize?”

“Ten galleons.”

Marlene turned to Alice excitedly.

“How about it, Alice?”

“I think I prefer to just watch,” Alice said. She smiled at Harry. “I’m into investments with quick results. I’m not very patient, you see.”

“Oh!” James looked delighted. He turned to Remus. “That’s similar to what you said!”

“Hmm…” Marlene examined Harry with a critical eye. Harry shifted uncomfortably.

“I say it’ll take him ‘til Christmas,” she decided.

Sirius raised his eyebrows.

“Is no one confident in me?” he asked incredulously. Harry and Hermione snorted.

“I said it’ll take ‘til first Hogsmeade weekend at the latest,” James said. He slapped hands with Sirius.

“Knew you had my back, Prongs,” Sirius said, grinning.

“How long does it usually take for girls to go out with you?” Harry asked him, suddenly curious.

“A day,” Remus replied with a snort. He caught Harry’s gaze on him and cleared his throat. “Er, well, the most it ever took him was a week, but usually, it’s much sooner than that.”

His ears were pink.

“Hm. And how many girls did you go out with?” She turned back to Sirius, who opened his mouth but didn’t get to reply as six voices answered together.

“Practically the whole female population.”

“All the girls except the ones in Slytherin.”

“Every girl we know.”

“All the pretty ones.”

“I’d say about a hundred.”

“More than a hundred, probably.”

There was a pause as Harry waited for Sirius to recover. Hermione giggled quietly beside her.

“A fair amount, I’d say,” he said with a shrug.

“But not the whole female population?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”
There was laughter around the table as Sirius attempted to look dignified.

“Yes, Lady Harry.” He shot James a look, which made the latter choke on his pumpkin juice.

“But you did go out with all the pretty ones?” Ron asked for clarification. Hermione elbowed him. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Yes,” Sirius answered him, smirking a little.

*Figures you were popular with the girls, Sirius*, Harry thought drily.

“Well, all right then,” she said. “Good for you, Sirius.”

Sirius blinked at her, taken aback. “That’s it? No snide or clever comeback?”

“No. Why? Were you expecting one?”

“Ooh, she is so not interested, Marlene,” Alice stage-whispered. Marlene and Lily giggled madly.

“It appears that Harry is too good for you, Padfoot,” Lily teased Sirius with his nickname.

Sirius stared at Harry with fascination and disbelief.

“An enigma,” he murmured. Harry turned back to her food, ignoring him.

“Is he not your type, Harry?” Peter asked her. His blue eyes were wide with excitement as he anticipated her answer.

Harry took a second to respond, surprised that he, of all people, would ask her a question like that. Her eyes narrowed a fraction, but she schooled her expression into one of nonchalance.

“No really, no.”

*Ooh.*

Her teammates stared at her. Everyone except Sirius looked highly amused or delighted. Sirius was no longer smiling and he looked at her intently with piercing grey eyes.

“Then what is your type?” he asked her without any trace of lightheartedness.

“Don’t have one,” she answered. She felt oddly flustered under his scrutiny.

“Don’t have one or don’t know?” he pressed.

“Well, it really is none of your business.”

There was another “ooh” around the table. Harry caught Ron’s impressed gaze and smirked back at him. Sirius let out a bark-like laugh.

“You’re quite determined to keep me out of your life, aren’t you?”

She nearly lost her grip on her fork from shock as she tensed. A jolt of fear went through her and she felt cold. She knew she had to say something quickly to appear normal, but her brain wasn’t working.

“Oh honestly, Sirius, you’re so dramatic that you’ve put Harry at a loss for words. That’s your ultimate move, is it? Charming the hearts of girls through self-pity?”
Hermione saved her. Her airy, mocking remark had the others snickering.

Harry slowly put down her fork and ran a shaky hand through her hair before turning to Sirius, who smiled at her, to her surprise.

“Too much, was it? I tend to get carried away around gorgeous ladies like yourself. I do hope you can forgive me.” His grey eyes were bright and cheerful as he looked at her. Harry’s lips twitched uncertainly as she mustered up a smile.

“You really are ridiculous,” she murmured back, shaking her head. It was all she could say, but it had him laughing. She felt a gentle grip on her wrist and turned to see Hermione looking at her with concern.

She managed a half-smile and turned back to her unfinished lunch.

After the lunch from Saturday, it seemed that the Marauders, Lily, Marlene, and Alice had gained new respect for Harry, which naturally spread to Hermione and Ron as well. The trio were now included in every conversation and Ron was set upon by James and Peter in the boys’ dormitory to answer questions about Harry for the purpose of teasing Sirius, who tolerated and threw back their taunts, while Remus watched them with amusement and joined in when in the mood. Harry, for her part, had to endure Marlene and Lily’s teasing comments and Alice’s curiosity about her love life, which she particularly tried to evade. Hermione took pity on her when she saw the look of helpless panic on her face when either Marlene or Alice asked a probing question about her type—something she was unable to answer at all in any case—by restating and backing up her claim that she was simply uninterested in entering a relationship at all.

Apparently, no girl had ever dismissed Sirius Black’s charm and to do it repeatedly and so nonchalantly at that…

Harry found it ridiculous.

But not Sirius’s question, which echoed in her head.

“You’re quite determined to keep me out of your life, aren’t you?”

“He was joking, Harry,” Hermione had told her soothingly after that lunch.

But she took it personally.

She was determined to save him this time because she wanted to keep him in her life. He wasn’t going to leave her, not like that, ever again, if she could help it. Why else had she put him on the list? But it was impossible to make him understand, because it would mean spilling her secrets, which,
besides not being the right time to do so, was dead last on her mental list of priorities (or really, of things she wanted to do). So how to let him know that he did mean something to her? His behavior towards her was making her increasingly wary—she had been pulled into his flirting game quite unwittingly and she wasn’t sure whether it was better to cautiously humor him while making sure that they both didn’t go too far or to put an abrupt stop to it by confronting him.

She most certainly did not want to do the latter.

Because the problem was, she didn’t know what this Sirius really thought of her. Did he only see her as another girl that he wanted to charm? Or did he consider her as a friend? Would he consider being her friend if his efforts were unsuccessful?

He was friendly and sincere in his own way, as his immediate willingness to help her with her classes demonstrated. But even so, had he only been that way because it was all part of his plan to endear himself to her?

She did not know how to interpret this Sirius.

Had he meant the question that he had asked her?

The others, including Ron and Hermione, believed that he had not—they took it as another one of Sirius’s deliberately dramatic attempts to force a reaction out of her. But she remained uncertain. His demeanor in that moment had seemed genuine. Defensive, like she had seen and known from him in her time. To her, the words felt sharp and self-deprecating despite the casual way in which he had said them. She had made him feel like there was something wrong with him.

But there wasn’t. There wasn’t anything wrong with him! He was who he was. He hadn’t asked for any of those awful things to happen to him, like she hadn’t asked for her own miserable experiences. She didn’t want to see him like that again. She wanted him to be happy, didn’t she?

She would make sure that it didn’t go too far because it was Sirius, but she’d play along enough to keep him untroubled until he gave up or…until she actually meant something more to him than just a girl.

Like a good friend.

Sirius continued to sit next to Harry during meals for the rest of Saturday and Sunday and she continued to counter his efforts to charm her. His determination to capture her attention whenever they were together prevented her from talking much with anyone else, which she didn’t mind, as she hoped to learn more about him as a person.

But she quickly realized her error.

All she seemed to see was a mask when he turned to her. His expressions were always pleasant and cheerful as he bantered and teased while genuine reactions and emotions seemed to only be on display around his fellow Marauders and Lily. It was difficult to see past his playful front, which she had rarely, if ever, experienced with her godfather. The careless ease with which he flirted made her mind whirl as she attempted to keep up with his wit so as not to lead him on unintentionally.

But the delighted look in his eyes that quickly followed the fleeting disappointment on his face when she refused to fall for his antics seemed sincere. She didn’t know what to make of it. It was
frustrating, when she had been able to see him and understand him so easily before.

Inner turmoil concerning Sirius plagued Harry through the weekend.

Otherwise present over the weekend was Dumbledore’s letter, which Egmond delivered to her during breakfast on Sunday.

Egmond hooted in thanks when she gave him her unfinished bacon.

“Who’s that from?” Sirius asked as she picked up the envelope from her plate. She felt Hermione and Ron’s alert eyes on her as she looked at the familiar narrow handwriting on the front.

“Professor Dumbledore. I think he wants to know how we’re doing so far at Hogwarts.” A quick glance at the head table confirmed that the headmaster was indeed present and conversing with Professor Sprout.

“Smashingly,” James said.

“You reckon?” she asked, giving him a bright smile. Elation spread in her chest as he grinned at her.

“Well, let’s see: you immediately caught the eye of one Sirius Black, you and Ron play Quidditch, which is all right in my book, Lily seems to have found a new study partner in Hermione, Moony and Wormtail seem to have warmed up to you three, and you like pranks. And you’re a girl!”

Harry and Ron laughed while Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“What does Harry being a girl have to do with her being all right?”

“Do you know how rare it is for a girl to actually be interested in pranks?”

“Hm,” Hermione said, looking thoughtful.

James exchanged a quick look with his fellow Marauders before clearing his throat and regarding the trio with an official air.

“The Marauders are pleased to notify you three of your acceptance into our esteemed circle of friends,” he declared pompously. “You have the Head Boy’s stamp of approval as well. Please do feel honored.”

Sirius and Peter clapped politely as he inclined his head in a mock-bow, but Remus gave him a skeptical look.

“Head Boy’s stamp of approval? That doesn’t mean much, considering your impressive track record of detentions and mischief.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione snickered while James wagged a finger at Remus.

“Careful, Moony, or I’ll take points for that cheek!”

“I’m a Prefect, so I can take points from you too, technically. Do you really want to play this game, Prongs?”

“James, I’ll take points from you if you take points from Remus,” Lily joined the conversation.
James turned to her open-mouthed. “Lily, my dear! What for?”

“For abusing your power,” she replied calmly. “And for having a big head.”

“Having a big head is a medical condition for him by now, Lily. He can’t help it. It’d be unfair to punish him for being disabled,” Sirius pointed out. He ducked as a piece of toast came flying at his head.

“HA!” he yelled out in triumph as James growled furiously.

“PADFOOT!”

Three crumpets flew at Sirius’s head in quick succession. They all missed, as did the spoon that barely sailed past his ear.

Then a goblet of pumpkin juice came flying. Harry saw the liquid spill out of the cup, aiming for her face…

Something dark and warm engulfed her just as the juice was about to hit her.

The cup clanged as it hit the table. There was a warm breath by her ear.

“James!” she heard Lily’s scolding voice.

Harry blinked as the darkness shifted and she saw light again. Then Sirius’s face was right in front of hers, so close that she could count his eyelashes.

Which were long, she noticed.

His clear grey eyes peered into hers and she was unable to look away. She vaguely registered his hands on her arms.

“It didn’t get on you, did it?” His low voice broke her out of her daze.

“Oh, no, it didn’t,” she replied, startled. He smiled in relief.

It really is nice to see him smile, she thought as she automatically smiled back.

Something dropped down onto her lap and she glanced down to see the now-empty goblet, which had rolled off the table. Her eyes widened when she realized what had happened and she looked up at his face.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Sirius, it got in your hair.”

She hastily grabbed a napkin off the table and began drying the part of his hair that dripped with pumpkin juice.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she scolded him as she dabbed at his shoulder. “I can take care of
myself, you know. Getting pumpkin juice on myself is nothing.”

“What in Merlin’s name is going on here?!”

Harry stiffened with the others as the sharp voice hit them with the force of a whip.

It appeared that James and Sirius’s antics had caused quite a commotion. Heads turned from other tables as Professor McGonagall strode towards them with a stern expression on her face.

James gulped. McGonagall’s eyes zeroed onto him like a hawk’s.

“Mr. Potter! When I recommended your name as Head Boy to Professor Dumbledore, it was with the belief that you would severely limit yourself if not abstain completely from your typical shenanigans! Why is it that I see Mr. Black soaking wet and breakfast items discarded on the floor?”

“Er, you see, Professor…”

“It was merely an argument that got out of hand, Professor,” Remus covered for him quickly. “We’re all very sorry about it. We’ll clean up the mess ourselves.”

Professor McGonagall narrowed her eyes and examined all of them carefully.

“Five points from Gryffindor,” she said coolly. “I expect better from you, Mr. Potter. The responsibility that was placed on you through that badge on your chest is not to be taken lightly, am I understood?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And mind yourself next time, Mr. Black. I assume that you don’t want a detention this early in the term.”

“No, Professor.”

James groaned after their Head of House returned to her table.

“Nice going, Padfoot,” he snapped.

“I believe you were the one who threw that goblet of pumpkin juice, Prongs. Which almost hit Harry instead of me.”

Lily sighed. “Both of you were idiots. And apologize to Harry, James. She really would have been splashed with pumpkin juice if it wasn’t for Sirius.”

“I really am sorry, Harry,” James apologized to her. “I didn’t mean for you to get hit at all. I was aiming for that git next to you.” He scowled at Sirius, who looked back at him haughtily.

“Well, you did hit him in the end,” Harry said. “I think that should make us all even.”

Sirius shrugged as James narrowed his eyes at him. James extended his hand to him and they shook hands.

“Padfoot.”

“Prongs.”

They grinned at one another.
“What a gallant bastard you are,” James told Sirius, “It got you good though, didn’t it?” He gestured at the wet side of Sirius’s robes, which Harry was still dabbing at.

“Yes, it did. Imagine what it would have done to lovely Lady Harry here. Of course I sacrificed my dignity for her beauty.”

“Keep saying that and I’ll wish the juice had hit me instead,” Harry said drily. She drew back and looked him over with a critical eye. “I suppose you should be all right. Your hair’s still not wet, is it?”

She combed her fingers through the damp strands of his hair to make sure. She did not notice his intense gaze on her as she did this.

“Prongs,” Sirius said, still looking at Harry, “will you douse me with pumpkin juice at every breakfast? That way I can have Lady Harry’s hands all over me in the morning. That’ll set me up for the whole day.”

Harry glowered at him while James roared with laughter. He wasn’t the only one amused. Hermione and Lily giggled furiously while Ron coughed loudly. Remus and Peter laughed with James.

“Oh sod off,” she snapped at Sirius, shoving him away from her. She had just realized how close he had been leaning into her.

He answered her with his own joyous laughter, distilling her annoyance.

She glanced back at him with a small smile.

Chapter End Notes

When I envisioned Harry as a girl/female, I couldn’t help imagining that her (would-be) girlfriends, notably Hermione and Ginny, would have taken it upon themselves to give her some sort of makeover, as girlfriends typically like to do to one another, with Ginny roping in the twins to contribute financially as they owe Harry anyway. The idea for the corrective eye potion was inspired by LASIK’s implementation around the 1990s. I thought it’d be interesting to have a counterpart for it in the Wizarding World. (Yes, I am well aware that I’m a nerd)

As for Harry’s thought process, I wanted to portray her struggle to disengage her mental overlap between the Sirius she knew and the Sirius she never knew. It won’t be easy for her.

Does anyone want to take a guess at which person said what when Harry asked Sirius how many girls he’d gone out with? I can’t guarantee that I know the answers myself, but I’m interested in what you think.

-The choices would be: Marlene, Alice, Lily, James, Remus, and Peter.

Next chapter will take the characters through the rest of their core classes—Potions, Herbology, and Defense Against the Dark Arts and will mostly be in Remus’s POV.

Thank you so much for reading and for all the feedback! I am grateful for all your
support through your kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks, and comments.

Hope you all have a wonderful holiday :)

The trio were restless come Monday.

During the weekend, they had been careful to not wander too far from the Marauders, fearing that one of the four would consult the map to see where they were. They had thus been prevented from discussing their upcoming meeting with Dumbledore, which was set for Monday evening. It had also been impossible to stay up late for the sake of discussion as they had been unable to come up with a solid excuse, having finished their homework on Saturday.

So it was at breakfast on Monday that Harry attempted to confirm the meeting with Hermione and Ron, while the Marauders and Lily were occupied in their own conversations. The three of them would have to skip dinner, since the headmaster had requested that they meet him immediately after classes were finished for the day. She was just about to turn to Hermione when something touched her shoulder, making her start.

She shifted her face to see that Sirius had put his head on her shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

He lifted his head and gave her a pleading look.

“Would you run your fingers through my hair for luck, my lady?”

It took her a second to respond, during which Hermione attempted to muffle her giggles.

“Why do you need luck?”

“Because we have Potions today and I really need a pick-me-up if I’m to see Snape’s ugly git-face again.”

Ron choked on his food and Harry felt Hermione tense next to her. The three of them had conveniently forgotten that they would eventually run into Severus Snape in at least one of their classes.

James gave a dramatic sigh. “Ah, yes, that’s right. Snivellus.”

Peter sniggered while Lily gave James and Sirius a disapproving look.

“Why do you dislike him so much?” Harry decided to ask. Her mind flashed back uneasily to Snape’s memory of hanging upside down as James and Sirius jeered at him. Her godfather had never given her a good reason as to why he had been so hostile towards Snape, to the extent of trying to get him mauled by an unsuspecting, transformed Remus in his fifth year.

“He’s a creepy, greasy-haired git with a disgusting penchant for the Dark Arts.” Sirius’s eyes clouded over a little at the end.

*That’s not much of an answer, either,* Harry thought, disappointed. But what had she expected anyway? Sirius had tended to shut himself off whenever any strong feelings were involved.

She saw his face suddenly brighten. He grinned at her.
“Will you pet me, Lady Harry?”

Remus spat out his pumpkin juice.

His snickers turned into full-blown laughter when he realized that Sirius had become his unintended victim.

“Sorry,” he wheezed, as he put a hand on Peter’s shoulder to steady himself. “Didn’t mean to—” He ducked his head, shaking with laughter.

“You’ve completely murdered him, Padfoot,” James remarked. “I don’t think I’ve seen Moony this incapacitated by laughter, not even when all your underpants disappeared.”

“Sorry, what?” Lily raised an eyebrow at Sirius and smirked. “I think I’d like to hear that story.”

“Never mind that,” Sirius said quickly. He grimaced as he inspected himself. “Great, just great,” he muttered. “I’m covered in juice again.” Then his eyes widened and he turned to Harry eagerly.

“Will you dry me ag—”

Harry shoved a napkin at his face.

“There you go. Something to dry yourself off with.” She let it drop into his lap. The others laughed at the dismay on his face.

“Harry dear,” he pleaded, “You wouldn’t let me go to class like this, would you? You wouldn’t let Snivellus see me like this?”

“I don’t know who Snivellus is,” she replied coolly. It was true. She didn’t know the seventeen-year-old Snape.

He stared down at the table gloomily as she turned her attention to Remus, James, and Lily, who were discussing Slughorn with Ron and Hermione. It seemed that the professor’s habit of favoritism had not changed. James and Lily were members of the Slug Club, although James had attended almost none of the dinners or parties.

“Wait, your father invented Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion?” Hermione stared at James with her mouth open.

James grinned. “My wonderfully rebellious hair has been an inheritance from my father’s side of the family for generations, you see. He decided to try and do something about it to help my mother calm his hair down. His hair drove her bonkers when they had to dress up.”

I didn’t know my grandfather was famous in his own way, Harry thought, exchanging an amazed look with Hermione.

But that meant that a talent for Potions ran in her family. Not only through her mother, but through her paternal grandfather.

Where did I go wrong? she bemoaned herself.

She listened avidly as James and Lily continued to recount their experiences with Slughorn. Breakfast ended before she knew it, helped by their animated conversation, and she waved goodbye to Peter (albeit half-heartedly) with the others, as he headed back to the common room while they headed to Potions.
Harry noticed something odd as they walked to the dungeons. Several students passing them noticed as well and gawked at Sirius as they went by.

“Sirius,” she addressed him, “why is your face still wet?”

Strands of his dark hair stuck to his face as he lifted his chin haughtily.

“Don’t worry yourself over me, Lady Harry. It does not matter that the lady I adore has decided that I am unworthy of her attention when I am in so much distress. I am perfectly fine in my misery, thank you.”

Ron stared at him. “Merlin’s beard,” he muttered next to Harry. “Does he really mean that?”

“Of course not, Ron, he’s just—”

“Utterly shameless,” Harry finished for Hermione, shaking her head. The two girls exchanged an amused look.

“Sirius, would you like me to help you?” Lily offered. She took out a handkerchief from her robes. “You can’t honestly go to class like this.”

“Yes, I can, Lily. And I shall permit no touch except Lady Harry’s.”

Hermione started giggling.

“How about a quick spell to dry you off?” Remus offered. “I’m the one who did it to you.”

“No, Moony, I must be dried by Lady Harry’s lovely hands.”

“Sirius,” Harry groaned. “Stop being ridiculous.”

“There is nothing ridiculous about being ignored, Lady Harry.”

Something froze within her at his words and she grabbed him by the arm.

“Come with me,” she demanded, pulling him along with her as she made her way off the corridor filled with students hurrying to their first classes of the day.

“Harry? Where are you going? Class is about to start!” Hermione called after her as she and the others stared after them with astonishment.

“We’ll catch up, don’t worry! If Slughorn asks, tell him we’ll be along shortly!” Harry shouted back through the crowd.

She stopped in a deserted part of an adjacent corridor.

“Er, Lady Harry, you’re not going to hex me, are you?” Sirius asked her cautiously as she faced him with piercing eyes. She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Why would I do that?”

She took out her handkerchief from her robes and moved closer to him.
“Move your head down a bit, will you?”

He complied and gazed back at her with curious eyes.

Harry gently wiped the pumpkin juice off his face and dabbed at his robes in the same way as the day before. “Is that better?” she asked him when she was done. Her green eyes looked into his grey ones.

Sirius did not reply immediately.

He was surprised. True, he had wanted her to fall for his theatrics, but with what he had seen of her so far, he had doubted she would. So he had milked his little act for all it was worth.

And she had fallen for it. Very suddenly, too.

From what he knew of her already, she was not a person who easily acquiesced to others’ demands or wishes. She had a very independent personality, that much was already clear to him. But this curious capitulation to his act…

He took in her bright emerald eyes, the soft curve of her lips, her thin, pale face, and the long, dark locks that framed it.

An enigma indeed.

“Better,” he confirmed. He watched her lips curve into a smile.

“Good. Let’s head to class then. We’re probably late.”

Her green eyes seemed to twinkle as she turned back to the corridor that led to the dungeons and started walking.

“My lady, wait!”

She laughed as he ran to catch up with her.

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“Where do you reckon they are?”

Ron and Hermione whispered anxiously behind him.

Remus turned his attention back to Slughorn with some difficulty. He, too, was curious.

Class had just begun and Slughorn was in the middle of explaining about the rigors of the N.E.W.T.-level course they were taking. It was fortunate that he had yet to introduce the potion he wanted them to brew, since Sirius and Harry were still absent.

“Now remember, I may be a more generous teacher than the other professors at this school, but I am afraid that I must look upon your progress and efforts in this class with a sterner eye—”

The door opened, cutting him off. Everyone turned to look at the new arrivals.

“Sorry we’re late, Professor.”
Sirius, now all dry, flashed Slughorn his most charming smile. The girls in the class giggled.

“Lovely Lady Harry here was lost trying to find the dungeons. She’s a new student, you see. So I helped her find the way.” He slung an arm around her shoulders, to which she did not react.

*She really isn’t like the other girls who fall for his charm,* Remus thought.

But in a way, she had, when she dragged him off on their way here. Or had she just been exasperated? Sirius’s persistence could certainly get on one’s nerves. But seeing as he didn’t seem to have had any jinx performed on him…

Perhaps she had just given him a stern talking-to?

Slughorn gave the latecomers a jubilant smile. “Oho! Quite the gentleman as ever, I see, Mr. Black. And I assume the young lady is Miss Harriet Granger? One of the students who were previously homeschooled?” His large eyes glittered with interest.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, looking wary.

Remus didn’t blame her. Slughorn’s enthusiasm could really catch one off guard.

“Well, very good to have you both with us. Of course, I do expect you two to be on time in the future.”

“Of course, sir,” Sirius answered as he and Harry joined them at the front of the room. Hermione and Ron looked relieved as Harry drew near to them.

“I was just telling the class, Mr. Black, Miss Granger, that I expect more than my usual standards of satisfaction this year. I daresay that I am looking for near-perfection in your work to help you prepare for your N.E.W.T. exam.” Slughorn beamed around at them all.

Remus sighed.

He was not a deft hand at Potions like James, Sirius, and Lily. And certainly not on Snape’s level of mastery. He had no significant qualms with Severus Snape and was willing to admit that the Slytherin had an intuitive knack for potion-brewing, which was nonexistent in himself.

“I’m going to die in this class,” he heard Ron mutter.

“You’re not alone,” Harry added grimly.

“You two just need to focus. You both got Exceeds Expectations in your O.W.L.s for Potions,” Hermione whispered to them.

“That was pure luck,” Harry muttered back.

Remus blinked.

Exceeds Expectations? O.W.L.s? Weren’t they homeschooled?

He turned around and caught Sirius’s eye. They exchanged a bemused look.

“Today’s class,” Slughorn continued with the lesson, “will be a bit of a review. I want you all to identify this potion in front of me and replicate it with a partner since we have quite a few students this year. When you’ve got it, get started. Time’s up ten minutes before the end of class!”
Remus leaned towards the table in front of them to see which potion it was.

“Excellent, it’s the Draught of Living Death. I know how to make that one,” he heard Harry say with a relieved sigh.

“Great, you can partner up with me, then,” Ron said.

“What about Hermione?”

“You two go on. I can partner up with Remus. Is that all right with you, Remus?” Hermione turned to him with a smile.

“Yes, of course,” he said gratefully. Hermione seemed academically gifted from what he had observed and thus seemed like the type to know her way around Potions. He needed all the help he could get.

Ron and Harry rushed off to an empty table.

“But—” Sirius gave a mournful sigh.

“Padfoot, what are you waiting for? Let’s go.” James had come over to them and pulled at Sirius impatiently.

“Aren’t you with Lily?” Sirius asked, surprised.

“She saw how lonely you were and said she could partner up with that Ravenclaw girl, Gwenneth Tracey.”

“Great girl, that Lily,” Sirius said with a grin as he went off with James.

Remus and Hermione found a table as well.

“Do you know how to brew the Draught of Living Death?” Remus asked her.

“Yes. It’s no big deal, really.” She looked very businesslike as she began preparing the ingredients.

“Good thing you know what to do,” he said. “I’d probably end up burning everything.”

“But you did well enough to get here, didn’t you? Surely you’re not as bad as you think. Harry and Ron did rather well on their—” she stopped, her face pink.

Remus knew what she had been about to say. He waited for her to finish.

“On their…their…Potions lessons at home,” she stammered, her face more flushed than ever.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Were you three homeschooled together? I thought you and Harry met Ron while running away from the Death Eaters.”

“Oh, er, Ron told me. He told me he brewed a really good Hiccuping Solution once.” Hermione turned away from him quickly.

Odd. Very odd.

He had been thinking that perhaps the three of them had previously visited Hogwarts to take their O.W.L.s as homeschooled students often did, to have a formal academic record for their future careers. But Hermione had refuted what he had eavesdropped from them.
Why?

It was suspicious, he had to admit. Perhaps he would mention it later to his fellow Marauders. Still stuck in his thoughts, he added the valerian roots to the cauldron. The potion hissed and bubbled as its color changed to forest green. His eyes widened.

“Shit.”

Hermione peered at the potion. “Oh dear, you added the roots too soon, didn’t you?”

“I’m very sorry,” he apologized.

“It’s all right,” she reassured him. “I’m sure it can be fixed.”

He watched as she managed to get the color of the potion back to black currant.

“I really need to practice,” he muttered, shaking his head at himself. He helped her collect the juice from the sopophorous bean and stood back as she took care of the stirring. He looked around to see how the others were doing.

James and Sirius were practically done. The two Marauders chatted as Sirius lazily stirred the potion, which was in its final stage. Lily and Gwenneth were reaching the final stage as their potion was lilac. And of course, Snape was already done. The Slytherin sat back in his chair with his arms crossed, glancing every now and then at James and Lily through dark, brooding eyes. His lips curled into a sneer when James shouted something to Lily and Lily answered him back, grinning.

Remus turned around to look at Harry and Ron’s potion.

They were nearly done as well. Their potion was at the brink of completion as it grew paler and clearer with every stir that Harry gave. Ron watched the potion, mesmerized.

“Way to go, Harry,” Ron said. “I think this is the first time that I’ll end up with a perfect potion.”

Harry smirked. “Well I’ve already done this before, remember?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have that book anymore. Great memory, mate.”

Remus furrowed his brows. Things just kept getting stranger with them. Had they known each other when they were younger, after all? If so, why lie? Was it because Ron was a pure-blood and Harry and Hermione were Muggle-born?

He turned back to his and Hermione’s potion. It seemed to be in its final stage too, although it was pinker and opaquer that Harry and Ron’s.

“TIME’S UP!” Slughorn bellowed.

They all stepped back from their cauldrons as the professor began to make his rounds.

“Wonderfully done as always, Severus.” Slughorn beamed at the surly boy. “Five points for Slytherin.”

Remus heard Sirius mutter something to James, who snickered. Snape’s eyes flew to them and narrowed.

Lily and Gwenneth both won five points each for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.
“Surprisingly flawless as always, Mr. Potter, Mr. Black. Take ten points for Gryffindor.”

The two Marauders grinned at one another.

“Flawlessly done, mate,” James said, shaking hands vigorously with Sirius.

“Of course it’s flawless, it’s me,” Sirius replied arrogantly.

Slughorn chortled as he moved on to Remus and Hermione. He beamed as he peered into their cauldron. “Well, well. A very good effort, Mr. Lupin, Miss Granger. Right on the edge of completion. Just needed a couple more stirs. Five points each for Gryffindor.”

“Great job,” Remus murmured to Hermione, who smiled at him.

Slughorn moved behind them to Harry and Ron.

“OHO!” he cried delightedly, making heads turn to Harry and Ron’s table. Remus peered at their potion and saw that it was perfectly done. Certainly comparable to Snape’s.

“Splendidly done! Just splendid! And you two were homeschooled, weren’t you? What an excellent education you both must have received from your parents. Or perhaps, you two are just naturally talented?” He looked at them eagerly.

Ron’s face was bright red. “It was all Harry, sir,” he said with an embarrassed smile. “I just followed her directions.”

“Is that true, Miss Granger?

“Ron helped a lot too, sir.”

“Well, well, well! I think we have another natural genius on our hands! Severus, you better watch out or this young lady might replace you as the best potioneer in class!”

Harry’s face blanched and Ron made a choking noise. Remus glanced over at Snape, whose sharp eyes were now trained on Harry, who avoided his gaze.

“Ten points for Gryffindor!” Slughorn said cheerfully. “And take an extra five for sheer talent!”

Class was dismissed afterwards, but Slughorn called Harry and Ron to stay. Remus knew what the professor wanted with them—he was going to invite them to the Slug Club, like James and Lily. He waited outside the classroom with the others and watched as Lily jumped on Harry when she came out.

“Harry!” she beamed. “I thought you said you were terrible at Potions! But you’re amazing! Gwenneth and I managed to finish ours on time, but it was nowhere near perfect as yours.”

Harry looked startled by Lily’s enthusiastic praise. “Oh, no, it’s nothing, really,” she muttered, seeming embarrassed but pleased nonetheless. Her cheeks were lightly flushed. “It just happens that the Draught of Living Death is the only thing I can brew well. I’m rubbish at the other stuff.”

“Did he invite you two to the Slug Club?” James asked her and Ron eagerly. “I never go, but I might this year, since Lily and I got together recently and now I’ll have a reason to go, know what I mean? And if you two go as well, it’ll be a lot more fun, wouldn’t you say so, Lily?”

Lily smiled at him, blushing. “Yes,” she said, turning back to Ron and Harry. “We can make the best out of a normally shallow affair.”
“Yeah, he invited us.” Ron seemed awed. He turned to Harry, grinning. “How ‘bout it, mate? We’ll get to meet some famous people.”

“Er, I’ll think about it. I’m not really into fancy dinners or parties.”

“Oh Harry, come on…”

James, Lily, and Ron continued to try and persuade Harry during Herbology, while avoiding the poisonous flying needles from the innocently-named Dandelion Cushions. They had to retrieve the fine, silver hairs where the needles hid in-between and shot out when one pulled too hard on the hairs.

Remus was partnered again with Hermione, who seemed somewhat disgruntled as she none-too-gently yanked on the hairs, causing several needles to fly out at their eyes.

“That was close,” Remus muttered shakily as he poked his head out from beneath the table.


“It’s all right. We managed to dodge them,” he reassured her. “But are you okay?”

“Yes,” she sighed, picking up the tweezer to start pulling out the hairs again.

They were silent as they worked. To his left, he heard Marlene shriek as the Dandelion Cushion that she shared with Sirius ejected needles at their faces. Sirius laughed as he ducked, pulling Marlene down with him.

“You all right there, Padfoot?” James asked him, grinning. “Messed up your hair yet?”

“Shut it, Prongs,” Sirius answered, still laughing. “There was a stubborn hair that Marlene just had to pull.”

“I’ll pull your hair,” Marlene shot back. Then she grinned mischievously.

“So, how’s it going with Harry?”

“We found out she’s brilliant in Potions!” Lily answered before Sirius could. “She and Ron got invited to the Slug Club!”

“Oh, congrats” Marlene said, giving Harry and Ron an impressed look. “You two must have something special that Slughorn likes. He only picks the ones he thinks has career potential.”

Ron flushed with pleasure while Harry grimaced.

“She’s on the same level as Snape. Lily and I are just ecstatic.” James put an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “I am so proud of you, my dear,” he said, beaming at her.

Harry’s cheeks flushed red and she looked up at James with something like hope on her face. Were her eyes sparkling?

Remus glanced at Sirius.

Sirius’s gaze was riveted on James and Harry, who was now laughing at something James had just said. Lily joined in the amusement and put a hand on Harry’s arm, as she teased her in good humor.
Her whole face is glowing. Remus thought with wonder. Harry’s green eyes were shining brighter than usual and she looked happier than he’d ever seen her.

A strange feeling rose within him as he watched the three of them—it was as if he was observing a close-knit family. He was just realizing how similar Harry was to James, with her slightly unruly pitch-black hair and her thin, pale face. And her eyes…

They were an exact copy of Lily’s.

Harry was a bit taller than Lily, but as they stood together, side by side, Remus noticed how their figures seemed similar as well. Like she and Lily were sisters, instead of her and Hermione. Or conversely, she could probably pass as James’s sister.

He shook the thoughts out his mind, embarrassed. What was he doing? Checking out Harry?

That was Sirius, not him. Speaking of Sirius…

Remus glanced at him again.

Sirius had returned to keeping an eye on the Dandelion Cushion while Marlene pulled out the hairs, but his attention constantly shifted towards Harry. He stared at her with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Hermione giggled as she watched Harry with James and Lily.

“She looks so happy,” she murmured with a fond expression on her face. Remus saw her exchange a look with Ron, who had been watching Harry with a smile as well.

He filed away the scene to reflect on later with what he had overheard in Potions.

Lunch went differently than usual.

James and Lily pulled Harry into sitting between them at the table as they continued to chat with her about Slughorn’s parties and dinners. James regaled her with the tale of his first Slug Club dinner, making her and Lily laugh as the story turned more outrageous, complemented by his flamboyant gestures. Peter, who listened in on the story, almost got smacked in the face as James flailed his arm out a bit too widely.

“Oops, so sorry, Wormtail. Almost decked you in the head there,” James apologized with a sheepish laugh.

Peter turned to Remus, who sat across from him.

“Did something happen today in class?” he asked curiously. “They’re very enthusiastic with her today.” He indicated Harry, James, and Lily with a flick of his head.

Remus smiled. “I think Prongs and Lily have decided to take Harry under their wing. She was invited to the Slug Club with Ron today.” He glanced at Ron, who sat in Harry’s usual place, between Sirius and Hermione. Ron talked with Hermione and they occasionally joined in conversation with Harry, James, and Lily.

“They got invited? Really?” Peter asked, wide-eyed. He looked over at Harry with admiration. “She
must be really good at Potions.”

“Hm. Comparable to Snivellus, apparently,” Sirius answered in a flat tone. He pushed around the unfinished mash on his plate with a moody expression.

“Are you jealous?” Remus asked him with a quirked eyebrow.

Sirius gave a start and stared at him.

“What?”

“I said, are you jealous?”

“What do I have to be jealous about?”

Remus narrowed his eyes and took in Sirius’s tense shoulders and arms as well as the indignant frown on his face.

Interesting.

He shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe you wanted to try beating Snape yourself in Potions but Harry did it before you. Or maybe you wanted to be invited to the Slug Club too.” He watched his friend’s reaction carefully.

Sirius looked at him as if he was mad.

“What?” he barked. “I’m not jealous because of Snivellus! Why the bloody hell would I want to compete against a greasy-haired git like him for anything? And who cares about the bloody Slug Club? I’m not interested in joining anything that Regulus is in.” His grey eyes were furious.

Remus winced inwardly. He had forgotten that Regulus was in the Slug Club.

“Is everything all right, Sirius?”

Sirius was startled as he turned his attention to Harry, who gazed at him with concern. James and Lily were laughing with Ron and Hermione about something.

His face immediately cleared itself of its irritation and he put on a pleasant smile, something Remus regarded wryly—he had always been impressed with how Sirius could change his emotions at his whim. A strict, aristocratic upbringing did have its advantages.

“Yes, Lady Harry, why wouldn’t I be? You’re here, aren’t you?” Sirius flashed her a charming smile.

Harry’s eyes narrowed.

Sirius blinked with surprise as she rose from her seat and came over to his side. Remus moved over so that she could sit beside him.

“Missed my company, did you?” Sirius asked her archly as he turned to face her.

“More like you missed mine. I can be charitable,” she replied with a smirk.

Remus couldn’t help snickering with Peter while Sirius looked delighted at her smart remark.

“My lady has quite the personality,” he purred. His eyes turned mischievous. “I think I’m falling in
love.”

“Please don’t.”

Remus wheezed like he did at breakfast. Harry laughed.

“Need something to drink, Remus?” She poured him a gobletful of pumpkin juice and pushed it towards him.

“No, no, I’m fine. I’ll be fine, thank you.”

He lifted his face after composing himself and felt himself flush when she sent him a bright smile. “Am I that funny?” she asked him.

“It’s nice seeing Padfoot being put down every once in a while,” he managed to answer.

Damn, were his ears pink? If Sirius’s sly smirk was anything to go by, then yes, they were.

“Feeling a little warm there, Moony?”

*Padfoot, you git.*

“Yes, from laughing at your pathetic face,” he shot back. To his horror, Harry’s laughter at his retort made his ears burn.

“Well, well, well,” Sirius said drily.

Remus turned away from Harry and Sirius, feeling mortified. He looked up to see Peter staring at him with fascination.

“What?” he snapped defensively.

“Nothing.” A slow grin spread on Peter’s chubby face.

“Remus, your ears are red. Are you okay?”

Remus glanced at Harry and wished he hadn’t. She looked at him with soft green eyes full of concern. She touched his arm.

“Hey…”

He was relieved when Lily grabbed their attention by announcing that class would be starting soon. He stood up and turned away from Harry, rubbing at his face.

*Stop it,* he growled at himself. *Stop being ridiculous right this second.*

A hand touched his shoulder. He almost yelled out in surprise before realizing it was Peter.

“Is my face still red?”

“…Sorry?”


“Er, a bit. Not as bad as a moment ago. I’m sure it’ll go away soon. Just calm down.”

“Right.”
He followed the others out of the Great Hall with Peter. They were behind Sirius, who had put an arm around Harry’s shoulders. Remus concentrated on calming himself down as they made their way to the third floor for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

The classroom door was locked when James tried it. Murmurs broke out among their fellow Gryffindors and the Ravenclaws with whom they shared the class.

“Did you try *Alohomora*?” Frederick Buckley, a Ravenclaw, called out from the crowd.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to force open a door that’s been left locked by a professor,” Hermione responded back. “We should just wait.”

“Well,” Lily said, looking at her watch, “there’s still three minutes before class starts, so it’s not too bad.”

“Who’s the professor this year?” Peter asked.

“Hector Harpinger, I believe,” Remus recalled. “He was absent for the Welcoming Feast, so I dunno what he looks like, but I overheard Flitwick talking about him with McGonagall.”

“Who used to teach for the past years?” Ron asked.

“Oh it changes every year. The post is jinxed, you see,” Sirius replied.

“Really? Even in this time?”

Harry and Hermione stiffened. Ron, after realizing what he had said, also froze and slowly turned red. He cleared his throat.

“I, er, I just meant that it’s dangerous nowadays and I would’ve thought that maybe the post would be filled longer. The three of us have heard rumors about the post being cursed as well.”

Remus exchanged a look with Sirius like they had in Potions. Sirius gave a small shrug. *Later,* his expression said. Then he leaned his head on Harry’s and nuzzled her hair with his face.

“Mmm, is that bergamot I smell? I like it,” he said in a low purr.

Hermione entered into a fit of giggles. She wasn’t the only one. The other girls who waited with them outside the classroom blatantly stared at Sirius and Harry and murmured among themselves. Some of them looked peeved. But Marlene and Alice, who were also in the crowd, were ecstatic.

“They’re so adorable!”

“Oh, but look at her face!”

Harry, who had frozen in shock when Sirius’s nose had touched her hair, looked resigned.

“You really are a dog, aren’t you?” she said to him drily.

The Marauders exchanged a swift look.

“What makes you say that?” Sirius asked. His eyes watched her face carefully.

“Oh I dunno. Maybe it’s your easily excitable personality, your touchy-feely ways, or the dumb look
of happiness you get on your face when someone pays attention to you.”

Remus laughed with his friends at her response. But he caught the way Sirius’s expression became pensive as he continued to study Harry, who looked up at him. Harry’s smile slipped when she caught the solemnity in his face and her brows furrowed. But as soon as she realized it, Sirius’s face turned mischievous and a roguish glint appeared in his eyes.

“Well, I am a dog for you, my dear,” he replied in a husky murmur, leaning his face closer to hers, so that their noses barely brushed.

Remus raised his eyebrows while his friends choked with laughter and excited murmurs ran through the girls who watched the scene. It wasn’t that Sirius wasn’t usually forward with the objects of his flirtation, but it seemed as if he was willing to go to extra lengths for Harry.

Harry’s cheeks flushed red and she swiftly turned away from him.

“Sirius,” she groaned, with her hands on her face. She shook her head. But she ended up laughing as well. Sirius, looking absolutely delighted with the reactions he received, pulled her close to him again with a wide grin. An air of haughtiness exuded from him.

“Well. Everyone seems to be in high spirits today.”

The voice brushed over them like a breath of cold, dry wind.

The laughter stopped and they all turned to look at the man who made his way towards them from the other side of the corridor.

Their professor had arrived.

Professor Hector Harpinger was tall, thin, and not a little severe-looking with his short, half-brown, half-grey hair and his flint-like face. Pale blue eyes wandered over them as they stood silently and Remus felt a shiver go down his spine as they passed over him. The students made way for the professor as he walked to the door. He took out his wand, which contrasted ludicrously with his tall stature as it was quite short, and flicked it at the doorknob, which unlocked with a sharp click.

The door yawned open as he stepped forward and entered the classroom. They followed.

“Stop.”

They froze in place behind the professor, who held an arm out before their seats. He raised his wand and waved it over the tables and chairs, which were levitated and pushed to the back of the room, where they landed in neat, organized stacks, leaving most of the room open and empty.

“Gather in the middle.”

Feet shuffled as they quickly made their way past him into the middle of the room. He faced them from the front with an impassive gaze. There was not even the slightest hint of a whisper, although the Marauders, especially James and Sirius, watched the professor with eyes brimming with interest and curiosity. Who was this man that Dumbledore had hired to teach them in their final year, during the worst year yet of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s reign of terror?
“I am Professor Hector Harpinger, your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” the man introduced himself in a cool, rigid voice after he had taken attendance.

“My goal for this class is to not only prepare you for your N.E.W.T. examination, but to also make sure that you can make it out alive in the unfortunate case that you find yourself face to face with a Death Eater, or most unhappily, with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, in which case, you will most likely end up dead, if he doesn’t care to torture or use you first.”

Several people gasped. Remus could feel the tension and fear among the students. He didn’t blame them. Harpinger’s words were harsh, unfeeling, and unexpectedly brutal.

But true.

And Remus wasn’t afraid to face the dark and bleak reality of their time.

A sort of excitement subtly glittered in James and Sirius’s eyes. But Peter was as pale as a sheet and his lower lip trembled. Remus put a firm hand on his shoulder to reassure him. He glanced at his other friends to see how they took it.

Lily, Hermione, and Ron were pale. But they looked back at the professor determinedly like James and Sirius. Harry’s stance and expression surprised him, however. Unlike the others, who were rigid with anticipation or fear, she was calm. There was a grim set to her eyes that spoke of resignation and a ready alertness.

She had the look of an experienced fighter.

Remus wondered if her experience of running away from the Death Eaters had anything to do with it. Had she actually gone up against one of them?

It seemed that Harpinger’s thoughts ran similarly to his, as the professor’s shrewd gaze lingered longest on Harry, who did not blink when he stared directly at her. Remus thought he saw a flicker of intrigue in the ice-like eyes.

“Now that the introduction to the class is over, let us begin. How many of you have been in a duel? And by duel, I mean a real, serious one and not the kind that you play with your friends. Hexing or jinxing others for sport or in a spurt of malice in the corridors do not count, either.”

The mildness of his voice and demeanor caught them off guard. His previously frigid eyes were now thoughtful as they took in the number, or rather, the lack of hands in the air.

James and Sirius looked put out. Certainly, the Marauders had dueled one another before, for sport and for practice, as the times grew darker, but according to Harpinger, they were out. Quick scuffles with Snape or other Slytherins did not make the cut, either.

No one raised a hand.

Not even Harry, who Remus now believed to have likely stood up against a Death Eater. He did not think her eyes lied…

But he did manage to catch the swift and nearly imperceptible glance that the three formerly homeschooled students gave one another as well as the flash of conflict on their faces. They were definitely hiding something about their background and what had happened to them. Harpinger seemed suspicious as well, as his gaze lingered on Harry again.

“Well,” he addressed the class, while yet maintaining eye contact with Harry, who looked back at
him with a guarded expression, “I cannot say that I am surprised by your lack of experience. Dueling for your life is not a typical occurrence, after all. But it can become a practice if our world becomes darker still.” He finally shifted his eyes away from Harry’s.

“Vigilance is a virtue in these dangerous times. It is disastrous to believe that no harm will come to you just because you have not been subjected or been a direct witness to our contemporary horrors. The fact is, you do not know when, where, and how you will be attacked. My primary goal other than your ability to take the examination, is to do my damnedest to help you survive outside of the protection of this school, in the arena of vicious reality. Therefore, all of our lessons will be hands-on in one way or another. The textbook will only be necessary as needed for a deeper comprehension of the principles of defense behind the spells you will be using.”

A rapid stream of murmurs broke out among the students while he paused for breath. Remus couldn’t help the excitement that bubbled up in his chest. Finally, they would be learning and doing something useful that was directly relevant to their lives.

As a werewolf, he was more worried than his fellow Marauders about a future after Hogwarts. Due to his condition, he did not see how he would be able to make a living, let alone remain unscathed under the threat of the Death Eaters, who were notorious for their pure-blood ideology, which detested “half-breeds or half-humans,” as they put it, like himself. He would need to do all that he could to at least make sure that his parents would not pay the price for his less-than-desirable existence.

“Your training begins today,” Harpinger continued as the room constricted back into tense silence. “For today and the next few lessons, you will be performing basic spells of defense against one another. I assume that you all know the basics, but not necessarily how to use them well or effectively. Starting today, you will practice dueling one another.”

With a wave of his wand, he had the room enlarged. He separated them into two groups and had each group stand at opposing sides, so that they faced one another. Remus, Ron, Lily, and Peter were in the same group while James, Sirius, Harry, and Hermione were in the other. They were to duel in the middle of the room after the professor demonstrated which spells he wanted them to practice.

They all held their breath as Harpinger walked into the middle. His eyes glittered and he smiled, unnerving them.

“I need a volunteer,” he said calmly.

No one moved or said a single word.

Then,

“I volunteer, sir,” James said, stepping out from his place.

Remus felt Lily shift next to him.

“Hm,” Harpinger said, looking not at James, but behind him. “I change my mind,” he said abruptly, startling them. Everyone’s eyes moved to where the professor’s attention was fixed.

On Harry.

Her stance was tense and alert as she stared back at the professor defiantly.
“Miss Harriet Granger, is it? Would you kindly be my partner for the demonstration? You seem to have the look of experience about you.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron moaned next to Remus at the same time that Lily whispered in a panicked voice, “Oh, what is he doing?”

“But—” James began to protest, glancing back at Harry worriedly.

“Miss Granger, if you would,” Harpinger cut across him.

Remus saw James exchange a wide-eyed look with Sirius as he retook his spot at the wall, while Harry stepped forward. Hermione’s face was bloodless and her eyes anxious. Remus himself was unnerved.

True, he didn’t know the extent of Harry’s abilities and Hermione had mentioned that she was skilled in defensive spells, but all the same, he was afraid that she would get hurt in some way. He felt a spark of indignation towards Harpinger for forcing Harry to duel him when she clearly did not want to.

He turned to Ron. “Didn’t Hermione say Harry’s good at defensive spells?”

“Yeah, and she really is, but we don’t know how good he is.” Ron’s face was pale.

“H-He’s not going to hurt her, is he?” Peter asked shakily as Harry and Harpinger faced each other.

“Of course not, he’s a professor,” Lily answered. But she gripped Remus’s wrist tightly.

“Thank you for your help, Miss Granger,” Harpinger said, giving the girl a courteous bow.

“Of course, sir,” Harry replied, regarding him with sharp and wary eyes.

Remus felt a tingle of admiration. She was tough, all right.

There was gleam of satisfaction in Harpinger’s eyes as he straightened himself.

“For today’s dueling practice,” he addressed the whole class, “You will be performing the Disarming Charm. Now, since I want this to feel like a duel, I will allow you to use spells other than the Disarming Charm itself to disarm your opponent. *But only to disarm.* I will not tolerate any extraneous jinxes, hexes, or curses. Do I make myself clear?” His tone took on a sharp snap at the end.

“Yes, sir,” everyone chorused.

“Those of you who utilize the Shield Charm correctly and effectively to defend yourself will receive extra points for your house. Remember, the spell is, *Protego.*”

“*Protego,*” they repeated.

He turned to Harry. “Can you tell me, Miss Granger, what the spell is for the Disarming Charm?”

“*Expelliarmus,*” she answered without hesitation.

“Very good. Take a point for Gryffindor. And I trust you know what color it is?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed a fraction. Ron shifted next to Remus.
“Red.”

“Take another point for Gryffindor. Now,” he said, turning back to the class, “Miss Granger and I will demonstrate a bit of dueling. Miss Granger, I want you to use the Disarming Charm against me, understood?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And normally,” he continued, “There is dueling etiquette, but in a duel out in the real world, you will hardly have time to exchange bows with your opponent, especially if that opponent happens to be a Death Eater. The key is to be vigilant.”

He turned back to Harry. “Any questions before we start?”

“Do we need to perform the spells nonverbally?”

Harpinger looked thoughtful. “It is not necessary, no. But as with the Shield Charm, if anyone manages to disarm their opponent nonverbally, I shall give extra points, since nonverbal usage is a strategical advantage. But I must advise you, certain spells are stronger when they are cast out loud, like the Disarming Charm.”

Remus sucked in a breath with the rest of the class as Harry and Harpinger faced one another with their wands out in front of them. He winced as he felt Lily’s grip grow tighter on his wrist. Harry’s green eyes watched Harpinger unblinkingly.

“Whenever you’re ready, Miss Granger. We shall both try to disarm one another.”

There was no movement from either Harry or Harpinger for a full three seconds.

Then Harry took a step forward and Harpinger made a sudden movement with his wand. But Harry was faster.

“Expelliarmus!”

The class watched as a red jet of light shot out from Harry’s wand and hit Harpinger square in the chest. The professor stumbled back and his wand flew out of his hand, arcing towards Harry, who caught it.

There was a beat of stunned silence.

Remus’s brain tried to catch up with what had just happened. Harry had moved so quickly. How was she so fast? She had just beaten the professor!

“YEAH, HARRY!”
Remus jumped violently at Ron’s roar.

“Great job, Harry!” Hermione also cried.

Then there were cheers as everyone, including the Ravenclaws, followed suit. Remus and Peter clapped enthusiastically with the others and Lily murmured rapidly in relief.

“Oh, she’s safe, thank goodness she’s not hurt.”

Across the room, Hermione shook James’s arm excitedly as he and Sirius gaped at Harry.

The room gradually quieted as Professor Harpinger straightened himself up.

“That was quite impressive, Miss Granger. Quite a potent force behind your spell. Marvelously done. Take another five points for Gryffindor.” His eyes glittered as he looked at her.

Murmurs of appreciation ran among the Gryffindors.

“But I must say that was too short. If you don’t mind, Miss Granger, I’d like to try again.”

There was a pause before excited whispers broke out.

“They’re going to duel again!”

“But she’s already beaten him!”

“Wicked. Reckon she’ll get the best of him again?”

“Probably not for the second time, he’s a professor.”

Lily and Ron both groaned next to Remus.

“I don’t think I care for him,” Ron growled, glaring at Harpinger. “The hell’s he playing at? He’s a professor, isn’t he? Why does he keep going if she’s clearly uncomfortable?”

“I don’t care for him much, either,” Lily agreed, also regarding the professor with fierce eyes.

Remus frowned as well. “Yes, he seems a bit too enthusiastic about her.”

A glance at the other side of the room confirmed that James and Hermione were not happy either, as they both looked indignant. Sirius’s brows were furrowed, but there was a spark of intrigue in his eyes as he watched Harry.

“This time, Miss Granger,” Harpinger started again, “I want you to perform the Shield Charm. We will try to disarm one another by means other than the Disarming Charm.”

What? Remus thought, appalled. Who did Harpinger think Harry was? A professional duelist?

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied.

A hush fell over the room once more as the two opponents faced each other. And again, Remus couldn’t help but be impressed by Harry’s resolve as her eyes immediately focused on Harpinger. Her body tensed, ready to move into action.

There were several shrieks from the girls as a bright-red jet of light shot at Harry from Harpinger’s wand.
“Protego!”

Remus thought he felt the reverberation of the impact as Harpinger’s spell was repelled by Harry’s powerful Shield Charm.

Harpinger ducked, narrowly avoiding his rebounded spell, which soared past him and hit one of the stacked chairs.

The room gasped when the chair exploded. Remus felt himself go pale.

Then everything happened so quickly that he was unsure of how exactly it had all gone when he reflected on it later.

Wands flashed as Harpinger and Harry shot spells at one another. Remus barely registered what spells were being shouted, riveted as he was on the action taking place. Shield Charms were cast, spells deflected, and spells were cast again as the duelists moved forwards and backwards from one another. Two jets of light hit each other then rebounded, causing both Harry and Harpinger to duck. Another chair exploded and the blackboard at the front of the room splintered.

The audience gasped, shrieked, and yelped. Remus’s whole arm went numb from Lily’s vice-like grip on his wrist.

Then Harpinger’s wrist flicked swiftly as he aimed his wand at Harry.

“Petrificus Total—”

“Stupefy!” Harry yelled, her wand pointed straight at him and her eyes blazing.

Harpinger barely had time to put up a Shield Charm. He was not Stunned, but was sent stumbling back as his hastily-put-up shield was unable to fully deflect the spell. He almost tripped backwards on his robes.

“Accio wand!”

Harpinger’s wand zoomed out of his slack hand and into Harry’s.

Harry panted from exertion as she continued to keep her eyes on Harpinger, who was attempting to collect himself. She held his wand in her left hand while her right hand still had her wand trained on him. The only audible sounds in the room were Harry’s harsh breathing and Harpinger’s rustling and shuffling as he pulled himself back together.

“Bloody hell,” Ron croaked.

Remus felt as if he himself had been hit with the Stunning Spell. He gaped at Harry like the others.

“T-That was—”

Remus turned his attention to James, who was stammering.

“BRILLIANT!” James roared, making the whole class, including Harry, jump.

James clapped furiously, followed by Sirius and Hermione, then the rest of the students, who cheered.

“Absolutely brilliant, Harry, just like Prongs said!” Sirius whooped, grinning. Astonishment and something else, something deeper, shone out of his clear grey eyes.
Harry blinked and turned her head towards them. Her wand, Remus noticed, remained fixed on Harpinger, as did her ready-to-duel stance. He could not see the expression she made, but the two Marauders beamed back at her.

Harpinger cleared his throat and the noise gradually ceased. Several people continued to murmur quietly.

“I think,” he said, turning to Harry, who relaxed her pose and lowered her wand, “That makes another five points for Gryffindor for successfully disarming me and for the excellent use of the Shield Charm with an extra two points for using it both verbally and nonverbally.”

Harry looked surprised. “I didn’t realize I used it nonverbally.”

“You were very much focused on our duel, so it’s understandable. Tell me, Miss Granger, have you dueled before?” He regarded her with expectant eyes. And Remus knew that Harpinger knew the answer too.

Harry’s mouth thinned and her jaw twitched.

“Yes,” she admitted quietly.

“Yes, I thought so. Those lightning-fast reflexes of yours can only come from experience. As would the force behind your spells. You see, you’ve got to mean what you cast for the spell to work properly. And the kind of resolution you displayed today through your spells, Miss Granger, cannot be learned. It has got to be felt, and experienced.”

His eyes glittered as he smiled.

“Well,” he said brightly, turning to the class, “I hope you all observed both duels closely. Since it is a double period, I trust that everyone will have time to duel one another. Miss Granger, you are excused from further duels for the day. You may watch with me on the sidelines. Everyone else, straighten up in your lines and when your name is called, step into the middle and begin your duel. Remember, I am looking for the use of the Disarming Charm and the Shield Charm. And the point of this exercise is to disarm, not injure or humiliate. Now ready yourselves!”

There was a flurry of activity as the students straightened themselves along the walls. Harpinger and Harry moved off to the front of the room, where Harry returned to the professor his wand.

Harpinger called the first two students forward.

“Angela Oswald and Frederick Buckley.”

The two Ravenclaws stepped into the middle and eyed each other nervously. Their wands trembled in their hands.

“Just to make it a little easier, focus primarily on the Disarming Charm and the Shield Charm if you’re at a loss for what other spells to use. I am not expecting to see a fierce fight for survival. I am merely interested in seeing that you can perform your spells competently. For now,” the professor finished ominously.

Angela and Frederick gulped. Then Angela raised her wand and aimed it at Frederick.

“Expelliarmus!”

A red spark of light flew out from her wand and Frederick’s wand twitched.
“Expelliarmus!” Frederick yelled next, pointing his wand at Angela.

Remus wasn’t sure if it was because Angela had flinched, but all the same, her wand lurched out of her hand and dropped to the floor.

“Try it again,” Harpinger told them. “And mean it this time, both of you.”

Angela and Frederick faced each other again.

“Expelliarmus!” Angela yelled in a stronger voice.

Frederick’s wand gave a definite jump and arced towards Angela but fell short before her outstretched hand.

There was an appreciative “ooh” around the room.

“Better, much better,” Harpinger said, smiling. “A point to Ravenclaw for Ms. Oswald.”

The class clapped as Angela and Frederick stepped off to the side to join Harry and Harpinger.

Remus felt nervous and excited as he watched his classmates attempt to disarm one another while awaiting his turn. He was unsurprised at their general lack of competency in casting the Disarming Charm, let alone the Shield Charm, which only one of them had attempted to use so far—it only half-succeeded as Marrick, the one who cast it, got only one twitchy ear from Alice’s Twitchy-Ear Hex, which caused him to drop his wand anyway, as the hand that held it automatically went to his ear.

Harpinger was the first Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to actually have them perform spells on one another.

In previous years, they had only learned about defense theory, the principles behind basic spells, the names of spells, and dark creatures. Reflecting on it now, Remus realized how appalling it was that they had not been taught how to properly defend themselves, especially in a time when it was most necessary to know how to survive. He knew that their parents had something to do with it, as they wanted to keep their children safe. There had been several high-profile cases put forward by anxious parents to the Hogwarts Board of Governors in the last couple of years to prevent the school from teaching or engaging in anything that seemed to suggest resistance against the Death Eaters or worse, You-Know-Who, which included the practical application of rudimentary defense skills. Remus knew that their fears were not unfounded—for these parents of half-blood or pure-blood students, it was most pragmatic to be as passive as possible by neither supporting nor opposing You-Know-Who, in order to lead a semblance of a normal life in these unstable times. It was likely that the headmaster, who had done his best to respect and sympathize with their wishes, had now decided that enough was enough and that the students needed to know as the days grew darker.

In the meantime, Remus and his fellow Marauders had become frustrated with the situation and had begun dueling amongst themselves, not only for sport, but for their own protection and survival as well. Each of them was in danger in one way or another:

As a half-blood and a werewolf, Remus knew he had a shaky future in front of him. He had heard that You-Know-Who was recruiting werewolves for his cause and of course, he was repulsed by the very notion of it. But how long would it take for You-Know-Who to approach him and target him when he refused his offer of power?

James was a pure-blood, but the Potters were known to have been historically sympathetic to Muggles and had even married them into their line. The Death Eaters would not look upon him
passively.

Sirius, on the other hand, came from the elite of the elite. Not only was he a part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but the Blacks were considered particularly pure, as implied through their motto, regardless of how Sirius himself felt about it. He was no longer the heir, but he still had the birthright. You-Know-Who would most certainly seek him out after he left Hogwarts, as he still carried the family name.

Peter was also a pure-blood, but blood purity ceased to matter when one defied You-Know-Who, as the several murders of pure-blood witches and wizards that had been covered in the *Daily Prophet* exemplified.

Remus refocused his attention on the duel taking place at Harry’s yell.

“You can do it, Ron!” Harry encouraged Ron, who stepped into the middle to face Casper Darvish, a Ravenclaw. Both opponents looked determined as they faced off.

Casper raised his wand.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

“*Protego!*” Ron bellowed at the same time.

Casper threw himself to the ground as his spell rebounded off Ron’s shield. He scrambled back up after the spell cracked a table in two.

“*Expelliarmus—*”

“*Immobulus!*”

Casper was effectively frozen in place as Ron rushed to him and took his wand from his rigid fingers.

“Excellent use of the Shield Charm. I’ll take that in place of the Disarming Charm. One point for Mr. Weasley. Nice work,” Harpinger told Ron as he joined the students who had already dueled. Ron grinned and bumped shoulders with Harry, who grinned back.

Then it was Remus’s turn. He was up against Hermione.

“Damn, who do we cheer for?” he heard James mutter to Sirius.

“Go Remus! Go Hermione!” Lily cheered.

“There’s your answer,” Sirius replied.

“Moony, you beast, do treat the lady kindly! Hermione, don’t be afraid to go all out on him!” James yelled at them.

Remus sighed and Hermione snorted.

“*Mean it, Hermione!*” Harry shouted to her. Hermione looked startled for a moment as she caught Harry’s eyes behind Remus, then nodded back. Her expression became resolute.

“Don’t hold back on me just because I’m a girl, Remus. I’m certainly not going to hold back on
“You,” she told him firmly.

“Oh, er, all right,” he agreed, taken aback. But even so, he couldn’t possibly go all-out on a girl, who was also a friend…

They faced each other. Remus watched her carefully, trying to gauge what move she would make. She made as if to start forward.

He raised his wand, but paused. Hermione took advantage of it.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Protego!” he yelled hastily.

Hermione ducked as her spell sped by her, breaking yet another chair.

She flicked her wand at his feet. The floor turned slippery under him and he almost face-planted into the ground. His feet would not stay still in one place and he struggled to focus his wand on her as she raised hers again.

“Expelliarmus!” he yelled this time.

“Protego!”

“Protego!” he cast the Shield Charm again as his own spell bounced back at him. He could not afford to cast anything else at the moment, as it was difficult enough to make sure his feet did not slip.

“Finite!” Hermione cried at the same time his Shield Charm went up. The rebounded spell disappeared. She pointed her wand at him.

“Expelliarmus!”

His wand flew out of his hand and was caught by Hermione. Cheers followed them as they made their way off the dueling area.

“Excellent work, both of you. Great reflexes. Take five points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for the effective use of both the Disarming and Shield Charms as well as performing a nonverbal spell,” Harpinger told her with a smile.

Hermione grinned as she joined Harry and Ron, who hugged her.

“Great job, Remus,” Harry complimented him as he reached them. She beamed at him.

Not again! he thought in dismay as he felt heat creeping up his face at her pretty smile.

Wait. What?

He was very flustered as he attempted to smile back at her. “Thank you, Harry, but Hermione was brilliant. I really shouldn’t have underestimated you,” he told Hermione sheepishly.

Hermione gave him a good-natured smile. “It’s all right. I’m used to being thought of as only a bookworm,” she said with a haughty lilt to her voice, making Harry and Ron laugh. The four of them turned their attention back to the middle of the room, where Sirius and Lily were facing off.

“This ought to be good,” Ron said to Harry, who grinned.
“I hope Lily wins.”

“Brutal,” Ron said, shaking his head, while Hermione giggled. “Sirius can’t catch a break, can he?”

“BE A GENTLEMAN, PADFOOT!” James bellowed at Sirius. “If you hurt her, I will end you! I’ll burn off your hair and make sure nothing grows on your head ever again!”

The class laughed and Sirius rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know if you remember, Prongs,” he drawled, “but Lily here is the one who hit you with the hex that made you sprout antlers on your head in fourth year. She’s more than capable of defending herself than you think.”

“Why, thank you, Sirius,” Lily said. “But I hope you’ll still think well of me when I successfully disarm you,” she added with a wicked smile.

Sirius turned back to James. “I think my point has been made.”

The opponents eyed each other warily. Sirius’s face was free of its usual jovial grin as his mouth was taut and his grey eyes watched Lily keenly. Lily’s stance was cautious as they slowly circled one another. They both retained eye contact.

“Expelliarmus!” Lily attacked first.

Sirius parried it with a swift movement of his wand and her spell rebounded, forcing her to duck. Another chair was smashed. Remus heard Harpinger sigh.

“I’ll probably have to foot the bill for all those chairs,” the professor muttered.

A red jet of light came flying at Sirius as Lily cast a spell nonverbally. It met with his own jet of red light and the clash emitted a profusion of sparks, making the class gasp.

“Wow,” Harry said, awed, as they watched Sirius and Lily duel without a word.

More sparks and jets of light flew as the two deflected spells and cast spells at a rapid pace. Then Lily’s wand moved slightly slower than Sirius’s sudden, sharp jab in her direction.

Lily stopped, as if frozen, then began laughing uncontrollably. He had hit her with a strong Cheering Charm. She tried to hold onto her wand as she doubled over from the force of her laughter, but her fingers fumbled and it fell to the floor.

Sirius pointed his wand at hers, making it fly to him. He caught it with a triumphant grin.

“Finite,” he said, aiming his wand at Lily, who stopped laughing.

Lily scowled as she took back her wand from him. “Watch me beat you next time,” she huffed, heading to the sidelines. But she was smiling.

Whistles and cheers rang out as Sirius bowed and left the dueling area as well.

“Impressive indeed,” Harpinger said, his eyes glittering again. “Five points each to Mr. Black and Miss Evans for proficient nonverbal usage, including the Shield Charm. Marvelously done, both of you.”

Sirius winked at Remus as he made his way to Harry.
“Did I manage to impress my lady?” His voice was low and pleasant.

Harry looked at him with wide eyes. “I didn’t know you were that good, Sirius!” she praised him and touched his arm. “I mean, I knew you were good at magic, but that was bloody brilliant! You were just brilliant!” She beamed at him and turned to Lily, who she also gushed over.

Sirius seemed taken aback as a look of wonder slowly passed over his face, as he watched her chat excitedly with Lily, with whom she was grasping arms.

“She’s actually impressed,” he murmured to Remus, who also gazed at Harry. It was the first time that Harry had acted…well, girly. It was quite interesting.

And adorable, his mind added. Remus shook his head to clear the thought.

Seriously, what was wrong with him?

“Oh look! It’s James and Peter!” Hermione exclaimed. Remus turned his attention to the middle of the room, where, indeed, James and Peter were facing off. They were the last pair and the whole room watched eagerly.

“Go Peter!” Lily cheered.

“Beat his arse, Wormtail!”

James, who faced them from his position, shot Sirius an affronted look.

Remus grinned and joined in. “Put a dent in his massive ego for us, Wormtail!”

“Oi!” James barked at them. He was about to say more when a movement from Peter grabbed his attention.

“Expelliarmus!” Peter squeaked, pointing his wand at James, who immediately put up a shield nonverbally, deflecting the red jet of light that was shot at him.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Protego!”

Peter’s wand jumped straight up from his hand as his Shield Charm had not been strong enough to completely deflect James’s Disarming Charm. His hand snapped up, reaching for it.

“Depulso!”

Peter’s wand shot back to the front of the room, where it was caught by Harpinger. The students whistled and applauded as James made his way off the dueling area with Peter.

“Great job, mate,” James said, ruffling Peter’s hair.

Peter smiled up at him. “You were better.”

“Well, my name is James Potter.”

Harpinger handed Peter his wand. “It seems like we have quite a few talented individuals in this class,” the professor said, looking pleased. “Five points for Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for the successful use of a nonverbal Shield Charm and an exciting end to the class.”
The Gryffindors cheered loudly. They had won quite a few points today.

“For your homework, I want you all to practice the Disarming Charm and the Shield Charm until you are proficient in it. Every one of you should be able to successfully disarm your opponent as well as produce a strong-enough shield to deflect your opponent’s attack. I will be testing you at the beginning of our next lesson. Points will go to those who can perform the Shield Charm nonverbally. Thank you for your hard work today. Class dismissed.” Harpinger waved them out of the classroom with a half-smile, no longer as cold or harsh as he had first seemed.

The Marauders talked enthusiastically as they made their way to the Great Hall for dinner.

“That was one hell of a first class for Defense,” Sirius said, grinning.

“I thought the man was mental at first with the way he introduced himself and the class, but I suppose he was quite sensible, now that I think about it,” Peter added.

“Well that’s the way Defense is supposed to be, you know what I mean?” James responded excitedly. “It’s supposed to be about hands-on learning, not book-learning. When did anyone ever learn to fight by just reading a book? I think Harpinger’s a bit of a nutter, but sane enough to know what he’s talking about. I’m certainly not complaining about today’s lesson. What did you think, Moony?” He turned to Remus.

“Yes, I think it was the best Defense class we’ve had so far. And I agreed with what he was saying about the state of our time. But I’m not sure if I completely liked how he handled the lesson,” Remus replied thoughtfully.

“I agree,” Lily said, frowning. “I don’t like how he pushed Harry to duel him when you’d already volunteered, James. We all saw how uncomfortable she was. And yes, she got the best of him both times, but I didn’t like the way he manipulated her into telling him about things she obviously didn’t want to tell, like her dueling experience, which I assume she got through her encounter with the Death Eaters. Which is something that no one who has been in that situation would want to talk about” she finished heatedly.

There was an awkward moment of silence as they mutually acknowledged this fault.

“She was brilliant, regardless,” James finally said. “Hey, Harry,” he said, smiling, as he turned around, “I—”

Remus and the others turned their heads with him to look at…

There was no Harry. Or Hermione. Or Ron.

“Er…” James turned to Sirius. “Thought she was with you, mate.”

Sirius seemed sheepish as he ran a hand through his hair.

“She was talking with Ron and Hermione behind us, last I saw. I figured it wasn’t a great time to jump in and talk with her.”

Lily snorted. “Now you care about a bit of propriety?”

Remus, James, and Peter laughed at Sirius’s pout.
“I can’t help that she’s alluring,” he said, shrugging. James and Lily raised their eyebrows.

“Alluring?”

“I mean, she’s pretty, obviously. But she’s also sharp, sweet, and unpredictable,” Sirius listed Harry’s qualities.

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever noticed about a girl, other than smashing good looks,” James commented, exchanging an amused look with Lily.

“Do you fancy her, Padfoot?” Peter asked innocently.

Remus burst out laughing at Sirius’s look of astonishment at Peter’s bold question.

Sirius shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe I will this time,” he replied with a smirk.

Lily rolled her eyes. “I hope you really do fall for her, Sirius. She seems like good value. She’s got the right temperament to deal with your absurdities.”

A complicated look flickered across Sirius’s eyes before they turned mischevious.

“But my dear Lily,” he sighed, “That is only possible if I believed myself capable of loving just one woman.”

James roared with laughter and Lily looked indignant.

“You are absolutely unbelievable,” she retorted. But she succumbed to laughter as well.

Remus chuckled, but a part of him wondered. Could Sirius fancy Harry? His track record would say no, but as Remus had observed these past few days, his friend had been willing to put in more effort than usual in chatting her up.

“I wonder if they’ll be joining us for dinner at all,” James remarked on Harry, Ron, and Hermione’s continued absence after they helped themselves to dinner.

“Yes, I wonder where they are. I don’t think they mentioned anything about missing dinner,” Lily added worriedly.

“Have you got the map with you?” Sirius asked James, who shook his head.

“Sorry. Left it in the room today.”

“We can go check the map after dinner if they fail to arrive at all,” Remus suggested.

They agreed.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the most that I’ve had to name-drop random OCs. There’s barely any canon material detailing the Marauders’ classes in seventh year, so I hope the scenes and situations I created came out all right. Harpinger’s character was inspired by Alastor
Moody—I like to think that any witch or wizard who was serious about defying Voldemort (especially in the time portrayed) would have had a similar mindset towards self-defense and survival.

It was nice writing from Remus’s POV, mostly because he feels like the type to reflect at the same time he takes in things, unlike Harry, who I feel is more of a sensing type (Myers-Briggs, anyone?) and reacts to situations as they come.

A quick comment on how I see Sirius and his behavior around girls:
I hesitate to think of him as a playboy or a classic womanizer, because my interpretation of him is that he values the company of his friends above all. He was popular with the girls, as Remus said to Tonks (under the section, “Marriage”), but I think he would’ve flirted because the ‘game’ intrigued and amused him through the reactions he got, rather than the sexual appeal of the girl, if that makes sense (and “getting all the women,” doesn’t necessarily mean that he himself went after them). So, if you were wondering about why I wrote him as not having fancied the girls he’s flirted with, that’s my two cents on it. And of course, you’re all entitled to your own opinions.

Next chapter will continue with the second part of the day detailed in this chapter. Heads up: there’s going to be quite a bit of dialogue (sorry) as three important conversations will be presented. But I promise there will be some action as well.

As always, thank you so much for all the feedback! I appreciate every single kudos, bookmark, subscription, and comment. Thank you so much for reading and I hope you all have a Happy New Year :)
“They’re not following, are they?” Hermione asked anxiously. She took a swift glance behind her in a vain attempt to see through the flood of students making their way to the Great Hall for dinner.

“No, I don’t think so. They were deep in conversation when we left,” Ron answered. But he also looked behind him just in case.

The trio had rushed off to the headmaster’s office as soon as they had stepped out of Harpinger’s classroom. They needed to meet with Dumbledore as quickly as possible, in order to make it to the Great Hall before dinner ended and before their new friends became too suspicious.

They turned a corner and stopped in front of the large and ugly stone gargoyle.

“Have you got the password?” Ron asked, turning to Harry, who nodded.

“Ice Mice,” Harry told the gargoyle, making it leap aside as the wall behind it shifted and revealed the ascending stone staircase. She led the way up the stairs and reached out her hand to rap on the polished oak door with the brass griffin-shaped knocker.

“Come in,” Dumbledore’s voice answered after three sharp raps.

Harry opened the door and entered the office, followed by Hermione and Ron. They paused near the doorway as their eyes took in the all-too-familiar details of the large, circular room. Harry’s eyes immediately went to the spot behind the door and found Fawkes atop his golden perch. A wide smile broke out on her face and she approached the beautiful scarlet and gold-plumed bird.

“Hello, Fawkes. Nice to see you again,” she murmured to the phoenix, who gazed back at her with his deep, intelligent eyes and made a low, chirruping sound in reply.

Hermione and Ron murmured their own greetings to Fawkes while she looked past the bird to see the Sorting Hat on its usual shelf, close to the glass case in which was encased the Sword of Gryffindor. Her eyes roamed around the room and she recognized the spindle-legged tables with their various magical paraphernalia. The black cabinet on the other side of the room was closed shut, making her wonder if it yet held the Pensieve.

Her attention finally came around to the large, claw-footed desk and Dumbledore, who sat behind it in his high-backed chair. The headmaster gave her a gentle smile when she met his eyes and gestured at the three armchairs in front of the table. Harry vaguely registered the curious gazes of the former headmasters and headmistresses in their portraits as she and her friends approached the chairs.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he greeted them.

“Good evening, Miss Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley. I trust that you have all been well?”

“Yes, Professor,” they answered as they settled down in their seats.

“Please do forgive me for arranging our meeting at such an inopportune time, but alas, I have another commitment after our discussion.” He smiled apologetically. “I do realize, however, that our meeting today is necessary and most pressing to our very extraordinary situation.”
Harry smiled back at him. “We understand, Professor,” she responded. “We can’t stay long, either, since our new friends may get suspicious if we’re gone too long. We failed to make up an excuse, you see.”

“Ah, well then, best we begin our discussion immediately. I assume that you wanted to discuss the horcruxes?” Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes peered at her through his half-moon spectacles as she nodded. “I have been keeping a more careful eye than usual on Lord Voldemort’s movements after our first discussion together.”

The trio took in a breath and leaned forward in their seats as he continued.

“It has been rather unhelpful, I’m afraid, in regards to the state of his memory. However, he has been unusually quiet and inconspicuous since your arrival here. I wonder if you three have already found out for yourselves, but this year is the first year in which he has not failed to be seen somewhere in Britain at least once a week. And yet, after our first meeting together, he has most curiously disappeared from the public eye, although his Death Eaters continue to be recognized in the streets,” he told them, his face becoming solemn as he finished.

Harry furrowed her brows. “Do you think he remembers? He can’t suddenly change his behavior without good reason.”

Dumbledore looked back at her thoughtfully. “I believe that something has certainly changed with him, yes…for all his madness for power and greatness, Tom is a creature of cold reason and calculated deliberation. It is not often that he acts on impulse and every one of his actions may be understood within their particular contexts.”

“Which can make him predictable, but because we don’t know what’s going on with him at the moment, we can’t really assume what he’s doing or what he’s going to do,” Harry concluded. A pensive expression took over her face as disappointment spread within her.

If only the scar…

She frowned and gave her head a slight shake, cutting off the thought.

Ridiculous. Was she really so desperate that she missed being a horcrux and the awful, inconvenient pain it had brought her?

Well, at least you were able to get some clues despite it all, her mind muttered again.

“Precisely,” Dumbledore’s voice responded, bringing her back to the discussion. The headmaster’s eyes crinkled slightly, as if he had guessed the troubled state of her mind. Harry refocused on him with a determined gaze and he turned from her to address all three of them. “At this moment, there are elite members of the Order tracking the movements of his most trusted Death Eaters. The only observation they have been able to make is that his followers are not as, er, enthusiastic as before. They certainly walk around the streets, displaying their power, but there has been a significant decrease in their attacks as of late.”

“That’s both good and bad,” Hermione said with a sigh. “It’s good that less people are getting hurt or dying, but it’s worrisome that their attitude suddenly changed.” She exchanged a hesitant look with Harry and Ron, unsure of how to proceed with the main topic for discussion.

Harry decided to initiate it. “We wanted to talk about the whereabouts of the horcruxes, sir,” she said, bringing Dumbledore’s attention to her again. “I know you said to be cautious about destroying them for now, but we took the liberty of taking the diadem from its place in the Room of
Requirement and had it hidden in a different room that we summoned. We know that there’s potential, if not actual, Death Eaters in Hogwarts at the moment, and we didn’t want to risk it being taken from under our noses. With all due respect, sir, I don’t believe that just touching it would trigger Voldemort’s memory, since we don’t know how he’ll be affected by my presence in the first place.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “Well, I must say that I empathize. I am aware that there are students who have very particular ties to the Death Eaters and to the ideology being espoused by them. However, I dare not do anything about them, because as much as they may be Lord Voldemort's eyes and ears inside Hogwarts, they are my clues to his movements and motives as well. And they are, after all, my students, and I do have a duty to protect them as long as they are in this castle.”

He sighed, looking weary.

“But I do commend your decision, Harry,” he admitted, turning his gaze back to her. “You are correct—ultimately, for the time being, we do not know of his status. Thus, it is advisable that we find the other horcruxes as soon as possible. Is the room in which you have hidden the diadem safe?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied. “Only we and the people we trust can find it. We specified that none of his followers nor he would be able to get to it.”

“Excellent.” Dumbledore’s piercing eyes looked at her keenly. “Now, about the other horcruxes…”

He listened as Harry told him about her thoughts and theories regarding Gaunt’s ring, Hufflepuff’s cup, Slytherin’s locket, and the diary. Hermione and Ron listened quietly as well.

“I just dunno when he gave the cup to the Lestranges and the diary to Lucius Malfoy. The only things I’m certain about are the ring and the locket...the ring should still be in the Gaunt house, if he hasn't gotten to it yet, and the locket should be with him, since he placed it in the cave sometime within the next two years, according to our part of the timeline,” Harry finished, feeling helpless from her lack of information.

Dumbledore looked down at his folded hands, thinking.

“I think,” he said, looking up at her again, “that our next course of action should be to determine whether the cup exists in the Lestranges’ vault. I will have my connections at Gringotts attempt to find out as soon as they are given the chance. As for the ring, I will have the Gaunt house inspected for any trace of his presence before attempting to retrieve it. But the diary…I wonder…will Malfoy be trusted again? It all depends on how much he does or does not remember...we will have to wait until Lord Voldemort makes a definitive movement,” he said grimly. “And regarding the resources we currently have at hand, I must admit that although the Order have been in action for seven years, we have not made much headway in undermining him. What you three have told me is the most I have been able to learn about him as he is. Frankly put, the Order does not have enough resources to properly infiltrate or spy on his ranks.”

Then my parents and their friends must have been invaluable when they joined, Harry realized. Dad had the Invisibility Cloak, Remus could spy on the werewolves, Sirius had knowledge about the most exclusive pure-blood families and networks, and mum was an all-around talented witch. And they were all skilled fighters—the ideal soldiers. Well, maybe except for Pettigrew…

“Then use us,” Harry said boldly. Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw Hermione and Ron give a start at her sudden declaration. But she knew they were of the same mind.
“Please let us join the Order,” Hermione’s firm voice confirmed her belief in them.

“We can be each other’s eyes and ears, sir, since we want the same thing—to defeat You-Know-Who as efficiently as possible,” Ron added determinedly.

Astonished blue eyes stared back at them.

“I—” Dumbledore began.

“Sir, your future self trusted us to take Voldemort down,” Harry cut in before he could say more. “You made us take on your mantle and we did. And with the confidence that you gave us in the future, we respectfully demand to be treated as your equals in the fight against Voldemort. We were willing to give our lives then and we are willing to give our lives now for the greater good.” She met his eyes with her jaw set.

Dumbledore seemed stunned as he stared at them with wonder. Several emotions flickered across his face before he closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. When he opened his eyes again, he looked more tired than Harry had ever seen him. She forced down the sympathy that rose in her chest. She needed him to agree first.

“I—” he paused, looking suddenly frightened, to Harry’s alarm. She had not seen him so vulnerable since he had drunk the potion in the cave. “I am not proud of what I made you three go through,” he said in a quiet voice that held the slightest hint of a tremble.

Harry hitched in a breath involuntarily. She heard Hermione and Ron do the same.

“And yet,” he continued, his brows creasing as his face took on a troubled expression, “I can understand and justify why I must have done the things I did. And knowing myself, I know that I would use you for the greater good again. It is not that I do not care about you three as individuals, but I—”

“We understand, sir,” Hermione interrupted. She looked at him earnestly. “We know. We know you did what you could to help us in our mission and you gave us the strength and determination to survive. We know that for the greater good, to protect the ones we love and cherish against the forces that seek to destroy them, sacrifices have to be made. We knew it since our first year when we first faced him.”

Ron nodded in agreement. “You gave us a way to continue our mission, or at least, you did for me. You gave me the means to come back when I thought I was done. You believed in me, sir, by giving me the Deluminator—you knew me better than I knew myself, in that sense. I wouldn’t say that you didn’t care about us as individuals, because you definitely did.”

Dumbledore was speechless as he gazed at Ron, and Hermione sent the redhead a teary-eyed smile across Harry, who sat between them. But Harry, for her part, was solemn as she faced the headmaster, who seemed a little afraid as he met her eyes.

“I did hate you for what you put me through,” she admitted to him. Hermione and Ron turned to her, concerned, while Dumbledore’s expression became sorrowful. Remorse glimmered behind the blue eyes.

“You chose to keep your secrets and never let me in fully. We found the answers to the problems you set before us, but through the hard way, which nearly made us lose sight of our goal. Because of your overcautious methods, I made mistake after mistake that cost me and my friends a great deal… the three of us suffered because of you. And you made mistakes as well. I lost Sirius partly because
of you.” Harry tightened her jaw, keeping her grief at bay.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath.

“But I forgave you,” Harry continued, “because I decided to understand you. And when I did understand why you did the things that you did, the things you believed in, and the kind of person you were, I realized that if I had been put in the same position as you, I probably wouldn’t have done things too differently. You were the first to realize that Voldemort would be the biggest evil you would witness in your time. And he was, and still is. You understood him better than anyone else and because you did, you knew what had to be done to defeat him, even if people had to suffer for it. I get it. People died because they believed in me. I know the pain and the burden. But the thing is, you can’t help it if someone decides to believe in you—the best thing to do about that is to use them for their belief, trusting that they’ll continue to believe in you even under the threat of death. Because in a way, believing that they’ll die for you because they believe in you, is one of the highest kinds of respect there is. So I don’t hate you. I believe in you as you believe in me.”

There was sob from her left and she turned to see Hermione putting a hand over her mouth as tears slid down her face. Ron got up from his seat and went to her. She took the handkerchief that he offered and pressed it to her face while he held her.

“Please excuse me,” Dumbledore murmured, rising from his seat. He made his way over to the glass case that held Gryffindor’s sword and placed his hands on it with his head bowed. Harry could not see his expression as his back was to her, but Fawkes swooped down from his perch and flew over to his master. He landed on the glass case and bent his plumed head to nuzzle Dumbledore’s hand. He emitted a soft, soothing coo.

“Thank you, Fawkes,” Dumbledore said, raising his hand to stroke the phoenix’s feathers. After a few more minutes, he turned around and made his way back to his seat. Harry noticed that guilt and remorse still lingered in his eyes as he settled down across from her.

“I accept your demand,” he addressed the trio solemnly. “The three of you are hereby inducted into the Order of the Phoenix under the direction of myself, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, as my equals in resisting Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hermione and Ron responded together, both sounding and looking relieved.

But Harry wasn’t done yet. “I have one more request, sir,” she spoke up, making her friends turn to her with curiosity. Dumbledore waited while she paused.

“I want you to trust us, sir,” Harry said boldly, looking back at him with a fierce expression.

His face constricted with the slightest bit of hesitation.

“Please, sir,” Hermione joined in, her voice stable and firm.

“We trust you, so trust us, sir,” Ron added last.

Dumbledore looked at each of them in turn. His eyes returned to Harry.

“I will,” he promised gravely.

The remaining issues for discussion were quickly resolved. They were given written permission to study in the Restricted Section of the library and at Hermione’s request, the headmaster agreed to ask Professor McGonagall to reserve an empty classroom for them, so they could practice the Disillusionment Charm. They also told him how to find their secret training room. As for finding a
method of destroying the horcruxes, he agreed to research it with them.

Ron wondered aloud if the Elder Wand could be used to destroy the horcruxes with, say, Fiendfyre.

“That’s way too dangerous, Ronald!” Hermione exclaimed. “It’s incredibly difficult for even powerful dark wizards to control!”

“Well, yeah, but it’s the Elder Wand!”

Dumbledore smiled as they bickered. “I daresay I could,” he replied mildly, “But we shall see if there are more practical methods, so that all of us may destroy the horcruxes.”

They left his office feeling rather accomplished. Ron’s stomach growled loudly as they re-entered the corridor after stepping off the stone stairs.

“Oh crap,” he said, forcing Harry and Hermione to stop alongside him as he suddenly paused in his steps, “d’you reckon dinner’s still going? What if they already left for the common room?”

Hermione checked her watch.

“Oh no, I think dinner just ended. We need to get to the common room fast!”

They ran.

“Belladonna!” Harry gasped at the Fat Lady, whose portrait swung open. They almost tripped over their robes as they scrambled into the common room, which, to their great relief, was empty.

“Check your room, just in case,” Hermione told Ron nervously.

“Empty,” he notified them when he returned.

A sudden burst of noise met their ears, making them turn their heads to the portrait hole. They saw that the portrait had swung open, admitting their housemates, who piled into the room. Harry’s eyes began searching for the Marauders.

“Oi! There they are!” a voice exclaimed, making her eyes swivel to its source.

James waved at them as he made his way through the crowd. Lily, Sirius, Remus, and Peter were just behind him.

“Were you three here all this time?” James asked when he and his friends reached them. He looked them over curiously.

“No, we had a meeting with Dumbledore. He wanted to see how we were doing so far,” Harry explained.

“Oh, right, you got that letter over the weekend,” James remembered. His eyes widened. “But that means you haven’t had dinner yet!”

“No. I’m absolutely starving,” Ron said, rubbing his stomach with a grimace. The Marauders glanced at one another.

“I think we’ve got time,” Sirius said with a shrug. He grinned at the trio. “Ever been to the basement?”
A few minutes later found them seated at a table in the kitchens, behind the painting of the bowl of fruit. The Marauders had escorted the three friends while Lily had stayed behind to get started on her homework before her nightly rounds as Head Girl began.

“Oh, bless you,” Ron moaned as he took a platter of baked chicken drumsticks from one of the elves, who squeaked with delight at his praise.

Hermione looked around the kitchen with mild disapproval as she served herself some beef stew while Harry, who was just as famished as Ron, lost no time in helping herself to a bit of everything. The Marauders took extra desserts from the elves, who plied them with custard cakes, chocolate éclairs, and treacle tart.

Harry had just swallowed a mouthful of Yorkshire pudding when she felt gentle fingers glide over her cheek. She started and turned to Sirius with wide eyes as he brushed back her hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. His eyes were warm as he smiled at her.

“I don’t think you want all that lovely hair to be in your food,” he murmured as his fingers continued to stroke through her locks.

“Er, thanks, Sirius.” Harry gave him a quick smile and turned back to her food, feeling a little flustered. He had caught her completely off-guard. How long had he been watching her eat? But his fingers did feel rather nice in her hair…

“So, Harry,” James began. Harry turned her full attention to James, who grinned at her.

“I was completely floored when I saw you duel Harpinger today. You were absolutely brilliant! You’re just surprising us with talent, aren’t you?” he exclaimed, his voice brimming with excitement.

Giddiness filled Harry’s chest at his praise and she smiled back at him shyly. She felt her face get warm. “Thanks, James,” she murmured, feeling so happy and light that she thought she could float up into the sky. She didn’t notice how the fingers in her hair paused as Sirius stared at her expression.

“Told you she was great at defensive spells,” Hermione said, beaming. “And her reflexes are nothing to scoff at.”

“She’s good enough to wipe the floor with us, I reckon,” Ron added. He leaned back in his chair, finally full, and sighed happily before reaching for an éclair.

“Oh, come off it. I may be quick, but I’m still rubbish at casting spells nonverbally. I didn’t even realize I cast the Shield Charm without a word,” Harry shrugged off their praise, grinning.

“That means you’re on the right track,” James told her enthusiastically. “It means you felt it instinctively, which is great in a duel. You just need to focus a bit more on attuning yourself to your preferred spells and they’ll come to you just like that, right when you think you might want to cast them. You’re already a great duelist, so it won’t be difficult to reach the next level.” He beamed at her and she ducked her head, her cheeks burning pleasantly. Hermione giggled next to her.

“Actually,” James continued, looking eager, “do you three want to join us for dueling practice sometime? It’s nothing formal. We just like to keep up with our own training for practicality’s sake. I think we’ll be able to learn loads off each other.”

Harry exchanged glances with Hermione and Ron, who looked pleasantly surprised at the offer.
“Yeah—” Ron started to say.

“We’ll think about it,” Hermione cut across him, nudging Ron, who fell silent.

There was an awkward pause as the Marauders looked between the two with mild puzzlement. Both Hermione and Ron’s faces were pink.

“We’ll probably be focusing more on our studying, that’s why,” Harry filled in the silence. “And Quidditch practice, if we manage to get in. Didn’t you say that tryouts are this weekend, James?” she quickly redirected the topic.

A bright light sparked within James’s hazel eyes as he turned to Harry.

“Yes, that’s right! Quidditch tryouts are this Saturday, so I expect to see you both—” he pointed at Harry and Ron, “on the pitch! We really need a new Keeper and a new Seeker if we want to beat Slytherin.”

“Is the Slytherin Seeker any good?” Ron asked.

Harry felt Sirius shift next to her. She followed the swift glance that James sent him and saw there was a tightness in his face.

Then she remembered the picture.*

“He’s decent,” James answered. “Not the best flier I’ve seen, but pretty good. Sharp eyes, too. Certainly better than our current Seeker, McAllister. He does his job well,” he finished a bit stiffly.

“What’s his name?” Ron asked further.

There was a pause as James, Remus, and Peter’s eyes shifted to Sirius, who was expressionless. James cleared his throat before replying.

“Regulus Black.”

Comprehension lit Ron and Hermione’s faces.

“Oh,” Hermione squeaked, looking at Sirius.

“Er,” Ron cleared his throat nervously, “Regulus Black? So is that—”

“My little brother, if you were wondering if we’re related,” Sirius answered in a mild tone that complemented the apathetic look on his face.

“Oh,” Hermione said again. Harry glanced at her and saw a nervous sort of hopefulness on her face. “Well, that must be interesting, seeing your brother on the other team against your friends. Have you ever played against him, yourself, at all? He must have quite a bit of talent if he made it onto the team,” Hermione addressed Sirius in a light and encouraging tone. But Harry cringed inwardly at her friend’s attempt to brighten up the atmosphere. She knew how touchy the subject of his family was to him. And knowing that he had already run away from Grimmauld Place by this time, it had to be an untouchable topic.

Sirius’s eyes darkened and he straightened himself up. A shadow of scornful disdain passed over his countenance, marring its personable charm as he faced Hermione.

“I don’t join anything that my brother or any member of my family is in,” he responded to her in a tone so cold that it made her flinch and her face flush red.
An uncomfortable moment of silence ensued as Ron attempted to wordlessly comfort Hermione, who was mortified and seemed to be on the verge of tears. Sirius turned his head and leaned back in his seat with a forbiddingly haughty air. Harry gave Hermione’s hand a comforting squeeze before turning to him.

“But you’re all right, aren’t you?”

She tried her luck at breaking through to him. There was no need for him to shut himself off and stew in his dark, bitter thoughts—she’d seen him do enough of that in her own time at Grimmauld Place.

Sirius tensed and out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the rest of the Marauders had stiffened as well. Harry fixed her eyes on him determinedly and continued.

“It’s not like we don’t know about the Blacks, you know—they’re famous for being so pure-blooded that they might as well be wizarding royalty. They’re notorious for their penchant for the Dark Arts, in which they’re known to be particularly skilled, something that’s let every one of their family member be sorted into Slytherin.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw.

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“Until you,” she elaborated. “You were sorted into Gryffindor, which might as well be Slytherin’s archenemy. I didn’t hear about you being a hatstall, so the Sorting Hat must have realized that you really are markedly different from the rest of your family. You’re not into the Dark Arts. You don’t believe in the pure-blood ideology espoused by your parents—it’s been made clear by your Sorting. There’s no going back on the Sorting Hat’s decision. You couldn’t be any more different from them.”

His rigid posture slowly loosened and he turned his face towards her. His grey eyes peered into hers suspiciously, searchingly, and, she thought, desperately.

“So what I mean to say is,” she said, looking back at him earnestly, both wanting and needing him to understand, “you don’t have to try and prove that you’re not like your brother or your parents. The only thing you share with them is blood and the family name, but even those things don’t dictate who you are or what you’re supposed to be. You’re you, Sirius. You’ve always been you ever since you found yourself against your family ideology. The Sorting Hat’s decision supports that fact. You don’t need to doubt who and what you are.”

His breath hitched and he suddenly looked vulnerable.

Perhaps she had said too much, she thought ruefully and with some embarrassment, as he stared at her as if he had never seen anyone quite like her before. They had only known each other for a few days and here she was, having a soul-searching conversation with him.

She did not back away from his gaze as his grey eyes probed hers with a frightening intensity.

“Well-put, Harry,” James said quietly, breaking the intimate tension between her and Sirius. The two of them turned their attention to him.

James looked at Sirius. “Padfoot, mate, what Harry’s just said is what Moony, Wormtail, and I have been trying to tell you all along. We don’t look at you any differently because you’re a Black. We
never have. You’re our fellow Gryffindor and Marauder—you’ll always be the same, obnoxious git
with annoyingly perfect hair that we’ve always known. And for the record, my mum and dad
absolutely adore you, especially my mum. Every time she looks at your long, silky hair, it gives her
hope. She’s always wanted a daughter too, you know.”

Sirius scowled at him while the others snickered. But his eyes were bright with gratitude.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he responded haughtily. “I do have rather gorgeous hair.” He gave
an arrogant toss of his head that had his smooth black hair flouncing up and settling back down
gracefully on his shoulders.

Harry stifled a snort. “Like a show dog,” she muttered to herself. But the others heard her and
laughed.

“Oh, Lady Harry,” Sirius sighed, “does nothing about me impress you?”

“Your vanity does,” Harry answered with a grin.

His eyes were full of genuine amusement as he leaned towards her. “I’ll charm you yet,” he
murmured to her in a low, velvet tone.

She turned her face away, smiling. He was back to his usual, playful self. “Have fun trying,” she
responded lightly as she reached for a plate of treacle tart.

“I reckon there should be a reward if he succeeds,” James suggested. “Like a kiss. How ‘bout it,
Harry?” He winked at her, looking extremely mischievous. Remus’s face turned pink next to him
and Peter sniggered.

Harry nearly choked on her dessert. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her dad was—no,
no, it was better to stop thinking about it.

“Oh, a kiss would be nice,” Sirius drawled, his voice very close to her ear.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Keep it in your dreams, Sirius.”

“I already do,” he purred, making her actually choke. Hermione squeaked next to her and she heard
Ron mutter something under his breath. Sirius handed her a goblet of pumpkin juice, looking very
pleased with himself. “Am I unnerving you?” he whispered in her ear, teasing her. He placed a hand
on her back as she tried to control her coughing and his fingers brushed through her hair again.

“Your utter lack of shame continues to astonish me,” she replied drily once she had recovered
herself. He let out a bark-like laugh and she glanced at him with fond amusement.

“We should head back soon,” Remus announced tentatively, looking a little embarrassed as he
shifted his eyes away from her and Sirius. “It’s almost time for Filch’s rounds.”

“Right you are, Moony,” James agreed. “It just so happens that I’m supposed to be making my
rounds tonight as well. It’ll be my first time doing so as Head Boy with Lily.” He lifted his chin
pompously. “I shall escort you all back safely to the tower.”

On their way back to the common room, Harry tried her best to not glance back at Sirius, who had
asked Hermione if he could talk to her as they were leaving the kitchens. She knew Ron, who
walked alongside her, was just as curious, as he purposefully walked a little slower behind James,
Remus, and Peter, who were in front of them. But the two of them were barely able to make out what Sirius was saying, as he and Hermione walked several paces behind. But she did manage to snatch a part of a sentence:

“—was out of line. It wasn’t my intention to—”

And the rest was lost as he spoke in a soft murmur. Hermione had yet to say anything, but Harry could imagine the look of concentration on her face as she listened to what he had to say.

“I think he’s apologizing about how he spoke to her,” Harry muttered to Ron.

“Well, that’s a surprise. Him apologizing, I mean,” Ron muttered back. “No offense or anything, but he doesn’t strike me as the type to really be sorry about half the things he does. I mean, he wasn’t very…er…well, he was stubborn, even in our part of the timeline.” Ron took a quick glance at her, as if he was afraid that he had upset her.

Harry couldn’t deny that she had felt a spark of indignation at his words. The old, familiar sensation of the need to defend her godfather had come rushing back, but she stifled it as best as she could. Deep inside, she knew what Ron had said was true, despite her reluctance to acknowledge it.

“Yeah, you have a point,” she decided to admit.

Ron seemed to visibly relax as the tension in his shoulders loosened and he lifted a hand to rub the back of his head. His ears were a little red as he sent her an embarrassed half-smile. She smiled back at him to further reassure him.

“Harry,” a timid voice spoke up.

Harry blinked when she realized it was Peter who had called her. She exchanged a wary look with Ron as Peter broke away from James’s side to fall in step with her.

“Oh hey, Peter.”

She suppressed her revulsion as he looked up at her with a hopeful expression.

“I-I was wondering, since Prongs is busy tonight with his Head Boy duties, i-if you could help me practice the Disarming and Shield Charms tonight.”

She stared at him, speechless.

The traitor from her time was asking for her help in dueling. It was as if he was asking her to shoot herself in the foot. A nasty reply shot to the forefront of her mind, but she prevented it from escaping through her mouth as she struggled to come up with something that was more appropriate.

“How ‘bout I help you out, Wormtail? I think Lady Harry’s had enough dueling practice for the day.”

Relief rushed into Harry’s chest as she turned her head around to Sirius, who grinned at her. Hermione gave her a warm smile when she met her eyes.

“Oh, thanks, Padfoot,” Peter accepted gratefully. He turned to Harry with a shy smile. “You were really great in class. I didn’t think anyone could beat a professor,” he complimented her.

“Thanks, Peter.” Harry offered him a quick smile as they reached the Fat Lady’s portrait, which opened, revealing Lily.
“There you all are,” Lily greeted them brightly. “Have a good dinner?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Ron replied, his voice sounding a little thick. He had just bitten into one of the custard cakes that the elves had given him.

Harry waved goodbye with the others as James and Lily left for their Head duties and smiled fondly when she saw them holding hands as they walked away.

When they re-entered the common room, the trio made their way to their usual study table while Sirius and Peter headed to the back to practice their dueling. They had just settled into their seats when Remus approached them.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Of course not,” Hermione replied.

He smiled his thanks as they helped him pull up an extra chair for the table.

“I’m guessing none of you need to do anything for Defense Against the Dark Arts?” he addressed them with a knowing look.

They grinned back at him.

“I don’t think you need to, either, Remus,” Hermione told him.

“No, I don’t think I do.”

Ron furrowed his brows as he looked over his notes from the day’s lessons.

“Remind me of what we need to do today,” he said to Hermione, who arched an eyebrow at his request.

“Two rolls of parchment on how the Draught of Living Death can be used and two rolls of parchment on the features of the Dandelion Cushion and its therapeutic properties,” she answered, already scribbling vigorously on a roll of parchment.

“Therapeutic properties?” Ron squawked. “That thing nearly took my eyes out!”

“Well, the hairs can be used for treating anxiety and depression,” Remus said. “But I know what you mean. I nearly got my eyes speared through as well.”

Hermione gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries. I think everyone got attacked by it at least once.”

A startled yelp came from the back of the room and they turned their attention towards it. Peter had evidently fallen on his bottom and Sirius looked a little exasperated as he helped him to his feet. Sirius sighed as he picked up Peter’s fallen wand and returned it to him.

“Honestly, Wormtail. You can’t go on scaring yourself with your own Shield Charm. The more powerful it is, the more it’ll protect you. It’s not going to turn on you and shove you back, you know.”

“S-Sorry,” Peter squeaked, his face pink. “I’ve never made a very strong one before, and that was
pretty strong for me.”

“All right, let’s try again. I’ll cast Expelliarmus, and you cast Protego. We’re going to try rebounding the spell off each other, got it? It’ll force you to cast the Shield Charm as much as possible. Whoever gets disarmed loses.”

“G-Got it,” Peter said nervously as they faced off.

The trio and Remus were not the only ones watching. The whole common room murmured excitedly as Sirius and Peter faced one another.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Protego!”

The Disarming Charm rebounded again and again as Sirius and Peter cast the Shield Charm repeatedly: Sirius nonverbally and Peter verbally. Peter sweated profusely in fierce concentration while Sirius looked unfazed as he routinely flicked his wrist to cast his shield.

Then Peter stumbled back after he cast his shield to deflect the spell. The spell bounced off Sirius’s shield and came straight for him as his fingers fumbled with his wand. Sirius made a sudden movement towards him just as he managed to put up a shield right before the spell hit him.

The rebounded jet of red light hit Sirius square in the chest.

“NOOOOOOO!”

The scream tore out of her throat without her realizing it.

Her breath came out in ragged gasps as she clenched her fists tightly to stop her body from shaking. A memory flashed behind her eyes, replaying a scene that she had never wanted to relive again:

Sirius, hit by a jet of red light that had illuminated the look of shock on his face before he fell back into the veil, never to be recovered.

Dead.

A terrible shudder ran through her body.

“Harry?”

She flinched.

Blinking with confusion, she gradually registered her surroundings. She had somehow stood up from her seat. Her gaze moved to Remus, whose brown eyes were cautious and filled with worry, before shifting to the silent room. Everyone was staring at her, including Sirius and Peter.

There was a tightness in her chest.
“Are you all right?” Remus asked her quietly.

Her lips twitched weakly as she attempted to compose herself. “Yeah, fine. I just overreacted, that’s all. It happened so suddenly and I…” she trailed off. “I think I’ll head up to bed,” she said abruptly, gathering her books and parchment and putting them in her bag.

“Harry…”

Remus’s confusion and Hermione and Ron’s concern went ignored as she headed to the dormitory. She ducked her head, shielding her face with her hair, as she passed by Peter and Sirius.

“H-Harry?” Peter called after her timidly.

The room was empty when she opened the door.

Good.

Tears threatened to fill her eyes as she lay in her bed after closing the curtains. There was something unbearably heavy in her chest and she shut her eyes to calm down.

_Pull yourself together, you stupid cow, _she reprimanded herself. _What the hell was that, causing a scene? You’ll blow your damn cover if you don’t get a hold of yourself._

_Breathe._

She let out a shuddering breath.


Another breath.

_It’s not him. It’s. Not. Him._

The door opened quietly as Harry breathed. Cautious footsteps stopped outside her curtains.

“Harry?”

She ignored her.

_Breathe._

The door closed as Hermione went back out.

The common room buzzed as its occupants discussed the scene they had just witnessed. Why had that seventh-year girl screamed? What was her problem? What was her story?

After Hermione had followed Harry to the dorms, Sirius and Peter had settled themselves on the sofa next to the study table where Remus and Ron were situated. Sirius barely listened as Peter talked
anxiously with Remus about what had happened. He couldn’t stop thinking about Harry’s reaction to the duel. That look on her face…

What had happened to her?

He had been practicing the Shield Charm with Peter when he had made the mistake of getting ahead of himself. His rebounded Disarming Charm had hit him on the chest, making him stagger back from the force of it, and Peter had scrambled to catch his wand as it arced towards him. Suddenly, there had been a scream.

And not just any scream.

It had been a scream of fear and despair. Of the worst kind.

He shivered involuntarily as he recalled it. Her bright green eyes had been wide and terrified, staring straight at him, as if he had been severely injured, instead of merely disarmed.

Or as if he had just been killed, he thought with an unpleasant jolt.

He wondered if it had something to do with her dead parents. Had they been killed right before her eyes?

But Hermione, who was her sister, had failed to react like her. Perhaps Harry had been the one to witness their deaths and the one who defended Hermione against the Death Eaters—that would explain her dueling skills, at least.

He twirled his wand between his fingers, lost in his thoughts.

“She’s in bed,” Hermione’s voice reached him. He glanced up to see that she had returned from the dormitory. She sighed, looking unhappy, as she settled back down in her seat.

“How was she?” Ron asked cautiously.

“I don’t know. Her curtains were closed and she didn’t reply when I called her. I wasn’t able to talk to her.”

“Hermione?”

Marlene and Alice had approached them. Sirius and Peter made room on the sofa.

“Is Harry okay?” Alice asked tentatively. Her round face was anxious as she leaned towards Hermione.

“She will be, eventually,” Hermione answered with a sad smile.

“What happened?” Marlene asked in a hushed voice.

Hermione and Ron hesitated and exchanged a conflicted look.

“You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to,” Remus said. “We just want to know if she’ll be all right and if there’s anything we can do—”

“It has to do with the Death Eaters, doesn’t it?” Sirius interrupted, startling Hermione, who stared back at him with wide eyes. Next to her, Ron swallowed.

“Sirius,” Remus hissed at him.
Sirius turned to him and gave him a defiant look.

“How are we supposed to help if we don’t know?” he demanded. “It’s a valid question. And it’s not like we don’t know what the Death Eaters have been doing out there. We should be more than able to understand.”

Remus glared at him. “It’s not about us being able to understand, you idiot. It’s about how we can help her regardless of what happened, because we’re her friends.”

“Aren’t friends allowed to know about each other? What’s the point of being friends if you don’t know anything about the other person? It’s not as if we’re going to avoid her just because of the truth. Being a friend means to accept everything about the other person no matter what, or am I wrong?” Sirius glared back at him fiercely.

Peter, Marlene, and Alice looked between them nervously.

“She—” Their attention snapped to Hermione, who hesitated.

“She saw someone close to her die in front of her,” she continued in a quiet voice. Ron’s eyes darted to her and she sent him a small, reassuring smile.

“Was it one of your parents?” Sirius’s voice was just as low.

“No. It was a friend of our parents. We didn’t see our parents die, er, well, I didn’t, but she, Harry, heard them die.”

Marlene and Alice gasped in horror.

“Who killed them?”

Remus sent him a swift, reprimanding look, which he ignored. He watched as Hermione turned pale.

“Voldemort,” she whispered.

Several heads turned to them as Marlene and Alice shrieked and Peter whimpered, clutching at Sirius’s robes. Sirius and Remus remained calm and steady, although Remus became as pale as Hermione.

“Sorry,” Marlene apologized in a small voice. She looked scared, as did Alice and Peter. Hermione continued with her explanation.

“After they were killed, their friend became our guardian and helped keep us safe. But the Death Eaters got him in the end. He was fighting one of them when a spell hit him in the chest and he…died.” Hermione swallowed. “I didn’t see him die, because I was unconscious, but Harry was there, helping him fight and he…he ended up dying in front of her. I think, when you were hit in the chest with the spell, Sirius, it reminded her of how our guardian was killed. She hasn’t been able to get over it yet.”

Hermione looked grieved as she remembered her sister’s pain. Her lip trembled. Ron put an arm around her shoulders and held her close to him.

“She’ll be okay, she’s strong,” he murmured to her. “We know how strong she is.”

“Were they close?” Sirius asked. It was worse than he had thought it was.

“Very,” Hermione mumbled, wiping tears from her eyes. “She understood him better than almost
There was a moment of heavy silence as they all processed the information.

*Well, Sirius thought grimly, That explains her reaction.*

He would not have guessed that Harry had experienced so much tragedy. He had already known that she had lost her parents, since she had told them during the Welcoming Feast, but she had dealt with it admirably, refusing to let their deaths define her. But now, he knew that she had been hiding all her pain under a tough exterior that made the others forget about the dark details of her admission to Hogwarts. She wore a mask to hide her secrets like he did.

And maybe that was why she had been so perceptive about him today. About his shame and fear, regarding his ties to his hateful family. She could see through him because she recognized someone who had something to hide, like her.

He felt guilt rise in his chest for forcing her to break her mask, although indirectly. He had forced her sister to let out her secrets.

Remus was right. What right did he have to invade her privacy? He had said she was a friend, but had he even treated her like a friend? All he’d really done with her was chat her up like another pretty girl he wanted to tease until it ceased to be amusing.

But that wasn’t quite right, either. She was different, he had to admit. She didn’t respond to his flirting like the other girls usually did.

*Well of course not, you git, she’s been traumatized!*

He cringed at his idiocy and absolute lack of tact.

*But, a cautious voice spoke up in his mind, her smiles and laughter at your antics were genuine, weren’t they? Surely, she couldn’t have been faking all that.*

How could a person who had experienced such terrible things in her life still smile and laugh so brightly?

*She’s strong, Ron had said.*

She wasn’t someone who folded up on herself or gave up. Her expressions and actions in Harpinger’s class had told him that much.

*She’s strong.*

An enigma indeed.

“What was his name?” he asked, suddenly curious. Who was this person who had been so important to her?

A spark of fear appeared in Hermione and Ron’s eyes. Their faces paled and they exchanged a look. Sirius furrowed his brows and regarded them sharply, making them squirm.

“That’s all right, you don’t have to tell us,” Remus said quickly.

“No, it’s just, I don’t think Harry would feel comfortable with us telling you,” Hermione said somewhat evasively. She shifted her eyes away from Sirius.
“We understand,” Remus said reassuringly.

“Is there anything we can do to help her feel better?” Marlene asked.

“Just give her time. She’ll have collected herself by the morning,” Hermione advised.

“We should never mention this to her, should we? That we know what happened?”

Hermione opened her mouth, but it was Ron who answered.

“No, just be honest about it if it ever comes up. She’s not one to be coddled or treated like she’s fragile. She hates that.” There was a firmness in his face that dared anyone to contradict him.

Sirius was impressed while Remus looked surprised.

“All right,” Remus said, nodding. “Thanks for telling us about, well, everything.”

A strange look passed over Hermione and Ron’s faces. Hermione turned to Ron anxiously.

“I do hope she’ll be okay with this.”

Ron nodded. “She’ll be fine, don’t worry. It’s better this way. It’s less awkward.”

The conversation ended after that, but Sirius glanced at the two of them intermittently as they returned to their homework. There had been several puzzling incidents that made him suspect that they were hiding something more. He knew Remus was of the same opinion, since he had noticed the same suspicious mannerisms and behavior as well.

Not all the truth had come out. Harry was still hiding something. He wanted to figure it out.

James arrived around midnight and met them in the dormitory. None of them had finished their homework, not even Sirius, who knew the essays were easy. They had all been distracted by Harry’s predicament.

His best mate whistled cheerfully as he took off his robes.

“Lily and I had a fantastic night out,” he said with a deliberate suggestiveness to incite their amusement and curiosity.

“That’s nice, Prongs,” Remus replied dully as he finished changing into his pajamas. Sirius himself was preoccupied with thoughts of Harry and what she could be hiding.

James looked around him with amazement.

“Did someone die?” he asked incredulously, making them freeze. His face became solemn when he took in the heavy atmosphere.

“Seriously, what happened?” he asked, looking at each of them sharply. His eyes landed on Sirius, who stared back at him. “Padfoot, mate, what happened tonight?”

Sirius found himself at a loss for words. He didn’t want to tell James about Harry. It would feel wrong, coming from him. Ironic, really, since he had been the one to push for the information.

He shrugged, avoiding his friend’s eyes.
James stared at him for a moment longer, frowning, then turned to Remus.

“Moony?”

But Remus avoided his eyes as well. He was about to turn to Peter, who was attempting to turn his back on him inconspicuously while buttoning his pajamas, when Ron cleared his throat.

“We talked about Harry,” Ron said. James turned to him, puzzled.

“Harry?”

Sirius, Remus, and Peter sat on their beds silently as Ron explained about what had happened and what they had discussed regarding Harry’s parents and guardian. James was pale and aghast when Ron finished.

“Blimey,” he said in a hushed voice, “that’s awful. To see someone you care about die right in front of you…” He sat down on his bed while continuing to stare at Ron with shock. His brows furrowed.

“How is she? Is she all right?”

“She will be,” Ron repeated Hermione’s words. “She’ll be back to her old self tomorrow.”

“But—”

“If you want to talk to her about it, then talk to her about it. She’s not going to shut down on herself or anything like that. She’s already accepted the situation and she’s trying to move on. She’s stronger than you think. You don’t have to walk on eggshells around her. That’ll only offend her,” Ron told him firmly.

“Okay,” James replied, looking grave. “I understand. Thanks for telling me.”

He turned to his fellow Marauders. “You heard the man, didn’t you? Don’t treat her any differently because of what you know now!”

Sirius snorted. “I think we already know that, Prongs,” he said drily. “She’s like Lily, isn’t she? She’s more than capable of taking care of herself. We all got a sense of that today in Harpinger’s class.”

“Not to mention how she’s been dismissing Padfoot’s charm every single day so far,” Remus added with a smirk.

“Whatever, Moony.” There were chuckles as Sirius rolled his eyes.

“D-D’you think she’s mad at me?” Peter asked nervously, his watery blue eyes wide and anxious.

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked him, frowning.

“B-Because I’m the one who made the spell rebound and hit you in the chest, Padfoot. And she was triggered by that. Maybe she blames me for what happened.”

“Well it certainly didn’t help,” Ron muttered.

Peter whimpered and the other Marauders turned to Ron with surprise. Ron’s eyes widened once he realized what he’d said.

“That was out of line. Sorry. Sorry, Peter,” he apologized to Peter. But Sirius thought his tone was a
little too forceful.

“I’m still worried about her, y’know? Even though I know she’ll be all right. She, er, she’s never reacted like that before in front of me and Hermione,” Ron attempted to explain. He ducked his head and fiddled with the buttons of his pajamas. His face was red.

“It’s all right, we get it,” James reassured him. “We’ll do our best to help her feel better. In a way that won’t offend her,” he added hastily.

The atmosphere was considerably lighter when they turned in for the night.

Lying in his bed, Sirius couldn’t help wondering about what Harry was thinking at that moment. Or was she asleep? If she was anything like him, she would barely get any sleep that night. He sighed.

Her wide green eyes flashed through his mind one last time before he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

*refers to the picture of Regulus with the Slytherin Quidditch team that was introduced in DH. It seemed as if Harry was the only one who took a careful look at that photograph.

Apologies for the delay! I meant to have this chapter posted at the usual time, but, well, life got in the way, as it has a habit of doing, and I wanted to give you guys a properly finished product.

A lot more happened in this chapter than I planned for—I meant to have the three main conversations in focus from the beginning, but several, lesser developments managed to attach themselves to the chapter during the final edits. And the bit of action that I promised turned out to be relatively slight compared to all the dialogue, but I hope it came through in its own way.

If anyone was a tad disappointed that the trio’s secrets weren’t revealed in this chapter, well, let me just go ahead say that the big reveal won’t be happening for a while. Remus and Sirius have begun to get suspicious, but their curiosity will remain in the back of their minds while other…things happen. I hope I can keep you guys interested ‘til then.

Next chapter will have the trio begin their training in the Room of Requirement.

Thank you so much for all your patience and support! All your wonderful feedback sustains my motivation and vision for this story. Thank you for each kudos, bookmark, subscription, and comment. Hope to see you all again next week :)
Harry looked up from her work as a sudden dark fell over the room and realized that several candles next to the windows had extinguished themselves.

It was nearly sunrise, she observed with a jolt, as the paling blue of the skies outside brightened the walls across from her. How time had passed, since she had decided to come down early to the common room to finish her homework. She stifled a yawn as she returned to her essay, starting the last paragraph that would complete it. It was a good thing that Herbology was the only class she had for the day, she thought tiredly.

A door opened and closed. She glanced up from her study table at the sound of footsteps approaching the common room and froze when she recognized Sirius. The two of them stared at one another, both startled by the other’s presence. Harry saw that he was fully dressed in his school robes like her and had his bag slung over his shoulder. Her mouth was dry as she attempted to come up with something to say. But he beat her to it, as his lips quirked up into a smile.

“Good morning, Lady Harry. You’re up early today.”

Some of the tension drained away from her shoulders at his playful greeting. She smiled back at him.

“I’m trying to finish up some work here. What are you doing up early?”

“Same reason,” he replied as he approached her table. He sat down across from her. Harry shifted her gaze from him, returning to her work, but felt his eyes watching her every movement.

“Do you need something?” she decided to ask, looking up at him. His shrewd grey eyes scrutinized her face and she resisted the urge to gulp.

“You didn’t get much sleep last night,” he commented, making her tense again. It seemed as if he meant to discuss it after all. Briefly, she wondered about Hermione and Ron with mounting chagrin as she considered the mess she had created and left them in. How much did he, they, know or not know? Well, it was time to face the consequences, regardless.

“No, I didn’t,” she admitted, a little stiffly. “Does my face look that bad?” Sleep had eluded her for most of the night, although she had somehow managed to drift into unconsciousness after calming herself. She had decided to ready herself for the day when everything was yet dark and silent, after waking up countless times in the middle of the night.

She watched as a mischievous glint entered Sirius’s eyes. “You’re a little paler than usual, but you’re as lovely as ever…lovely Lady Harry,” he teased.

“Thank you, Sirius, that’s nice to know.” She turned back to her essay, smiling slightly.

“Hermione and Ron told us about what happened with the Death Eaters.”

The amusement vanished from her face and her quill froze on her parchment mid-sentence. Nervous anticipation and dread coursed through her veins as she met his solemn expression. What had her friends told him and the others? Even those two must have been baffled by her behavior, when she herself hadn’t expected it. It had just...happened. It had been completely involuntary and she had
been left shaken by the fact that she had been so affected by the scene as she was mortified by the spectacle she had made of herself, which had inconvenienced and even endangered the trio’s precarious positions.

She put down her quill and leaned back in her seat, steeling herself for what had been laid out for her.

“What did they tell you?”

And Sirius explained.

Harry was impressed by the time he finished. Hermione and Ron had told the others a vague and somewhat alternate version of the truth. It wasn’t a complete lie, which made it easier for her to admit to it, if questioned. Although, it was strange and absurd, having Sirius unwittingly know and feel sorry about his death from another part of the timeline.

“By the way, I’m sorry.”

Harry was pulled out of her thoughts and she blinked at him.

“Why are you apologizing?”

She furrowed her brows as he shifted his gaze away from her, looking guilty. He brushed his hair back from his face and his eyes flicked back to hers.

“I pushed Hermione for information and invaded your privacy. That’s how the others know, including James. Ron had to tell him when he came back and saw how distracted we were,” he elaborated when he saw her mouth grow taut. “I know how aggravating it is for others to try and pry out things you don’t want them to know, but I did it regardless, because I chose to be curious.” He paused, looking troubled.

“And I apologize if I ever offended you with any of my behavior,” he continued quietly and sincerely. “I’m well-aware of how I’ve been acting around you, but I promise that I wasn’t being malicious—I just meant to have fun and I honestly didn’t think you minded. And if I did offend you, I swear I can be better. I’ll start being a proper friend, for starters, if you want, that is.” He looked at her cautiously with eyes that were just as earnest as the ones she had seen yesterday in the kitchens.

Harry stared back at him, bewildered and touched. She had never expected Sirius to be so… thoughtful and open with his words. Perhaps Hermione had felt similarly when he had apologized to her.

Her expression softened when she took in his nervous demeanor while he awaited her response. “You don’t have to apologize for any of that,” she murmured, feeling a little shy from the honesty he had shown her. “I know my reaction was puzzling, to say the least, if not alarming, and you did deserve an explanation for that. I can’t blame you for asking Hermione when I left you all so suddenly, right after it’d happened.” She smiled a little before continuing, “And honestly, I didn’t mind the flirting, although you did take me by surprise more than once, but really, I just took it as a natural part of your personality in the end. It was even kind of nice, going back and forth with you… I’ve er, never really interacted with anyone like that before, and you made it kind of fun. And yeah, I’d really like it if we were friends.” She felt warm and happy as she smiled at him. He was finally seeing her as more than just a girl.

Sirius’s eyes were grateful as he returned her smile. He held his hand out to her.

“Shall we formalize out friendship, Harry?” He attempted to look stiff and dignified.
They shook hands.

But he held on to her hand when she tried to retract it. She watched with surprise and amusement when he brought his head down to her hand and kissed it, reenacting their introduction. He winked at her in the same, mischievous manner.

“I’ll be taking advantage of the fact that you don’t find me bothersome. You’re too lovely to not tease,” he told her. Harry’s chest felt warm as she let out a huff.

“Figures you’re the type to take advantage of any opportunity handed to you.”

“That I am,” he agreed cheerfully. To make his point, he deliberately caressed the top of her hand with his thumb. He paused. Harry tilted her head at him, bemused, as he stared intently at her hand.

Why…?

It was with a panicked jolt that she realized what had caught his attention as he turned his eyes back to her face and opened his mouth.

“Is this a scar?” he asked her. He frowned at her, as if he couldn’t make sense of what was on her hand.

“Yes,” she replied reluctantly, after a tense pause. He seemed to be waiting for her to say more, but she was in no mood to start explaining. She tried to dislodge her hand from his grip, but if anything, his hold on her tightened.

“Am I seeing it right? Does it really say, ‘I must not tell lies?’” His voice was suddenly demanding and his eyes looked at hers searchingly.

“Yes, it does, Sirius. Will you please let go of my hand?” She gave him a defiant look as she tugged at his grip.

“How did you get it?”

Harry grit her teeth as irritation spiked within her. “It’s none of your business, Sirius. I thought you felt sorry about prying into my past?” she shot back at him. Her heart beat erratically in her chest as she watched his eyes narrow and his jaw tighten. They both knew that he was aware that she was hiding something from him. Something big enough to make her immediately defensive.

She didn’t want to lie to him, never to him, but what choice did she have? It wasn’t the right time to come clean about everything. And besides, the scar on her hand had always been her burden to bear — she had refused to tell even Dumbledore about it in fifth year, although she had been forced to tell the Dumbledore here when he had seen her hand. But from the determined look on Sirius’s face, she knew he was far from giving up, despite the sharp remark she had just thrown at him. Ron’s words about him being stubborn echoed in her head as she desperately thought up an explanation that blended fact and fiction to make herself convincing.

“All right, fine,” she snapped. “I got the scar from a Black Quill. I assume you know what that is?” The grim look in his eyes served as her confirmation. She continued.

“When Hermione and I were on the run from Voldemort, I got caught in a trap laid out by some Death Eaters, who made me believe that they’d caught my guardian while he was away. I took Hermione with me to rescue him, but Hermione got hit by a spell that made her unconscious and I was forced to surrender. I was taken away from her and made to sit in a room with one of them, a particularly nasty woman, who asked me where my guardian was. I told her I didn’t know and she
told me that I’d have to be punished because she knew I was lying. I thought she was going to use the Cruciatus Curse on me, but she opted for a softer option—she took out some parchment and a Black Quill and had me write ‘I must not tell lies’ until the message sank in. I didn’t know what she meant until she made me write it over and over again, until my whole hand was covered in blood. She wasn’t going to let me stop until I told her the truth and she got impatient enough to consider using the Cruciatus, but my guardian arrived before she could resort to that. And of course, you know what happened afterwards. So there you go—that’s how I got the scar on my hand. Happy?” she finished with a sarcastic snap. She seethed, hating how vulnerable she felt. Of all her school years, her fifth year had been the worst. That year had almost broken her and recalling any of the miserable and painful experiences from it was most undesirable.

But she regretted her tone when she looked at his face. He was pale and his contrite grey eyes had a tinge of horror in them as he stared back at her. She was suddenly sorry about her attitude towards him. It was true that he had pushed her to answer, but he couldn’t be blamed for wanting to know—if she was him and had seen the disturbing mark on her hand, she would have demanded to know too, especially if they were friends. Friends worried and cared about each other, didn’t they?

“Look,” she said quickly, “I’m not mad, okay? You just caught me off guard and it wasn’t a pleasant thing to talk about in the first place. I…I’d like to forget that it ever happened if I could, but it did happen and I can’t run away from that fact. But, er, I’d appreciate it if you don’t tell the others. I don’t need them to feel sorry for me any more than they already do.”

She gave him a pleading look. It was already bad enough seeing the sorrowful expression on his face. What would James and Lily’s faces look like if they heard about it? The last thing she wanted was for her young parents to look at her with sadness and pity. They didn’t need to be burdened by her past.

She just wanted them to be happy.

“I won’t,” he promised. He hesitated and added, “I know what you mean about not wanting others’ sympathy. Sometimes, it makes you feel worse.”

They looked at each other with silent understanding. His thumb brushed the top of her hand as he looked down at it again.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured before he bent his head over it. Harry tried to repress the shiver that went through her when his lips touched the scar and quickly took her hand back as he slowly pulled away from it. The top of her hand tingled and she felt shy under the warm smile he gave her.

“Right,” she started in a businesslike tone as she finally returned to her essay, “Let’s get our work done before the others come down, shall we? I’d like to get Potions done as well.”

"Of course, Harry."

When the others finally descended to the common room, it was with surprise that they found Sirius and Harry talking and laughing over a joke with their finished essays rolled up next to them.
The morning went by without any major incidents, to Harry’s relief. The awkwardness that had hovered in the air between her and the others in the common room had been diffused by Sirius, who had greeted the others with his usual cheerful air before giving a short explanation of how the two of them had both woken up early to finish their homework. The tension had disappeared completely after she had responded drily to the few teasing remarks he had sent her way, which had encouraged James and Lily to join in mocking him. Ron and Hermione’s nervous and hopeful faces had become relieved at the reassuring smile she had sent them, and she had accepted Hermione’s tight hug and Ron’s arm around her shoulders as they walked to the Great Hall. Remus had looked as if he wanted to say something to her about the events of the previous night, but had instead started a conversation with her about their lessons for the day.

She wouldn’t have minded if any of the others had brought up the subject, as it was something that they were all aware of, but she was grateful for their thoughtfulness, nonetheless. Even Marlene and Alice had greeted her with their usual smiles, when she had caught their eyes during breakfast. Although, she had to somewhat force herself to send Peter a friendly look after the frequent, anxious glances he had sent her, and was coolly satisfied by the resulting elation that spread across his features.

The affection that she felt for Ron and Hermione, who must have told them to treat her as they usually did, spread to the others as well.

Harry and Ron headed to the library after breakfast while the others made their way to their elective courses: Sirius, James, Hermione, and Lily to Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and Remus and Peter to Care of Magical Creatures.

“Did you manage to finish the essay for Herbology?” Ron whispered to Harry as they settled themselves at a table near the Restricted Section. Harry figured that since she was done with her homework, she would do some research on dark spells.

“Yeah,” she whispered back. “D’you want to look at it? I’m done with Potions, too.”

“Blimey, Harry, did you turn into Hermione?”

“Dunno, but I feel more motivated to study in this time than in ours.”

Ron snorted. “Yeah, me too,” he admitted with a grin. “I think it’s ‘cause the others are so damn brilliant. I mean, I figured that the Marauders were great at magic, but seeing it first-hand is something else. And your parents were amazing in their duels yesterday.”

“They were, weren’t they?” Harry said, beaming. “And so was Sirius—I mean, I wanted to see Lily win, but he was fantastic!” She hid herself behind her book as Madam Pince looked up at her excited voice. Ron regarded her thoughtfully as she placed her book down on the table after the librarian turned her attention elsewhere.

“What?” she asked him.

“D’you have the feeling that Sirius might fancy you?” His face turned pink at her incredulous stare, but he smirked all the same.

“What do you mean?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “He’s been hitting on you, mate, and not so innocently either. Why were you two in the common room this morning?”
“Like he said, we just happened to wake up early to finish our homework. He told me about what you and Hermione told him and the others last night and we moved on from there. Nice explanation for the scene I caused, by the way. Thanks.”

Ron grinned. “That was all Hermione. Brilliant, don’t you think? She was hoping that with a different version of the truth, she’d be more convincing and they’d get distracted from anything weird they might have already noticed about us.”

“Yeah, I had to do the same thing with Sirius this morning…”

Ron listened as she told him about the story she had concocted for the scar on her hand.

“Bloody hell, he’s sharp,” he muttered after she’d finished. “That was excellent, by the way. I, on the other hand, need to get better at making stuff up. D’you remember the rubbish I told him and Remus yesterday when we were talking about the post for Defense being jinxed?” He shook his head at himself.

Harry found some books on dark spells while Ron wrote his essays by consulting his books and her work. She found an extremely old history book with peeling silver letters on its dark, stained cover, which gave her information on ancient dark magic and its evolution through time. It did not list all the spells that it described, but there were several spells that caught her attention. There was also a medical journal that listed and explained the process of treatments for the effects of dark magic which Harry found to be useful. The journal included the names and incantations of the curses so that the healer who consulted it would be able to figure out possible counter-spells. Although the purpose of each spell was not explicitly stated, the description of what the spell did to the victim was enough to give the reader an idea of what it was meant to achieve. Pictures were included as well.

Looking up the spells was grisly work. It was not ideal for weak temperaments or stomachs, Harry thought grimly as she flipped a page that depicted the victim ejecting his innards from his mouth.

“Need help, Harry?” Ron asked, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. He was done with his homework.

“Careful, you might lose your appetite for lunch,” she warned him as she passed him a small stack of books.

Sure enough, at lunch, Ron grimaced as he cut into his steak and ale pie. He hesitated as he stared at the piece caught on his fork. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

“What’s the matter, Ron? I’ve never seen you this unenthusiastic about food.”

“Upset stomach,” he muttered, pushing his plate away. “Pass me the salad, will you?”

Hermione turned to Harry, astonished.

“Are you all right, Ron?” Lily asked him worriedly. “You’re not eating much today.”

Ron’s face flushed at Lily’s motherliness.
“Oh, I’m fine. I just don’t feel great today. Might’ve caught something from someone in the library. It was packed.”

“Well, if you’re getting sick, you’ll need your strength to combat the virus! Here…” Lily served him a generous helping of hot beef stew. “Eat up. It’ll help you feel better,” she encouraged him with a smile.

“Thank you,” Ron muttered, his face bright red. Hermione passed him some bread, giggling.

“Lily, darling, you are such an angel,” James cooed at Lily, making Harry turn her attention to them. “It’s one of the reasons I fell in love with you.” He pulled Lily to him and placed a kiss on the side of her head. Lily gave him a glowing look and he beamed back at her. It was about the sappiest and most heartwarming thing Harry had ever seen, and she stifled a giggle as she watched them.

“Do you like watching him that much?” a voice murmured by her ear. She gave a start and turned to see Sirius looking at her.

“Oh, er, it’s just, he reminds me of someone that I once knew,” she replied vaguely, flustered and embarrassed from being caught staring at her parents. Sirius gave her a searching look.

“I see.” Then his face brightened as he smiled.

*He’s quite good at that—changing his expression in the blink of an eye,* Harry thought warily.

“Be my partner in Herbology, will you Harry? And want to study with me and my fellow Marauders afterwards?”

“Oh, Hermione, Ron, and I have a meeting with McGonagall after class,” she replied, recalling the excuse the three of them had decided to use to justify their absence while they practiced the Disillusionment Charm. “She wants a full review of how the three of us have been doing and about any difficulties we’ve had. I reckon it’ll take ‘til dinner. She looked rather stern about it.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow. “Like Dumbledore wanted from you? Wouldn’t he let McGonagall know about how you’re doing himself?”

“I think she still wants to hear it straight from us,” Harry improvised with a shrug.

She turned away from him as nonchalantly as she could and joined in conversation with Remus, who told her about Professor Kettleburn’s lesson on Occamy eggs, one of which the teacher had managed to procure from a trader from the Far East. She laughed at Remus’s description of his shock at hearing Kettleburn admit that he meant to bring an actual Occamy into Hogwarts to show the class, which reminded her of Hagrid’s own fondness for dangerous animals. Glancing up at the head table, she noticed that Hagrid was absent. He was probably busy tracking down a new creature in the Forbidden Forest or tending to his own plants and animals, she thought wistfully. She wondered how he was doing in this time—perhaps she could talk with Ron and Hermione about paying him a visit.

Returning to her current surroundings, she felt the prickling sensation of being watched. She turned to its source and was immediately put on her guard when she caught Sirius’s thoughtful gaze on her. Had he been watching her for the entire time? He couldn’t possibly be suspicious about how she had responded, could he?

“Do you like watching me that much?” she decided to throw his previous question back at him mockingly. Her lips curled into a victorious smirk as his eyes widened. The others turned their attention to them when a surprised laugh escaped from him.
“I do, actually,” Sirius replied, looking mischievous. “I’ve always liked looking at beautiful things. And you, my lady, are one of them.”

Harry laughed with the others, glad and relieved that she had successfully distracted him. Although, she wasn’t sure how long she could hold her own against his sharp instincts, which had begun to probe at any crack in her and her friends’ supposed background.

The trio waited patiently while Professor McGonagall gathered her belongings. They had arrived at the third-year Transfiguration classroom that they were to use for the Disillusionment Charm after leaving the greenhouse, while the Marauders and Lily had gone to the library.

“Well then,” their Head of House addressed them once she was finished, “you may use this classroom until dinner. What spells are you three practicing again?”

“The Disarming and Shield Charms for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Harpinger expects us to have perfected them by Thursday,” Hermione answered readily.

McGonagall raised her eyebrows. “For dueling practice, I assume?” She looked at Harry. “I heard you are rather skilled, Miss Granger.”

“I like to think it’s mostly due to my fast reflexes,” Harry replied, feeling self-conscious. No one besides Dumbledore was aware of her true identity and yet, her name was being spread around. Attention, it seemed, never failed to seek her out in one way or another.

“I would say that is a skill in itself. Not many duelists can react as quickly in a real situation as they would on a professional dueling stage. Fast reflexes are a valuable asset, indeed.” There was a hint of pride in McGonagall’s eyes as she regarded Harry, who did not know how to react to this rare praise.

“Good luck to you three,” she told them as she left.

“Thank you, Professor,” they chorused as the door shut behind her.

Hermione turned to Harry and Ron with a businesslike expression. “Right, so let’s talk about our goals before we get started,” she began. “I don’t know about you, but I think we need to become proficient in the Disillusionment Charm by the end of today. I don’t know how many more excuses we can come up with to keep the others satisfied during the day. At least in the evening, we can either drag on our homework until they go to bed or sneak out to the common room after they’re asleep to practice.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, “I think Remus and Sirius might’ve started to notice that there’s something shifty about us.”

“Do you know how long James and Lily are out on their nightly rounds?” Harry asked them. “We might want to know when they come back, so that we know when to start or pause in our practice until they head to bed themselves.”

“Oh, right, you wouldn’t know since you turned in early last night. They came back a little before midnight, when everyone else had already gone to bed,” Hermione answered. “Hopefully, it won’t be too different tonight. It also depends on how long the others stay up to finish their studying as well. They might still be in the common room when James and Lily return.”
“Did you get a lot of homework for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I think the homework is all doable in one night, not that it’s all due tomorrow, but I don’t know how quickly James, Sirius, and Lily do their work.”

“Pretty fast, I reckon.”

“Hm.”

“Well, we’ll find out tonight,” Harry said briskly, eager to get on with learning the spell. “In the meantime, let’s do our best to master the charm, shall we?”

Hermione nodded. “Let’s begin.”

They were relieved when they were forced to stop for dinner. Harry felt queasy after practicing the charm repeatedly, as the sensation of the spell, which felt as if an egg had been cracked on her head and dripped down her body, had become disturbing after several half-successful attempts.

Hermione, as usual, had gotten the spell down faster than Harry or Ron. She had reached the point of proficiency where she could walk around and continue to be cloaked by blending into her surroundings. Harry was almost there. She was all right if she stayed still, but there was a noticeable ripple in the air if she moved. Ron was next best. He would be all right if a passerby only glanced at the spot he was trying to blend into.

“I feel like taking a shower,” Ron muttered as they headed to dinner. “I feel disgusting, like something was slipped down the back of my shirt.”

“You’re not alone,” Harry said. “I feel kind of slimy.”

They saw that they had arrived at the table before the Marauders and Lily.

“Eat up,” Hermione advised them as she doled out generous helpings of mash on their plates, “We’ll be practicing late into the night.”

“Practicing late for what?”

They jumped at Lily’s voice. The others had arrived.

“Dueling,” Harry said the first thing that popped into her head. “We’d like to refine our reflexes and try casting the spells nonverbally.”

“I look forward to watching that,” Sirius said, sliding into his seat beside her. “I want to see your reflexes in action again.”

“Oh, but, it’ll be very late when we practice. We mean to do it together, you see. Harry and Ron only have homework for Herbology, but I’ve got work for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as well, which I plan on getting finished tonight.” Hermione held her breath, hoping her attempt to disinterest him would work.

Sirius gave her an astonished look. “You do realize that the work for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes aren’t due until next week, along with tomorrow’s assignment, right? And yet, you mean to finish all the homework for all three classes tonight? Are you sure you’re human?”

Hermione’s cheeks turned pink. “Yes, I am. I can be very determined once I set a goal for myself.”
Lily shook her head, impressed. “I think you’re on a whole different level than us, Hermione. Brilliant as James and Sirius may be, I don’t think even they’d be willing to subject themselves to the kind of rigorous schedule you’re going for. But frankly, I think it’s quite admirable. You’re motivating me to work harder.” She smiled at Hermione, whose face took on a darker blush from her praise.

“I just do my best,” Hermione replied bashfully. She ignored Harry and Ron’s snorts.

“By the way, where’s Remus and Peter?” Harry spoke up, having noticed that their seats were empty.

Lily’s brows furrowed and James and Sirius exchanged a dark look.

“Mulciber,” was James’s grim reply.

That caught the trio’s attention.

“What happened?” Harry asked, as her mind whirled with various possibilities of why the future Death Eater had made a move against the Marauders. The worst she came up with was the conviction that Voldemort had regained his memories and was beginning to move towards her through his followers, by striking at those around her.

James put down his fork and turned to her.

“We were going down the corridor from the library to head to dinner when we heard someone yell something. We ignored it at first, thinking that it was meant for someone else, but then we heard some girls shriek near us before we saw the spell headed our way.”

“I didn’t see it first, actually, and neither did Peter,” Lily interjected. “We ducked when James, Sirius, and Remus told us to. It was some sort of Blasting Curse, which took out a chunk of wall that was above—”

“Lily’s head,” James growled. There was a spark of fury in his eyes as he recalled the incident. “I pushed her behind me while Padfoot put up a shield to deflect the next spell that came our way. I heard some students calling for a professor, but during that time, we saw that it was Mulciber who was coming towards us. Avery and Snape were just behind him.”

Harry tensed with Hermione.

“Did Snape do anything?” Harry asked. Lily’s expression became stony.

“No, he just stood there and watched while Mulciber shot spells at me and Moony,” Sirius answered with a scoff. “Avery joined in a bit, but it was Mulciber’s hex that managed to hit Wormtail and half-transformed him into a pig. He aimed for the weak link when he saw he couldn’t get at the two of us. Moony took Wormtail to the infirmary afterwards.”

Harry didn’t feel as bad for Peter as she probably should have, but decided to ask, mostly for curiosity’s sake, “Will he be all right?”

“Most likely,” James replied this time. “It was a clumsily-done spell. I think Mulciber meant to turn him entirely into a pig. Shame that half his brain cells are missing. But we fixed that for him, didn’t we, Padfoot?”

“We did indeed, Prongs. But I don’t think it quite turned out like we expected it.” The two of them exchanged a smirk.
“What did you do to him?” Ron asked.

“Let’s just say there’s an extremely overgrown toad with an overlarge head that’s continuing to swell in size until someone stops it. And covered all over with a skin-eating rash.”

“Impressive.”

Sirius and James turned to Harry with appreciative grins.

Hermione swatted at her arm. “No, not impressive! That’s some serious damage they’ve done to him! Did anyone see? You two haven’t gotten yourselves a detention, have you?” She gave the two Marauders a reprimanding look.

Harry rolled her eyes. “Oh c’mon, like Madam Pomfrey won’t be able to get him back in order in five minutes with her wand. And besides, Hermione, Ron and I would do the same thing if you were the one attacked.”

“Oh, definitely,” Ron agreed. Hermione and Lily looked at each other and sighed.

“Looks like we’ve got some daredevils among us,” James remarked, exchanging grins with Sirius.

“But did you two get detention?” Harry echoed Hermione's question, feeling concerned about the possible punishment they might have gotten for their admittedly nasty retaliation.

“Nope,” Sirius responded cheerfully, slinging an arm around her shoulders as he leaned his head on hers. “Luckily for us, everyone in the corridor had run off by the time Mulciber tried blasting us for the third time. So no one was there when Prongs and I hexed him back. Shame we couldn’t return the favor to Avery and Snape, though—we heard Flitwick’s footsteps running towards us and beat it out of there as fast as we could. I’m assuming that Avery and Snivellus aren’t too keen on explaining what happened since they were ones who started it. That part, everyone saw before leaving.”

“You two really caught a lucky break this time,” Lily told him and James sternly. “Imagine what could have happened if Flitwick did catch you at it, James—your status as Head Boy would be revoked, not to mention the detentions you’d have to serve and the points you would have lost.”

“I would have allowed for all that to happen if only to defend you and your honor, Lily,” James told her gallantly, making her flush. Harry laughed with the others as Lily muttered about how ridiculous he was.

“But why did he attack you?” Hermione asked James when the laughter faded. “What he did…it’s pretty serious to have just been out of pure spite.” Harry and Ron held their breath and awaited his answer with her.

But James seemed unconcerned as he shrugged.

“It’s typical for Mulciber, actually. He’s a bit of a loose cannon, especially when it comes to Gryffindors or—”

“Mudbloods,” Lily said quietly, making him fall silent. “But there’s something not quite right with him in general. He creeps me out more than the usual lot he hangs out with.”

Sirius snorted. “Junior Death Eaters, you mean.”

The trio were quiet as they listened to James, Sirius, and Lily enter into a heated discussion about whether Mulciber and his friends had the Dark Mark or not. Sirius was convinced that they did while
Lily was unwilling to believe that Dumbledore would allow them to be at Hogwarts in the first place if they did. James seemed undecided, as he occasionally supported or refuted some of their points.

Harry exchanged a nervous look with Hermione and Ron. It seemed that Mulciber was prone to violence in general, but his actions had reminded them of how delicate and unpredictable their circumstances were.

Remus returned with Peter to the common room after dinner.

Harry eyed Peter shrewdly from the study table she shared with Hermione and Ron as he made his way to the sofa, where James, Lily, and Sirius were settled. His skin was still a little pink, but he seemed normal, other than the haggard look on his face from his ordeal.

“You all right, Wormtail?” James asked him as he made room on the sofa for him.

“Yes, I’m all fine now,” Peter replied in a tired voice. “By the way, thanks for getting Mulciber back for me.”

“What are friends for?” James said, grinning, as he put a friendly arm around his shoulders. Peter smiled at him gratefully and Harry returned to her homework, her mouth taut.

“Seems to be all right,” Ron muttered across from her, as he glanced at Peter. “I guess that’s good.”

“Of course it’s good, Ron. Even he didn’t deserve to be hexed that way, not when he’s still…you know,” Hermione hissed back at him.

Ron and Harry gave noncommittal shrugs and the three of them worked quietly on their homework. They said goodbye to James and Lily when they left for their nightly rounds.

Hermione looked up when Sirius called her name.

“Yes?” she inquired. Harry and Ron turned to him as well, wondering what he wanted.

“What do you think about a bit of competition?”

“Competition?”

“Yes, to see who can get all their homework finished first. You were rather confident that you could handle three classes’ worth in one night. I’m interested in contesting that.” Sirius grinned as she blinked at him.

“Oh…hm…”

Harry and Ron watched as a glint of intrigue appeared in Hermione’s eyes and a familiar fiery determination spread over her face. The two of them looked at one another with raised eyebrows, more than a little amused. Hermione could never resist competition when it was in an academic context.

“All right,” Hermione agreed to his offer. She lifted her chin haughtily. “You’re on.”
By the time James and Lily returned, close to midnight, Harry, Ron, and Remus had finished their homework and were watching Hermione and Sirius try to beat one another in their translations for Ancient Runes. Peter drifted in and out of sleep as he tried to refocus his attention on his diagram for Care of Magical Creatures, with Remus gently shaking him awake every now and then.

“Have you seen anything so extraordinary, Lily?” James asked Lily as the two of them looked between Hermione and Sirius with wonder. “I don’t think I’ve seen Padfoot so intent about his work. Ever,” he remarked further, noting his fellow Marauder’s fierce and concentrated expression as he furiously scribbled away on his parchment.

“Don’t talk to me right now, Prongs,” Sirius muttered, frowning. “I’m attempting to beat Hermione here. We’re competing against each other to see who can finish their homework first.”

Lily let out a surprised laugh. “Well, don’t kill yourself,” she told him. She greeted Harry and Ron as she approached the trio’s table.

“How far have you gotten?” she asked Hermione with a smile.

Hermione started and paused for a split-second before finishing the rest of her translated sentence. She sat back and rolled up her parchment.

“All done,” she told Lily brightly. Sirius’s head snapped up.

“What?” he barked, looking incredulous. “All done, did you say?”

“Yes.” Hermione gave him a serene smile.

James laughed. “Well, Padfoot, she beat you. Better admit defeat and head up to bed, mate. I can see the bags forming under your eyes already.” He poked Sirius in the face.

Sirius swatted James’s hand away, scowling, and refocused his attention on Hermione, who did not waver as she met his gaze. “You’re not lying to me, are you?” he asked her, giving her a suspicious look.

“Of course not,” Hermione shot back, sounding indignant. But her reply was a little too quick, Harry thought. A glance at Sirius told her that he felt similarly, as his eyes narrowed.

“Really?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

Harry saw a glimmer of panic pass over her friend’s face and decided to cover for her. Hermione’s skills at split-second deception needed more work than her own.

“Don’t tell me you’re feeling insecure, it’s so unbecoming of you,” she scoffed at Sirius, whose eyes widened when he registered her taunt.

He made a sound of protest while his fellow Marauders and Lily laughed at him. Ron and Hermione laughed appreciatively across from Harry, who arched an eyebrow at Sirius when he sent her a betrayed look.

He let out a huff after everyone had composed themselves. “Well,” he addressed Hermione in a haughty tone, as he gathered his belongings and stood up to go to bed, “I’ll make sure to beat you next time. I only had one more paragraph to translate for Ancient Runes to complete all my work.”

Harry saw Hermione’s eye twitch.
“Good night and good luck dueling,” Lily told them as she left for the dormitories with the others.

“Best you cast an Imperturbable Charm to not wake anybody,” James advised them. He grinned at Harry. “I’ll be betting on your win.”

Harry’s spirits rose at his confidence in her and she smiled at him.

“I won’t disappoint.”

Hermione cast *Muffliato* right after the doors to the dormitories closed. Ron turned to her.

“You didn’t really finish your homework, did you?”

“No,” she admitted, looking disgruntled. “I acted like I did, because we need time to practice. I can’t believe he got farther than I did—I didn’t even start the problem sets for Arithmancy.”

Ron and Harry snickered.

“Seems like Sirius is smarter than you, Hermione,” Ron teased her.

Hermione lifted her chin. “Quality over quantity,” she replied coolly, making him snort.

“How d’you know he hasn’t got both parts down?”

Hermione ignored him as she rolled out the parchment with her incomplete translation. “I’ll work on finishing my homework while you two practice. I can practice afterwards, since I got farther along in the spell than you both did.”

By the time Hermione finally finished her homework, Harry had reached her level of proficiency. Harry was amazed when she looked down at her body, which blended perfectly with the fireplace behind her, as she walked forwards and backwards to test out the strength of her spell. Ron was nearly there, as he had not quite managed to dispel the slight ripple which appeared when he walked. Fortunately, it was only noticeable in stronger light.

“Great job, you two,” Hermione told them with a tired smile. “I think that should be good enough to fool Filch and Mrs. Norris. I suppose we could try going out tomorrow night. The darkness will help conceal us as well.”

“Won’t Mrs. Norris be able to smell us though?” Ron asked worriedly.

“I could try casting an animal-repelling spell,” Hermione suggested.

Harry nodded. “Great. We’ll try tomorrow then.”

It was past three in the morning when they went off to bed.

The next day passed by smoothly. Harry and Ron headed off to the library again while the others went to their elective classes for the second day in a row.
“If anyone’s interested in going on a diet by turning off their appetite, they should try looking up the Dark Arts in the Restricted Section,” Ron muttered, looking a bit green as they headed to lunch. The two of them joined the others for Charms and Transfiguration afterwards.

The trio were lucky that Hermione had so much homework that night, which enabled them to continue using the excuse of finishing up work before heading up to bed. Sirius was smug as he successfully completed all his work by the time James and Lily arrived at midnight. Hermione was a little outraged.

“But how? You had to do four classes’ worth of homework tonight!” she snapped at him as he shrugged.

“He started working on Arithmancy and Ancient Runes during Charms and Transfiguration, that’s why,” Lily explained. “He can multitask extremely well, unfortunately, as can James.” She mock-scowled at Sirius when he grinned at her.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I think Transfiguration and Arithmancy are the easiest of the lot,” Sirius said in lofty tone as he leaned back on the sofa with his trademark haughty expression on his face.

Hermione muttered under her breath as she returned to her work. She let out a frustrated growl after the others retired to their beds.

“He is absolutely infuriating. I can’t lose to him!”

“You’ll have to deal with it since we’re heading to the Room,” Harry told her as she took out her wand to perform the Disillusionment Charm.

They exited the portrait hole as cautiously as they could, but Ron’s foot got stuck as he inched his way out from behind the portrait, which made him stumble. He cursed.

“Shh!” Harry and Hermione shushed him just as the Fat Lady cried out.

“Who’s there?”

They made their way to the seventh floor as quickly as they could, stopping every once in a while to listen for Filch, Mrs. Norris, or a teacher. They held their breath and drew themselves up against a wall when they heard a rustle near them.

It was Mrs. Norris. She was passing by them when she paused in front of Hermione. Her tail swished as her large, yellow eyes peered around her suspiciously. But she moved on, to their relief. Hermione’s animal-repelling spell had apparently worked. The three of them hurried on to the corridor and Harry called upon the room. They undid the charm after entering and made their way down to the training area.

“I think we should make a list of what we want to achieve through our training,” Hermione suggested, getting out some parchment and a quill from her robes.

“Casting spells nonverbally,” Harry said immediately.

“Faster instincts or reflexes,” Ron supplied next.

“Perfection of defensive spells,” Hermione finished.
They added a couple more goals to the list, including theoretical knowledge of practical dark spells, although the three of them grimaced at the thought of it.

“Right, so how should we start?” Ron asked. He and Hermione looked at Harry.

“Er…”

“You’re the one who led the DA, Harry. This is somewhat like it. Lead us,” Ron told her encouragingly.

“Er, right…,” Harry began, feeling a little awkward from their faith in her, "so, I suppose it’s best if we start by taking a leaf out of Harpinger’s book by dueling each other with the purpose to disarm. It’s the fastest way to spot any weaknesses or faults right off the bat. As there’s three of us, one of us should sit out and observe the other two who are dueling and tell them how they did afterwards. Once we get a good idea of what we should avoid doing when we duel or what we can do better, we can then start improving ourselves and move on from there.”

The three of them looked at one another, hesitant as to who would begin the process.

“I’ll sit back and watch you guys first,” Hermione offered.

Harry and Ron faced each other in the middle of the room while Hermione settled down on the marble steps and pointed her wand at the pile of cushions, anticipating the possible case in which one of them fell back after being struck by a spell.

“Stupefy!” Ron yelled, pointing his wand at Harry.

“Protego!”

Ron leapt out of the way of his rebounded spell, which hit one the practice dummies behind him. Harry took advantage of his momentary lapse in concentration.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Ron froze in place, his eyes wide, as her spell hit him.

“Finite.”

Ron blinked and shook himself as he regained control over his limbs.

“Try dueling a couple more times. Then I’ll be able to get a comprehensive idea of both your skills,” Hermione advised them from her spot.

Harry and Ron dueled three more times. Harry managed to win the next two, but Ron managed to disarm her on the last try.

“Great job, Ron,” Harry told him as they made their way to Hermione. Both of them were breathing hard, as they had immediately begun the next duel after one had ended.

“Thanks,” Ron said, grinning. “I think my reflexes finally caught up with my brain on the last one.”

Hermione clapped and beamed as they approached her. “Great job, guys.” She turned to the notes that she had taken while watching them.

“So, Ron, as you’ve already noticed, you need to work more on your reflexes. You’re always a little slower than Harry when you cast your spells. You need to try moving at the same time she does.”
“Right,” Ron said, nodding.

“And Harry…well, actually, there’s not much that you need to improve, really. Your reflexes and intuition are really good. Your instincts are pretty sharp for the spells coming your way and er…I suppose just keep on doing what you’re doing and prepare yourself for nonverbal spells?” Hermione shrugged at her, smiling.

“Cool, great,” Harry replied with a grin, feeling pleased with herself. “I guess I’ll try practicing spells nonverbally on the dummies, then. So who do you want to duel, Hermione?”

“Oh, er…” Hermione looked between Ron and Harry.

“How ‘bout with me?” Ron suggested. “Since Harry’s got a knack for dueling, she’ll be able to analyze your skills better than me. Just give me five minutes to recover myself.”

Hermione smiled at him. “All right.”

Harry watched as Ron and Hermione dueled. Ron did well by holding his own against Hermione, whose reflexes were also fairly good. Hermione cast spells nonverbally half the time and managed to beat Ron in all four duels. Although…

Harry frowned while finishing up her notes.

“So,” Ron panted, as he and Hermione approached her, “How did we do?”

“Pretty well,” she told them. “You’ve already gotten better with your reflexes, Ron. I’d say that’s partly because Hermione’s a tough opponent.” Hermione blushed at the compliment and Ron threw an arm around her shoulders.

“You really are brilliant, Hermione,” he murmured to her.

Harry continued with her assessment. “Your reflexes were more than decent, Hermione. And your spells came out right when you thought of them, whether verbally or nonverbally. But you do have a problem.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, looking anxious. “What is it?”

“Well, frankly put, you’re not putting enough force behind them.”

“But she managed to beat me four times,” Ron said, puzzled.

“Yes, but, Hermione, you’re not using the spells to their full potential, as they’re meant to be used. You don’t really mean them when you cast them.” Harry looked into Hermione’s nervous, brown eyes and knew she was already aware of this fault. She hesitated, wondering if being blunt was the best way to go, then decided it was.

“Look, I know you don’t want to hurt anybody, ever, but think of it this way, Hermione: let’s say we’re up against some Death Eaters, who have no qualms about killing us, as they typically don’t. You Stun one of them and rush to help me or Ron, but it happens that you didn’t Stun them strong enough, so they get back up and get you while you have your back turned on them. Or, they turn the wand on either me or Ron and take one of us out. Hesitation is a liability, Hermione, I know you know that. You dueled with Bellatrix, remember? Were you holding back then, too?”
Hermione’s lip trembled. Ron seemed torn between giving Harry a reproachful look and turning anxiously to Hermione to see if Harry’s claim about her weakness was true.

“I just don’t like attacking people,” Hermione whispered, “I can’t really deal with violence, Harry, even against Death Eaters, not really. I can say the spells and cast them, but I always balk when I do, even if my instincts tell me to give it my all. Sometimes the spells come out stronger than other times. I can’t really control it because I get afraid. I get so scared when I’m up against one of them, Harry. I think I’m going to get killed and sometimes I get desperate and give it my all because I think about the people I want to protect, but other times… I think I’m fighting a losing battle. I don’t trust myself to win when I’m so unwilling to kill, which I know I should be ready to resort to when I’m up against them. I just don’t have the right resolution in me to fight.”

She gave Harry a pleading look. “How do you do it, Harry? How do you stop being scared? You’ve always been braver than the both of us.”

Despair shone in her teary eyes and Ron pulled her into his arms to comfort her. Hermione pulled away after a moment and turned back to Harry, who looked at her solemnly.

“I can’t tell you how to stop being scared because I don’t know, Hermione. And I’m not brave, not really. The reason I can still stand up to Voldemort and his Death Eaters is because I’ve gotten used to it. That’s not bravery, it’s resignation. Because with the prophecy, it’s like my fate’s been sealed. I either survive or I don’t. But that doesn’t mean that I’ve stopped being scared—when I think of the people that I can lose because of him, I can’t stop the fear from rising in my chest until I can hardly breathe, because I know that in the end, I can’t possibly save everyone that I care about.” She paused for breath as her chest suddenly became tight.

“Do you know how many times I’ve wished that it wasn’t me who has to face him in the end? It’s awful, knowing that he rampages around, causing destruction, because of me, half the time. But that doesn’t mean that I want to give up, because I can’t, if I want to stop him from destroying everything I care about. I mean to remain alive for as long as I can to at least make sure that the people I love don’t get hurt or killed. So I fight, because that’s the only way to stop him. He can’t be reasoned with through words because violence is the only way that he knows to get what he wants. I don’t want to kill either because that’s what he does, but I don’t know…I could probably find the resolve if that’s what it takes to save you, Ron, Sirius, my parents, Remus, or any of the other people on the list we made. And I’m willing to die for you if that’s what it takes to protect you from him because it’s the people around us who keep us going in life. What would life be for me without you and Ron, who’ve stuck by me no matter what? I reckon it wouldn’t be worth much if I lost you two. So think of Ron when you fight, Hermione. Think of your parents. Think of the people you want to protect. That’s why we made the list, isn’t it? To remind us of why we chose to fight at all and to give us the strength to continue to do so. You can’t protect or save anyone if you aren’t willing to give it your all to do so.”

Hermione hitched in a breath and tears coursed down her face as she wept. Ron stood next to her, rubbing her back soothingly with a grave expression.

“She’s right, Hermione,” he told her quietly. “Every time I fight, I think of you, Harry, my family…the fear of losing the ones I love trumps the fear of losing my life. It’s okay to be scared. Fear helps us fight too, you know. You just need to redirect your fear. Because in a real fight, you can’t afford to be afraid of losing. You can’t, if you don’t want to lose someone close to you because of them. And you are strong, Hermione. Harry and I know that. You found enough strength in yourself to change your parents’ memories to protect them, didn’t you? You were willing to die for them. The resolve to fight is already within you. You just need to grasp it more firmly, that’s all.”
Hermione looked up at him, sniffling. She nodded. Harry steadied herself as Hermione rushed to her and embraced her tightly. Her last, remaining tears soaked into her robes as she hugged her back.

“I’ll mean it. I swear I’ll mean it next time,” Hermione’s muffled voice reached Harry's ears. “I’ll fight for you, Harry, I’ll fight for Ron, I’ll fight for everyone.” Hermione drew back from her and gave her a firm look.

“I know you will,” Harry said.

Hermione hugged her again.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the delay again.

My excuse is that I got sick in the middle of this past week, and while I was able to reply to comments, my mind was not in a right state to look over the new chapter with a critical eye, much less edit it to its final form. It was just this past Friday evening that I even opened the file for this chapter to edit it. This does not mean that this chapter was rushed—I don’t put something out, especially if it’s a written piece, unless I am able to look at it with grim satisfaction, more or less.

For future reference, especially for any new readers, I aim to post a new chapter by the end of every weekend (PST). If there is any delay, please know that I do my best to get it posted as soon as possible. I’m trying to be as transparent as possible about my writing process, not only because I appreciate interaction with readers, but also because I’ve been on the other side as well— I was a reader (still am) before I decided that I wanted to put something out myself. So I understand the feeling of frustration that comes with waiting for a work to update because I’ve felt it myself.

As for the contents of this chapter:
- The rest of the trio's scars will be revealed eventually (I know some of you may have been curious about the scars). The reason for their gradual, rather than immediate reveal, is due to my personal belief that people are generally ignorant about the finer details of a person's appearance, unless they have a singular interest in them or are looking for something specific, like the Hogwarts students in the books, when they knew to look for Harry's lightning-bolt scar, since they'd heard about it.
- Hermione’s self-doubt in the final part was inspired by the scene in the Department of Mysteries, when she prevented Harry from attacking the Death Eater who got his head stuck in the bell jar, which turned his head into a baby’s through a sort of time-regression. Harry would have been right in taking him out, but Hermione insisted that he couldn’t, because the Death Eater was a baby… well, in a way, he was, but he also wasn’t.

I realize this chapter may not have been as exciting as previous chapters, but I think the next chapter should be (hopefully) more engaging, as it will have… Quidditch tryouts!

Thank you all so much for your patience and understanding and as always, I am grateful for all your feedback, whether it be through your kudos, bookmarks, comments, or subscriptions. Thank you so much for reading and for your interest in the story :)
The next morning, Harry and Ron could not stop yawning in Potions while preparing the ingredients for the Cleansing Elixir, a medicinal potion that refreshed the body by eliminating nausea, rejuvenating blood flow, and relieving any discomfort from digestive problems.

Harry was not feeling optimistic as she started heating up the cauldron. She had never made the potion before and without the Half-Blood Prince’s help, she was back to square one with her dismal Potions abilities. She hoped to squeeze out any skill she had miraculously used to get her Exceeds Expectations score in her O.W.L.s.

“Right, so we add the eleuthero root first—”

“No, Ron, that’s the second to last ingredient to put in. We need to wait at least three minutes before adding anything in. The waterlily juice needs to heat up first,” Harry said, stopping him. She wanted to impress James and Lily again and was determined to succeed through her own abilities.

She painstakingly read every direction at least two times and tried to remember any stirring tips that the Half-Blood Prince had given in his book. If she had learned anything from sixteen-year-old Severus Snape, it was the importance of stirring—how you stirred the potion made all the difference in the final stage.

Ron took over the second part of the stirring, allowing her to take a break by looking around the room. Her gaze landed on Snape, who brewed his potion alone. His dark eyebrows were furrowed in single-minded focus and concentration as he moved his stirring spoon back and forth in his cauldron. Harry watched his movements attentively, determined to learn through observation for future lessons in the class—his potion was already closer to the correct shade described in the book, compared to hers and Ron’s.

Then, as if he had felt her watching him, Snape raised his head and stared straight at her. Harry ducked her head quickly and returned her gaze to her potion. Even from across the room, she could feel his scowl directed at her.

“Don’t look up,” she advised Ron, who turned to her. “Snape’s glaring at us ‘cause he caught me looking at him.”

Ron’s eyes flicked to Snape then returned to her.

“Noted,” he muttered. “Wait, why were you looking at him?”

She shrugged. “Just wanted to see if I could glean some tips from him,” she replied, making him snort.

“Yeah, allowing us some tips is the least he can do—I don’t think I learned anything from him in class except to wash my hair regularly.”

Harry felt a little ashamed as a snicker escaped from her.

“You got an ‘E’ in your O.W.L., though,” she pointed out, half-laughing.
“A bloody miracle, that’s what that was.”

To Harry and Ron’s immense relief, it seemed that their potion had turned out all right by the end of class, as the final color was the correct shade of sea-green and a pleasant, minty aroma exuded from it.

“Very well done!” Slughorn praised them when he reached their table. “Another perfectly-done potion! I think Severus got the best of you this time, Miss Granger, but I can see you are a serious competitor for the title of best potioneer in class! Well done indeed.” He beamed at her and once again, Harry avoided glancing over at Snape, from whose direction she felt a pair of penetrating eyes boring into her.

“I don’t know how long I can keep it up,” she muttered to Ron and Hermione as they left the classroom. “There’s only so far my own abilities can get me.”

“Well, you’re doing great so far,” Ron responded. “I’d say it helps that Slughorn’s the professor and not Snape. Although, Snape is our classmate this time, so that still puts a damper on things.”

“I knew you could brew potions on your own, Harry,” Hermione told her cheerfully. “You don’t need the Half-Blood Prince after all.”

“Half-Blood Prince?” Lily’s voice questioned, making them start. She and the others had caught up with them. “That sounds familiar…” she added, frowning slightly.

“Who’s this Half-Blood Prince that’s helping you out, Harry?” Sirius asked, joining the conversation. He moved to her other side as they walked and narrowed his eyes at her. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a secret pen pal…”

“Er, no,” Harry said, puzzled, while the others snickered. “Why are you so worried that I have a pen pal?”

“Just making sure.”

“Have you heard about Matilda Ogden yet, Harry?” James piped up behind her. Hermione made room for him when he moved up to join Harry, who smiled back when he grinned at her.

“Prongs, you git—”

Sirius’s indignant protest went unheard as James loudly updated Harry on the unfortunate love life of one Matilda Ogden.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harpinger had them find a partner and had each pair prove their proficiency in the Disarming and Shield Charms in front of the class. He was pleased to see more than half the students demonstrate them successfully and had them duel again in two separate teams by using the Shield Charm nonverbally for the rest of the period. Sirius, Remus, James, Lily, and Hermione all passed easily. Harry had some trouble getting her nonverbal Shield Charm to be as potent as her verbal one, but her shield was good enough to block Alice’s Jelly-Legs Jinx and Impediment Jinx, although it shook a little after each impact. Harpinger seemed satisfied nonetheless, as he awarded her three points for Gryffindor. Ron was decent as well, but one of his legs was affected by Remus’s Tarantallegra and his leg tapped on madly until Remus ended the spell after their duel. Peter, however, still flinched when his shield went up and nonverbally, his shield was
semi-permeable all around. Darvish’s Knockback Jinx easily pierced through it and Peter stepped off the dueling area, blinking back tears while rubbing his aching limbs. For homework, they had to get the Shield Charm down nonverbally by next class and write a roll of parchment on the various aspects of a perfectly-done shield.

By that evening, the trio’s late-night studying had become routine for the others, who headed up to bed at their usual time.

The three of them made it safely to the Room of Requirement that night and practiced their dueling again. Hermione stayed true to her word, as her spells bounced off Harry and Ron’s shields with more force and resolution than they had ever done.

The next night passed by with similar success as well.

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Saturday arrived and with it, James’s exuberant enthusiasm.

“Quidditch tryouts today!” he proclaimed in the morning when they all met in the common room. He was already in his red and gold Quidditch robes and had his broomstick in his hand.

“Did you see the model he has?” Ron whispered to Harry while heading to breakfast.

Harry’s eyes widened when she glanced over at James’s broom.

“The Nimbus 1001,” she murmured, awed, as she took in the broom’s polished, honey-colored handle with its model inscribed on its tip in a dark, elegant script and the neat, trimmed twigs of the tail with the dark silver foot grip attached just above it.

“Yeah, turns out he’d been keeping it under his bed. He just took it out, as casually as you please, after changing, and I barely registered which one it was until we stepped into the common room.”

Harry didn’t respond to him as she continued to admire the broom. Of course he has the latest model, she thought proudly.

“Don’t you want to ask him if you can see it?” Ron’s voice brought her back. She blinked at him, startled.

“O-oh no, no, that’s…it’s fine,” she said quickly. It would be enough to see him fly, she thought. To hold his very own broomstick would be…

Ron’s grin was her only warning before he cleared his throat and called James, who turned around.

“D’you think Harry could have a look at your broomstick? She’s got a real interest in broom models, you see, and she’s been dying to see the Nimbus outside of its display case in the shop.”

Harry flushed as James’s face brightened. The rest of the Marauders and Lily turned their attention to them with interest.

“Is that so?” James addressed Harry, who could only nod in reply.

“Show her at the table, James. We can lay it out there so she can look at it properly,” Lily advised him, just as he was about to offer his broomstick to Harry.
“Right you are, Lily,” he agreed cheerfully as they approached their house table.

Harry and Ron admired the broom together after James placed it in the middle of the table for everyone to see. He had taken very good care of it, Harry thought, as her eyes went over the still-glossy handle and the relatively unmarked sheen of the metal foot grip.

“How can I pick it up?” she asked James, wanting to feel the weight of it to appraise and admire it properly.

“Of course.”

She gingerly picked it up by the handle and was pleased to find that it was lighter than it looked. It was certainly ideal for efficient and speedy flying. She handed it over to Ron so that he could judge it for himself.

“It’s the latest model of its kind, isn’t it?” she addressed James. “Ron and I saw it in behind the display window at Quality Quidditch Supplies for the first time. It looks just as amazing in person.”

She glanced at the broom in Ron’s hands, appreciating the look of its features again. “The way the handle’s designed—it’s made for ultimate comfort and flexibility, which is great, because that means it prioritizes reliability for its rider. I’m guessing the braking mechanism isn’t too shabby either. Is the hand-grip slip-resistant when it rains?”

The others, except for Ron and Hermione, who knew about Harry’s interest in broomsticks, observed her enthusiasm with surprise. Elation spread over James’s face at her obvious knowledge and interest in broomsticks.

He grinned at her. “Yes, it is. But I’d recommend putting a slip-resistant charm on it just in case when there’s heavy rain—it’s always good to be careful. Did you notice how the twigs are designed? They’re trim and more streamlined than the previous model, the Nimbus 1000, for better speed and efficiency, especially if you’re facing multiple wind currents at once. I definitely recommend it for someone who’s looking to be a Seeker.”

Harry brightened at the reference. “Yes, because a Seeker needs to fit with his or her broom more than the other players. Catching the Snitch is all about speed and economic movement. A good Seeker can make any broom work for him or her, but it definitely helps if the broom is top-notch in the first place.”

She and James beamed at one another in the stunned silence that followed. Hermione and Ron exchanged amused smiles.

“You two are exactly the same,” Lily said, amazed. “Congratulations, James. You’ve found yourself a fellow Quidditch fanatic. Now you’ll have someone to talk to about Quidditch who actually cares.”

She turned to Harry. “He talks about Quidditch half the time when he’s with me. Now I’ll be left in peace,” she told her, smiling.

“You must be good at flying, to be knowledgeable about all that,” Remus remarked. Harry gave him a radiant smile, but did not see the light flush that suffused his cheeks as she turned at Hermione and Ron’s response.

“She is,” her friends both answered, looking proud.

“Something tells me that dear Lady Harry is going to be the new Gryffindor Seeker,” Sirius teased, smirking at her.

“Oh, don’t jinx me,” Harry responded, bumping him with her shoulder. “There might be someone
better than me at tryouts.” There was a warmth in her chest that spread through her entire body—Lily, Remus, and Sirius’s words had made her inexpressibly happy.

“I doubt it,” Ron said, biting into a sausage. “Me, on the other hand, well…” he sighed.

“You’ll be fine, Ron,” Hermione said reassuringly.

“How good of a Keeper are you looking for? Good enough to cover the basics, yeah?” Harry asked, turning back to James, who nodded.

“Honestly, as long as they guard the goal hoops half the time, I’ll be satisfied. I wasn’t kidding when I said Gibbons, the previous Keeper, was rubbish,” James said. Then he perked up. “So it’s been decided? You two will be out on the pitch for tryouts?” he demanded, looking between Harry and Ron excitedly.

“Yes,” Harry confirmed with a smile. She and Ron had discussed the matter of Quidditch on the previous night with Hermione, who had grudgingly agreed that they couldn’t very well go back on their word to James without looking highly suspicious with Sirius and Remus’s sharp eyes on them as well. “We’ll be using the school brooms,” she added, guessing what James was about to ask next, when he opened his mouth with a quizzical expression after looking her over.

“Hm, all right,” he replied, looking thoughtful. “But I recommend that you two go to the broomshed right after finishing breakfast to get the best pick of the lot. I reckon there should be some decent Cleansweeps and Comets in there, if you look carefully.”

“I look forward to seeing you two fly,” Peter spoke up, surprising Harry and Ron. He gave them a timid smile. “Good luck in your trials.”

The two of them exchanged a swift look before answering.

“Thanks.”

Harry and Ron rushed off to the broomshed after finishing their food before the others, who wished them luck. They did not take James’s advice lightly—both knew how important broom quality was to flying and flight control. The broomshed was thankfully deserted when they arrived and Ron was especially anxious as he browsed through the stacks of broomsticks.

“A Silver Arrow? That’s got to be a joke,” he muttered, tossing the old broomstick aside. “Can you imagine me trying to guard the goals with that thing?”

Their movements became hurried when they heard voices coming towards them and they were immensely relieved and satisfied when they finally unearthed a decent-looking Comet 180 and a slightly worn Cleansweep Five just as the other tryout hopefuls came trickling in.

“Take the Cleansweep,” Ron told Harry, holding it out to her.

“Don’t you want it? It’s a bit faster than the Comet,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but you’re the one trying out for Seeker. You’re gonna want the faster broom.”

“Thanks, Ron.”
They made their way onto the pitch and glanced over at the stands when they heard their names being yelled.

Sirius, Remus, Peter, Lily, and Hermione waved madly at them from the stands and they waved back, grinning. They joined the group of other hopefuls in the middle of the pitch, where James looked to be preparing the equipment.

“Seems like there’s quite a lot of people watching today,” Ron said nervously, looking around at the stands, which, Harry had to admit, were more packed than they usually were for tryouts.

“I’m guessing that the opposing teams are here as well,” Harry responded, gazing at the stands with him. “That’s what happened when I held tryouts in sixth year.” Her eyes stopped on someone and she blinked, wanting to make sure that it really was him.

It was.

He looked exactly as he did in the picture from his room, she thought as she stared at him with wonder.

Even from the middle of the pitch, there was no mistaking the features of Regulus Black, who resembled and yet did not resemble his older brother. He had the same smooth and well-groomed black hair with grey eyes in his pale face, as well as the same haughty, well-bred air from the look of his demeanor. But his hair was a bit shorter, his nose a little longer, and he was not as handsome as Sirius. His mouth seemed inclined to sneer while Sirius’s seemed inclined to grin. And Harry was sure that if he stood up, he would not be as tall. But his slim build seemed suited for the role of Seeker as did his shrewd and sharp eyes that surveyed the crowd of hopefuls trying out.

This was Sirius’s brother-turned-Death Eater, who had defied Voldemort by stealing the locket and paid for it with his life back in her part of the timeline. And currently, he was the Slytherin Seeker and her main rival in Quidditch.

She swallowed.


“No way,” Ron muttered as he stared at him. “That’s him? The bloke who betrayed You-Know-Who?” He let out a disbelieving huff. “He and Sirius look alike but not quite at the same time, don’t they?”

“Mm.”

“WELCOME TO QUIDDITCH TRYOUTS!” James’s voice suddenly boomed at them, making them jump. Everyone on the pitch quieted as all attention turned to the captain, who stood in front of the group of hopefuls with a stern air.

“My name, if you don’t know it already, is James Potter, and I’m the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team,” he began loudly in a brisk tone. “Today’s tryouts will help me determine if you’ve got what it takes to be on the team. I don’t care how much you love or care about Quidditch as much as I care about your ability to help Gryffindor win. I’m looking for dedication, perseverance, and skill. I’m looking for people who are willing to sacrifice their health for the team, who’ll come to every practice and stick with it, no matter how grueling or difficult it becomes. If you’re chosen for the team, then you will have to make room in your schedule for practice and no excuses, on any account, for not showing up. If any one of you isn’t prepared to make that commitment for me or for Quidditch, then you might want to reconsider your plan to try out. I recommend that you go off to
the stands now if you aren’t ready.”

There was a pause before the group of hopefuls began to shift. Several students, who seemed to be in the lower years, walked off to the stands, looking put out, disgruntled, or sheepish.

“He seems like a slave-driver...pretty hardcore, isn’t he?” Ron muttered to Harry.

“Yeah, a bit,” she agreed. “I’m reminded of Oliver Wood.” But she was amused and impressed with her young father’s fierce determination. He was serious about Quidditch, all right.

James regarded the remaining hopefuls with a satisfied air.

“Right, then, let’s begin.”

Harry smoothed out her hair and tied it with the hairband that Hermione had given her while she waited in line with Ron. James was making them do the same thing that she had made the hopefuls do when she was captain, by making them fly a lap around the pitch, to immediately determine individual flying skills for quick and necessary eliminations.

James looked as if he was on the edge of toppling into frustration when another hopeful swerved off into the stands, making a small group of Hufflepuffs scramble out of the way before the third-year boy crashed into their seats, which he did. James sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Finally, it was Harry’s turn. She mounted the Cleansweep Five and pushed off from the ground when she heard the whistle blow. A familiar euphoria washed over her as she ascended smoothly into the sky. She was back in the air, where she belonged. It had been much too long since she had last flown. A fierce grin took over her face as she flew her lap around the field, perfectly in line with its outermost limits, as she was supposed to be. She accelerated steadily until the world around her became a hazy blur of mismatched colors and barely registered the open-mouthed surprise of her friends in the stands as she whooshed past them.

Her descent was just as seamless when she returned to the middle of the pitch, and her feet landed lightly on the ground when she jumped off her broom. James looked ecstatic when she reached him with a grin as bright as her eyes. The crowd of hopefuls applauded her and Ron sent her a double thumbs-up with a wide smile on his face.

“NOW THAT’S WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT!” James roared, unable to contain his glee when she stopped in front of him. “That’s what flying should look like!” His hazel eyes were animated from excitement as he beamed at her. “Just stand right here next to me, Harry. Obviously, you’ve passed the first round, so we’ll wait while the rest of this lot finish up before moving on.”

Harry glowed from his praise as she joined him and watched Ron take his turn. He flew perfectly as well, making James roar in approval again when he returned.

A third of the hopefuls were cut, following the exercise, which prompted complaints that nearly broke out into arguments from several of those who did not make it. Harry and Ron waited patiently with the others who had also passed while watching James firmly rebuff the attempts of the rejected to have another go. The third-year boy who had crashed into the stands was especially displeased, as he threw his broom onto the pitch before stomping off towards the stands with a sulky expression on his face.

Next, James began calling out the names for the Chaser candidates, who would demonstrate their skills first. The Beaters from the previous year were recruited to aim Bludgers at each candidate to ascertain the precision and efficiency of their aims under pressure, and Harry and Ron winced as one
of the Bludgers smashed through the broomstick handle of a fourth-year girl who did not manage to swerve aside in time. James ended up picking his former teammates who had also tried out for the position, although he hesitated on picking Parker again.

Then it was the Keepers’ turn. James joined them in the air to throw the Quaffle himself.

Ron’s face was pale from nerves when it was his turn.

“Remember how well you did in our first match in sixth year? You’ve got to believe in yourself, Ron,” she told him firmly and squeezed his shoulder before he mounted his broom. He responded with a half-grunt as he ascended into the air.

Even from the ground, Harry could see him gulp as he positioned himself in front of the goal hoops. She crossed her fingers, feeling a little optimistic, as the other contenders who had gone before him had not performed particularly well. The most goals that had been saved so far was four, but the one who had done so had barely managed to save the fourth. She knew he was better than he believed himself to be—the final match from fifth year and the Felix Felicis incident had confirmed that fact.

“You can do it, Ron!” Harry heard Hermione shout to him from the stands. There were whoops and cheers from the others sitting with her as well.

Harry held her breath as James hovered across from Ron, lightly grasping the Quaffle in his hand, as he prepared to throw it. Ron looked nervous as he leaned forward on his broom, but he kept his eyes on James, catching every single movement he made.

Ron saved the first three goals, to Harry’s relief and pride. For the fourth try, James moved his broom from side to side, seemingly undecided on where he should throw. Ron’s eyes, now looking steelier, moved from left to right as James swerved back and forth teasingly. Then James made as if to throw from his right and Ron lunged forward. But James swiftly re-positioned himself on his left and threw the Quaffle, which soared towards the leftmost goal hoop with astonishing speed. Ron snapped his body back just as quickly, making his broom soar in reverse to the same goal hoop, and reached his hand out, leaning backwards, to stop the Quaffle from going in. His fingertips brushed it and that was all it took for him to smack it away and save another goal.

“YES!” Harry cheered from the ground. There were whistles and excited shouts from the stands as Hermione, Lily, and the Marauders cheered as well.

There were the beginning traces of a delighted grin on James’s face as he retook his position to throw the Quaffle for the last time. Ron looked more confident than ever as he refocused his attention on him. He caught the red ball by lunging to the side with the upper half of his body while his legs held on to his broomstick when James threw the red ball at the rightmost goal.

Ron landed on the ground, grinning.

“Great job, Ron! Knew you could do it,” Harry said, beaming and slapping hands with him. She cheered loudly when Ron was chosen as Keeper. “See? You were more than fine! You made the team!” She shook his shoulder excitedly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did,” he responded, his face flushed with joy and awe.

He shook hands with his teammates, who congratulated him, and rejoined Harry to watch the trials for the Beaters. It was an easy choice for James, as his current Beaters were the best of the lot, and Ron shook hands with them as well when they joined them on the ground.

It was now time for the Seeker tryouts.
“Show them what you got, Harry,” Ron said, giving her quick hug before she went to join the other Seeker hopefuls.

Murmurs rippled across the stands as the audience anticipated the last part of the tryouts. There were only three candidates for Seeker, including Harry. They were all girls, to Harry’s mild surprise. One of them, a tall girl with long blonde hair, looked vaguely familiar. The girl glanced at her while they waited for James to finish his preparations for their trials and seemed to recognize her, as her large blue-grey eyes widened.

“Oh! You’re Harriet Granger, aren’t you?” she addressed Harry with enthusiasm. “The seventh-year?”

“Yeah, I am,” Harry replied, taken aback by her eager and almost greedy gaze. “Sorry, but have we met before?” She tried to remember where and when she had seen her. The girl grinned.

“No, not exactly, but word gets around fast when a girl gets involved with Sirius Black. Every girl in Gryffindor’s noticed Black’s interest in you already. My dormmates have been gossiping about you,” she answered. The third girl, who was short and had thin, reddish-brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, turned to them.

“Oh…is that so?” Harry felt uneasy. Had her interactions with Sirius been so noticeable to everyone all this time? “Sorry, but I don’t know your name, although I feel like I’ve seen you before.”

“Natalie Templeton, fifth-year. I’m one of the new students, like you.”

“Oh,” Harry said, remembering, “You went before Ron during the Sorting.” They shook hands.

Natalie shot her a sly look. “So, are you and Black going out?”

“No,” Harry replied, feeling awkward. “We’re just friends.”

Natalie raised an eyebrow at her and gave her a somewhat appraising look, as if she didn’t believe her. Harry felt a spark of irritation.

“So you’re the girl who’s going out with Black?” the third girl jumped into their conversation eagerly.

“Like I said, I’m not going out with Sirius. We’re just friends, that’s all,” Harry responded calmly and firmly. Why were these questions being asked at all? She was beginning to feel annoyed.

“Ooh, I’ve never heard of Sirius Black being friends with a girl before,” the small girl said with an impish look in her dark brown eyes.

Harry furrowed her brows. “Well, he’s friends with Lily Evans, isn’t he?”

The girl scoffed. “That’s only ‘cause she’s his best mate’s girlfriend. The only thing he cares to get from girls is a nice snog and quick shag. Sirius Black being friends with a girl? Ha!”

Natalie giggled and Harry stared at the shorter girl, shocked by her crass attitude.

Indignation and fury rose in her chest. How dare she talk about Sirius like that? Did she even know him? Who did she think she was? She struggled to calm herself. Exploding at this girl, rude little cow that she was, was not advisable.

“Sorry, but I didn’t get your name,” she addressed the third girl in an even tone.
“Sarah McAllister.” Sarah extended her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same.” Harry shook her hand and let go quickly.

So this was the incompetent Seeker that James had told her about. Feeling more than a little vengeful from her still-seething anger, her lips twitched up into a haughty smirk. She would fly circles around her.

The three of them snapped to attention when James approached them with a cheerful smile. He held his hand out to them and they saw the small, golden ball unfurl its wings and hover hesitantly in the air before he wrapped his fingers around it again.

“Ready, ladies? I’ll release the Snitch once I blow my whistle. There’ll be Bludgers coming at you while you go after it, like the Chasers in their trials. The one who catches the Snitch and the one who was next best in getting it will be moving on to the second part of the trials, while the third and slowest one will be eliminated. The remaining two will go up against each other to catch the Snitch again. The one who catches it becomes Seeker for the team. Got it?”

They nodded.

“Excellent. Go ahead and push off on your brooms,” James told them.

Harry made a quick analysis of her fellow competitors once in the air: Sarah had the ideal build for a Seeker as she was small and slight, but Harry could detect the anxiety that James had mentioned in her face as she stared down at the pitch, waiting for the Snitch to be released. She rode a newer-looking Comet 180 than the one found in the broomshed. Harry thought she could probably beat her in speed and in sheer nerve to catch the Snitch.

Natalie, on the other hand, had no hint of apprehension on her face as she calmly looked down at James. She rode a Nimbus 1000, which surpassed the quality of Harry’s Cleansweep Five. But Natalie was not as slim as Harry and was a bit taller. Harry decided that Natalie was going to be her main competitor.

The three of them watched as the Beaters flew up to them and arranged themselves at different sides of the pitch, ready to aim the Bludgers at them.

“May the best girl win,” Natalie said, winking at Harry and Sarah.

James put the whistle in his mouth and blew. He opened the supply trunk to release the Bludgers before releasing the Snitch from his hand.

Harry dived at the same time the Snitch moved away from James’s hand. She barely registered James’s startled expression as she whooshed past him, pushing her broom to go as fast as it could go. The Cleansweep Five was nothing like the Firebolt, whose acceleration was instantaneous at its rider’s whim. But she would do the best with what she had. She could feel the wind from the other girls’ brooms behind her. One of them was gaining on her quickly—it was most likely Natalie with her Nimbus 1000. She needed to lose her somehow before she was overtaken.

She sensed before she saw the Bludger hurtling towards her as she flew towards the goal hoops on the other side of the pitch and moved her broom down to avoid it before swerving up again to chase after the Snitch. A glimpse of blonde strands in her left periphery made her lie almost flat on her broom to urge it to go faster as they both sped towards their target. She felt someone else gaining on her tail. Sarah.

Then Natalie sharply ascended as a Bludger shot towards them again and Harry barely managed to
perform the Sloth Grip Roll. She heard a shriek as Sarah dived down to escape it.

The Snitch zig-zagged through the leftmost and center goal hoops before looping towards the rightmost hoop. Harry swiftly moved her glance up to gauge Natalie’s position—the blonde girl was aiming to dive, she noted grimly. But that didn’t mean that she would be overtaken. Harry was already closer to the goal hoops and even if Natalie was to dive, she would have to level out to fly straight towards the Snitch like her.

Harry grit her teeth and pushed her broom on, hoping that somehow, it could break through its own top speed, as she sped towards the fluttering gold ball, which teased its pursuers by hovering at the edge of the rightmost hoop.

Something zoomed past her from behind and she flicked her eyes to the side to see a Bludger streaking towards the Beater on her far right. The Beater raised his bat and she knew what was about to happen. She flicked her eyes back to the Snitch and mentally gauged the distance. Would she make it?

There were screams from the stands as she zoomed through the rightmost goal hoop after the Snitch, missing the Bludger that had been aimed at her by a hand’s-breadth from her broom’s tail. A shriek and a thump sounded behind her. But Harry didn’t care.

All her senses were focused on the Snitch, which streaked down towards the field. One of them was right behind her. She dived after the Snitch, urging her broom to go faster and steeper as the Snitch flew straight down towards the grass.

There was only wind in her ears as she grasped the Snitch in her fingers just three feet from the ground and soared back up. Laughter escaped from her mouth from the adrenaline rush as she lifted the Snitch above her head, showing everyone that she had got it. There were screams and cheers from the stands and from the pitch as she flew back to James.

James’s eyes looked as if they were about to pop out from excitement when she landed in front of him.

“THAT. WAS. RUDDY. BRILLIANT!!!!” he roared so loudly that all the birds on the pitch flew off, squawking.

“YEAH, HARRY!” Ron bellowed as well. He rushed towards her and caught her in a hug. Harry grinned, hugging him back just as tightly.

“I have never seen such nerve!” James yelled at her, practically jumping with delight when she handed him the Snitch. Harry winced from the volume of his voice but beamed back at him.

“Seriously, Harry, when you went through the goal hoop…” James shook his head at her admiringly. “Shame McAllister crashed, though. Poor girl needs to get checked at the Hospital Wing. Probably has a concussion.”

“So she was the one who crashed?” Harry looked to the other side of the pitch, where Sarah was being levitated by Madam Hooch so that she could be taken to the infirmary. “Pity,” she said, not feeling sorry at all.

“Nice flying,” Harry looked behind her to see that Natalie had approached. She was trying to calm down her long, extremely windswept hair into a neat ponytail. “This is the part I hate most about Quidditch,” she said, grimacing, as she ran her fingers through her hair. “My hair always gets messed up and there’s so many tangles.”
“You should’ve probably put it up,” Harry told her.

“I suppose I could’ve, but then, I didn’t expect trials to be so intense, especially for this last one.”

Harry and Ron exchanged a look.

“Oh, what’s that on your forehead?” Natalie asked her suddenly. “You didn’t get that just now, did you?” She pointed at it.

Harry’s fingers automatically went to the scar on her forehead, which, she realized with dread, was exposed from her bangs being windswept. She felt her face flush as James peered at her curiously and attempted to straighten out her hair as calmly as possible.

“No, I’ve had it for a while now,” she replied to Natalie with a shrug. “Got it when I was really young. Don’t really remember and don’t really care to talk about it.”

Natalie gave her the same appraising look she had given her earlier.

Harry decided she didn’t care for Natalie much. She seemed like a more judgmental Lavender Brown, which meant that the girl would get on her nerves very quickly with her presumptuous attitude. Harry had been able to tolerate Lavender better than Hermione, but barely.

“Will the second trial be starting soon?” she asked, turning to James, who still regarded her with some puzzlement. He blinked and smiled.

“Actually,” he began, “I’m wondering if we even need to go through with it at all. Your performance just now told me everything I need to know about your potential, which I say is damn good. Welcome to the team, Harry.”

Elation spread through Harry’s chest and she grinned at him. “Are you sure?” she asked, ecstatic and astonished at James’s quick decision. Next to her, Natalie looked indignant.

“Yeah, I am. Congratulations,” James said, beaming back at her. He turned to Natalie.

“Your flying was more than decent, but you weren’t willing to take the same risk as Harry to catch the Snitch at all costs. I got what you were trying to do when you waited to dive down after the Snitch after avoiding the Bludger, but you waited a bit too long. It’s good to be careful and wary about your surroundings, but you’ve got to be willing to go for it when the time calls for it, and you didn’t do that—you purposefully decided to stay safe and go after the Snitch after the last Bludger had streaked by, which lost you the few seconds it would’ve taken you to get the Snitch before Harry. Look, if this had been a real match against, let’s say, Slytherin, you would’ve lost against the other Seeker. You can’t afford to be too careful when the game itself is bound to be brutal,” he explained to her.

“Well excuse me for caring about my own safety,” Natalie retorted. “That Bludger nearly took off the tail end of her broomstick! Besides, I didn’t know it was going to be aimed at her—it could’ve been aimed at me, in which case, I would’ve been right to wait a bit and see.”

“Well, then I suppose it’s a difference in instinct. Harry’s got a better sense for the game. She somehow knew that the Bludgey was going to be aimed at her and that she’d be able to avoid it,” James pointed out reasonably.

Natalie narrowed her eyes and James turned his back on her to address the now-complete team in front of him.
“All right, everyone,” he said, pulling Harry forward with a jubilant grin. “Meet your new Seeker! The seven of us are finally assembled! We’ve got a great year ahead of us!”

The team cheered and whistled.

“First practice will take place next Wednesday! Thank you all for coming to tryouts! WE’RE GOING TO WIN THE QUIDDITCH CUP THIS YEAR!” James ended with a roar.

Harry cheered and clapped with the others. The watchers in the stands, observing that the trials were now over, began dispersing to head back to the castle. Ron threw an arm around Harry’s shoulders and whooped.

“We’re both on the team! How great is that?” he exclaimed. “That was some great flying by the way.”

Harry grinned back at him. “Thanks.”

“Bloody well done, you two. I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to have a decent Keeper and Seeker on the team for once,” James praised them. “I’ll be back in a moment—just have to put the equipment away, you see. But the others should be making their way down the stands soon.”

He walked away, whistling cheerfully while carrying the supply trunk.

“I’d be careful if I were you,” a voice drawled behind Harry.

Harry and Ron turned around to see Natalie, who had remained in place, grooming her hair with her fingers. “Potter seems like a reckless captain if what he said about taking risks was any indication. I suppose I’m lucky I didn’t get picked. I’d probably be targeted by the Slytherin Beaters right off the bat and be more worried about getting my head smashed in than looking for the Snitch. He probably won’t care if you get hurt as long as you win the game for him. So watch out for yourself,” she said to Harry in a haughty tone.

Anger sparked and burned inside Harry. Sarah had insulted Sirius and now Natalie was badmouthing James? What was wrong with these girls? But before she could even snarl, Ron scoffed.

“Are you being serious right now?” he asked Natalie in a mocking tone. “Of course you’re going to have to take risks in Quidditch. That’s what makes the game exciting and fun. And of course you’re going to have to give it your all if you want to win the game. Do you not know how brutal Quidditch can be, especially if we’re playing against Slytherin? I mean, do you really play Quidditch or are you just faking? You might be able to fly a bit better than most of the lot that tried out, but I think you’re a bit too concerned with your hair for anyone to take you seriously.”

Natalie looked furious. “Excuse me—” she started to snap back.

“Hey Harry, I think I see our friends coming over,” Ron talked over her and turned Harry’s attention towards the stands. Sure enough, Hermione and Lily were running towards them with the Marauders close behind. The girls practically jumped them.

Hermione laughed in Harry’s ear as she hugged her and Ron. “You two were so amazing!” she squealed. “Lily and I were on the edge of our seats when you managed to make those saves, Ron! And Harry, when you flew straight through the hoop, missing that Bludger…” she trailed off like James, too excited for words.

“Yes, you two were absolutely brilliant!” Lily exclaimed, beaming. “Those were some spectacular
saves, Ron! And Harry, your flying—it scared the crap out of me but it was incredible to see!” Lily pulled Harry into her arms, giggling. Harry’s arms stayed frozen for a moment before going around Lily to hug her back. Her mother was embracing her...

She could have gasped from overwhelming happiness, but that would have confused Lily and ruined the moment.

“Yes, wasn’t she just fantastic?” James had returned and beamed at her with his fellow Marauders. “I think we might actually be able to catch the Snitch before the other team for once. And Ron, mate, stop being so modest about your skills. You’re more than anything I could’ve hoped for, seriously.” James slapped hands with Ron, whose face was red from the compliment.

“Glad I can help out the team,” Ron replied, grinning widely.

They headed back to the castle, chatting cheerfully. James was over the moon with delight as he talked Lily’s ear off about how much Gryffindor would gain from the new additions to the Quidditch team. Peter tagged onto James, listening attentively, while the trio followed them with Sirius and Remus.

“So I didn’t jinx you, after all,” Sirius commented mildly, nudging Harry’s arm with his own.

Harry smiled at him. “No, you didn’t. Hey, have you—”

A raucous burst of laughter cut her off and she turned with the others to the group of Slytherins that had drawn near them. Regulus, she recognized him again with a jolt, as the Slytherins took notice of them as well.

“Well, will you look at that, Black…there’s your new rival right there. Reckon you can forget your noble manners for the match to knock a lady off her broom?” a tall, stocky boy with dark hair drawled, sneering at Harry. His arm was around Regulus’s shoulders.

The tall, thin girl with lank brown hair in front of him let out a shrill laugh.

“You’re mistaken, Wilkins. That’s no lady, that’s a Mudblood.”

Ron’s face turned red with fury and he let out a growl. His mouth opened.

“Ron, no!” Hermione hissed at him in a panicked whisper. She grabbed his arm to stop him from hurling an insult at the girl. Ron muttered angrily under his breath and settled for glowering at the Slytherin, who turned up her nose.

“Careful, Lucinda dear. That’s no way for a proper pure-blood lady to talk. Exhibiting such an uncouth side to yourself does no favors for your already dismal and nonexistent charm.”

The smirk on Lucinda’s face vanished at Sirius’s cold taunt. Her cheeks became red and blotchy as she flushed and she sent Sirius a malevolent look.

Sirius did not cast her a single glance, but put an arm around Harry and drew her close to him.

“I won’t need to do anything to her, actually.”

Harry’s eyes flicked to Regulus, who shrugged Wilkins’ arm off his shoulders. She felt Sirius’s hold on her tighten as he stiffened at the sound of his brother’s mild voice.
“I’ve got a Nimbus 1001 and what does she have? A Cleansweep Five? Clearly, there’s no contest.” He did not send a single glance towards Harry or the rest of her friends, for that matter, as he kept his haughty gaze in front of him.

Actually, Harry thought, as suspicion suddenly rose within her, *maybe he's avoiding Sirius.*

Harry shifted her eyes to Sirius and saw that his own gaze was focused solely in front of him as they walked up the stairs to the castle.

*So that’s how it is.*

The Slytherins laughed derisively as they headed inside before them.

“I’m sorry you had to hear all that, Harry,” Remus told her quietly as they made their way to Gryffindor Tower.

“No, it’s all right. It’s not like I’ve never had insults thrown my way before. Was that the Slytherin team?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “The girl, er, Lucinda Flint, is the captain.”

Ron let out a loud snort, no doubt remembering Marcus Flint from their first three years.

Hermione sighed. “Why are they all so awful? Well, actually, I suppose Slughorn’s decent, but…”

They saw James, Lily, and Peter entering through the portrait hole as they climbed up the stairs leading to the Fat Lady. Remus said the password when they reached the portrait, allowing them to enter. Harry was about to step into the common room after Ron and Hermione, as Remus had graciously stepped aside for her, but Sirius stopped her by tightening his grip on her shoulder. Harry looked up at him inquiringly.

“Just give us a moment, Moony,” he told Remus, who looked surprised at his solemn tone and expression. Remus nodded, looking a little hesitant, before disappearing behind the portrait. Sirius remained silent until the portrait closed shut.

He let his arm fall from Harry’s shoulders and faced her. He seemed to be deliberating on what he wanted to say, as he put his hands in his pockets and shifted his gaze from hers to the floor. Harry waited.

“If anyone from the Slytherin team says or does anything…offensive to you,” he finally began, looking at her piercingly, “I want you to come to me and tell me. I’ll make sure to take care of them for you.”

Harry was quiet as she contemplated his words.

“Even if it’s your brother?”

His jaw tightened before answering.

“Especially if it’s him.”

They stared at each other for a moment.

“All right,” Harry agreed. The slightest hint of a smile appeared on his face, although his eyes
remained grim. She hesitated before deciding to ask.

“How long have you two been like that?”

The glint of surprise that appeared in his eyes at her question was quickly replaced by impassivity as he shrugged.

“How long enough.”

She looked at his face searchingly, pondering whether she dared to probe a little further, when a high-pitched voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Ooh!”

Harry and Sirius’s attention shifted to the top of the stairs, where a small group of girls had arrived. Natalie Templeton was among them, Harry noticed with displeasure.

Natalie gave her yet another haughty once-over before turning to Sirius as she and her girlfriends approached the two of them to say the password to the portrait.

“Hi, Black,” she greeted Sirius in a flirtatious tone and winked at him before entering the common room with the rest of the giggling girls.

Harry snorted as the portrait closed behind them.

“Seems like you’ve got yourself an admirer, Sirius,” she teased, turning back to him.

“Hm,” he responded, making her quirk an eyebrow at him.

“What, not interested? I thought you liked chatting up girls for fun.”

His lips curled up into a smile and he let out a huff of laughter, bringing back his face’s mischievous charm.

“Not while you’re with me, Harry.” He put an arm around her again as they approached the Fat Lady.

Harry let out another snort as they entered the common room. “What, so you’ll go hit on her when my back is turned, is that it?”

“Ooh,” he said, turning to her with a grin, “is that jealousy I detect in your voice?”

“You wish.”

“You have no idea.”

They joined the others, who were in their usual places in the middle of the common room, and the rest of the day was spent discussing the events at tryouts and Quidditch in general, at least for Harry, Ron, and the Marauders. Lily and Hermione occasionally humored them in-between conversations with Marlene and Alice, who joined them as well. Harry did not fail to notice the looks that Hermione and Ron gave her ever since she had entered the common room with Sirius, but was prevented from satiating their curiosity until their nightly dueling practice in the Room of Requirement.

"What?" Harry asked when her two friends exchanged an amused look after she had told them about Sirius's reason for pulling her aside. They had finished their dueling and were sitting in the small
sitting room outside the training area.

"Oh, nothing, really. I just think it's kind of sweet, what he said to you," Hermione answered. Her eyes were bright with merriment and her lips threatened to twitch into a grin when she met Harry's skeptical gaze.

"Right," Harry responded slowly, narrowing her eyes after Ron shrugged at her when she turned to him inquisitively. "I just think it's a shame, y'know? They're brothers who got Sorted into different houses and were treated differently by even their parents...I didn't get the feeling that Sirius really hated him when he told me about him that time at Grimmauld Place. I just want to know a bit more, that's all. I mean, Regulus couldn't have been all about the Dark Arts and the other side if he balked at Voldemort's methods so early on in his career as Death Eater."

"Oh, right, Regulus, yeah." Ron said, clearing his throat. Hermione nodded next to him.

There was an awkward pause while Harry looked between them, a little bewildered by their pink faces, which had suddenly turned serious when she mentioned Regulus.

"Maybe we should head to bed. It's late and it wasn't a big deal, after all," she finally suggested after failing to comprehend their bizarre shift in behavior.

Her friends seemed embarrassed when they returned to the common room. Hermione and Ron shared another cryptic look before heading to bed, and Hermione's face was still a little pink when she bid her good night in their room. Harry decided she was too exhausted from the day's events to give their peculiarities any further thought and dismissed them completely as she drifted off to sleep.

The rest of the weekend passed by uneventfully, with Harry, Ron, and Hermione continuing to make their way to the Room of Requirement to train after everyone else had gone to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A little more lightheartedness returned to the story through this chapter, although it did get a little serious towards the end. I do hope that I managed to depict the Quidditch scenes all right—I am not a sporty person, although I occasionally enjoy watching some sports, so I hope you all take in those scenes with a more generous mind than usual, especially if you are a sporty person and know the physics of movement better than I do, heh.

I feel like most people would have met either a “Natalie” or a “Sarah” (not the actual people with the names, but the kind of characters depicted in the story) or maybe both, at least once in their lives. You know the type—individuals (disregarding gender/sex) who are a bit eager to take in gossip and hear about the people around them and assume the character of the person they concern through general and faulty assumptions. If you are one of the people who has not met a person like this, you are lucky. (Of course, this is according to my own experiences, so don't take my words too seriously.)

More random OCs appeared, as you may have noticed: the names of the Slytherin team members were taken and mixed-up from a list of known Slytherins. The Cleansing Elixir was also made up, as were the features of the Nimbus 1001.
The full moon approaches in the next chapter—that is all I will say.

Thank you all so much for your continued patience and support! Thank you so much for each kudos, bookmark, comment, and subscription. This girl appreciates them all. :)
I know you're not used to seeing notes at the beginning from me but I wanted to first thank you all so much for your patience! I know I've made you all wait more than usual, but there are two chapters this week (or rather, for this recently past weekend, eh heh), so I hope that makes up for the delay! They both lead up to the full moon: Part 1 is from the Trio's POV (or rather, Harry's) and Part 2 is from the Marauders' POV (guess which Marauder). It does not matter, necessarily, which Part you begin with, but if you are concerned about chronological and background details, starting with this current chapter, Part 1, is recommended. The day of the full moon is based off the actual month of September, 1977, if you are interested in how I formatted the chronology. End notes for both chapters will be at the end of Part 2.

The trio’s second meeting with the headmaster occurred on Thursday, following the weekend of tryouts. This time, the three of them made sure to notify the others about the meeting beforehand, to prevent any suspicion against them when they disappeared after classes ended for the day.

“Again?” was Sirius’s inquiry when he found out on Thursday morning with the others. He raised an eyebrow at the trio.

“Yes, we don’t really know why, but I suppose it’s because we used to be homeschooled,” Hermione replied. “It’s our final and most important year since we’ll be taking our N.E.W.T.s, so he probably wants to keep on eye on us to make sure that we’re doing all right. I expect it’s all routine.”

“ Makes sense,” Lily said, looking thoughtful. “It’s not so easy to get used to the workload here, especially when it keeps on increasing, but I don’t think you three have anything to worry about—you all seem to have settled into Hogwarts like you’ve been here from the start.”

Harry felt Hermione tense with her as they smiled back at Lily. Perhaps the three of them had been a bit too eager to impress, Harry thought ruefully. But then again, Hermione would have never agreed to earn a subpar score on her homework, even for the sake of seeming more natural.

Dumbledore’s opening news to them at his office made her forget about her worry, however.

“Did you really retrieve the cup, sir?” Ron asked, his eyes wide with excitement. “Was it really in their vault?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he smiled at him. “To our extremely good fortune, yes. My connection at Gringotts managed to procure it for me at great risk to himself. I would have done it myself, but he insisted, so instead, I personally made sure that nothing will be traced back to him.”

“May I ask what your methods involved, sir?” Harry asked, feeling some trepidation about the cost of their actions in gathering the horcruxes. The headmaster seemed to understand her sentiments as he gave her a sad smile.
“I am afraid that our friend at Gringotts manipulated a certain goblin into opening the vault for him through the Imperius Curse and performed the Memory Loss Charm on him afterwards. And after he told me what he had done, I personally took it upon myself to implant a heavily edited version of our friend’s memories of taking the cup from the vault into the goblin’s mind, so that he would believe that he himself had removed it, specifically in the case that Voldemort or one his followers triggers the memory of the incident by mentioning it.”

Hermione put a hand over her mouth, looking stricken. Ron stared at Dumbledore.

“So he’ll take the fall instead,” Harry concluded quietly. She did not look at the headmaster with disappointment or disgust, but with grim understanding.

“Yes, I am afraid he must.”

Harry looked down before continuing the discussion. “Did you already place it in the Room, sir?”

“I did, in the room hidden behind the bookcase, within the fourth depth of the trunk, right below Ravenclaw’s diadem.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But of course.”

“Has You-Know-Who made any movements, sir?” Ron spoke up. He gulped, still seeming unnerved from what had been done to the goblin, but faced the headmaster, nonetheless.

Dumbledore turned to him with a grave expression. “I am afraid he remains inactive as ever.”

“So we can’t destroy the horcruxes yet.” Harry furrowed her brows. “And the ones closest to him remain reticent as well?”

“On the whole, yes, but I trust that you have already learned of Antonin Dolohov’s recent actions?”

“Yes, it was in today’s Prophet,” Hermione answered, paling. “He burned down the Bones’ country manor yesterday. It’s a good thing that no one was in the house.”

“The Bones family are all right for now,” Dumbledore told her gently. “They have retreated to their main family home and have several Order members guarding them. They are currently deciding on whether to cast the Fidelius Charm.”

“But why wouldn’t they?” Ron asked, frowning. “Wouldn’t it be the smart thing to do, to perform the Fidelius Charm to keep them and their families safe from You-Know-Who?”

“I don’t think they know who to trust,” Harry answered, as her own mind carefully considered the question. The consequences of the Fidelius Charm had been something of interest to her, ever since she had learned of it backfiring on her parents and Sirius. “Even if a family member offers to become Secret-Keeper, the slightest suspicion that they might capitulate to Voldemort would prevent the others from agreeing. We’re in a time where no one really trusts each other anymore, not even the person closest to them. At least, not out there. Am I right, sir?” She turned to Dumbledore.

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “And the burden that the Secret-Keeper must bear, if he or she is worthy of such a responsibility, is terrible. The Secret-Keeper must be willing to have any manner of torture done to them and must accept the possibility of death. The secret, of course, cannot be given up involuntarily. But the very idea of keeping oneself resolute under such dire pressure makes even the strongest and most loyal of individuals to hesitate. And although the Secret-Keeper may die with his
or her secret, others who may also know the secret and yet cannot divulge it, may be targeted and threatened in an effort to somehow extract the information from them. Thus, the significance of such a role is quite formidable.”

Sirius was afraid too, Harry thought. *He didn’t trust himself to not give up the secret since he would’ve been targeted immediately as the obvious choice. Although, that probably says more about Voldemort’s power and influence than anything…*

“Are you the Secret-Keeper for anyone right now, sir?” Harry asked him, suddenly curious.

“No, not at this time.”

Their conversation gradually moved on to more pleasant matters, such as their experiences at Hogwarts, their new friends, and classes. Harry felt embarrassed when the headmaster mentioned the way Harpinger and McGonagall had praised her dueling abilities in the staff room.

“You have certainly made an impression on them, Harry,” he told her with a gentle smile. “And I have heard that you and Mr. Weasley have managed to join the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Congratulations to you both.”

Ron’s face was red as he thanked him.

Talking about matters unrelated to the grim tasks they had at hand greatly relieved some of the stress that Harry felt regarding her circumstances, as it made her feel somewhat like a normal student. They left the office after agreeing to meet with the Headmaster once a week.

As the end of the month drew near, Harry, Ron and Hermione were finding less and less time for sleep.

As the weeks passed, the homework for almost all of their classes increased. Harry and Ron were particularly horrified when Slughorn announced to their class that each of them would be taking on a project that involved brewing a potion that took a month to be perfected. He would reserve a small classroom in which to keep their potions while they brewed. They could choose any potion they wanted, with the only condition being that it would take a month to complete.

Meanwhile, Flitwick and McGonagall had them simultaneously learning new advanced spells and reviewing the spells they had learned from sixth year. Pop quizzes became frequent in the two classes. Often, they would have to write one essay based on the new spell they learned and another on a spell they had reviewed, due by the next lesson.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harpinger continued to have them duel one another with increasing emphasis on the importance of casting their spells nonverbally. He pushed them to rely on their instincts and homework included responding to different dueling scenarios that he posed to them on the board. And although he rarely had them use the textbook, he had them painstakingly review the purpose and potential of each defensive spell he had them perfect.
Herbology with Professor Sprout was the only class that remained consistent in its expectations and demands. And while Hermione had the additional workload from Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, Harry and Ron had Quidditch practice.

It was intense like Ron had feared. James had them practice every Wednesday and Saturday for three hours each. He told them he would have had them practice for five hours each, if it wasn’t for regulation, which specified three hours maximum for a day’s practice. He had them pushing their limits on how fast they could fly, throw, catch, dodge, and hit. He timed how quickly Harry could catch the Snitch and kept a record of how many saves Ron could make in a simulated game. The whole team was completely exhausted by the end of each practice, with only James keeping his fierce energy until the end. It had Harry wondering if his spirit of devotion to Quidditch had somehow passed down to Oliver Wood, who had then passed it onto Angelina Johnson. On days with Quidditch practice, Harry and Ron struggled to get as much of their homework done before the others went to sleep. But the Marauders and Lily were pressed for time with their own work as well, and the time they went to bed became later. Despite everything, the trio never missed a day of training at the Room of Requirement. As it was, they were averaging around four hours of sleep every day, and five hours at the most. Harry felt that she spent at least a third of her time yawning and rubbing her eyes. And although the Marauders did not have it as badly as the trio, signs of fatigue wriggled their way into their behavior.

For instance, on the second to last Tuesday of the month, Sirius, despite his constant, energetic personality and fierce determination, decided to briefly close his eyes during Herbology. Harry, who was his partner for the lesson, was carefully plucking the petals of the Belligerent Bearflower they had been given, while Sirius was supposed to keep an eye on the belligerent, leafy part of it, which, when it sensed a presence it deemed threatening, lashed out with its surprisingly firm leaves to smack the hostile party. Harry had just completed gathering all the petals when she happened to turn to Sirius and saw his eyes close and his head droop forward slightly, making his hair brush the plant’s leaves.

She was about to yell out his name to warn him, when he jerked himself awake as a leafy fist swung towards his face. It was unclear as to whether he had been hit, so she went up to him and inspected his face.

“Did you get hit?” She frowned, doubtful as to whether a punch made by a leaf would leave any bruising in the first place.

“No, but do carry on touching my face,” he told her with a cheeky grin, making her huff out loud.

“Yeah, you’re fine, except for your hair, which I’d say got the worst of it.” Her lips quirked up into a smile as she smoothed out his disheveled hair for him. “I assume your hair is quite important to you,” she responded to the mild look of surprise on his face. “I imagine that you would’ve been your typical whiny self about it and made me take care of it after class, so it’s better for me to address it now, instead of later.”

He let out his bark-like laughter.

“How well you know me, Harry.” His eyes were bright as he grinned. “I think you’re getting a soft spot for me now. I’ve been told that I have an endearing personality.”

“I dunno about that, as I have yet to see it.”

She laughed at the wounded look he gave her in reply.

The following day saw Peter falling asleep in McGonagall's class, of all places. Harry and Sirius saw
him nodding off during the middle of the lesson, just as McGonagall reached the most crucial part of her lecture.

"Poor Wormtail," Sirius said, letting out a sigh. "He's been so stressed out lately. The scores he received on the last few quizzes devastated him."

"That bad?" Harry asked, turning to him.

"He's teetering on the edge of getting a Troll."

"You're not joking?"

"Nope."

They watched Remus attempt to wake up Peter by shaking his shoulder before McGonagall noticed his inattentive state. He was unsuccessful, however, and unfortunately for Peter, the Professor noticed. Peter was startled awake from the harsh voice that called his name, and did not realize that it was McGonagall until the Professor addressed him for the second time. Harry felt somewhat sorry for him when she saw his distraught expression and teary eyes after being harshly reprimanded for his carelessness in the class.

He was just tired from being overworked, like all of us, she thought to herself as she turned back to the lesson, after regarding him with some pity.

It seemed that his fellow Marauders sympathized with his predicament, as they turned in earlier that night. All four of them had been looking rather exhausted, Harry thought, as she watched them leave for the dormitories together. She felt a little envious—a long night still awaited her through her training.

But as September drew to a close, one member of their group became increasingly haggard as the days went by.

Remus became paler in the last half of the second to last week and his face began to look a little more indisposed each passing day. Dark bags appeared beneath his eyes and there were times when he nearly dozed off in class from sheer exhaustion.

Only Hermione recognized the symptoms for what they were, as Harry and Ron failed to comprehend the significance of Remus's ill appearance until the last Sunday of the month.

“We need to talk about Remus,” Hermione told them in the sitting room after their dueling practice.

Ron sank into his armchair by the fireplace and leaned his head back with a deep, exhausted sigh.

“What about Remus, Hermione? Poor bloke’s been looking peaky these days,” he mumbled while he rubbed his eyes.

“The full moon is this coming Tuesday.”

There was a pause while Harry and Ron let her words register in their minds.

“Oh,” Harry groaned at the same time Ron exclaimed.

“Bloody hell, I forgot he was a werewolf!”
His face turned red when Harry and Hermione stared at him.

“I’ve been tired, all right?” he defended himself. “There’s just been so much to do lately, and okay, fine, I suppose I didn’t really forget that he was a werewolf, but I was able to ignore it, with everything that’s been going on. And Remus doesn’t help much— he’s just been so...normal.”

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him. “Werewolves are normal people, Ron.”

“Oh, you know what I mean—he’s a nice, solid bloke whom you wouldn’t associate with being a werewolf, until you start seeing the signs.”

“Hm.” Harry had to agree. She herself had conveniently forgotten about Remus’s monthly transformation until Hermione had mentioned the full moon. Young Remus, being quite different in personality to Lupin, as she had referred to him, had somehow disconnected the common bond of lycanthropy between the two individuals in her mind.

“And it doesn’t help that the others have been looking exhausted as well,” she added. “Especially Sirius.”

“Mm.” Hermione nodded. “He doesn’t smile anymore while he’s doing his homework.”

Ron looked baffled. “Who smiles while doing their homework?”

Then he became solemn.

“Er, okay, so, about Remus...do we really need to be worried? I mean, we know that the Marauders take care of it themselves, by sneaking out at night to keep him company.”

Harry cleared her throat. “It’s actually the map that we’ve got to worried about.”

Ron looked puzzled for a moment before it hit him. He groaned aloud and slumped in his seat.

“Argh, Harry, the map! They’re totally going to look at it if they don’t want to run into Filch! Damn, how’d I forget about it?”

“Ron, have you seen the map at all? Have they ever shown it to you or have you seen one of them holding it?” Hermione’s face was just as desperate as his.

“No,” he answered glumly. “Haven’t seen it at all so far. But I don’t think they’ve really been using it, or else they’d have confronted us by now.”

His eyes were anxious as he looked between Harry and Hermione.

“Is this it? Is it going to be time for us to tell them who we are?”

Hermione moved her gaze with him to Harry, who resisted the urge to swallow as she attempted to steel her own nerves.

“Only if they come to us about it,” she said quietly. “Like we discussed before, we can’t do anything about it if it can’t be helped.”

“Maybe...maybe we can try something,” Ron suggested, straightening up in his seat. “Like the Summoning Charm. ‘Course, they might have put a spell on it to prevent it from being summoned, but it’s worth a try. If that fails, I’ll try searching the room.”

He gave Harry a reassuring look. “How ‘bout we take advantage of when they’ll be away for their
elective classes on Tuesday, by heading to the common room instead of the library? We can try finding the map together. I know it’s cutting it real close, since it’ll be the day of the full moon, but… I’m not confident that we can pull it off on Monday, since we have classes for the whole day.”

“Yes, you’ll have to do it on Tuesday. We have to consider it from their perspective as well,” Hermione said, looking pensive. “They’ll be on their guard around us, I imagine, since they’ll need to hide the fact that they’ll be sneaking out to see Remus that day.”

“And they’ll be coming up with an excuse for Remus’s vanishing act. I remember Lupin telling us in third year that he had to disappear on the day of the full moon, which is what made him really suspicious to the others. I dunno whether he had to be gone for the whole day, but if he avoided teaching class and locked himself up in his room on the day of the full moon even while taking the potion, I reckon it’s pretty likely that he’ll be in the shack for all of Tuesday,” Harry added onto her thoughts.

Hermione shuddered. “Oh, the shack…imagine being in a place like that for the whole day.”

“Yes, I’d probably go mad. ‘Course, I don’t ever want to go near that place again, if I can help it. Haven’t got many great memories about it.” Ron grimaced.

“So we’ve got to be careful, but not too careful,” Harry recommenced the discussion. “They’ll be watching how we act through the remaining days leading up to the full moon, to come up with ways to throw us off. Dunno if their efforts will work, since we already know the secret, but we can’t give that fact away.”

“Especially on the actual day of the full moon,” Hermione emphasized. “We need to accept whatever excuses they come up with for Remus’s absence and act as naturally as possible. But, still, the map… your name, Harry…”

“Well, that’s what I was saying—Hermione, d’you know any spells that might be able to change Harry’s name on there?” Ron looked at Hermione eagerly.

“Maybe,” Hermione said, nodding. Her eyes became brighter. “I’ll think some up and make a list, which I’ll give you tomorrow.”

“Excellent.” A smile spread on Ron’s face and he turned to Harry. “There might yet be hope for us, mate.”

Harry responded with a half-smile, not entirely convinced, as hope and fear mingled within her.

“Oh, but…” Hermione bit her lip, looking anxious, “we don’t know when they’ll be going out of the castle, do we? I expect it’ll probably be after James returns from his Head duties, but…if they decide to sneak out after going up to bed at their usual time, they’re going to expect to see us still studying in the common room.”

“Er…” The three of them looked at each other.

“I suppose we can skip training for the day, then, just to be safe,” Hermione suggested, looking uncertain.

“I don’t mind that, actually. We can get more sleep.” Ron let out another yawn.

Hermione grimaced. “No, no, we’ve got to be careful. We don’t know when they’ll go out and we probably won’t see them going out either, since they’ll probably be under the Invisibility Cloak, which I assume is with James.” She shot a quick look at Harry, who nodded in confirmation. “So we
need to stay awake until it er, seems appropriate for us to head up to bed.”

“What? But how the hell are we supposed to know when that’ll be? No offense, but I don’t fancy staying up ‘til the break of dawn if that’s what happens to be appropriate.”

“They’ll be gone before then,” Harry hastily cut in as Hermione frowned and opened her mouth to argue back. “Lupin once told me that they’d run around on the castle grounds and in Hogsmeade until the end of the night, when he had to return to the shack to retransform. I dunno how late in the night they ventured out, but I don’t think it would’ve been too late—I can’t imagine my dad and Sirius making Remus wait alone for too long, especially if he had to coop himself up for the whole day.”

“I suppose the best thing to do is to see how the day goes,” Hermione said after a pause. “Even if they are under the Invisibility Cloak, they’re bound to make a bit of noise, as it gets quiet at night and we’ll be the only ones in the common room…well, we’ll be able to decide better after your attempt to change your name on the map, Harry. And…Lily…do you think she knows?”

Hermione and Ron waited for Harry, who considered it. Her mother had used Sirius’s nickname on the letter she had penned him about the toy broomstick that he had gotten her for her first birthday. If Lily had known to call him Padfoot, then perhaps she had known about his Animagus form as well, although the question was when she had found out…

“Maybe, maybe not. But I’d sooner bet she would,” she decided. “I don’t think they would’ve been able to keep the secret from her for too long, especially after she got friendlier with them.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit hard keeping secrets from the people you regularly hang around,” Ron agreed. “You get too comfortable and things tend to slip out.”

Worry was etched on each of their faces as they looked at one another.

“We’ll just have to deal with things as they come, in the end,” Harry echoed their thoughts. “There’s nothing about it that we can really control, except our reactions.”

On Tuesday morning, Harry and Hermione waited nervously in the common room with Lily for the boys to come down. How had it gone with Ron up there? What excuses had been made?

Hermione shifted next to her when the door opened, revealing the boys. Just as they had expected, Remus was not with them. And to Harry’s surprise, Ron seemed amused.

“Oh, is Remus sick today?” Hermione affected a concerned tone as she addressed the Marauder’s missing presence.

*Good job, Hermione,* Harry thought. *They expect us to be worried.*

Harry saw James flick his eyes to Lily before answering with a solemn expression.

“Yes, he went home with his mother before the break of dawn to get better at home.”

Harry blinked. *Went home with his mother?*
She exchanged a bemused look with Hermione. *Was that really the excuse they had come up with?*

“Oh,” Hermione replied, “I didn’t realize his condition was so serious that he had to go home.”

Sirius shrugged. “He just has an overly concerned mother who makes him tell her everything through letters. He should be back tomorrow in full health.”

Harry tried with all her might to suppress the mirth that bubbled up within her. The image of quiet, gentle Remus writing home to an anxious, simpering mother was suddenly very funny to her. She ducked her head in an attempt to compose herself and almost let out a laugh at Hermione’s comment.

“That’s…that’s kind of sweet.” Hermione let out a giggle. “And I’m glad he’ll be well enough to return to us tomorrow.”

Harry was relieved when Ron joined them to head to the Great Hall, as she was unable to contain the grin that threatened to break out on her face. The three of them stifled their laughter as they made their way to breakfast.

Harry and Ron rushed to the common room after breakfast while the others headed to their elective classes. They only had time to check the boys’ room until Care of Magical Creatures ended, as Peter would return to the tower.

Luckily, Harry did not meet any boys coming down or going up the stairs to the sixth-floor dorms. Ron opened the door and they entered.

“Wow,” Harry commented as she took in the state of the room. Half of it looked like a disaster zone with half-made beds, piles of clothes on the floor, textbooks strewn everywhere, and trunks partially open. She felt sorry for the house-elves who had to clean up the mess. She pointed at the neatest bed which was in the cleanest part of the room.

“I assume that’s Remus’s?”

Ron smiled sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“Which one’s yours?”

“The one right next to you, by the door.”

At least Ron’s bed was fully made and his dirty clothes were in one, obvious pile, unlike the two beds next to it.

“Yeah, that’s James and Sirius’s,” Ron confirmed, following her eyesight.

“So that would be Peter’s,” she said, pointing at the equally messy bed next to Remus’s. Ron nodded and took out his wand.

“Right, so I’ll try the Summoning Charm,” he said. He cleared his throat and raised his wand.

“*Accio, Marauder’s Map!*”

Something zoomed out from James’s open trunk. Ron caught the map in his hand and stared down at the blank parchment with Harry.

“Well. That was surprisingly easy,” he remarked after recovering from his shock.
“They probably figured that since no one knew about the map, they didn’t have to put an anti-
summoning spell on it,” Harry said. She pointed her wand at it.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Their eyes quickly searched for Gryffindor Tower as the layout of the castle spread itself out on the
parchment.

“There you are,” Ron said, pointing at an ink dot, which was situated in the boys’ dormitory.

*Harriett Potter* was inscribed over it. Harry checked her watch.

“We’ve got about an hour to try to disguise my name until Peter starts heading back.”

Ron searched in his pockets and took out the list of spells that Hermione had given him on the
previous day.

“Let’s hope one of them works.”

An hour later, they made their way down to the common room, dispirited. None of Hermione’s
spells had been successful, despite their best efforts. The map had been carefully returned to its place
under the tangled pile of clothes in James’s trunk.

“Now what?” Ron asked, sighing, as he sank into the sofa.

“Nothing we can do,” Harry said grimly, “except wait for our fate.”

“They’re really good at magic, aren’t they? To prevent it from ever being deceived?”

“Mm.”

They sighed.

“Want to get started on some homework?”

Harry turned to him with raised eyebrows.

“What? I can be studious, too.” His defensive tone made her snort, but she acquiesced by heading to
their study table with him.

Peter arrived a few minutes after they had settled into their seats and started their homework. The
sound of approaching footsteps made her glance up. She nudged Ron, who looked up and
recognized him as well. He grunted when Peter stopped in front of them.

“Oh hey, Peter,” Harry greeted him as well.

It seemed to work, as Peter gave her a shy smile and turned to Ron, who greeted him with a nod.

“I thought you two would be in the library,” he told them as he got himself a chair to join them at
their table.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other.
“Just wanted a change in atmosphere,” Ron decided to answer him.

“Oh.”

The startled tone of his voice made them look at him. Peter seemed nervous, as his eyes darted between them. He fidgeted with his hands.

“D-D’you mind if I sit here and study as well?”

Yes, actually, Harry thought with an inward grimace, while Ron looked elsewhere and shifted in his seat.

“No,” she decided to respond, as the pause grew longer by the second. She smiled at Peter to reassure him.

Peter smiled back. “Thanks. Er, let me put away some of my books first.”

Harry tensed and felt trepidation rise within her as she watched Peter make his way to the dormitories. Ron cursed after the door closed behind him.

“What the bloody hell is he going up there for? You don’t think he suspects, somehow?”

Harry took in a breath to calm herself. “Of course he doesn’t. We’ve got to look at it realistically, Ron—we haven’t shown any signs of being aware of their secret, at least I don’t think we have.” She turned back to her essay, feeling uneasy, even as she shrugged. “He won’t find anything strange up there, anyhow. All we did was summon the map and put it back where it was. We didn’t touch anything else.”

“Yeah, all right.”

They remained tense until Peter came down a few minutes later and joined them at the table. It was one of the most awkward study sessions that Harry had ever experienced. She and Ron remained quiet and did not talk to one another, uncomfortable as they were with the idea of including Peter in their conversation. She wasn’t quite sure if it was her or Ron who was more unwilling to have Peter near them. Ron still held a deep-seated grudge against the Animagus whom he had unwittingly allowed to sleep in his bed, while Harry could not forget him as the one who had betrayed her parents to Voldemort and ruined Sirius’s life.

She and Ron exchanged relieved looks as they packed up their belongings to head to lunch.

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful and seemed to flow smoothly like usual, which soothed the trio’s nerves. They seemed to be doing all right so far, after the admittedly awkward moment in the morning when they had heard the Marauders’ explanation for Remus’s absence. They were unable to discuss the curious matter of the fabricated excuse, as they had constantly felt the Marauders’ eyes on them that day.

Sirius, for instance, had self-elected himself to be her partner again in Herbology. This was by no means unusual, but Harry felt that the manner of his gaze on her during the lesson was different—his eyes seemed to want to scrutinize her rather than contemplate her.

The three of them did not dare to say a thing about any of the Marauders’ behavior until they returned to the common room after dinner, when all three of them were finally able to detach themselves from them.
“Y’know, it just occurred to me,” Ron began in a whisper, after they had settled down at their study table. “Doesn’t James have his Head Boy duties tonight? How’s he going to deal with that?”

“Skive off, probably. That’s what I’d do.” Harry’s voice was just as quiet. She glanced at James, who was on the sofa, working on his homework.

She furrowed her brows when she saw him grimace and shift in his seat. Then he let out a low groan, which caught Hermione and Ron’s attention as well. The three of them stared at James, who slumped in his seat with a hand over his stomach.

“What—” Ron began to say, when Lily rose from her seat beside James.

They watched as James grabbed Lily’s arm. He looked up at her with an anxious expression.

“Lily,” James said in a pitiful voice, “my dear, I am so sorry, but I am afraid that I have fallen ill with something. I dunno whether I’ve caught it from Moony, but I absolutely cannot bear even the thought of going out on my nightly rounds tonight. Please forgive me.”

Harry raised her eyebrows, feeling amazed. He wasn’t serious, was he? She stifled a snort while Ron coughed to disguise the snicker that came out of him.

“He can’t be serious...” Hermione murmured, echoing Harry's sentiment. She looked incredulous.

Harry hid a smile when Lily touched James’s head and caressed his hair.

“Oh, James, are you sure you don’t need to go see Madam Pomfrey? I’m sure she’ll be able to give you something to make you feel better.”

“You know how I feel about the infirmary, Lily. No, no, it’s better that I go to bed early. There’s nothing that a good night’s rest can’t fix.”

“Well, if you’re sure…”

Harry caught Hermione’s eyes across from her and they ducked their heads, muffling their giggles. They heard the sofa creak as James stood up with a groan after Lily left for her Head duties.

“Well, Padfoot, Wormtail,” James began in a mournful tone, “I’ll be heading up to bed, then. Do try to not be so loud when you enter the room, will you? I need all the peaceful rest I can get.”

The trio scribbled furiously on their parchment, keeping their amusement at bay.

“Good night, you three,” James told them as he turned towards the dormitories.

Harry was unable to look at him for fear of bursting out with laughter. “Feel better, James,” she decided to say as evenly as possible, while keeping her eyes on her essay.

“So that’s how you skive off Head duties,” Ron commented across from her, after the door had closed behind James. The two of them exchanged grins and Hermione stifled a giggle.

Less than an hour later, they perked up at Sirius’s voice.

“Wormtail? Are you heading up too?”

The three of them shifted their gaze to Peter, who stumbled as he rose from his seat on the sofa.

“Merlin, again?” Ron muttered.
Peter had slightly overdone the expression of fatigue on his face, Harry thought, as she took in his efforts to appear only half-conscious from exhaustion.

“Yes, I’m so very tired,” Peter whined in the same pitiful tone as James. “And I don’t feel quite right, either…might’ve caught whatever Moony’s got as well.”

Ron gave a discreet cough. “Clearly,” he muttered, almost making Harry snort and miss Sirius’s response.

“Really? Like Prongs?”

Harry was impressed as she took in Sirius’s tone and expression. He actually looked and sounded skeptical—there was just the right amount of disbelief in his voice and face to support Peter’s dramatic acting. *He’s got quite the talent for deception,* she thought wryly while observing the rest of their exchange.

“Y-yes. I really don’t feel well…” Peter took several staggering steps away from the sofa.

“Need me to escort you, Wormtail? We can’t have you fainting while going up the stairs.”

_All right, that was a bit too much._ Harry exchanged a look with Ron, who had also raised his eyebrows. Hermione’s bushy hair swung into her face as she turned back to her homework. Her shoulders shook slightly.

“No, I’ll be all right, Padfoot. G’night, Harry, Ron, Hermione.”

All the three of them could do was raise a hand in acknowledgment as Peter headed to the dormitories. Harry knew that the Marauders were doing their best to be as convincing as possible with their acting, but to them, who knew everything, the whole thing might as well have been a joke. “Please don’t tell me Sirius is going to act like he’s sick, too. I dunno how much of this I can handle anymore.” Ron cracked a grin when Harry met his eyes. The two of them smothered their snickers. They knew they shouldn’t be so amused by the Marauders’ sincere attempts to deceive them, but they couldn’t help it—everything was just so…_dramatic._

Hermione nudged Harry, who looked up and saw that Sirius had approached them.

“Since the others have already gone up to bed, may I study with you three?” he asked them with a pleasant smile.

“All right.” Harry moved her chair to make room for him.

“Are you sure you haven’t got sick as well?” Hermione asked him casually.

Harry saw his eyes flick to Hermione. “No, not yet, at least. Hopefully I won’t.” His eyes narrowed a fraction as he studied her.

“You might want to get more sleep, or else you really will get sick.” Harry turned his attention away from Hermione. “You’ve been looking so tired lately. Not as bad as Remus, but close enough—the bags under your eyes are certainly comparable, though,” she added, making Ron snort.

Sirius let out a bark-like laugh, but his eyes looked at hers intently. “Yes, I suppose more rest would be nice,” he said, sounding uncharacteristically solemn. Harry was beginning to feel wary under his gaze, but then he grinned, startling her. His expression was suddenly mischievous.

“Does this mean that you care about me, Harry? I knew it—I’ve endeared myself to you somehow.
I’ve somehow managed to wriggle my way into your heart.”

Hermione and Ron seemed equally stunned, as they stopped writing to stare at Sirius. Then Hermione shifted her gaze to Harry and burst into laughter when she met her eyes. Harry frowned at her before turning back to Sirius, who looked rather pleased with himself, if his smug expression was any indication.

“Well?” he asked, quirking an eyebrow at her.

“Well what?”

“Have I endeared myself to you?”

Harry turned away from him, unable to come up with a reply. She was still reeling from his abrupt change in demeanor and thought it best to ignore him. *Never mind what I thought of him being too dramatic. His theatrics are the foundation of his natural bearing—I dunno who else can be so perfectly and naturally dramatic as him.* She glanced at him when he let out a chuckle.

“Hm…” Sirius’s eyes glittered with amusement. “I think I have.”

Harry couldn’t help scoffing. “Don’t get too excited—I’ve merely resigned myself to putting up with you, that’s all,” she told him drily.

“Semantics, Harry dear. In the end, you do adore me.”

She raised her eyebrows at him, astonished. “Adore?”

His grin widened and she realized she had fallen for his trap. She sighed inwardly as he began listing all the times they had bantered back and forth and the ways that she had humored his demands, which embarrassed her, upon hearing it all out loud. He was precise to the point of being shameless, she thought to herself, disgruntled. But she did not dare to ignore him again—that would have meant that he had won.

He looked at her expectantly when he was done.

“All right then,” was her only reaction to him and she promptly turned back to her work. Ron and Hermione laughed. Perhaps at her response or at Sirius’s expression, which she did not see—she did not know nor particularly care.

But she heard him sigh.

“You are quite unfair to me, Harry.”

She kept her eyes on her writing as she replied. “Define unfair. I literally just listened to you talk for half an hour, Sirius.”

“Exactly, my dear. You have humored me yet again.”

Harry sighed. Why did she even bother countering his ridiculous claims? “I—yeah, all right, you’ve won this time,” she admitted her defeat.

Sirius turned to Hermione and Ron. “She just can’t resist me,” he told them cheerfully, looking smug.

Harry narrowed her eyes at him. “Careful.”
“With you, my dear, always.”

The words and the bright smile he gave her made her freeze. She stared at him, feeling a warmth creep up her neck. “Right,” she managed to get out before turning away from him. The warmth reached up to her face and she shifted her head, so that some of her hair fell on the side of her face that was towards him. She refocused her attention on her essay to dismiss the sensation of the nervous flutter that had briefly stirred in her chest.

There was little conversation between the four of them as they continued with their homework. A couple hours later, Harry saw him glance at his watch out of the corner of her eye.

“Hm,” she heard him grunt quietly. The trio looked up when he rose from his seat with his belongings.

“I think I’ll go to bed now,” he told them. “This past week’s been rather rough on me and I haven’t recovered from it over the weekend. So I think I’ll take your advice, Harry—I’ll make sure that the bags under my eyes disappear by the next time you see me.”

She smiled at him. “You mean tomorrow?”

He answered her with a wink.

“I’ll say one thing,” Ron began after Sirius had disappeared into the dormitories. “He was the best out of the three of them.”

Hermione nodded. “He’s a natural. We should probably learn some tips from him.” She looked at her watch. “Oh, it’s only a little before ten. They might be heading out sooner than we thought they would.”

“Excellent.” Ron yawned. “I know we still need to wait for Lily to come back to prevent her from getting suspicious, but we’re still skipping training tonight, right? I’d really appreciate a few more hours of sleep.”

“Yeah, just to be cautious,” Harry confirmed. She turned to Hermione questioningly when she saw her give a start.

“Oh, quick, act like you’re working! They might be coming out any moment now!”

Harry and Ron obeyed. Harry resisted the urge to glance at the door to the boys’ dormitories.

*It’s probably going to open any second now. And we won’t be able to see them since they’ll be under the Cloak.* She had just managed to fully settle herself back into writing her essay, when there was a scream. The trio whipped up their heads and saw a curly-haired fourth-year girl in the middle of the room, staring around her with wide, fearful eyes.

“Th-Th-There was…” The girl was trembling so much that she could barely get a word out. Harry immediately understood. Her eyes scrutinized the area around the girl in an attempt to see any hint of the Marauders’ presence. But of course, there was nothing.

“What? What was there?” A blonde-haired boy at another study table spoke up. He frowned at the terrified girl. “I’m trying to study here, you know! I’ve got an exam tomorrow for Muggle Studies and now you’ve got my attention. So, what? What scared the bloody wits out of you? Come on now, speak quickly, I haven’t got time!”
Harry moved her attention to the portrait hole out of sheer instinct and caught a glimpse of the outside corridor. She hitched in a breath. They were leaving.

“There’s no need to talk to her like that!” Hermione was arguing with the blonde-haired boy, so Harry turned to Ron. “They just left, I think,” she murmured to him.

His eyes widened. “Right.” He turned his head to the portrait hole, but the portrait was now closed. The two of them looked at each other grimly.

“Now we wait?”

“Now we wait.”
“Peter.”

He heard but did not reply. The sweet oblivion of darkness was much too dear to lose and so he held on, gripping onto its folds.

“Peter.”

He felt himself being shaken, but chose to frown and let out a sound of protest. Didn’t he understand how tired he was?

“Mr. Pettigrew!”

His body jerked up and his eyes snapped open. He blinked blearily, taking in his surroundings, and recognized Remus’s sympathetic face when he turned towards him.

“Oh hey, Moony,” he said with a yawn.

Someone snorted near him. It sounded suspiciously like Sirius.

“Mr. Pettigrew! Is my lesson so boring as to make you fall asleep in the middle of class?”

He jumped at the sharp, whip-like tone and immediately turned his attention to the front of the room, where, to his dread and horror, Professor McGonagall stood, staring straight at him with a severe expression on her face. Her eyebrows furrowed further as he opened and closed his mouth, unable to come up with a reply. All he knew was that he had been so tired.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” she told him with asperity, making several of his classmates groan.

“The first month of the school year is only just ending, but already, you find it fit to slack off in my class, no less. I am very disappointed in you, Mr. Pettigrew, very disappointed indeed. May I remind you that this year, while being your final year, is your most important, as you will be taking your N.E.W.T.s. I will tell you right now that the day I allow one of my students, who is from my house, no less, to pass this class while falling asleep, is the day I hand in my letter of resignation to the headmaster. Do I make myself clear?”

Peter trembled and a whimper rose in his throat. “Y-yes,” he squeaked back. He blinked back tears as she narrowed her eyes and continued with the lesson. Rubbing his flushed face, he looked down at his notes in an attempt to restart his focus on the lesson, and was only mildly consoled by Remus’s soft pat on his back.

“It’s all right, Peter,” Remus told him soothingly after class. “It’s not that big of a deal. We’ve all been tired lately and you know McGonagall—she’s always been like that.”

“Yes, cheer up, Wormtail,” James encouraged him. He broke away from Lily to walk beside him. “You just fell asleep ‘cause of all the work that’s been piled on us. We’ve all been getting less sleep since the middle of the month. It’s not easy on the rest of us either, you know. I mean, Padfoot here’s been getting grayer in the face ever since Slughorn assigned us that month-long Potions project.”
Peter let out a half-hearted chuckle as Sirius sent James an unamused look while walking next to Harry, who smiled at James’s remark.

“You should try looking at the mirror yourself, Prongs. I daresay your hair’s starting to fall out, from how much you’ve been pulling at it while studying. Best you be careful to not go bald, or else Lily might leave you for someone who still has a full head of hair.”

Harry laughed as Sirius ducked behind her, avoiding James’s sudden lunge towards him. Lily rolled her eyes as James let out a growl after another unsuccessful attempt to catch Sirius, who looped around Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were deeply amused by their antics.

Peter turned away from watching James beg Lily not to leave him when Remus spoke up next to him. “I’ll help you with your homework tonight so you can get some more sleep, Peter. Sirius should be able to help as well.”

Cool relief and gratitude rushed into Peter’s chest. “Thanks, Moony. But don’t you want more sleep as well? I know it’s been hard on you as well, even though you’re smarter than me.”

Remus smiled. “I’ll be all right. It’s not like I’ve never been exhausted out of my mind. You know my ‘furry little problem—’” he stopped and turned pale.

Peter’s eyes widened with mutual comprehension. He cast a swift glance at the others. Sirius was laughing at James with Lily, while Harry, Ron, and Hermione were conversing quietly amongst themselves. He turned back to Remus.

“Moony,” he hissed urgently, “the full moon! It’s coming up, isn’t it? It’s the second to last week of the month. We…we have to come up with something about…about them.” He indicated the three new additions to their circle of friends with a flick of his head.

“Y-yes…I…I don’t know why I…how could I have been so careless?” Remus was shaking slightly as they reached the Great Hall for lunch. His face was ashen. Peter gripped his arm reassuringly.

“We can talk about it after Prongs gets back from his nightly rounds. Ron doesn’t come up to bed until after we’ve fallen asleep, right? So we should be able to discuss it then.”

“Yes, all right.”

Remus remained unsettled for the rest of the day, Peter observed. He was quieter than usual and kept on glancing at the ‘new trio’ (as Peter liked to think of them). Or really, specifically at Harry, especially when he heard her laugh. Curious, Peter thought, as he noted the way his friend turned back to his homework, looking downcast, after watching Harry smile and talk with Ron and Sirius, who had gone to the trio’s study table after she had asked him for his advice on which potions were easy to brew for their project. Was he perhaps jealous? If he was, Peter couldn’t blame him. Sirius had an enviable knack for getting along with women, especially the good-looking ones—it probably helped that he was rather good-looking himself.

“D’you like her or something?”

Peter had long wanted to ask Remus this. It certainly was not unwarranted, as Remus had almost always flushed one way or another whenever Harry had given him her attention and every time she had smiled at him.

Remus’s quill tip snapped and broke on his parchment when he registered the question. Peter
watched with mild puzzlement as Remus gulped and slowly turned towards him with wide, frightened eyes. He hadn’t looked so unguarded since his secret had been found out in second year, Peter thought as he looked at him.

“It’s okay if you do,” he decided to say when Remus failed to respond. Was it the right thing to say? He didn’t know. He just didn’t understand why his friend seemed so afraid. There was nothing wrong with fancying a girl...

“I mean, she is pretty,” he continued, shrugging. “She’s got nice eyes and a nice body…er, she’s smart and good at magic and Quidditch…and…Padfoot seems to like her.”

But that was evidently the wrong thing to say, as Remus’s face fell and he turned back to his parchment. Peter fumbled for words in a desperate attempt to salvage the situation.

“I…I only meant that…well, the ones Padfoot usually likes to chat up are the ones worth getting interested in, I figure…” he trailed off uncertainly. “I-I’m just saying, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t like her that way. I mean, I get it.”

Remus was silent as he continued working on his homework, which made Peter anxious. There hadn’t been many instances where his friend had become moody—that was usually Sirius, who, if Peter was being quite honest, scared him a little. Only James could usually get through to Sirius when he was in one of his moods, but Remus…wasn’t typically like this. He was usually the mediator, not the injured or offended party.

“M-Moony,” he began tentatively, shifting in his seat, “I’m sorry if I made you cross. You just seemed a little down and I wanted to make you feel better, honest. I’m sorry if I messed up.”

He gnawed on his lip and glanced at Remus, who paused in his writing. Remus let out a quiet sigh before turning to him with a wan smile.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Peter. I’m just feeling a little on edge because of…you know.”

Peter nodded eagerly. “Yeah, yeah, I understand. Er, Prongs should be returning soon with Lily, so we won’t have to wait much longer to talk about it.”

Remus gave him a small smile and returned to his work.

When James finally arrived with Lily, Peter was more than a little relieved to see him. It had been awkward finishing up homework with a taciturn Moony and an otherwise distracted Sirius, who had failed to discover or realize their little situation.

James nodded at him as he and Lily reached the sofa. Remus had notified James of their problem during lunch and James had passed the message to Sirius afterwards in the library, as he had been busy talking with the new trio about Quidditch. Well, with Harry and Ron, really. Hermione hadn’t been interested and had conversed with Lily during the meal.

“Well, I’m heading up to bed,” James announced brightly, getting Sirius’s attention. “Still got some work to finish, but I reckon it’s nice taking a break once in a while.”

“I think I agree with you, Prongs,” Sirius responded, standing up from his seat with a yawn. “Wormtail falling asleep in class today reminded me that I need more sleep as well. And besides, it’s not like all our homework’s due tomorrow. How about you, Moony? Want to sleep a little earlier for once?”
Remus snorted. “It’s only been two weeks since we’ve been sleeping later than the beginning of the month. But yes, I suppose I should, if you two are. Want to join us, Wormtail?”

Peter felt elated at the warm smile that Remus gave him. He was back to normal.

“Definitely. I can’t fall asleep in class again. If McGonagall got shirty with me today, then I don’t want to imagine what Harpinger’ll be like if I end up falling asleep in his class tomorrow.” He shuddered at the very thought. The teacher would probably hex him if that happened.

“Oh, well, good night then,” Lily said, looking surprised, as she returned James’s hug. The new trio bid the four of them good night as they headed to the dormitories.

Sirius cast the Imperturbable Charm on the door after they had all entered. The four of them met at James’s bed, which was closest to the middle of the room. Peter looked at James expectantly with the others after they had all settled themselves.

“Right, so,” James began, as he looked at each of them, “I, er, owe you an apology, Moony.” He turned to Remus, who blinked at him.

“What do you mean?”

James rubbed the back of his head. “I somehow forgot about the full moon happening at all. It’s the first time that it’s happened, and I’m really sorry about that, Moony. The three of us should’ve anticipated it and prepared for it weeks ago.”

“Yeah, sorry Moony,” Sirius apologized. “It honestly slipped my mind this time. I reckon it’s ‘cause so many things have gone on lately, but that’s not much of an excuse really, with what we’re, or rather, you’re facing.”

“I’m sorry too, Moony,” Peter added last. “I didn’t realize it either, until you mentioned it. I dunno why the three of us forgot this time.”

Remus gave them a self-deprecating smile.

“Actually,” he began with a wry expression, “I forgot as well. It was your exhaustion, Wormtail, that reminded me of it. So there’s no need to be sorry. If anything, I, er, should’ve been the one to remind you all, but…” he looked down and swallowed. “I think Padfoot’s right—we’ve all been rather busy and lots of things that we weren’t used to have happened, which probably made us all forget. I mean, for starters, none of us expected to have a new addition to our room nor did we expect to gain our new friends. It’s shifted our regular standards of behavior, really. And, Prongs, you’re Head Boy this year, which means you’re obligated to go on your nightly rounds, which would’ve been a problem to our er, monthly excursion, regardless of whether we met our new friends or not. We would’ve had to think up of ways for you to skive off your duties once a month so that you can join us as usual in the shack.”

“Oh, blimey, you’re right.” James grimaced. “Forgot about my Head duties being an issue… honestly, why does it have to be every night?” He leaned back on his bed and sighed.

“It’s not that big of an issue, really,” Remus responded, shrugging. “It actually works out, in a way: the three of them already expect us to go to bed around midnight—well, actually, past midnight now, since we’ve been staying up later for homework—after you and Lily return. You three can sneak out after they think you’ve gone up, and join me afterwards.”

James frowned. “But that means you’ll have to wait down there longer than usual.”
“Well yes, but it’s the most natural way to go about it.”

“No,” Sirius said firmly. “We are not making you wait down there for several hours longer than usual, Moony. It’s not fair to you.”

“Padfoot, don’t be stubborn—”

“No, Padfoot’s right. We are not leaving our friend down in that miserable shack any longer than necessary, even if it means we’ll have to sacrifice a bit of our pride and dignity to keep to our regular schedule.”

James and Sirius turned to Peter with an expectant look.

“I agree with them, Moony. I don’t want you to be alone longer than usual, when the three of us can think up ways to distract the others. We’re your friends, and we’ll be joining you at the same time we always have.”

Remus seemed stunned, as his eyes widened slightly and he blinked. His eyes flickered between the three of them uncertainly.

“But—”

“All right?” Sirius gave him a stern look.

Remus hesitated and stared back at him. Trepidation mixed with wonder shone out of his eyes.

“All right,” he agreed after a long pause. He gave them another self-deprecating smile and the three of them grinned back at him.

“All right,” James said briskly, jumping off his bed. He began pacing in front of it. “Now we need to figure out how to distract them. Wait, when’s the full moon, by the way?”

“Tuesday, six days from now,” Peter answered.

“Right,” James muttered, furrowing his brows. “Well, first, we’ve got to account for Moony’s absence on Tuesday, which shouldn’t be too difficult, seeing as how Moony tends to look peaky a few days before…how about we make it seem like you got so ill that you had to go off to the Hospital Wing during the night, Moony. How does that sound?”

“But what if they try to visit him?” Peter spoke up before Remus. “I mean, I s’ppose we could say that Moony doesn’t want visitors, but you never know.”

“We can keep a close eye on them by making sure they barely leave our sight.”

Remus shook his head. “That’s not going to work, Prongs. It’ll be a Tuesday, so that means Harry and Ron have a free period while we’ve got our electives. You, Padfoot, and Lily can keep an eye on Hermione, but not the other two.”

James’s expression became conflicted. “Then…what? One of us skives off lessons for the day to monitor them? Or actually…we can use the map and see whether Harry and Ron go to the infirmary or not. Lily and I could check it during Arithmancy and Ancient Runes from time to time to see if they do.”

“Or just come up with a better excuse,” Sirius suggested. “Be more practical that way—instead of the Hospital Wing, say that Moony’s gone home for the day ‘cause his mum wanted to take care of
him. By the way, that’s the third excuse you used for your absence in first year, Moony.”

Peter snickered at the dry look Remus sent to Sirius.

“Is that really the best you’ve got, Padfoot?”

Sirius’s face became mischievous as he grinned. “Well, think of it this way: it might be well-received by the ladies, by which I mean, Harry and Hermione—there are some ladies who fawn over a young man still writing home to his mum, you know. I dunno about Harry, but Hermione seems like the type to buy it.”

Peter laughed shrilly at the red flush that crept up Remus’s face, which looked mortified. Something like frustration passed over his eyes before he gave a resigned sigh.

“Well,” Remus began, narrowing his eyes at a smirking Sirius, “I suppose Padfoot’s got a point. It is much cleaner that way—let’s just say that I have a habit of writing home to my parents regularly, even about my health, and that my mum got worried enough to want me back home so that I can get well. It’s not so unusual for students to go home when they’re particularly ill.”

“Right, and it’s perfectly common for a young man of age to still be writing home to his mum about the full, intimate details of his health,” James commented, making Peter and Sirius laugh.

Remus gave him a wry half-smile. “All right, so I’m accounted for, but how about you, then? How’re you going to skive off your duties?”

James shrugged. “Fake an upset stomach or something. Maybe say I caught whatever you have and need to go to bed early. I’ll tell Lily everything tomorrow, after we’ve planned it all out. She’ll back me up if the three of them get a bit suspicious.”

“But what about us, Prongs? What’ll me and Padfoot say?” Peter fidgeted with his hands as he considered the potential obstacles. “We’re supposed to leave the castle around ten at night to join Moony. But how’ll the three of us manage to get out together?”

“Go up to bed shortly after Prongs, Wormtail,” Sirius suggested. “Make it seem like you caught whatever’s Moony’s got as well. Act like you’re dizzy or something and say you need bed rest. As for me, I’ll head to the dormitories a little before ten, claiming I need to get more sleep. It shouldn’t be too bizarre, seeing the work we have to put up with these days. I’ll make sure to put on an act a few days beforehand, as if I’m suffering under the workload—I will be, by the way…I’m going to attempt to finish up work days in advance in preparation for the time we’ll be spending outside that night.”

He exchanged a grim smile with James, who nodded.

“That’s a great idea, Padfoot. I should start completing my homework days before it’s due as well. You too, Wormtail. It’ll make sure we’re on track academically and more importantly, give us some credibility to our acts. People do tend to get ill from overtaxing themselves, you know.”

Peter let his shoulders slump and he grimaced. “Okay,” he agreed reluctantly. He was going to suffer more than any of them in the coming days—he wasn’t a genius, not like them. He perked up when James came to stand in front of them.

“So this is how Tuesday’s going to go: Moony will be absent, since he’ll have been escorted to the shack by Madam Pomfrey the night before. When Ron wakes up and asks where Moony is, we’ll tell him that he went home with his mum ‘cause of his illness. The rest of the day should go normally, unless Ron gets suspicious and gets Hermione and Harry to think something’s off as well.
In that case, Padfoot, I need you to make yourself into a distraction, preferably to Harry.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow at him. “Why me and why Harry?”

“Because, my dear Padfoot, you tend to make yourself into a distraction half the time around Harry, even by accident. And when you catch that dear lady’s attention, you tend to bring the other two’s attention to you as well. Like yesterday, when you almost got punched by the Belligerent Bearflower in Herbology.”

“What happened?” Peter asked, filled with eager curiosity. He glanced at Remus by sheer habit and saw his smile falter at James’s words. Sirius leaned back on a bed post with a carelessly graceful air. He smirked, looking pleased, while James explained.

“I didn’t see how everything happened, but what I did see was Padfoot ducking as the flower aimed a punch at his face and Harry fussing over him afterwards, touching his face and hair, which she straightened out for him. I’d say he’d done it on purpose, if there hadn’t been the look of shock on his face after he managed to avoid getting hit.”

Peter sniggered. “Why were you in danger of getting hit at all, Padfoot? I thought you were more careful than that.”

“I was—”

“Probably staring at Harry,” James quickly cut in, grinning. “I daresay Padfoot actually fancies her. I mean, why else would he want to protect Harry from the Slytherin Quidditch team?”

Peter laughed with James when Sirius gave them a haughty look.

“I was being a good friend by looking out for her,” he replied. “You know how nasty they can be.”

“Right, but you didn’t offer the same thing to Ron,” Peter teased.

“Well, he’s not the Muggle-born they’re targeting now, is he?”

That was a fair point, Peter had to admit, exchanging a thoughtful look with James.

“Well, I still think she’s different,” James responded with a shrug. “You’ve tamed yourself a bit around her and she’s actually quite observant when it comes to you. She’s been able to deal with your shifts in temper better than anyone I’ve seen who’s attempted it—well, maybe other than me, but the point is, she’s not your usual girl.”

Sirius furrowed his brows and his expression became contemplative. “No, she’s not,” he agreed quietly.

“By the way,” James said, suddenly looking serious, “have you noticed she’s got a scar?”

Sirius’s eyes snapped to James. Peter frowned slightly. What scar?

“A scar?” Remus questioned. His face was alert.

“Yeah, on her forehead. I mean, you can’t see it normally, ‘cause it’s covered by her hair, but I managed to glimpse it during tryouts when her bangs got windswept from flying.”

“There’s a scar on her forehead?” Sirius was frowning.

“Shaped like a lightning-bolt. Looked kind of serious. Apparently, she got it when she was really
young. Said she didn’t really remember how she got it either.”

“She said all this to you?”

Peter watched as Sirius leaned forward from the bed post to look directly at James, who shook his head. “No. Heard her explaining to that blonde girl who tried out for Seeker—can’t remember her name, oh well. She was the one who noticed it first.”

“Hm.”

Peter regarded Sirius’s tense demeanor with puzzlement. It was indeed rather bizarre that Harry had a hidden scar on her forehead, but why was Sirius so concerned about it?

“D’you reckon it has something to do with the Death Eaters? I know she said she got it a long time ago, but she could’ve been lying,” Peter wondered out loud, looking between James and Sirius.

“Yeah, maybe. Anyway, Prongs, we need to finish talking about how we’re going to get out come Tuesday.”

Peter, James, and Remus blinked at Sirius’s abrupt change of topic, but James acquiesced as he shrugged and continued.

“Yeah, all right. So like I was saying, do whatever it takes to distract the three of them, especially Harry, on Tuesday, if there’s any hint of them getting suspicious. And when you get up here after me, Wormtail, I’ll be in my bed, with the curtains closed, just in case it’s Ron who comes up for whatever reason. Just so I know that it’s you and not him, whistle a bit of “Odo the Hero”* when you enter. Then get in your bed and close the curtains around you as well. We’ll wait like that for Padfoot. When you come in, Padfoot, you do the same thing—whistle the tune so that we know it’s you, then put your stuff on your bed and shut the curtains around it so it’ll look like you’re sleeping. Then I’ll get the map and the Invisibility Cloak, which we’ll put around us before heading downstairs and making our way out of the common room. How does that sound?”

“I can’t whistle very well,” Peter said nervously. “I’ll be off-tune and everything.”

“Forget the whistling.” Sirius waved away his concern with an impatient expression. “It’s too complicated. It’ll be enough for us to call your name, Prongs. Instant voice recognition.”

“Oh, all right.” James looked a tad disappointed.

“And we might want to magick our curtains shut, just in case Ron decides to be nosy and have a peek at our beds.”

“Won’t that make him more suspicious, if he does get nosy and finds our curtains like that? What if he tries to force them open with magic?” Peter asked, turning to Sirius, who looked unconcerned.

“He won’t be able to bring it up even if he does, since it’ll be awkward—why was he snooping around our beds in the first place, know what I mean? And if he does bring it up, we’ll be the ones questioning him back about his suspicions.”

James nodded and turned to Remus. “How ‘bout it, Moony? Think it’ll work?”

Peter looked at Remus, who looked thoughtful. “I suppose,” he agreed. “But we all need to consider the fact that we’ll be needing to come up with more excuses for the coming months.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Sirius said, stretching himself out on James’s bed and
yawning. “Just take it one month at a time, ‘cept next time, we’ll be more vigilant, obviously.” He
knocked away James’s hand when James came over to him to move him off his bed and looked up at
him insolently.

Peter stood up with Remus when James took out his wand. Sirius put his hands up and got off the
bed, grumbling, making James smirk as he placed his wand on his bedside cabinet.

“Well, at the very least, the three of them have a set schedule for their daily routine,” Remus said as
he moved to his own bed. “They’ve got their classes, weekly meetings with Dumbledore after
dinner, Quidditch practice for Harry and Ron, and studying late into the night. Their movements are
predictable, which makes it easier for us.”

“Are they really meeting with Dumbledore, though? ‘S a bit weird for the headmaster to take such a
close interest in them by meeting them once a week.” The thought had just occurred to Peter—he
hadn’t heard of any of the other homeschooled students meeting so frequently with Dumbledore.

“I imagine it’s ‘cause of their unusual entrance into Hogwarts. They were being chased by Death
Eaters, remember? Dumbledore probably wants to check that they’re doing all right after everything
that’s happened to them,” James answered reasonably. Peter hummed in response while buttoning
his pajamas.

Their three new friends were quite intriguing indeed, he thought as he settled himself in his bed.
Their entrance into their circle had changed the Marauders’ routine and diversified their attention.
James was still the same as ever, as he engaged equally with every one of them like he had always
done, but Sirius's attention had increasingly shifted towards Harry, who was different, like James
had said—Peter was no longer sure if Sirius really meant to flirt with her, as he joked around with
her like he did with his fellow Marauders, while occasionally throwing a provocative comment her
way, just to see her reaction. He was touching her a bit more, Peter mused, but not exactly in a
suggestive way. It was usually just an arm around her shoulders. And as for Remus…he had never
seemed so interested in a girl like he was interested in Harry.

Apprehension slowly rose within him.

Surely, things wouldn’t get tense between Sirius and Remus because of Harry? Suddenly, it seemed
as if everything revolved around Harry for half the Marauders.

That’s the problem with newcomers, he thought, shifting in his bed. They start messing with already-
established group dynamics. Even Lily’s inclusion wasn’t wholly welcomed by Padfoot, at first. But
at least she only had Prongs’s eyes on her. With Harry…

Peter yawned and blinked blearily as he looked up at the ceiling.

Ron’s the next most problematic. This room isn’t only for the Marauders anymore. Our
conversations have turned private now. Prongs can’t just whisk out his Cloak or the map anymore.

He turned on his side and closed his eyes.

And Hermione’s not really a concern. She’s like another Marlene or Alice—she doesn’t engage with
the four of us, much.

Vague musings of the new trio’s interactions with the Marauders thus far drifted through Peter’s
mind before he surrendered himself to the soft arms of sleep.
Remus’s symptoms began to appear just a couple days later, which made the three other Marauders vigilant. The three of them kept a wary eye on the new trio, opting to let Remus answer their possible questions about his ailing health himself, while preparing themselves to jump in to support him in the case that any skepticism showed on the new trio’s faces at his responses. But there were not many questions, other than a few worried glances, that the new trio, or specifically, Hermione, threw Remus’s way.

On Sunday night, Peter’s anxiety spiked when he caught Hermione’s eyes lingering on Remus while they studied in the common room. Remus did not look particularly well that night—the bags under his eyes had grown darker on his pale, drawn face and he was evidently so tired that he kept nodding off in the middle of homework.

“Remus?”

Peter and Remus both jumped at Hermione’s voice. Remus put on a smile that took a lot of effort, from what Peter could tell.

“Yes, Hermione?”

Hermione’s face was kind as she smiled back at him. “Perhaps you should head to bed early. You seem so exhausted.”

“I, yes, perhaps I will. I’ve been getting a little, er…”

Peter saw his face start to flush as Harry turned her gaze on him as well.

“Moony here tends to get sick at least once a month,” Sirius filled in for him cheerfully. “I reckon it’s ‘cause he refuses to give himself a break every now and then. And with all the work we’ve been having to put up with lately…”

“You should take some rest, Remus,” Harry spoke up. She gave him a sympathetic smile. “First Peter fell asleep in class and now you’re getting sick…we all understand how difficult it’s been recently. The three of us haven’t been getting much sleep as well.”

Peter exchanged an amused glance with Sirius when Remus’s ears turned red from Harry’s concern.

“It’s all right, really,” Remus managed to get out. Peter stifled a snicker as he watched him attempt to compose himself by straightening himself up in his seat. “It’s nothing that I’m not used to. Like Sirius said, I always tend to get sick every month from overworking myself, but it’s all worth it in the end—the scores make up for it.”

Sirius snorted. “What a model student you are, Moony. I s’ppose that’s why you became Prefect.”

“You probably could’ve if you’d stopped getting detentions in the middle of third year.”

Peter laughed with the new trio as Sirius shot Remus an affronted look.

“I did not get that many detentions.”

Harry let out a disbelieving snort, making Remus laugh. Sirius turned to her, wide-eyed.

“I’m being honest here, Harry! I’m very well-behaved, usually—”

Harry arched an eyebrow at him. “Well-behaved?”
The crestfallen look on Sirius’s face made Peter and Remus collapse in laughter. Sirius drew himself up with a self-suffering and dignified air.

“I will have you know that I can be a perfect gentleman.”

“Hm.”

Harry cast him one last skeptical look before turning back to her homework and ignoring him. Hermione and Ron snickered across from her.

“She’d know if she ever went on a date with me,” Sirius grumbled, returning to his Potions essay. Peter felt Remus tense beside him and looked up to see his friend’s face become morose.

He couldn’t help wondering why Remus didn’t bother asking Harry out if he liked her so much. It wasn’t as if Sirius had laid any claim on her, really.

When Peter woke up on Tuesday morning, it was with nervous anticipation that he prepared to carry out the plan to deceive Ron with James and Sirius. The first obstacle they would face that day was Ron’s surprise at Remus’s absence.

He had just returned from the bathroom when Ron woke up.

“Morning,” Ron grunted.

“Morning,” Peter greeted him back with James and Sirius, who were already putting on their clothes.

Ron rose from his bed, stretching and yawning, while Peter put on his shirt. Peter glanced at him and saw him look towards Remus’s bed. His fingers fumbled with his tie as he put it around his neck.

“Remus not here today? His trunk’s gone,” Ron spoke up, noticing the unslept-in sheets and Remus’s missing possessions, which Remus himself had hidden under his bed after subjecting them to a Shrinking Charm.

“No, unfortunately,” James answered. “He became very ill last night and his mum came to pick him up before the break of dawn to take him home.”

Ron raised his eyebrows. “His mum?”

“Yes, she knew about his illness through the letters he sent her about his health and decided to try to get him back to health through her own means. Remus woke me up when he was leaving to tell me.”

Ron stared at James, then Sirius, then Peter, who tried to keep his gaze steady when he met Ron’s incredulous expression.

“Er, right,” Ron said slowly. Peter thought he looked mildly amused, as the corners of lips twitched while he put on his dressing gown.

The three Marauders remained quiet until Ron left for the bathroom. They turned to each other.

“Well, that wasn’t awkward,” James remarked, looking pointedly at Sirius, who shrugged.
“He can’t prove that we’re lying.”

“No, but, that was a little weird. He just accepted it without asking about Remus’s condition.”

“Maybe he doesn’t care. I mean, all he needs to know is that Remus is getting some treatment, regardless of where he is, after looking so peaky these last few days.”

“Hm.” James looked only half-convinced as he finished putting on his robes.

Peter silently concurred with James as they waited for Ron to finish getting ready. Ron was surprisingly unconcerned about Remus—did that mean that Harry and Hermione would act similarly? He frowned. It just didn’t feel quite right. Ron had always been friendly with Remus and his reaction had been rather...careless, if he was being honest.

Peter anxiously bit the inside of his cheek when they met the girls downstairs.

“Oh, is Remus sick today?” Hermione was the one to ask instead of Lily, who exchanged a quick look with James. She had assured James that she would help set the stage for explaining Remus’s absence to the girls, but Hermione had taken the initiative to ask about his condition.

“Yes, he went home with his mother before the break of dawn to get better at home,” James explained again.

Hermione and Harry looked surprised. The two girls exchanged a look.

“Oh,” Hermione responded, “I didn’t realize his condition was so serious that he had to go home.”

Sirius shrugged. “He just has an overly concerned mother who makes him tell her everything through letters. He should be back tomorrow in full health.”

Peter watched Hermione’s lips twitch up into a smile. Next to her, Harry seemed to be suppressing her own amusement if her twitching jaw was any indication.

“That’s…that’s kind of sweet,” Hermione elaborated, after a giggle escaped from her. “And I’m glad he’ll be well enough to return to us tomorrow.” She gave him and his friends a kind smile before heading out of the room with Harry and Ron, who was half-grinning as he joined them.

The Marauders and Lily exchanged a look before following them.

“I suppose that went well,” Lily finally offered in the bemused silence that had befallen them as they walked to breakfast.

“I don’t understand why they seem more amused than anything,” Peter added, frowning. “They don’t seem very worried about Remus…”

“That’s probably ‘cause Padfoot oversold the mother part.” James knocked Sirius’s shoulder with his own.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at him. “Oversold? I think not. It was the most basic explanation you could give. They’re just…” He furrowed his brows. “Are they suspicious or not?” he suddenly asked, narrowing his eyes at the new trio. “They’re not being nosy, which is actually bizarre. I dunno whether we should just go through this naturally or try distracting them like we planned.”

“I’ll leave that up to you,” James muttered to him as they reached the table.
Peter carefully watched the new trio’s expressions throughout breakfast, but there wasn’t anything too suspicious, other than their lack of curiosity regarding Remus’s illness. The three of them acted as they usually did, as if Remus wasn’t absent at all. Which was a matter of suspicion in itself.

The ambiguity of the situation disconcerted Peter as he headed to Care of Magical Creatures, where he did his best to pay more attention than usual to take notes for Remus along with his own. Were they really being strange, or were they not? He couldn’t understand how the three of them could be so dismissive of someone they considered a friend. Their behavior wasn’t that odd, he tried to persuade himself. Harry always talked with Sirius the most when they were all together or when she wasn’t conversing with her two best friends. And Hermione and Ron interacted equally with all of them, more or less.

But…

Even Lily had shown more concern about Remus’s health as his fellow Prefect, before the Marauders had decided to entrust her with the secret. He couldn’t wrap his head around it. Was he being overly sensitive because he was anxious? His musings were cut short when the baby dragon he was observing sneezed, shooting a burst of flame his way, making him yelp and leap aside.

“Why did I ever choose to take Care of Magical Creatures?” he grumbled under his breath as he returned to Gryffindor Tower after the lesson. Although he had managed to dodge the dragon’s fire, his partner for the class, a Hufflepuff girl named Emilia Murray, had doused him with the bucket of water that had been given to each of them—for the purpose of putting out any fires that their dragon started—believing that he had caught on fire. He had only been half-successful with his Hot-Air Charm and all he wanted to do was to get himself a change of clothes.

His heart nearly stopped at the sight that met him in the common room. Harry and Ron were at their usual study table, working on homework.

Why were they here? Weren’t they supposed to be at the library?

He approached them slowly, looking them over with wary eyes. Harry was the first to notice him.

“Oh hey, Peter.”

Peter gave her a tentative smile and turned to Ron, who nodded at him in greeting.

“I thought you two would be in the library,” he said as casually as possible as he drew up a chair to sit with them.

The two of them exchanged a swift look.

“Just wanted a change in atmosphere,” Ron replied with a shrug.

“Oh.” Peter felt awkward for some reason as he looked between their calm, composed faces. “D-D’you mind if I sit here and study as well?”

Ron shifted in his seat and scratched the back of his head, not looking at him. Peter suddenly felt as if he needed to check the dormitories.

“Sure,” Harry answered and gave him a quick smile, which he returned.
“Thanks. Er, let me put away some of my books first.” Ron’s eyes flicked towards him as he left for the dormitories in the most nonchalant way he could.

Nothing seemed off, however, when he entered the room. Everything was in its rightful place. He moved to Remus’s bed and inspected it carefully. None of the sheets seemed disturbed and…he bent down and lifted the covers from the bottom to make sure his friend’s possessions were still there. They were.

He straightened himself up. There seemed to be nothing amiss, and yet…

Ron shifting his gaze away from him and ignoring his request made him frown.

Well, there really was nothing, he told himself as he descended to the common room. Ron was just being...odd.

Peter surreptitiously glanced at them while they worked on their homework. No one talked. He wasn’t sure why they seemed more…cautious (or was it detached?) around him than the others. A spark of annoyance ignited within him towards Ron, who had already confused him several times. It had all started with the night when Ron had thrown that remark at him in the dormitories, about his culpability regarding Harry’s triggered response to his practice duel with Sirius. That remark had struck him as unwarranted and unexpectedly hostile. What had he, Peter, ever done to him? Besides that incident were his personal observations of Ron’s behavior towards him, which he had logged into his memory after that night. Ron was only ever polite to him, not quite friendly, like he was with James, Sirius, and Remus. If he was being quite frank, he would say that Ron didn’t like him at all, which didn’t make any sense to him. Harry and Hermione seemed to prefer the company of his fellow Marauders as well, but at least the girls were more than civil towards him. They had only ever been nice to him.

Peter brooded on his grievances against Ron, consequently forgetting about the curious implications of Harry and Ron’s decision to study in the common room on the exact day of the full moon.

Dinner came around and Peter felt jittery from nerves as they walked to Gryffindor Tower afterwards. The second part of the plan—it had originally been the third, but Sirius had found it unnecessary to distract the new trio with his antics—was about to begin.

It wasn’t too long after they had settled themselves at their usual places on the sofa that James began grimacing and putting a hand to his stomach. Peter and Sirius looked away from him with barely-suppressed mirth when he let out a low groan just as Lily was standing up from her seat to leave for her duties. The new trio glanced over at them.

“Lily,” James whined, latching onto her arm, “my dear, I am so sorry, but I am afraid that I have fallen ill with something. I dunno whether I’ve caught it from Moony, but I absolutely cannot bear even the thought of going out on my nightly rounds tonight. Please forgive me.”

Peter heard coughing from the new trio’s table and turned to them. He saw Ron duck his head as his eyes fell on him.

“Oh, James, are you sure you don’t need to go see Madam Pomfrey? I’m sure she’ll be able to give you something to make you feel better,” Lily told him, running her fingers through his hair in a soothing gesture.

“You know how I feel about the infirmary, Lily. No, no, it’s better that I go to bed early. There’s
nothing that a good night’s rest can’t fix.”

“Well, if you’re sure…”

Lily bent down to kiss him on the head. “Stay safe,” Peter heard her whisper as she drew back from her boyfriend. James stood from the sofa with a groan after Lily exited.

“Well, Padfoot, Wormtail, I’ll be heading up to bed, then. Do try not to be so loud when you enter the room, will you? I need all the peaceful rest I can get.” He talked in a louder voice than usual, no doubt to ensure that at least Ron heard him.

“Good night, you three,” he addressed the new trio as he left for the dormitories.

“Feel better, James,” Harry responded. Her eyes were on her parchment, but Peter saw her lips twitch.

Peter’s hands shook, making his quill spell out crooked letters on his parchment as the time for his own little act approached. He heard a throat being cleared and turned to Sirius, who gave him a meaningful look. He gulped.

This is for Moony, I have to do this for Moony, he repeated in his mind as he braced himself.

He schooled his expression into that of long-drawn suffering and exhaustion as he gathered his belongings and stood up from his seat.

Sirius turned towards him on cue. “Wormtail? Are you heading up too?”

Well, at least Padfoot’s good at acting, he thought, taking in his friend’s perfectly bemused expression and mildly surprised tone. He took a swift glance at the others and was pleased and unnerved to see three pairs of curious eyes on him.

“Yes, I’m so very tired.” His voice came out petulant, just as he wanted it. “And I don’t feel quite right, either…might’ve caught whatever Moony’s got as well.”

“Really? Like Prongs?”

Peter was so strung up on nerves that he had to stop a grin from breaking out on his face at Sirius’s carefully-composed skepticism.

“Y-yes. I really don’t feel well…” He made sure to stumble a bit as he moved away from the sofa to turn towards the dormitories.

“Need me to escort you, Wormtail? We can’t have you fainting while going up the stairs.”

A snicker almost escaped his mouth at the thought of Sirius holding him up as he climbed the stairs.

“No, I’ll be all right, Padfoot. G’night, Harry, Ron, Hermione.”

He thought he heard Ron coughing again when he closed the door to the dormitories behind him. James pulled his curtains aside and greeted him with a wide smile when he called out his name upon entering the room.

“Great job, Wormtail.”

Peter smiled up at James when the taller boy ruffled his hair.
“So now we wait for Padfoot.”

Peter tensed on his bed when he heard the door open. Was it Sirius or was it Ron?

“Prongs.”

He breathed out in relief and drew his curtains aside to see Sirius walk briskly over to his bed and place his schoolbag on it.

“All good, then?” James asked him.

“Yeah, let’s get moving.”

The three of them magicked their curtains shut and put the Cloak over themselves before heading down the stairs.

“Carefully, now,” Sirius murmured as James opened the door to the common room.

They held their breath as the new trio were revealed, almost directly ahead of them. They shared a look and nodded.

The door was held open just wide enough to allow James to pass through first, then Sirius, then Peter. At least one of them kept his eyes on the new trio while they each squeezed themselves out. Peter made sure to close the door as gently as possible—it helped that many of their housemates were still awake and chattering in the room. They crept their way towards the new trio’s study table, which they had to pass to reach the portrait hole. James led the way.

Peter did not dare to breathe as he passed Hermione, who was closest to them by the way her seat was angled. He barely registered Sirius’s panicked whisper, so focused was he on keeping his eyes on Hermione on the off chance that she turned to stare directly at him.

“Prongs, look out!”

A girl screamed, making everyone in the common room, including them, freeze. Peter instinctively clutched at Sirius’s robes and stared in horror at the fourth-year girl that James had bumped into. There was silence except for the girl’s terrified breathing as she stared around her with wide, frightened eyes.

Then Sirius cursed under his breath and pulled at James’s arm to move him along.

*Go! Just go!* Sirius mouthed at him furiously.

James shook himself out of his shock and did as Sirius demanded. Peter almost had to jog to keep up with their brisk and wide steps as they rushed to the portrait hole, still invisible. There was some shouting behind them, but he didn’t bother to listen, as relief began rushing through him when they reached their exit. He wasn’t sure what it was that made him do it, but he turned his head to the new trio’s table before leaving the tower. Hermione seemed to be arguing with somebody across the room, while Harry and Ron were discussing something with one another. They weren’t even looking his way. He shrugged off his uneasiness as they descended the staircase to make their way to the first floor.

“Right, now check the map to see if we’re running into anybody,” Sirius told James as they reached the last several steps.
Peter peered over James’s shoulder to look at the map after the necessary phrase was said.

“No one’s ahead of us,” he notified Sirius, who grunted.

Peter transformed the moment they reached the Whomping Willow and dived through the swinging branches to touch the knot at the base of its trunk. The tree shuddered and became still. He waited for Sirius to transform and lead the way into the tunnel. Wormtail followed, then James, who would transform once his feet touched the floor of the shack, as Prongs’s antlers were much too wide to allow him comfortable passage underneath the tree—they had found this out the hard way on the first night they had transformed to join Moony.

They heard Moony’s growl as they approached the sitting room and saw him rise onto his feet to greet them. Wormtail’s nose quivered in response when Moony sniffed him like he always did when they met to embark on their monthly adventure in Hogsmeade and the Forbidden Forest.

Wormtail gripped onto Prongs’s antlers as he and Padfoot followed Moony out of the shack.

The grass was wet and cool beneath their feet as they waited together, hidden amongst the trees near Hagrid’s hut. The fresh, cool scent of early morning rain surrounded them as they watched the Whomping Willow give itself a shake to displace the drops of water it had collected before sunrise. It quivered and shook as a raven flew past it, squawking with alarm, as one of its branches swung towards it in an almost playful manner.

Prongs’s ears twitched, as it so often did at any hint of noise, as Padfoot shuffled his paws beside him with a quiet sniff. Prongs knew that his friend was itching to shake the water off his fur, but resisted the temptation in favor of remaining undetected, although, if Fang’s whining in Hagrid’s hut was any indication, they ran the risk of getting caught if Hagrid decided to heed his dog’s senses and barge out of his hut and stare directly at the edge of the forest closest to him. They would make quite a curious picture, Prongs knew. A large dog, next to a stag with a rat atop its antlers—strange companions indeed.

Wormtail let out a squeak and Padfoot and Prongs tensed, at attention, as they focused their gaze on the back entrance of the castle, where the matron had just arrived.

They watched as she hurried her way to the Whomping Willow, raised her wand to levitate a stick to prod at the knot, enter through the gap, and saw her usher out their weak and barely conscious friend from underneath the tree.

They waited until Madam Pomfrey and Remus disappeared into the castle before heading inside themselves.

“Right, let’s go,” James muttered to Sirius and Peter once they were back in their human forms. He took out the Invisibility Cloak from his robes and draped it over them. The three of them had to huddle close together and stoop down—well, only James and Sirius had to stoop down since they were tall and Peter was not—for the Cloak to cover them completely.

They made their way slowly and tediously across the grass and towards the castle, taking care to not run into anything or anyone this time. The three of them had been horrified when James had accidentally bumped into the fourth-year girl on the previous night. They had been trying so hard to avoid the study table that Harry, Hermione, and Ron occupied that they had not paid enough
attention to what was on their other side.

Now, they had just barely shuffled past Hagrid’s hut when something slammed near them. They paused and slowly turned their heads. Hagrid was outside on his doorstep, breathing in the fresh morning air. He let out a loud, contented sigh and beaming, turned around to the entrance.

“C’mon now, Fang, that’s a good boy. ‘S time fer our mornin’ run in the forest.”

The black boarhound stepped out reluctantly, whining a little. They hitched in a breath when the dog sniffed the air and looked directly at them. He whined and wagged his tail. Hagrid beamed at him.

“That’s the spirit. Yer quite energetic t’day.”

But Fang whimpered as Hagrid made his way into the forest, whistling cheerfully. The three Marauders waited until master and dog disappeared into the forest before continuing on their way.

“Okay, Prongs, check the map for us, please,” Sirius whispered when they entered the first corridor.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” James muttered, pointing at the map with his wand. He carefully perused the route to Gryffindor Tower.

“Let’s go,” he muttered to his friends and led them safely to the Fat Lady, avoiding Filch, Mrs. Norris, and the few teachers that were already up and about. He checked the map once more to see if there was anyone in the common room.

“All clear,” he whispered to them.

The three of them stepped out from underneath the Cloak and faced the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame.

“Belladonna,” James said. The Fat Lady started awake mid-snore and blinked blearily at them.

“Yes, yes, all right,” she said in a voice thick with sleep and swung open for them.

Sirius groaned as they sank down into the sofa in the empty and silent common room.

“What a night. I don’t think I’ve been so stressed about sneaking out since, I dunno, the first time we went out to see Moony?” He sighed.

“I think I want to go to sleep,” Peter said thickly, his eyelids drooping as he sagged in his seat.

“You sure about that, Wormtail? I’d be afraid of not waking up for breakfast if I fell asleep now. There’s only about an hour and a half until we need to prepare for the day anyway,” James pointed out with a yawn.

Peter sighed as he leaned his head back on the sofa. “Never mind then, I s’ppose.” He and James looked up as Sirius rose from the sofa.

“Well, gents, I think I’ll head up and take a shower and freshen myself up. It’ll certainly help with rejuvenating my senses,” Sirius said, heading to the dormitories.

“Or make you want to sleep even more,” James responded, rumpling up his hair as he let out another yawn.

“I’ll take my chances.” James and Peter heard the door close behind Sirius.
There was a moment of peaceful silence as the two Marauders sat in a half-daze in the common room, too tired to do anything, but knowing they must. James finally stood up with a groan.

“I think I’ll go freshen myself up too. I’ve got to be up to standards for my girl.” He stretched and noticed he still had the map in his hand. “Oh, right. Mischief managed,” he said, pointing his wand at it. But before all the markings disappeared, he glanced fondly at the girls’ dormitories to see Lily’s name. Something caught his eye as it all vanished. He blinked, bewildered, as he stared at the now-blank parchment.

“Something wrong, Prongs?” Peter asked, blinking up at him. He slurred his words a little.

Half his mind urged him to summon the map again and the other half snorted and said he was seeing things because he was so bloody tired. He decided to listen to the latter.

James shrugged. “No, nothing. Just seeing things since I’m exhausted. Want to go up with me to get your books and change your clothes, Wormtail?”

But as he stood underneath the warm water in the shower, James found himself wondering at the back of his mind about what he had thought he’d seen.

*Could’ve sworn that it said her surname was—no, no, that’s impossible. You were just hallucinating, mate. There’s no way that’s possible. Now pull yourself together so you can wake up and face the day.*

The strange feeling was forgotten as he joked around with Sirius in the bathroom after his shower and laughed as a tube of toothpaste was flung at him in retaliation.

Chapter End Notes

*from HBP— it’s the song that Hagrid and Slughorn sing in Hagrid’s hut after Aragog’s burial.

I hope the two chapters made up for the delay! I was mid-way through editing what was supposed to be one chapter, when I decided I wanted to explore both sides—the trio’s perspective and the Marauders’ perspective. So it took longer than usual to edit and post this time.

I took some liberties with the details concerning Remus’s situation during the full moon. It was said in POA that he vanished once a month, but it wasn’t clear as to whether he was gone for the entire day or for that night. I chose the former, because Remus chose to not teach on the day of the full moon in POA, even while taking the Wolfsbane Potion. I also realize that the pacing for the two chapters was faster than usual, but well, I decided that things needed to get moving a bit more, especially as the full moon was near the end of the month.

The next chapter will be delayed from the expected schedule as well, the main reason being that several things have changed in the outline for this story than when I first imagined it, and while I am not depleted of ideas for the next chapter, I am unable to give you all a teaser for it at this time. Please expect the next chapter to be posted by the
end of Sunday, PST, at the earliest.

Honestly, thank you all so much for your wonderful patience and support. I appreciate all your feedback, through your kudos, bookmarks, comments, and subscriptions. Thank you all so much for reading and taking an interest in this story :)

Movements in Shadow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She was running to Gryffindor Tower with Ron and Hermione. They had to get to the common room before they looked at the map.

Ron cursed as they ran up the last flight of stairs to reach the Fat Lady.

Please, please, please, Harry thought frantically while Hermione gasped out the password. The three of them scrambled through the portrait hole and froze when they caught sight of what was before them. She felt her heart sink.

They were too late.

James, Lily, Sirius, Remus, and Peter were standing in the middle of the empty room, murmuring in hushed voices. James had the map in his hand.

“No,” Harry moaned to herself. But the others heard, as they paused in their discussion to raise their heads and stare straight at her.

It was time.

She took in a breath to steady herself and took a glance at her friends—

Who were no longer there.

Her heart missed a beat from the terror that filled her body before taking on a rapid, thudding pace inside her chest.

She was alone.

Her head turned itself to face the Marauders and Lily, whose expressions were grim as they stared at her with accusing eyes.

Please, she beseeched them in her mind. But they did not hear. Or perhaps, they chose to ignore.

Her body moved her forward while her mind fluttered weakly—she could only feel and not think. And all that was palpable within her was fear and a desperate spark of hope as she made her way to her parents and their friends. The light around her became dimmer as she approached them.

“Who are you?”

Harry flinched and paused in her steps. There was about a meter’s worth of distance between them. She felt herself begin to tremble as she met James’s eyes. Her mouth was dry when she answered...
“I’m Harry.”

“Harry…what? What’s your full name?”

Harry swallowed. “Harriet Euphemia Potter.”

James’s eyes grew wide and the hand that held the map tightened its grip on it.

“Say that again!”

“Harriet Euphemia Potter.” She felt helpless under his cold, hazel gaze.

He scoffed. “Harriet Euphemia Potter?” He glanced down at the map before turning back to her.

“So you’re saying that the map is right—you really are a Potter? And with my own mother’s name, no less.”

“I…” She didn’t know what to say. His eyes narrowed at her silence.

“So just whose daughter are you?”

Harry opened her mouth, but he held up a hand and let out a sharp laugh.

“No, hold on, let me rephrase that—just whose daughter do you think you are? Because you see, I’m actually a Potter and I’ll be damned if I didn’t know my own family tree—I don’t ever recall having any cousins carrying the name, Potter, or any siblings, for that matter…unless you’re saying that my parents somehow had another child who’s now the same age as me, which they hid…”

“No, you’ve got it wrong, I—” Harry looked at Lily, hoping that her mother would help her, but Lily remained silent and stone-faced like the others. And she was afraid of looking at Sirius and Remus.

“I’m your daughter.” Her voice was small and quavered when she uttered the words. But like before, all of them heard.

There was a bark of laughter and Harry’s eyes flew to Sirius. She wished they hadn’t. His grey eyes were cool and expressionless as they regarded her.

“She just said she’s your daughter, Prongs. Did you go off and have a child with some poor girl when we weren’t looking? Although, you’d have had to be…what? An infant when you had her?”

Peter let out a snigger. “I think she’s trying to get one over us, Prongs. She can’t be your daughter—she’s got to be mad if she thinks that’ll explain her name on the map.” He turned to Harry with shrewd and beady eyes. “Just tell us who you really are. We’re not stupid, you know,” he sneered.

“I am telling the truth!” Panic was starting to rise within her. If they didn’t believe her, then how was she going to explain why Voldemort was coming after them? How would she be able to protect them? “I’m the daughter you had with Lily,” she burst out. Her eyes flicked between her parents, who frowned. Sirius let out another bark of laughter.

“She really is mad,” Peter muttered.

“I think I’m inclined to believe you, Wormtail.”

Harry shifted her attention to Remus, who had finally spoken. There was none of the familiar warmth that she grown accustomed to seeing in his young face as he gazed back at her with an
apathetic expression.

Was no one willing to give her a chance? Was no one willing to listen to her?

“I don’t understand why you insist on lying.”

Something painful bloomed in Harry’s chest when she met Lily’s indignant green eyes.

“I know the map never lies, but even so, how can you stand there and dare to imply things that have never happened? What gives you the right to say such a thing to us? What have we ever done to you, that you would seek to deceive us? All we’ve done is to help you feel welcome here by including you within our group and yet, here you stand, an imposter, showing no ounce of the honesty that we’ve shown you. Just what do you mean to do with us?”

Harry took an involuntary step backwards when Lily drew her wand.

No, please, mum...

Lily raised her wand.

Then she was shaking as if the world was crumbling around her.

“Harry!”

Harry jolted awake, a strangled moan leaving her lips. Her eyes cracked open slowly, taking in what was in front of her. She made out a fuzzy outline of bushy brown hair before her friend’s concerned face swam into focus.

“Hermione,” she croaked out. Hermione drew back from her as she sat up in her bed. “What—”

“You were moaning in your sleep, like you were having a nightmare.”

Harry felt a gentle hand brush back her hair from her face before landing on her shoulder in a comforting grip.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

Harry closed her eyes, willing away the image of Lily pointing her wand at her. A slight tremor ran through her, making Hermione squeeze her shoulder to stabilize her.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she answered, opening her eyes. “What time is it?” Her curtains seemed to be partly illuminated by the light filtering in through the windows. It was probably close to the time that she would wake up to get ready for the day.

“Six in the morning. Dawn just broke. The others are still asleep, if you’re wondering.” Hermione’s voice was a quiet murmur. Her hand left Harry’s shoulder and moved down to cover her hand. “I only heard you ’cause I was drifting in and out of sleep—I wasn’t having a good night’s rest either. I think I was too worried about the map.”

Harry saw Hermione bite down on her lip. “D’you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” she responded, looking down at her covers. “It was just—” She felt her face spasm as she remembered the cold way they had looked at her. “They didn’t believe me.” Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper and Hermione’s face became soft with compassion. She pushed down the heavy
feeling that arose in her chest as Hermione leaned in to hug her.

“It wasn’t real, Harry. It wasn’t. It was just a reflection of your deepest fears regarding them. You know they won’t be like that when they find out.”

“Won’t they?”

“No.” Hermione’s brows furrowed as she looked at her. “You know they’re better than how you saw them in your dream. They’re kinder than that. You know them, Harry. You know.”

Harry allowed Hermione to hold her until they heard the sheets from the other beds rustling as the other girls woke up. The two girls were putting on their dressing gowns when Lily drew back her curtains, followed by Marlene and Alice. Harry could not bear to look at Lily until she felt a hand on her shoulder while walking to the bathroom and turned around to see her bright green eyes and warm smile. Then it was as if the Lily from her dream was melting away as she drank up the sight of the very real and very tangible red-haired girl right next to her.

“Morning, Lily,” she returned her greeting. Her nerves retreated into insignificance when Lily pulled her and Hermione into a lighthearted conversation about what lessons they had for the day.

But her dread came creeping back when she saw the door to the boys’ dormitories open while she waited in the common room with Hermione and Lily. What had fate decided for her?

Hope fluttered within her chest when she heard James and Sirius’s laughter when the Marauders came into view, followed by Ron. She blinked when Lily rushed past her to James, who caught her hug.

“Always a nice surprise when you greet me like that, Lily,” Harry heard James murmur to Lily.

“She was probably worried about them last night,” Hermione whispered beside her. “It’s not the safest thing, running around all night with a werewolf.”

But Harry was only half-listening as she watched Sirius coming towards her with Remus, Peter, and Ron. Her eyes were only on Sirius, carefully searching his face for any trace of suspicion against her, although, if there was any, she could not find it—his grey eyes were happy and bright on his beaming face as he slung an arm around Remus.

“Morning, ladies. Look who returned to us in the early morning!”

Harry let the last remnants of the dream slide into the dark recesses of her mind as a smile spread over her face at his infectious cheerfulness. She greeted Remus with honest delight.

“Welcome back, Remus. I’m glad to see you’re looking better.”

And he did, although he looked a little worse as well—the bags under his eyes had almost faded away, but he was thinner, as his robes hung loosely around his shoulders.

“Thank you, Harry,” Remus responded, smiling at her. His eyes were warm as they always were when they were turned to her and it seemed that some color had returned to his once-pallid face. She beamed at him and turned to Ron, with whom she exchanged a mutual look of relief—it seemed that all was well for now.

Ron confirmed her conclusion while walking to breakfast together.
“I don’t think they noticed anything,” he told her and Hermione, glancing back at the Marauders and Lily, who were laughing and talking behind them. “When I got up, they were already dressed and working on their homework on their beds. Well, actually, I woke up ’cause one of them laughed really loud—I reckon it was Sirius ’cause he got something thrown at him—and I don’t reckon they would’ve been doing that if there was something wrong.”

“When did Remus come back?” Hermione asked.

“Right when I was about to head to the bathroom. The door opened when I reached for it and there he was, in front of me, fully dressed and ready. The others cheered so loudly when they saw him, I’d be surprised if they didn’t wake up the dorms above and below us.” He turned to Harry. “Not saying that I’m not happy that they didn’t see your name on the map, but I’m surprised that they didn’t.”

“Yes, well, people tend to be astonishingly ignorant of what and who’s around them on a daily basis,” Hermione said blithely as they reached the Great Hall. “We should just be glad that we’ve still got time to figure things out.”

Harry felt the last of her nerves drain out as she quietly observed the Marauders between bites of toast. The signs of exhaustion on their faces were well-balanced by their cheerful attitudes. They seemed livelier than usual, which she figured was due to their successful run on the previous night. She smiled as she watched James, Sirius, and Peter, as they piled so much food on Remus’s plate that it was soon overflowing.

“Eat up, Moony!” James pushed a gobletful of pumpkin juice to him. “You may no longer be ill, but it looks like you’ve lost a couple pounds. What’d your mum do—starve the sickness out of you?”

Remus smiled while his friends laughed. “Something like that. She was following some odd piece of Muggle wisdom that suggests fasting as the quickest road to recovery.”

Hermione snorted while drinking her tea.

“Do Muggles really believe that?” Ron asked, turning to her.

“Of course not, Ron.”

“Yeah, I thought not—it seems a bit mental.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny, Harry?”

Harry turned and saw Sirius scooting himself closer to her and raised her eyebrows when he snuggled up to her side to place his head on her shoulder. He closed his eyes and let out a contented sigh.

“Er…”

“Please allow me this one small kindness, Harry. I’m terribly tired this morning.”

Hermione began giggling when she turned to exchange looks with her, and Ron raised his eyebrows when she met his eyes. She looked down at Sirius and deliberated on whether she wanted to shrug him off or not. Her decision was made on the latter when she took in the signs of exhaustion on his otherwise peaceful face as he breathed in and out. By the look of him, he had had a rough night, which she and her friends were partly to blame for, Harry thought somewhat ruefully. Not only had he not slept, but he had also done his best to distract them from any strange behavior on the
Marauders’ part—he had no doubt been quite intent on keeping his secret as the trio had been intent on keeping theirs. Something like fondness rose within her and she smiled as she turned back to her food to make herself a cup of tea.

“Yeah all right. But didn’t you go to bed early last night? I can’t believe you’re still tired. And the bags underneath your eyes seem to have gotten worse, instead of disappearing, like you said they would,” she teased him.

“Blame Prongs for that, Harry. He snored so loudly last night that I had to subject him to a Silencing Charm after waking up for the seventh time. Dunno if anyone else in the room heard, though. Wormtail, Ron, did you hear him?”

“Yeah, Prongs was loud last night,” Peter agreed with a yawn. He let out a nervous laugh when James scowled at him and Sirius.

“I personally didn’t hear anything—” Ron winced when Hermione elbowed him. “But that might’ve been ’cause I’m a deep sleeper.”

“I see,” Harry told Sirius while Hermione and Ron bickered wordlessly through strained looks. She felt him smile against her shoulder when he shifted his head for better placement.

Hermione paused on her way to Arithmancy and Ancient Runes when she heard Harry call her name.

“Hermione, can you make sure that Sirius doesn’t fall asleep in class? I don’t want him getting scolded for something he can’t help.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Okay, Harry, I’ll do my best.” There was a knowing smile on her lips as she turned away to head to class. Harry watched her walk away, feeling puzzled, before following Ron to the library.

According to Hermione, Sirius did not fall asleep in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, to Harry’s relief. But by the time their last class of the day arrived, it seemed that his exhaustion had finally caught up to him, as he rubbed his face to keep himself awake while they listened to McGonagall’s lecture in Transfiguration. He let out a sigh when they were told that their lesson would be more hands-on than usual, as they would be transforming small wooden cabinets into dogs.

“Of all the bloody days…” he muttered while McGonagall sternly reminded them to keep a tight hold on their dogs until she came around to check their progress.

Harry yawned before replying. She herself was affected by her own sleep-deprivation. “Just do enough to be acceptable, then,” she suggested.

The two of them faced their cabinets after their desks had been cleared away to make space for their dogs. It really would be an interesting lesson if I wasn’t so tired, Harry thought, after overhearing Marlene and Alice’s excited chatter about which adorable dogs they wanted to transform their cabinets into. She took a glance at the others. Ron and Hermione seemed to be in the middle of a discussion—probably about dogs, while Remus seemed to be coaching Peter on how to best cast the spell. James and Lily were practicing the wand movement.

“Want me to go first?” Sirius yawned as he pointed his wand at his cabinet. “Might as well get it over with, so McGonagall will check us first.”
“Yeah, go first so I can watch you do it and learn from it. D’you already have a dog in mind?”

He shrugged. “I suppose.” He gave her a mysterious smile before turning back to his cabinet.

Harry watched with curious eyes as he expertly flicked his wrist to make the correct wand movement. Her eyes flew to the cabinet when he made a final flick of his wand as he cast the spell nonverbally. Her mouth dropped open when his cabinet transformed into something very familiar.

“Oh!”

She stared as the shaggy black dog with pointed ears barked and ran towards Sirius, who grinned down at it.

“That’s…”

His cabinet had become his Animagus form in miniature. Before she knew it, she had approached Sirius.

“Can I pet it?” she asked, suddenly feeling shy. He looked surprised and amused at her request.

“Oh, Harry.”

A delighted smile broke out on her face as she bent down to scratch the dog behind its ears. It barely came up to her knees. It had been quite a while since she had last seen Padfoot. “What a sweet dog,” she crooned, while it wagged its tail and tried to lick her hand. The smile that Sirius gave her when she looked up at him made her face feel warm for some reason and she turned away from him.

“All right,” she said, straightening herself up. She forced back a grin when the dog whined for her continued affection. “So walk me through the spell, will you?”

“It’s simple, really. All you have to do is—oh no you don’t!” He caught the dog when it tried to run towards her. “Just visualize an image of a dog as clearly as you can right after you go through the wand movement and just before you think of the incantation.”

“All right. And any dog will do?”

“Yeah, any dog, but it’ll be easier if you go smaller rather than bigger.”

“Got it.”

Harry faced her cabinet and practiced the wand movement while repeating the incantation in her head. As for the kind of dog she would transform it to…

Her mind flipped through various dog breeds. *Yeah, no, not a bulldog…not Fluffy either…* She shuddered. *Maybe it’s best to go with a beagle or something smaller like a Pekingese…like Sirius said, the smaller the easier.* She hesitated. Maybe the beagle was a better idea. Although she was tired and didn’t particularly care about the mark she received for the day’s lesson, she didn’t much fancy the idea of McGonagall lecturing her on how she could’ve done better with the spell.

She readied herself with a near-perfect mental picture of a respectable-looking beagle as she pointed her wand at her cabinet. Her hand had almost completed the wand movement when a loud bark startled her and she shifted her gaze to mini Padfoot, who was being restrained by Sirius, just as she uttered the incantation in her head. A memory of a large, shaggy black dog propping its front paws on a stile flashed through her mind.
Several people gasped when a huge, shaggy black dog burst into existence inside the classroom. Harry gaped at it, stunned by what she had successfully produced through the spell.

*Padfoot.*

The dog she had transformed out of her cabinet was his carbon-copy in both appearance and size. A choking sound came from beside her and she turned and saw Sirius’s shocked face as he stared at the dog. Panic flooded her senses when he turned his questioning eyes to her.

Then a deep, cheerful bark met her ears and she barely had time to steady herself as her dog bounded straight towards her. It almost knocked her to the floor when it jumped up on its hind legs to place its large front paws on her shoulders.

A small shriek left her mouth when the dog licked her across the face.

“Sirius, help!”

The weight on her shoulders disappeared when Sirius pulled the dog off her and she wiped her face with the sleeve of her robes. “Urgh,” she groaned, grimacing at her drool-covered sleeve. She heard laughter near her and turned to see Ron and Hermione grinning at her.

“Miss Granger!”

Harry froze when she heard the voice. She looked up and saw that Professor McGonagall was walking towards her from across the room. The room had become quiet except for the sound of yipping, whining, and the occasional bark that came from her classmates’ successfully-transformed cabinets.

“Are you the one who transformed your cabinet into this creature?”

McGonagall pointed her wand at Harry’s dog, which Sirius was holding back by the scruff of its neck while holding his own dog under an arm. Harry cleared her throat.

“Yes, Professor.” Apprehension rose within her. Was she about to be punished for creating a ruckus? Or perhaps she had done the spell entirely wrong? The dog she had produced was, admittedly, rather big for the small cabinet she had been given to transform.

“Nonverbally, I assume?”

Harry gulped as she looked into the teacher’s sharp eyes.

“Yes, Professor.”

The whole class watched while Professor McGonagall approached the dog and inspected it. The dog seemed to want to break free and leap onto her, as it whined and furiously wagged its tail. Harry had to stifle a snort when a sudden image of the dog licking McGonagall’s face and the teacher’s subsequent look of horror popped up in her head.

“Hm…” Harry was surprised to see a glimmer of satisfaction in McGonagall’s eyes as she turned away from the dog and towards her. “Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said, making Harry’s eyes widen. “I must confess that your dog is not the size that it was expected to be for today’s lesson, but nevertheless, the ability to nonverbally transform your cabinet into such a large animal is quite exceptional. I see that you have understood today’s lecture particularly well. Excellent work.”
Harry blinked at the rare smile she received. “T-Thank you, Professor,” she stammered out, unable to believe her luck—she could barely remember half the lecture from the beginning of class, as she had been in danger of falling asleep while McGonagall was speaking. There were happy murmurs of approval from her fellow Gryffindors as McGonagall continued on to another group to check their progress.

“Have you seen this dog before?”

Sirius’s voice startled Harry. His tone was light, but his grey eyes were piercing when she turned to him. He was still holding onto her dog. She fumbled for an answer.

“No, I was er, rather charmed by the dog you transformed out of your cabinet, and I suppose I imagined what it’d look like if it was...bigger, I guess. I’m actually quite fond of dogs, especially the larger ones.” She forced herself to remain calm while pushing down her embarrassment. The intensity of his scrutinizing stare gradually cleared as she continued to hold his gaze, and he quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Is that so?”

She nodded.

“Hm.” His face was thoughtful when he turned to the large dog, which turned its head towards him at the same time. Harry resisted the urge to giggle when the two of them seemed to exchange a look.

“Well,” he began, turning back to her with a bright grin, “I’m quite flattered, Harry. We must be the perfect partners, since we inspire one another—argh!”

He stumbled back as the large dog finally broke free of his grip and jumped on him. Harry burst out laughing at Sirius’s attempts to lean away from the dog, which tried to slobber all over his face. The smaller dog leapt out of his arm in his distracted state, and let out a yip before tugging playfully at the ends of his robes. Sirius tripped over backwards, allowing the larger dog to pin him to the floor and lick his face. His wand rolled away from his slack hand.

“Argh! Harry, help!”

But Harry was too caught up in her mirth to hear or even consider helping him. She couldn’t stop laughing as she watched Sirius attempt to push the dog off him as it moved on to licking his hair. The smaller dog scampered over to her and wagged its tail while she gasped for breath. It was only Professor McGonagall’s announcement at the end of class to transform the dogs back into cabinets, that finally convinced Harry to pull herself together and point her wand at both dogs to return them to their previously wooden and inanimate states.

Sirius picked himself up from the floor with a groan and gingerly touched his hair. Harry giggled at the look of disgust on his face when he pulled his fingers away to stare at the strands of drool that clung to them. His eyes flew to hers and narrowed.

Oops.

She slung her bag over her shoulder, picked up the cabinet closest to her, and ran as fast as she could for the front of room, dodging dogs that had yet to be caught by their spellcasters and looping around surprised students, including Ron and Hermione, to place her cabinet on McGonagall’s desk before escaping the room and Sirius, who came after her, muttering indignantly.

“Harry!” she heard him growl just as she ran outside. She sprinted for the Great Hall.

He grabbed her arm just as she reached the middle of the corridor and pulled her to him so that she
was unable to escape his grasp. She shrieked and laughed while attempting to extricate herself from him, when he began rubbing his drool-covered face and hair all over her own face and hair. She was so busy laughing with Sirius, who cleaned the drool off them with a Scouring Charm after finally being satisfied with his revenge, that she did not register the five pairs of intrigued eyes that followed them to dinner and one pair of eyes that looked at anywhere else but her.

Hermione and Ron were more than a little amused when she finally told them about what had happened in Transfiguration after dinner, at their usual study table.

Ron shook his head at her, grinning. “I still can’t believe you thought of Snuffles for your dog.”

Harry snorted at the nickname. “I honestly didn’t mean to. I was trying to go for a beagle, but his dog distracted me and the image of him waiting for us at Hogsmeade just happened to pop up.”

Hermione giggled. “It was adorable, though. Ron and I saw the dog he produced as well—they were like different generational versions of each other. And it’s a good thing that he bought your excuse. It was awkward though, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, you have no idea. Even I was shocked by what happened. But at least I got some points out of it.” Harry exchanged grins with them. “And thank Merlin the others don’t seem to be too bothered by it as well.” They turned to look at the sofa, where James was miming Sirius being set upon by the dog, an act that made Remus and Peter laugh out loud and Sirius scowl.

“I’ve never seen your hair become that slimy, Padfoot!” James exclaimed, making Lily giggle. “You better be careful, or people will start mistaking you for Sniv—” Sirius threw a cushion at his face before he could finish the sentence.

“Well,” Harry began, while Hermione and Ron snickered at their antics, “I suppose I should be glad that everything seems to have turned out all right, including our problem with the map and my er, incident in class. Things could’ve gone worse.”

“You can say that again.” Ron let out a grunt as he stretched. “I was so worried about the map that I could barely get a good night’s rest.” He yawned. “It’s nice to know that we don’t have to worry for now…well, I mean, we always have to worry, but at least we caught another lucky break. I hope we continue to be lucky.” He sighed.

“That’s up to Voldemort, though.” Harry sobered up at the thought of Voldemort’s continued inactivity. “He needs to make a move soon, or else…we won’t know where to go from here. I mean, there’s the Death Eaters, but they’re not really the main problem, are they?”

“It’s messed up, isn’t it?” Ron frowned. “Us needing to depend on him to figure out what we need to do next. But I get what you’re saying…him not doing anything is starting to give me a false sense of security. Obviously, there’s the horcruxes, but if no one’s coming after them to get them back before we do, it’s not much of a mission, is it?”

Hermione looked between their grim faces and let out her own sigh.

“Well, we knew it wouldn’t be easy. We’re trying to be normal when we defy the very definition of it—we were never supposed to be here and yet, we’re kind of fitting in with everything. I know it’s all an act on our part, well, mostly…I mean, I don’t think any of us can deny that we each haven’t been getting something out of our experiences here. For me, it’d be completing my seventh year. For you, Ron, it’d be…”
“Honestly? Taking a break from dodging Snatchers, escaping from Death Eaters, looking over my shoulder for You-Know-Who, and…I suppose having the chance to get stronger and defend the people I care about.” He smiled at her and Harry. “As for you, Harry, I think it’s a bit obvious for all of us.”

Harry gave him a half-smile. “Yeah, it’s been nice getting to know the others before…just, before, you know? I can actually talk with my parents and get to know Sirius and Remus better…and it’s been interesting seeing Peter in this time, despite everything. It’s nice getting to know them when they were our age.”

Ron smirked. “Especially Sirius, I imagine.” He scowled at Hermione when she elbowed him. “Oh c’mon, again? You know as well as I do that—ow! Did you just kick me?”

Hermione turned to Harry with a perfectly calm expression. “Don’t mind him, Harry. I think Ron’s rambling a bit from being too tired. I completely understand what you’re saying—you’ve never really had a chance to know them back in our time, so it’s quite reasonable that you’d be rather fond of him.”

Harry blinked. “Er, him?” She watched in bewilderment as Hermione froze and became very pink. Ron grumbled next to her.

“See? You just let something slip too.”

“Er, what’re you two…” Harry furrowed her brows when Hermione cleared her throat loudly and began opening her textbooks.

“Let’s get out homework done, shall we? We’ve got a busy schedule ahead of us and we can’t be wasting any more time on idle chit-chat.”

Harry stared at her and Ron, who continued to mutter under his breath about how unfair it all was. This wasn’t the first time that her friends had behaved strangely and she wondered about its cause. Well, she thought as she opened her textbook for Charms, it doesn’t seem to be that important, at least not yet, or else they would’ve just let it all out in front of me.

October’s arrival was swift and met with a sense of panic among the trio. The passage into the new month would have gone ignored, if not for certain impending deadlines:

On the first day of the month, which happened to be a Saturday, Harry, Ron, and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were gathered by a stern-than-usual James, who notified them of the first match against Slytherin. They were left with a little over a month of practice before the day of reckoning arrived, as the match was set for the beginning of November. Then he shocked them by announcing that they would now have three days of practice per week, as they were expected to relinquish two hours of their Tuesday evenings to him and Quidditch.

“Kill me now,” Ron moaned next to Harry, while their teammates complained to James about already scheduled club meetings, the need for study time, and the increased exhaustion they would certainly experience.

But James was stubborn and remained resolute in his decision. He shot down their complaints by fiercely reminding them of the implicit promise they had made to him and Quidditch when joining
the team and appealed to their sense of house pride by providing reasons for Gryffindor’s need to
win the Quidditch Cup. By the end of his little speech, morale had more or less returned to the team.
Harry and Ron, who had been taken aback by the team’s dismal record of triumphs, which James
had cited as one of his forty-eight examples, were properly fired up to respond to James’s shout:

“WHO’S GOING TO WIN THE QUIDDITCH CUP THIS YEAR?”

“GRYFFINDOR!” the team roared back.

And to James’s delight and approval, the team produced their best practice session yet. The Chasers
were all coordinated in their movements, the Beaters were ferocious with their hits, Ron made seven
saves in a simulated game, and Harry made a new record in catching the Snitch by nearly breaking
the speed limit on her broomstick, which almost made James cry tears of joy when she returned the
Snitch to him.

In addition to the first match against Slytherin, however, was the fast-approaching due date of their
Potions project. The trio took any spare time they had during the day to drop by the classroom in
which their potions were kept, to add ingredients and stir as necessary. The last two weeks of
brewing were the most crucial for the perfection of their potions, they soon found out—Slughorn had
most helpfully apprised them of this fact on the exact day of the two-week mark. According to the
teacher, most minor to moderate mistakes that had previously been made in their potions could be
ameliorated or corrected during the final stage.

So it was on the following day, the second Tuesday of the month, that Harry, Ron, and Hermione
decided to work on their potion after Herbology.

“That old git could’ve done us some good by telling us about it a week beforehand. He could’ve told
us in advance so that we’re not rushing to get things done,” Ron muttered at breakfast while pouring
himself some strong tea.

“I’m just grateful that he said it at all,” Harry said, taking the teapot from him. “My Polyjuice
Potion’s been looking a bit off, but now, maybe I can try to fix it—well, at least I hope it can be
fixed.”

Sirius turned to her. “Would you like me to help you out, Harry? Since we’re brewing the same
potion, I could take a look at yours if you’re not confident about it.”

“Oh no, that’s all right, Sirius. I’d like to try doing it on my own. I reckon I’ll need to know how to
do it properly if I want to become an Auror, so I’m using the project to learn, more than anything.”
She smiled at him. “But thanks for the offer.” He had been going out of his way to be more helpful
to her in various ways since the past week, which mildly surprised her but was not unwelcome—she
didn’t mind and kind of liked it. It made her feel closer to him. Or was it the other way around?

He raised his eyebrows at her. “You want to become an Auror? Really?” Across from him, Remus
raised his head to look at them.

She nodded. “I’ve been wanting to be one since fifth—since I was fifteen,” she corrected herself.

“What made you want to become an Auror?”

Harry turned her attention to Remus, who dropped his gaze to his goblet.

“Oh, er…I suppose it was because of what’s been going around us. Out there, I mean.” She shifted
her gaze downwards, considering her next words. “I figure it’s better to do something about it rather
than wait for things to pass or get better, while people are being hurt out there.” When she looked up
again, both Sirius and Remus’s attention were on her. Sirius opened his mouth, but before he could
say anything, Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm.

“Harry! It’s Egmond!”

Harry, guided by Hermione’s pointing finger, looked up and saw her owl as he swooped down in a
descent. Hermione helped her clear the area around their plates before he landed. A letter was
attached to his leg along with a copy of the Daily Prophet, which Harry handed to Hermione after
taking the letter. Egmond accepted her offer of scrambled eggs with a grateful hoot.

“Is that another letter from Dumbledore?” Sirius asked her, noticing the familiar narrow handwriting
on the envelope.

“Yes.” Harry quickly took out the letter and read it. The headmaster wished to see the three of them
that very evening, after dinner and Quidditch practice. She furrowed her brows. It was rather short
notice for him, she thought. Perhaps it had something to do with his decision to skip their meeting on
the previous week. She glanced at the High Table and saw that his seat was empty. Frowning
slightly, she took in the rest of the letter’s contents. He also advised them to ask either Head Boy
James or Head Girl Lily to escort them to and back from his office, as students wandering around the
castle past curfew had taken to forging permission slips from teachers to fool Filch, who had lost his
patience with all of them and was now deeming all students out past curfew as rule-breakers,
regardless of the situation.

“Hey, Ron,” she called him to hand the letter to him, as Hermione was immersed in the paper. She
was about to turn to James and Lily to ask if one of them wouldn’t mind walking them to
Dumbledore’s office, when she noticed Hermione frown and bite her lip while reading the paper.
“Read something interesting?” she asked her.

“There’s—”

But Hermione was cut off by Marlene’s shout to Lily. Harry turned with the others to see their fellow
housemate waving at them from the Ravenclaw table.

“Lily! Lily! Have you seen this yet? Take a look at the Prophet if you’ve got a copy with you!”

Harry shifted her gaze to Hermione, who looked anxious while gripping the paper in her hands. The
others turned to her when she cleared her throat.

“I think Marlene’s referring to this,” she said, placing the paper in the middle of the table.

They all leaned in to stare at the bold headline:

**HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED MISSING?**

“Wait, what?” James said sharply, frowning at it. “Can you read it for us, Hermione?”

They listened as Hermione read the article, which reported on Voldemort’s curious absence in the
streets of Britain or anywhere else in the world where he was known to frequent, for the entirety of
the month of September. Not a trace of him or his magic had been seen or sensed by the top-ranking
Aurors who had been put on his tail. The underground society, the Order of Phoenix, seemed to be clueless as well, as two of its rumored members (it did not state who) had been observed dogging the steps of the lesser-known Death Eaters, apparently in a desperate attempt to discover Voldemort’s whereabouts. In addition, the article noted the fact that although the Death Eaters continued to make their presence palpable through their violent actions, the scale of their attacks had seen a considerable decrease since Voldemort’s disappearance from the public eye. Moreover, sightings of his most fanatical Death Eaters, namely Bellatrix Lestrange (Sirius scowled when he heard the name), Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, Antonin Dolohov, and Travers, had become only occasional. The article ended by speculating that perhaps Voldemort had fallen ill, was somehow indisposed, or even had been secretly defeated, with or without the knowledge of his followers.

Sirius scoffed when Hermione finished reading. “Voldemort defeated?” he said, looking incredulous. Peter squeaked in alarm and Ron flinched. Sirius ignored them and continued, “It’s not bloody likely. The only wizard known to have a chance against him is Dumbledore, and if he hasn’t been able to defeat him sometime in the past seven years when he was less powerful, why would he be taken out now? I say he’s biding his time for something big.”

“I agree,” James said with a grim expression. “The fact that he hasn’t been seen lately isn’t something to be optimistic about. It’s disturbing. Mum and Dad implied something like it in their last letter—they said that people were getting hopeful and venturing out more ’cause he and his followers haven’t been too active these days. But they also said that something doesn’t feel quite right—they reckon he’s the not the sort of bloke to take a holiday after seven years of hard work to undermine the Ministry and everyone else who’s not on his side. And besides, I find it hard to believe that his most loyal followers would start retiring into the background if he’s actually gone. I don’t think some of them are even capable of returning to their normal lives. Remember Dolohov from a few weeks ago? He’s one of the vicious ones and his burning of the Bones manor was the only significant break from the relative quiet so far—seems a bit strange to just write that off as part of the ‘general decrease in attacks.’ It felt more like an act of frustration against the quiet, than anything.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine dear Bella and her husband settling down into their rich, comfortable life after their run with Voldemort. Once Bella gets into something, she’s the type to see it through ’til the end. If Voldemort was defeated, there would’ve been panicked reports of her rampages through the country, destroying anything and anyone that gets in her way, just so she can go down spectacularly like her master.” Sirius exchanged a dark look with James.

Peter let out a nervous hum. “Well, but what if he really is gone, though? The Death Eaters might not be aware of it like the article said, ’cause…’cause he likes operating from the background, mostly, right? It’s only this year that he began going out more to be seen. And less attacks are good, right? Even Dolohov and the Lestranges haven’t been acting out lately. Maybe they got cold feet.”

“Did you not hear what Prongs and I just said, Wormtail?” Sirius turned to Peter impatiently, making him flinch. “It’s not like them to be like that—listen, I know Bella, all right? She’s madder than any other Black I’ve ever known and that’s saying something. She’s not the type to stay still unless she’s told to by someone she actually fears. And the list of people that she fears is shorter than my list of family members that I like.”

Lily sent Peter a sympathetic look before turning to Sirius. “You can’t blame him for being hopeful. Everyone’s on edge as it is with what’s going on or not going on out there. We’re all scared, in one way or another—” She frowned slightly at Sirius’s scoff. “—if not for ourselves, then for others. And while I don’t agree with the article, it’s got a point…why hasn’t he been seen for a month? Where is he and what is he doing? A month-long absence is unheard of, given what people have gone through this year because of him. So it does make sense that a bit of optimism is starting to spread, especially when the Death Eaters aren’t as active as they used to be, either.”
Remus was the only one who remained silent, Harry observed, while she listened to the other Marauders and Lily talk. His attentive gaze shifted to the speaker each time and his expression became more pensive the more heated the discussion became. She wondered what he was thinking about. *It can't be easy for him either. He’s a werewolf, which makes him a target for recruitment by Voldemort. He’s not going to be safe once he leaves here...well, none of them will be...* A sudden thought occurred to her. *I never asked about his family,* she realized. *I dunno who his parents are or how they came out of the first war against Voldemort.

“D’you think Dumbledore wants to talk about the article?” Hermione whispered next to her. “It’s not like we didn’t know about the things it talked about, but it’s the first time You-Know-Who’s disappearance is being publicly discussed.”

“Yeah, probably, or maybe he’s got actual news on him this time.” Harry glanced at the headmaster’s empty seat again. “We’ll find out this evening along with whatever else he’s got to tell us.”

The spare classroom that Slughorn had reserved for their potions was the dungeon closest to the Slytherin common room, which had unnerved Harry and Ron when they had first found out, as they still remembered their secret intrusion into the rival house in their second year. But frequent visits to the dungeons gradually allowed them to ignore the Slytherins who jeered at them as they passed them on their way to their common room. However, their main concern continued to revolve around the possibility of accidentally bumping into Snape, Mulciber, Avery, or even Regulus—although Harry had promised Sirius to tell him about any incident that involved her and his younger brother, she had no intent to follow through with it, if she could help it. She did not wish to trouble Sirius by potentially exacerbating the relationship between the two siblings simply because she was unwittingly caught in the middle. Besides that, moreover, was her determination to figure out Regulus as he was, without the presence of his brother to complicate the composition of his personality and character.

The trio were grateful when they found the classroom vacant after Herbology. They made their way to their cauldrons through the moderately-sized and stone-walled room, which was filled with vapors of several different colors from the various potions that were brewing. A cauldron that was situated in a far corner was smoking and exuded a burning smell.

Harry stared down into her cauldron when she arrived at her desk. Her Polyjuice potion seemed a bit runny, as it bubbled with an energy that it wasn’t meant to possess. She glanced at Sirius’s cauldron, which was on the desk diagonal to hers, and sighed when she saw that his Polyjuice potion seemed to have the correct consistency, as it bubbled sluggishly.

“Maybe I should’ve accepted his help,” she muttered. Ron looked up from his cauldron, which was next to hers.

“Whose help?”

“Sirius’s. He asked me this morning if I wanted some help with my potion since we’re both brewing the same one and I said I was fine. But now I reckon I should’ve, ’cause my potion’s looking a bit...off.”

Hermione, who was at the desk next to Ron’s, peered over at her cauldron. “I suppose the
consistency could be a bit thicker. But you should be able to make up for it by putting in a bigger amount of the lacewings at the very end, before the final stir," she advised.

“He’s been offering you a lot of his help lately,” Ron commented, stirring his potion, which was a rich shade of purple and emitted periwinkle wisps of smoke. “And he’s been coming out to Quidditch practice a lot more, too.”

Hermione looked up at him. “Really?” She raised her eyebrows at Harry, who shrugged.

“It’s probably ’cause the Slytherin team’s been coming out to watch us practice. He probably wants to keep an eye out in case they try jinxing the team members.”

That was her best understanding of the reason behind Sirius’s increased attendance in the stands while they trained. The Slytherin Quidditch team had started attending Gryffindor’s practice sessions at the beginning of the second week of the month—Harry and her teammates took this development as Slytherin’s attempt to spy on their play tactics and maneuvers. And despite James’s attempts to have them banned from watching, Lucinda Flint, the Slytherin captain, had been clever—she had scheduled Slytherin’s practice sessions to either occur right before or after Gryffindor’s. So that in the case that the Slytherins were interrogated by a suspicious Madam Hooch, they would be able to excuse their attempts at gathering intel by stating that they were in the stands because they were waiting for Gryffindor to finish practice, or because all of them had yet to finish changing, while they watched outside the changing rooms. Sirius had begun coming to Quidditch practice because, Harry figured, he meant to keep an eye on the Slytherins for the whole team’s sake, like an extended version of his intentions to watch her back in case the Slytherins targeted her. He was often accompanied by Remus and Peter, who worked on their homework while cheering them on in their training.

She glimpsed her friends exchanging a look. Hermione shook her head and Ron smirked as he returned his gaze to his potion.

“How’s your potion so far?” Harry decided to ask him after a pause. She felt somewhat awkward, as if she was missing something that was in the air between the three of them.

“Er, not bad, I think.” Ron furrowed his brows. “It’s probably supposed to be a bit more effervescent, but the color’s right on the mark, I think.”

Hermione let out a giggle. “I still can’t believe you got the idea from *Witch Weekly*.”

Ron lifted his chin, although his ears turned pink. “It was invented by a man, just so you know.”

Harry laughed with Hermione. “Right, with the intent of helping housewives out in the country, against magical arachnids.”

“Actually,” Ron began with an unusually serious air, making the two girls raise their eyebrows at one another. “Guillaume Delaforet created Arachne’s Tears ’cause he’s got a fear of spiders, just like me. And it can do more than repel common house spiders, you know—it can dissolve cobwebs and egg sacs to prevent spiders from spreading and proliferating, wherever you are. You can also use the potion to make these little pellets, which can distract acromantulas in the unfortunate case you run into one. Those disgusting, hairy monsters will be drawn to the pellets’ scent and they’ll be temporarily poisoned when they eat them, allowing you to make a quick escape. This potion can save lives—”

Harry and Hermione burst into laughter at the same time and did not hear the rest of Ron’s explanation. It took them a whole minute to recover, during which Ron continued stirring his potion.
with a calm and dignified expression.

“All right, Ron,” Harry addressed him after wiping away her tears of mirth, “the day that your potion saves my life, I’ll buy you a broomstick, ’cause then, you’ll really have earned it.”

Ron’s face lit up and he turned to her, grinning. “I’m holding you to that, Harry. And just so you know, only the top model will do.”

She grinned back at him. “Well, of course.”

The three of them turned their attention to the other side of the room when a soft clatter met their ears. Harry stiffened when she recognized him. She exchanged a look with Ron and Hermione, who looked apprehensive. Silence ensued inside the classroom while the four students concentrated on their potions.

Then he broke the silence.

“Need something?”

His voice was less deep and yet, shockingly familiar. Harry had not heard it since the Battle of Hogwarts, as she had not once heard him speak in the current time, even in Potions. She glanced at him and saw that he was glowering at Hermione, who had turned pink.

“Oh no, I’m fine, I don’t need anything. I…I was just curious about your progress with your potion, since it’s the same one I’m doing.” Hermione’s voice shook slightly from nerves as she looked at Snape, whose mouth thinned. Harry saw Ron tense and his eyes flick between him and Hermione.

“One could consider that cheating,” Snape replied coldly. “I suggest you keep your eyes on your own work, lest someone gets the wrong idea and tips off the professor about it.”

“Y-you’ve got it all wrong—I would never consider something so low as cheating! I-I just thought it was interesting that someone else was brewing Veritaserum as well, since it’s a really difficult potion, and when I saw that it was you, I just wanted to see how you went about it, since you’re excellent in class…” Hermione trailed off when Snape narrowed his eyes.

His lips curled into a sneer. “Figures that a Muggle-born like you would try to take advantage in any way to be considered just as magically talented as the rest of us.” He flicked his eyes to Harry, who understood that he meant to include her in the insult as well, before returning his attention to Hermione. “Listen carefully, Granger, because I’m only going to say this once: glance over at my potion again, and I’ll make sure that you won’t pass this class above a D.”

Hermione’s face became very red and it seemed as if she wanted to say something, but she hesitated and ducked her head.

“Is that a threat?” Ron addressed Snape loudly. He looked at him with an expression full of great dislike.

Snape scoffed and turned back to his potion, ignoring him. Ron’s face reddened, and despite Hermione’s attempt to dissuade him, opened his mouth again.

“You know that you’re a half-blood, right? I don’t think you should start acting all high and mighty ’cause you got some pure-blood in you. If you think that Hermione’s some no-good magic thief just ’cause she comes from Muggles, then that must mean you think half of you is a thieving scum as
well. Just ’cause you happen to hang around a bunch of pure-bloods doesn’t mean it ‘magically’ makes you one too. Or maybe, you’re hoping that some of their pure-blood-ness will rub off on you or something. Then in that case, you really are no better than what you just implied Hermione to be.”

A slow flush crept up Snape’s neck and onto his face, blending unpleasantly with his sallow complexion. He looked at Ron with scornful black eyes. “I’d mind my words if I were you, Weasley,” he said in a low, dangerous tone. “A blood traitor like you has about the same credibility and reputation as a Mudblood.”

This time, Harry and Hermione both grabbed each of Ron’s arms to hold him back from lunging towards Snape, who gave him a mocking half-smirk. “A Gryffindor acting before he thinks… typical.”

Harry stiffened when she realized that Snape had his wand in his hand. When had he drawn it? He twirled it between his fingers, contemplating Ron with a bored look. There was a beat of tense silence before he let out a scoff and placed his wand inside his robes. The trio watched him bend his head over his potion, give a disinterested hum, and pack up his materials. He gave them one last look of contempt before slamming the door behind him as he left.

“You should’ve let me have a go at him,” Ron growled, shaking out his arms after Harry and Hermione released them. “He would’ve benefited from a good punch in the face.”

“No, he wouldn’t have, Ron.” Hermione sighed and rubbed her temples. “That was…awful. I should have been more careful. I really shouldn’t have looked over at him.”

Harry shook her head. “You didn’t know he was going to react like that. It’s not your fault, Hermione. It’s on him—he’s not exactly supposed to be personable during this time, is he? He took to pure-bloods and aligned himself with them ’cause he wanted to feel special like them.” She looked at Ron, who seemed to feel just as frustrated as her, and at Hermione, who looked worried and conflicted.

“Let’s just finish touching up our potions and head to dinner. We can’t be late for Quidditch practice, Ron.”

Ron and Hermione took her advice and the three of them worked silently while concentrating on their potions, which had a mollifying effect on their troubled minds. They began a casual conversation as they headed to dinner.

“D’you know when you’ll be done?” James asked the three of them when they stopped in front of the stone gargoyle. He had escorted them after Quidditch practice and had agreed to take them back to Gryffindor Tower when they were done.

“No, but I expect we’ll be out around ten, depending on how much he wants to discuss with us,” Harry answered.

James nodded. “All right, then I’ll come back around that time. See you all later.” He saw them go up the winding staircase before leaving.
Dumbledore’s voice sounded weary when he bade them to come in after they knocked on his door. He smiled at them in greeting as usual, but he looked extremely tired. A heavy traveling cloak hung on the coat stand near the entrance.

“How are you doing, sir? You look exhausted, if you don’t mind me saying so, sir,” Hermione addressed him, looking concerned.

He smiled and his blue eyes twinkled. “I do not mind you saying so at all, my dear girl. I am cheerful for the most part, although my current state seems to indicate otherwise. You see, I took a trip this morning, which provided us with something very essential to our ongoing mission.”

“A trip, sir?” Ron inquired. “Where did you go?”

Dumbledore gave Harry a meaningful look. Harry’s eyes widened in comprehension.

“Sir, it couldn’t be—have you got the ring, then?”

Hermione and Ron’s eyes widened and they faced the headmaster with eager expressions. There was a triumphant gleam in the headmaster’s eyes as he pulled out Gaunt’s ring from his robes.

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “I have finally been able to procure the ring from its hiding place on the outskirts of Little Hangleton.” Harry stared at the Resurrection Stone’s uneven surface with the mark of the Deathly Hallows etched on it. Relief filled her chest. Just two more, she thought to herself. But the last two would be the most difficult to obtain, she knew. As if he had read her thoughts, Dumbledore’s face became solemn.

“Now, there are only two left to find,” he echoed Harry’s thought. “Two that must still be with him or at least, very close to him.”

“The diary and the locket,” she said automatically. He gave a nod.

“I have placed a strict watch on Lucius Malfoy’s movements, as we do not know if the diary has come into his possession. As for Lord Voldemort’s own movements…well, I assume you have already seen the Daily Prophet that I sent along with my letter?”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione answered. “The headline article caught our attention—the Prophet seems to think that You-Know-Who has disappeared, because he’s been inactive for an unprecedented amount of time. But we were already aware of it because of our meetings.” She hesitated. “Sir, does the Minister for Magic believe he’s gone?”

Dumbledore gave a hum. “No, for the most part,” he replied, looking thoughtful. “I believe that Minister Harold Minchum* would prefer Voldemort to have disappeared completely, but his scrupulous nature will not allow him to entertain the idea, as the theories supporting it are generally baseless. I do not think that we will have a difficult time in convincing the Minister of Voldemort’s ongoing threat.”

The trio exchanged relieved looks. Cooperation from the Minister for Magic would be nice for once. The headmaster continued:

“And yes, you are right about the article presenting old news. While the public may have just officially found out what has been evident for a month, I can say with a decent amount of satisfaction that I have new information on Voldemort’s status.”

Harry leaned forward with Hermione and Ron. Please let it be something helpful, she thought with desperate hope.
Dumbledore gave them a small smile full of understanding. “He is, at the moment, indisposed,” he began, making them furrow their brows. “Since the beginning of this month, he has neither ventured outside nor seen anyone, as he prefers to remain in his quarters. He refuses his followers’ concern, even from those who are closest to him, and the several Death Eaters who have attempted to enter his room have been disposed of, by his own hand. The most his followers have seen of him when they must communicate with him, is his cloaked figure, as he sits with his back to them when they glimpse him through the door. And perhaps most interestingly, he has only recently awoken from a comatose state—it has only been a week since he regained his consciousness.”

There was a pause while the trio took in his words.

“In a comatose state…” Harry’s mind whirled as she tried to make sense of it. She and her friends had experienced something similar when they had arrived in this part of the timeline, although they had not taken a month to awaken…

“How did you manage to retrieve this information, sir?” She looked up at the headmaster, whose eyes twinkled as he replied:

“Two extremely brave and lucky members of the Order managed to overhear all that I have told you from the mouths of a drunk Antonin Dolohov and Evan Rosier. Two weeks had already passed since they had begun visiting the pub where the two Death Eaters were known to frequent, when these secrets were finally revealed on the previous night.”

“Did they also manage to hear where he’s staying, sir?”

“Alas, no. Even before he fell into his current circumstances, the location of his main habitation was a closely-guarded secret. However, there have been whispered rumors of the Lestranges hosting many of the Death Eaters’ meetings at their ancestral home.”

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione and Ron. Not unlike the Malfoys at Malfoy Manor, was their mutual thought. Except, Harry thought to herself wryly, Bellatrix would be more than willing to play host to her beloved Dark Lord than Lucius and Narcissa.

“Er…” Ron looked nervous as he cleared his throat. “Sir, it’s just something that I was wondering… did any one of You-Know-Who’s followers try to off him while he was unconscious? I mean, a lot of them haven’t been too active lately and I reckon some of them joined him just ’cause they wanted some power, and since You-Know-Who was out of it…” His face flushed when Dumbledore turned to him with an interested gaze.

“Yes, that is a fair point, Mr. Weasley. And your inquiry may be answered by the information overheard from Dolohov, who said that although the Dark Lord had been physically indisposed and unresponsive in his comatose state, his own powerful magic seemed to protect him, as it encircled him and lashed out at anyone who dared to come near him,” Dumbledore explained generously.

“Freaky,” Ron muttered.

“Sir,” Hermione spoke up next, “do you have an idea as to why You-Know-Who took longer to awaken than us? It seems strange that he didn’t awaken at the same time we did, when considering the connection between him and Harry—shouldn’t he have regained his consciousness at the same time as her?”

Dumbledore seemed to contemplate her question as he paused and looked down at his desk before shifting his gaze to her again.
“Actually, Miss Granger, I wonder if it is because of his connection with Harry that his recovery was so delayed.” He turned to Harry. “To be more precise, I wonder if it has something to do with shock.”

The three of them blinked. “Shock, sir?” Harry asked slowly.

He gave her a meaningful look. “I remember how, at our first meeting, you told me of Tom’s body becoming insubstantial after being hit by his own rebounded Killing Curse, when you were an infant, as well as the fact that he could not find a body of his own until your fourth year.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry confirmed. “He told me in Little Hangleton, after he took my blood, that he was like the meanest ghost, wandering around in great pain, before he could find something or someone to attach himself to.”

“Yes, and to have been in such pain must have made him mindless. I am wondering if his prolonged state of physical indisposition is not dissimilar to the state in which he found himself after he made you what you are—the one who is to defeat him, as predicted by the prophecy. When you appeared here, twenty-one years back from your own time, I believe that the stipulations of the prophecy that were made about you were carried over—as it is, the significance of your relationship to him is too great for magic itself to ignore. And by this, I mean that when you arrived in this time, Harry, Voldemort may have felt himself struck with the same sense of shock and pain that overwhelmed him when he was hit by his own Killing Curse, as that event was what marked you two as equals. I am inclined to believe that as the impact of that moment was rather heavy on him in your time, it was just as considerable in this time.”

“But since he wasn’t literally struck by the curse here, the shock and pain was internalized in his still-living body,” Harry said, understanding.

“Fascinating,” Hermione murmured, her face lit up with wonder. She blinked after realizing what she had said. “Oh no, I just meant it in the peculiar ways that magic works,” she said quickly, her face turning pink. She gave Harry an apologetic look.

“I know how you meant it, Hermione,” Harry reassured her.

“But it doesn’t mean that Harry’s a horcrux again, does it?” Ron asked anxiously. “Because if it does, that’s just bloody messed up—oh, sorry, language…”

Dumbledore chuckled. “No, I do not believe it does. Based on what you three have told me, it was Lily Potter’s sacrifice that made Harry suitable to be Voldemort’s equal as she was protected by the power which the Dark Lord knows not. It was never the piece of his soul that truly marked her, although, it may have had its uses in understanding Tom.” He looked at Harry, who gave him a grim smile.

“Thank you for telling us all this, Professor,” she told him sincerely.

“But of course, my dear girl.”

They smiled at each other. Then Harry gestured at Gaunt’s ring, which was on the desk.

“Would you like us to place the ring in the Room tonight?”

“No, I shall take it there myself after our discussion. It is already late in the evening and I do not wish to keep you three from the rest of your night.” He picked up the ring and examined it. Harry thought she saw a flicker of longing in his eyes as he gazed at the mark of the Deathly Hallows. “The Resurrection Stone,” he murmured, his face both wistful and mournful. “A part of me has always
been on the Quest and yet, when I have finally found another Hallow, it is in a condition such as this…”

The trio remained silent out of respect. The moment passed when Dumbledore refocused his attention on them, blinking a little. He gave them a tired smile.

“I think I have kept you too long again,” he said apologetically. “I bid you a good rest of your evening, Miss Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley.”

Ron paused before leaving. Harry and Hermione stopped as well and looked at him curiously when he turned to the headmaster.

“Sir,” he began, “Just one last thing… I was just wondering—who were those two members of the Order that finally got information on You-Know-Who?”

Dumbledore beamed at him. “I daresay you know them as your own, Mr. Weasley. The two admirable members of the Order were Fabian and Gideon Prewett.”

Ron was in a daze as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower and didn’t even bat an eye when they ran into Filch, who regarded them with a suspicious and skeptical gaze while James cheerfully told him about their meeting with Dumbledore and his duty of escorting them back to the common room.

Chapter End Notes

*Harold Minchum: Minister for Magic (1975-1980)*

Time is really passing now, isn’t it? Clues about Voldemort’s activities will come up more in subsequent chapters, as a return to the main plot, heh.

-About the beginning of the chapter: I decided to take it a bit slow, as I wanted to explore the state of Harry’s mind following the night of the full moon—although she has accepted that the truth must come out sooner rather than later, it does not mean that she is comfortable with it.
-Regarding Ron’s anti-arachnid potion: (Headcanon) I imagined that Ron would’ve wanted to brew a potion that was practical and relevant to his own interests to score well on the project. He probably said something aloud to Harry and Hermione about how it’d be cool to brew a potion that kept away spiders, which Lily overheard. Lily probably remembered that she had seen an article in a recent issue of Witch Weekly (which I imagine she’d be subscribed to) about a housekeeping potion against spiders, and retrieved the issue for the purpose of helping Ron, who was embarrassed and interested when he discovered that the potion would take a month to brew—I like to imagine that there would be some housekeeping potions that are difficult to make, depending on the kind of housekeeping it concerns :)

The next chapter should be posted sometime around the weekend, if my schedule goes to plan—it will explore some of the developments that this chapter hinted at, and may be presented through a surprise POV (this is only a possibility at the moment, as I haven’t quite decided yet). I know it sounds rather vague, but I don’t want to spoil anything~
Thank you all so much for your continued patience and support! I appreciate all your feedback through your kudos, bookmarks, comments, and subscriptions. Thank you so much for reading and taking an interest in this story :)
A mournful cry made him glance at the augurey in its cage, behind the teacher’s desk. Its head was raised and its beak still open when the bird turned its head to meet his eyes.

Well. Now he knew that rain was soon to come.

His mouth thinned as he looked down at his watch and checked the time. “Little twit,” he muttered, annoyed. He had been waiting for ten minutes already. There wasn’t much time left before his friends began wondering what was taking him so long at the loo.

With another disgruntled mutter, he began pacing. A soft clatter came from the demiguise in its large silver cage not far from the augurey, as it shifted around, also seemingly restless. Sirius let out an irritated sigh and ran a hand through his hair.

Did he not mean to come at all? But he had met his eyes from across the room after reading the note he had sent him. He checked his watch again. *Five more minutes*, he decided. *Five more minutes and then I’m out of here. That little—*

The sound of approaching footsteps cut off his thoughts and he swiftly turned his head to the door. The footsteps stopped before it and the doorknob turned. A cool, haughty expression spread over his face as he drew himself up to face him right as he entered.

“You’re late,” was his cold greeting when the person he had been waiting for finally stepped through the doorway.

“You should be glad that I decided to heed your request at all.”

Regulus turned around after locking the door with a spell and looked around the room. “Kettleburn’s classroom, is it? I suppose you chose it as our meeting place because he never locks it?” His eyes passed over his older brother and landed on the demiguise’s cage. “Is it true he keeps the door unlocked for the sake of the beasts?” he asked, not moving his gaze from the creature, who looked back at him with its large brown eyes.

“Yeah, he thinks it’s inhumane to keep the door locked on them when they’re already cooped up in their cages. He wants students to come visit them, besides, in case they get lonely.” Sirius cleared his throat when Regulus’s eyes moved up to the ceiling, from which a round cage full of buzzing fairies hung.

Regulus let out a soft sigh.

“What did you want to talk about, brother?”

They both tensed. Sirius stared hard at his sibling, whose jaw twitched from the slip-up. He pushed aside any hint of emotion within his chest as he answered him:

“I want to know why you’ve been watching us this past week.”

Regulus cocked his head, which was still tilted upwards.
“Us?”

“Did someone tell you to watch us?”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘us.’”

Sirius narrowed his eyes, irritated. He was already getting on his nerves. You’re still the same, spoiled and soft-headed brat, aren’t you? All right, fine, let’s do it your way. For now. He let out a quiet scoff. “Let me be more specific, then.” He forced his tone to stay even. “What were you doing this past week, standing outside the Potions classroom after my friends and I finished class? And why did you suddenly decide to take the long way to get to your house table, by walking past the whole length of Gryffindor’s? You’ve been looking over at us during meals as well, which you’ve never done before, since you prefer to pretend as if I don’t exist. But that’s not all—you’ve been passing through corridors in which I’ve never seen you before, just to go by us. What are you playing at, Regulus?”

He watched as Regulus blinked, looking mildly surprised. A wry expression crept over his face and he let out a soft laugh.

“Are you sure that you’re not the one who’s been watching me instead? You certainly seem to have kept a more careful eye on me than usual, like during Quidditch practice. And who’s been ignoring who? You and I both know that the decision to pretend we don’t exist to one another was mutual.” A coldness seeped into his voice at the end.

“You’re avoiding the question.” Sirius continued as if he hadn’t heard. “I haven’t got much time, so you’d better speak quickly. And don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about—you wouldn’t have come here if you didn’t know.”

Regulus looked bored as he shrugged. “I was simply curious as to why the disowned heir of the Black family wanted to speak with me. But I decided to be generous and listen to what the blood traitor had to say. For the purpose of humor.”

He was really set on pissing him off, wasn’t he? Sirius resisted the urge to grind his teeth and regarded his brother haughtily.

“Then humor me,” he snapped. “Answer the question—what have you been doing, sticking out like a sore thumb this past week, by making yourself seen, by me, no less?”

“Heh.” Regulus scoffed. “All right then, why not?” He sighed. “Well, first, for your information, my Potions lesson is right after yours, on Mondays and Thursdays. That would be why you’ve been seeing me outside the classroom. I don’t know why you never noticed before, but I’ve always been there, waiting for you and your lot to leave.” He spoke slowly and precisely, as if Sirius was a child who had trouble understanding. “And I always walk past the Gryffindor table to get to mine—”

“No by the long way, you don’t.”

“And if it seemed like I’ve been looking over at you and your friends, well, I must admit that I’ve been a bit curious from the rumors that have been going around—do you have a thing for her?”

Sirius blinked and frowned. Where did that come from?

“What—”

“By her, I mean the girl you’ve been hanging onto recently. The one with the long dark hair and green eyes.” Regulus smirked and gave a derisive huff while Sirius registered his words. “You
know, the Mud—"

"Don’t you dare say that word!"

His voice was sharp and furious, and Regulus flinched. Sirius felt a thrill of triumph while the white-hot anger that had burst within him at the mere implication of the insult towards her continued to burn. He felt cold satisfaction wash over him at the sulky expression that took over his younger brother’s face as he finally lowered his head to meet his eyes—Regulus had always hated that tone of his.

He was still the older brother.

Regulus glowered at him. The idiot seemed to deliberate on whether to retort or not, as his jaw twitched. But he decided to compose himself, as he forced the sullen look off his face by reverting back to his façade of cool indifference.

“Fine. The Muggle-born, Harriet Potter. You two seem to have gotten quite close, from what I’ve heard. If I’ve been looking over at the Gryffindor table, it was to see if the rumors were true.”

Sirius scoffed. “Really? Just for that reason, you’ve been looking over at me and my friends? I find that hard to believe when you’ve just spent the first part of our conversation looking at anywhere else but me. And her name’s Harriet Granger, not Harriet Potter—don’t you know the name of your main rival in Quidditch?”

“She looks like a Potter.”

“What?” Sirius was taken aback for the second time. He didn’t know where Regulus was going with this—what was he doing, changing the subject? Probably eating up time so that he didn’t have to answer his questions. Scowling, he opened his mouth to get him back on track.

But Regulus was faster. “Haven’t you noticed? She looks like both Potters—her hair’s similar to the bloke’s and her eyes are the same as the girl’s. She could be related to one of them.”

What the bloody hell is he going on about?

But despite his frustration, Sirius was bewildered by his brother’s claim. “Hold on,” he snapped. “What do you mean, ‘both Potters?’ There’s only one Potter, as you very well know.”

“James Potter and Lily Potter. Your best mate and his girlfriend.”

Sirius stared at him. He couldn’t be this much of a dolt, could he? “Lily Evans, you mean,” he corrected him slowly and emphatically. “Do you really not know her name? Lily’s not exactly unpopular—”

“I don’t pay attention to Muggle-borns.” There was a spark of impatience in Regulus’s eyes as he gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Whenever I hear a Muggle-born’s name, I don’t bother holding it in my mind. I’m a pure-blood—their names mean less than nothing to me. So her surname’s Evans? I heard that blonde girl from your house—Langley, I believe—call her ‘Lily Potter,’ when I passed them in a corridor and took that to be her family name.”

It wasn’t a bad justification, Sirius had to admit. Calling Lily, “Lily Potter,” was one of Alice’s favorite ways of teasing her, he knew. Regulus very well could have overheard them if he had been in the same vicinity as them. But he decided to press him further.

“Potter’s a pure-blood name, though,” he argued. “You’re telling me that your brain cells couldn’t
come up with the idea that Alice was just joking around with her? You already know Lily’s with James.”

“Like I said, I don’t care about Muggle-borns. And besides, it’s not unreasonable that her last name could be Potter—the Potters are known for having married Muggles and Muggle-borns, if you remember from our family history lessons. The Potter name could have found its own place among Muggle names, which would be rather unfortunate, if true.”

Regulus regarded Sirius haughtily. “But I suppose we should return to our main subject,” he said, making Sirius glare at him. “What was I saying before? Ah, yes—I couldn’t help glancing over at your table because of the rumors of you falling for a Muggle-born girl. Not that I particularly care, as you’re no longer part of the family. And you’ve always done as you’ve pleased.” There was something bitter in his voice that made Sirius clench his jaw and a hint of uneasiness stir in his chest. The corner of Regulus’s mouth twitched like it did when he was irritated. “And as for my presence in the corridors,” he continued in a drawl, “I believe that there’s more than one way of getting around the castle. I might have been in a rush and decided to go another way than my usual—I don’t remember and I don’t see why you should care. Now, are we done? I’ve answered all your questions.”

There was a pause while the two siblings stared at each other.

“Not quite,” Sirius said quietly.

Regulus raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh?”

“Because the problem is, I don’t believe you. I know when you’re lying, Regulus. I can always tell when you’re lying—”

“Can you?”

Sirius tensed at the sudden asperity in his brother’s voice. He watched Regulus swiftly take on a calm demeanor before continuing. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe me. I’ve responded to your inquiries as you wished, when I didn’t have to. Like I said before, you should be grateful that I came here at all to speak with you. I don’t owe you anything.”

Regulus turned around to open the door and leave, but paused at Sirius’s voice.

“I don’t know who told you to keep an eye on us, but I’m betting it’s someone more important than Flint—if she wanted you to spy on Harry and James, she would’ve told you to be more natural about it. But you haven’t been, which is strange. I know you’re smart enough to not let yourself get caught, especially by me, so I don’t know what you’re playing at, being so careless. Unless...you wanted to be caught.” Sirius clenched his jaw as he stared at his brother’s back. He narrowed his eyes. “You’re using me for something,” he accused him. “You let me catch you at it, so I’d get suspicious enough to get you to meet me somehow. I don’t know what it is you want, but if it involves Harry,” he paused, his expression becoming dangerous, “I suggest you stop now, before I decide to really get angry.”

Regulus took his hand away from the doorknob and slowly turned around to face him.

“So who do you think told me to watch you and your friends?” His voice was quiet.

“Mother, or even father.” Sirius wasn’t certain, but there was little hesitation in his mind when he considered who would be willing to have eyes placed on him, especially through his younger brother.
A strange look passed over Regulus’s face, which spasmed before he let out a disbelieving huff.

“Mother? Heh…” His lips curled into a sneer. “Well, you’re certainly becoming a little paranoid like her, broth—” He stopped and stiffened. “I’ll be going now,” he said instead, coldly, as he turned to the door. The door shut behind him with a soft click.

Sirius clenched and unclenched his fists as he grit his teeth. Frustration, indignation, desperation, and some regret roiled inside of him. Biting back a curse, he began pacing again in front of Kettleburn’s desk to calm himself. But he ended up slamming his hands down on the desk as his emotions mounted inside of him, making the animals in their cages chitter, squawk, and squeak in alarm. The demiguise moved to the back of its cage and turned invisible while the augurey ruffled its feathers and re-positioned itself on its perch while turning a wary eye on him.

Sirius closed his eyes and let out a breath. “Sorry,” he muttered to them. He counted one, two, three, four, five breaths before straightening himself up.

“Hm?”

Sirius was about to turn to Harry, who had nudged him, when he felt a weight land on his shoulder. He blinked when he saw that she had placed her head on his shoulder. Well, hello.

He smirked. “Finally warming up to me, Harry?”

But a closer look at her face revealed that she had fallen asleep on him, as her eyes were closed and her breaths came out slowly and evenly. She had not nudged him after all, but had naturally leaned towards him when succumbing to unconsciousness. And her head had happened to hit his shoulder. Well, that’s nice too.

Sirius glanced at McGonagall, who had her back turned to them as she wrote on the blackboard. Harry had caught a lucky break by nodding off at an opportune moment. The lesson was nearly over, besides, as the teacher was using the last ten minutes of class to outline and give a lecture on her expectations for their upcoming exam. I suppose I don’t need to wake her up right away. Sirius took in Harry’s sleeping face, which showed signs of the exhaustion that she and her two friends had been recently exhibiting. His eyes noted the smooth, pale canvas of her slender face, the soft curves of her slightly parted, pink lips, and the light shadows underneath her closed lids. They lingered on the gentle flutter of her long, dark lashes, as she breathed in and out. His lips twitched up into a soft smile.

Such a lovely creature, he thought, not for the first time.

But it was the first time that he had seen her asleep, and the implicit vulnerability of her situation mesmerized him—since he had only seen her awake, he was only ever accustomed to the steady, yet easily reactive, energy exuded by her conscious state, which had its own charm. When she was awake, she was anything but unguarded, as the swiftness and unpredictability of her responses to him and his antics served to create a barrier of inscrutability around her. The singularity of the moment lay in the fact that he was now a witness to the basic and organic gentility of her features, now stripped away of their natural armor.

Who are you really, beneath all the layers that you’ve put on yourself? I’ve never seen you this fragile and yet, it’s still assuredly you.

He wasn’t sure as to the justifications behind his certainty of the natural union between these two sides of her, but perhaps it was partly because of the latent connection he sensed between them—
their conscious demeanors were as sincere and honest as they could make it, but they were not the whole truth, not by a long shot. He hid, and so did she, and they both knew it. How else could they ever dare to deliberately probe at one another?

He was stirred from his thoughts when she shifted against him. She made a soft, sleep-induced sound that could only come from the depths of true fatigue. Sirius glanced at McGonagall again—she was still writing. Good.

Wait…no, she had just stopped writing. Crap.

It was most regrettable, but quite necessary, that he wake her up now.

“Harry. Harry, wake up,” he whispered to her urgently, lightly moving his arm against her to shake her awake.

Harry made another low, incoherent sound before her eyelashes fluttered, as her eyes blinked themselves open, allowing him to glimpse the verdant hue within. “Sirius?” she murmured, turning her head towards him and registering his face. Sirius pushed away the thought of how adorable she sounded in her sleep-hazy state to properly rouse her. But he made sure to smile.

“Might want to wake up, Harry, before McGonagall notices that you’ve been asleep for the past five minutes. I don’t reckon you want to be scolded like Wormtail.”

She blinked, looking confused, before realizing the position she was in. “Oh, Sirius, I’m so sorry,” she apologized as she quickly drew herself away from him. “I dunno how it happened—one minute I was listening to the lecture and the next thing I know, I’ve been using your shoulder as a pillow.” She gave him an embarrassed smile.

He grinned. “Nothing to worry about, Harry. You’ve always allowed me to lean my head on your shoulder, so it’s about time I returned the favor. And besides, I like being in such close proximity to you—I get to smell your hair, which is nice. What shampoo do you use, Harry? It’s got something citrusy in there, doesn’t it? I quite like it.”

Harry raised her eyebrows and stared at him. “Did you just admit that you like smelling my hair?”

“Yes, Harry, I—”

“Are you two quite done over there?”

Sirius turned with Harry to Professor McGonagall, who had finished writing on the board and was now facing the class and glaring at the two of them. The heads of their fellow classmates turned to them accordingly.

Sirius put on his most charming smile. “I was just talking—”

“More like flirting,” James cut in with some loud coughs.

Harry let out a sigh and Sirius continued talking as if he had not been interrupted, while the class laughed. “—to Harry about your expectations for the class in general, Professor. Since she’s been homeschooled, she wanted some clarification on the points you wrote on the board and I was explaining to her. We’re sorry for distracting you from the lesson, Professor—we didn’t mean it.”

“Hm.” McGonagall frowned, making them shift in their seats. “Clearly, you should have asked me after class, Miss Granger, if you had any questions about the exam and my expectations. However…” Her stern eyes flicked to the large hourglass on her desk. “Since your disruption
occurred at the end of class, you will be excused for it today. Consider yourselves lucky, Mr. Black, Miss Granger—I may not be so lenient next time.” She turned to the rest of the class. “Make sure that you’ve all understood what I have put on the board. If you have any questions, come directly to me. Class dismissed.”

“Thanks,” Harry told Sirius with a grateful smile as they packed up their belongings.

“Anytime, Harry. I’ll always back you up.”

There was a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes as she looked back at him before smiling again.

“I’ll hold you to that, then.”

Her tone was light and brisk, but he wondered if he had somehow unnerved her. She was being elusive again and he wanted to catch her.

James wouldn’t stop coughing at dinner. Sirius exchanged a look with Peter while Lily patted his best mate’s back and spoke to him soothingly.

“James, you’re sick. Go to bed early tonight. I’ll tell Filch that you’ve fallen ill again.”

It was the second full moon of the school year and the Marauders had decided on a plan similar to the one from the previous month—it had been Sirius’s idea to continue on the same route just until the repetition of their behavior seemed to take on a pattern to the trio, at which point, they would come up with another ruse. His reasoning had been that no one generally noticed that something was off or strange until it happened a certain number of times, like when the three Marauders hadn’t become properly suspicious of Remus until their second year, when they finally discovered his lycanthropy through their own research. And Ron himself had made it easy for them—he had asked Remus on the third day of his symptoms, if he would be taking a leave for home again, as he was beginning to look rather ill. Remus, like the smart chap that he was, had jumped on this opportunity and replied in the affirmative. And now, here they were, with James acting sick, earlier than the last time, with a plan to pass on his illness to Sirius during the meal—the two of them would use the excuse of feeling ill to head up to bed early, while Peter would use his exhaustion as an excuse to join them a few hours later.

“He doesn’t look well,” Harry commented to Sirius as she watched James snuffle and wipe his nose with a tissue that Lily had given him.

“Mm, not for the past few days, he hasn’t. Probably caught something from Moony again. I wouldn’t be surprised if he heads up to bed early tonight as well. Speaking of going to bed early, you should probably consider that, Harry. You’ve been looking rather tired lately.” Perhaps, if Harry agreed to turn in early for the night, Hermione would follow, and then it would only be Ron that the Marauders would have to avoid. Peter would most likely be pleased with that arrangement.

Harry’s face became thoughtful. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea.” Sirius silently congratulated himself when Harry turned to Hermione. “Hermione, want to turn in early for the night? I fell asleep in Transfiguration and I think that’s a sign that I need more sleep. You haven’t been looking much better off as well.”

Sirius saw Peter and James’s eyes flick to the two girls as they held their breath and hoped.
Hermione yawned. “I think that’s a good idea, Harry,” she replied, rubbing her eyes. “I want to finish more homework, but the past week has been rather difficult.”

The three Marauders exchanged a brief look of barely suppressed glee and relief.

“Wish I could go to bed early,” Ron grumbled next to her. “I need to finish that stupid essay for Potions. Can’t believe I didn’t know that it was supposed to be two rolls of parchment instead of one. I’m just saying—he already made us brew the damn thing for a month, so why does he need an essay to top it all off? Two rolls of parchment, Merlin’s pants…”

“At least he doesn’t mind that it’ll be turned in late. He’s been rather generous about the project, hasn’t he? You’ll still be able to get a good score if you finish it well.” Hermione rubbed his back with a sympathetic look.

Ron grunted, sounding somewhat mollified. “Dunno why he’s being like that, though. Didn’t he say that he’d be grading us harder this year?”

“It’s probably ’cause of Voldemort,” Harry responded with a grim twist to her mouth. “Slughorn’s probably ecstatic that he’s apparently disappeared.”

Peter let out a whimper at the name, but Sirius gazed at Harry, interested and impressed. There it was again—the surprising strength that she held inside of her. She wasn’t afraid of saying Voldemort’s name, even though she had suffered at the hands of his Death Eaters.

James let out a discreet cough and Sirius turned to him and caught his meaningful look.

“Padfoot,” James began hoarsely, in-between coughs, “I need to ask you something. Lean over a bit, will you? I think my voice is nearly gone from all that coughing.”

That was his cue.

“Sure, Prongs,” he replied, grinning. He leaned across the table towards him. “What d’you—”

“ATCHOO!”

Sirius closed his eyes right when the spittle from James’s open-mouthed sneeze hit his face.

There was silence.

Murderous rage began filling his chest when he registered what had happened.

James. had. sneezed. on. him.

“Prongs,” he said quietly, keeping his eyes shut as he forced himself to remain calm until they both reached their room, where he would kill him in the most painful way possible. “did you just sneeze on me?”

James let out a loud sniff and sighed. “Yes, I’m afraid I did. Sorry ’bout that, mate.” His voice was
no longer hoarse, but cheerful, and Sirius could imagine the shit-eating grin on his face. He opened his eyes and saw him smirking.

Sirius ground his teeth and glared at him. “No need to apologize—you’re sick, Prongs. Very sick.”

Peter let out a nervous laugh and Lily put a hand to her mouth to cover her grin. But it was Harry’s snicker that distracted him from his attempt to disintegrate James into ashes with his eyes. When he turned to her, her eyes widened and a small laugh escaped from her before she was completely overtaken by mirth. Hermione joined in laughing with her and so did Ron, then Lily, and finally Peter. Sirius settled down in his seat with an angry mutter and narrowed his eyes at James, who gave him a smug look.

“Here.”

Harry was offering him a napkin. She giggled when he accepted it with a sigh. “Well, I’m glad to know that you take pleasure in my misery, Harry,” he told her in a mournful tone. “Soon I’ll be sick, just like Prongs, but with no one to take care of me.” He began wiping his face with a grimace.

Harry snorted. “Don’t be so dramatic, Sirius. I’m sure some hot tea and a good night’s rest will be enough to chase away anything you might’ve caught.”

He turned to her with a pained look. “But what if it’s not chased away and I end up sick and bedridden? What’ll happen then? I don’t like the Hospital Wing, and all I’ve got as visitors is this tosser across from me—” he indicated James with his chin, “—and two semi-decent blokes and Moony, who’ll just laugh when he sees me in that state.”

“Semi-decent?” Peter’s voice was shrill and indignant, making James laugh and Ron snort.

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“I’ll send a get-well card to your room.” Harry let out another laugh when he saw his shoulders slump.

“Well, I suppose that’ll have to do.” With a deep sigh, he moved to lean his head on hers.

“Ah, ah, ah!” James stopped him and wagged a finger in his direction. “No touching the lady, Padfoot! Are you trying to make her sick, too? I don’t think Harry would appreciate being bedridden and I’ll kill you if she’s unable to play in the first match against Slytherin.” He gave him an imperious look. “Do control yourself.”

James was definitely going to die tonight, was Sirius’s grim resolution while the others laughed.

The moment they entered the dormitory, Sirius jumped him.

“Aargh!”

James struggled to escape his tight grasp as he wrestled him to the floor.

“You were supposed to cough on me, not sneeze!” Snarling, Sirius maintained his grip on James’s head while James tried to elbow him. “That was bloody disgusting, you prat! What’d you do—snort some pepper up your nose while I wasn’t looking?”

James had the nerve to laugh. “Sneezing powder from Zonko’s, actually. I was trying to help you, Padfoot! I figured that if I sneezed on you, Harry might get sympathetic and fuss over you again. But clearly, that wasn’t the case—ow!” Sirius had given him a sharp prod in the ribs.
Muttering curses under his breath, Sirius let him go after he made a choking sound against his arm. James coughed and cleared his throat as he picked himself up. He grinned after straightening his glasses and rumpled up his already messy hair.

“So,” he began cheerfully, while Sirius glared at him. “Did she ask you yet?”

“Ask me what?” Sirius moved to his bed and sat down on it.

“You know, if you want to go with her to Slughorn’s Halloween party.”

Sirius sighed as he leaned back on his pillows. “No. But that’s not a surprise. She said she’s not fond of fancy parties and it looked like she really didn’t want to go when you, Lily, and Ron were talking about it.”

He thought back to Monday, two days ago, when Slughorn had called for James, Lily, Harry, Ron, and Snape to stay after class to invite them to the Halloween party he was organizing. According to his friends, the teacher had told them to clear their evening schedules for next Monday, so they’d be able to attend and meet some of his former students and celebrities whom he personally knew. They were encouraged to bring guests. With James and Lily it was obvious, like it was with Ron, who would no doubt invite Hermione. But Harry had looked rather unenthused at the idea, and when prodded by her two friends during Herbology, had drily replied that she preferred attending the annual Halloween feast instead. Sirius had been a little disappointed, as he had been rather curious about who she would have considered inviting, and, if he was being honest, had been quite intrigued at the idea of seeing her in dress robes.

Not that she wasn’t already pretty. But he did want to see what she would look like when all dolled up and wearing something besides her school uniform.

“I’m surprised you haven’t been pestering her about it.”

Sirius shot an annoyed look at James, who raised his eyebrows and continued. “I’m just saying, I expected you to, seeing how fond of her you’ve gotten. And you’ve been determined about everything else so far—you’ve continued to try to flatter her by pushing your attention on her, you’ve pretty much attached yourself to her, except when she’s got her free period and when she’s with Ron and Hermione, and…” Sirius furrowed his brows when James paused and gave him a thoughtful look. “You’ve actually been honest with her—if not through words, then through your actions. I can tell. You’ve never let any of the other girls come close to seeing you as you’ve been letting her.”

“She’s not like the other girls.” The words left his mouth of their own accord.

“Go on,” James encouraged, when there was a pause.

But Sirius didn’t feel like explaining. His head was already starting to get muddled from the rush of impressions, thoughts, reminiscences, and feelings all connected or having to do with her. The only common ground he could glean amongst them was the certainty that he liked her, which naturally led to the question—how much did he like her?

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer. It lay in an emotional territory that he had barely, if ever, traversed, and as fearless as he was about most physical things, he shied away from emotional discourse—he would prefer that his feelings remained obscure, even to himself.

James shook his head when he responded with a shrug. “Yeah, all right, keep it to yourself. But all the same, ask her on a date to Hogsmeade, will you?”
“Sorry, what?”

James grinned mischievously. “Remember the bet that Marlene and I made last month about how long it’d take you to go out with her? It’s still going, technically, and I put my money on first Hogsmeade weekend, which is this Saturday. I’m not saying that you should force her,” he added hastily, when Sirius’s expression turned indignant, “but just ask her as friends or something. I don’t think she’ll mind, seeing as how she’s been tolerating you all this time. I bet she’s more fond of you than you imagine.”

Sirius couldn’t help smirking, pleased as he was by his friend’s remark. Harry being fond of him, he could certainly believe. But as to whether she would mind being asked out on a date…his confidence dimmed a little—he had promised her that he would be a friend first, and it wouldn’t be exactly right of him to renege on it by proposing something that was motivated by a silly bet, even if he suggested they do it as friends. It wouldn’t be true.

“I can try, but no promises,” he decided to answer. James gave him a shrewd look, but shrugged instead of saying anything.

When Peter finally came up to the room, they went through the same motions from the last time—they magicked their curtains shut and slipped on the Invisibility Cloak after James grabbed the map from his trunk.

“Shit, wait,” James stopped Sirius just as he was about to open the door to the common room.

They could hear voices coming towards them. Girls. Two of them.

“I think that’s Harry and Hermione,” Peter whispered, putting his ear against the door to hear better. His guess was proved correct when the voices became louder as the girls drew closer.

“Probably turning in early,” Sirius murmured. He perked up when he heard Harry. He heard her sigh.

“Dunno, Hermione, I was thinking of asking Remus, if I was going to go at all.”

“Remus?” Hermione sounded surprised. “Why?”

“I think he’d have a better attitude about it. I don’t think Sirius—”

Their voices faded as they entered the girls’ dormitories. The Marauders remained silent.

*She doesn’t think I’m…what? Why would Moony have a better attitude about it?*

Sirius was certain that she was talking about the party.

*She’s considering inviting Moony?*

Incredulity and indignation rose in his chest.

*But…*

“Hey, let’s go.” James pulled at his sleeve and Sirius realized that his friend had opened the door.

He remained distracted as they made their way out of the common room and barely heard Peter’s pleas to slow down his pace so that the Cloak didn’t slip off him.
It was just…

Why would she not ask him? He had thought, after how close they’d gotten—well, he thought they’d gotten close—she would come to him first before anybody. Wasn’t she fond of him? He didn’t want to consider the possibility that he had deluded himself of her affection towards him. Because she had seen and cared even when he had not wanted her to—she had even dared to broach the subject of his family with him. Not that he minded, he had quickly found out, when it was her. Because she seemed to understand, somehow.

“You all right, Padfoot?” James’s voice was quiet as they made their way down the stairs. They had almost reached the first-floor corridor.

“Fine.” Sirius struggled to focus on the task at hand. “Shouldn’t we check the map, Prongs?”

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Sirius felt James shift next to him as he tapped his wand on the parchment.

“Er, all right… I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Another tap. Then James stopped right as they stepped off the last step onto the first floor, making Peter bump into Sirius.

“What’s the matter, Prongs?” Sirius glanced down at the map and frowned. “Why’s it still blank? Didn’t you say the words twice already?” He felt Peter look over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I dunno why…” James said the words again and tapped the parchment, which remained blank. “Here, you try it.” He handed it to Sirius, who repeated the motions, but still, nothing. Peter was unsuccessful as well.

Sirius couldn’t believe it. “Prongs,” he hissed, “please don’t tell me you mistook the wrong piece of parchment for the map!”

“What?! No! This is supposed to be the map. Why the bloody hell would I keep another piece of parchment under my clothes?”

“How would I know? You’re the one who keeps it!”

“Can’t we just summon it?” Peter suggested.

“Right, like there’s going to be nothing suspicious about a piece of parchment just casually zooming through the castle to get to us.” Sirius let out an irritated sigh. “We’ll just have to make do without the map for tonight. Not like we haven’t gone around without it, before. Let’s go.”

Feeling dissatisfied and disgruntled, they made their way to the Whomping Willow to join Moony. Their nighttime run helped chase away their worries, but when they returned to their human forms in the morning, the three Marauders made their way to Gryffindor Tower as quickly as they could, while dodging Filch and Mrs. Norris, who sniffed the air as they passed while going up the stairs. Instead of pausing and staying still, they all but ran for their destination before the cat could make up her mind to arouse Filch’s suspicion.

Back in the dormitories, Sirius and Peter waited while James carefully took out each item of clothing from his trunk in an effort to show them that he had not made the mistake of taking out the wrong parchment.
“Hurry the hell up, Prongs. I need to take a shower and get into some clean clothes,” Sirius whispered, as Ron was fast asleep. They could hear him snoring from his bed.

James gave him a dirty look. “I’m doing this to clear my good name, Padfoot. And don’t worry, I’ll be getting to my pants, soon. I hide the map in-between them, ’cause who wants to put their hands into a bloke’s pants unless—”

Peter let out a loud snigger, making James and Sirius hush him.

“Ah, now we’ve come to my pants.” James took away each pair of pants slowly and deliberately. “It should be underneath this one…” He lifted it and froze.

Sirius and Peter walked over to him and stared. There was a piece of parchment beneath the pair of pants.

Sirius let out a sharp exhale. “Well, there you go, Prongs. You made a mistake.”

“But…” James frowned and snatched it up. “This better be it,” he muttered as he took out his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

The familiar design and inscription appeared and spread across the parchment. The three of them looked at the boys’ dormitories.

“Yes, there we are,” Sirius pointed their names out. “It’s the map, Prongs. It was here all along.”

“I don’t believe it.” James’s shoulders slumped as he stared at their names with a gloomy expression. “It was supposed to be the only parchment I had in my trunk.” He sighed and pointed his wand at it. “Mischief managed.”

He looked up when Peter spoke. “Maybe…” Peter hesitated. Sirius turned to him and saw his anxious eyes flick to Ron’s bed. “I dunno…just being paranoid, I guess,” he backtracked and let out a nervous laugh. “Er, I’m going to go to the bathroom to get ready.” He hurried to his bed and left the room with a change of clothes.

Sirius exchanged a puzzled look with James after the door closed behind him.

“Was he just implying that Ron…” James pointed his thumb at Ron’s bed.

“Yeah. Dunno why, though. There’s no way he’d know about the map. But I’ll admit that was unprecedented for you, Prongs—you’ve never mistaken another parchment for the map before.”

“Yeah…guess I’ll have to check if it’s the right one next time.” James let out a bemused huff and stood up. “You’re taking a shower too, right, Padfoot? You better, if you want Harry to stay fond of you.”

Sirius tensed at the mention of her. Her words from the previous night came back to him and he grew pensive. He wasn’t feeling too confident of her affection for him anymore. How could she consider asking Remus when there was…him? Why didn’t she think he was the right one to ask?

“Look, Padfoot.”

He shifted his attention to James, who looked solemn.

“If you’re unsure, just ask her about it. You don’t have to make it seem like you overheard their conversation—just ask if she’s thinking of going to Slughorn’s party and just be your impetuous,
Sirius bided his time by watching Harry for the next few days. He wanted to know if she meant to ask Remus to the party or not, before making his move—he needed to know if she would be attending the party, to make his offer to go with her seem relevant.

But she made no mention of the party, although James, Lily, Ron, and Hermione did. She merely smiled when Lily and Hermione suggested that she go with them to some of the clothing shops in the village to look at dress robes—perhaps she would be persuaded to go with them if she saw something she liked. But she remained stubbornly indifferent, which relieved and frustrated him. He did not want her thinking of going to the party, as that would mean that she would make a move to ask Remus, but he increasingly found himself thinking of how nice it would be to go to a formal affair with her as her date for the evening. She would look more than a little lovely, he knew, and, he thought with some grim resolve, if she was going to the party, he would want to be by her side to keep an eye on his younger brother. Regulus had heeded his warning from their meeting on the previous weekend, but he still caught his eyes glancing at her and him every now and then during meals. Remus couldn’t keep an eye on him for her—only he could.

Then Saturday came and Sirius found his opportunity when they stepped into Hogsmeade after making their way through the secret passageway, entered through the statue of the One-Eyed Witch. All of them except for Lily and Hermione had opted to take this route, in order to avoid being prodded with the Secrecy Sensor at the gates. Besides which, they knew that the trip through the official process would take longer than usual, as they would be surveilled and escorted by Aurors from the Ministry of Magic to the village. Sirius personally led Harry through the tunnel to Honeydukes, but lost her in the dense crowd that filled up the shop. Then he spotted her standing next to Remus by the display of chocolate bars and panicked.

“Harry!” he gasped when he reached her. He was short of breath from squeezing his way towards her through the multitude of students. She turned to him with Remus and smiled.

“Oh, there you are, Sirius.”
He couldn’t help noticing the vibrant green of her eyes, illuminated as they were by the bright glow of the shop’s lights.

“Want to go on a date with me?”

It came out in a rush and he blinked just before she blinked, surprised by his own impulsiveness. He inwardly shrugged and went with it.

“As friends, obviously. I can show you around the village, if you want. I know you’re not keen on looking through clothes with Lily and Hermione. So allow me to provide you with an alternative.” He gave her his best smile, hoping that she would agree.

“Oh, er…” She glanced at Remus, who looked a little pink. “Well, actually, I think Remus was—”

“It’s all right, Harry. It’s actually better if you go with Sirius. He knows the village and its shops better than I do. He’s been visiting this place since he was young, so he’ll be a better guide than me.” Remus looked at Sirius and gave him a wry smile. “You’ll be on your best behavior, won’t you, Padfoot?”

Sirius beamed at him, more than a little grateful—Remus had his back. “Of course, Moony,” he replied with a haughty tilt of his chin. “But first, the lady must agree. How ’bout it, Harry?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “It’s not going to be an actual date, is it?”

Merlin, the girl was careful.

“No, only if you want it to be.” He let the suggestion hang in the air.

A light flush suffused her cheeks and he found himself smiling widely as a happy thrill rushed through him, leaving something soft and warm in his chest.

“All right then,” she agreed, seeming a little shy, but not displeased. “I’ll go through the village with you, as friends.”

He felt like whooping, but settled for an exuberant grin instead. “Excellent. We’re going to have such a great time, Harry. Hogsmeade will seem so much more interesting while I’m next to you, explaining about its history in my wonderfully dulcet tones.”

Harry scoffed and laughed. “Do you ever stop being vain?”

He smirked. “Never.”

Satisfaction and happy excitement ran through him as he chatted with her in the shop, while she perused the shelves full of sweets and made a purchase. He did not notice Remus slip away to join James and Peter, who had met up with Lily just outside the shop.

The two of them walked for an hour, looking around and talking. Sirius was surprised when she grimaced at Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop, which he pointed out to her.

“Not a fan of tea shops, Harry?”

“No, just not that one. It’s so disgustingly pink and frilly inside.”

“Oh.” He was taken aback. “Have you been to Hogsmeade before? Why didn’t you say so?”

She shrugged. “Like you said, I wasn’t keen on looking through clothes for the entire time we were...
here. And, well, it’s nice being here again. It’s been a while since I’ve seen this place like it was before—” she stopped and her jaw tensed.

“Before…?”

“Before everything happened.”

Oh. Right. The Death Eaters.

“Well,” he began brightly to distract her from her dark thoughts, “I’m glad Hogsmeade’s stayed the same, more or less. It’s nice when some places stay the same, regardless of the time. It gives you something to come back to, to remind you that constancy and familiarity still exist, when life refuses to stop moving forward.”

“Hm.” Harry smiled as she looked down, shuffling her feet. “Only some places, though. Not all.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Only some.”

They continued walking.

“So,” Sirius began again, “who did you go to Madam Puddifoot’s with, Harry? Who was the bloke that was fortunate enough to catch your interest?” He eyed her shrewdly, full of curiosity. She had once said that he wasn’t her type—so who was?

Harry let out a small laugh. “Actually, it was a girl that invited me. She wanted to talk to me about her boyfriend, who had recently passed away, since I knew him as well. She didn’t think she could really talk to anyone else about him.”

He was amused and somewhat relieved. “So it wasn’t a proper date, then.”

“No. Although, a guy I knew once thought I might like having tea in there, before I told him I hated it. That wasn’t a date either, but I suppose it was the closest I’ve ever come to having one.”

His tone was light when he asked her. “Who was he, Harry?”

“He’s not someone you know.”

“I’d still like a name.”

“Why? You’re not jealous, are you?”

That made him laugh and he decided to go for a bit of honesty. “Maybe a little. You’re a hard girl to please, you know.” He met her incredulous gaze and smiled. “You’re a very interesting girl, Harry. Who wouldn’t want to go on a date with you?”

Her dark hair swung forward as she turned away from him, but not before he caught the pink that had risen in her cheeks. So he really could affect her like that—a smug sense of confidence came over him and he decided that it was as good a time as any.

“Are you really set on not going to Slughorn’s party? It’s the first time he’s thrown one for Halloween, and on a school day. You might as well go when he’s feeling more cheerful than usual ‘cause of Voldemort’s disappearance. He’ll be keener on thinking that you’ve got potential in you if you show interest by showing up—he’s known for giving a leg up to students in their future jobs, you know. You’re in the Slug Club, so you might as well take advantage of it.”

Harry gave him a skeptical look. “That’s what James and Lily said, but, I’m not really excited at the
idea of a fancy party, where you have to talk with people you hardly know and play nice. And besides, it’ll be a bit strange, being the only one who didn’t bring a guest, not that I really care about going alone, but—"

“I’m available, Harry.”

She paused in her steps and he stopped with her. He held her surprised gaze. “I mean, if the only thing that’s really holding you back from going is a problem with finding someone to go with, I wouldn’t mind going with you, if you want, that is. ’Cause it’s a bit of a shame, isn’t it, if you don’t go? James and Lily are going, and so are Ron and Hermione—you might as well go, since the others are, and you’re bound to have a nice time when they’ll be there as well. And I can tag along just so you don’t have to feel strange.”

Hope rose and fell within him in waves as she furrowed her brows at him.

“But…Sirius, are you sure? Are you sure you’d want to go to Slughorn’s party, where the rest of the Slug Club will be?’”

“Well, why not? I can play nice for a couple hours.”

“Yes, but, Regulus will be there. Are you sure you wouldn’t mind seeing him? I know you don’t like seeing him or having him mentioned…”

Sirius blinked before comprehension slowly set in.

Oh. Oh.

That was…surprisingly, even shockingly, thoughtful. How considerate she was. He did not realize he had been staring at her until she cleared her throat.

“So…I’m guessing that you don’t want to go, then?” Her eyes were cautious and her face slightly anxious when he refocused his attention on her.

“No, I—I mean yes! I’d still want to go with you, even if Regulus will be there. It’s not so difficult ignoring someone who’s in the same room as you, you know. And there’ll be so many other people, besides—I won’t even have the occasion to notice he’s there. Although, I’d still go with you, just to keep an eye on him, in case he tries anything funny. Your first match is coming up next week, right?”

He watched as her lips twitched up into a smile. “Yeah, it is, but I don’t think you need to worry about him in that way. He hasn’t done or said anything to me so far, so I reckon I’ll be fine. But are you really sure, Sirius? You wouldn’t mind going?”

“I have never been so sure of anything in my life, Harry. It would be an honor to accompany you to the party.” He grinned when she laughed. They continued on their way through the shops.

“Well, all right, if you’re set on going, then I suppose I might as well go. Er…” Her hesitation made Sirius turn to her. “The funny thing is, I did consider asking you, after I got tired of Hermione and Ron pestering me to go with them, but then I realized that Regulus would be there. So I considered asking Remus, since he’s nice and good company, if I decided on going at all…’cause I figured that you might be offended at the idea of being in the same place as your brother.”
“But you would’ve preferred me?” Sirius watched her face carefully, anticipating her answer. It was very important that he captured everything. Her face was briefly reflective before a small smile appeared on her face. He caught the way her eyelashes fluttered as she looked down, before looking up at him with her bright green eyes.

“Yes. I really do like having you around, Sirius.”

He thought about kissing her.

Before they knew it, Monday and Halloween had arrived.

After Defense Against the Dark Arts, their last class of the day, the six of them quickly made their way to Gryffindor Tower to get ready for the party while Remus and Peter headed to the feast in the Great Hall.

“Have fun,” Peter told them before they hurried off. Remus merely smiled and waved.

The girls beat the boys to the dormitories.

“Meet us down here in two hours,” Lily told James, Sirius, and Ron, before making way for Harry, who was already being pulled up the stairs by Hermione.

The boys, for their part, were done dressing in under an hour. Except for James, who had yet to return from the bathroom. Sirius suspected he was in the midst of coaxing down his rebellious hair, a particularly difficult task, especially without the use of Sleekyazy’s Hair Potion, which James had refused to use when it had been suggested by Hermione. He was proud of the way his hair was, thank you very much, he had responded to her in a dignified tone—a declaration made questionable by the fact that half an hour had already passed since he had gone to the bathroom for some ‘finishing touches.’

Sirius was adjusting his tie with the help of the mirror he had levitated before him, when the door opened and James entered.

“I hate you,” James told him in a flat tone when he reached his bed. He threw down his comb and sighed.

Sirius glanced at him and smirked. “No luck with your hair, Prongs? You should’ve listened to Hermione and used your dad’s hair potion. Then you’ll be looking just as dapper as me and Ron.”

“Shut up,” James grunted. But he looked down at himself with a troubled look. He turned to Ron. “Reckon I look all right?”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, you look fine. ’S just dress robes and well, if you can’t do anything ’bout your hair, you can’t do anything ’bout it, mate.” He exchanged a grin with Sirius when James let out a groan.

“You look very handsome, Prongs. Lily will be impressed when she sees you, which’ll be a first.” Sirius clapped James on the back. “And it’s better to have a bit of rebellious charm to an already stuffy look. Trust me, I know.”
James sighed, but he seemed mollified as his mouth quirked up into a wry smile. “Well,” he began, looking down at his watch, “the girls still have another half an hour to go. Want to wait here till it’s time or go down to the common room?”

Ron’s stomach had been growling steadily for fifteen minutes when they heard the door to the girls’ dormitories open from their place on the sofa.

“Finally,” Ron muttered, as the three of them stood from their seats.

But the girls seemed to be hesitating, as the door remained slightly ajar, and whispered murmurs could be heard from where they were. Sirius’s curiosity was piqued. He wanted to see Harry. While they waited for the girls to appear, two boys in the lower years exited the dormitories and hurried to the portrait hole, no doubt on their way to meet their dates and head to the party as well. Then Lily’s voice was heard as the door opened wider, revealing a long, dark blue sleeve and a slender hand, which held the door open.

“I think it’ll be all right, Hermione. The Sticking Charm should’ve worked—it’s still holding when you put your weight on it, isn’t it?”

“Mm, I suppose.” Hermione sounded hesitant. “I just don’t want to trip accidentally, since my robes are a bit long…” A sigh. Then, “All right, let’s just go. Can I hold your arm just in case, Harry?”

Sirius heard James draw in a breath when Lily came out. She looked beautiful, he had to admit, with her long dark red hair that was lightly curled and partly pulled back into a braid that disappeared into her tresses. The redness of her hair complimented the rich blue of her dress, which sparkled subtly when she walked towards them.

“You look nice,” Ron complimented her after James. Lily gave him a radiant smile in return.

But Sirius kept his gaze on the door, where two dark heads had just appeared. He watched, transfixed, as Harry was finally revealed in robes of deep forest green that were simple in design, but elegant in style and cut. Her face was turned away from him, as she was helping Hermione, who was walking gingerly, as if there was something wrong with her right foot, but he could see that her hair, which was normally slightly rumpled, was now sleek and tied up into a complicated chignon, close to the side of her head. There was something gold and sparkly in her hair—perhaps a barrette.

Then she lifted her face when she drew near them and the picture was complete.

Sirius felt a smile spread over his face when he took in the enhancements made to her already striking features—the area around her eyes was darker, making the green of her eyes more vibrant than he had ever seen them, and her lips were rosier, although not red, making them seem softer. The differences were simple, but that was the point, he supposed—something drastic would have stifled her. Everything beautiful about her was implicit.

He watched as she came to stand before him after Hermione released her arm to be helped by Ron instead. She looked nervous as she smiled at him in greeting.

“So how do I—”

“Wonderful.”

Her smile became embarrassed and she smoothed down the front of her robes.
“Thanks. You look quite nice yourself.”

“You are very kind, my lady.” He offered her his arm, which she took, and they followed James and Lily out of the common room.

He couldn’t help glancing at her as they went down the stairs, passing their housemates, who were returning from the feast. Although her expression showed no sign of discomfort, he felt her stiffen when a group of girls that included the blonde fifth-year who had tried to flirt with him went by them, whispering loudly and staring. “Did you do something to your hair?” he decided to ask, to distract her.

“Oh, you noticed, did you?” She raised a hand and touched her hair. “Hermione made me use Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion, so she could style my hair properly. She and Lily helped me with my makeup as well.” A wry smile crossed her lips. “I’m not very knowledgeable about those kind of things, you see.” Her face was shy when she glanced at him before looking away.

“No,” he agreed, feeling very fond all of a sudden, “you don’t seem to care about those things.” Then he realized how that must have sounded and added, “You’re more focused on other things, like dueling, Quidditch, and…” He grinned as a mischievous thought crossed his mind. “Making sure to humor me. You’re practically devoted to the last one, Harry—makes a bloke think that you’ve grown fond of him, which I know you have. You told me yourself that you like having me around. I must be completely adorable to you.”

There was a low sound of incredulity behind him, followed by muffled snorts and snickers. “Merlin’s beard, I swear…” he heard Ron choke out, complemented by Hermione’s giggles.

Harry opened her mouth, but seemed to change her mind, as she closed it and shook her head. “I…I don’t even know what to say to that. Sirius, you are just…completely shameless, that’s what you are to me.”

“Oh, Harry dear, have I broken you?”

“Yeah, you have. Congratulations.”

The corridors were filled with their laughter as they made their way to the third-floor room that Slughorn had reserved for the party.

The party was in full swing when they arrived. Sirius raised his eyebrows as he took in the decorations—all the walls seemed to have been covered with black and orange hangings and several dozen bats flapped their wings, flying above the attendees’ heads and past the strings of miniature jack-o-lanterns hanging from the ceiling, which provided the room with light. He noticed that some of the house-elves from the kitchens had been gathered to serve the guests, who offered trayfuls of hors-d’oeuvres, desserts, and many other kinds of food besides. Ron made a happy sound of exclamation when one of the elves approached them with a large tray full of small jacket potatoes and mini quiches.

Sirius felt Harry press herself close to him as they maneuvered through the crowd of people. He let his eyes roam around the room, looking and searching. A scoff almost escaped him when he saw Snape loitering around the refreshments table and tensed at the sight of Regulus, who was listening to a wizard with a large hat whom he did not recognize. His brother seemed bored, as his eyes intermittently flicked to other parts of the room. Their eyes met and Regulus briefly narrowed his eyes before shifting his attention back to the wizard.

“Harry, Sirius!” Lily came towards them, smiling. She held a flute of champagne in her hand. “Let’s
go say hi to Slughorn, shall we? He was looking forward to seeing us.” She led the two of them to
the Potions Master, who was already in conversation with James, Hermione, and Ron. There was a
tall, thin, wizard next to the teacher, who looked as if he had just recently recovered from a long
period of exhaustion, if his half-hollowed cheeks and the weary look in his eyes were any indication.
Slughorn beamed when he saw them.

“Welcome, Miss Granger! I see that you have brought Mr. Black as your guest—I see that talent
attracts talent…” His mustache quivered as he chortled at Harry’s flushed face as she greeted him.
Sirius, for his part, felt pleased at the teasing remark—he and Harry did seem suitable for one
another, didn’t they?

“Ah, yes!” Slughorn’s large eyes brightened and he turned to the thin wizard next to him. He
beamed as he pulled him forward. “I should introduce you all to this young man right here—such
promising talent! He was the best potioneer in his year when he was at Hogwarts! Of course, he’s
been under the radar for the past few years, and it was only a week ago that he contacted me with
some very significant information. I was so delighted to hear from him that I invited him to the party.
You wouldn’t mind telling them about what you told me, would you, Damocles? After all, you did
say that you were in the process of getting a patent for it, so the news will hit the stands before we
know it!”

Sirius thought he heard Hermione let out a little gasp at Damocles’s name.

Damocles gave them a wide smile and shook their hands. “I certainly don’t mind at all, Professor.
But er…” He gave a small laugh, looking somewhat embarrassed. “I’m not sure as how to start, as it
is quite a…quite a topic, especially for these times…er, but I’ll try.” He cleared his throat and
regarded them with an eager expression. “Well, to put it simply and frankly, I am in the process of
getting a patent approved for a potion I have created—the Wolfsbane Potion, I have decided to call
it.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow, mildly interested. He felt Harry squeeze his arm slightly.

“The Wolfsbane Potion? What does it do?” Lily asked, her green eyes shining with curiosity.

Slughorn looked proud as he beamed at Damocles, who gave a self-conscious laugh. “Well, to put it
simply, it is a potion to treat the worst effects of lycanthropy. Er…” He took a quick glance around
him. “It is a potion that will allow werewolves to suppress the wolf inside of them, so that they may
be able to keep their minds intact on the night of their transformation. It cannot prevent the
transformation, as it cannot cure, but it will have the effect of rendering them harmless to humans on
that day, as they will maintain their full mental, by which I mean, human, faculties.” There was a
gleam of excitement in his eyes as he anticipated their reactions.

They were silent. Sirius stared at him before exchanging a look with James and Lily, who seemed
just as stunned. Had they really heard him correctly?

“Pardon me, sir,” James began.

“Call me Damocles.”

“Damocles, are you really suggesting that this…Wolfsbane Potion that you have created will help
werewolves on the day of the full moon, by preserving their human minds even while they transform
and are transformed?”

“Yes, precisely.”
“But how does that work? More importantly, how are you sure that it works?” Sirius asked next. He was taken aback by such a notion—the idea of a werewolf being harmless to humans…it had never been thought possible, and yet, here was a wizard claiming the opposite. He felt hope stir in his chest for Remus—perhaps, if this potion really worked and was put in production, Remus wouldn’t have to suffer as much as he did by worrying about the threat he posed when they went on their monthly adventure.

“Ah, well, first, I can assure you that it works, with the utmost confidence. However, as to how I became sure…that was not an easy process, no, but, necessary.” He paused, his face becoming pensive, before continuing. “You see, the main ingredient is wolfsbane, also known as aconite, or monkshood, a plant well-known for being poisonous to wolves—perhaps you may be able to understand why it was chosen to, shall we say, kill, or quiet the wolf inside the werewolf. It was a long and hard road to perfect the potion, which cost me much sleep for the past few years. It was a constant process of trial and error, as I discovered how the effects of the plant were muted by the other ingredients, which changed constantly, until I finally came upon the appropriate formula. Early versions of the potion were tested out on actual wolves, which were caught—sometimes not—and fed meat injected with the solution. The desired result was immediate death. I needed to make sure that the wolfsbane was potent enough to kill the actual wolf despite the addition of the other ingredients, the main purpose of which was to keep the human part of the werewolf alive while the poison did its work on the wolf inside. As you might have guessed, most of the wolves did not die…either at all or immediately, that is. Those who died in the early and middle stages of the process varied in their time of death—some took hours, some days, some weeks. I had to record them all to see what had worked and not worked, and it was not until the last week of the previous month that I finally broke through.” His eyes brightened, lighting up his entire face. “I produced a formula that was consistent in causing immediate death to the wolves that were subjected to it. And so, I needed to test it out on an actual subject, by which I mean, an actual werewolf.”

“I’m guessing you found one.” Harry’s voice startled Sirius and made the others turn to her as well. She stared directly at Damocles, who nodded vigorously.

“Yes, indeed I did. It’s not—” He took a glance around him again. His voice was quieter when he continued. “It’s not so difficult to find one these days. As you might’ve discovered from the papers, there’s quite a few of them who’ve made their identities as lycanthropes clear, by er…causing a bit of mayhem, under the influence of the Dark Arts.”

Lily’s voice was cool when she spoke. “Not all of them are like that, though. Most of them are your typical wizard or witch, going through the same motions and lives, except for the week of their transformation.”

Damocles widened his eyes. “Oh, yes, of course I’m aware of that. I just meant that, because of the times, it’s not so difficult to get yourself connected with a werewolf, as their networks have become clearer. So back to what I was saying—I acquainted myself with a decent chap, who was a werewolf, and proposed the potion to him. He was intrigued, but wary, as to the potion’s success, so I paid him a certain sum to be my first werewolf test subject.” He hesitated. “It worked, but not completely. I put him in a locked room on the day of the full moon and watched him transform through a small window on the door—his state, when transformed, was not docile when he caught sight of me through the window. But I could tell that there was something holding him back as he tried to claw at me through the window…he would make as if to jump, then pause, then try to jump again, before deciding to run at the door, which he just managed to stop himself from crashing into. From watching him, I knew that the potion worked only in some respects. So I had to go through the process again. I…” He paused and gave Lily a grim smile. “I reckon I went through about a dozen werewolves. Thank Merlin that the eleventh one proved to be my breakthrough. The twelfth one was to make sure. By that time, there weren’t many decent werewolves left—well, according to my view,
anyway. And that’s how I finally concocted the definitive form of the Wolfsbane Potion to apply for a patent.” He raised his flute of champagne to them and drank it all in one go.

Slughorn raised his own glass to him and drank, before turning to his students with a cheery smile. “Now wasn’t that a fascinating story? Damocles, the poor chap, went through so many travails just to produce something so revolutionary! There had been nothing but radio silence from him for the past three years! But it has all been worth it, I imagine, wouldn’t you say so, Damocles? It’s certainly one for the books!”

Damocles let out another embarrassed laugh before turning to him and talking animatedly.

Sirius’s mind reeled from the information—the potion apparently worked! He saw no reason why the wizard would have lied. If anything, he had been a bit too chatty about the methods he had used to make the potion. If it was true that Damocles would soon be receiving a patent for his potion, then it wouldn’t be long before the potion was made known to everyone to brew. The problem, of course, lay in obtaining the ingredients and the process of brewing it, but he was sure that between himself, James, and Lily, there wouldn’t be much to it. Then Remus would be able to take it and have a bit of peace for once about his condition. He glanced at James and knew that similar thoughts had run through his head.

This was fantastic. He couldn’t wait to tell Remus about it.

“Harry,” he addressed her, feeling optimistic and cheerful, “want to get something to drink with me?”

“Oh, all right.”

But Lily stopped them. “Wait!” she exclaimed, grabbing onto Harry’s other arm. “We should take a picture first.” She gestured at the photographer who had approached them with his camera.

“Er, I’m not too fond of having my picture taken.” Harry eyed the camera warily.

“Oh, but you must, Harry!” Hermione looked very insistent, to Sirius’s bemusement and Harry’s surprise. Harry, despite her protests, was pulled into standing alongside Lily, on whose other side was James. Sirius took his place beside Harry. He looked questioningly at Hermione and Ron, who stood back while the photographer readied his camera. Lily noticed as well.

“Ron, Hermione, aren’t you joining us? It’ll be lovely to have a picture taken all together.”

They smiled and shook their heads. “We can always take another picture. You four can be in the first one.” Hermione waved away Lily’s protests, which were short-lived as the photographer raised his camera. Sirius put an arm around Harry and he felt her put a hand on his back just as the flash appeared.

“Here.” Lily beamed as she handed him his copy of the photograph that been taken of them. Hermione and Ron crowded around Harry and commented and laughed about the picture. It was a rather good one, Sirius had to admit. All four of them had their arms around each other and were smiling and laughing. He took a moment to appreciate the way Harry ducked her head a little as she laughed and the way her eyes seemed to grow brighter as she grinned.

“You and her really do look alike, Harry.” He heard Hermione giggle with Harry.

He looked down at the picture again, wondering, and blinked. By ‘you and her,’ Hermione could have only meant Harry and Lily, who were standing side by side.
Oh. She had a point. The two girls’ eyes were extremely similar in their shape and color. But Sirius knew, from looking into Harry’s eyes, that there was a different depth to them than there was in Lily’s. But as for the actual color…

It was the same.

Something that Regulus had said during their brief conversation flashed through his mind.

“—her eyes are the same as the girl’s.”

He had meant Harry and Lily’s eyes. It was perturbing to think that his younger brother had grasped the obvious similarity between the two girls faster than him. It made him think of his entire remark:

“She looks like both Potters—her hair’s similar to the bloke’s and her eyes are the same as the girl’s.”

Clearly, Regulus had been mistaken in the case of Lily’s surname, but…if he could ignore the fact that Harry’s hair was smooth and sleek for the evening and imagine the way it normally was, then… perhaps his brother had not been so far-fetched in his observation of James and Harry’s hair. He furrowed his brows, perplexed.

“Everything all right, Sirius?” Harry had returned to him. Her bright green eyes, made to look wider by her makeup, made his mind blank for a second.

“Yeah, fine.” He grinned. “Want to get those drinks now?”

They made their way to the refreshments table. Someone tapped him on the shoulder right as he picked up a glass of mead. He turned around and saw Lily.

“Something wrong?” he asked her, noting the anxious look on her face.

“I can’t find my picture—you know, the one we just took. I accidentally left it here on the table while getting a drink and it’s only been a minute or two…”

“D’you want mine, Lily?” Harry offered hers to her. “I can make another copy off Sirius’s.”

“Oh no, Harry, I couldn’t do that. I’ll have James make a copy of his for me. It’s just, that was the original one, you know?” She sighed, looking very put out, as she stared into her empty glass. “Well, I suppose that’s enough alcohol for the evening. Can’t believe I got so careless.” Then her face brightened and she looped an arm through Harry’s. “Why don’t you come with me to meet the rest of the Slug Club, Harry? You haven’t met them yet, have you?”

“I—”

Sirius laughed as he followed them, after receiving the panicked look that Harry sent him. The rest of the evening was spent socializing with the different people that Lily knew, with Sirius backing up Harry by talking enough for both of them when the attention was turned to the two of them. Every grateful and amused look that she sent him was logged into the part of his mind that had somehow been subconsciously created for her. It was a mysterious and alluring place, full of green eyes, wry smiles, and bright laughter. It was midnight when they left for Gryffindor Tower.

“Thanks for going with me,” Harry thanked him before he entered the dormitories. “You helped make it better than expected.” She turned to face him and he let the arm that he had draped around her shoulders to drop. He wished her hair was down so that he would have an excuse to touch her by running a hand through it.
“Anytime, Harry. It's always nice being a date for someone as lovely as you.” He caught Hermione quickly turning her head away from them as she waited by the door to the girls' dormitories.

“Listen,” he said, looking at Harry again, “if you ever need a date again, for anything, just, er, come to me first, all right? ’Cause I won't mind—ever.” He felt a soft smile spread on his face when her eyes widened and she averted her gaze, seeming a little stunned. He went up the to the room after seeing the door close behind her.

Remus was apparently the only one asleep when he entered, as the curtains were drawn around his bed. James and Ron passed him, heading to the bathroom. Peter, who was sitting on his bed with a textbook on his legs, greeted him a yawn.

“Have fun, Padfoot?”

“Yeah.”

He took out the photograph from his robes and gazed at it for a moment with a small smile, before opening the topmost drawer of his bedside cabinet and placing it on top of the two-way mirror that he had made with James.

Chapter End Notes

This was honestly the most difficult chapter that I have written thus far. I played around with different ideas for this chapter’s POV, but I really wanted to try and get into Sirius Black’s mind, which turned out to be more elusive than I had feared it to be—this is subject to, of course, my personal interpretation of him, the basis of which is: Sirius does not care for processing his emotions properly. In short, I was attempting to write through a character who knows and is well-aware of what he feels, but does not necessarily or completely comprehend the significance of his emotional experiences. It was more complicated than I imagined, to put it more simply. (I still don’t know if I got through what I wanted to get through properly for this chapter—this matter is subject to, of course, your opinions, as the readers.)

-The easiest part of this chapter to write was the opening scene, ironically enough.
-If some of the reflective parts concerning Harry seem a bit romanticized or rather, dreamy—that was intentional. Just to make my intentions clear (because I’m not sure if this chapter is as coherent as I wanted it to be): I was attempting to depict the experience of having one’s first, serious crush.
-For any Remus fans out there: I know. I am so sorry.
-For the Halloween party: Although not mentioned in the books, I took it to be plausible that Snape would’ve been in the Slug Club, as he was rather good at Potions, certainly enough to make his own instructions for the potions in the textbook. I imagine Slughorn might’ve noticed his talent. Damocles’s inclusion was due to my desire for there to be an at least semi-interesting party guest, like Eldred Worple and Sanguini in HBP for the Christmas party. I took liberties with the few details surrounding the Wolfsbane Potion, which was most likely invented after the Marauders left Hogwarts, but for the purpose of the scene, I had it be invented earlier. It could probably make for interesting future scenes as well.

The next chapter will be…different, to say the least. It will take the story back chronologically, and will take place outside Hogwarts. One thing I will tell you with
dead certainty: it will be easier to write than this one and I am especially eager to write it, so it will be posted by the end of the weekend. It will answer some of the questions raised in this chapter.

THANK YOU SO MUCH for all your patience and support. It is your enduring patience in addition to all your wonderful feedback that encourages me to go on. Thank you all so much for each kudos, bookmark, comment, and subscription. Hope to see you all again next chapter :)

His Most Loyal Servant

Chapter Notes

**Warning! (Just in case):** Implied violence/indirect violence ahead. Nothing too graphic, although there’s mention of blood and torture. There’s some dark stuff included in this chapter—you have been warned.

Oh and there's a lot of flashbacks.

The room was as dark as ever when she cracked the door open, just enough to glimpse the barely discernible outline of his prone form on the bed. The curtains had been drawn around him, to give him a sense of privacy, but a gap had been left open, so that the current status of his state would be gauged.

Her face was kept an inch away from the doorway to prevent his magic from reacting to her presence—even the mere tip of a finger could be sensed by the yet invisible barrier of magic that encased him as he lay in rest. The first time she had attempted to enter the room after the barrier had appeared around him had made her fear for her life as a crack had sounded in the air, presaging the flash of red light (magic, she learned later) that had sped towards her as she stood frozen with shock and terror, just one step into the bedroom. Her quick reflexes had saved her, as she had stumbled backwards into the hallway and slammed the door shut just as the light reached it and clashed with it, emitting a loud thud that had made her flinch as she maintained her hold on the doorknob, lest the magic tried to force it open to harm her.

Now, she let out a tentative breath as she squinted, observing the slight rise and fall of his body. The only light came from the soft glow emitted by her wand to illuminate the obscure length of the fourth-floor hallway in which she stood. She tensed as something in the air around his body crackled. A spark of red light blinked into existence and became brighter as it spread into a web-like dome, making evident the protection it offered to its master, whom it surrounded. The curtains around the bed fluttered, disturbed as they were by the magic’s presence. Bellatrix continued to stare, despair rising in her chest as she thought back to the day of the unhappy incident…

It had been a week since his sudden collapse into unconsciousness in the drawing room. His visit had not been sudden, but expected, as he had come to relay his instructions to them on that early morning of the previous Wednesday. She had been so pleased to receive him, as most of her invitations to her home had gone ignored. But he had decided to be so generous as to grace her with his presence that morning. The tea had already been made and the house-elves had been dismissed for the duration of his stay, as she insisted on preparing everything herself—it was important that she please him through her own efforts, as was expected of his most faithful servant.

Rodolphus had been standing by the entryway when she had entered the drawing room, carrying the tray with the tea, while he had been examining the framed pictures of the family ancestors on top of the mantelpiece. She had passed her husband to give her lord his tea first, when the air surrounding
him rippled—an obvious presence of strange magic that had made her freeze in her steps as she approached him. His eyes had flashed red as he swiftly turned to face her, when the ripple crossed through his body and…

A scream had torn out of his mouth when a sudden burst of white light burst from his body, covering him and blinding her—a cry had escaped her lips as she dropped the tea, shocked, barely registering the hot liquid splashing on her robes and feet, as the light threatened to wash over her like it did with his half of the room. She heard him scream as she had never heard him scream before—one of pain (and perhaps fear), rather than rage—while Rodolphus cast the Shield Charm to prevent the light from touching her as it reached towards her, grasping with its rays. But she had struggled when her husband grasped her tightly by the arm and dragged her away from him, as the room grew ever brighter as her master continued to scream. And she had screamed as well.

“LET ME GO, YOU FOOL! WE MUST HELP HIM! I MUST HELP HIM!”

But Rodolphus had put an arm around her neck to restrain her, almost choking her, as she persisted in her attempts to rush towards him.

“MY LORD! MY LORD!”

She had never felt so helpless as she did in that moment, as she watched the light begin to retreat in on itself. Then it disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared and the screams stopped. Her heart had been pounding, wanting to escape the confines of her chest, as she stared at the frozen form of her master, the pale features of his face twisted in unspeakable agony…

His body crumpled to the floor.

She screamed.

Rodolphus could not prevent her from running to him, as he jerked his arm away from her, as if burned.

But she had not been able to touch him as she knelt before his still form—she had not dared. He did not wake at her frantic pleas, and so, she had drawn her wand and cast every reviving spell that she knew. None had worked. Her fingers had been trembling when she finally reached out a hand towards his nose and mouth, hoping…

A breath had caressed her fingers, and she had let out a shaky exhale.

“Is he dead?”

Her neck could have snapped from how quickly she turned it.

“He’s alive. Of course he’s alive,” she had responded coldly, her eyes boring into the impassive eyes of her husband, who had moved to stand right behind her. She turned back to her lord and gently closed the lids over his eyes, which had rolled back when he had fallen to the floor.

She and Rodolphus had decided to place him in the master bedroom after a brief discussion on how to best accommodate his state. Her husband had not looked pleased at the idea, but had relented, grudgingly, at her vehemence—it was unthinkable to let their Dark Lord occupy one of the lesser, guest bedrooms. How could he dare suggest that?

Rodolphus had levitated him to the chamber, wary as they both were of further disturbing any part of him. And there he had stayed, unresponsive and unaware, as if he were…
Voices rang out from the drawing room on the second floor as she descended the stairs from the fourth floor. A disdainful sneer curled itself out on her lips as she heard some of them laugh and shout, no doubt halfway on their way to complete inebriation. The whole lot of them had settled into the habit of coming by her house since the night they had been summoned. And despite her orders to the house-elves to not serve them any alcohol as the night grew later, her guests had taken the liberty of raiding the pantry and the wine cellar themselves.

*Disgusting beasts,* she cursed them in her head as she approached the door. *Complete lay-abouts, all of them. At least they’ll be gone again in the morning, when they’ll return to their jobs and homes. They say they’re here to help and show support, but what have they done, except empty my house of food and drink?*

The large, oaken double doors opened before her and she strode in with an imperious and haughty air, ignoring the glances that she had attracted by her entrance, and took her seat by her husband at the long table that had been set up for them. Her nose wrinkled at the smell of firewhisky, mead, and wine, the presence of which were made evident by the empty and half-empty bottles along the table. She quietly clucked her tongue as she observed the stains they had made on the dark tablecloth, making her brother-in-law turn to her.

“No changes, then?”

“None,” she answered, in no mood to explain further. Visiting her lord and seeing him in that state always put her in a terse mood—not only was her chest constricted with worry, but the continued presence of her esteemed guests that met her every evening threatened to make her temper ever shorter. Her lips pursed in disapproval when Rabastan poured himself a goblet of wine, but she raised her eyebrows in mild surprise when he offered it to her. She gave him a nod in thanks before taking a sip.

“So he refuses to wake, still? It has already been a week.” Lucius’s cool drawl made her turn to him. She narrowed her eyes when he leaned back in his chair with a sigh, an expression of boredom spreading across his face.

The fool could go home anytime he wanted, she thought, offended and irritated by his apparent lack of concern for the Dark Lord. In fact, all of them could leave—it would make it easier for her to take care of her lord, as all her attention would be devoted to him, instead of having to play host to such…

Yaxley grunted in agreement. “A week’s a long time, ’specially for someone like him. And according to what Madam Lestrange has told us, it’s something that shouldn’t have happened, not in normal circumstances. I mean, given his magical prowess, who would’ve thought that he’d be defeated by a mysterious burst of magic?”

*Defeated?*

Bellatrix tightened her grip on her goblet as her temper flared. “Mind your words, Yaxley,” she told him coldly, her dark eyes flashing. “How dare you be so presumptuous! You and I, as well as everyone in this room, know that the Dark Lord is not one to be defeated by something so fickle and inexplicable. How dare you speak of him that way when he is in such a state—”

“It is precisely because he is such a state that I dare say so, Madam Lestrange. It has been a week! Never have we seen such a thing happen to him—he is, as you implied, far above us in his magical
abilities, but he, in all his greatness, has fallen and continues to remain so. We cannot move forward in our plans, as it is. He might as well be dead for all the good he’s doing us—”

She slammed her goblet down on the table, silencing him. The wine sloshed out, splattering her hands, but she waved away Travers’ offer of a napkin as she slowly stood up from her seat. The room was silent and every eye trained on her.

“Dead? How dare you.” Her eyes were wide and her voice shook from her anger, which mounted as Yaxley stared back at her. He attempted a placating smile.

“I do not mean that I believe he is dead, Madam Lestrange. But we might as well think him dead, if he remains as he is, in that comatose state, forever encased by his magic, which clearly persists. But his body, perhaps, may indeed be a husk, if—”

“YOU FAITHLESS SCUM!”

Yaxley gave a violent jump at her yell. Bellatrix could not believe what she was hearing. The indignant look he gave her made the fury inside her explode.

“How dare you sit there, with the mark upon your arm, the robes around your shoulders, and declare that he might as well be dead? He is not dead! He will awaken and when he does, he will know that you, you who dare consider yourself his servant, openly declared that he was no better than an impotent husk!”

Yaxley’s face colored and he stood up so quickly from his seat that his chair fell and clattered on the polished wooden floor.

“You are being unreasonable, Madam Lestrange!” he snapped. “You clearly refuse to see the facts! I stand by what I said about the Dark Lord—he might as well be dead, with his magic swirling around him, making us unable to get near him, much less enter the damn room to revive him! Which is your fault, by the way!” He pointed his finger at her, his eyes wide like hers, in his anger. “Who decided to try reviving him by summoning him through the Mark? Eh? A smart idea, that! All it did was make his magic react by rebounding the summon towards you and all of us here assembled today—” he gestured at those around the table, “—who have his Mark! And it has continued to burn since that day, has it not? A most ugly inconvenience, being unable to cover it up by any means—” With a savage movement, he pulled away the sleeve of his robe from his left forearm, exposing the black brand that had been burning on all their arms for the past five days, “—when he himself told us to keep it secret! It is never supposed to burn like this, except when we are summoned by him! But because of your mistake, our very lives are being threatened by the exposure of this truth!” He slammed his hand down on the table and the two of them glowered at one another.

Bellatrix let out a scornful laugh. “You’re scared because your actual life out there, in the public, is being threatened?” Her voice took on a mocking, childish tone at the end.

“YOU COWARD!” she roared, making him flinch and startling several others, who spilled their drinks on themselves and cursed. “HIS GOAL WAS NEVER TO KEEP OUR IDENTITIES SECRET, YOU FOOL! IT WAS A MEANS TO AN END—WE WOULD UNMASK OURSELVES AFTER HIS, OUR, MISSION WAS COMPLETED, WHEN THE NEW WORLD ORDER BEGAN!”

Yaxley’s face became purple from his indignant fury. “AND YET IT’S FALLING APART NOW! NOT ONLY FROM HIS INEXPLICABLE FALL, BUT FROM THIS ACCURSED—”
“Bella!”

Rodolphus seized her left arm and squeezed enough to make her feel pain. Her right hand had grasped the wand inside her robes.

“Restrain yourself. He would not want us fighting amongst ourselves.”

Her chest heaved from her harsh breathing as she continued staring at Yaxley, whose hand had frozen as it reached towards his chest to pull out his own wand. She inclined her head slightly, indicating that she had heard him. Rodolphus relaxed his grip on her and she pulled her arm away from him as she settled into her seat, her eyes refusing to leave Yaxley, who mirrored her movements.

“Yaxley has a point, Bella,” Lucius began, leaning towards her. “It was unthinkable that something like this would happen to the Dark Lord. We have all seen his power at work, have we not? He is not someone to suddenly collapse, as you’ve told us—”

“If that is the truth,” Dolohov cut in, his voice low and sardonic. His eyes glittered maliciously as he turned to Bellatrix, whose fingers twitched. But it was Rodolphus who responded.

“Are you calling us liars? Answer carefully, Dolohov—this is my house and my table you are sitting at.”

Dolohov smiled thinly. “But I have known him longer than either of you. And let me assure you, Lestrange, he has never entered into such a state as this, and in your house, no less. I am not calling you and your wife liars, but there is probable cause for suspicion when the event occurred under the roof of two of his followers, one of whom is known to be particularly obsequious towards him…”

The corner of his mouth twitched as he looked at Bellatrix, who grit her teeth. “I am merely saying…it is not so unreasonable to suspect that his current state was brought upon by two rather recent followers, who, under the guise of his greatest flatterers, sought instead to gain his power—”

This time, Rodolphus rose with Bellatrix, who had drawn her wand. Rabastan remained seated and looked between the three of them warily.

“Considering such a possibility is out of the question, Dolohov!” Lucius snapped. “What exactly do you mean by your words? That the Dark Lord was cursed into that state by Bella and Rodolphus? Not only are you offending our fellow comrades, but you are underestimating the Dark Lord as well! How dare you suggest that he be taken off guard by two of his servants who, like you and I, and the rest of us here, are nothing when compared to his superior state of being? The fact that his magic reacted to Bella’s summon by creating an impenetrable barrier around him is proof of his resilient power, which none of us can counter, as demonstrated by our failure to even step into his room!”

There were murmurs of agreement from around the table. Dolohov’s lips curled into a sneer and he shifted his gaze from Bella, who seethed with repressed fury. What appalling scum, she thought as she continued to bore her eyes into his head. To dare suggest that I, his most loyal servant, would do such a thing! The prone form of her unconscious master flashed through her mind and her knees felt weak. My lord, what are we to do without you? You promised to see us through to a better world, but now, as you are…when will you wake? A thrill of fear gripped her heart. Will you awaken? Without him, what would she do? Go back to her high-society lifestyle by calling on the ladies who were also part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight? Return to being the perfect pure-blood wife by organizing and hosting dinners for special guests, like the Minister for Magic and members of the Wizengamot?

No, she decided, repulsed at the very thought. To continue with her cover, yes, but never again as an
identity and a place in society—the Dark Lord had shown her that she was far above such a station. Under his command, she was his trusted soldier and servant, able to unleash her magical skills in full, as an equal, or even a superior, among her fellow Death Eaters, the overwhelming majority of whom, she thought with a disdainful sniff, were men. Spineless ones too, as Yaxley had demonstrated himself to be. With the Dark Lord, she would transcend them all.

“But you must realize, Malfoy, that we cannot carry on like this much longer.” Dolohov’s eyes flicked to hers again and narrowed. “We do not know how much longer he will remain unconscious, which means we are on stand-by until he awakens—it is a significant blow to the mission we all accepted when we joined him.” His mouth twisted into a grim smile. “I think we need to consider the possibility that he will never awaken to discuss our future plan of action.”

“YOU DARE—”

“Yes, I dare!” he snapped, turning towards her with a fierce scowl. “Listen to me carefully, Bellatrix, because I do not say this lightly! Everything about the Dark Lord’s current state indicates that he will not awaken soon, if ever! We are powerless as it is, to help him. So now is the time to truly discuss what we are to do for our mission, which he allotted us to fulfill, while he remains absent _out there._” He jabbed his finger at the windows. “Just what do you think the public will say when he fails to appear again next week? It’s unprecedented for him this year—unless we take matters into our own hands, all his, and our efforts, to _make them know their place_ will have been for nothing. So we must compensate for his absence by—” he pushed back the left sleeve of his robes, “—revealing ourselves instead.”

There was pause while the whole table took in his words. Many looked appalled as they turned to one another, stunned. Lucius’s face was as white as a sheet as he opened his mouth.

“Now see here, Dolohov—”

“We, of the inner circle, have already unmasked ourselves to one another when we were all inadvertently summoned here by Madam Lestrange, have we not?”

“That’s because we had no choice! We were all confused—”

“This is no different,” Dolohov cut across him again. “From my perspective, we have no choice but to inspire the same sense of terror through revealing our identities. Well, I suppose I can understand your reserve, Malfoy—after all, the public already knows my face, as I was one of his earliest followers, before you and the others were assembled, so I don’t have much to lose. But to expose yourself, a respected man in pure-blood society, as one of his followers, by unmasking yourself and baring his Mark to anyone who’ll see it—now, that is what I call a public scandal. The Wizarding community will be unsettled by the revelation and you’ll certainly get the idea across—if a highly-respected man of prestigious pure-blood stock had previously hidden his connection to the Dark Lord, then how many others from the esteemed pure-blood families follow him as well? A public disorder is what we’ll have on our hands, and those whose sentiments fit ours, but had hidden them, may be persuaded to join us and our mission, while those who truly fear…shall be exposed as well. Then we shall know our friends and our enemies.”

Bellatrix stared at him. What Dolohov was suggesting…it was utter madness and yet…revealing her identity as a Death Eater…it was…

Lucius slammed his hands down on the table. “We’ll be persecuted and thrown into Azkaban, you idiot! Your idea will destroy the mission, not expand it! Perhaps you want some glory for yourself by putting yourself out there—”
“Mind your words, boy.”* Dolohov’s voice was low and dangerous. “And use your brain—I’m not asking you to get yourself thrown in prison, but to reveal the brand on your forearm, which no one out there knows about. The public’s never seen your face when you take part in your little rampages around Muggle towns and villages, have they? Then they won’t know what you’ve done. All they’ll know, from seeing your Mark, is that it’s the same one as the one they see in the sky after a job has been completed, and that, therefore, you must support the Dark Lord’s aims. All they will conclusively glean from it is your tacit approval of him and though you may be suspected as a Death Eater, they can’t prove that you’ve done anything or that you really are one. It’s the symbolism that matters and carries a message, not the actual action.”

Excitement slowly rose within Bellatrix as she considered Dolohov’s explanation. His suggestion to expose and yet not expose their identities as Death Eaters was quite sound. The Dark Lord’s aims would not be forgotten and she would be so proud to reveal that she was one of his. And perhaps, several members of her family would be encouraged to join her lord as well, once her support for him became known…

But she had her own ideas as well.

“Not a bad idea, Dolohov,” she said silkily, giving him a cool smile. “But I say we can go farther than that, if we wish—I, for one, wouldn’t mind unmasking myself in public and revealing my Mark.” Rabastan, who sat across from her, stared at her, but she ignored him and continued. “Because as much as symbolism may matter, the message can only carry so far without more physical proof of our support for the Dark Lord. I wouldn’t mind putting myself out on the edge, if you will—oh, they’ll know that I’m a Death Eater, but as to which activities I’ve partaken in? How would they know? Perhaps I only tagged along to watch. Of course, I may get a little bored and accidentally find myself taking part in some of the fun…”

She exchanged a smirk with Dolohov. Lucius made a choking sound.

“Bella,” he addressed her hoarsely with wide eyes, “Don’t you understand? If they catch you at it, you can be arrested and given to the Dementors at Azkaban!”

“Oh, quiet your worries, Lucius. I mean to keep myself only on the edge—I can’t help the Dark Lord while in prison, can I? I’ll be sure to keep myself out of Azkaban while furthering his cause as much as possible. That is what a loyal servant does.”

Lucius stared at her, as if he couldn’t believe what she was saying, but gave no response. Instead, he turned to Rodolphus and Rabastan, whose eyes were also on her. Bellatrix did not mind them at all, but took a sip of her wine. She did not care whether her husband and her brother-in-law approved of her decision or not—she would do anything she could to make sure her lord’s mission and presence were not forgotten.

“Rodolphus? Rabastan? What do you make of this? You must think this is madness as well, what Bella and Dolohov have just said…”

“My father was in the Dark Lord’s circle of friends when they were at Hogwarts,”** Rodolphus replied, turning to Lucius. “And I joined him as his Death Eater, in part to honor my father and because I found myself sympathetic to his ideas. And in this case, I shall follow my wife. The Lestranges have everything to gain from furthering the Dark Lord’s cause. Of course, perhaps my brother…”

“I’m with you, brother…and sister.” Rabastan inclined his head at Bella, who acknowledged it with a nod. She felt proud as she looked at the two men—the Lestranges were not cowards. They were loyal and true to the Dark Lord.
She heard Lucius mutter something that sounded like “madness,” under his breath. “You may think we are mad, Lucius, but we have nothing to hide—” she smirked wryly, “—apart from what needs to remain hidden to keep us out of Azkaban. We are his proud servants and we mean to keep his ideas alive while he rests. You may do nothing, if you please, but when the Dark Lord finally wakes, he will know all that the Lestranges have done for his sake, while you…simply waited.”

The chair scraped across the floor as Lucius stood up from it. “I’m leaving,” he stated. “I shall wait for him to wake and I will hold you to it, Bella, to inform me when he does. I am still his loyal servant, but I cannot do as you will—I will be patient and observe everything to report back to the Dark Lord about all that I have heard and seen whilst he was asleep. That shall be my contribution to the cause.”

Bellatrix scoffed as he turned towards the doors and left. “Anyone else?” she asked the rest of the table. “I’d rather you leave my house now, if your sentiments run close to those of dear Lucius. I can’t say it’s been a pleasure having you all here, each night, for the past several days.” She watched, amused and disgusted, as her fellow Death Eaters stood up from their seats and left, some silent, and some muttering amongst each other with anxious looks. Only Travers and Dolohov stayed at the table with the Lestranges.

“Well, Madam Lestrange,” Travers said, downing the last of his drink and standing up from his seat, “I shall be heading home now as well, but believe me when I say that I will follow through with you and Dolohov.”

Bellatrix rose from her chair after he had gone. “I’m guessing you mean to stay here?” she asked Dolohov tartly, when he poured himself another glass of firewhisky.

He grinned and she pursed her lips at the sight. “It would be greatly appreciated if you were to let me stay. Your house will be an ideal place to lay low in. But I recommend you increase the protective spells outside if you really mean to go through with your intentions.”

“Hmph. Then stay.” She downed the rest of the wine in her goblet and exited the drawing room to ascend the stairs to her room. But she paused when she reached her landing and continued up the stairs to the fourth floor. She made sure to step carefully and silently towards the ornate wooden door made of polished oak, and reached out a hand to the doorknob, which turned itself into a hissing snake head—it bit the hand of those who were not the master or those to whom the master had not given permission. Bellatrix grasped it and the snake fell silent as it turned back into round, ornate steel. The door cracked open without a sound and she peered into the pitch-black room. Like before, as if her presence had been detected, the air around the middle of the room, where the bed was situated, crackled and emitted a burst of red energy. In that momentary glow, Bellatrix glimpsed her lord, lying as still as ever, on the bed. She watched as the crackling energy reappeared and formed a domed web around the bed, once more encasing the figure on it.

A plan formed in her head that night as she brushed her hair, readying herself for sleep. An owl would be sent out early in the morning to ensure it was delivered to him before all the other mail. Surely, the Dark Lord would not be displeased at what she intended to do, to preserve his reputation and ideals through the willing sacrifice of her anonymity as his Death Eater.
branded on the inner forearms of the Dark Lord’s closest followers, as Aunt Walburga’s fondness for her had grown, since finding out about her Mark, which she herself had revealed to her. This had occurred soon after her afternoon tea with Minister Minchum, whom she had personally invited to her home, on the weekend following the heated discussion in the drawing room on the previous month:

She had gone about it rather sweetly, she liked to think, as she had purposefully worn robes with shorter sleeves than her usual, the left sleeve of which had casually slipped down into the crook of her elbow as she ostentatiously picked up her teacup with her non-dominant hand while sitting across from the Minister, who had sat between Rodolphus and Rabastan. They had been out in the garden for afternoon tea and the day had been fair, with clear blue skies and a bit of cheerful sun. A serene smile had graced her face when the Minister’s eyes fell on her left forearm, which she had conveniently turned towards him as she drank from her teacup. She had watched as his eyes widened and bulged as he recognized the Mark and its significance.

Everything had gone quite productively after that: Rodolphus and Rabastan had shown him their Marks as well, for added effect, when he had turned to stare at them to ensure that he had indeed seen the brand on her arm. The Minister’s face had blanched, then colored rapidly, while she continued the conversation that he had started, a discussion about, of all things, the tense political atmosphere that was seeping through and under every door in Britain, regardless of one’s personal interest in politics. He had actually been in the midst of speaking quite tersely about the matter of the Death Eaters, who had, on the previous week, attacked the house of a wizard that had offended them by selling some odd Muggle knickknacks out on the street, by the Leaky Cauldron, when she had startled him by showing her arm.

His face had grown stonier as she calmly put forth the pure-blood take on current politics, to which she and her family were subscribed. In short, she had explained to him about the necessity of reinstating the old magical hierarchy based on blood purity, which had been undermined in the last couple centuries by the inclusion of Muggle-borns and Muggles into their very exclusive magical society, which had undergone a regression from the dilution of magical blood, through the proliferation of half-bloods. But, she had emphasized, while the Minister grew ever tenser, the Dark Lord would be the Wizarding world’s salvation by reinstating pure-blood supremacy based on the degree of blood purity, thus returning the right and control of magic to where it had all originated—from the old and highly-esteemed houses of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, who, to this day, were the purest—herself included, of course.

“One must seek to preserve, not demolish the root of all our magical powers and prowess, Minister,” she had chided him lightly. “The Dark Lord only seeks to dismantle the oppression the Muggles have over us, by revoking the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, to which our desperate ancestors resorted, when the Muggles feared us and persecuted us. But that time is now long past—now, we must take back the rights to our magical expression that have been stolen from us and make a new era for the Wizarding world.”

The Minister had made not one comment after that and had left as soon as he had finished his tea. And she knew that he had understood.

It had not been long afterwards that an article in the Daily Prophet had appeared about the Dark Marks on their forearms, although the Lestranges had not been named, despite the article’s insinuation of several high-profile pure-blood families’ connections to the Death Eaters and their adoption of the Mark as a show of support for the Dark Lord. Then a few weeks later, another article had appeared, confirming Dolohov as a Death Eater, as the photograph accompanying it showed the Dark wizard laughing as he cast more flames at the Bones’ country manor and the approaching
Aurors. His left forearm had been exposed when he brandished a fallen Auror’s wand with his left hand to shoot more curses at the others. He had made quite a scene, staying just long enough for the *Prophet*’s reporters and photographers to record his actions, before Apparating just as recruitment from the Ministry of Magic arrived. Dolohov had laid low at the Lestranges’ since then, much to Bellatrix’s exasperation.

And although their other comrades had continued their show of intimidation by publicly walking in their Death Eater garb, complete with masks, they had ceased to do much of anything, even reducing their attacks on Muggles, to Bellatrix’s frustration—were they sheep, lost and stupid without their Dark Lord to physically guide them to their goal? *Idiots*, she had snarled to herself. It had infuriated her to the point of heading out herself, with Rodolphus and Rabastan at her side. They had set fire to a small Muggle town not far from their home and she had stood on the roof of the town’s church and pulled off her mask to take in the sight properly. She had watched her husband and brother-in-law go through the burning town to find Muggles who were attempting to escape, to play with them at their leisure. She had relished the sounds echoing around her—she had been missing it—the sound of chaos and despair, as the vermin, in their death-throes, screamed and pleaded.

The sound of a sharp and distinct click had made her shoot a curse to her left, where a journalist from the *Daily Prophet* had been hiding behind one of the stone angels. He had managed to dodge the curse, as he had dived behind the statue, which had shattered into a hundred pieces, as it had taken the curse in his place. He had been trembling and shaking when she stopped before him and took the picture that he had taken with his camera. The photograph had shown her profile, as she sighed and smiled while watching the fiery scene, and showed a full shot of her face, as the camera had also caught her turning towards it at the sound of its click. The young man had looked shocked when she had knelt down and told him in a soft, silky voice, to make sure that it made the papers for the next day. And it had. The headline article the next morning featured her as a possible Death Eater, present as she had been at the burning of a Muggle town, with two Death Eaters, theorized to be Rodolphus and Rabastan (it had been right, of course).

But the Minister sent no Aurors after them, conscious as he now was of the truth of the pure-blood connection between the followers of the Dark Lord. Even he could not go after them indiscriminately, as they all came from the oldest and most powerful families, who had many other connections in the Ministry, besides. That had been the understanding they had come to—he knew the truth, but he could not purge them through it, as many faceless, potential enemies surrounded him. They would not harm him, as he would not harm them—if he did, he knew that he could be easily disappeared and replaced by one of their own, as pure-blood influence ran deep in their society, even amongst the half-bloods. For who had always been the main contributors to political and social investments? Someone, somewhere, always owed one of the extant Sacred Twenty-Eight something. It was better that he, the Minister, wait for the Dark Lord’s reappearance before taking any extreme measures against them, as by that time, all would be allowed to become clear to the public.

And so, the papers, though they often claimed that the Lestranges (along with Dolohov and Travers) were Death Eaters, they often lacked conclusive proof to truly condemn them. The worst the public could really claim as fact was that the Lestranges were pure-blood supremacists who gave no second thought to attacking Muggles—not much different from Death Eaters, really. But no one called them Death Eaters to their faces except through the papers.

On the day of his awakening, she returned home around late afternoon, after finishing tea with her
sister, Narcissa, and their Aunt Walburga at the Black family home. She had just stepped into the entrance hall when two of her three house-elves came running to her.

“Mistress!” one of them squeaked, looking up at her with wide, frightened eyes, as the other took her cloak, hat, and gloves. “There’s been a terrible accident!”

Bellatrix frowned. “What terrible accident? What are you talking about?” A sudden thought struck her and she stared down at the elf, who trembled under her gaze. “You didn’t by any chance go up to the fourth floor, did you?”

“No, not I, mistress. It was Oggy who went up there despite your orders not to. There had been a strange crackling sound coming from the room, mistress. And Oggy went up to check on it, because he thought there was an intruder and…” the elf whimpered when Bellatrix widened her eyes.

“And what happened that was so terrible?” she asked, barely daring to breathe as she anticipated the answer.

“I did not see it happen, mistress, but I heard Oggy let out a loud cry and I ran out from the drawing room, which I had been cleaning, when I…” the elf shuddered and covered her eyes with her hands. “I saw him fall from the fourth floor, over the stairs and down to the second floor… He was dead when I checked to see…” Tears spilled over the elf’s fingers as she shook from reliving the memory.

“You’re saying that someone up there, on the fourth floor, killed him?” Bellatrix’s heart hammered with hope as she thought of her lord. “How did Oggy die, from the look of him? He was killed by magic, was he not?”

“Yes, mistress. There was not a mark on him except for the blood that pooled beneath his head, from it cracking when it hit the floor.” The elf let out a low wail and sobbed.

Bellatrix straightened herself up, her chest brimming with excitement. The corners of her lips twitched upwards as she thought of her lord, finally awake and aware. “Take Oggy to the garden and bury him,” she told the two elves, who bowed and hurried off to the second floor. She herself climbed the stairs two at a time, in a hurry to meet her lord. Rodolphus and Rabastan were currently absent, sorting out their own affairs, and so she was the only one to welcome him back and take care of him…

His magic was palpable the moment she set her foot on the first step to the fourth floor. She paused, briefly judging the strength of the magic that pooled out from behind the room’s door, which had been left halfway open, by the elf, no doubt. She ventured forward cautiously and quietly, fearful yet hopeful to see him. “My lord?” she called out softly when she was halfway up the stairs. “It is I, Bellatrix. Can you hear me, my lord?”

It seemed as if the magic in front of her froze as the air became still around her. She did not dare to breathe. Then she gasped when she felt something like wind rush through her mind, sweeping aside her half-hearted mental defenses—she did not dare to use Occlumency around him, as he would know and punish her if she did (one did not keep secrets from the Dark Lord). She thought she heard a soft exhale come from the room and let out a sharp breath when the wind withdrew from her mind. The magic before her retreated to the door and disappeared behind it. Then she knew that he had heard and acknowledged her. It was an invitation to come forward.

Her eyes swept around the room when she stepped into it. The bed was in complete disarray and the curtains that usually hung around it were ripped to shreds—Rodolphus would not be happy. The
curtains were drawn tightly around the windows, shutting out any hint of light from the outside. A small gasp left her mouth when she saw him sitting in the armchair before the fireplace, in which a fire was burning, emitting the room’s only source of light. He had put on his cloak and drawn the hood over his head, so that all she saw of him was a thin figure, encased all in black.

“Bella, is that really you?”

Her heart almost skipped a beat from the sound of his hoarse voice.

“Yes, my lord. My house-elf told me that you had just awoken and I have come to greet you.” She kept her gaze on the floor, demure, despite his face not being directed at her.

“Ah, so that was a house-elf that I tossed over the stairs. My apologies, Bella. I did not realize it was your servant.”

“It is of no matter, my lord. It can always be replaced.” Not like you, my lord, she wanted to add, very dearly. She glanced up at him and saw a long, pale hand rise up from the chair and beckon her forward. He held it up again, making her stop, when she was but half a meter from him.

“Bella.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Will you allow me to look into your mind? It will be a much faster way to see and understand what has happened…in full. And you are the only one that I trust to do this for me, as of this moment.”

Elation spread through her body at his request and his confidence in her. She had never been deluded—as she was his most loyal servant and he knew it as well. Why else would he have chosen her to tell him?

“Yes, my lord.”

She opened her mind to him and held her breath as he entered, not in a rush like before, but almost intangibly, as he if was but a subtle disturbance in the air that was her mind. Her eyes closed as she marveled at his gentleness, as he swiftly sifted through the various impressions that had been made upon her during his period of inactivity. A sigh almost left her when he withdrew, just as indiscernibly.

“I see,” he said quietly, making her open her eyes. “Not only were you responsible for having the Mark continue to burn on your arm from your attempt to revive me, but you have let the Minister know of the Mark as well. And so have Rodolphus, Rabastan, Travers, and Dolohov.” Bellatrix shifted her feet when he inclined his head downwards, as if thinking. “The five of you chose to reveal it despite your awareness of my caution towards it. It was against my wishes that you make yourselves known, and in such crude ways…”

“M-my lord,” Bellatrix began, as fear began to creep through her chest, “please, I…we were—”

“However,” he cut in, silencing her, “it was for my sake, was it not? You were all afraid that I would not awake…you could not have known when I would regain my consciousness, and thus, you resorted to such means, to ensure that I was not forgotten by anyone, least of all, the Minister for Magic.”

“Yes, my lord,” she whispered, shrinking in on herself. “We knew you were against us revealing our secret and the risks involved in doing it, but for your sake, to continue your mission, we chose to expose ourselves. But please, my lord, I have done my best to be careful, so that I may continue to
serve you—"

“That is enough, Bella. You have made your intentions perfectly clear.”

Her eyes widened and she felt the blood drain from her face when she saw his pale hand rise again, this time with his wand between his fingers. She wanted to inch back from him, but dared not. Her body began to tremble as she watched his fingers twirl the wand between them, and saw him raise his head to contemplate it. She flinched when he spoke.

“Do you believe that I am angry with you, Bella?” His voice was light and caressed her ears with its low and almost gentle timbre, making her shiver.

She ducked her head and did her best to keep her voice from shaking. “I do not dare assume what you feel, my lord. If you are displeased with me, then I shall understand. I only hope, my lord, that you may look upon my efforts with your great generosity.” Her head snapped up when she heard his soft laugh.

“My dear Bella,” he crooned, lowering his hand and tapping the chair with his wand, “you are my most loyal servant, are you not?”

“Yes, my lord.” The words came out of her so eagerly that she was left breathless.

Another laugh. Then,

“I require your aid, Bella. I have been asleep for a month, with nothing but magic to sustain me, and thus, I am in need of your potion-making skills.”

She widened her eyes and nodded, although he could not see it. “I shall brew some rejuvenating potions for you, my lord, and bring you some food.”

“Very good, Bella. But make sure that you are the one making them and no one else. Do you understand me?” A hint of coldness seeped into his voice, making her understand that it was an order.

“Yes, my lord. No one but I shall brew the potions for you.”

“And you shall be the only one to bring them to me…or to enter this room, at all. Do not send any of your small servants. Tell the others as well, that unless they would like to see their lives cut short, they will not come into this room, and will instead stand outside to speak with me when I call for them. Only you are to enter this room, Bella.”

“Yes, my lord. I shall tell them.”

It seemed as if her feet floated down the stairs when she made her way down to the kitchens, in the basement, to brew the potions for him.

She was the only one to see him…the only one! A smug smile spread across her face as she inwardly gloated at being the one allowed closest to him. It would not be long before he considered her to be his second-in-command, not that she would ever need the formal title, but it would show all of them, that he considered her to be above them, and nearer to becoming—dare she think it—his equal.
The Lestrange manor, to Bellatrix’s dismay and well-suppressed irritation (as she accepted it for her lord’s sake), became the primary meeting place for members of the inner circle and for several less important Death Eaters, who did not have the Mark on them, and yet were summoned for the Dark Lord’s needs.

It did not take long for everyone in the household and for every Death Eater who stepped foot into the house to realize that Bellatrix was his most preferred servant, as she was the only one allowed to enter his room or to gaze upon him at all. Dolohov was furious when he found out, to Bellatrix’s great amusement and satisfaction. He even had the nerve to test out her warning to stay out of the Dark Lord’s room by stomping up to the fourth floor, and came running back down in less than a minute. Bellatrix smirked when she saw that he had earned a slash across the left side of his face for his efforts.

She affected a gentle tone to taunt him. “I did warn you, you know.”

His long, pale face colored as he glared at her. It seemed as if he wanted to speak, as his lips twitched—perhaps to direct some choice swearwords at her, but she knew that he dared not, as he was well-aware that the Dark Lord would not be pleased to hear that his decision to appoint Bellatrix as his personal assistant was being mocked. Instead, he beckoned to Rosier with his head and the two of them left the house. There was a loud crack from the outside, signaling that they had Disapparated.

*Gone to a pub, most likely,* Bellatrix thought with a derisive sneer.

But Dolohov was not the only fool to go against an order from the Dark Lord:

Before Dolohov’s impatient actions, two of the newest recruits, who had quickly assimilated themselves to the Death Eaters through their eager participation in joining in the hunt for Muggles and Mudbloods, had ignored her warning, instead regarding her with haughty disdain—perhaps mistaking her for an ordinary pure-blood wife who had simply followed in her husband’s footsteps by taking on the Mark as a statement for the cause—and had the nerve to fully open the door to the Dark Lord’s room, which was left slightly ajar to communicate with his followers. She had waited at the foot of the second-floor stairs, peering upwards, to see how it all unfolded, and was not alarmed to see a bright flash of green light illuminate the fourth-floor landing. There had been two distinct thunks and she had ordered her house-elves to dispose of the bodies.

As for the Dark Lord himself, Bellatrix’s happiness grew when she sensed him grow stronger as his health returned to him through the potions she brewed and the nourishment she brought him. She could feel his magical aura become more potent by the day when she entered the room to wait on him. Then came his questions, some of which bemused her.

“Bella,” he called her quietly, just as she was about to leave after placing his potion on the table beside the armchair in which he was settled. He had not moved—at least she had not seen him move—from his seat, since his return to consciousness on the previous week.

She paused, surprised, as his words thus far had been few or nonexistent. He had preferred to remain silent and twirl his wand between his fingers while he brooded. His face had not once turned towards her.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Although I have seen your mind, I must know, from your own mouth, to make sure, as I have been unaware of everything for the past month…has there been any mention of a Harriet Potter while you
were out, perhaps in the streets, or in conversations with your various friends?”

Bellatrix blinked and furrowed her brows as she tried to recall if she had heard of a Harriet Potter.

“No, my lord,” she finally decided. “But you mentioned a Potter…the only Potters I know are the three who are left on the family tree—Fleamont and Euphemia Potter and their son, James Potter, who is at Hogwarts.” Her mouth twisted in contempt as she thought of them. “They are pure-bloods, but they might as well be blood traitors, my lord. Their ancestors had the habit of breeding with Muggles and Mudbloods.”

“So the boy is still at Hogwarts.” His tone had become cold, making her wary. “Then the girl who was with him must be there as well…that accursed girl…Lily Potter.”

“Lily Potter, my lord?” Bellatrix decided to ask tentatively. He had already mentioned a Harriet Potter and now, a Lily Potter…were there more Potters than she was aware of? She did not think that she had ever heard of old Fleamont and his wife having more children or having other extant family members with the Potter name.

A spark burst from the end of his wand when he tightened his grip on it, making her jump and nearly yelp.

“Hogwarts, they are at Hogwarts…under Dumbledore!” His mutters grew louder and the air around him agitated as the fire in the fireplace shuddered as if a breeze had gone through it. Bellatrix pressed her back against the door and made sure to keep her eyes on him, in case he forgot himself in his sudden anger and directed his rage at her—she would need to know when to flee, in that case.

Then he stood up and she cowered as he began pacing in front of the fire.

“She must be there…that much is certain…who else would she turn to, but that old, decrepit fool? And she had come of age then…yes, she must be at Hogwarts, disguised as one of them.” He stopped and abruptly raised his head to stare at Bellatrix, who gasped when she saw his red eyes focused on her.

“Bella.”

“Y-yes, my lord?” Despite her fear, her eyes traced over every inch of his pale, waxen face, become thinner by his long period of unconsciousness.

“Who, among your family members, is still at Hogwarts?”

“A-at Hogwarts, my lord?” She was bewildered by the question, but nevertheless, began thinking. Well, she thought, Narcissa had already been out of school for a few years, which left no one on her side of the family who had yet to graduate. But on her Uncle Orion’s…

There was cousin Regulus and the blood traitor.

“There are none on my side of the family, my lord, but on my uncle’s side—from Orion Black’s family, I mean to say—there are my cousins, Regulus Black and Sirius Black. However, my lord, the latter one is a—”

“Blood traitor, yes, I remember. He will join the Order. Unless he is persuaded to join me this time.”

Bellatrix glanced at him. “My lord, if I may be so bold, that one was sorted into Gryffindor. He is probably not an ideal—”
“It does not matter if he is a Gryffindor. Some Gryffindors, I have found, can be easily convinced to see things my way.”

She had not a clue as to whom or what he was referring, but she remained silent.

“But you have a point, Bella. Regulus is more suitable for this task—he is eager, is he not? I seem to remember you gloating about how much he admires my ideas and my work.”

A task? What task?

She was so perplexed that she stared directly into his eyes. “My lord, are you suggesting that you mean to include him in our circle?”

“My circle, Bella,” he corrected her softly. “And perhaps, if he does his job well. But I trust that he will. Do you not trust him yourself?”

She shook her head. “No, my lord, that is not what I meant. I am sure that he will carry out all your demands. But it is his—”

“If you are confident that he will follow my orders, then that will be enough. And your aunt and uncle shouldn’t be too displeased, as you fear—your Aunt Walburga was pleased about your Mark, was she not? Then she shouldn’t mind her son supporting me and joining the inner circle of my Death Eaters when given the opportunity. The Blacks are loyal to the pure-blood ideal, are they not?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then I shall expect you to bring Regulus Black to me this weekend so that I may give him my instructions. You must bring him, Bella. Or else, I shall be most displeased.”

A shiver ran through her body as his eyes flashed while gazing at her. She blinked when he spoke again, as his tone softened into a croon. “My dear Bella…”

Her heart fluttered at the term of endearment.

“Who else can I trust to do this but you? And where else but from your own family would I find someone so worthy to fulfill an important task for me?”

Her breath hitched and she flushed with pleasure. “My lord,” she murmured, too giddy to say anything else. She bowed her head to him and inwardly exulted in his flattery. She was special—they were special. “I shall bring Regulus to you, my lord. He will be most honored to know that you have chosen him.”

“That will do, Bella.” He turned around to the fireplace.

She knew it to be a clear sign of dismissal and she left with her instructions in mind. An owl was sent to Regulus at Hogwarts before she prepared herself to head to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, to apprise her aunt and uncle of the great honor that had been bestowed upon their house.

Saturday evening after dinner found Bellatrix pacing anxiously before the fireplace in the drawing room, where Regulus was bound to appear at any moment. It was vital that her cousin make a good
impression, lest she finally be punished for allowing the cup that had been entrusted to her to disappear from her vault.

She still could not believe how it had happened—how could anything be stolen from Gringotts? Were they not famous for being impenetrable to deceitful intruders? What had those goblins been doing, allowing a thief through their defenses, to enter the vault of one of the oldest and most esteemed families in Wizarding society? And how could she have known that the cup she had brought back was not the original, but a replica? Had there been something singular about it? In the face of his mounting fury as he glared down at the goblet, she had fallen on her knees and sworn in a shrill and pleading voice that she had not dared to even touch it since it had been placed in the vault.

He had not been gentle with his intrusion into her mind to confirm her words—he had plunged into her memories and ruthlessly swiped through them to find the ones from her time at the bank. It had felt as if a dozen barbed needles had been run through her brain and after he was finished, she had held her head between her hands, whimpering. “Bring me the goblin who led you to your vault,” he had told her in a tone so dangerous and seething with a barely-suppressed need for murder, that she had not wasted time in escaping the room, before she had the Crucio performed on her or worse.

The house-elves had been allowed into his room that day, to clean up the remains of the goblin.

“Bella.”

She stopped pacing and looked up at her husband’s voice. He nodded at the fireplace, and she turned her head and saw that the flames had turned emerald green. She drew herself straight as she watched the slight figure of her young cousin step through the flames and onto the rug.

“Cousin Bella,” he greeted her. Although his expression was impassive, his face was paler than she had last seen it and his grey eyes held a tinge of uncertainty.

“Regulus.”

After a quick nod to Rodolphus to indicate that they were heading to the room, she ushered her cousin to the stairs, where she stopped. Regulus regarded her with mild bemusement as she faced him.

“Listen to me carefully,” she began in a low and serious tone. Her hands reached out to grip his arms. “You must not hide anything from the Dark Lord. Do not attempt to shield your mind from him, do you understand me? He will know if you are hiding something from him. He always knows.”

She watched his Adam’s apple bob as he gulped. “So it’s true, then? The rumors about him being a skilled Legiliemens?”

She tightened her grip on him and he winced, feeling her nails dig into his skin. “I said, do you understand me?”

Another gulp. “Yes.”

“Good.” She released him from her hold and gave him a bright smile, making him stare at her. “Remember, dear cousin, be truthful and he will be pleased.”
His voice was but a murmur when she knocked on the door to alert him of their arrival.

“Come in.”

Bellatrix opened the door and stood back for Regulus, who had frozen behind her. She gave him a sharp look and he slowly stepped forward. His face managed to disguise any hint of nerves by adopting a mask of dignified calm that all the Black children had been taught since they were old enough to walk.

“You too, Bella,” her lord called her as well, stopping her from closing the door behind her cousin.

She entered and stood beside Regulus, who was tense as he glanced at the Dark Lord, whose face was hidden by the hood of his robes while he stood gazing down at his wand, which he held between his long, pale fingers. Regulus hitched in a breath when the Dark Lord looked up, revealing his face. It was, Bellatrix knew, the first time that he had seen him in person.

“My lord.” Bellatrix bowed to him and Regulus followed. Good. The boy had always been a fast learner. “I have brought you my cousin, as you commanded. May I present to you, the heir to the Black family name and fortune, Regulus Black, the son of Orion and Walburga Black.” She laid a hand on Regulus’s arm when he began to lift his head and gave a slight shake of her head.

“Regulus Black. I have heard much about you.” Her lord sounded mildly interested.

Bellatrix removed her hand and Regulus slowly lifted his head.

“My lord, it is an honor to meet you.” His voice was respectful and steady. But Bellatrix felt him stiffen when the Dark Lord began walking towards him.

“A boy with many talents, I see.” The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed as he contemplated Regulus, who lowered his gaze when he stopped in front of him. “And I see that you admire me.”

Bellatrix glanced between the two, just as nervous as Regulus, who flicked his eyes up to the Dark Lord and gave a slight flinch when he met his eyes. Her mouth thinned as she grimly hoped that the boy’s curiosity would be excused.

“Are you close to your older brother?”

Regulus gave a start and looked directly at the Dark Lord. Bellatrix let out a low hiss.

“He is no longer my brother, my lord. Not since he turned his back on his family by running away. He is nothing more than a common blood traitor.” His voice held a slight tremor, but the Dark Lord seemed pleased by his vehemence, as he let out a soft hum.

“I see. And yet, I sense something interesting…”

Regulus swallowed as the red eyes continued to study him.

“But it is understandable that you would be affected by his decision. After all, he is your brother.”

“My lord—”

A pale hand was raised, cutting him off.

“Yes, I know—he is a blood traitor.” His tone was almost lazy. He turned around, making his robes swirl, as he walked back to the fireplace. Bellatrix and Regulus exchanged a quick look while the Dark Lord situated himself in front of the fire again. “I have a job for you, Regulus. And it is
something that only you can do for me.” The words were said coldly, in the unmistakable authoritative tone that Bellatrix was used to hearing.

Regulus opened his mouth to reply, but the Dark Lord continued to speak.

“You will spy on the Potters at Hogwarts.”

Bellatrix saw Regulus furrow his brows and a puzzled look come over his face.

“The Potters, my lord? Forgive me, but I am not sure as to who—”

“James Potter, Lily Potter, and Harriet Potter. Does that make it clearer?”

Regulus continued to frown. “Harriet Potter, my lord? There is a Harriet Granger—”

“Her real name is Harriet Potter. She is the girl with the long black hair and green eyes that your brother seems to be fond of, according to your memories of him.”

A flush appeared on Regulus’s pale face. His mouth seemed to want to form words, but nothing came out. Bellatrix nudged him when the pause grew longer. “Yes, my lord.” He lowered his gaze when the Dark Lord turned towards him.

“You will watch the three Potters and send a letter detailing all that you have observed to Bella. You must do this every night once you return to Hogwarts. I do not care if the things you notice seem trivial—note them all, from as much as you can see of them. I do not think that I have to tell you to be careful…”

“No, my lord.” Regulus bowed to him. “I will do everything as you have told me to do.”

Bellatrix gave a start when her lord’s eyes landed on her. “Bella, you will receive his letters every night and bring them to me. Unopened.”

“Yes, my lord.” Her response was automatic.

“I will leave it to you both to determine if protective spells are necessary to ensure that the letters are not read or opened by the wrong hands.” His eyes narrowed, making her shrink back. “But remember that I am not in the habit of tolerating failure.”

The underlying threat made Bellatrix and Regulus tense together.

“Regulus.”

“Yes, my lord?” His voice came out in a whisper.

“If I find your work to be satisfactory, then I, Lord Voldemort, shall honor you by personally welcoming you into my inner circle of Death Eaters. You shall bear my Mark and sit at my table, as one of my most trusted followers. The tasks that will be entrusted to you will be like none other and can only honor you if you succeed in fulfilling them. And when I conquer the Wizarding world, then you, along with your family, shall be rewarded beyond your dreams for the services that you have done for me. Lord Voldemort does not take his followers’ loyalty for granted, as Bella herself may confirm for you.”

Bellatrix watched with the Dark Lord as Regulus’s eyes widened. Thank him, you fool, she thought, impatient, when her cousin seemed to fumble for words. She sighed to herself in relief went he stooped into a deep bow.
“You already honor me beyond all that I have imagined, my lord. Thank you. Thank you, my lord.”
His voice trembled—most likely from gratitude, Bellatrix supposed. But she saw hesitation glisten in his eyes as he glanced at the Dark Lord while straightening himself up. She felt uneasy, wondering if he meant to trespass on the Dark Lord’s thoughts by questioning his intentions, but he held his peace.

“Smart boy,” the Dark Lord echoed her thoughts, startling her and Regulus, who flinched. He was turning back to the fire when he paused. “Ah, I almost forgot,” he said softly. “What are your thoughts on Severus Snape? He is your fellow Slytherin at this time, is he not?” He looked at Regulus, who shifted under his stare.

“Yes, my lord. He is a half-blood.”

Bellatrix couldn’t help letting out a scoff. But the Dark Lord seemed intrigued as his expression was thoughtful.

“Watch his movements as well, and include your observations of him in your letters. Tell me, does he meet with Dumbledore at all?”

A crease appeared on Regulus’s brow. “I…believe he does not, my lord. I have not seen him—”

“Very well. Watch him.”

“I will, my lord.”

Bellatrix laid a gentle hand on Regulus’s arm when the Dark Lord turned his back to them, indicating that they were to leave. The two of them were silent as they made their way down the stairs and to the drawing room. Tea was served to them as they sat across from one another at the long table.

“You did well,” she told him, breaking the tension in the air. His solemn face constricted slightly in bemusement. “To not question him,” she added, when he flicked his eyes to her. “I know that his motives may seem obscure and strange, but it is not our place to question or to doubt, when we are in his service. We must accept his wishes and do our best to carry them out—that is our duty as his loyal servants.”

Her cousin’s gaze shifted to his teacup again, the sides of which he tapped in silent contemplation.

“I shall send you my letters then, starting from Monday evening.” His grey eyes met hers and she smiled at him.

“And I shall receive them and deliver them to the Dark Lord,” she responded.

The boy was indeed a fast learner, was her thought, when he stepped into the green flames to return to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

The following week brought a fresh dose of anxiety for Bellatrix, as the Dark Lord seemed to grow ever more impatient in his room, which he still refused to leave. He seemed to prefer—this was her
personal conclusion from what she had observed—to brood in his thoughts while pacing. Often, she would hear him muttering when she arrived at the door to bring him his last few remaining potions. And although Regulus’s letters came as expected, they seemed to give him little peace, as he took but one look at them, swiftly perusing the contents, before feeding them to the fire.

During the next week, however, he finally descended to the drawing room to meet with the rest of his inner circle. He did not say much while they fawned over him and flattered him, and instead watched every one of their faces carefully when they spoke. Bellatrix particularly observed that his eyes seemed to probe most intensely at Lucius, who did his best to mask his disconcertment while smiling back in a servile manner. The Dark Lord’s high, cold laughter filled the air when they told him about the Prophet’s regular articles that theorized about his continued absence or, as the writers liked to refer to it—his complete disappearance.

“My lord, when shall we resume our activities?” Travers asked him during the meeting. “The public will be thrilled that you have recovered.”

His fellow Death Eaters chuckled and the Dark Lord gave them a hint of a smile.

“Soon, Travers. As soon as I have more information.”

His followers looked at him inquisitively.

“Information, my lord?”

“It is already being taken care of,” the Dark Lord silenced their curiosity.

Halloween was a quiet affair. Despite Bellatrix’s attempts to coax him, the Dark Lord remained in his room for the entire day. To be mindful towards him, the Lestranges went to number twelve, Grimmauld Place to join the Blacks for dinner. They did not stay long afterwards, as Bellatrix had to receive the owl from Regulus, who continued to send his letters.

His owl arrived much later than usual, close to midnight. She wondered at the contents of the envelope, which seemed bulkier when she picked it up. The Dark Lord seemed to have similar thoughts, as he paused before opening it. He pulled out a folded piece of parchment—the letter—and a small blank card, which he contemplated for a second before laying it aside to read Regulus’s report. Bellatrix hitched in a breath and moved backwards to the door when his grip on the letter tensed, crumpling it.

Something in the report had displeased him.

She warily pressed her back against the door when the air around him seemed to constrict, making it harder to breathe. He let out a low hiss. Then she saw him toss the letter to the side, letting it fall to the floor, as he picked up the card, which was revealed to be a photograph when he flipped it over.

Peering around his back from where she stood, she saw that it was a picture of four laughing students in dress robes. Her eyes widened when she recognized one of them.

The blood traitor!

The flash of temper that came over her was muted by his yell. She gripped the doorknob, ready to make a run for it, when he bolted up from his seat, his whole frame shaking with fury—she felt the waves of his anger through the tendrils of magic that reached towards her as they emanated from him. His nostrils flared and his eyes flashed red as he stared down at the four jubilant faces. Fear
engulfed her senses when his chest heaved and he raised his wand—

A shriek left her mouth as she rushed down the stairs, when an explosion came from the room she had just fled. The ceilings above her trembled and she felt debris catch in her hair. She pushed past Rodolphus, who stood at the foot of the stairs to the third floor, looking alarmed and bewildered by the noise. His startled exclamation went ignored when another destructive bang sounded from the fourth floor.

She watched from her position in the garden while bursts of light flashed from the room’s now-broken window as the Dark Lord’s rage continued to burn.

What had been in the letter and the photograph as to make him so furious?

The outer wall of the room exploded and she shrank back into her place between the trees.

Perhaps it was better if she did not know.

Chapter End Notes

*Lucius Malfoy would’ve been in his early 20s at this time, as he was a prefect when the Marauders entered their first year (DH). And Dolohov was one of Voldemort’s earliest followers, as he accompanied him to his job interview at Hogwarts (HBP), so he would be older than Lucius.

**In HBP, Slughorn mentioned a Lestrange in his memory about the discussion involving horcruxes with Riddle. The only thing that seems to be clear about his connection to Riddle is that he admired him. It’s unknown whether this Lestrange was an older family member of Rodolphus or Rodolphus himself, so I decided to get a bit creative about the details. And well, actually, there’s not much information on individual Death Eaters in general, so I took liberties with everything, really, heh.

I can’t say it was an absolute pleasure writing from Bella’s POV, but it was certainly interesting to try to see things from her side.

This chapter is meant to provide some plot-significant action and details, which, as you may have noticed, diverge considerably from canon details: the Dark Mark on the Death Eaters’ left forearms, which was kept secret during the First Wizarding War, is revealed to the Wizarding public for this story. Several Death Eaters also revealed their identities, which were meant to be kept secret. These changes were made in accordance to my personal vision of how Voldemort’s closest followers would’ve reacted to his comatose state. My original plan was to have these changes be introduced gradually and naturally through earlier chapters as the story moved forward, but I got caught up in other parts of the story that I wanted to develop and they went ignored (unintentionally, I swear) until now…

-Voldemort’s got a nose, if you noticed. I’m not sure if he’s bald, either. I took it from the books that his snakelike qualities developed after he had been feeding on Nagini’s poison. There’s a general dearth of details about his appearance in this chapter, but I imagined that he wouldn’t look too different from the time of his interview at Hogwarts, as he had created his first five horcruxes by then and still has them as they are in the
current time period, without having made any more.
- The mystery of the photograph wasn’t much of a mystery, was it? Many of you figured it out quite easily. And as for why Regulus acted the way he did in the previous chapter (making his attempts at spying deliberately conspicuous)—I figure he did so to use Sirius for gaining more information on the Potters. But, of course, he was disappointed.

Next chapter will include the first Quidditch match of the school year—Gryffindor vs. Slytherin and more…developments (I’ve still got to fine-tune the things I’ve planned, but you’re bound to see a bit of drama, one way or another).

- It'll be delayed from the usual schedule, as I'll be busy on the weekend.

Thank you all so much for reading and keeping up with the story!!! I really appreciate your patience and your support through all your wonderful feedback. Thank you so much for the kudos, bookmarks, comments, and subscriptions. Hope to see you all again next chapter :)
Author's Notes

Chapter Notes

This is not a new chapter, but I’d greatly appreciate it if you read till the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s two main things I would like to address by taking up a chapter to address you all with an AN—story updates and the subject of several comments from Chapter 16.

But before I get to them, I would like to thank everyone who’s been keeping up with this story, and who are waiting so patiently for the update that I’m currently working on.

Thank you especially to those who continue to comment and show your support through your words—on days when I feel conflicted about my writing and ideas for this story, I go back to the wonderful and encouraging sentiments that you have expressed to rally my spirits and push forward with my vision for this story. And thank you so much for being so consistently lovely and understanding despite my recent struggles to update regularly.

I sincerely apologize for the radio silence and lack of communication for the past two months—it’s been a bit wild, I won’t lie, because I still can’t believe that time has gone by so quickly. Last month, I began studying for an exam that takes several months to prepare for, and it’s taken me a while to set a new schedule for myself with all the other activities I’ve got at hand. It’s taken me two months to come back with some news, because I avoided coming back to this site until I got some of my bearing back. I intended to have the next update posted by the beginning of this month, but things obviously did not go as planned. *insert self-deprecating laugh*

The next chapters (there will be two for the next update) are currently in the works. Because my life has gotten busier, it’s been difficult getting the inspiration to write—it takes considerable energy and time to immerse myself into the writing process, to do the characters and their world proper justice, and so, I must beg for your understanding if there’s any delay (which continues to the present), as this story, as much as I am invested in it, is but a hobby, and as of now, I can only devote a portion of my evenings to the task.

But I can assure you that the next update will be up by the next weekend—it’s reaching the final stages, so there’s some hope, eh?

Because of the slower pace, there will be a schedule change for future chapters: chapters after the next update may be expected on a bi-weekly basis, unless I get a sudden spurt of inspiration and type one out on a faster pace than usual. There shouldn’t be another two-month-long gap between chapters, unless life happens again, at which time, I’ll be sure to add an additional note at the end of the most recent chapter posted, to let you all know if there’s going to be a delay. I do try my best to stay on schedule as much as possible, because it helps with my own flow of motivation as well.

I will still be reading and responding to comments during breaks in my personal schedule, because I mean it when I say that I appreciate interacting with you all. It’s always interesting to get a glimpse of your thoughts and again, I cannot thank enough those of you who continue to comment and provide me with feedback on my work—thank you so much for taking time out of your personal lives to do so. Writing this story may have started off as a self-indulgence on my part, but knowing that there’s...
people out there who think my ideas and creative decisions are worth considering by continuing to keep up with this story is positively staggering to me—I still can’t believe how lovely you’ve all been to me as well as the attention this story has gotten thus far. Thank you so much to those who silently support this story as well, through kudos, bookmarks, or subscriptions—I know it can be nerve-wracking (not to mention time-consuming) to comment in general, because that is, in effect, letting your voice out, which may be a difficult thing to do.

Now, for the second subject I’d like to address:

There have been several comments left at the end of Chapter 16, which concern the matter of my story being possibly plagiarized by another writer.

First, I must thank BluePiggyOwl, TheFunkyMuffin, ahopelessromantic, and ExperiencedPenandQuill. I did not see your comments till now, as I never check the side email I made for my AO3 account (I prefer to check up on things directly by coming here), but I still appreciate your concern. Please pardon me for my tardiness. Thank you also to the several reviewers from fanfiction.net (you know who you are) who read my story and tried to defend my work—I know you were just looking out for me.

I’ve taken a look at the story that’s supposed to have been so similar to mine, which is Second Chance with a Twist, by Merlin242 on fanfiction.net. I’m not quite sure as to what the exact problem was at first, but as of now, it seems pretty solid as a story of its own. I think there was an issue over taking inspiration and not giving credit, according to the author’s AN at the beginning of her story and from several reviews it’s gotten, based on similarities between my story and hers. However, I did see that the author has credited me, though according to some reviews, it seems that it wasn’t evident before. Regardless, I’d like to make it clear that the author has credited my story as a source of inspiration for her own story and that whatever issues there were at first seem to have been taken care of by now, to the best of my knowledge.

If Merlin242 is still following my story and reading this:

I am incredibly flattered that my story seems to have inspired you. I don’t have a fanfiction.net account except for the one from my middle school days which is now defunct, so I figured this was the best way to reach out to you, so as to clear up the matter in one go by also addressing the others who were concerned with the situation. Thank you so much for crediting me, though I think your story is quite different from mine and it would’ve been all right even if you hadn’t credited me, though it was sweet of you to do so! I think it’s fantastic that there’s another femHarry/Sirius story added to the Harry Potter fandom—it looks quite interesting! :

-To anyone who’s interested in time travel stories with a femHarry/Sirius ship, I recommend that you check out Second Chance with a Twist by Merlin242 on fanfiction.net to read in your spare time. You may find it quite engaging~

That being said, I must admit, however, that I was rather taken aback when I read the comments that suggested my story had been plagiarized. Firstly, because I never could’ve imagined that my story would ever be a source of inspiration to another—this story is my very first fanfiction, because as it turns out, Harry Potter is the only fandom for which I can write at least semi-confidently, spurred by a continuing obsession with and fondness for the series and its characters. I’ve had ideas for possible stories for other fandoms, but they’ve never made it to the writing/typing stage, never mind the planning stage. So, perhaps you may understand why I am so grateful for all the support that you all have bestowed upon me. Writing a fanfic, posting it, and receiving and responding to feedback—it’s
all really been quite an experience and I am still learning. Nonetheless, it was a bit of a shock to be told that my ideas may have been copied, because that is one of the last things that a writer wants or expects to hear.

**I would like to make it absolutely clear that AO3 is the only site where I have posted this story.** If you ever see a copy of this story elsewhere, please notify me, because it has not been done so with my knowledge or permission. To repeat, *AO3 is the only place where I have posted this story.* To be frank, the only reason I signed up for an account on this site was because I finally wanted to post something. I have no plans to post this story elsewhere.

And I suppose I should address the possibility of transformative works being made off my story—this feels surreal, because again, I never could’ve imagined the possibility of someone taking inspiration from me:

**I give blanket permission for transformative works inspired by/stemming off my work, which includes translations, fanfictions, fanart, etc. The only condition being that I be provided with a link for it or be told/notified of it, so that I can marvel and flail over it. But please do not repost my work in its original format without my knowledge and permission—this is a matter of basic human respect and decency.**

You can contact me through the tumblr that I’ve decided to make for such purposes: snowbunnytiger or by posting a comment on the latest chapter of my latest updated work on this site.

-Any one of you can go over to my tumblr to ask me anything, really—about my work, my writing process, or even random things. I don’t think I’ll be using it much except to reply to questions, comments, or concerns, or give updates on my work, so please feel free to visit. I’ll try to respond as soon as I’m able.

Thank you so much for reading this till the end. I appreciate all your support, especially your patience, and I hope that my story continues to entertain you all. I appreciate you all and I hope to see you all again with the new chapters next week!

-Cindy (snowbunnytiger)

Chapter End Notes

**Update (05/31/2018):** The new chapters are still coming along, guys! Apologies for the extended wait, but I haven’t forgotten and I hope to have them up soon! :) Thanks so much for your patience. I really owe you guys~

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!