One Day We'll Have a Name for This Thing

by scorpiris

Summary

(in other words: untitled)

When Remus & Dora find out they are expecting a child, a floodgate opens and a whole raft of histories comes rushing out. A few secrets too.

Or... It takes a village to bring a child into the world (yadda yadda), whether Sirius likes it or not.
Prologue 1

The Summer before the start of their Seventh Year

Remus Lupin glimpsed a familiar silhouette hurrying down the opposite corridor. Like any impulsive teenager, he ran to catch up even before he realized the reason why. The person he was pursuing took a sudden sharp right, then disappeared behind swinging double doors.

He was about to push through to follow when someone walked out, narrowly missing bumping into each other.

"Sorry," Remus mumbled, making an attempt to side step the stranger.

"You're not allowed through here," the person blocking his path said.

It took a while for Remus to look up, preoccupied as he was in his single-minded task to not lose sight of his quarry completely.

"I'm sorry?" he told the person blocking his path: a tall, dark woman in white researcher's robes.

"I know you're sorry," she said. "You're still not passing through here. Exit is that way." She pointed to the opposite direction, to where most people were headed.

"I... I mean, I think I saw a friend passing through there."

The woman didn't respond immediately, apparently waiting for him to offer more information though he's at a loss as to what she wanted from him.

She soon sighed, taking it upon herself to break the brief stalemate. "What's your friend's name?"

"Er.. pardon?"

"Your friend's name?"

"Er... Se... Sn... Snape. Severus Snape." His statement came out inflected like a question, tailing with a high note like a nervous bird in front of a cat.

"You're asking me?" She raised one amused eyebrow in a way that's somewhat familiar to him. Someone he knew had such a sarcastic gesture as well.

"No, I mean, my friend's name is Severus Snape."

She looked him up and down before grabbing the small tag hanging on a lanyard around his neck. "Werewolf serum trials participant," she read the small script under a photo of him that was constantly rotating to show all sides of his face and head. "How did it go for you, I wonder?" Remus somehow knew that it was rhetorical question, so he kept quiet. He watched her conjure up a parchment and then another, and just in case, another parchment from seemingly out of nowhere.

After a while, she vanished all the parchments and said, "No one called Severus nor Snape is listed as volunteer participant in the WST project or... any of our other projects, really. Are you sure?"

"I..." To be honest, it had been a fleeting glimpse at best. In the short silence while waiting for the woman to finish going through her list, Remus had managed to convince himself that he must've
been seeing things, chasing after mirages. The research attendants did say that the newer serum they’re testing could cause vision problems as a temporary side effect, among others.

"You'll have to let me know if there's someone not part of the project roaming the building. We do not tolerate trespassers or unauthorized persons, even if it's a friend of a participant," she said, quite seriously and rather urgently. She wasn't that much taller than him, but at that particular moment, she seemed to loom larger than life, towering above him, putting him on the spot.

"No... er..." He fumbled for words. Soon, he faltered and slumped. He settled for shaking his head.

" Anything else?" She leaned back, and the dark looming threat seemed to recede back as well. She looked amused. "You know your way back, I hope," she had not the will nor the time to babysit a lost teenager.

"No... er... yes... er.... thank you," Remus said, casting one last lingering look at the double doors behind her as though he had the ability to see through solid oak doors, before turning to where the exits were. His parents would've been antsy by now, waiting in a room reserved for accompanying family and guardians. His session ended at least half an hour ago, by his estimation, and he had never been late on returning. His overactive teenage imagination hoped that his parents were not causing a ruckus or sending a search team for him.

She watched him leave, making sure the teenager walk himself past the exit checkpoint, all the while wondering whether they’d put in too much sopophorus bean shavings in the latest batch of serum.

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Present Day

Sirius Black had been knocked into the Veil and ended up on his bum on... Dumbledore's couch? There’s no doubt about it: chintzy and frilly, the patterning different from when he first sat in it as a schoolboy, but uniquely Dumbledore that there's no way he could be wrong.

Even if he had doubts, it was soon dispelled once he lifted his eyes and saw the same old man smiling at him from across the room, seated in a similarly chintzy wing-back next to a cozy fireplace.

"Hello, dear boy," the headmaster said, with a hint of I-know-something-you-don't. Dumbledore calmly waited for Sirius to gather his wits, taking a leisurely sip from a fine porcelain cup. A matching saucer floated rather sedately next to him.

Rather than replying, however, Sirius merely fell onto his knees and emptied the meager content of his stomach onto Dumbledore's finely woven carpet. He thought he recognized some chopped carrots from among unrecognizable overly digested food covering finely embroidered stars twinkling at him in disgust.

"...mothion sikhneth..." Sirius feebly offered an unsought-for explanation, pushing words past bile and days-old food that thickly coated the insides of his mouth. He heaved some more, moaning rather apologetically and unintelligibly.

"Think nothing of it," Dumbledore said, quite unbothered, as if Veil victims appeared unannounced every day on his couch. "It's self-cleaning. A necessary thing in a school," the old man explained fondly, though more to himself rather than to the vomiting man.

Dumbledore sipped on his tea now and again, while Sirius heaved now and again, nausea persisting even if there's nothing more to bring up.
A house elf appeared a few moments after Sirius finally stopped, slumped quite bonelessly and rather out of breath against the foot of the couch. A Hogwarts house elf, he thought, not that he cared. His nose, mouth, chin and neck was magically cleaned, harsh and impersonal. Some ginger-smelling drink was pressed up insistently upon his lips. He didn't drink it, but brought it up to his nose to blot out the stench of bile.

It was a while later, once he was cleaner and a smidgen more composed, that they spoke. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Dumbledore's office. Unmistakable sounds of children stampeding out of their last classes for the day filtered up through thick office doors.

"Perfect timing, Sirius, my boy," Dumbledore said as they waited for a fourth pot of tea to materialize in place of an empty third. "I need you to do something for me."

"A job?"

"Something like it." A pause. Cup and saucers. The birds outside. Sounds like broken glass after the eerie quiet of the Veil. "Though not right away," Dumbledore said with a kind smile. "I gather you'll need a night to recuperate, falling into Veils can be nasty, indeed."

"A night?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, seemingly on purpose for Sirius to hear. His benevolent smile went away with the sun that slipped beneath the horizon, if it were there at all. A mirage, perhaps, Sirius thought. The setting sun chilled his bones. "Fine, two nights, but I can't spare you more than that. There's a war out there you know."

'Remus is going to have a child!' Sirius pondered that piece of news as he readied himself for bed.

The news delighted him more than he thought it would. He's sure he had never felt such joy, not since Prongs told him that Lily was pregnant with Prongslet.

Remus was going to have a child, Dumbledore had told him, and he was to ensure that Grimmauld Place would have everything an expectant mother might need to keep her and the baby healthy and happy.

"Does this mean that Tonks will be staying with me?" Sirius had asked, soon after he got out questions like: Boy or girl? Do you know what they're going to name the baby? Who'd be the baby's godparents?

"Well, we do hold Order meetings at Grimmauld Place, so..." Dumbledore had replied in that cryptic way of his. Sirius thought that perhaps the old man wanted Tonks to stay with him so she didn't have to commute whenever they had Order meetings. He wondered whether she would stop doing so much Auror-ing now that she's pregnant.

Sirius was never close to his nephew. She would probably not appreciate any well-meaning suggestions from him. They probably wouldn't get along like a house on fire, either, but that didn't mean he wasn't fond enough of her.

He wondered what girls, or rather, women... particularly women like Nymphadora would like. He wondered if he should ask Andromeda, but then he realized that it had been literal ages since he had spoken to her last. He wouldn't even know where to start to contact her.

He nodded off to sleep wondering whether one day he would have a child or two of his own.
Prologue 2

Chapter Summary

We learn about the mundane life at the research institute... and at the present day, Walburga has some thoughts.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for all the kind encouragements, kudos, and for reading.

As we muddle along, I hope that you'll indulge me still! Anyway... Unexpectedly, this prologue-thing is getting long... there's maybe one more (I hope no longer than two anyway...) prologue part left before we get to the main event and finally Severus meets Sirius for the first time in a new light. There will be OCs, but they're only there to move the plot along. In the meantime, I hope that things won't get too muddled. Let me know what you think!

Before

Beyond the double doors were dormitories for live-in employees, a warren of hundreds of tiny sleeping quarters. Though they were allowed to magically enlarge their space (within reason, of course), most researchers barely felt the need for it at all. In fact, more than a few thought of it as a burden, a reminder of one's own mortal body. Except for a few who had family staying with them, the rest of the researchers, apprentices, and interns preferred if they should not need to return to their sleeping quarters at all.

Some would sooner pull up or transfigure chaises next to their workbench, than walk to their beds. Others couldn't even be bothered. A few had somehow mastered the art of taking naps standing up.

Though research supervisors and lab managers were supposed to ensure that work and rest times were observed, most of them were as bad as their own charges. Only one or two supervisors were strict enough to ensure that their charges get their proper rest. One such unfortunate charge--for it was a great misfortune to be sent to bed while one was working on a potion or in the middle of reading--was a summer intern.

Though dark and sullen, this final-year Hogwarts student was someone the brewing supervisors had come to rely on. And yet, as relentless as they were at piling work on the intern's willing shoulders, labour laws must still observed.

It was difficult to tell who felt sorrier when the requisite rest time came: the intern or the lab supervisors.

Omphale shoved open one particular door in the wing reserved for summer interns, perhaps rougher
than necessary. Although these old oak doors were heavy by nature, they were well-charmed to be light and its hinges were kept well-oiled by the Institute's hard-working elves.

Laden with books like a common pack-mule, however, she didn't find that she much cared for decorum. Her friend had asked for some reference books, which she promised she would get. She hadn't expected how heavy those mere few books were. 'No more favors!' she fumed.

She found her friend on the room's only chair, slumped bonelessly across a parchment-strewn desk. It was a typical scene, of course, common across the population of this little productive enclave. Banished from the labs and barred from the repositories, they'd resort to writing and reading in their own rooms, their minds too overstimulated with discoveries and conundrums to ever properly shut down.

Sleep was, however, a sure mistress. In the end, her hand would find even the most alert minds.

Like this one: a friend, only two or three years her junior, who joined them as an intern year ago, with some of the best OWLs marks anyone had ever seen.

Truth be told, she thought it odd for her to call anyone a friend after knowing each other and working together for a year, and even then only during the summers and the longer school holidays like spring and autumn equinoxes. Yet, somehow they were. Friends, that is.

Omphale unloaded her burden on the narrow cot with a thump, hoping if not the sound then the tremors would wake the sleeper. Indeed her friend was not only a light sleeper but a paranoid one.

Sure enough, that dark head began to lift and turn. A scowl formed. Black eyes first blinked owlishly then glared. Her friend looked like a ruffled basilisk. "Hullo," her friend greeted, voice scratchy from sleep but moreso from much disuse. The laboratories were mostly quiet places. "Thanks for the books, by the way. Owe you one."

"And don't you forget it," she said, putting a placating smile behind her haughtiness. "I had to flirt with that old man at the Desk for them, you know. You should be thankful that my dear Antonin isn't a jealous boyfriend."

"You mean, Antonin the long-distance boyfriend?"

"Oh hush you," she grouched, "it's the thought that counts."

True though, it had been a while since she saw her darling Antonin last. He was always so busy, always going abroad on one errand or another for his employer. Omphale sighed. "Want to dress up?" She didn't wait for an answer. Quickly, she summoned up a mirror and other things from her friend's closet.

Omphale was an only daughter. A happy-accident baby, her mother always said, as her brothers had all grown and been married away by the time she was born. So she greatly enjoyed someone she could read with and coddle, but also to rough-house with when the mood strikes.

"By the way, someone was looking for you," Omphale said after a stretch of friendly silence. "A friend, he said. Almost barged here, he did." With anyone else, it would just be a simple statement of happenstance, a report of some goings-on. But with Omphale, it was no less an invitation to gossip.

"A friend?"
Omphale made a show of rooting through the little things her friend had inadvertently left out on the
desk. She had caught a glimpse of something shiny underneath all the parchments, books, empty ink
bottles and quills. With a triumphant cry, she found an onyx feather-shaped hairclasp.

"Remus Lupin, I think he's called," she informed him, lifting the hairclasp up so it could catch a stray
light, turning it here and there, admiring its craftsmanship. It was summarily snatched from her by
lightning-quick potion-stained fingers.

"He can hardly be called a friend of mine."

"That's not what he said." Undeterred, she rooted about and lifted up another item, this time a shell
comb. Interesting how such a small desk could hold so many things. She smoothed her own hair and
fixed the comb into place.

"We go to the same school, is all. Share some classes. I don't recall ever exchanging any civil words
with him." With that said, her friend stood up from the chair and grabbed the shell comb off her hair.
Omphale scowled and kicked a table leg in a childish snit. It slid only slightly along the flagstones
with an irritating squeak. It earned her another glare.

Later, a small box was unearthed from one of the desk's bottom drawers. It was not so large, but
Omphale knew that there were some interesting things in there. True to her magpie patronus, her
fingers quickly snatched the box away. She marveled at the meager contents of the box. Only a few
pins, brooches, and ornamental combs, each shinier than the next, all equally well-made. "Let me
borrow?"

"You'll take them, anyway," her friend declared with a put-upon sigh. Everyone who knew her,
knew that Omphale had always been free with other people's belongings, easily finding other
people's stash, be it of snacks, chocolate, or jewelry. Strangers might think she was an uncouth
kleptomaniac, but truth be told, she never acted upon her knowledge, nothing was ever taken,
nothing ever lost.

Something in the small jewelry box caught her eyes—a gold baguette clasp decorated with small
slivers of malachite, which she angled artfully in her friend's hair, keeping stray hair away from those
pale temples. "So pretty on you," she cooed, earning a very endearing blush in return. "You're off
the clock for the day and the weather seems nice," she mused. "Maybe we can go out and show it
off." She already had the perfect walking robes in mind that would go so well with the clasp. It was
practically new as she had only worn it once. In her opinion, it would suit her friend even more than
it ever did her.

"I guess," came the sedate answer. "My shopping list is already a foot long." It was not an
exaggeration either. It's scary how quickly a list could grow when one's short of money. Despite the
careful husbanding of an intern's meager allowance and money gained from some favors performed
here and there, it still took such a long time to scrounge up the required funds. Well... such is life.
Not everyone could burn through money like the Blacks and Malfoys of the world.

"Oh! This reminds me!" Omphale's exclamation broke through her friend's self-pitying thoughts.
"You know, your fri... well, schoolmate... Hmmm, anyway. The one who was looking for you?
Seems odd to me that he said he was looking for Severus Snape. Not... you know..." she made a
vague gesture, unsure of how to put it in terms that would not offend. "I take it he doesn't know...
about this... I mean, about you... like this."

Dark, kohl-lined eyes crinkled at the sides mirthfully, a bitter smile curving on blush-painted lips.
"One can only hope he never finds out."
There's a whole story hidden behind those words. Indeed there were so many things that Omphale had yet to find out about her friend. But she knew that only the patient bird gets the juiciest gossip, and she was the most patient person she knew.

- Present Day

Walburga Black wondered why paintings like her could still feel bone deep pain. It was like a rending deep in her heart and she could feel it in her bones.

Kreacher had told her about Sirius’s return, despite news of him having fallen into the Veil. Apparently he was alive and hale, perhaps even healthier than after Azkhaban.

Why Sirius? She wailed, so distraught that it broke the Silencing Charm the ungrateful boy had cast upon her all those times ago.

Why Sirius and not her beloved Regulus? The unfairness of it all! Had she not been punished enough? She railed against her ancestors on the tapestry, but they had long fled.

Halfway through her self-pitying wail, another tremor shook the family tree tapestry, shook her from her self-misery.

A new addition was trying to make itself known. At every conception of a new life, a burst of family magic would call out, fine threads reaching out, struggling to find purchase on the great family tree, so it could take sustenance from its strong root. 'How pitiful,' Walburga dismissed. 'An effort for nothing.' She knew that it would be a matter of time before this new magic learned the futility of its effort, as that particular line had been struck off. No branch for it to latch on, no refuge to be found among its boughs.

Walburga was also curious, however. The tremors had been going on for a few days now, so the Magic must be a strong one. She hadn't expected it to be so insistent, since metamorphagus or not, Nymphadora was half-muggle. Furthermore, Andromeda was never the strongest Black.

Pride stopped her from asking questions. Anyway, she'd find out for herself soon enough. Sirius was already busy preparing some rooms for Nymphadora and her partner.

In the meantime, she wept. It's the only thing she, a mere portrait, could do now. She wept for Regulus, wept for her family, wept for what might have been.
Prologue 3

Chapter Summary

The past, a surprise for Remus. The present, a surprise for Walburga on the big Lupin-Tonks moving-in day.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading and sticking with me despite the long set-up. Some action to come up soon, I hope. School interactions, Order interactions, etc....

Thank you for taking the time to leave kind and encouraging comments, thank you for leaving kudos. They warm the cockles of my heart and make my day. Tell me what you think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before

Remus Lupin knew he was fortunate to get a slot in the Institute’s Werewolf program. His name had been on the waiting list ever since he was bitten, but it was only in his fourth year of school that he was finally able to take part.

First, he was only part of the small ailments research, aimed at making and improving treatments for common illnesses that could not be addressed in the same way as with normal witches and wizards. Sniffles, ringworms, headlouse... those seemingly pedestrian ailments, almost inconsequential to many people, but were in fact important to be vigilant about.

Six months after that, he was doubly enrolled in the werewolf-specific ailments research program—from viruses and bacteria that sought werewolf-only hosts, to debilitating illnesses caused by simply being a werewolf. This program demanded more of its volunteers. Remus had many rules, times, and diets to keep track of. It was, after all, necessary if the researchers wanted to keep their work repeatable and accountable.

The rather complicated demands were easy enough to follow during the summer months and other times he was able to go home. His parent would make sure he kept to them stringently. At school, he found it more difficult; there were just too many things to distract an easily-swayed eager-to-please teenager like him.

Most of the time, though, he had been able to do everything demanded from and required of a good test subject. Despite the Shrieking Shack Incident (what a whole kerfuffle that had been!), he was finally considered good enough to be enrolled in one of the more rigorous and long-term projects.

So this was how he found himself one day at the height of summer: in a sunny room in one of the
Institute's upper levels, trying not to blush to death. They were discussing werewolf reproduction, specifically ways to create new werewolves without having to maim or violently transform other people into werewolves.

"No doubt about it," a researcher said in a wink-wink nudge-nudge way. "The traditional way is still the most preferable way."

He and his parents sat across five researchers. The table was as wide as it was long but it was almost all covered wit paperwork.

They began their discussion by speaking about the general myths of werewolf sterility (not sterile, they told him detachedly, just low in number and poor in quality). Up until that point, he was sort of fine. Remus was even amused when he learned they even had a name for this situation: oligoasthenotateratozoospermia... A long-long time ago, the much bigger non-scientific part of society took one look at that word, said 'wot?', went with 'sterile', and that was that. True in some extreme cases, but not true for most.

The Institute was currently developing a low-stress, long-term treatment for young werewolves which could significantly improve their lifestyle. Further, the Institute had a loftier, more political goal, which young werewolves like Remus needn't worry his little head about just yet.

Soon, they dove into the deep end.

Remus had grossly underestimated how embarrassing this specific "birds-and-bees" discussion could be.

He wished the whole floor would open up and swallow him whole as he listened to his parents discuss the quality of his swimmers and how many, of his chance of success (actually, quite okay, all things considered), of the soonest he could give his parents a grandchildren or two. They spoke at length of many other things equally or even more horrific things.

This self-perceived humiliation lasted all of five minutes, but felt like five lifetimes to him. Then, they dove straight into test protocols, indications, counter-indications, and co-morbidities. They went through all the regimens, the different potions he needed to take, and charms that he or someone else needed to perform and when. They talked about the different safeguards that must be put in place and strictly observed--the only thing more dangerous than a loose rabid werewolf is an amorous rabid werewolf; the researchers tittered among themselves, rather amused at their own jokes. Remus squirmed but said nothing.

A separate copy of what they discussed would be sent to the Headmaster of his school and also the school's Matron, they told him.

While the Lupins reviewed every piece of parchment they were presented with, one of the researchers turned to her colleagues. "Who's going to supervise him? I'm on the brink of a breakthrough, and I don't want to be traveling to Hogwarts if I can help it."

This researcher had been his handler for the past year. A sullen woman who was always on the brink of some breakthrough or another, who thought of any work outside the lab as a waste of her time. To make things worse, she would never get along well with Madam Pomfrey. Rumors had it that they had been rivals from way back when.

"Don't worry," a colleague soothed. "Here, we have a fast-track brewing intern who can be assigned to assist! Needs polishing but totally dependable," one other researcher piped in. "They're yearmates, too, from what I hear. Should be enough incentive to ensure everything running quickly and
smoothly."

Remus Lupin tried to hide his surprise. 'A yearmate who works here?' he pondered inwardly.

He wondered who that might be. Then he remembered about chasing someone he thought was Snape down the Institute's corridor some time ago. 'Could it really be Snape?' he shuddered. 'How would that even work? Snape hates me!' Remus was sure that Slytherin boy would sooner sabotage his potion than monitor him or even touch him. Or maybe Snape would take some perverse pleasure in poking him!

"Oh!" exclaimed one of the researchers who had her hair in tight locs. "That's right! Analyst Omphale's friend. Yeah, she's a dab hand at brewing! Moreover, her notes are amazing!" She realized belatedly that she had gotten over-excited, so much so she had jumped up from her chair, toppling it over. Sobering up, she gathered her chair and herself, then more sedately added, "I guess, she's good to have around." A small contemplative pause. "A bit abrasive and standoffish though..." Everyone sighed and nodded regretfully. "All in all, she's okay." More nods.

Did Remus hear correctly? 'She? So, not Snape?'

Remus tried to think who else would be good at brewing and spellcasting in his year. Other than Snape, the only halfway decent one was Lily. Could it be Lily, Remus wondered, brightening up instantly. Working with Lily would be great, he thought.

Then again, this person could be a Ravenclaw. From their first year, Gryffindor house only shared a handful of classes with Ravenclaw and none of them were potions or charms. Nevertheless, what an exciting idea to look forward to.

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**Present Day**

Remus and Dora walked into Grimmauld Place through the front door. Sirius, who had been expecting them to emerge out of the floo, rushed and stumbled to the door to greet them. He toppled a potted plant as he ran.

Nobody could even tell who shed the most tears. Remus for seeing Sirius again after thinking him dead. Sirius for reuniting with his friend after resigning himself to a long lonely existence. Or Dora, because of sympathy tears not hormones thank you very much.

Dora stood aside, feigning indifference, yet indulged in a little bit of voyeurism while waiting for such heartfelt reunion to end. If she hadn't already confirmed that Remus was as straight as a carpenter's ruler, she would've been worried.

She was half-asleep on a small bench by the doorway (which must've been new, she thought, the padding was a bit stiff) when she heard the two men's exuberant cries petering out.

'It's high time they realized they're not the only one in the room.

"I like what you did with the house," she said when she found a lull in-between their chatter.

The corridor was bright, cheery, and light. If it's an indication of the rest of the house, she might not want to leave--screaming portrait of her aunt notwithstanding.

Speaking of the devil...
"Is it him?!" she screamed, almost on cue. "Is that blasted werewolf the father?!" the portrait wailed, threatening to burst eardrums, crack paint, and snap stitches. "Andromeda had the gall to spit in the face of Black legacy by marrying a muggle! Now you kick it in the teeth by breeding with a werewolf! Have you no sha... hmmmff fhmmmff!!"

Sirius sheepishly cast the silencing charm he was supposed to cast before his friend-and-cousin's arrival, but he had been wrapped up in selecting paint colors for the future nursery that he had forgotten all about it.

"Sorry about that," he said, as he ushered the happy couple down to the newly renovated sitting room. He tried not to puff up too much at the appreciative noises coming from Dora. Even Remus, who couldn't tell a side table from a coffee table, recognized the efforts that went into it.

"Great job, Pads," Remus slapped him in the back.

Dora sniffled as she sat down in a comfortable armchair with discrete flowers in a masculine colorway; Remus sat on one of the chair's arms and found it well padded, too.

"So, tell me all about it..." Sirius invited. "Well, not all of it, of course. But I thought werewolves fire blanks, no offence Moony."

"Long story, Pads."

"Well, better get talking then," Sirius nudged. He poured two glasses of firewhiskey and one lemonade.

Chapter End Notes

I started at a new job this week. It's been a rough handful of days. But my boss is a great woman, so I survived.
1-Starting on the wrong foot

Chapter Summary

The past: Remus manages to screw things up first day back at school.
While the present has presents.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading, commenting and kudoing. They are so lovely. A blackout
happened at work on Monday and I was able to squeeze out a short chapter. As always,
let me know what you think!

There were many things that Remus couldn't share with Sirius. It hasn't always been this way.
Perhaps a lifetime and a half ago, when they were young and stupid, he would keep nothing secret
from his friend.

Sirius still needed to be told something, so Remus inundated Sirius with scientific minutiae and
medical mumbo jumbo. As expected, Sirius lost interest quite quickly.

"When you said 'long story', I didn't expect it to mean 'boring story'," Sirius grumbled.

"I don't know where you get that idea from, Pads," Remus replied flatly.

Dora shot a knowing look at Remus. She knew what's up and she smiled approvingly. Remus
returned her smile.

In truth, the story was certainly long, though not nearly as boring. Even if the fertility treatments had
ended in failure, which thankfully it did not, he still gained a good friend at the end of it. Remus had
never stopped marveling at his good fortune, and vowed to try never to arse it up.

- Hogwarts, Beginning of their Seventh Year

There was a room next to Madam Pomfrey's own office. It was small and square with high ceilings
and one tall narrow window opposite of the entryway.

A bookcase leaned on one wall, creaking with all things research accumulated since Remus's fourth
year. His records were all there, along with various observation notes, and even a few novels the
previous observer had left behind and never thought to reclaim.

A long desk was shoved against the other wall. All sorts of laboratory equipment rivaling even
Slughorn's personal brewing room were laid out neatly on its weathered surface. Remus could tell
you the name of each piece of equipment, down to the smallest septum, but his stomach was too full
from the Welcoming Feast.
"First day back and already breaking promises, I see."

Snape walked in from behind him, armful of bottles and a book under one armpit.  

"I hope the food was worth it. Some new menu we never had before?" Snape ground out each word, almost spitting them as if they were venom.  

Remus was thankful that Snape was carrying breakables, because he knew that Snape would like nothing more than to throw things, preferably at him.  

"You were supposed to come straight here, not make a long pit stop at the Welcoming Feast," Snape dropped all those glassware with forced calmness. "Did you forget? Are you that stupid?" The book followed soon after, falling with a more satisfying thump. "Maybe you just enjoy making my life harder?" Bottles rattled dangerously against one another.  

'It was an honest mistake,' Remus defended himself in his mind. He didn't dare to say it out loud though.  

He had simply forgotten, carried away as he was by James's enthusiasm and Sirius's clinginess. It was, after all, their last Welcoming Feast as a student and they were all excited. The sorting was boring, and the usual dinner was served. It was only that odd sense of nostalgia that made them stay for the whole thing; they were among the last to leave.  

He realized he hadn't seen Snape at the feast at all. Peter had actually commented on it. 'The git must be hiding,' he had said derisively, 'Coward greaseball.' Seemed like every Gryffindor within earshot had laughed at that cheap shot, including him.  

He knew now that Snape must've been waiting for him, only for Remus to shirk away from his duty. 'Way to go,' Remus mocked himself. 'Great first impression. Always starting on a wrong foot.' A Remus Lupin specialty, especially when it came to him and Snape.  

"You do know this potion needs to be taken on an empty stomach, don't you?" Snape said conversationally, lifting a bottle with an Institute label. Of course Lupin knew. This was far from his first time. His parents had even reminded him about it. They had even packed him a hearty lunch with extra desserts to tide him over the long stretch of required fasting. "Then we were supposed to take some baseline samples, weren't we, Lupin?" Snape aimlessly moved boxes, vials and some small instruments."You would've made it back in time for a good portion of the Feast." Remus felt his dinner weighing like a rock at the bottom of his stomach. "And I could've started the base for something you need to take tomorrow." The day before the full moon.  

"I..."

"Don't you dare," Snape cut him off harshly.  

Deprived of the chance to apologize, Remus could only let silence stretch uneasily. Thin and heavy all at once, like molasses pulled to a breaking point. Remus felt so guilty he felt like throwing up. Snape was seething, all red face and white knuckles, body thrumming with anger barely contained.  

"We could start again next month, there's always that option," Snape said through gritted teeth. Then they would've wasted a month, and Snape would see it as a personal failure. He stood rooted at the spot, he was even afraid to breathe. He watched Snape pace about.  

"I need to think," Snape said at last. "Kindly piss off, Lupin". Finally something Lupin could do. He was rather good at it, even. He needn't be told twice.
Madam Pomfrey was outside the door when Remus stepped out. She didn't offer any words, merely patted him softly on his shoulders. She went in and closed the door.

But Remus could hear them talk, just before the door closed. "I hate him," Snape bit out. "No you don't, dear." An undignified snort, then, "I hate this."

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Just a few minutes after curfew, Madam Pomfrey collected Remus from his dormitory and led him to the hospital wing. His friends had wanted to come, but Madam Pomfrey was quick to dissuade them.

He sat on his usual bed, a writing board in hand, dutifully listing down what he ate and drank over the past eight hours. If anything, it made him realize that his stomach was quite the bottomless pit.

For his troubles, he was given a glass of water and a good tucking in.

He let the ambient sounds of the infirmary calm him. He listened to Madam Pomfrey pottering about, her low humming, the occasional sniffling firstie. He must have hovered for hours between wakefulness and sleep.

Right at the edge of slumber he heard, from somewhere down the corridor, "Finished?" Followed by an unintelligible grumble that sounded like a yes. "Go to bed, dear. You can poke your friend tomorrow, bright and early. Deal?" Silence, then a petulant mumble, "he's not my friend."

- 

In the morning, a half-asleep Remus peed into a cup, let Snape pull out a few hairs from his head and scrape the inside of his mouth with a sharp spatula. Something was poured down his throat and he didn't know whether it was really bitter or it was his morning breath.

Madam Pomfrey and Snape worked on him for awhile more, even though he was out for most of it. Nobody ever said he was a morning person.

Snape rushed back into the brewing room while Remus prepared for his first class of the year. A house elf had delivered his robes and bookbag some time between Snape collecting some earwax and Madam Pomfrey clipping a toenail.

"You can leave now," said a note written in Snape's hand landed on the foot of his bed, but he didn't feel like going to the Great Hall for breakfast. Madam Pomfrey coaxed him to have a healthy serving of jam toast along with huge omelet with extra peppers and a huge glass of cold milk instead. He tried not to eavesdrop as he ate his breakfast. Leaning against the bed's frame, he decided he should read up some Herbology.

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That day, Gryffindor and Slytherin had Defense and Herbology together. Snape was missing from both of them. There's a good chance he missed the other classes too.

Guilt gnawed his insides and it made Remus antsy all day. When Peter wondered loudly whether Snape had finally did them a favor and dropped off the face of the world, he felt something inside him snap.

"Shut up, Peter," he bit out, perhaps harsher than necessary, then stopped himself from giving away too much.
He couldn't tell them what Snape was doing for him, for all sorts of reasons. Snape wouldn't be pleased if he did, and his friends wouldn't believe him anyway. Knowing them, they might even cause Snape extra grief because of it. Remus really didn't need to get on the brewer's bad side more than he already had.

"You sound like a broken record," he told Peter, finally.

As rebukes went, it was rather mild. But coming from Remus, it was a surprise. Sirius fell backwards in shock.

Herbology was the last class for the day. His friends made sympathetic noises about him having to go back to the infirmary but were equally quick to ditch him for the quidditch pitch. Remus watched them race themselves up the path and disappeared quickly around the bed.

He chose the long way around for himself, to calm his mind and make sense of things. He walked slowly, almost lethargically, eyes downcast toward the gravelly path beneath his feet. Then, he thought he heard Lily say, "Look who finally grew a little spine."

He looked up but there was no one there. Must be something in the potion this morning.

-  

It set the tone for their interactions the whole year. Remus would make mistakes, most often unintentional, and he would feel bad about them. He never apologized because Snape would not have it. So he would just let Snape snap at him now and again, for slights and wrongs either real or perceived.

They would never be best friends, but at least they were not enemies. Or so Remus hoped. He could not even guess what Snape was thinking on a good day.

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**Present Day**

The first Order meeting after Sirius's return from beyond the Veil was festive. Very little in the way of Order business was discussed.

They hugged the mother-to-be, patted the father-to-be, and raided Sirius's cellar. Moody took alcohol-fueled potshots at Walburga, knowing the portrait couldn't do or say anything in retaliation.

It was only Snape's arrival that stopped him from portrait-baiting. "What are y..." but Snape, wise to the ways of Moody, walked straight to the small room off the parlor.

"You're here!" Dora called out. The door was quickly opened and shut.

"Hiding from well-wishers?"

"The next person to pat me on the stomach will go home with broken fingers."

"I'll refrain from it, then," Snape said with a smirk, patting her shoulder conciliatorily. Taking the time to look around, Snape remarked, "that dog did a good job renovating."

"He did, didn't he?" Dora laughed, picking up a throw pillow. "I won't tell him you said that." Not that her cousin would believe it.

"For some reason, Lupin asked me to tell you to cut back on 'auroring', as he called it," Snape said
with an air of bemusement, "which I know is a waste of my breath. So, I'm giving you the next best thing."

A box expanded in size as it hit the coffee table. "For nausea, for itching." Snape pointed to bottles of different shapes and colors. "This is to strengthen the uterine wall. That one helps protect the baby when you morph, although it's better if you don't do it too often if you can help it." They went through a few more, "Let me know if you need them refilled."

"Amazing," Dora coo-ed over her hamper, bringing bottles and jars up to her nose. She read some of the labels and noted that each of them had instructions on them. "You still have time to brew?"

It earned her an 'are you simple' look.

"I got them from the Institute." At Dora's skeptical look, Snape scowled. "They've been approved. You're never a good guinea pig, anyway."

"Thanks," she said. "I think."

"Don't mention it to anyone."

"I won't," Dora promised. She was just about to offer Snape some cake when the door opened. Remus peeked through the opening, a small smile on his face as he watched her shrink down her gifts. "Was that S..."

"Where's that greasy git?!" The door opened violently, but Snape had already left through the floo.
2-At the Institute

Chapter Summary

A trip down memory's lane.

Chapter Notes

According to Wikipedia: Sevda is a Turkish feminine name meaning love, ambition, and passion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Their Seventh Year. Three days after Christmas

Remus picked up his latest packet from the service desk. The clerk dismissed him impatiently and called for the next person in line before Remus could say 'thank you'. The Institute's lobby was unusually packed with people, but Remus thought everything went quite efficiently.

He practically had to wade his way to the front door. So intent was he on protecting the fragile package in his hands that he barely missed getting hit by the door swinging open. A group of white robed researchers pushed through in a hurry to escape the blustery December wind. A stiff chill came in with them and Remus shivered.

He mumbled a vague apology. He was almost out of the door when long thin fingers wrapped around his forearm, stopping him in his tracks. "Lupin, wait," he heard a vaguely familiar voice call out. "Can you spare some time?"

Remus all but stared. The other person merely looked at him with infinite amusement. Then it dawned to him... Here was Snape, but not the Snape he was used to.

Severus Snape was not a handsome boy by any stretch of imagination. Sevda Snape, while not beautiful in a classical sense, was undoubtedly a very striking girl.

It wasn't surprising that it took a while for Remus to put a name to a face. He had seen her only once before. But what a meeting that had been

*(Let's rewind to the summer just past)*

Toward the end of their introductory meeting, one of the five researchers stood up and bade Remus to follow him. "Let's leave your parents here to sort out paperwork. How about we go see Master Belby?" It was phrased like a question, but Remus really thought it wasn't. "We'll introduce you to the one who will be monitoring and helping you at school."

Remus followed the woman dutifully, down meandering corridors that he had no hope of
remembering. At the end of a long stretch stood a fireplace, all dark green marble and easily taller than Hagrid. It was the only feature in that otherwise austere corridor, next to the empty ornate portrait frame that sat on the floor against the far wall.

The researcher fished out a handful of floo powder from a box she kept in her pocket, "Brewing Basement 4!"

It was a large room, more like a big assembly hall with no windows or doors. Oddly it was well-lit, despite Remus not seeing any major source of light. There were rows of long sturdy tables spaced comfortably apart, occupied by people in identical white robes bent over a cauldron or two with the same kind of focused determination.

At the opposite end of the room was a door. Tall and dark brown, it was almost black.

"Wait here," the researcher told him when they were steps away from it. She went inside, leaving Remus to examine the door.

Soon, he could hear people arguing within. He was certain that a good portion of the hall could hear them too. In fact, more than a few people had started to inch closer, but the door was too thick for any of them to hear anything more than snatches of garbled words.

Suddenly the door swung open, scattering curious bystanders away. The man was someone Remus had seen only cursorily. Tall and stern, he had a jovial twinkle in his intelligent gaze. "Ah, Remus Lupin! Come in, come in!" Master Belby greeted excitedly, striding out and grabbing Remus by the shoulder.

Inside the room, the researcher that came with him was arguing in hushed tones with a girl in similar white robes. They didn't seem to notice their audience.

"I could've come up with a story," the girl hissed. Remus could only see her figure from the back. She was probably only a finger shorter than him, with a straight back, and midnight black hair gathered in a low ponytail at the base of her neck.

"Too late," the elder of the two said sheepishly. "We sort of told him already. It sort of came out."

Master Belby coughed dramatically, loud enough to stop the bickering.

"Oh, look at the time, I better leave you all to it!"

"Coward," the girl hissed at the older researcher's retreat. That venomous delivery sounded rather familiar to Remus. When she turned around, Remus got a better look. Pale face, the darkest pair of eyes he had ever seen, eyebrows beetling in anger over an aquiline nose, and lips turned down in displeasure.

"Remus, Sevda. Sevda, Remus," Master Belby said by way of introduction. The name did not ring any bells.

"I... don't believe we've met," Remus ventured. His offer of a handshake was accepted quite reluctantly. It ended before it barely begun.

"Indeed we have n..."
"Oh that's right!" Master Belby cut her off. "She goes by Severus at that school of yours!"

"Se... WHAT?"

"MASTER BELBY!"

The two Hogwarts students exclaimed loudly at the same time, though for different reasons. Their outburst was so loud it earned them a huge 'Shush' from the people outside of the door.

It took a while for Remus to recover from shock.

"Thanks ever so much, Master Belby." The bitter sarcasm wasn't lost on anyone in the room.

"I don't see what's the problem here, dear," Master Belby said placatingly.

"The problem is that everyone is so damn free with my secret!"

Despite his lingering shock, Remus still found it amusing to see Snape sputter in that familiar way, despite an appearance that was so different from what Remus was used to.

"Severus?" Remus found his voice. "How..."

"None of your damned business!" Snape snapped at him, voice an octave or so higher than what he's used to as well. It actually reminded Remus of Snape's voice before the Slytherin reached puberty.

"I'm sorry we let the cat out of the bag, dear, you know how scatterbrained we sometimes are," Master Belby said kindly. "But don't you think it's better out than in? Or, what was that saying again?"

"Quit acting like a dotty old fool. You're not old or dotty. Neither are all those people outside!" Snape spoke the last sentence loudly enough for everyone to hear, even those on the other side of the door. People shuffled and muttered. "I thought I explained it to you. You said you understood."

"I'm really sorry, Sevda," Master Belby appeared contrite.

"I want the key to Restricted Storage."

"That's fine. I'll even let you keep it until you return to school," Master Belby was not above bribery. He should probably talk to her Brewing Supervisor to let her do overtime for the week as well.

Snape let out a huge sigh, "I'm screwed." Remus watched how Snape's proud stance disappeared within the space of a breath. In its place was a shadow of that cowed look Remus was used to seeing from Severus Snape back at Hogwarts. "As if I don't have enough problems at school."

"Nonsense," Master Belby said. All traces of joviality vanished with a word. "Who's going to tell? Definitely not this nice young man here..." Remus felt the Master's fingers digging lightly but insistently into his shoulders.

Something in the man's voice made Remus's hair stood up at the back of his neck. "I..."

"Now, you'll keep our Sevda's secret safe at your school, won't you?" The man asked him. There was something oddly compelling about his gaze and his quietly insistent tone. Then the man turned to Snape, his gaze a little bit softer. "Don't worry so much, dear. Young Mister Lupin won't tell
anyone, not if he wants to stay in the program for long." It was a crude thing to say but it made sense in a way. Unfortunately, test subjects were a dime a dozen. Good brewers and competent researchers were harder to come by.

Turning back to Lupin, the man said, "You do like being part of our program, don't you? We can trust you, can't we?"

Lupin nodded like an automaton, like there's some strange force persuading him to do it.

They spent the next half an hour in discussion. Master Belby explained a lot of do's. Snape covered all the don'ts. Basically, everything boiled down to: do follow all experiment protocols, don't ask inane questions. Snape threatened, Master Belby refereed, and Remus's part in the whole exchange was to nod or shake his head as needed.

Other researchers would drop by a few times, either to add to the discussion or consult something unrelated. With every passing minute, Remus saw Snape sitting up straighter again, speaking with a calm confidence, bantering with fellow researchers, matching Master Belby wit for wit. This Snape never had to lurk in shadows, Remus realized, or look suspiciously at everything that lived and breathed.

The next time they met, though, it would be back in Hogwarts, with Snape's old shifty self back to the fore and Remus feeling more disoriented than he had ever been.

"Quit daydreaming, Lupin!"

And just like that he was back standing in front of Institute's door on a chilly December afternoon.

Remus blinked to clear the cobwebs in his head.

Preparing for NEWTs and trying to live up to one's prefect badge (for once) meant that his contact with Snape was limited to very brusque interactions and very little conversation. Snape was never a person of many words to begin with, but with NEWTs, projects, and brewing, Snape had even less time to hang around or chat.

It also meant that Remus was ill-prepared for any interactions with Snape at the Institute at all. It seemed that there's one rule for school, and another as-yet-unexplained rule for here at the institute.

"Sev... er... Sn...," he fumbled. He wanted to say the correct words, do the right thing, but it only left him more confused. "Hello," he settled with a neutral greeting instead.

"Yes, yes, how do you do and so forth," Snape said hurriedly. "Do you have a moment to spare? I need a favor."

'Snape in any form was like a natural disaster made human', Remus concluded, 'devastating and totally unpredictable.'

"Ye... yeah, I think," was all Remus could say.

They stood ensconced in small alcove off to the side of the lobby, the crowd making a steady din behind them.
"I have a problem, Lupin."

"What is it? You know I'll do anything I can to help," Lupin said truthfully. He wondered if it's anything to do with the program.

"I ran into Black a couple of days ago," Snape said with a scowl.

Chapter End Notes

Perhaps I should've done this chapter sooner, as it sort of details how ground rules for interactions (particularly between R and S) are set. As expected, it's difficult for Remus to reconcile between the personas of Severus and Sevda, to stay on Snape's good side, to keep an eye on his friends and keep his mouth shut about what he knows about Snape, and we'll probably see him flounder bit more as the chapters go. I'm starting to feel sorry for what I'm doing to Remus actually.

Recap: Sev joined the Institute after the OWLs, so it was only then that Sev could begin to bring Sevda into reality (tbh, it's going to be a long journey ahead). Anywhere else outside the Institute time (therefore also Hogwarts), Sev is still Severus in body and appearance. In my mind, I also imagined Sev honestly not wanting anyone from her past knowing about Sevda. The Institute marked a "birth" of Sevda, and life as Sevda is everything light and good, free from all the Severus's hardships. I see there's a reluctance to bring Sevda into Severus's world, and vice versa. Of course... human plans, god laughs. I envision this determination to keep the two lives (past and future) separate will only lead Sev into a lot more complexes and angst.

In addition, I'm still trying to figure out how to approach her transition and what magical gender affirming procedures would entail. Other big questions: Timeline. Also whether Sev will still join the DE, if so, why and how.

I hope everything makes sense. Would definitely love to hear from you and what you think!
Because Snape would never talk about Regulus with Remus, he knew that they were waddling into Sirius Black territory. His head knew he should approach cautiously, but his mouth betrayed him by blurting out, "How did _that_ happen?"

The expected insult, or worse a jinx, never came. Snape merely fidgeted.

"No..." Remus corrected himself. 'Not Snape... This is Sevda.' For some reason, he couldn't just think of the person in front of him as Severus at all. They looked, even sounded completely different, even when they shared a lot of the same mannerisms.

"Not by choice I assure you," Sevda said flatly, pushing back a tumble of hair away from her face. This nervous tic, unconscious gesture, was uniquely Sevda. Severus would rather hide behind it.

It was a quick gesture, easily missed. But the stark white bandage around Sevda's hand contrasted sharply against her inky black hair that Remus couldn't help but stare at it. Gauze extended halfway up the palm, and all the way down her wrist, disappearing under the cuff of her long-sleeved robe. Sevda noticed Remus was staring and quickly stuffed both hands into the deep front pockets of her robes, scowling all the while.

Remus merely smiled, bemused if anything. Where a scowl would twist Severus's face into an ugly mask, Remus found Sevda's attempt at one quite... endearing.

"A bicycle ran into me and I ran into Black."

"And..." Remus ventured, when no other explanation was forthcoming. "Are you worried he might recognize you?"

"It's not that."
"Did he..." Remus hesitated. "Did he do something to you?" Remus was genuinely concerned about this, to be quite honest. He knew very well that Sirius would never win prizes for patience. In fact, Sirius could be rather explosive, prone to assuming the worst out of people and lashing out even at genuine accidents. He had gotten a tiny bit better with his temperament over time, but it had taken a lot of hard work from James and Remus, while Peter was no help at all.

"It's not... that is..." Sevda floundered for a while. "Black was," an awkward pause, as it was painful to say loud. "Hewassurprisinglykind."

"He what?"

"He gave me a handkerchief for my hand, got me a cab, put me and my groceries into the cab, and threw money at the cabbie," Sevda spoke hurriedly. "I don't like owing people anything."

"Wha..." Remus was still a bit disoriented by the barrage of information. "So... er..." A naturally inquisitive person, Remus direly wanted to ask: how? why? where? when exactly did that happen? But he knew Snape would never volunteer superfluous information easily, if at all. Any gossip, he would have to ask Sirius.

So Remus asked instead, "What do you want me to do?"

A small box appeared in front of his nose almost out of nowhere. Remus could see a piece of fabric neatly folded underneath the clear top of the box. "Unfortunately the blood wouldn't come out in the wash, so I got him a new one." Remus could see that Sevda was contemplating very hard whether to divulge more information. He waited. After a short while, Sevda added, pointing at the gold-embossed logo on the side of the box. The same logo was embroidered discretely on the handkerchief itself. "It's the same brand but not the same style."

He wasn't the most up to date when it came to fashion but Remus knew it was an expensive brand. It was a high-end brand very popular with muggles and wizards alike. Sirius had taken Remus to the store one time, and Remus still couldn't get over the lavishness of it all. He realized that the small piece of fabric must've set Sevda back quite a bit to buy. Much as Sirius hated his pure-blood supremacist family, he still had expensive pure-blood tastes when it came to the finer things in life. The hand-me-downs that Remus got from Sirius cost more than everything the Lupin family ever bought for themselves.

"And all the money he threw at the cabbie," Sevda said, handing over an envelope. It wasn't glued, so Remus opened it. His eyes bugged out. Inside were rows of colorful muggle money. "I know, right?" Sevda scoffed. "There's easily a hundred pounds in there. Where did he think I was going? Luton?"

"So... Sirius thought you were a muggle?" Remus asked, comprehension dawning. So that's why Sevda wasn't worried about Sirius recognizing him.

"I think so."

"And how am I supposed to return all of these to him, then?" Remus asked, bemused. "Because I can't even begin to explain you to him." Was it just Remus, or had the temperature in the lobby dropped suddenly. "I mean, hypothetically speaking of course. Not... that I'm going to tell anyone or anything," Remus backtracked.

"You're smart, you'll think of something," Sevda smiled, in a way that Remus had seen quite a few times before. On Severus it was predatory. On Sevda, it was quite persuasive; it made Remus want to do things he wouldn't normally dare to do.
Despite the slight bit of tension, there was an absence of danger. Remus never sensed that Sevda would throw a hex at him at any second. And this sense of security made Remus very bold all of a sudden, "Wh... what do I get out of it?"

"Let me hear it then," Sevda challenged, without missing a beat. Remus wondered whether he was that readable. It made Remus feel like he was an examinee about to take a test. A test that he didn't want to fail.

"Two weeks of studying together," he ventured cautiously, remembering that, all things considered, Sevda still knew all the same hexes and spells that sometimes landed the Marauders in the hospital wing.

"Two weeks? Try one hour. I'm a very busy person, Lupin, in case you forgot."

A sarcastic jest or otherwise, Sevda's counter-offer genuinely took him by surprise. Lupin had actually expected Snape to turn him down outright, with a side dish of snark to go with. His astonishment must've shown on his face because Snape was looking at him with what could only be regarded as a triumphant smirk.

Caught off-guard, Lupin's first instinct was to push his own luck. "A whole week, one hour each time?"

"For that, I'll need you to do another favor."

'Bargaining with Snape!' Lupin was giddy at this unexpected exchange. 'Wonders never cease,' he crowed inwardly. No one would believe that Snape had just agreed to give him a time of day. "What is it?"

"Mind you this is only a conjecture on my part," Snape cautioned. "I have no tangible proof, but Black might have picked up and kept something of mine. If it's true, then you'll need to retrieve it for me."

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**Present Day**

Sirius moved the dresser in his room for the second time that day. He was full of excited energy since Dora asked if he wanted to accompany her to the doctor's office. Remus was supposed to go with her, but he was still stuck deep inside Greyback's territory, two days overdue.

The clock told Sirius that it was only ten in the morning. Dora had nervously gone to the Ministry before sunrise, giving up any pretense of sleep. Meanwhile, Sirius finally succumbed to his anxiety and began pushing furniture sometime after breakfast.

A minute had passed since Sirius looked up at the clock last. Their appointment wasn't until half three in the afternoon.

He decided to put the dresser back to where it had been standing, unsure of its placement. Perhaps it would be better to bin it altogether. He never liked this piece of dark wood furniture anyway. Perhaps he should get one of those modern ones. He wondered if he should remodel his room again. The current setup fitted with the rest of the house nicely, but it didn't quite suit him.

Mid-push, something fell behind the dresser. It was a long, slim wooden box that he had forgotten about.
Opening the ornately carved top, he peered inside and a memory returned.

It was Boxing Day on his Seventh Year at Hogwarts. A weirdly bright winter morning sent him out of the door of his family home for a trot. Padfoot ambled down the streets without any fixed destination. He always loved walking around muggle neighborhoods. He thought they were more interesting than any old magical alleys. The sounds and the scents and the way people wear their clothes and move about... they all intrigued him.

He stopped in front of a bustling chippy, the scent of fried fish wafted out of the door and made him drool. A cat was curled on a mat just beyond the threshold of the shop, eyeing him with the sort of lazy suspicion as only a feline could.

He crossed a few more roads, and saw a few dogs trotting happily next to their owners. The two biggest barked at Padfoot in what sounded like a greeting. Not that he would know. Being Padfoot didn't give him automatic knowledge of dogspeak. He barked back nonetheless.

The humans were more wary of him. Children were constantly being steered away from him. Padfoot was, after all, a dog with no collar wandering around the streets alone.

He soon found a deserted alleyway where he turned back into Sirius. He could no longer abide by the feeling of cold pavement on his paws. Idly, he wondered whether proper dogs' paws were built differently to that of an animagus. They didn't seem to mind the cold at all. Maybe it was a matter of habit. After all, they spent all their lives as dogs while he only moonlighted as one.

Whistling as he walked, now on two feet clad in warm sturdy boots, he soon came up to the busier part of the high street. Everyone seemed to be in very high spirits, either eating, shopping, or merely admiring the holiday window displays in front of most shops. His attention was immediately caught by them. Each was more festive than the next, all of them very sparkly and cheerful. They reminded Sirius of the Great Hall's Yule decorations and made him a bit nostalgic.

"Watch out!" someone suddenly yelled. Something slammed into him. People were shouting. He was sent sprawling on the pavement.

A little angry at being bowled over, he struggled to stand but only managed to prop himself up on his elbows. The fall had all but knocked the wind out of him. He felt around for his wand but remembered he was in the company of muggles. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man on a bicycle rushing away, with a few people giving a good chase.

People started fussing over him, most of them women.

He turned his head a little and saw a girl about his age similarly sprawled next to him on the pavement. At first glance, Sirius thought she looked pitiful with her whole appearance in disarray. He then caught his own reflection on the window of a nearby store. He looked a fright, he realized, with his scowling face, dishevelled hair, and a body language all but rearing for a good fight. He schooled his face quickly, so as not to frighten the girl.

But he soon realized that she wasn't scared of him at all. There was a determined look in her eyes as she told him, measuredly, that she was sorry for colliding into him.

"It's not your fault, dear," an older woman spoke on his behalf. She had seen Sirius's face twisting up and darkening. It made her worry. The last thing she wanted was for the boy to yell at the poor girl.

"It was that horrid man on that bicycle," another woman chimed in. "Speeding like a demon! I hope
they lock him up! The nuisance!"

The girl became quiet during all this exchange. Sirius worried she might have gone into shock from the fall, but he found her merely staring intently at him with a steady and unreadable gaze.

"Are you okay?" Sirius asked.

"Yes, thank you," she said, looking away at him. She sat forward in a bit of a crouch and began collecting her fallen groceries. The way she was carefully avoiding using her left hand told him that she must've injured it when she fell. Sirius saw some nasty scrapes on the back of it, and a little bit on the palm.

"You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," she all but dismissed him. "How about you?" He was filthy, at the very least, having fell into a particularly sludgy spot in the middle of the pavement. "At least, let me pay for cleaning?"

Sirius knew a blatant attempt at diversion when he heard one. He was determined not to fall for it. "Oh don't worry about me, nothing a good wash can't fix," he waved off her concern, taking out a handkerchief instead.

He easily caught her injured hand and she was not quick enough to pull back. He touched her wrist lightly and it felt a bit warm. 'Inflamed,' he thought. She must've twisted it. He began wiping and blotting at her scrapes, carefully avoiding jostling her wrist too much. "It's clean. I haven't used it yet," he assured her, as he tied the piece of cloth loosely around her hand.

"Keep it on, wouldn't want you to bleed all over your pretty coat," he said, and she rolled her eyes at him. He knew he was exaggerating, it's not like she had a gaping wound or anything.

"Are you injured anywhere else?" a woman of about fifty-ish elbowed in, fussing over the girl who seemed a little put off by the attention.

Sirius climbed onto his feet and brushed ineffectually at the dirt on his trousers. He stood aside and studied the girl instead. She had her hair in a bun, which had mostly unraveled into a messy tumble around her shoulders. Her face was pale, and her lips were a bit white from the shock. Sitting on wet pavement had dirtied her clothes--a good but well-worn coat and woolen winter skirt--but they seemed quite intact. She didn't appear to have other visible injuries. He hoped she wasn't also hurt elsewhere he couldn't see.

"You didn't sprain your ankle or anything?" the woman asked, already crouching down. The girl's oxfords were horribly smudged and scuffed. There's even a huge gash across the outside of her left shoe. She quickly moved her feet from the woman's reach, standing up from her crouch and urged the woman to do the same. "I... No. I'm okay. Look..."

Obviously, the woman was still not done mother-henning the poor girl who grew more distressed as more attention was directed at her. Sirius took pity on her and stepped in. "Let me get you a cab, okay?"

Sirius flagged one down in no time at all. He gave the cabbie some money which he hoped would be enough to see her home. He wasn't quite sure how much muggle transportation cost these days. One of the women helped him get the girl and her groceries inside the cab, and soon it sped away.

"You should dry your clothes quickly, my dear." The extra-helpful woman found a new hapless quarry.
He mumbled his thanks and smiled as charmingly as he could, slowly inching away. Then he felt a crunch under his boots.

-  

Sitting in his own room, having escaped overly-concerned strangers and his own overly-critical mother, he was finally able to get a good look at the bracelet he’d picked up.

Its clasp was broken, though Sirius didn't think it was because of him trundling all over it. Perhaps it had broken when the girl fell the first time, if it indeed belonged to the girl.

On a thin and plain golden chain were a round green stone and a small diamond stud, looking a little bit like a planet and its moon suspended side by side. One end of the chain had an alphabet charm on it. At the other end, next to the broken clasp, was a small flat tab with a three-letter initial engraved on it. He wondered if it stood for her name.

It was easy enough to clean, and the clasp only needed one quick _Reparo_. He turned the bracelet idly in his hands. It was simple and nothing like the heavy jeweled ones his mother favored. It suited the girl, he thought as he rooted around his own dresser.

Underneath a lot of junk he didn't realize he had, Sirius found empty box. Long and thin, the box had come with the pocket watch he now wore everywhere. He put the bracelet down carefully lengthwise inside the box, making sure to lay it down straight and flat. Inside the oversized case, the bracelet looked daintier than it actually was. Its modest diamond stud sparkled against the dark velvet lining.

He had every thought of returning it to the owner, though he didn't know how or where he would find the girl, who must've been a muggle. He didn't even know her name, and he only took a fleeting look of her face.

He knew lots of muggles go to the police station to report something stolen or lost. He could try to find out where the local police station was. He imagined it wouldn't be too hard to do. A point-me charm might suffice. Or a few conversations with muggles at the very worst. If he returned it there, the police might even be able to track her down, he thought.

Yes, Sirius decided, he'd do that tomorrow. Perhaps, things could turn serendipitous and he could even bump into her. It would be nice to be able to return the bracelet to her in person. Well, that had a very slim chance of happening, of course. But Sirius was always the closet romantic, even though all the Mills & Boon books in the house belonged to Regulus.

But even the best laid plans had the ability to go to hell most times. So it should come as no surprise that his latest half-baked plan stood no chance of ever happening the way he wanted.

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The day's excitement took quite a bit out of him. After nodding off and nearly drowning in the bath, then almost knocking his head against the door jamb, he made it to bed just barely, where he slept all through dinner and breakfast.

It was already bright outside when he woke up to insistent knocking. He almost tripped over his bedclothes to open the window before James's owl could tap a hole into it.

Less than two hours later, Sirius was on his way to spend the rest of his holiday at James's.

Chasing the spectre of a girl would just have to wait.
I modeled Sev's bracelet on this one: Piaget's Possession rose gold malachite and diamond bracelet

I'm still thinking about what letter and what initials I should put on the bracelet--either Sev's own or Eileen's, or someone else's.
4(part A)-One Step Forward...

Chapter Summary

Student Lupin and Student Snape, poking at the boundaries of friendship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January, their Seventh Year

While Sirius and Peter chose to sit with Lily and James in the Head Boy and Girl's compartment, Remus thought he would like to sit with the other Prefects. He had been talking with Xenophilius as they waited to board the train and he was eager to pick up where they left off.

"I don't know what can be so interesting, Moony," Peter whined. "He looks like he's not all there, you know," he continued, tapping quickly on the side of his head with his pointer finger, and rolling his eyes around as emphasis.

Remus stepped out and slid the compartment door closed quickly so he didn't have to listen to Peter's cuckoo imitation and Sirius's guffaws.

The Hogwarts Express was not as full this time of year, with many students opting to stay at school for the holidays or returning to school before the new year. Yet even among the thin crowd, Xeno proved very difficult to find. He was not in the Prefect's compartment, and no one seemed to even know where he went!

When he found his path blocked by the food trolley, Remus decided to abort his search altogether. He purchased a few chocolate frogs and a pumpkin pasty, then made his way back to his friends. In hindsight, he probably shouldn't eat and walk.

Midway through his pasty, the train rocked a little bit rougher than usual. Trying to salvage his pasty and chocolates, Remus lost his footing and tumbled about in the gangway connection. One last jolt sent him sprawling on someone who had been hiding in a corner apparently unnoticed.

Remus couldn't even get an apology out when thin fingers dug into his wrist and he was hauled bodily across the short distance to the next carriage over.

They managed to shoo out of the occupants of the compartment furthest away. With any luck, the group of third-year Hufflepuffs would be too shocked to be able to spread any rumors about Remus and a strange girl.

"Sevda? What are..."

Remus was ignored quite thoroughly as Sevda pulled down a screen over the compartment door window, then cast a quick cleaning charm over both of them. They were starting to smell like
pumpkin and melted chocolate.

Since the train's doors had no locks and no one was not supposed to perform locking charms on board, Remus helped Sevda keep the door closed with an enlarged trunk.

"You were saying?" Sevda said, taking a seat across Remus.

Remus floundered a bit until a small "why" left his mouth, his hand making a sweeping gesture at Sevda's person.

"A simple miscalculation," Sevda said.

*(flashback to early in their Seventh Year)*

"There's no way to make a permanent potion for it?"

They were waiting for Remus's potion to finish "cooking". Remus had finished filling in all the questionnaires and doing his homework for the week, and was fast becoming very gabby. The spotlight inevitably turned quite uncomfortably on the secretive Slytherin.

Snape glared at the cauldron in the corner and wished it didn't still need half an hour to simmer and about the same time to cool. "There's no such thing as 'no way', Lupin. It's just a slow process."

When Snape first joined the Institute, gender potions only lasted the drinker a week. The first time Snape took the potion, it lasted two weeks and a few days before another dose had to be taken.

The most recent dose lasted Sevda the whole summer, sloughing off completely just in time for Severus to board the Hogwarts Express, leaving everyone none the wiser. The ingredient mix was heaps more versatile as well, giving Snape more freedom to adjust the doses--even as short as a weekend, if need be.

"Why not Family Magic?" Remus asked, like the know-it-all he could be sometimes. "I read that it renders permanent and perfect change." Ever since their meeting in Master Belby's office, Remus had been reading up on gender potions voraciously. It frankly disturbed him that he never knew there's an affliction like this. That it was not as simple as playing dress up with Polyjuice; in fact, it's not dress up at all. He wondered whether there were other people like Snape at Hogwarts. He wondered if they would be people he knew. "Your mother's a powerful witch, isn't she?"

"She was," Snape said tightly, hoping Remus would drop the conversation soon.

No such luck, though, as Remus didn't even miss a beat, "I'm so sorry."

"It felt like a long time ago, anyway. Don't worry yourself about it." Snape dismissed. But Remus knew it was all an act. Losing a parent was always going to be hard, he thought, and it seemed like there's a strong mother-and-child bond where Snape was concerned.

"When?" Remus asked tentatively, a cold finger of dread running up his spine. He had an inkling of when that might be.

"Around the time you and your friends started calling me Snivellus." Remus looked like he had swallowed a lemon.

"Anyway," Snape waved it all off. "It wouldn't change a thing even if she were around."
Eileen Snape above all had wanted to give a son to Tobias. From all accounts she had been very happy when the muggle midwife confirmed that her baby had a pecker. On top of it, Tobias for sure wouldn't appreciate a tranny in the household. Snape never felt so liberated as the day when news of Tobias's death arrived. Sure there had been some tears, but he wasn't so sure it was from sadness. It must've been convincing enough that even Slughorn showed a rare gesture of condolence by giving Snape a note to skip a day's worth of classes and a vial of Felix Felicis.

Silence stretched and Remus misread Snape's vicious thoughts about Tobias Snape as sadness. It made him extremely regretful.

Snape, who thought that it was actually not that big of a deal, did nothing to convince Lupin otherwise. Snape was not above using personal tragedy as a weapon to attack someone else or score a point somewhere. If this misplaced pity would buy Snape a peaceful final year at Hogwarts, then by all means he'd take it. Perhaps Slytherin was really the perfect place for Snape to be.

Second-hand anguish made Remus look like he was about to spout platitudes, cry, or both. To stop the waterworks from happening, Snape quickly launched into a lecture. Some facts were left out, of course. There's no need for Lupin to know about the sordid soap opera otherwise known as the Snape Household. "I don't know how much you've read, but you have to know that Family Magic is a very sinister thing."

"Old pureblood families have been practicing it since time immemorial, though they don't advertise it... for obvious reasons. Not enough sons? Too many sons? Gender magic. Practically foolproof. Need to eliminate a potential claimant without the mess that comes with murder? Let's change the child's sex. The sooner the better." They were almost always done during infancy, and any time before puberty when the child's magical core was still malleable.

The earlier it was done, the less chance of a scandal too. Such was Pureblood logic. Doing it to a minor also meant that the Families did not need to have the child's consent at all. "These adults think that it wouldn't affect the child. Or they just don't care enough to be bothered. They think they can do anything they want to a child and get away with it."

At the Institute, Snape had seen a fair share of pureblooded men and women who struggled with their gender identity. They paid a lot, either for mind healing or to futilely reverse the effects, and they almost singlehandedly kept the Institute swimming in research funding.

Remus didn't need to know (not that Snape was going to tell) but it so happened that Lucius Malfoy was one of those people. In fact, it was Lucius that had led Snape to the Institute, almost by accident.

"In any case, it's good to have alternatives to Family Magic," Snape continued, eager to avoid thinking too much about the Malfoys and their sorry brand of family melodrama.

"There are just too many cases of people not having access to such a thing." Disowned or orphaned children and late bloomers were just some of them. If you go by class or racial profile, things could get more complicated very quickly.

Snape stood up to douse the fire from underneath the now bubbling cauldron, and moved the fat pot onto an ornate trivet that looked very turn-of-century. Remus, by virtue of his occasional experience working with Snape in Potions class throughout the years, was allowed to help with clean up. They got into a good rhythm fairly quickly. Snape would never admit it, but Lupin could be a competent assistant when he put his mind into it.

"It's a complicated bit of research." Snape laid out a clean ladle on a square of linen napkin next to the steeping cauldron. A goblet waited next to it. "If it helps, you can think of it as something similar
to the research going into your Wolfsbane." It had always been the Institute's ultimate goal to find a potion that could stop werewolves from changing, if not reverse the curse entirely.

"Just that mine's aiming for the opposite effect, I suppose." Rather than stop change, Snape hoped that soon there would be a potion that could make change permanent. Snape rather looked forward to saying goodbye to Severus once and for all.

A white world whiz past with cold detachment outside the train window.

"I'll have to skip tomorrow's classes at this rate." Sevda had every plan to be the last to leave the train. She would have to spend the night in Hogsmeade, until the potion wore off. She was still beat up about it. It wasn't all that often that she miscalculated dates and got measurements mixed up. The encounter with Sirius must've addled her brain.

In any case, Sevda had quickly dismissed the notion of using Glamors and Notice-me-nots. There's just no way they could hold up even if it's only to last the ride up to the Castle.

"Can't you... like Polyjuice yourself?"

"Even if I happen to carry Polyjuice around with me, which I don't, " Sevda said crossly, "I'm not in a habit of carrying my other's hair with me."

"Maybe you should?" Remus quipped, then preemptively raised both hands in the universal gesture of peace-don't-hex-me. "Just a thought."

Chapter End Notes

I've always wondered about how Magical Britain approach gender dysphoria. My headcanon made it not too different from what Muggles have. Like for example, the potion Snape has to take was just a better version of HRT. That although Sev still has to take it periodically all through life (unless her dreams come true and there's One Potion to Rule Em All), it does save Sev from having to undergo surgery, and it actually gives Sev all the parts necessary to make Lil Sevs (am I too crazy to hope they'd be like Snarky Jack-Jacks? (Lol). The magical world better be ready! Anyway, that's still a long way away, if it happened at all).

As the above conversation happened during their Seventh Year, I try to make it fit with what is already known during that time frame (1970/80s). But, I've never been good at research, so, please let me know if it looks iffy, if it makes sense (or not) or if you just have thoughts in general.

I think Remus is the best person to put in place as someone who can sympathize with Sev. Afterall Severus is to Sevda like the Werewolf is to Remus, isn't it? I'm thinking that this will play a role in bringing a group of former enemies together and heal wounds. I'm still thinking of a way to get Sev and Siri to talk at Hogwarts, and probably get Lily and Sev to make up.

On a side note, although it was completely an unintentional plot device when it began, I'm now feeling rather invested in Lucius's past. ((lol)) Maybe one day I'll write
something short about the very short life of Lucia Malfoy or something ((please don't hate me)).

I can't believe it's been a month since I started this. Thank you all for all your lovely support!
Chapter Summary

Friendship tug-o-war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the end, Sevda didn't have to spend the night in Hogsmeade after all. In a quintessential display of reckless risk-taking, Remus managed to get James to lend him the invisibility cloak. It had prompted some questions and sleazy innuendos, but Remus's meekness ultimately worked in his favor. None of his friends even suspected that he was going to use it to help a known enemy of the Gryffindors.

Sevda, who didn't expect Remus to be back once he left, was genuinely surprised when Remus reappeared hours later with the illicitly-acquired item. Accepting the 'peace offering' for what it was, Sevda refrained from asking too much about it, especially since Remus already looked quite uncomfortable.

"Figures," she said instead, harrumphing and rolling her eyes that seemed to amuse Remus for some reason. 'Of course they have something like this,' Sevda grumbled inwardly. 'It's so obvious!'

To her chagrin, the potion didn't wear off until rather late into the evening of their first day back at school. But skipping classes had never been so fun! With the invisibility cloak, Snape was able to spend the day in the library doing some meaningful and uninterrupted research, raid the kitchen, and languish in bed.

'No wonder the Moronders look so damned smug all the time,' was Snape's last thought.

On the second day back at school, most students were still trying to one up one another with holiday stories. Not willing to be outdone by stories of hols at home, those who decided to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays told their friends about staying up past curfew, the daily feasts in the Great Hall, the magnificent fireworks they had for New Years celebration.

They exaggerated the size of snow forts they built at the edge of the Enchanted Forest. They boasted about skating the length and breadth of the Great Lake, leaving out the fact that it was only possible after both McGonagall and Flitwick spelled and charmed the lake to the hilt. The Giant Squid was not very amused at how its home had turned partially solid.

All in all, even though the elves had long taken down and packed up every little festive decoration, the air felt residually festive. Children were loudly jealous over one thing over another, boasting about this and that. Almost everyone no matter their year had a hard time concentrating in class.

Professor Sprout was forced to let her Gryffindor-Slytherin Seventh Years out earlier than usual, because they were practically useless and frankly a danger to her plants.
The merry band of Marauders were heading toward the Quidditch pitch when Remus told his friends, "Looks like I'm missing a book."

They all eyed the small tower of reading materials in Remus's hands and raised their eyebrows together. Remus glared back at them. He wanted to be with his friends but it didn't mean that he had to watch them practice till sundown.

"Well, get it quickly, then!" James said distractedly. He was already thinking about new maneuvers he wanted to try. Lily had promised to watch at least part of the practice, so he wanted to put on a good show. Sirius called back something unintelligible, already ahead of them by a good few steps.

Oddly enough it was Peter who insisted on coming with Remus, trailing him partway back up the path. It took every ounce of Remus's patience to cajole Peter to go to the pitch with James and Sirius instead.

Remus didn't dare turn his back until he was convinced that Peter had caught up with the other two. 'How weird,' Remus thought as he watched the small boy huff and puff up the crest of a shallow hill. Peter had never sought him out so vigorously before, preferring to toady up to James and Sirius. 'Did he suspect something?'

Professor Sprout was nowhere to be seen, but Remus found Severus hunched over several pots of motherwort. He deliberately made his footsteps heavy to announce his approach.

Snape looked up, pinched face relaxing as Remus approached. "Oh it's you."

A book freed itself from a ratty satchel sitting in a barrow next to the pots. It landed neatly on top of Remus's stack. The top opened by itself to show Remus it was hollow inside. The invisibility cloak was folded neatly inside the space that must be bigger than it looked. "Keep the book," Snape said without looking at him.

Remus put down his belongings on the nearest flat surface and loitered around aimlessly, peering at one plant over another. He could recite the facts for half of them, while the rest registered only vaguely. He didn't know when he started, but he ended up examining Snape's back.

"You're still here?" Snape had moved down to the next row of pots. Remus followed dutifully, noting the way Snape pruned leaves or fixed soil beds. Little things that could be important to remember come NEWTs time. He caught how Snape would secret away some cuttings no doubt for the Slytherin's own private use.

"Yeah," Remus hesitated. "I want to tell you... er... I did it."

"You did what?" The question came flatly, without inflection.

"I passed them along... er, the two things..." He fidgeted. His gaze darting around the greenhouse, as he struggled to relay something without saying incriminating. At Hogwarts, walls and windows had a bad habit of growing ears. "For Si..." Remus clapped his mouth shut. Instead he made the universal finger-rubbing gesture for money, and the not-so-universal gesture for handkerchief.

"Yes I know."

"I don't think he suspects a..."

"As long as he's got them," Snape cut off the other boy's speech. Honestly, Remus could take
forever to get to the point. "I couldn't care less."

"And about the other thing you asked..." Remus noted with amusement that it made Snape straighten up a little. Was there even a hint of interest?

"Yes?" Snape prodded, hoping that Remus wouldn't attempt at another comical gesture.

"I can't find it." Though not for the lack of trying, Remus thought. He did try to snoop around Sirius's things, but he still came up with nothing.

"Oh." Was the only answer.

"He has so..." He never realized how much junk Sirius had managed to accumulate. If anything, it only made him realize how much of a packrat Sirius was.

"It's fine," Snape said impatiently. "Just... leave it. Either it's not with him or he's stowed it somewhere you..." The rant stopped midway, as though Snape had just realized how whiny it sounded. With a huge put-upon sigh, Snape continued, "Anyway, you don't have to continue looking. I don't want you to get into trouble." A beat later, "It's fine."

Remus knew it was a lie. 'Who are you trying to convince?' Remus wanted to ask, but was neither brave nor foolish enough to voice it out loud. Snape was obviously not fine, but Remus was not going to push. "So about studying together..." Remus ventured, trying to change the subject.

He knew without a doubt that Snape was never one to go back on a promise. But he also knew that Snape was crafty enough to create situations that would prevent it from ever happening.

"I'll think about it," Snape said, gaze resolutely fixed on the plants and nowhere else.

When he first arrived at the greenhouse, Remus had entertained the thought that he was actually making good progress at befriending Snape. After all, Remus had done what Snape had asked of him and even did him a huge favor! How wrong he was! Snape was as cold as ever.

Remus began to wonder if the budding sense of friendship he felt on the train-ride over was merely a figment of his imagination.

He saw tension slowly appearing along Snape's slight frame, pulling it down to a hunch, until Snape was tightly coiled like a spring. He could tell Snape's paranoia was slowly coming back, from the way Snape's wand hand began to shake slightly. It was only because of his years on Snape-watch for his friends that Remus could recognize the signs. He had better get the hell away very soon, and he needn't be told twice.

Remus gathered up all his stuff with nary a word. His pride too wounded to offer a conciliatory parting word.

He was almost out of the greenhouse when he thought he heard a faint "thank you, Lupin". Imagined or not, it deflated his annoyance a little bit.

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The next Monday, Lupin cornered Snape after lunch. It wasn't quite so difficult to slip away from his friends, sluggish as they were after stuffing themselves full. Even Peter, who had been irritatingly interested in Remus's comings and goings as of late, merely waved him off with a sleepy smile.

"What do you want?" Snape asked. Remus made a zippy gesture over mouth and steered them to an
unused classroom quickly and (hopefully) stealthily. Remus felt he was turning into a paranoid mess the longer he hung around Snape. It was a disturbing thought.

"If this is about that study thing you wanted to do, rest assured, I haven't forgotten." Snape tried to push past Remus who was blocking the door. "Get out of my way, Lupin."

"It's not that," Remus said, suddenly defensive. He hadn't even done anything wrong yet! There's something about Hogwarts that made Snape so antagonistic, Remus thought.

Snape scowled and sat heavily on a nearby chair. "Well, spit it out, then. We only have five minutes before our next class!"

Remus sighed. Why must every little conversation with Snape be so difficult? He wanted very much to confront Snape about it, shake some sense into that greasy head, make that often-too-brilliant mind realize that not everyone had ill-intentions and that some people just wanted to be nice.

In hindsight, Remus should've realized that it was perhaps he who had unsustainably high expectations. They hadn't exactly exchanged many civil words in the seven years they knew each other. So why should it be any different now that Snape was his Institute-sanctioned minder, or that he knew Snape's secret.

At that moment, however, his ego was too bruised to care.

"Binns won't care," Remus said finally, stopping himself from literally tearing his own hair out in frustration. "Here, catch."

Remus threw a small, plain cardboard box onto Snape's lap. Snape stared at it, then at him, mouth agape.

"Happy birthday, you thankless sod. I don't know why I bothered." He couldn't help but get that last dig in before turning around and striding away without waiting for an answer. Remus hated how his footsteps echoed badly in such heavy silence. He tried to not breathe so harshly, but it just made him feel like he was suffocating.

In that the short span of time it took Remus to reach the door, Snape's surprise finally found form in a barking laugh. "Do you kiss your mother with that filthy mouth, Lupin?"

No answer was forthcoming as Remus was afraid he might say something he would later regret. Meanwhile, he was proud of the fact that he managed to make it out of the door without tripping over his two feet. The little slam and click of the door was also satisfyingly decisive. It's almost worth not hearing a word of thanks. Not that Snape ever thanked people like normal people would, Remus thought pettily.

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Alone in the empty classroom, Snape grew puzzled. Lupin was by nature a mild person, rarely ever confrontational. The boy was only ever aggressive near the full moon, and even then it only reached "prickly" on a scale of zero to murderous. 'How curious', Snape thought, especially since today was a new moon night. Snape decided to check the ingredients of the potions the Institute made Lupin ingest over the holidays.

Later that night, back in the safety of one's own heavily warded bed with Lupin's unopened present sitting at the foot of the bed, Snape came to a possible realization about Lupin's odd behavior.

Snape had spent the whole day checking and rechecking the ingredients list. It was faultless. What if
it wasn't the ingredients? What if... "Was it me?" Snape asked loudly, to no one at all.

Chapter End Notes

Weekend almost is here! Hope everyone has an enjoyable one, with or without football on television!
5-Tale of Two Brothers

Chapter Summary

Sirius opens a box, releases a memory.

From Chapter 3(6)/Collide: *Underneath a lot of junk he didn't realize he had, Sirius found empty box. Long and thin, the box had come with the pocket watch he now wore everywhere.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Present Day

Remus tumbled out of Grimmauld Place's main fireplace, body nearly pitching onto the floor. Brushing dust off his clothes, he looked around and found the whole place eerily quiet. Even Kreacher, who would sometimes appear just to take the piss out of him, did not bother to materialize this time.

The clock on the mantlepiece told him that he arrived with plenty of time to spare. He didn't want to miss a doctor's appointment if he could, even though Dora told him it was merely routine. Dora should still be at the Aurory at this time, so the best bet was to go find the master of this house.

He went straight to Sirius's rooms, and promptly sneezed as he pushed the door open.

The specks of dust floating about the room told him that he arrived with plenty of time to spare. He didn't want to miss a doctor's appointment if he could, even though Dora told him it was merely routine. Dora should still be at the Aurory at this time, so the best bet was to go find the master of this house.

He went straight to Sirius's rooms, and promptly sneezed as he pushed the door open.

The clock on the mantlepiece told him that he arrived with plenty of time to spare. He didn't want to miss a doctor's appointment if he could, even though Dora told him it was merely routine. Dora should still be at the Aurory at this time, so the best bet was to go find the master of this house.

He went straight to Sirius's rooms, and promptly sneezed as he pushed the door open.

The specks of dust floating about the room told him that Sirius must've spent a good part of the day pushing furniture around. And if Sirius was this anxious, goodness knew what he had put Dora through by returning late from Greyback. Guilt gnawed at him. Remus gathered his mind, exactly the way Dora had taught him, and tried to push it away.

Remus picked his way around sundry things strewn all over the floor. They were mostly carefully placed, awaiting to be positioned somewhere new. Didn't make them any less of a tripping hazard if he wasn't careful.

Even though Remus was very light on his feet, but the floorboards still creaked a little. He became somewhat concerned when Sirius, usually a person of quick reflexes, showed nary a sign of acknowledging Remus's entrance, sitting almost like a statue in front of a dresser at the far side of the room.

Remus got behind Sirius easily and peered over those hunched shoulders to see an empty box cradled lightly in his hands. It was slim and long, with dark velvet lining that had seen better days.

He coughed once, waited, and coughed another time, hoping to draw Sirius back into the room with him. He had to physically restrain himself from touching Sirius. This was something Remus hated Azkaban for. His usually touchy-feely friend became so nervy he didn't do well with surprise touches.
It took Remus three more throat-clearing before the box in Sirius's hands closed with a snap. Remus could finally see the carvings on its top. Although it looked extremely fine, there were some rough edges to the filigreework that showed it was not an amateur production rather than a professional one.

"Regulus's gift," Remus breathed out in realization.

He remembered the day when the younger Black braved a veritable Gryffindor horde to present his brother with a birthday gift: a beautiful pocket watch inside a slim handcarved box. The watch itself had ended up at the bottom of the Great Lake less than a year later, the day Sirius found out that Regulus had taken the Dark Mark.

There was no way Remus could forget the raw and messy display of grief, hurt and anger. Things had been tossed around, and unsuspecting people had gotten in the crossfire.

That day Remus watched how the already tenuous relationship between brothers finally snapped and went up in flames. From the ashes, a garden of regret would soon grow, though at the time nobody knew.

"I thought you threw the box out as well," Remus croaked, overcome by memories.

Sirius looked up slowly and wanly, his sad smile was a shorthand of his decade-long grief and regret. He yanked a random drawer open and dropped the box blindly in it. He used more force than necessary to close the drawer, sending a puff of dust up into the air.

Remus placed a light hand on Sirius's shoulder. They stared at each other, one with pity and another with regret. They blamed their tears to the dust in the air between them.

-Eve of Sirius's Eighteenth Birthday-

Hogwarts in November was just a dark castle snuggling under a colorful blanket of crisp fiery leaves. The students opted to frolic outside whenever they could, unbothered by mercurial skies. Excited squeals and screams could be heard almost without end, the sound resembling a kindergarden playground than what people had in mind when they heard the name Hogwarts.

But of course they were still children after all.

Playground noises soon turned into alarmed shrieks as the skies opened up without much warning, dumping cold rain over the children's festivity.

"I thought I heard Peter scream like a girl," Snape observed offhandedly, feeding an Institute owl with some crackers, idly casting warming charms that fluffed up the bird's feathers. It seemed like a storm was brewing up north.

"I think I did too," Remus acquiesced, distracted by an oddly-phrased question on the parchment in front of him.

They went back and forth like that for some time, empty quiet conversations as they worked on their own appointed tasks. Remus filling endless questionnaires, Snape chopping endless horklumps.

"So this one, here..." Remus was stopped mid-question when the door burst open suddenly, sending huge drafts into the room, disturbing Snape's burner.
"Regulus," Snape scolded as the younger Slytherin stepped inside the room. The younger Black came to his senses just in time to catch the door from slamming close. With a sheepish look, Regulus guided it to close with a dainty click.

"I need you to get me inside Gryffindor common room," Regulus ignored Snape and stood in front of Remus with a defiant lift of his chin.

"Why?"

"I have some business with my brother," Regulus said, hauling an astounded Remus onto his feet.

"What? Now?" Remus flailed. He looked toward Snape for help, but the older Slytherin just watched them with an air of amused detachment.

"Go," Snape said, sounding benevolent. "The potion won't be ready for a while yet." And to Regulus, "I'll thank you to return him within the hour."

"I still don't understand why you hang out with Gryffindors so much, but fine. Thanks, Severus," Regulus led Remus out of the room.

"One Gryffindor," Snape's voice followed them out. "One hour, Regulus."

Regulus looked very put upon and rolled his eyes. It reminded Remus of how he often acted when his own mother was especially naggy.

"What do you want with Sirius, then?" Remus tried to fill in the gaps of silence between them.

"None of your business."

-

The Gryffindor common room was always crowded at this hour, even more so when the weather was bad outside. The spot in front of the fireplace was prime real estate, coveted by those who wished to read, chat, or fall asleep.

James and Lily were playing chess with Peter giving Lily unwanted advice. Sirius was at the far end of the room, always surrounded by friends and admirers, always laughing at something or the other.

Standing just outside the portrait entrance, Remus turned to Regulus, "Wait here, I'll call him."

"No need," Regulus said as he stepped, quite literally, into the lion's den.

The noise in the room cut off instantly, and Remus thought his breath stopped at the same time. Regulus walked straight toward Sirius who looked startled, first, then scowled.

Gryffindors simultaneously moved forward and stood back, eager to watch the exchange. They made gestures, pointing fingers and cocking heads. Sometimes they whispered and tittered at one another, but never so loud as to miss whatever words the brothers would say.

"What are you doing here?" Sirius asked, eyes narrowed. "What do you want?" Regulus stood in front of him, stone faced. He put one arm into his robe pocket and everybody took a deep audible breath. It wasn't a wand that emerged, but a slim box. Remus, from his vantage point near the portrait door couldn't see the details very well, even with his werewolf enhanced vision. It looked like something wrapped in brown paper and tied up with a piece of twine.

"Happy birthday," Regulus said, holding the box out. When his brother did not even move, wide-
eyed and frozen in his seat, Regulus merely sighed and placed the box on the table next to Sirius. "Don't open it until tomorrow."

Nobody performed a spell at any time, but Sirius really resembled a Petrificus victim. Regulus turned on his heels and oddly enough the Gryffindors let him pass with nary a comment or a squeak.

"Come on," Regulus said to Remus who was doing his best to look unaffected. "Let's get you back to Severus before he decides to poison my breakfast tomorrow."

As the portrait door swung shut, Remus could hear the common room erupting in horror and disbelief. A snake! Did a snake just slithered in? From the small amused chuckle coming from his side, Remus knew Regulus must've heard it too.

- Of course Sirius, never one to follow orders, did not wait until his birthday to rip into his present. Although he did wait until he was already in bed, with only his three best friends around him.

"Let us see it then," James said, wand drawn. He wasn't going to leave anything to chance, who knew if the gift was a trap. "Come on Remus, you too," James ordered. Peter already had his wand out the second James's was.

Paper and twine were discarded to reveal a box made from wood. Every inch of the surface had been polished to a high shine. Sirius was almost afraid to touch it, lest his fingers left smudges all over it. Apart from the ornately carved top, the box was entirely unadorned allowing the swirling grains of the wood to shine.

The carving on top was nothing ostentatious. Elegant curlicues showed that it had been done by a competent yet amateur hand. When they were young, they had learned woodworking on a lark. It all ended when their mother found them covered in wood shavings. They each got a hearty box around their ears and a warning not to engage in such low class pursuit ever again. Sirius wondered whether Regulus had kept up with it in secret.

The box opened flat upon its hinges to reveal a beautiful silver pocket watch on a fine yet sturdy chain. There's a finely wrought profile of a grim on the top of the watch, facing left, surrounded by a sheaf of gladioli. Inside, the face of the watch was made from a flawless piece of mother of pearl.

There was no inscription either on the box or watch, and no note accompanying it. It was just that, a gift given as it was to be taken at face value.

To his dying day Sirius would swear that he never shed a tear that night, and Remus would humor him about it.

The next morning over breakfast, Remus noticed Sirius glancing toward the Slytherin table every so often. Yet, Sirius never did go over to the table nor, as far as Remus knew, sent any acknowledgement to Regulus.

Over the next few days an idea quietly formed in Sirius's mind. In less than a year, Regulus would reach his majority. When they were little children, when it had just been two of them against the world, before all this House-loyalty mess and pure-blood business tore them apart, they often spoke grandly about adulthood and all the fun parties that went with it.

Regulus had missed Sirius's big day the previous year, at the height of their enmity. But the youth had more than made up for it this year. Sirius decided that it would be his turn come next year. He vowed to pay Regulus back in kind and make sure his brother had the best birthday ever.
In the end, there would be no party. The watch would languish at the bottom of the lake with all other things that children and adults dropped or threw into it--by accident, in jest, or in grief and in anger.

The day Regulus turned seventeen would be the last time Sirius spoke to his brother.

Chapter End Notes

A delayed flight is still causing havoc on my schedule. But I hope everyone else has a better start of the week!

<3
Chapter Summary

The odds are stacked against Creature babies. Sirius beats them with his checkbook.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Siri, it's time...oh REMUS!" The sound of Dora's voice floating down the corridor barely prepared them for the cannonball of a woman who all but bowled over Remus and clung to him fiercely. "Oh Remy!"

The dam of anxiety she held within her broke and all her bravado vanished. She tucked her head under his chin and took a deep shaky breath.

He smelled like an open drain under baking sun, but his strong and steady pulse under her fingers undid a tight knot around her heart. She slowly let go of the tight rein she had around her emotions, and sobbed a little into Remus's pongy clothes. "Oh Merlin, you're dirty," she whispered against the base of his throat.

Sirius coughed to suggest that they were probably better off getting a room. He was ignored rather thoroughly, so he decided to arrange his underwear drawer. With commentary.

The clock on the wall chimed thrice. Dora reluctantly untangled herself, wiped her eyes, and pushed Remus toward the bathroom. "You have fifteen minutes to get ready, okay! We don't want to be late!"

- "Now that Remus is back," Sirius could finally stop commenting about animal prints versus sequins, "do you still need me to come with?"

Dora merely shrugged in an up-to-you kind of way, plopping down on Sirius's bed. In Dora's opinion, it was firmer than the one in her and Remus's room. But she didn't dare say it out loud just in case Sirius tried to gift them a bed. And that was something she felt oddly uncomfortable about.

"So, will we know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"It's still only a month along. It's too early."

"Okay," Sirius mumbled as he gave his big desk a big heave-ho. "Wait, did you say... a month?" Sirius exclaimed, leaning against the side of the desk. "But you were only married two weeks ago."

"So?" Dora challenged. She thought for someone who revelled in thumbing his nose at convention, Sirius could be so fixated on some old-fashioned values.

Sirius answered with a peal of laughter, tickled pink at a joke only he knew the punchline of. "A shotgun wedding! Oh, Moony!" He shook his head disbelief and laughed some more.
Dora threw a pillow that landed squarely on Sirius's face.

Remus returned a bit later to a all-out pillow fight. "What did I miss?" he asked, pulling Sirius away from Dora.

"Moony, you dog, you!" Sirius exclaimed mirthfully. "I didn't know you had it in you!"

"Shut up, Sirius!" Dora yelled, the Hufflepuff blushing as red as a Gryffindor scarf.

The doctor's office was on the floo network, though the name was a foreign one and rather difficult to pronounce. Sirius would need to learn it for next time, he promised to himself.

The usual reception nurse was already on her feet, greeting Dora and Remus by name. She acknowledged Sirius with a nod, recognizing him as a non-threatening friend of the patient.

The doctor was of similar predisposition as the nurse—a tall and severe woman, with sharp eyes and a toothy smile. They might be related for all Sirius knew. She seemed like a good doctor, at least compared to all the prison doctors Sirius had the misfortune of encountering. She poked Dora here and there with efficient fingers, asked questions, gave clear answers, and dispensed advice rather liberally.

Dora had admitted to some pains when changing. She couldn't change as smoothly or instantaneously either, she said. The doctor had a hard time calming a very concerned Remus and a very anxious Sirius. She explained that it was a common problem among Metamorphmagus pregnancies, for which there were potions. Although, to tell the truth there had been some recorded cases of lost abilities, though mostly temporary. The use of the word "most" was not lost on the non-doctor contingent in the room.

A brief moment later, Dora was declared healthy and hale, though a little bit on the borderline, and could definitely use some extra care. "Try to cut back on work, especially field work."

"I can't possibly do that," Dora lamented. "We're short-staffed as it is, and You Know Who..."

"I understand very well," the doctor said kindly. "Still, you will need to exercise caution if you want to keep the baby." She paused to allow herself time to prescribe a potion or some such. Her writing was undiscernable, Sirius noticed, almost resembling a straight lines with a few shallow valleys and loops.

An elf in an odd pink smock appeared with a quiet pop and took the prescription away with a promise to come back real quickly.

"We have a good number, not a lot mind you, of werewolf pregnancies coming through our door," the doctor said conversationally as they waited. "Metamorphmagus pregnancies, as well. So we're better at recognizing the signs with them. But a WM pregnancies like yourself? Not so much. Every one of us at the clinic has very little hands on experience, and even thinner literature to fall back on. I'd rather err on the side of caution with you." Especially with your line work, the doctor didn't say, but everyone heard it anyway. "I'd like to be able to monitor you closely."

"How closely?" three people chorused.

"Every ten days or so, for the first three months. Only because weekly checkups are just not convenient," the doctor sighed. It went without saying that she would be much happier if Dora just stayed off her feet and on constant observation.
By the end of the consultation, the doctor's icy demeanor had somewhat thawed when Sirius assured her that they would spare no expenses to ensure the health of the mother and child. Nymphadora—once a Black, always a Black—accepted Sirius's goodwill immediately, while Remus gave a token protest, which fell on deaf ears.

The doctor smiled inwardly as she watched the trio bickered among themselves, a bit like how people bickered over restaurant bills.

It was frankly a relief to know that this pair—this very interesting pair—would be able to get all the medical support they might need. Without access to state health coverage, as more laws seemed to be passed each day to limit opportunities for werewolves and the likes, everything had to be paid out of pocket. The doctor had seen patients who stopped coming for their check-ups once their funds dried up. The clinic raised money where it could, the doctors and nurses took pay cuts where they could, but ultimately, it was a bigger problem than they alone could solve.

Soon, the clinic elf reappeared with all the prescribed potions arranged neatly in a little crate. The doctor added a booklet of dietary suggestions on top of bottles. She repeated her assurance about the health of the fetus as she ushered them toward the floo in her private sitting room.

The two old friends were still bickering as they stepped through the other side.

-  

**January, their Seventh Year**

Remus and Severus managed to avoid exchanging even one word with each other in the week following their sour exchange on the latter's birthday. They could've easily gone on like that indefinitely, sliding right back into their earlier antipathy, if not for their Institute-sanctioned interactions.

Finally, came the day before the first full moon of the year, and Remus dutifully made his trek down to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey, who was busy with a couple of third years with purple skin, merely waved him off, quietly indicating that Snape was already waiting for him.

Before Christmas Break last year, Snape had been hinting about some new regimen of tests and potions for the new year. It sounded ominous and Remus approached the room with much trepidation.

Remus barely made it past the door of when a sheaf of parchment was pushed under his nose. A quill followed, making him sneeze.

Even with all the stars in his eyes from sneezing so hard, he still recognized the quill as the one he had gotten for Snape's birthday, which showed the tell-tale sign that it had seen quite a bit of use.

"Fill that in." Snape looked away so as not to witness Lupin's self-satisfied smile.

-  

It was the standard pre-potion questionnaire that Remus had become quite a master at filling in. Gone were the days when Snape had to make Remus redo them over and over again.

"Anyway, I am supposed to relay some good news," Snape idly remarked. Come to think of it, Snape had been suspiciously cheerful for a while now.

"Do I want to know?" What was good news to Snape, did not always mean the same to Remus.
"Latest results... good health baseline, good routine, supplements seems to be working. So... on to the next phase."

"What's the catch?" Dread settled like a wet blanket.

"No catch, Lupin. I'm not always out to get you." Remus knew better, so he patiently waited for the other shoe to drop.

"What is it anyway, that I need to do?"

"Oh nothing much." Snape produced a cup, quite similar to the ones he had been peeing into every week since school started. "Nothing complicated. In fact the whole thing is really something tedious."

"Like what?" Remus eyed the cup suspiciously.

"Like wank into this cup, for a start," Remus thought his face would combust spontaneously. He stammered unintelligibly. Surely, he wasn't asked to do what he thought he heard Snape asked him to do, was he?

"I'll be in Poppy's office. Call me as soon as you're done. We have a lot of ground to cover before tomorrow."

"Wait, I...

The open, unrestrained laughter coming from Snape was such a pleasant surprise that Remus forgotten what he was supposed to be objecting about. "I don't know why you're so missish, Lupin. You are on the fertility program. Your swimmers are probably the most important part of it."

Oh yes, that.

Chapter End Notes

It's almost the weekend again! ((hug))
Remus didn't even know when he had finally fallen asleep. He woke up in his own bed, somehow. A steaming goblet was already waiting on his nightstand. It was pleasant smelling, he noted, as he drank down the whole thing. The goblet disappeared as soon as he placed it back on the table. It instantly disappeared. A notecard appeared in its place.

'What a neat bit of magic', Remus thought as he picked up the note card with one hand and scratched his arse with another. Either it was elf magic, or something he'd like Snape to teach him to do.

"First study session today. Shrieking Shack, 2 hrs before moonrise. Bring whatever is your best subject."

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Back in their Fifth Year, when news of the Shrieking Shack inevitably reached the Institute, they had initially considered dropping him as test participant. If the Press somehow caught wind of it, they thought, there's no telling what sort of collateral trouble the Institute would get into.

Pre-emptively, they triggered an Institution-wide review which revealed that similar incidents happened alarmingly often everywhere, with other test subjects. These incidents had gone unnoticed for a long time, because most werewolves lived in seclusion or did most of their change at home. Even though they were required to report any incidents, the guardians and families of test subjects were obviously less forthcoming.

The inspectors found that most incidents involved lax guardians or watchers sleeping on the job. A second investigation was soon made, and to everyone's relief, no innocent passers-by had been harmed. Snape had been, they concluded, someone who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Nevertheless, the Institute soon drew up a general safety guideline. They wasted no time implementing it throughout all research departments, not just the Werewolf division. The Ministry had no choice but to back them up.

Soon, charms and wards went up everywhere, tailor-made to each subject's unique characteristic and environment.

In theory, the one devised for Remus and Hogwarts should've kept Prongs, Padfoot, and Wormtail away. The Marauders, in their own ingenious way, were able to circumvent it. Remus suspected that Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey knew about the breach but had turned a blind eye and never cared to report it.

Snape had been livid upon learning about this. "This time, you better make sure your stupid friends
stay in bed. Even the rat," Snape had said vehemently at the beginning of their Seventh Year. "And keep my name out of it."

Eager to get on Snape's good side, Remus managed to warn his friends away, despite their very loud protests. They stayed away that first month.

They wouldn't be Marauders if they didn't try at least once, though. On the second month, they pushed their luck. Snape discovered them instantly and sent a mild stinging hex from a concealed location. Only the fear of being fired from the Institute stopped Snape from killing the three Marauders slowly and painfully.

Snape promptly sent an Owl to the Institute, and demanded additional measures be taken.

When an Institute warder came post-haste to make all the modifications that Snape wanted, Dumbledore was very much against it. "Surely," the Headmaster said, "it's already too excessive, as it is."

The inspector merely smiled politely, did what she was supposed to do, and added two more wicked charms to the already bristling defenses.

The Marauders never tried again, and none more surprised at this turn of event than Snape.

-  

Snape was already at the Shack when Lupin arrived with an armful of Defense books. He had taken a long time in the library to choose the better references, even obscure ones, that he thought would impress Snape.

They found a good rhythm in no time at all and made a sizable inroad through their review materials. One offhanded comment from Remus soon derailed their swotting, and sent them down much more esoteric discussion topics, about things that he could never fully discuss with his own friends. The Marauders were smart in their own way, but they lacked the attention span or willingness to make the sort of fully-formed arguments that made intellectual debates so exhilarating.

The unlikely duo soon ran out of time, or so the hourglass told them. It was an old gift from Madam Pomfrey; she had it charmed to cluck like a chicken.

Remus found it very amusing that Snape was infinitely fascinated by it, so far as to have gone straight to Madam Pomfrey, asking to be taught the charm. Remus never told anyone about that bit of childish glee he had seen in Snape's eyes as the hourglass clucked and shook in the loose circle of potion-stained fingers.

Remus quietly gathered all the notes, books, and sundry stationery into a small repurposed milk crate, while Snape checked all the warding around the Shack. There was still time before Snape had to leave the room, lock the door behind him, and conduct his observations from the other side of the door.

"That was... exciting," Remus said, by way of thanks. It was a suprising revelation. Exciting was roughhousing with his friends. Exciting was sneaking into the Forbidden Forest and coming back with McGonagall none-the-wiser. Studying, while always interesting, was never exciting.... until now.

"I'm glad you think so," came the reply. Snape was propped against the wall next to the door, writing board and chalk in hand. "So, how do you feel right now?"
"Good." He said, but Snape was obviously expecting more. "Not... not tired." He was usually tired because he used to run around with his friends before changing. His friends told him that physical exertion made him mellower after the change, not that he could tell.

Snape said nothing, merely tapping his chalk against the board impatiently, signaling Remus to spit out more words. "I feel... oddly excited actually. Everything just seems brighter somehow."

"That's only because I got us better candles," Snape explained seriously.

Remus laughed anyway.

"You're already sprouting, Lupin," Snape said suddenly.

"What?!” He looked down and saw he was already a good way through his transformation.

To say Remus was surprised would be an understatement. Usually, even with three friends to distract him, he would be so hyperaware that he couldn't help but work himself up to a nervous frenzy.

"I'll be outside. See you in the morning," he heard Snape speak just as Remus pitched forward violently, the bones in his face cracking.

Pain shot up his spine and fireworks burst brightly behind his eyelids.
Chapter Summary

Werewolf & Snake Study Club. Membership: Two.

or: meetings 2 through 5 of the seven days Remus demanded of our Sev.

2/

The morning after his transformation, he woke up to Snape's voice, dictating Remus's vitals to a furiously scribbling quill. From what he could pick out as he swam back up to consciousness, his vitals seemed better than usual. He felt better than usual.

"How sluggish do you feel?" Snape asked. Remus grudgingly opened his eyes. A plate of breakfast appeared in front of him. He had been in the hospital wing long enough to know that the food would be bland.

"Not as lethargic as usual," Remus said in wonderment of his own condition. "Was it a new potion?"

"No. Merely a mental experiment."

For years, Remus had started his transformation overtired and nervous. The Institute wanted to observe whether emotions pre-transformation affected the afflicted's time as werewolf and post-transformation. This month, they were simulating for positive self-reinforcement through non-taxing activities. Which explained last night's exercise in intellectual stimulation.

Memories of last night made Remus studious all of a sudden. Speaking with his mouth full, Remus asked, "Could we review our Defense notes again?"

"Finish your breakfast, then come find me in the brewing room."

Thus, their second study meeting came to pass.

- 

After study meeting numbers one and two, meetings three through seven happened quickly one after another, though not quite daily. That's just too inconvenient.

Remus's friends were beginning to wonder why he seemed so eager to spend time with Snivellus. Remus gave them the fake back story that he and Snape had agreed upon: simply that Madam Pomfrey had asked the Slytherin to assist with Remus's potions. "Especially now that Snape knows I'm a werewolf," Remus added, looking sharply at Sirius.

Sirius had the decency to look a bit guilty. Although Remus had mostly forgiven Sirius for his callous behavior, it didn't mean that he no longer felt hurt at the betrayal. In fact it made him wonder if Sirius could be trusted with any secret at all.

"The problem with that dog," Snape had remarked one day, "is that he has no brains. He acts as if none of his deeds carry consequences."
Remus defended his friends and himself, but Snape merely walked off.

-  

St. Valentine's Day came around the corner like a lovesick teenager — quickly and clumsily. Soon, hordes of Hogwarts students flooded into Hogsmeade to gorge themselves in sweets and chocolates, in the name of love — gained, lost, or yet to come.

Remus managed all of thirty minutes before begging off to return to the Castle.

"Don't tell me you're... studying," James goaded, his right hand wrapped loosely around Lily's warm left hand.

"Is there something you're not telling us? Are you dating a Ravenclaw?" That was Sirius, with his wild leaps of logic. On Valentine's Day, the only ones left in the Castle were several outcasts (mostly Slytherin) and most Ravenclaws (who thought that swotting in the stacks was Peak Romanticism). Sirius didn't think that Remus would betray House colors by engaging in tete-a-tete with the former. So whomever it was that Moony was seeing must belong to the latter group.

Remus spent the barest amount of time defending himself before trudging back up to the Castle.

-  

3/

The library was almost entirely occupied by Ravenclaws. The atmosphere was thick with Ravenclaw-competitiveness but somehow very syrupy sweet.

Despite the many open seats available, it's quite difficult to find one that wasn't adjacent to some lovey-dovey Ravenclaw. It didn't change even when he ventured deeper into the less interesting parts of the library.

"Psst..."

Remus looked around until he found the source of the sound.

There was a two-person desk tucked behind the Goblin Accounting stack, below a large window overlooking the Astronomy Tower. It was a quiet place, the only sound seemed to be the chirps of sparrows that made its nest outside the windowsill.

For their third study meeting, Remus and Snape studied Care of Magical Creatures, or tried to, anyway. The sparrows were such cute distractions.

"Oh goodness, Lupin. Don't tell me they inspire your nesting instincts."

- 

For the whole week after, Sirius would goad Remus whenever he could.

"I saw you in the library," Sirius said, as they lounged under a big tree near the lake. "Who did you meet? You looked real happy when you left..."

"What did you see?" Remus pretended to root around in his bookbag, nearly putting his whole head in, to hide what he knew to be a face rapidly losing color.

"Oh nothing." Sirius misread Remus's gesture as embarrassment, and decided to spare him (for
"The spring of your life has finally come?" James leered.

"Behind the Goblin Accounting stacks, no less!" Sirius exclaimed.

Lily turned her head so quickly, Remus wondered if she didn't get whiplash. "Goblin Accounting, you say?"

Remus's hemming-and-hawing gave her an opening to push the issue. She leaned past James, and almost clawed at Remus's forearm. "Who did you meet?"

A year ago, Remus might have blurted out an answer, because he couldn't help it. This time, he stood his ground and merely opened a random book and buried his head in it.

Lily narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She knew how to fight her battles though and decided to let the issue rest (for now).

James looked at Lily askance. Why would she care? James wondered. He forgotten all about it soon enough as Sirius distracted him with some transfiguration question.

4/

"Lily is starting to suspect something. She's been pestering me." Remus said when they met again in the hospital wing's brewing room. "I think she..."

"Don't think too much about it. I don't." Knee deep in brewing, Snape couldn't care less about bridges that had been burned. February's full moonrise would be in less than 30 hours and they've got a lot of ground to cover.

"See you tomorrow," Snape said finally, many hours later. "Same time, but bring your worse subject."

"I'm going to fail Astronomy at this rate," Remus whined, throwing his class primer onto the floor. The sharp thud was somewhat satisfactory.

"Same," Snape sighed, leaning against the wall next to the door. Other than to know when to harvest what under which sky conditions, Astronomy was a lost cause.

The change came, and this time Remus did not approach it with the same enthusiasm he had a month ago.

When morning arrived, Remus surfaced sluggishly and the first thing that came to his mind was how badly he was going to fail some of his classes. He was in the middle of scolding himself for electing those classes in the first place when he realized a stranger was doing the all the things Snape usually did.

"Good morning," the man said flatly, and went back to work.
Remus found Snape when he was leaving the hospital wing.

"Merlin! What happened to you?" Remus saw the bandages peeking underneath Snape's sleeping robe and was immediately horrified.

"It's not you," Snape told him, quickly assuaging Remus's guilt before any of it could arise.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"You've been hanging around mind healers too much, Lupin. You're starting to sound like them."

"Yes, well..."

"Don't worry yourself. It's just inner-House disagreements," Snape scooted up to lean against the head of the bed. Remus could see how even this simple movement aggravated the Slytherin. "You should see the others."

Remus had no doubt about that. He knew all too clearly how well Snape could cause damage to others. Still, he couldn't help but worry. Snape looked pained, Remus observed, knowing that it wasn't just from physical wounds.

Making up his mind, Remus sat on the empty bed next to Snape's. He took out his Astronomy notes and began to flip through his primer.

"Don't you have classes to attend?"

"I don't feel so good," Remus replied flatly, without looking up from his notes. He knew Snape would never fall for the flimsy excuse, but hoped that Snape would take the offer of companionship for what it was.

Remus loosened his grip on his quill when Snape merely huffed and pointed to one of the primers on Remus's lap, "Give me that."
Werewolf & Snake Study Club. Membership: Two (and a little bit)

Or Sirius might want to consider joining Wizarding MasterChef.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A sudden doxy infestation managed to close down half of the hospital wing. Unfortunately, that half included the brewing room.

Remus, Snape, and everything in the room that could be salvaged were forced to temporarily move to an unused classroom. It was in a corner with not a lot of foot traffic, so Snape was at least mollified that way.

Unfortunately, it also meant that Remus's friends thought it would be okay for them to loiter around the room. It made Snape reticent about having another study session with Remus, despite the fact that studying with the werewolf was kind of enjoyable (and it made him miss Lily a bit).

He tried to pretend the Marauders (not including Lupin) did not exist. Most of the time it worked like a charm. He ignored them, they ignored him. However, interactions could not be postponed forever. Like today.

"What are you making, Snape?"

Today, Sirius had appointed himself as Remus's bodyguard. Though he couldn't do very much because Remus had put a sticking charm on him.

"What is it?" Sirius asked again after a while.

"A potion," Snape answered curtly.

"What kind of potion?"

A parchment floated itself off the table to hover in front of Sirius, expectantly.

"It's upside down, Snape."

Remus quickly put the parchment right side up before Snape could break something. Like Sirius's nose.

"I don't understand any of it," Sirius said finally.

Sirius kept a close eye on all the potions his friend had to ingest. He listened closely to all the questions Snape had to ask and the answers Remus had to give.
After about an hour or so, Snape declared everything was in order and was about to shoo the two Gryffindors out when Sirius pointed, "What's in *that* cauldron?"

It was easy to miss that cauldron, which looked more like a stovepot. It was tucked in a corner, half hidden by a bookshelf. His sense of smell, strong even without having to change into Padfoot, detected a lot of leeks and tubers and a disturbing smell of burned flesh.

"Something," came the reply. "It doesn't concern you."

"It's not a potion?" Sirius stepped up to the cauldron, now that Remus had released the sticking charm. Snape was too slow and Sirius stuck his nose in before anyone could stop him.

"I never thought you'd be so bad at cooking, considering you're such a genius in potions," Remus croaked, finally finding his voice again after shouting himself hoarse trying to stop his friends, old and new, from killing themselves.

It was only the high regard both duellists had for Remus that they refrained from close-quarter combat. None of them were willing to chance a hex bouncing off a Protego and hitting the werewolf.

Snape actually had the frightening image of Remus jumping in between two spells and turning into a bloody mess. One look at Black and Snape knew the dog was thinking along the same lines.

"They're *not* exactly the same," Snape said in a small voice, already embarrassed.

"That's true..."

The Slytherin tried not to keel over from extreme astonishment. Black? Something they both agree on?

"What?" Black asked, as he dropped a bit of clove he had managed to find before stirring the pot. "I'm proof of it. You know I'm pants at potions. I am however, very good... great... no... bloody stellar at cooking."

"You cook?" Remus beat Snape to the question. He couldn't believe that he had spent seven years being best friends with Sirius and not know this little tidbit.

"Why not?" Sirius looked genuinely hurt.

"That's actually quite good," Snape remarked after sipping from the ladle still held in Sirius's outstretched hand. Sirius, by some minor kitchen miracle, had managed to salvage the soup.

"I can teach you how to cook if you want," Sirius said, immediately regretting his offer. Damn his impulsiveness. One meager praise from Snape and he was already offering services. There must be something in that soup! He wouldn't put it past Snape the snake. (oh say that ten times quickly)

"No you won't," Snape said, correctly reading the look of regret on Black's face. Black would rather cut off his nose than help his enemy.

"I don't take back a promise or offer, Snape, unlike some snakes I know." Pride was always going to be Black's downfall. "So? Going to take me up on it?"

"No thank you."
Sirius looked like he was about to burst a vessel, so Remus quickly dragged him out, mumbling an apology to a bemused Snape.

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6/

It was a new moon night and all was calm. After an hour of swotting Charms, Snape quickly sent Lupin away with some before-bed potion. Not long after, the door to the converted classroom flew open.

Snape turned around quickly, wand at the ready.

"Peace!" Sirius shouted immediately, moving slowly into the room as though approaching a wounded bear. He hesitated a little, but saw Snape's unwavering wand hand and decided that he should be the one to make the first move. 'This is for Moony,' he reminded himself as he placed his wand on the table where Snape could see it.

Sirius could easily grab or wandlessly accio it. He trusts his reflexes.

"What do you want?" Snape loosened up slightly, but remained wary.

"It's about Mo... Remus."

"He just left," Snape said. "Don't worry, he's still alive and unharmed."

"I know." Sirius had made sure that Remus would not need to get out of bed for anything. Even so far as fluffing the werewolf's pillow and tucking him in. Remus had looked at Sirius funny. In hindsight, maybe Sirius shouldn't have laid it on so thickly. "I'm talking about his birthday tomorrow."

- 

They agreed to hide their temporary truce from James and Peter. Not that the other two would believe them anyway. They'd sooner believe that the Slytherin had imperio-d Sirius one way or another.

Remus woke up to a raft of presents sitting at the foot of the bed. Tucked in the middle of the pile, among loosely wrapped books and quills, was a box that emitted an amazing smell. He looked around but his friends had all gone, presumably to breakfast.

The box was slightly cold and a whiff of cold mist escaped when he opened it.

Six cauldron cakes! They came in three different flavors, each one as beautifully colored and heavenly tasty as the next.

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He knew Sirius's sticky fingers were all over these custom made cauldron cakes, and Padfoot admitted to it quite quickly when Remus questioned him after breakfast.

Remus thanked him profusely and thought Sirius was acting rather strangely. Usually very quick to accept another person's gratitude, even fishing for more compliments, this Sirius seemed a little bit uncomfortable.

"I had help," Sirius admitted in a low whisper later on in the night, when everyone's asleep. He cast a
Muffliato, looked around and scooted closer.

He had found an old recipe book in a flea market, he began his explanation.

Snape helped, Sirius admitted haltingly. The thought of Snape and Sirius willingly working together was so improbable, Remus actually looked out of the window to see it wasn't hailing fire and brimstone.

The Slytherin had helped make the fillings, Sirius told him after a while. Snape had devised the cooling charm to stop the kulfi from melting, and the solutions to create a pearlescent effect on the jalebi, and make the gulab jamun bright and gemlike.

"That git has no taste buds at all, Moony!" Sirius exclaimed theatrically. He seemed more disturbed by Snape's non-existent sense of taste than the fact that they had somehow managed to not kill each other.

"Probably why all your potions taste like death," Sirius continued, blissfully unaware of Remus's internal wonderment.

- 7/

Remus found Snape behind a particularly large tree in a particularly dense copse at the far end of the lake, already half-asleep with a heavy tome draped like a small warm blanket across the chest. Either Remus no longer posed a threat, or the usually prickly Slytherin did not care.

"Thanks for the present, Snape," Remus began.

"I was coerced into it," Snape grumbled, but mumbled something that sounded like "Happy Belated Birthday" to Remus, though it might just be "Go Away".

"They were so beautiful it was almost a shame to have to eat them," Remus carried on conversationally. "They tasted amazing too."

"That was all the dog's doing."

"You're too modest," Remus said, earning him a glare. "You look terrible by the way." Snape was paler than usual, with dark circles around those already dark eyes.

"Thanks," Snape said from behind a yawn. "Black kept me up all night."

Remus could only laugh. First, it was Sirius who had sworn up and down, unprovoked, that nothing happened between him and Snape in the six ("okay, seven!") hours they were baking and cooking. And now Snape, bone tired and half-asleep, was spouting innuendos with an unbelievably straight face.

"What are you studying?" Remus asked instead.

-  

He had to marvel at it somehow, Remus mused as he trudged back up to school. Within the span of a night, Snape and Sirius had somehow reached some sort of truce. 'But whether they can become friends,' Remus pondered, 'that remains to be seen.'

First, Remus had to figure out why he was actually feeling a little bit of resentment.
I hope you have a better weekend than me so far. My weekend is miserable but also boring with the flu. They say oranges are good for you. Thank you for all your support thus far! They're gold to me and chicken soup to my soul. Let me know what you think!
Sirius, Dora, and Remus emerged not in the house's main sitting room, but the kitchen instead. Floos could be weird that way. They quickly unloaded their burden of potions on the nearest free surface. Stretching out his spine, Sirius's eyes drifted toward the manky calendar that Kreacher kept in the kitchen.

"It's the 26th today..." he remarked.

"Yes," Dora nodded, already sitting down on a wobbly kitchen chair to study the different labels the potions she needed to take. She quickly lost interest in them. If she needed something explained, she'll ask Snape.

"I still don't have a present for Harry!" Sirius shouted suddenly. His sense of time was still iffy from spending more than a year behind the Veil. The clock told him it's ten to six and he wondered whether the shops would still be open.

"Remus and I got Harry a Firebolt," Dora said. "We can say it's from the three of us."

"You can also bake a cake if you feel bad," Remus suggested.

Sirius gave them both a jaundiced look.

"Right," Remus corrected himself. Far be it for Sirius to pass up any opportunity to shop.

"If we're going out, I want gelato and pickles."

"Is that supposed to gross us out?" Sirius asked as he stored all of Dora's potion in a cabinet spelled for safety. "I'm sure the muggles have already came up with a recipe for it somehow."

Not to mention the things Sirius had to eat when he was on the run as Padfoot, he didn't say.

"So we're going out to Muggle London?"

"That's where the best gelatos are," Sirius answered as they head out through the muggle-facing side of the house. They could've apparated to where they were going but the doctor told them to take it easy on the magic.

Anyway, today's bright summer's late afternoon weather wasn't so bad.

"Say no more!" Dora patted Sirius's back jovially before linking up her arm around the crook of Remus's.
They took a black cab to Covent Garden even though all of them were familiar with muggle public transportation.

At Covent Garden, there were street magicians and dancer-contortionists that made Dora ooh and aah. These muggles have their own brand of happy magic.

"Here," Sirius guided them through the late afternoon crowd to a gelato stand that had more than a few children queueing patiently. "This shop has been around since the turn of the century," Sirius said in his best visitors' guide voice. "Every one of their flavors is to die for!"

They reached the top of the line in no time, and the proprietor greeted Sirius by name.

"Do you come here often?" Remus asked, as he and Sirius waited for a shop assistant to help them. They smiled as they watched Dora study the colorful treats in front of her. She asked the proprietor this and that question every so often.

"No. Old man's got a good memory and mind like a steel trap," the shop assistant answered for Sirius instead, smiling wide enough to show off his paid-for pearly whites. "So, what are you in the mood for, today?"

The gentlemen portion of their little contingent was soon seen paying for their cold treat. Dora meanwhile was having a small cone-or-cup crisis. Finally, she abandoned the sugar cone in favor of a large cup with a little bit of everything inside. When the old man produced a big piece of pickle out of nowhere, with a wink, they could only laugh.

Sirius insisted on paying for Dora's. This time no one protested.

"Been a while," the old man said as he recorded the purchases at a quick pace. Soon a ping sounded and Sirius dutifully opened his wallet.

"Yeah, been away," he said, handing over a good sum.

"Ten years or summat," the old man said and Sirius nodded. "Ye changed. Not much. Still as handsome as ever."

"Thanks," Sirius mumbled. He knew the old man was humoring him. He knew he looked like death had warmed over on a good day.

"Your lady friend still comes here every so often, though," the old man said conspiratorily. He had his head down in the cash drawer counting out the change, so he did not see the conspiratorial look blooming on Remus and Dora's faces.

"Sorry for all the coins," the old man said as he handed a pile of ones and twos.

Sirius quickly ushered his friends down toward the shops.

"So, Pads. Which lady friend?" both of his traitorous friends asked, wiggling their brows in unison.

"None of your damn b... oh look isn't that a cute teddy bear?"

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**Easter Break, their Seventh Year**
He was a boy at loose ends, nothing much to do and nowhere to go in particular. Sirius had been walking around muggle London for quite some time, working through his disappointment and frustration.

He was supposed to spend the day with Regulus at Diagon Alley, but their mother had all but scuppered his plans by monopolizing his brother's time. They were going to have an important guest over for dinner, their mother had said, and she needed Regulus to help her with preparations.

Why only Regulus, Sirius had asked.

"Aren't you going to stay with your Gryffindor friends, anyway?" Walburga spat out the word 'Gryffindor' like it was poisonous. "And you never liked my guests. I'd rather you stay away than embarrass us more than you already have!"

Regulus, afraid that Sirius would throw a tantrum again, quickly promised that they would go another time. They would be back at Hogwarts soon, anyway. Maybe they could have a brothers-only day at Hogsmeade soon.

Not willing to put his little brother in a tight spot, Sirius held his tongue and nodded stiffly.

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Somehow his feet brought him to Covent Garden. He was surprised at how far the rebuilding work had come in four short years. When he began his third year at Hogwarts, the old market was nigh a derelict place where even ghosts feared to come.

Sirius's little trinket loving heart leaped with joy as he saw carts of artisan-made accessories. He was torn between visiting those bountiful barrows and the Coppershop, whose high polished copper pots and pans gleamed under the late morning sun like an invitation.

As he hesitated, a group of three smartly-dressed people passed in front of him headed toward the Royal Opera House, chattering excitedly about some ballet or another.

"Do you think we still have time to get gelato?" One of the two young women in the group asked.

"Of course," the lone young man, who had his hand around the inquirer, answered fondly.

"No we don't," the other girl, shorter and perhaps younger than her two friends, said with disdain. "Not with the time you usually take deciding on a flavor."

Her voice was a little familiar that stopped Sirius on his tracks. He turned around and looked at the small group intently.

There's no mistaking it! Even with her back toward him, he still remembered her voice and her gait. That was the girl he ran into over Christmas! The girl whose bracelet still languished in his drawer back at Grimmauld Place.

He ran to catch up with the group, but they were already too far ahead to begin with. They also walked very quickly despite the very high heels the two girls wore.

By the time Sirius arrived at the entrance of the opera house, the trio had already disappeared inside. The doorman stopped him and asked to see his ticket of which he had none.

"Is there any way I can buy a ticket?"
"We're all sold out unfortunately," the doorman said. It was a modern ballet piece by one of the best choreographers Britain had to offer, premiered only four years ago. It was a polarizing piece, thus drawing so much attention from both fans and detractors every time it was performed. Tickets for today's dress rehearsal and the main show had been sold out for ages. "But maybe you could get on the waiting list for tonight's show."

"Oh. But I don't have time tonight," Sirius said, putting on his best puppy dog look.

The doorman was, however, impervious to it. In his very long years as doorman, he had seen plenty better than this one. And all of them had failed. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said with forceful politeness. "That is indeed a regretful circumstance."

Sirius was contemplating about using magic to compel the man to let him in. He's no longer bound by underage laws, and he could be very discreet if he wanted to. A simple and small spell...

"Perhaps, you can try the box office?" The doorman said as he observed the fidgety boy in front of him. "Sometimes the ticket lady has some set aside just in case."

Sirius followed the doorman's direction to the box office and found it firmly closed. He realized he had just been tricked!

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A dark cloud hung above his head as he sullenly trudged up and down Covent Garden. He couldn't believe that crafty old doorman! He fumed at himself.

As he sighed and looked up at the annoyingly cheerful spring sky, he caught a glimpse of the newly installed water clock on the walls of a food store. It was actually made by a couple of muggleborns who passed themselves as 'aquatic horologists'. They were clock enthusiasts, and with a little bit of magic and muggle science, they had devised this ingenious time piece run entirely with water.

As the clock struck the hour, Sirius was overcame with revelation.

Despite his limited interest in ballets and operas, he knew that they lasted a good while. He figured he still had an hour or so to kill before the end of the show.

Suddenly, his tiredness and irritation went away. He decided he would sneak back to Grimmauld Place, retrieve the bracelet, come back, and wait for the ballet to finish. Maybe things would look up.

If he was quick, he could even find some time to buy a nice copper pot for Mrs. Potter.

Chapter End Notes

Covent Garden in 1978

The ballet was Manon.

The water clock was at Neal's Yard and wasn't supposed to be built until 1982, but artistic license?
8(part B)-In a Pickle

Chapter Summary

Sev learns that friends do the darnest things in the name of cheap thrills.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weird boy's back, the doorman noted from his station behind the glass doors. He watched the boy pace back and forth in front of the building. Sometimes the boy would sit down on one of the benches, but it was clear that he was too nervous to sit still.

Every time the door opened, the boy would turn around with an expectant look on his face. Clearly, he was waiting for someone.

The boy looked disheveled with his hair flying every which way. However, despite the few wrinkles already setting in, his clothes looked well-made, discretely tailored in ways that only the more expensive pieces were.

Soon the inner theater doors opened, and the doorman was faced with a gaggle of very excited audience members. Most of the attendees were family and friends of the performers, and it seemed that the general consensus was quite glowing.

He tried to guess the person whom the boy was waiting for. He studied each person's face and demeanor, but soon, there were just too many of them coming out at once.

- Sirius heard the door being pushed then propped wide, just in time for the wave of people to rush out of the building without missing a beat.

Like the doorman, he also studied every face of every person. Unlike the doorman, he was not easily discouraged, and he knew exactly the person he was looking for.

He heard them before he saw them.

"So can we go get my gelato now?" the taller of the two girls asked. Her younger and darker friend scowled good-naturedly and made an up-to-you gesture.

They veered left from the building and Sirius had to wade through a throng of smartly-dressed people to keep up. He could guess where they were going, but it would be better if he could keep them in his sights.

His heart was pounding, but it was not from any physical exertion. His mind was already thinking and discarding the many different ways he could introduce himself to her. His palms were a bit sweaty and he rubbed them repeatedly on his trousers as he maintained what he thought was a good non-stalkerish distance.

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The gelato shop was a small building with an open booth at the front. There was a good line in front of it already, which the trio quickly joined.

Sevda took the time to retie her already unraveling ponytail, as she tried not to gag or hurl at the sickly sweet scene between two lovebirds. You couldn't put a piece of paper between the two. She also noted how Omphale was acting unusually girly and clingy. There should be a limit as to how simpering you can get, surely!

Well, she supposed Omphale had a good excuse. After more than a solid year away, Antonin the absentee boyfriend was finally back in London.

For a whole week before the boyfriend's return, Sevda had grudgingly allowed Omphale to talk her ears off. Her friend had planned all the places she and her boyfriend would visit. All the spectacles they could see. She had it all mapped out right to the minute, while somehow keeping it reasonable enough without coming across as too obsessive.

But no. All good plans unravel eventually. Omphale's meticulous itinerary soon went the way of the compost pile, and her week-long plans was reduced to a single day out.

Antonin had made his excuses, something about obsessive bosses and boring meetings and training new recruits and such. Basically being a working adult with a crazy schedule meant that time waited for no man and no love.

'Poor Omphale', Sevda thought. Wasn't having a busy absentee boyfriend a pain? She hoped, when *her* own spring finally came, that it wouldn't be with someone who went away years at a time.

The line was slow. Held up by a group of children who couldn't make up their minds.

Someone was blocking her light. There's someone standing to her left, which usually meant that she had a queue-cutter in her hands. Sevda turned, frown in place, ready to unleash verbal fury at whoever-that-was.

Only to have whatever words die as she saw who stood there.

'Fuck,' she swore in her heart.

The world, for Sirius, moved in slow motion. One time the girl was retying her hair—velvet ribbon held gingerly between rosy lips, her elegant long-fingered hands deftly pulling her hair into place. Another time, she was turning to look at him—her dark, glittering eyes narrowed at first then opened wide in recognition.

'Oh, thank Merlin!' Sirius exclaimed happily in his heart, misreading Sevda's astonishment. 'She remembers me!'

It would make his introduction easier.

Or so he thought.

"H... hello," he stammered.
Was Sirius sweating and blushing?

If Sirius was nervous, then Sevda was confused.

The vision of Sirius standing in front of her was so unlike the Sirius she knew. Gone was the cocksure, casually-cruel image of a boy, replaced by this uncertain apple-cheeked copy of one. She had to double check to see that it was indeed Sirius "Insufferable Dog of Hogwarts" Black standing in front of her, not just someone who looked like him.

"Oh!"

It was Omphale who exclaimed. Still hanging off her boyfriend's arm, cheek lightly resting on one sturdy shoulder, she said, "Fancy meeting you here."

"You know him?" Sevda exclaimed incredulously just as Sirius asked, "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"Not yet!" Omphale winked at the two young persons in front of her. "But I can guess."

Momentarily detaching herself from her boyfriend, she looked closely at the boy and hmm-ed in an exaggerated way, before leaning back in a self-satisfied pose. "I think you must be the boy Sevda ran into over Christmas!" She put her hand out for a handshake, resolutely ignoring Sevda's glare.

Christmas last year, Sevda had told her about a boy and an unfortunate encounter in front of a muggle supermarket. Sevda had been furious but also very confused. The boy was one of the big bullies back at school, she claimed, but he had been very kind to a 'muggle girl' he didn't know.

Omphale, not someone to let bullying and confusion get in the way of what she considered romantic, ignored Sevda's silent threat and carried on talking. "She described you so well, I could recognize you anywhere!"

"Sh... She did?" Sirius asked. So not only did she remember him, the girl described him in such detail to her friend? His chest puffed up.

"This is all too romantic, darling," Omphale leaned forward and gave Sevda a big hug, uncaring of the girl's darkening scowl. Anyway, they're in Muggle London. That alone should stop Sevda from maiming her outright.

The line moved and soon it was their turn to be served. Omphale rounded everyone and pushed them all forward. "Pick as many flavors as you want, my treat!"

She knew Sevda's going to give her an earful once they're back at the Institute, but... it's spring! And romance was in the air!

- 

Omphale soon led her boyfriend away. It's time for the grown-ups to have some grown-up time, she had cheekily told the younger two.

"Don't," she stopped Antonin from walking to a nearby Dis/Apparating Spot. "The boy thinks we're muggles."

"Does he now?" Antonin wondered to himself. "He looks familiar," Antonin said as they walked to the next Spot five streets over. He frowned and tried to put a finger on where he had seen such structure and coloring before.
"Let's not talk about them now," Omphale shrugged. The sun was setting. She only had a precious few hours left with him and she's not going to waste it by talking about another boy.

Chapter End Notes

So, I spent the week recuperating from the oddest flu/cold/cough/whatever I've ever experienced, and I binged read a lot of mangas and novels.

One of them, Utsukushii Koto by Narise Konohara (translated entirely by 9ave), inspires this chapter and possibly the next few chapters too.

Please go have a read when you have time!
Chapter Summary

Sirius "Big Fish in Small Hogwarts Pond" Black, despite all his bravado, doesn't really know how to act around a girl.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Bloody Omphale," Sevda cursed the friend for abandoning her. Sometimes she hated this side of Omphale, the side that willfully ignored certain facts just so that everything could fit with that nice neatly packaged romantic scenario she got in her head. But that's a problem for later.

Right now, she had a more urgent problem in her hands. She glared at the oblivious mutt next to her. She was about to tell him to go away in the rudest possible manner, when Sirius rush-stammered, "I think I have something of yours."

- They ended up sitting on a bench in the shade. Sirius balanced his almost-empty gelato cup on the slats of the bench and rooted around his jacket's inner-pocket.

"Actually, I want to return this to you," Sirius said, as he placed a box in Sevda's hand.

"I don't remember this at all." She was confused. It was indeed a beautiful box and possibly an expensive one. Nothing she could afford surely. It looked familiar somehow, though nothing came to mind. Her mind went directly to, 'this could be a trap'.

"Oh," Sirius said, realizing belatedly. "It's inside. The box is mine."

She opened the box cautiously and couldn't help but gasp. No wonder Remus couldn't find it, since it was hidden inside a box... in Sirius's pocket?

Did Sirius carry a random person's bracelet around all the time, like a creeper? Sirius didn't seem like he was going to explain himself, and Sevda decided she didn't want to know. After all, he wasn't the only one with a secret.

"I found it on the ground on the day we met," Sirius explained. He took the bracelet out of the box, and held it out in an unspoken invitation.

Trying to figure out if it was a trap, Sevda slowly held an arm out. She held her breath and rehearsed some wandless spells in her head, just in case Sirius decided to try anything funny. But the mutt only leaned forward to fix the bracelet around her wrist.

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"She's so shy,' Sirius thought, completely misreading Sevda's apprehension, as he clasped her bracelet around her wrist. The bracelet really looked like it belonged there.

"It suits you," he told her as much.

"Thanks," the girl replied, it was short and curt and completely swallowed up by Sirius's babbling.

"Then I'm glad you have it back. Er... I found it on the ground the day we... hum... met. I should've probably hand it over to the police or something, but I got the clasp fixed and I forgot to... Sorry, I talk a lot when I'm nervous."

- Sevda tried valiantly not to be charmed by the Sirius she had sitting in front of her. She reminded herself about their many encounters at Hogwarts. The Shrieking Shack. The Incident that day by the lake. It was enough to get her blood near boiling.

She itched to get up and leave now. She's got her bracelet back, right?

But Sirius was babbling. Dressed almost like a muggle and without that ever-present malicious grin on his face, he looked like a different person. This Sirius was a flustered and bumbling mess. Was this the Sirius that Remus knew? No wonder the werewolf liked the dog so much.

Somehow the mental image was too much.

She stood up shakily, almost blinded by rage and confusion.

She forgot she still had the box on her lap, so it tumbled onto the ground with a thud.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, crouching down and gathering it into her hands.

She looked up expecting the normal Sirius-like reaction when it came to Slytherins breaking Gryffindor things — anger and hexes. So when Sirius stretched a hand, she took an involuntary step back, a wandless curse at the tip of her tongue.

- Sirius saw the box tumble to the ground and the girl lunging to catch it. He instinctively reached out to help her, but was surprised to see her recoil in fear. As though she expected him to lash out violently. He flinched and pulled back. Was he so bad that even strangers thought he was going to hurt them?

He lifted his hands in a universal gesture of peace, and hung back. He tried to arrange his face into what he thought would be suitably non-threatening, with a smile. He wished there was a mirror where he could check himself, make sure he wasn't snarling or anything like that. But the clear-glassed shopfronts were no help in the glaring light of day.

"Are you okay?" he asked, keeping his hands firmly down his sides as she climbed onto her feet and gingerly returned the box to him.

"Check it. I'll pay for its repair if I have to," she said tersely after a long uncomfortable moment.

"It's okay. The box is tough," Sirius took the box and shoved it into his pocket without checking it. He thought the muggle girl didn't need to know that he had the box charmed for protection.

The girl didn't look convinced. She was already reaching into her purse, most likely she was going to
retrieve some money to pay him.

"You know," Sirius figured that conversation was the best diversionary tactic. "I got this from my brother." He took out the box again and pointed to the carving at the top of the box, "He did this part all by himself. He's done a good job, don't you think?"

Sirius fumbled around his waistcoat and took out the silver pocket watch he now carries around with him.

"It comes with this," he showed it off proudly. "My brother... my younger brother, that is... got it for my birthday."

"That's.... very nice," the girl commented, hand still inside her purse but no money emerged as yet. She still seemed rather wary, but most of it had melted into curiosity.

"Here, take a look," Sirius urged, as he detached the chain from inside his pocket.

She eyed him warily, but finally took her hand out of her purse.

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She held the heavy silver watch in her hand, turning it this way and that way, admiring the work that went into it. Black spoke the entire time, carping endlessly about Regulus's good taste and woodworking skills.

Sevda knew that Regulus had not been in good terms with his brother, even though things seemed to be looking up a little nowadays. She knew that there was a present involved, but she didn't realize that Regulus had gone to such an extent. She wondered if Regulus realized how happy Sirius was with his present.

Time passed and Black was still talking.

Sevda frowned when she realized that the elder Black was actually gilding the lily about his family situation. If she were anyone else, if she didn't know better, she'd think that the two brothers had the best sibling relationship in the whole world.

'Which is not the case at all,' she reminded herself. What's Black on about? The part of her that had always hated Sirius was convinced that it was all an act; merely a disingenuous way to charm a muggle girl.

The part of her that liked Regulus wondered if there's truth in what Sirius had said. She'd have to talk to Regulus very soon.

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Despite her ever-present frown, Sirius was glad to see the girl smiling a little as he spoke fondly of his brother. She looked rather wistful and he saw it was actually a good look on her.

He mentally patted himself on the back for choosing a good topic. Girls liked feel-good sibling stories. She didn't need to know the whole truth, he decided to himself, painting a perfect picture for her.

The smile disappeared too soon, however, while her frown only deepened.

Sirius stopped his spiel abruptly, wondering if he had laid it on a bit thick. He didn't want to offend
her. Not only that, he wanted her to be impressed.

Did she figure out he was lying? It's not like they were all outright lies, he rationalized to himself. He truly wished to have a better relationship with Regulus. And he knew Regulus wanted it too; the watch was proof of it.

Maybe she didn't have a good relationship at home and he was making her feel bad?

"Sorry, I talk too much sometimes," Sirius said.

The girl lifted her head and grimaced a little at him. It looked like a small smile, even though it was really a wince. His heart did cartwheels anyway.

"I'm glad you have a good relationship with your brother."

"It's... not always been this way though," he sighed. "It's... getting better."

It wasn't easy to face the truth himself, but it felt nice to be able to say it.

"Good, that's good," she mumbled, as though she didn't know what else to say.

A gust of wind blew and a lock of her hair escaped her ponytail. She moved her hand to tuck it back, but he was faster.

She felt his hand on her hair, then the back of her ear. She jumped back as if scalded. It was all she could do not to hex Sirius on the spot, muggles be damned.

Sirius looked a bit horrified as well at what he did.

"Sorry my hand just did it on its own" sounded so absurd.

So maybe touching her hair was a bad idea, because now the girl looked really uncomfortable. She looked really angry and about ready to bolt, even.

"Please don't go," he pleaded as she returned the watch to him. "I... I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

She didn't say a word, lips pursed into a thin angry line, as she brushed wrinkles out of her skirt and shouldered her purse.

"Will you have lunch with me tomorrow? I promise to keep my hands to myself."

She looked at him hesitantly, shifting from foot to foot, slowly inching away. She looked like she's struggling to decide whether she should even answer him.

"I'm really busy these days," she said finally.

"I'll... wait here tomorrow," he pointed at the bench they had just vacated.

She merely walked away. She didn't exactly bolt for the hills, but she didn't really say anything. No thank you, no goodbye, no see you later.
It was a barely polite brush-off, and he knew it. Usually, that would be the end of that. He always saw himself as someone who didn't need to be told twice. "Life's too short," he always said. No girl was worth the hassle. He was even irritated on James's behalf when he was treated badly by Lily. This one (what's her name again? Sirius frowned) wasn't even pretty or interesting.

So, Sirius did what he did best — succumb to impulsiveness. "I'll wait here the whole day, so come when you're free."

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The stupid dog! She cursed inwardly. What's gotten into him?

'He can't wait there the whole day,' she thought, half bemused. If anything, the bobbies would become suspicious and probably throw him in jail or something.

She kept walking, put her head down, pretended not to hear him. He didn't follow her nor made any move to stop her. Maybe she should've done this earlier. Maybe if she had acted a bit ruder, he would've been more put off and less insistent.

A good minute later, just as she was rounding a corner, she heard him yell, "I'll be waiting!"

She almost stumbled on a loose stone. A passer-by asked if she's alright. She nodded and mumbled her thanks.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I'm drunk on Benadryl and not making any sense, here or anywhere... but you are all lovely~
Let me know what you think!
Chapter Summary

Sev is a bad friend.

Present Day

"I'm hungry," Dora declared.

They had returned to Grimmauld Place just as the summer sun was setting. Remus couldn't believe how much shopping both Dora and Sirius could do in only a couple hours. His feet and arms were so sore, he didn't even care about food anymore. He's half tempted to tell his two conspirators to go eat and leave him to bed, or maybe the couch. He honestly couldn't do anymore walking.

"There's a good place around the corner from here," Sirius said. "Owner's a squib. Magician in the kitchen."

"There's no time for that, I'm afraid," Sevda Snape's voice floated across the room from the door. "Well, well, look who the dust bunny brought in."

"Junior's in danger," she chose to ignore Black's snark.

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Earlier that day, at the Institute

"Sev!" Omphale called out, "Oh! Darling!" She pulled out a chair and all but threw herself in it. The scant number of people in the pre-lunch refectory gave her an evil eye for her noise.

"Custard?" Sevda slid a small cup across the table.

"I don't know how you can stomach that glop to be honest," Omphale pushed the cup back to Sevda's side of the table.

"More importantly, what are you still doing here?" Omphale was supposed to go on a date later that day. Having been friends with the woman for two decades or so, Sevda knew Omphale usually never bothered turning up for work on Anniversary Day.

"Aren't you supposed to be at the foot spa?" It was a new establishment a few buildings down the road. Omphale had yet to stop talking about it.

"That bastard!" Omphale moaned loud enough to earn her a resounding shush. She slapped her hand on the table sending porcelain, silverware, and food jiggling in fright.

Conversation around them stopped. The room fell silent in anticipation of a good gossip.

Sevda jumped up to her feet, collected her half-eaten lunch in one hand, her half-distraught colleague in another, took all of them to a quieter corner, where she began to cast Muffliato liberally around
"Calm yourself, woman," Sevda said, passing a glass of water to her friend. "It's not the first time he's backed out on you."

"I can't take any more of this," Omphale tilted her head back against the wall so she could look up at the ceiling and stop her tears from falling.

"Maybe you should... break up?"

Omphale took a series of quick big gulps that only managed to give her a sharp pain in her chest. "Weren't you the one saying I should stay with him?"

"I did no such thing," Sevda said, crossing her arms defensively.

"Yes you did," Omphale mumbled, placing down the empty glass on the table, and covering her painful chest with one warm palm.

"I did not put it quite that way," Sevda said politically, in a tone that dared Omphale to say otherwise. She placed a steadying hand on Omphale's shoulders and felt her friend's body quake underneath her palm. "What did he do now?"

"He canceled, that's what!" Omphale railed. "Via owl no less. Said he still has work to do. What's so urgent about work, anyway? It's the bloody weekend, isn't it? He didn't even have the balls to come say it to my face."

Their schedule had not changed since the very beginning. They could only meet a handful of times each year—the anniversaries and the holidays, sometimes, and rarely outside of those. Antonin travelled too much.

In the beginning, Antonin would ask her to quit her job and accompany him instead. Even offering to introduce her to his boss, and get her a job with him. But Omphale loved the Institute too much and felt that following him around would make her "an extra baggage waiting to be discarded." Antonin had long ceased asking.

"...and it's not like he's overseas right now! How hard is it to take a few hours out of whatever bloody important job he had! It's our anniversary!" Omphale took a big calming gulp of water that managed to go down the wrong pipe. Watching Omphale cough out water and on the verge of a messy cry, Sevda wished she had a calming draught on hand. She wondered if she could summon one from the brewing stores, but lunch hour was fast approaching and a flying bottle wouldn't be safe from the stampede of hungry researchers.

"...by Merlin! It's not like he's in John O'Groats or some forsaken place like that! He's in bloody Surrey!"

"Surrey. That sounded familiar for some reason. She was about to dismiss it when realization fell like bricks. 'Shit!"

Omphale, who mistook her friend's horror as commiseration, continued, "I know, right? Even on a muggle train it would only take him less than an hour!"

"Where in Surrey, do you know?" Sevda pressed on urgently.

"Oh I don't know!" She wailed. "Some place called Whining or shite like that! Why do you care?" Omphale had a pinched look on her face, the kind that told everyone that she had a migraine coming
on top of an imminent crying jag.

"Maybe we should go back your flat... Shall I keep you company?"

"I want gelato."

"I'll rent you that movie you like as well, deal?" Sevda didn't wait for Omphale to agree with her. She just hauled her friend to the closest Disapparation Point.

'Dolohov is in Little Whinging,' Sevda thought grimly. Who knew how long he'd been there, and how many of his cronies were there with him. The Order needed to be told of course, but she had to take care of Omphale first.

First she needed to calm Omphale down. Then, a trip to Covent Garden for gallons of Omphale's favorite gelato, followed by a visit to the video store because the wizarding world had yet to catch on to the joys of the Sound of Music. Then, she should pump her friend for more information, if at all possible.

Sevda debated whether Omphale needed to be Obliviated.

"Better safe than sorry," Sevda told herself under her breath. Too many things could go wrong if someone knew what Sevda's been up to.

She swallowed down her guilt. It would just be like the last few times.

She turned to Omphale, who looked sad and downtrodden. "It's been too long since we've had a girls' night in, right?"

"Years, I guess," Omphale answered tiredly, wringing her hands in front of her to stop herself from throwing something.

"Time flies, doesn't it?" Sevda's store cards, always brimming with points and stickers, told a different story.

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Back at 12 Grimmauld Place, Remus, Dora, and Sevda made themselves comfortable in the room Sirius had set up for the littlest Tonks-Lupin. It was still empty, but it was fairly clear that it wouldn't stay like that for long.

For now the walls were still white and a woodworking project was just beginning, tucked in the corner of a room. Sirius wanted to build a crib from scratch.

Sirius got the dirty job of contacting every Order member via floo. Judging from the small talk he seemed to be rather fond of doing, despite the urgent nature of his task, he wouldn't be back for a while yet.

There's no sense to wait.

"Dolohov's been in Little Whinging for at least a week. Others might've been there much longer," Sevda updated them, as Remus served hot chamomile tea from a cow-shaped self-replenishing teapot that was already a permanent fixture in the nursery.

Remus and Dora looked grim as they listened carefully to what Sevda had to say. Not that there was anything much to tell.
Thankfully Remus and Dora were very good at reading between the lines and piecing pieces of scant information together.

Remus was more than happy to share his own theory about it, but Sevda quickly put her hand up. "Well, don't tell me about it!" Gosh, this werewolf and his filterless mouth. Someone need to take him aside and teach him about "need-to-know". Or in Sevda's case: "really don't want to know".

"I trust you to brief the Order properly," Sevda climbed onto her feet. "And to make sure they don't get up to any stupid schemes that would get them all killed."

Remus rolled his eyes. He knew she also meant 'Don't let the dog get anywhere near action'. They've only just gotten him back.

"Are you leaving?" Dora asked.

"I need to be back before Omphale wakes up." The Dreamless Sleep should wear off soon; she hadn't dared to give Omphale a full dose.

"How is she?"

"Good, considering she's been Obliviated yet again," Sevda sighed tiredly.

"How are you?" Sirius asked as he stepped inside the room. Sevda took an involuntary step back, much to Sirius's abject disappointment.

"Considering I have just Obliviated and Compelled one of my few friends to stay in a relationship with a Death Eater just so we can get scraps of information.... Again..." She drew a shaky breath. "Fine. Just fine."

Sevda studiously ignored the pitying look in the others' eyes.

The grandfather clock out in the hallway chimed a few times.

"When will they arrive?" Dora wondered aloud, as Remus made for the door.

"Any minute now," Sirius said. He'd prepared the floo for a surge of visitors. No one used the door if they could help it.

"Do you have a moment?" Sirius turned to Sevda, ignoring the sudden looks of interest blooming from the peanut gallery. "Just to talk," Sirius added. Sevda had been avoiding him since he returned, first from Azkaban, then the Veil.

"I don't have time."

It wasn't even an empty excuse as people started arriving. The muffled screech of Walburga Black was ample enough evidence.

If spending a year trapped behind the Veil taught Sirius anything, it was knowing when to fight his battles and when to step back. "Use the floo in my room then," he offered.

Sevda hesitated.

"No one's strayed into the hallway, yet," Remus said, relying on his sharp senses. He could faintly hear people exchanging pleasantries in front of the floo.

Tonks peeked to confirm. She gave a quick thumb's up before yanking the door open. "Ok, go!"
Sirius threw caution to the wind, grabbed Sevda's hand, dragged her quickly out of one room, across the hallway, and into his own room.
9(part B)-Not Love Actually

Chapter Summary

A domestic scene, only not so much.

edit 07/29--extended scenes of the same chapter, as I struggle with a flashback.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'What kind of a friend am I?' Sevda wondered, as she sat in the corner of Omphale's tiny kitchen. There's a pair of limp kebabs on a plate on the table under a warming charm. Beyond the kitchen doors, she could hear Omphale shuffling slowly out of the bedroom.

"Where have you been?" Omphale sat down lethargically across the table. There were shadows under her puffy eyes. Her hair hung limp around her pale face. "You were gone a long time."

"Didn't you ask for kebab?" Sevda busied herself putting out cutlery for her friend to use, while getting herself in Omphale's line of sight in the meanwhile.

Omphale never asked for kebab, but Sevda pushed it into her mind anyway. Never a very good Occlumens, Omphale's mind opened up to Sevda's experienced probing like a patsy offering. The false seed was planted easily, like always, joining the others that had already taken root and bloomed into a false garden.

"Did I?" Omphale asked, voice small and hesitant.

"This is from that manky shop next to the tube station," which was about twenty minutes away by foot one way. Because everyone knew Hakeem, the neighborhood's favorite kebab vendor, had gone on an extended holiday.

"Thanks, sorry to bother you."

'I should be the one apologizing,' Sevda didn't say. Every day, there's always something new to feel guilty about.

Omphale went back to sleep after polishing both kebabs, hungover from Dreamless Sleep. Sevda, usually a stickler for cleanliness, found laziness had set in. She had no desire to wash dishes.

She laid her cheek directly on the table's pockmarked surface, the smell of kebab still lingering thickly in her nose.

The flat was quiet, she could hear the clock ticking away and not much else.
She hated being left alone with turbulence in her head.

She must've fallen asleep at the table though it couldn't be for long. It was still dark out.

The lock on the front door turned and she was instinctively alert, grabbing her wand and wobbling her way down the short corridor separating the kitchen and the rest of the house.

"Hey," the man greeted, as he let himself in with a key he used only rarely.

"Anton," Sevda greeted coldly.

He didn't offer any explanation, but at least he looked slightly apologetic. He didn't say a word, not even a greeting as he wiped his shoes off on the mat. Despite his best efforts, they were still too muddy for the flat. He discarded them haphazardly while making silent gestures toward Omphale's bedroom, clearly asking for permission to go wake his distraught girlfriend up.

Sevda merely raised an eyebrow and whipped her arm in a "go to her before I hex you" motion. Once Dolohov was out of sight, Sevda floated them to the far end of the entry way, where it sat neatly in the shadows, mud and all.

Dolohov's footsteps were heavy on the creaky floorboards, and the door to Omphale's room needed oiling for a long time now.

There was a short stretch of silence before they began quarreling.

Sevda, still standing in the entryway and in the middle of debating whether she should cast discreet tracking charms on Dolohov's shoes, did the only respectful thing: listen in for clues.

The quarrel seemed to go on forever, but they quietened eventually.

Sevda, acting like she had any business in the hallway in front of Omphale's room, loitered around until she convinced herself there's no more information to be heard. In fact, things were beginning to stray into the too-much-information territory.

Trudging back to the kitchen, she wondered how long their whole romantic truce would last, though. Dolohov would soon be gone again, and Omphale would soon be in mourning again. If she deduced correctly, things would come to a head in no time at all. She may not be an Order member in the sense that Lupin or Tonks were, but she was always smarter (and Lupin liked to tell her things for some stupid reason).

She was up to her elbows in sudsy water, harshly scrubbing a plate with a long-handled brush, when Dolohov emerged from Omphale's bedroom.

"She's sleeping again," he informed her lamely, sitting on the same chair Omphale had sat on some time previous.

"I can't believe you forgot the big one," she half-threw the plate onto the drying rack. It rattled a little next to a dripping cup and saucer. "Again."

They both cringed, remembering the near mayhem that happened five years ago. It was supposed to
be the Big Two-Oh, instead it turned out to be a big fat zero.

"I really tried, you know," Dolohov sighed, picking up a stale croissant from Omphale's bread basket. Omphale actually made an anniversary cake, but she had it thrown away some time ago. Sevda very much wanted to take it out of the bin and choke Antonin on it. "But my boss isn't someone you or I can say no to."

Sevda rolled her eyes. "Well, isn't that a convenient excuse?"

"What do you know? You and Omie," Antonin scoffed around a big mouthful of croissant. "Both of you. All nice and cozy with your oh-so-fascinating research and sheltered lives. Neither of you know what it's like out there."

"It's not like you ever tell us anything," Sevda poured out dirty dishwater then laid her wet marigolds across the rim of the sink to dry. "You're always held up at work. It's always 'boss this, boss that'. Sometimes I wonder if 'boss' is actually shorthand for 'someone on the side'."

It was frankly a surprise when Antonin suddenly threw down his half eaten croissant onto the floor, clearly aiming it at Sevda. He did it with such force that it bounced rather high into the air, then skidded across the floor. There's fury in his face, like he actually cared about being accused as an adulterer.

Sevda had her wand out, her hand shaking with adrenaline, but Antonin was quickly apologetic, instantly crouching down to collect bits of croissant from around Sevda's feet. "I'm telling you, we are in the middle of something really important."

"It's always is, isn't it?" Sevda needled, as she handed him a short brush and pan.

While Dolohov was never really a loose cannon (Sevda didn't think he ever said it out loud that he was a Death Eater), but he also never thought highly of women in general. To him, women were either guileless like Omphale or absolutely bonkers like Bellatrix. If perhaps his guard was slightly lower and his lips slightly looser around the womenfolk, then Sevda did nothing to discourage it.

So she let, even encouraged, him to defend himself. Which he did, quite furiously in fact, so much so that words began to collide with one another, even as he was on his hands and knees chasing stray bits of pastry flakes into the bin.

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The flat was quiet once again. From down the corridor, Sevda could hear the shower running. She had told Dolohov to throw away his clothing as it was too filthy and too smelly to be laundered. If she were to close her eyes, she could imagine a life so ordinary it felt like family, even if it was one she never had—with Omphale as her older sister and the sister's insufferable long-time boyfriend. Sevda sighed and poured her cold tea down the sink.

For scraps of information, Sevda had practically gambled with her friend's life and youth. From the sidelines, she watched as Omphale struggle to salvage an unsalvageable relationship, living a mirage of a life half-lived.

If not for her, Omphale might've left Dolohov a long time ago instead of celebrating (or not-celebrating, rather) their twenty-fifth year together.

Sometimes, she wished she never learned that Antonin-the-absentee-boyfriend was the same Antonin Dolohov, Death Eater par excellence.
She wondered if there really wasn't a different way to go about all this save-the-world business.

Chapter End Notes

in my mind, Dolohov never actually admitted outright he's a DE, for one reason or another, being vague with 'boss this and that'. And he could've concealed his tattoo in many different ways. How did Sev find out about him? Perhaps Sev caught a glimpse of his tattoo or something. I'm not sure yet. We'll cross the bridge when we get there. Anyway, thousand apologies if this feels so much like filler, but I'm sort of struggling to orchestrate the next steps. (Slowly moving along, slower than molasses). As always, thank you thank you all for your patience, thank you for your indulgence, and for all your kind encouragement! And let me know what you think! Ideas are always welcome!

edit 07/29--additional filler (±500words), as I struggle with a flashback.
10(part A)-Party by the Lake

Chapter Summary

Sirius has plans. Everyone else girds their loins.

Last week of June, their Seventh Year

They were supposed to be celebrating Regulus's birthday, and Sirius had somehow collected a hodgepodge of people who passed his extremely arbitrary list of accepted party attendees. Surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly), the list was predominantly Gryffindor, which would've baffled the younger Black, with Severus Snape the only Slytherin grudgingly invited. And somehow, Xeno Lovegood was also there, much to the delight of some of the Gryffindor girls who managed to snag an invite.

It was supposed to be The Greatest Lakeside Bash of the Seventies, as Sirius had immodestly declared. But it had ended up being the greatest lakeside temper tantrum Hogwarts had seen in a good while.

It started innocuously enough a week or so before, right at the last day of exams.

For the past fortnight, from the beginning of June, all Seventh Years lived and breathed exams, ate parchment, and drank writing ink. They did nothing that had nothing to do with NEWTs. Though it felt like none of them would survive, they somehow did.

So on their last day of exams, they sat their final subject with equal parts dread and nostalgia. In a dozen or so days, they would leave Hogwarts for good.

Sirius leaped onto his feet once Flitwick called quills down, already forgetting what he had learned about the subject. He took out his pocket watch and saw he only had less than an hour to get ready for the traditional last flight of the out-going Seventh Year quidditch players.

The flurry of parchments flying off the students’ desks barely slowed his path to the door. He weaved his way out blindly, and almost ran into a gaggle of sixth year Slytherins. Regulus was part of that group. Sirius absentmindedly registered his brother greeting him curtly and leaving without waiting for a reply.

Watching his brother disappear around the corner, pocket watch still ticking in his hands, an idea took root in his mind. They no longer lived in the same house, when Sirius moved in with the Potters over the Easter just past. They no longer spoke lengthily about their childhood dreams. But they were still brothers. In this whole wide world, Sirius only had one brother.

Regulus would be seventeen this year, and who better to arrange a coming of age birthday party than his own brother? Sirius thought.

From the corner of his eye, Sirius saw Snape trying to sneak out of the classroom. He wasn't really
keen on talking to Snape, actually. Any other time, he would much rather eat his own socks than talk to the slimy git. But he knew Snape was one of the better people to help him pull off his half-formed plan.

In hindsight, perhaps he should've approached the whole thing in a less urgent way, somewhere quieter than a corridor absolutely packed with stressed out students.

"What do you want?" Snape's voice rose in a controlled panic. Sirius had grabbed Snape by the shoulder then caught Severus's wand-arm, partly to stop Snape from escaping and partly to avoid getting himself hexed.

Conversation around them stopped and a huge group of bystanders soon formed. They hadn't forgotten the show the Gryffindors put two years ago, and by the looks of it, they're going to get a reprise. Some were already wondering what color Snivelly's underpants would be this time.

Snape's pulse was racing and Sirius could feel it thumping wildly against his fingers wrapped around Snape's inner wrist. Snape's eyes were wide and wild. Sirius also knew that there's a wandless hex already forming at the tip of Snape's tongue.

Remus frantically waded through the crowd of yearmates and younger students, heart hammering against his chest, hoping to reach Sirius before it was too late. He did not expect Sirius to go rogue on Snape. A year ago, maybe. But, not now.

Remus was already blaming himself for letting his guard down, partially because a truce seemed to have happened over the past few months. Even Lily was starting to warm up to Snape again. The two old friends were now slowly building back the bridge they had burned down after the OWLs. Him, Snape and Lily (and occasionally James, Sirius, and Peter most grudgingly) had been studying together, for Merlin's sake!

Lily was chatting with some friends at the other side of the corridor when she saw Sirius pouncing on an absent-minded Snape. Severus was too engrossed in a class primer to anticipate Sirius's next moves.

She swore under her breath. Having shared many classes over the seven years, Sirius would've known that the time immediately after the exams was truly the best time to catch Snape unawares. The swotty Slytherin would be too wrapped up in the subject to notice much of anything.

She thought she saw Remus sprinting up, almost knocking over a few younger students in his haste to get to Snape and Black. She too broke into a run, ignoring James's surprised yelp and urgent questions.

For more than a year, she had been regretting many things--her fall out with one of her oldest friends being at the top of that list. A year ago, if someone had hinted at a possible truce with Snape, she would've laughed and then cried. But these past few months, thanks in no small part to Remus's frankly laudable efforts, things had begun to look up for her and she was genuinely looking forward to leave Hogwarts on a high note. She'd be damned if she let Sirius ruin it now.

By the time Remus and Lily arrived next to Sirius, Severus was already gone, having shoved Sirius to the ground, aided by a discrete wandless hex that tripped the boy's feet.
"What were you thinking?" Remus asked, as he helped Sirius to stand.

"Clearly he wasn't thinking," Lily said. She glared at James, daring him to say anything.

"I thought we promised to lay off Se... Snape," Remus reminded. "You've all been getting along so well."

"I wouldn't call it 'so well' exactly," James finally found a way to butt into the conversation.

"Well, six of one and so on," Remus said dismissively, as the crowd dispersed with a disappointed grumble.

"I just wanted to talk to him," Sirius huffed indignantly, feeling a bit put off that he actually had to defend himself to Remus. His friend had never been so uptight before. He blamed Snape's bad influence and shifty potions for this change.

"I believe him," Lily said, earning her a dirty look from Remus. "But as I said before, he never thinks."

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"So, I heard you had a dust up with my brother earlier today," Regulus began conversationally as he made himself comfortable on a chair in Snape's makeshift brewing room.

Snape let out a small snort, but otherwise elected not to humor the younger Black.

Regulus watched as Snape stirred this way and that, wrote this thing and that, until finally he got bored and opened his mouth again. "It sounded rather spectacular, I'm sorry I missed it. And here I thought you were on your way to becoming a House traitor."

Like most of his Housemates, Regulus had noticed the way Snape seemed to be hanging around Gryffindors (not just one) all the time now. Even with that hoity-toity Mudblood girl that everyone thought had dumped Snape's arse.

"I'm not the one with a Gryffindor for a brother," Snape said, taking a pause from stirring to smirk at a sputtering Regulus. "It's seven months since, and yet people are still talking about your little jaunt into the lion's den."

Slytherin House hadn't been too happy to learn about Regulus's little foray into enemy territory. He was actually persona non grata in the Slytherin common room for a good half-week. Thankfully those little snotty brown-nosers were unwilling to antagonize House Black too much, but it didn't stop them from looking suspiciously at him time and again.

"Anyway," Snape spoke after a short, uncomfortable silence. "Your brother was quite moved by your stunt. I heard a tear was shed. So, he wanted to do something nice--his words--to pay you back."

Regulus groaned anxiously even though he was secretly happy to learn that Sirius liked his gift so much. Sirius's idea of a return gift was usually in the white elephant territory.

"Don't worry, little Black. I've talked him out of giving you a boat."

Black the elder had cornered Snape again after dinner, using Lupin as bait. But just as Snape was about to jinx the two Gryffindors, Sirius began spouting the most unbelievable spiel Snape had ever heard. Neither Snape nor Lupin could understand why anyone would want a three-person boat, but
for a good minute or so, Sirius had been convinced that Regulus needed one. "He's going to throw you a birthday party instead. It's supposed to be a secret, so you, little Black, didn't hear it from me."

"I will act suitably surprised when the time comes, then," Regulus said, grinning conspiratorially.

Chapter End Notes

Interesting (to me) but a useless tangent nevertheless... Apparently.... The phrase "six of one and half a dozen of the other" was first recorded in a journal of a British naval officer aboard HMS Sirius.

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